RAMSEY CAMPBELL

THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION

The
Collected Short Fiction
Of
Ramsey Campbell

As of 2015, this collection is complete but for two Solomon Kane stories completed from fragments left by Robert E. Howard, and a missing early piece, 'Midnight Appointment'.

The introduction to each story varies slightly. All feature a writing date with details of initial publication and subsequent inclusions in official Campbell anthologies. Some feature an introductory quote, carefully chosen to give background yet not spoil the show. When it comes to dates, these are taken from the readers' guide *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*, which authoritatively charts Campbell's work from his earliest writings through to 1994. Beyond this date, Campbell's own website has been useful, followed by his fore- and afterwords. Failing that, we are left with the copyright pages of anthologies, other secondary sources and, as a last resort, best guesses.

An index is available here.

1957/58

This section contains early fiction. Readers may wish to skip forward to Campbell's first published works and return to this section at their leisure.

The Oak Chest

Written in: 1958
First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #50*, Michaelmas 1987

The clock struck midnight. An owl hooted somewhere out in the darkness. Rover, the dog, twitched in his sleep. Then he opened one eye, looked up the staircase that led to his master's and mistress's bedroom... and then he leaped up, his teeth bared, his eyes bulging, every hair bristling.

For something was coming down the stairs.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson had found the oak chest in the attic when they bought the house. Johnson didn't care for it, and Mrs. Johnson hated "those cats' heads," which were cat faces, carved on the lid of the chest.

One day, three weeks after they had moved in, Jane (Mrs. Johnson) said "You know that old chest in the attic?"

"Yes?" said David (Mr. Johnson).

"Well," said Jane, "you know we didn't open it when we found it? Well, I tried this afternoon, and do you know, it *wouldn't* open!"

"Locked... or stuck," said David, lighting a cigarette.

"Yes, but... Suppose there's something in it? Jewels or maybe..." she hesitated "...a *body*?"

"The trouble with you, darling," said David, settling back in his chair, "is that you read too many ghost stories. Look at the one you've got now! *Spine-Chilling Stories*! How can you think *this* house is haunted?"

"Oh, very well," said Jane, picking up a cup from the table. "I didn't say I thought the house was haunted, but all the same, I do. There's a feeling in the air."

A scratching sound came from the door.

"What did I tell you!" shrieked Jane. "*Don't open the door!" Crash* went the cup onto the floor.

But Jack opened it slowly, revealing... Rover the dog, demanding to be taken for a walk.

In the now empty house, nothing stirred. Then... in the attic, the oak chest's lid moved. A green thread of matter trickled through the gap. It hung on the air, like a silken thread. Then it was joined by another, which melted into the first. The green matter solidified, and became an arm. It stretched itself, and then withdrew into the chest.

It had been hard work, holding the lid shut.

The door closed downstairs. Jane and David and Rover had returned. Rover, freed of his lead, went and laid on the hearth rug. Jane and David listened to some jazz and comedy programmes.

After the last one David said "I'm going to bed. How about you?"

"Yes," said Jane, "I think I will."

She had been in bed about half an hour when she heard something moving in the attic. She called sharply, "David, listen!" but only got "For heaven's sake let me get some sleep!" as a reply.

She called again, "David, wake *up*!" and finally he said "Well, what is it? Hear a skeleton knocking at the door?"

"No, but there's somebody in the attic," she answered.

"Humph. Well, what did you wake... *What* did you say?" He listened. It was true; a creaking came from the room above... a sound like the lid of a chest lifting.

It only took him a little time to reach the attic door; he was hindered, however, by slipping on a... *thing*... which, he saw, was a cutting of garlic; and he realised there was one on most of the stairs leading up to the attic.

He wrenched open the door, found the attic in darkness. In the minute it took to find the light switch, he heard something moving about in the dark, and then heard the oak chest's lid slam down. By the time he had pulled the switch, the oak chest was shut, and everything was still.

The oak chest wouldn't open; he hadn't expected it to. He grunted and wrenched it for a few minutes, but it was firmly wedged... almost as though it was being held from the inside... But he could do nothing. He went back to bed.

In the morning the milkman got no answer, even when he kicked the door. He looked in the front window, then went and telephoned the police...

In the hall lay the body of Rover the dog. The bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Johnson lay in their beds. In each case there were two tiny holes in the throat, and the bodies were bloodless husks...

"Did you know the previous owner committed suicide?" said the Inspector in charge to one of his constables. "I believe his body was stashed in an oak coffin."

"Suicides are supposed to become vampires," said the constable.

"Vampires indeed!" ejaculated the Inspector. "In *this* modern age..."

The Hollow In The Woods

"This would seem to be the first story to indicate Campbell's familiarity with Lovecraft, but the description of the shoggoths is actually taken from Robert Bloch's *Notebook Found in a Deserted House*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1958
First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #50*, Michaelmas 1987

> I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little
> wood,
> Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
> The red ribb'd hedges drip with a silent horror of blood,
> And Echo there, whatever's asked her, answers "Death."
> - Tennyson

I

"Do you know any ghost stories?" said I, to my friend Hamilton.

"I know a supernatural story," he answered, "but it's not very nice. For one thing, it's true, and for another, it happened to me. Have you ever heard of a thing called a shoggoth?"

"No, never," I answered. "What is it?"

"Well, the best way to answer that is to tell you the whole story," Hamilton said. "So, if you're not squeamish, I'll begin." (I thought, rather absurdly, of *Listen With Mother*).

"It started," he began, "one day when I was walking in the woods with my sister. We were just talking and strolling along, when she slipped and nearly fell. We were on the edge of... the Hollow.

"There was a little white boulder at the bottom; at least, we thought it was a little white boulder. We were too young to know of... such things..." He shuddered violently.

"How old were you at the time?" I interrupted.

"Just turned eight, both of us," he shivered again and gave a low sob, "Mary and I. Poor... Mary..." He turned away and I saw his shoulders heaving.

"Something happened to her, then?" I asked sympathetically, using all the empathy I could muster. I had a nasty feeling that whatever had happened was to do with the story and... what was the word?... shoggoths. It was a pity I'd started on this; if he was going to break down every few minutes, I wouldn't be able to piece it together. Then Hamilton turned his face back to me; his eyes were reddened, he said: "Look, do you mind if I go home? I'll see you tomorrow, and maybe I'll tell you the story."

"No, of course I don't mind, old boy," I assured him. "By the way, since you came, there's been a car crash on the road and there's a road block up. Bits of metal and glass everywhere... You'll have to go through the woods."

"N-not the woods!" Hamilton shrieked. "They—they—they're the woods I was telling you about! I *can't* go that way!"

"But it's the only way," I told him firmly. "You can't stay here. See you tomorrow."

"Very well," he said, suddenly calm. "See you tomorrow." He went to the door and let himself out. I watched him go towards the woods. As he reached them the trees seemed to close in on him...

"See you tomorrow," he had said. But the next morning his body was lying in the woods, close to a little hollow. His neck had been broken.

II

It made quite a sensation in the local paper. "Murder by person or persons unknown," was the verdict at the inquest. The person or persons remained unknown. But I wondered. *Shoggoth*?

I looked it up in the dictionary. Finally, I found it, tucked away in a corner. *Shoggoth: evil spirit or demon in the shape of a tree with mouths scattered over its trunk*. Could it break a man's neck? I thought it possible; now I knew the truth of what happened to Hamilton and his sister.

Of course, nobody will believe me, except Connor, one of the schizophrenic patients. And he doesn't count, because our doctor says he's

one of the craziest patients in the asylum...

Oh, *all right*. I'll get on with the story. Whoever you are, I don't know why you're listening to my story.

Anyway, I knew now that his death must have something to do with the Hollow. And those things that he called Shoggoths. So I went into the woods one night. I've regretted it ever since, but now it's too late.

When I reached the Hollow I realised why Mary had tripped. There were long white sticks lying all round the little clearing in which the Hollow was. And in the Hollow two white boulders lay side by side, while near them lay more of the long white sticks...

White sticks? Boulders?

I stared at them in horror. They lay there grinning up at me... human skulls! And the white sticks... the white sticks were human bones! The whole place was an open graveyard.

The trees were swaying as though in a wind. The branches were reaching for me, like skeleton hands... a shadow fell over the ground in front... a thing like a tree with mouths all over its trunk... its roots were snakelike tentacles that groped over the bones... the branches were reaching for my throat... I fell into the Hollow and cracked my forehead against one of the skulls... I fell through a red, spinning void...

III

At first, when I regained consciousness, I thought I'd gone blind. But then I realised that one of the skulls was lying on my face. I jumped up and threw the horrible thing away.

Then I saw Them. The shoggoths were crawling down the sides of the Hollow on three sides of me. The slimy things had puckered mouths over the branches. They were reaching for me...

I sprinted up the fourth side of the Hollow, while the shoggoths mumbled and moaned and stretched their branches towards me. Then the others showed themselves. Two glowing green figures... Hamilton and his sister... standing by the shoggoths... beckoning with long skeleton fingers and calling, "Come, John! Come! Life holds no attractions for you. You will be happy with us. Come to us!" But I ran away from the evil place in the

woods, and I never went back. But (now I know, for I made inquiries in the village) many people went through the woods and were never seen again. The woods are evil... the shoggoths live there, and they are over-running the earth. They are spirits, but they can be captured and killed, by certain rituals and exorcisms, that will be found in some grimoires.

But I am digressing. Two weeks later, I was more or less normal, and I fell in love with a girl. Three months later I married her. And one night, someone 'phoned her up and asked her to meet him in the woods. I didn't know where she'd gone until I found a note on the kitchen table. I tried to bring her back; but I seemed to be running in circles, and the next morning I still hadn't found her.

I never found her.

That was when I had a nervous breakdown; finally my doctor gave up hope and sent me off to an asylum. And, even now, in the asylum, Mary Hamilton and her brother come to me in the night. Nobody can see them except me; the doctors say my case is hopeless, and I'm happier here than I could ever be, in the outer world with all its memories. But you, whoever you are, can kill the shoggoths. Go into any wood and you will find...

Here the journal of this patient ends. He disappeared from the asylum last night; one of the walls was smashed in and tree branches were found scattered around his cell. His disappearance has not yet been accounted for; it is just another strange problem that will never be solved.

Things From The Sea

Written in: 1958
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When I, and my friend Hartley, met the creature that called itself Ennis, we thought it was human. I was taking Hartley out in my motor-boat, and we came across one of those small rocks that jut out of the sea. We found Ennis hanging on to it, and screaming in a horrible high-pitched voice. The waves were smashing against him. His eyes... they were bright green... were dilated.

We pulled him off the rock and laid him on the bottom of the boat. I started up the motor; the vibration woke him, and he jumped up. As the rays of the setting sun drew a red path across the water, he shrieked into the swirling liquid "Ki! Zora nozak!" I could have sworn that a thin red hand rose out of the water and then fell back, as though the owner was exhausted. But, of course, I told myself it was a fish.

I took Ennis home, where he promptly went to sleep on the sofa. (I knew his address, as he had it in his wallet.) He woke up as I was leaving, and asked me to stay the night. I accepted.

In the morning, he asked me to stay for breakfast. Again I accepted—then quickly refused when I saw what it was that he expected me to eat. Raw meat, running with rivulets of fresh blood. And the drinks were of a red liquid. It looked suspiciously like blood—blood of an animal; but I had a horrifying feeling that it was human blood. And the raw meat...

Ennis raised his eyebrows when I refused. "Raw meat is very good for you," he said. A huge, bloated spider fell from the ceiling on a silken thread and alighted on the plate of raw meat that Ennis had set out for me. "If you will not eat your meat, then Spider will eat it," he said. He picked up a fly that had landed on the table, and gave the fly to the Spider.

I ran out of that terrible place as fast as my legs would carry me. I looked back once; Ennis was pointing his finger at me and cackling, while his

horrible pet sat on the meat and sucked at the fly... I bumped into an old man. "Where have you been?" he asked. "At Ennis's place," I said. "What, him with the four wives?" remarked the old man. "Four wives," I gasped. "Yes; they all disappeared," he answered. "The fourth went only two days ago." I leant against the wall for support, a sickening idea had crept into my mind about the raw meat.

I only saw Ennis once more; I was out again, in my motor-boat with Hartley. We were just coming to the rock where we saw Ennis first, when Hartley said, "You know Ennis yelled *Ki zora nozak* when he was with us last time. Well, it's Egyptian, and it means *I will bring more meat*. What do you think he meant?"

That was when I told Hartley the whole story (he had gone to his own house when I took Ennis home). Then the rock came into view. Ennis was standing on it, throwing pieces of flesh to... *something* in the water. He threw the last piece, and I saw, all round the rock, sharks eating the flesh... flesh from the body of his fourth wife.

"Help!" he shouted, as he saw my boat. "Get me off here!"

"Stay there, you... you *ghoul!*" shouted Hartley before he could say any more. Then he (Hartley) shrieked, "John, look *out*! The sharks are trying to tear bits off our boat! We must distract them!" Then he took a gun from his pocket and said "I won't regret this," and shot Ennis. The sharks made short work of his body.

But I have a feeling that the affair is not over yet. Before I went to sleep at Ennis's house that night, he gave me a drink of a red liquid. I didn't recognise its taste or smell, but I have a nasty feeling that I know what it was.

Since then, I can never bring myself to kill a spider. And I've developed an unnatural craving for raw meat.

The Grave In The Desert

Written in: 1958
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Reynolds was walking in the desert when he found it. It was a grave. A mound of sand with a wooden cross on top if it. The sun was low in the west, and the cross cast a shadow over the sand.

"I wonder whose grave it is?" he mused. "I wonder whether—"

He was wondering if anything valuable had been buried with the body. That was the case sometimes, he knew. Gold or jewels, maybe, or money in a box. He had cause to know, for he had robbed quite a few graves.

He pulled the cross off the top and had a good look at it. Nothing valuable about that, anyway. He began to dig at the mound with his hands, for he was hardened. A boy had once seen him digging up a grave, and Reynolds had tried to make him an apprentice, but the boy threatened to tell the police, and so Reynolds had had to silence him. (He'd put him in the place occupied before by the original body.)

He worked for ten minutes... and then uncovered a box. He broke it open, and saw... jewels! Emeralds, rubies sparkled and glistened in the setting sun; a stone as big as a man's head winked at him like a huge blue eye. He stood looking at them, entranced... when he heard a slight movement behind him and a hand touched him on the shoulder...

He turned. A decaying body was standing with both hands stretched towards him. An echoing voice that seemed to come from under ground said "*Come to me! Come to guard my jewels!*" He tried to run, but some invisible force was dragging him towards the horrible Thing... a sand cloud blew into his eyes and he staggered about blindly... he fell into the open grave and the soil closed over his head...

The Thing stood by the grave. Soon Reynolds would rise again and guard his jewels. He dug himself a grave and lay down in it. Sand blew over the hole and covered him...

The power of the Un-Dead is greater than we know...

Accident

Written in: 1958
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As Jim Organ reached a corner of the lonely cliff road, he saw the patch of oil that lay directly in his path. The car skidded and crashed into the railings. There was a snap, and the car screamed over the edge. It fell forty feet.

Organ saw himself lying in the debris, a look of horror frozen on his face. Then a luminous cloud floated down from the sky, and he was gently but firmly urged into the middle of it. Then it rose again; he saw the remains of the car lying on a brown strip of road, and the countryside spread out around it; he stared at a tree that had fallen across a road, just as the cloud sped into the darkness of outer space.

"Well, Mr. Organ," said Saint Peter, "I have been through your record, and I have decided that you definitely belong here, in Heaven. I will take you to your section of Heaven. Follow me." Organ was taken to a beautiful garden, a garden that surpassed all earthly beauty, and left to do whatever he wanted.

There is no such thing as time in Heaven, so Jim did not know how long had passed since he had died. But suddenly a black cloud came down into his garden, he was dragged towards it, and soon it enveloped him. It leapt upwards; once again he passed through the blackness of space, and then fell through the Earth's atmosphere, towards a large white building. In fact, a hospital.

"Where am I?" Organ groaned.

"In a hospital," said a doctor, standing by his bed. "You've been almost dead for three days, but I pulled you through."

Organ never told anyone why he picked up a bottle of medicine and hit the doctor over the head with it.

The Friend

Written in: 1958
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I was sitting in a café reading a paper, when the man came and sat down by me. He had been in the inn next door, so I expected him to be a little drunk, but he was cold sober. The wind was howling outside like an animal in mortal agony, and the rain had been pouring down for at least half an hour.

"Did you ever have a really good friend, one that never left your side?" said the man.

"A dog, you mean?" I suggested.

"A *human*," he said, and relapsed into silence. The rain poured, and there came a faint rumble of thunder. Somewhere out in the darkness a dog howled. A teenage couple got up from their table, and went out into the teeming rain.

"I had a good friend once," came the man's voice. "His name was Frank—Frank Swann. I met him one night at this café, and took a liking to him as soon as I saw him. Well, I'd seen him before at shows and places like that, but this was the first time I'd spoken to him."

A flash of lightning lit up the scene outside. Two men were making their way, rather unsteadily, down the street, while they sang something about the loyalty of pals. It didn't need a detective to tell where *they'd* been.

"He owned a small shop," the man continued, "and he offered to let me go into partnership with him, as I was looking for a job.

"Things went well for the first few weeks, and then something cropped up that we didn't see eye to eye about. I wanted to do one thing, Frank wanted another. We had a hell of a row, and he roared off home in a raging temper. The next morning I learned that a motor-car had knocked him down and killed him.

"The shop had been left to me in his will, and I did what I wanted about the affair I mentioned. But that night, as I went home through a field, Frank met me with a gun in his hand. He said 'Now *we'll always be together*' and shot me."

"But you're not dead!" I shouted. Getting no answer, I turned... The chair next to me was empty.

I called a waiter. "Where did the man go who was sitting here?"

"You've been alone all night," he said.

The Devil's Cart

Written in: 1958
First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #50*, Michaelmas 1987

The wind shrieked louder outside the narrow window of the highest room in the castle. Count Slävus, the Scandinavian lord, had before him the Great Book, the Black Grimoire. He was reading it in pitch darkness, for it was the third section, the section written in luminous ink on black paper.

"...take one eye, cut fresh from a black cat, and place in the centre of the second pentacle; then stand in centre of first pentacle and repeat incantation. You should then..."

A knocking on the door of the castle room made him start, and nearly drop the precious book; he pushed it inside an oak box and locked it. He called "Who's there?"

"It's me. Lord, only your loyal Wulf!" came a voice. Slävus opened the door. "Yes? What do you want *this* time?"

"'Tis Martha, the old peasant woman, that would speak with you!" answered Wulf. Martha was the worst nuisance, according to the Count, in Scandinavia. He had taken steps to have her eliminated.

"Oh, bring her up to me," said the Count. "I suppose I must hear her groans. Oh—have you any cats in the castle? *Black* cats preferably?"

"I have none," answered Wulf. "But Martha gets more hysterical every minute. I will go and fetch her."

"*Hysterical*?" repeated Count Slävus. "You mean something has frightened her?"

"Something very evil. Lord," said Wulf in a hushed voice. "But she will not tell me what it was... she said she would only tell you."

"I was walking along the road to the castle," began Martha when she had recovered from her hysteria, "when I saw a cart coming along behind me. I stepped out of the road... when I saw the horses that were pulling it."

"What was wrong with them?" asked Count Slävus. Not that he wanted to know, but it seemed the only thing to say.

"Their eyes were like burning pits, and the horses had *wings* growing out of their backs! But the d-driver... the driver, he was a skeleton! His eyes were like two openings into hell, and when he saw me he cracked his whip and cried, '*To Slävus Castle! Let us take that servant of the Evil One to Hell*!' Oh, Lord, it is your dabblings in black magic and satanism that have brought this doom upon your soul! For your own sake, repent while you can. Count Slävus. *Your end is near*!"

Count Slävus spat. "Interfering wretch of a peasant woman!" he roared. "Meddling with things that you do not understand! I will teach you to keep your skinny hands out of my affairs!" He called out of the doorway, "*Franz*! *Karl*!"

Two guards stumped in through the doorway. "Yes, Lord? What is your wish?"

"*Throw this woman from the window*!" shrieked the frenzied Count.

"No! Have *mercy* on me!" screamed Martha; but it didn't matter how loud she screamed. The two men dragged her, screaming, fighting and pleading, to the window, and pushed her out. A horrible shriek, followed by a dull thud, resounded through the silent country.

A silence followed, only to be broken by the sound of horses' hooves on the drawbridge. Then Slävus heard slow, heavy footsteps coming up the staircase.

"Who is it?" he called. "Who is It?" There was no reply, except for an insane giggle. The footsteps came nearer... nearer... nearer...

With a hysterical scream the Count rushed over to the door, and slammed and double-locked it. The footsteps came across the landing. Then something crashed against the door, as though a giant's fist was pounding it. Then the lock gave way; the door banged open, and the afore-mentioned skeleton rushed in. Without wavering he caught Slävus round the throat with his bony fingers and bore him off. The legend says that, as the Count was thrown in the cart, a lightning bolt hit it, and it disappeared completely.

A railway runs on the track that used to lead to the castle; and passengers on the midnight train sometimes see two figures glowing at the side of the track; a man and a skeleton.

Tem Basish

Written in: 1958
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> Two brothers climbed Tem Basish, The story said:
> Two brothers climbed Tem Basish, But one was dead.

So ran the old rhyme. Tem Basish is a mountain, as you have guessed; and the rhyme is a kind of warning to any unwary climber who might want to climb Tem Basish.

I was staying in the old village of Borak'esh, and as soon as I saw Tem Basish I felt the climber's urge creeping over me. Once I see a mountain that I haven't climbed I take its presence as a challenge that I must answer.

When I first saw Tem Basish it was an awe-inspiring sight. Its twin peaks towered up towards the sky, and in between the peaks the sun was setting, giving a blood-red tint to the sky. I resolved to ask the keeper of the inn where I was staying, to tell me all that he knew about Tem Basish. I knew that some legend about the mountain was told in the village, and I wanted to know the whole story.

Unfortunately, none of the villagers knew English, but luckily I knew all the words, including unprintable ones, in their language; so I have written all speech translated into English.

"Well," began the inn-keeper," there were two brothers who lived in Borak'esh about fifty years ago. Their names were Tem and Basish, and all their lives they had wanted to climb the mountain.

"It is a rule in Borak'esh that a mountain has no name until someone has climbed to the top. So the two brothers set out one day and said 'As the mountain is unnamed, we will climb it together, and reach the top at the same time, so shall the mountain be named Tem Basish.'

"So one brother climbed one peak, and the other climbed the other peak, and as had been prophesied, they reached their goals at the same time, so

the mountain was named Tem Basish.

"Now the brothers grew jealous over something, the legend does not tell what. But the next time they climbed Tem Basish, only one returned. That one was Tem. They searched for the other's body high and low, but they never found it.

"Tem climbed the mountain alone a few days later, and he never returned. His pick was found in the rock about half way up. His body was found at the bottom of the mountain. A clump of bushes had broken his fall, and the body was still recognisable. He had not just fallen, he had been murdered."

"How on earth did you know that?" I asked.

"Because of the finger-marks round his throat, where he'd been choked to death," he answered.

However, this did not scare me, and I resolved to scale Tern Basish the next day, alone. I collected my tools, and started out for the right-hand peak.

At the bottom, as I stared up the rocky sides of Tern Basish, I noticed something protruding from the rock. Then, giving it no more thought, I started to climb.

About half-way up I saw what it was. It was nothing more than a pick. Then it was that I remembered what the old inn-keeper had told me... "*They found his pick about half-way up.*" Of course, I thought that they had left it where it was... as a sort of memorial, maybe. I never thought of the supernatural, for I did not then believe in ghosts.

Then I hit an area of hard rock. It took me four hours to climb it, and by then the sun was setting. So I made for a cave that lay near me, like a gaping mouth. I had brought a torch, luckily, and when I was into the cave I shone it round.

That was when I discovered that there was more than just rock in the cave. There was more. Something much worse.

To be precise, a human skull.

Being trapped in a cave one hundred feet up, with nothing for company except a grinning skull, is not a position recommended for retaining your sanity; but I am sure that *they* were real.

They were dim, shadowy figures, that appeared at the cave entrance. Echoing words floated to me, as I crouched shivering in a corner of the

cave. Words with a sinister meaning, words that were not for mortals to hear: "*I will reach the peak, then I can rest in peace*"... "*I will hurl you down from my mountain, then my spirit can rest*"... There was the sound of fighting, curses; the ethereal figures were struggling, one was being forced nearer and nearer to the edge...

I could stand it no longer. I screamed and ran towards the two figures of Tem and Basish, who had been dead for fifty long years. They vanished and I found myself falling down, down, down...

Basish's skull still lies in the cave where Tem had put it after he had murdered his brother. Tem's pick has moved two-thirds of the way up the mountain. But I don't think it's fair; I have to fight two people while I try to haunt this damn' mountain.

The Whirlpool

Written in: 1958
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Tom Bart, the man who had murdered six people, waited by the whirlpool in the woods for another victim. This whirlpool had claimed the bodies of all his victims as soon as he had taken everything that could be of any possible use to him. But it had been said to him, by an old man who he had met out in Egypt, "For some people seven is a lucky number, but to you it will be unlucky."

He waited a long time in the woods, a very long time. He fancied footsteps that came through the woods, but if he really heard them, they remained as footsteps. Finally he tramped off home, feeling very disgruntled.

As he climbed into bed he thought of all his victims: John Kissane, a middle-aged commercial traveller; David McBryde, a young gamekeeper; Sid Latham, a pork butcher; Eric Laird, a tourist; Mike Shea, a local trumpet-player who had been thrown out of Johnny Dankworth's band, and Ray Murphy, an amateur author. All rotting away somewhere deep down in the whirlpool.

Then he shut his eyes and started to sink down in a humming void... Somewhere in his mind formed a bizarre pattern, and he dreamed.

He was in the middle of a huge, featureless plain; it was lifeless, there was nobody there but himself. Then he saw faces, faces floating in the air; they were all his victims... one, two... five, six, seven! Whose was the seventh face? It was vaguely familiar.

The mouths chanted in unison, "Come! Come with us!" He could not resist, he did not want to resist, so he followed the strange beings.

The ground felt rough, although he knew it was flat. Then the faces began to move faster, and he ran after them. Once he tripped, but saved himself by catching hold of something which wasn't there. . .

Suddenly he woke, and the full horror of the situation was borne in to him... In his sleep he had walked straight into the whirlpool! And as the water closed over his head, he remembered who the seventh face in his dream had belonged to.

It had been his own.

The Whispering Horror

Written in: 1958
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This is a story of the lengths that a woman may go to if her husband is unfaithful. But this woman was different from other women, for she had strange powers, and knew things that it is not given to many to know. For instance, she could change... But this is not a list of all the things she could do, but the story of one thing that she did.

Even though she was not beautiful, she had married a man called Victor Sloane. Her maiden name (she was a foreigner) was Puol Eripmav.

But after three years of marriage, he tired of her. There was a young woman in the next street, and soon he started to take her out any time he thought his wife wouldn't notice.

Finally she found out, and she resolved, in her white-hot fury, to use her black-magic powers to get her revenge.

That night, as Victor got into bed, he heard his wife muttering something outside his bedroom door. He thought he heard another voice answer, but wasn't sure, so he took no notice.

She had certainly been mad at him today, he thought. Oh well, she'd get over it. His head touched the pillow and soon he was asleep.

He woke up, with the feeling there was something in the room. It was the middle of the night, and it was pitch dark. It took him a few minutes to get used to the blackness, but when his eyes were in focus he saw a Thing lying on the bed beside him.

If it was like any earthly creature, it was like a spider; but it had many more legs than a spider... about twenty, in fact.

He tried to scream, but the Horror wouldn't let him. A whispering voice in his mind said, "If you scream you will wake everybody in the house. You wouldn't want to do that, it wouldn't be right, would it?"

I must be going mad, he thought numbly. But when he heard the next words of the Thing... for he was sure that it was the Thing that was speaking... when he heard the next words of the Thing he felt a dull edge of horror go down his spine.

For the Thing was saying: "It is nice to be dead. Why don't you commit suicide?" But Victor did not answer, he had fainted.

When he came round it was only to hear the Horror's inexorable "It is good to be dead. Why don't you commit suicide?"

And suddenly he knew he must. With slow, heavy footsteps he walked over to the window and pushed up the sash; he stood on the ledge, poised himself... .

Then, quite suddenly and without any warning, like a clarion call, a cock crowed. The Horror gave a low cry of anger, and vanished as though it had never been.

Victor came out of his trance with a start. Where was he? What on earth was he doing on the window-sill? One slip and he would have plunged down to a horrible death. He pictured himself lying, like a broken doll, his head a splash of brains and blood. He thought about it in more detail, and was nearly sick.

That night, Puol was speaking to her familiar. It was getting restless and hungry. "I must feed soon," it said, "and you know I can only eat somebody who has been killed by a human, or one who has committed suicide. *I must feed tonight!*"

As before, Victor woke up only to find the Horror lying on the bed beside him. Also as before, the Horror started to discourse on the happiness and marvels of being a dead soul, and once again he felt unconsciousness creeping over him.

The Thing knew that if Victor fainted, it would go hungry for another night. That it could not bear. So it did the only thing that it could think of to do; treacherous, of course, but the Thing had no human feelings or emotions, except greed.

It told him *the whole truth*.

It told him about his wife's powers, and her jealousy of the girl on the next street; the jealousy that had made her try to kill him by the dreadful use of

black magic. And he listened, and his face became grim and purposeful.

Puol was standing before a mirror, sharpening her nails, when the door opened and Victor entered. He moved towards her, his eyes were glazed and staring.

"Your familiar came to me tonight," he said. "Somebody's going to be killed tonight."

"Oh?" she said sleepily. "Who?"

"You," he said, putting his hands round her throat.

On the day of Victor Sloane's execution, they found him dead in his cell. Like his wife, his body had been gnawed in many places. When the warder entered the cell, he thought he saw a huge spider sliding through the window. At the inquest, the verdict on Victor was that he must have, for some reason, decayed quicker than other dead bodies.

Only two people knew the truth.

Bradmoor

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I

Come at once. I am in a horrible trap.—Frank.

That was all. Just ten words. All that was in the letter that I read over a cup of coffee. I am a private psychic investigator, and in my profession I naturally get a large number of cranks, one or two psychiatric patients and quite a few practical jokes. But the writer of the letter was a personal friend of mine; he was none of the things I've mentioned, except possibly the latter. That was why I left everything just as it was, and drove as fast as I could to my friend's country home.

I had to ask the way to his home, which was called Bradmoor. The only person I could find to ask was an old man who was smoking a clay pipe that was not a thing to go into ecstasies about. The fumes that came from it made me think twice about the methods that farmers use to dispose of surplus pig swill. Something like that must have been in that pipe.

Anyway, I asked him how to get to Bradmoor, and he said, "Bradmoor? Ar, the man there be right snappy. Don't you go there, sir. Ar." And he blew out a cloud of dense smoke.

But I told him that I was Frank's friend, and after muttering something about "you will find him different" and blowing out a cloud that lingered in the air and insinuated itself into my throat, he gave me instructions that I could just barely follow.

At last I saw the house. It was partly hidden by clumps of trees that grew haphazardly around it, but on the iron gate outside the drive I read the letters, partly obliterated, "B AD OOR."

Above me the clouds ran across the purple sky in a macabre ballet. I drove my sports car up the drive. At the top I alighted, then walked into the old

wooden porch and crashed the iron knocker against the door.

Hesitating footsteps approached the door. Then it opened. A man stood there; his eyes had dark rings under them. I said "Is Mr. Bardell in?"

That was my friend's other name. It was my first shock that night, as I felt a vague edge of horror trace itself down my spine.

The man was Frank Bardell.

II

A roaring fire in the grate, the flames fanned by the wind howling down the chimney. Rain battered against the window; and outside, trees, like vague, phantom figures, were swept up and backwards by the force of the gale. Frank and I sat on either side of the hearth. The vague edge of horror that I had felt after meeting Frank that night had not disappeared; on the contrary, it had grown, for there was *something* very evil about the old house, and I had a feeling a lot of it emanated from Frank himself. However, I hid my feelings as best I could, and finally asked Frank: "Is this... *trap* that you mentioned a supernatural one?"

He looked into the fire, seeming to see something there, something more than the leaping flames. His eyes swivelled towards me, and he said, "I don't know *what* it is. I only know that it is here now, and I'm afraid of it."

"Have you ever heard anything?—Seen anything?—Felt anything?"

"I've been hearing something moving about for a few weeks now," he answered. "First I started to hear something bumping down the old disused stairway... there is one, it leads to the cellar, but when I investigated, I saw that nothing lit up the stairs, so I couldn't see anything.

"Then I started hearing the voices. I never heard the *words* they said, but I knew that they were voices... of men and women, it sounded like a whole crowd of them."

"I see," I said. "And what do you expect *me* to do about it?"

He thought I was joking at first, but after going ha-ha and seeing that I still looked as serious as before, he stuttered, "Y-you are a psy-psychic investigator, aren't you?"

"I am," I said. "But I can refuse my services, can't I? You know, '*the company reserves the right*,' and all that. And I'd like to keep out of this

affair. On second thoughts, though I'd like to stay the night here, and when the noises start, I'll go and investigate. If you don't mind, that is."

"Of *course* I don't mind!" he exclaimed. "That's why I wrote to you! I'll put you up in the bedroom next to mine."

"By the way," I said, "are you sure there's nothing more to tell? Nothing that could be connected even remotely with the haunting? Did anyone ever swear that after death they'd return to haunt you, or anything like that?"

"No, never," he said. Then, suddenly, he turned towards the window. Rain still battered against it. The trees still twisted themselves into weird shapes, but they were not the only things that Frank Bardell saw out in the darkness.

He fell back in his chair with a gurgle of terror. I ran to the window, but all I could see were trees in bizarre shapes. Then, for an instant, I thought I saw a man standing in the grounds; he was naked, and there was something else about him that I could not place. Then I turned to Frank, and when I looked back the figure had gone.

III

The wind howled and rattled the window of the bedroom. I lay awake in bed and listened for... any sounds that might be footsteps and voices. But nothing came except the wind and rain.

"Heard anything yet?" came Frank's voice through the connecting doorway.

"No, not yet," I called back.

"Neither have I."

The hooting of an owl came from somewhere outside. The window rattled, and then... and then there came the slam of a door somewhere downstairs. Leaping out of bed, I hesitated briefly to grab my gun, loaded with silver bullets, and yell "Come on! it's here!" to Frank, then I started off across the landing.

The staircase was dark, pitch dark, so I had to hold the banister until I got my torch out, wasting precious minutes. But I ran as fast as I could, the torch's light wavering through the darkness. Frank was close on my heels.

Now I could hear the sound of voices and footsteps clearly. We burst into the kitchen, for that was where the top of the disused staircase was located.

The opening to the staircase gazed at us like a hollow eye-socket of a skull. I shone the torch down the steps, but it was a winding stairway, and I saw nothing more than a wall. So I started down the stairs. Frank was still on my tail.

The voices had stopped, except for one, a high-pitched voice. Down and down the stairs we went, and the high-pitched voice yammered on and on. We started running faster and faster... And then, quite unexpectedly the stairs finished. There was nothing more except a ten foot drop. I pitched forward into space. A last glance back showed me that Frank, too, had been unable to stop. Then I hit the ground and spun into oblivion...

IV

When I came round I found that my arms and legs were chained to the floor. Twisting my head, I saw Frank in a similar plight. He, too, was conscious.

"Is this a cellar?" I asked him.

"I can't make head or tail of it," he said, obviously shaken. "This isn't the cellar that I saw when I came down the stairs last. Where on earth are we?"

Then I remembered something that I had meant to ask him. I said, "What did you see in the garden last night that frightened you so badly? I saw a naked man."

"So did I," he answered, "but there's something... Look, we're going to be here for quite a long time, by the looks of things, so do you mind if I bore you with a story?"

"Not at all," I said. "Go ahead and bore me."

"Well, in my first year at college," he began, "(I was at Cambridge, you know) I found myself short of money, and I needed ten pounds to pay off an urgent debt.

"I scouted round the college, and finally met a student, who called himself de Ville. He said he was willing to give me the ten pounds, on condition that I did something for him.

"Of course, I said, '*What is it?*' whereupon he produced a scrap of paper and a pen, and wrote something on the paper. Then he passed them to me. 'There,' he said, 'sign that.'

"It was quite simple; seven words, but oh God, the terrible meaning of those words.

"It said: *I sell my soul for ten pounds*.

"I looked at the paper, then at de Ville. I read the paper again, then turned it over to make sure I hadn't missed anything. I felt de Ville's eyes on me... he had coal-black eyes, you know... then he said 'Well? Will you sign it?'

"I looked at it again, and at the two five-pound notes that he held ready in his hand, then I picked up the paper and pen and signed it, and gave it to him, receiving the money in exchange.

"That, I thought, was the end of it. But now I'm not so sure. That man that we both saw in the garden is de Ville! I have a horrible feeling about this."

I must have been pale; I know I felt ghastly. Now I knew why I felt that vague horror when I had met him, and now I knew where the evil that emanated from him had its source. It was because Frank Bardell had *no soul*!

"Is there no way I can regain my soul?" he shrieked in horror.

"There are two," I said. "You can confess what you have done, to a Roman Catholic priest, then somehow get hold of the document that you signed and burn it in the presence of the same priest."

He didn't take to that one, so I told him the other. "You have to get hold of the sum of money... ten pounds, in your case... and sit with it, in a pentacle, repeating over and over 'I buy back my soul for ten pounds.'" Then gloomily, "if we ever get out of here, that is."

"Look!" he said, feeling in his pocket. "A file! I was going to file the lock off a cupboard door that had stuck, but I never thought it would come in *this* useful!" He bent down and began to file away frantically.

Soon he had freed both himself and me. We started for the stairs... when a wall of flame rose up before us. But I said "Quick! Follow me!" to Frank, and ran straight for the fire, and saying the *Lord's Prayer* as loud as I could, while I ran.

The flames hissed and went out. But in their place, sitting on the floor not a foot from me, was a huge toad. I say it was a toad, for that is the creature it resembled most, but in reality it was not like any creature that lived on the earth. It passed its tongue across its lips, if they were lips, and stared at

Frank and me with unblinking, lidless eyes. It had a slimy skin that had decomposed in parts, revealing the raw red flesh beneath. I have never seen anything more filthy or obscene than that Thing.

To reach the stairs, we had to pass the Thing. Wondering if it was invulnerable, I fired the gun with the silver bullets at it. There was a dull *plop* as the bullet struck. But the Thing just looked at it, languidly picked it out with a front paw, spat on it, and pitched it back at me. Then it laughed... a harsh, grating laugh, that echoed through the great hall.

The *Lord's Prayer* resounded in the hall as I advanced, hands outstretched, towards the Thing. When my hands were nearly touching the Thing's face, it gave a scream of terror and vanished. We kept on towards the stairs, when suddenly a low, pleasant, persuasive voice called "Do you want that document? I have it here; come and take it back."

I gasped out "Don't look, Frank! He's trying to trap you! Don't look at his eyes!" But it was too late; Frank was walking towards a figure that I recognised as de Ville, the naked man who had been in the grounds of Bradmoor, and I also saw what had been wrong with him; *he didn't cast a shadow*.

There is a word that will overcome all evil; it is not known to many, but luckily I am one of the few. One of the many queer, psychic people that I met in my job, was a Magister Templi; in fact, an Ipsissimus. He told me in strict confidence, the Word; in case I should meet anything really evil. It has five syllables, and it fell through my lips like a liquid stream. I cannot divulge the Word.

For a minute a blue light seemed to flicker round my fingers, then it started to extend towards de Ville. He saw it, and with a thwarted scream, he disappeared.

Frank came out of his trance with a start, and we ran for the stairs. We had only covered about twenty steps, when we came into a cellar. Now we knew why Frank had not known of the existence of the place under his house.

Then Frank whispered: "*Listen*!" But he had not needed to tell me; I could hear as well as he could. A sound like a wet rag being dragged up the steps, and a cackling laugh floated up to us. I saw a dark shape on the stairs, coming quickly upwards and leaving a trail of green slime in its wake. The thing looked like a rotting toad, maybe the same thing that I had tried to

banish. This time I used the Word, and it dissolved in a flash of flame. All that was left was a pool of green slime.

Nothing more followed us, and the house stayed silent. We went to bed and locked all the doors behind us.

VI

The next morning I went down to the village to buy some chalk, ignoring the urgent beseechings of Frank that if he left the house de Ville would probably destroy it, and if he didn't de Ville would kill him; but I assured him that no evil thing, even de Ville, would have power in the daytime. So, finally, and after much argument, he let me go.

When I returned I found him lying on a settee, with his face white as a corpse's. When I asked him what the matter was, he answered, "I've been trying to say the *Lord's Prayer* for about half-an-hour, but I can't do it! Listen:

"'*Our Father, who art in...*'" But further than that he could not go. For the first time I felt pity rather than revulsion for this man who had no soul.

"The part I find most horrible," said Frank, "is that I can say it backwards! Has that... does it make it any worse?" By my expression he saw that it did. Again, I must have looked ghastly. The *Lord's Prayer* spoken backwards, the worst denial of the belief in God that a man can give. De Ville had certainly had his way with *this* man's soul, though, of course, Frank may have been laid open to Hell, for I did not, then or now, know what kind of thing he may have practised in later life.

"I can see that it does," he said brokenly. "But anyway, have you got the thing that you went out for?"

"I have," I answered. "But we must wait until tonight... ." Then, suddenly, a horrible realisation struck me. I ran to a calendar that was tacked on the wall, and looked up the date. Then, to be sure, I found it in my diary. It was true. Both gave the same date, and the dreadful truth broke in upon me.

Tonight was Walpurgis Night!

VII

I stood stock still, not moving an eyelid as I realised the truth. Tonight was Walpurgis Night, the night of the year when, according to old grimoires and legends, everything evil was let loose to roam the earth and do as it pleased. And I knew what that meant. It would be the best night for Frank to regain his soul, but all evil would be let free to fight him. It would be abnormally easy, however, for Frank to reach his soul, for, according to popular belief, all unattached souls were also let from their prison to walk in the world. All this I told to Frank, and his face grew into a mask of worry.

"I'll carry the ritual through," he said finally. "You admitted that tonight is the night when I'm most likely to regain my soul, and nothing you say will keep me from practising the ceremony."

"Very well," said I. "And as I have enough equipment to construct two pentacles, I will stay this night with you. But tomorrow, whether or not your soul has regained its body, I will leave Bradmoor, and nothing that you say will prevent me from doing so. And I should advise you to do likewise; if you do leave, or stay for that matter, promise me that you will have that stairway walled up. If you do not promise, I will destroy all the equipment that I have brought, and then you will not regain your soul. Do you promise?"

"I promise," he said, and I could see that he meant it. "By the name of... by the name..."

But he could say no more. But he knew that it would be in his interests to promise.

Then I saw something that made my blood run cold. Pressed against the window, so hard that it looked like a flat mask, was a face. I didn't need a second look to see that it was that of de Ville. But what made my hair stand on end was not the face itself, even though it was decayed and bloated with evil. No, it was not just the face. Straight above the pointed ears were two horns, growing out and up... .

The sheer horror of the thing, the blatant revelation, was just too much for Frank. This time he didn't even gurgle, but keeled over and slumped to the floor.

I went to get some water to bring him round. As I crossed the hall with a cup of water, I heard the window open stealthily in the room where Frank lay.

I moved towards the door. There was the sound of something climbing through the window, and the thump of something falling on the floor. Then there was another sound of falling, but this time it sounded soft... like a wet rag.

I pushed open the door and entered. The door made no sound. I saw de Ville standing by Frank's unconscious body, and saw something else behind him.

It was... I can't find any creature to resemble it in this world, unless it was a jellyfish. But a jellyfish hasn't got legs, and a jellyfish hasn't got an eye that protrudes up out of the centre on a stalk.

De Ville stood back, and muttered some strange words. I am not an Ipsissimus, so I did not know what they denoted. But it was clear that they were some sort of order to the Thing, for it began to move toward Frank.

Still moving silently, I went over to the table, on which stood a flask of Holy Water. The Thing was intent on Frank, and de Ville had his back to me. I unscrewed the top, and threw the Holy Water over the Thing.

The effect was instantaneous. The Thing dissolved in a shower of glittering atoms, and the flask of Holy Water was empty. But I had not got rid of de Ville. He turned to me, and screamed: "I curse you in the name of..!" But he got no further. I always carry a small gold crucifix with me in my pocket, and I had pulled it out in the space of a second and thrown it at his evil, decayed face. He gave a horrible scream and vanished in a curl of smoke. For a minute I saw something else, some thing indescribably obscene, then the room was empty except for the inert Frank and me. Outside, across the wild moorland, I heard the yelping of a dog. Otherwise, the place was silent. Frank groaned and tried to get up. I helped him over to the settee, where he rested while I constructed two pentacles.

"Now," I asked him, "have you got ten pounds on you?"

He investigated, then gave an affirmative answer, brandishing the money under my nose as he did so.

"All right," I said. "Now here's what you'll have to do. You must take that money and sit with it in the pentacle all night. When anything comes, as it definitely will, you must show it the money and tell it that you want to buy back your soul. Now, is that clear?"

He assured me that it was, just as the sun sank below the horizon. We went to our respective pentacles, and I heard Frank frantically trying to say the *Lord's Prayer*.

It's going to be a long night, I thought.

VIII

Have you ever been in a pentacle on Walpurgis night? Believe me, it's not a thing to be experienced by anyone with a nervous temperament. I have never been the same since that night at Bradmoor; in fact, I would probably not be here now, writing this account, but for Divine intervention that saved me from a ghastly fate at the hands of the Devil's priests, or something worse.

It was a stormy night. Thunder rumbled across the moors and lost itself in the hills beyond. Dogs howled, owls hooted and a bittern boomed somewhere out on the marshes. Frank was muttering "*I buy back my soul for ten pounds... I buy back my soul for ten pounds... I..."*

Then it started. I started to fancy whispers in the room, whispers that said obscene things, whispers that were trying to persuade me to do obscene things too. But I shut my eyes and visualised Christ on the Cross, and the whispers died away and stopped altogether.

Apparently the whispers continued for Frank, for he was not saying anything about his soul, but something very different. But as he had no soul, obscenity had no meaning for him, and he had no resistance against it.

I shouted, "Frank, *shut up! Remember your soul*!" At this, he relapsed into silence, but finally broke out again with the formula I had told him to repeat.

There was a humming in the air. Suddenly without warning, there came a sound of laughing. It vibrated in the air, a slow rhythmic laughter. It sounded like a chorus of lunatics, invisible ones at that. It was horrible. Frank's face had gone pale; a stream of saliva ran from the corner of his mouth. He started to try to get out of the pentacle, but something held him back.

This time I said the Word. The laughter became shrieks and died away. Frank wiped his forehead and tried to look as if he was not scared. But he was; so was I.

I thought I saw the jellyfish in a corner, but after a minute it disappeared. Then, quite suddenly, the electric light, which had been switched on, dimmed and went out. A hot wind blew at my face, and something squealed. Three loud knocks came from the window, and as the Thing squealed louder, the window started to open.

The darkness was lit again, but not by electric light. It came from the window, and it was the light of flames. At first I thought that the house was on fire, but then I saw that I had been mistaken. For this was not true fire, but ethereal fire, and in the centre was a many-faceted jewel, that seemed to writhe in agony, and I knew that it was Frank's soul, trying to return to its body. But then a hand, a fleshless skeleton hand, came through the flames, and took the soul through the fire, back to the empty beyond where the souls of the damned howl forever. And I heard Frank give a suppressed sob of agony as the Hand took his soul.

"Keep going!" I encouraged him. "Walpurgis night has only just started."

"I know," he answered. "That's what is worrying me."

It had gone dark again, when suddenly something crashed through the window. I could hear its panting and growling, a sound that made my blood run cold. But all I could see was a vague intensifying of the darkness, and two red eyes that seemed to glow. The fiery glow came back and the Beast was illuminated. I have never seen one since, and I do not want to. But I knew instinctively what it was. It was a *chien du feu*, a *Hound of Hell*!

It put back its head and bayed, then glared at me balefully. As it did this again, I picked up one of the flasks of Holy Water and threw it down the Hound's throat.

Once again the powers of Good triumphed over those of Evil. The Thing dissolved, but Frank's voice shouted "John! Look out! It's behind you! *Look out*!"

I turned. There was nothing behind me, but I heard a stealthy movement in the spot that I had been facing a moment before. Whipping round, I saw a purple face floating in the air just outside. The Word got rid of it, however.

"Who was that shouting?" came Frank's voice.

"Wasn't it you?" I asked.

"No," he said. "It was another of the Things that hunt me, no doubt. If they can imitate my voice, who can tell what more they may do?"

There was a ghastly scream from behind Frank. He jumped up... and knocked over one of the cruets of Holy Water...

The face of de Ville materialised in the air, and swiftly his naked body produced itself. A green glowing figure of horror appeared on the other side of the pentacle. It had no face. A snake was suddenly curling around Frank's body, and above him a skeleton hand, holding a glowing knife, materialised. The horrors converged on him...

Suddenly darkness descended on my mind, and I knew no more.

IX

I was a jewel, floating in a humming void. I had no feelings or emotions; I could not speak, only think. I told myself, quite unemotionally, that I was dead.

I found that I could project myself to any spot, faster than the speed of light. I projected myself, quite unhurt, to Bradmoor's cellar. Then I knew the truth. The voices. The footsteps down the disused stairway. The fact that tonight was Walpurgis night.

Bradmoor was the place where, unknown to Frank, The Grand Sabbat was held!

The footsteps and other noises had been the witches and Devil's priests taking the equipment for the Black Mass to the meeting-place. And they *knew* that Frank had sold his soul, and would not be able to use the Powers of Good to help him. But they had not realised that he might write to a friend who knew how to disperse Evil. Even so, I had not saved him, and I could not do so now, for I was dead.

The witches in the place under Bradmoor had a girl on the altar, and they were going to sacrifice her to some filthy god that they worshipped. I could see a Thing near the altar; it was the figure of an old man, clad in black robes that were covered in Satanic symbols, but his head was that of a wolf, the teeth dripping with blood and saliva. He moved forward, toward the altar upon which lay his prey, a girl who probably knew nothing at all about Black Magic and Satanism. If she had known about it, she could have protected herself.

I strove to put a barrier of Divine protection around her. "Oh God, don't let her die. She is so young, so beautiful." And almost immediately a huge white dove flew down and alighted on the altar. Putting its wings around her, it vanished through the wall. A vulture glowing with an eerie red light, appeared to follow the dove, only to be struck down by a fork of white lightning.

The darkness began to disperse; the inner light started to fade. My soul was quite inexplicably, returning to my body.

Then I had a feeling that, in the void, I was not alone. A voice echoed in my mind. "*You have done as much as you could. As a reward, you will not die yet. The night is finished, and you will return to your body..."*

I was in the pentacle, and the sun was just rising. My eyes raked round the room... and then I froze, as I saw the other pentacle.

A small pile of ash lay just inside it, like that which could result from pound notes being exposed to the fires of Hell. Frank lay on his back in the middle of the pentacle. There was no wound or mark on him. But he was dead!

X

There was an inquest, of course. But the verdict was "Death by natural causes," and I gave none of the evidence that is written here. They would only have said I was crazy, anyway.

And de Ville? Nobody knows, but I can guess. I think he should have been named Le Noir for his short stay on earth, or maybe Natas.

I think that, even though the powers of Good are on our side, when we go near anything or anybody evil, we should be careful. Corruption's claws can sink deep into human flesh.

As for me, I am a bank clerk. It is a boring job, but at least I am relatively safe from de Ville. I never laid another ghost, except that of The Tower, of which you will learn if you read on.

Hybrid

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Tom Dickson stood quite still, amazed at what he saw, lying in the middle of that barren place. It was a man, naked except for a cloth which covered his head and face.

Then a numbing horror began to creep into his mind. The hands were long and the nails were long and pointed. That was disgusting enough, but the thing that horrified him was that the hands were *dripping with blood*!

The Thing began to crawl towards him. It made a motion of throwing away the cloth, and he screamed. "No!" he cried. "You won't make me see the face! I'll shut my eyes!" But he couldn't. They seemed to be stuck open. The Thing crawled nearer, and half-dropped the cloth, revealing a pointed muzzle, and red eyes that seemed to bore into his eyes... He could not escape, the Thing was hypnotising him...

"You say you are in a barren rock desert, the only landmark being a rock that resembles a hand pointing up into the sky?" said the psychiatrist.

"Yes, that's right," said Tom Dickson, "but the inexplicable part of it is that, even though I'm in a place that seems to be, even though it's impossible, a desert, I can hear the sound of the sea, quite near me too! What do you make of it?"

"It strikes me," said the psychiatrist curtly, "that you're making altogether too much of this dream. After all, what can a dream, however horrible, do to you?"

"You try it, sometime!" shouted Dickson, leaping out of his chair. "It's driving me mad!" He smashed his fist down on the psychiatrist's desk, making the inkwell jump into the air and getting a splash of ink in his eye for his troubles. Wiping his eye, he continued, "Can't you do *anything* for me?" in a somewhat subdued tone of voice.

"My advice," said the psychiatrist, "is to go for a few weeks in Cornwall," while he frantically endeavoured to mop ink off his once-shining desk.

"Thanks," said Dickson. "Maybe I will. In fact, I *will*!"

You can easily lose yourself in Cornwall, if you're not careful to note your surroundings. Dickson found that out when he lost himself there on the first day of his "rest cure."

He had been walking along the rocky coast, when it happened. The red mist that he had noticed gathering over the sea was, quite swiftly, extending smoky tentacles across the water and curled round him... Very soon the only thing in sight was a flat wall of pink mist. Dickson did not think of the strange colour at the time. He looked at his watch: six o'clock. The sun would set soon. There was a faint copper-coloured disc floating in the sky, but it was sinking.

Before long it had disappeared. He walked along through the night, and before long he found that he must lie down, he was so tired. The mist began to disperse as he lay down on the dew-covered grass.

Waking up, he found the mist had completely disappeared. He took stock of his surroundings; the place looked like a rock desert. The only landmark was a rock that resembled a pointing finger.

A movement behind him made him turn. A man stood there. He was young and very dark with green eyes. His canine teeth were pointed and extremely long. His voice was soft and purring, like the low growling of a dog. "Lost your way?" he asked Dickson.

"Yes, I have, as a matter of fact," Dickson answered. "Do you know the Planet Hotel?"

"I do," said the green-eyed young man. "But I don't think you'll be able to get there till tomorrow. The road between it and here has been flooded. I would be honoured if you would consent to stay the night at my house. It is only a few hundred yards down the shore. Come! Let us go!"

"What is your name?" Dickson panted as he ran after the young man, who seemed to run like a wolf.

"Call me *Lupus*!" called back the young man, over his shoulder.

Lupus's home was a small house on the edge of a cliff. As Lupus was just eating his meal... Dickson did not know which meal, he had no notion what

time it was, but he thought it was breakfast... as Lupus was just eating his meal, he invited Dickson to join him. But Dickson found it almost impossible to eat a pork chop with an all-wood knife and fork.

Late that afternoon, just before sunset, Dickson was alone in Lupus's house. Lupus had said he was going to "get some food." As he sat before a fire in the lounge, reading *To the Devil—A Daughter*, a book from Lupus's shelf, a slow realisation crept over him, and he began to feel afraid. The place where Lupus had met him was the scene in his dream!

He ran along the shore to the rocks. Yes, there it was, exactly as it had been in his dream, except that there was no naked body lying inert on the rocks... He felt a touch on his shoulder.

He turned. A naked man with a wolf's head stood there.

A voice said, "Now I've got food." It was Lupus's voice.

As the Thing tore his throat out, he realised in his last moments why Lupus did not use silver knives.

The Tower

"The story explicitly mentions M.R. James and evokes his tale *Oh Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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Prologue

As a monument to anyone, it was very impressive. As a monument to Franz Asta, it was impressive, but there was some aura of evil about it that brought into the mind thoughts of suicides falling from the roof and splattering, dolls of red pulp, at the bottom. Looking up at the tower, Reynard knew of the Tower's bad reputation, and even though it was a hot day, he shivered. The ancient maxim said. *What goes up must come down*, but apparently scientific laws did not apply to the Asta Tower, for many people had gone up the stairway into the Tower and most of them had not returned.

Reynard, a college student, was to sleep the night out in the Tower, for when two of his student friends had heard of its evil reputation, they told him that they were willing to bet twenty pounds on the fact that he would not sleep in the Asta Tower. With a student's usual recklessness about such things, Reynard had taken on the bet, and now he scanned his night's lodgings, the Tower.

When he had been in the local museum with his friends, they had seen a portrait, captioned under a glass case. The portrait showed a man with high cheek-bones and red, sunken eyes. He had a cruel mouth, with thin bloodless lips that seemed to be permanently set in a sneer. The caption informed them that "this man is Franz Asta, a count of the sixteenth century. He is reputed to have practised sorcery in the Tower, named after him, outside this town. Many people were invited to the Tower, his permanent residence, and some of their bodies were found in the moat, which dried up in the long past, but there were two small holes in their throats where the life-blood had been sucked out of their bodies." This was in German, but has been translated for the benefit of my listeners and readers.

Reynard was ascending the shadowy stairs. Outside, some weird animal gave a sobbing cry. Fog was stretching smoky tentacles through the gaping holes of windows.

Reynard lay on a bench in the darkness. Suddenly a cold wet hand brushed across his face. He screamed... and then he felt a kiss, not on his lips, but on his throat... his throat felt numb, he couldn't breathe... and the hand was laid on his mouth, so that he couldn't scream...

His student friends came for him the next morning and found him dead. All the blood had been drunk through two holes in his throat, and there were marks around his mouth that showed that a hand had been held across his mouth. The two students, horrified and broken at what they had done, ran all the way to the nearest police-station, leaving behind them a small wooden whistle, with Latin words engraved on its side, clutched in Reynard's dead hand.

I read about the Tower Mystery in one of the foreign journals. It was a topic of conversation there for a month. Then they started talking about a woman who had... But I am not here to tell you sordid *News of the World* cases. I investigate psychic cases, not cases of that kind. I wouldn't want to... Oh well, it's too late now anyway.

As I was going to say, the whistle that had been in Reynard's hand when they found him, had not been buried with him. Unfortunately, it had been left in the morgue, and when the police came to take it as an item in the inquest, it had gone. Whether some thief with an eye for strange loot had taken it, or whether its owner had returned for it, was not possible to say. But it had certainly gone.

As I am a psychic investigator, as you learned in *Bradmoor*, I knew at once that the Terror of the Afka Tower was none other than that most terrifying of all denizens of darkness, a vampire. I have never met a vampire in combat before, and I can assure you that I do not wish ever to do so again. There is a spiritual, as well as a mortal danger from were-bats.

And the whistle? you ask. What has that to do with vampires? Those of you who have read M. R. James' story, which deals with a whistle, may have some idea. Those who never heard of M. R. James, read on, while the shadows move and weird night noises assail your ears.

I

Mist was creeping over the land by the time I reached the Tower. It was like a pointing finger, a stairway to Heaven... or to Hell. There was indeed an aura about it, there seemed to be something *watching* from the Tower. An invisible *Thing* waited in the tower for prey to come blindly into its clutching claws.

A bird alighted on the towering battlements. Birds do not usually frighten me, but this was the filthiest of all gnawers of carrion... a vulture. A wet hand was tracing its way down my spine when the vulture, giving vent to that horrible cry that is so often heard near dead bodies in this country, disappeared through a gaping window-hole. I walked back to my car, feeling that this was the most evil place that I would come up against. Then, my mind reminding me of Bradmoor, I improvised on the second worst.

Starting up the engine, I found that it had inexplicably stopped completely. After an hour of pulling out every component and gazing at it as though I expected it to change into a worm, then putting them back in a convenient place, I found that the car still stayed as inert as ever. Finally I decided to go to the nearest village to fetch helpers.

The hand of night was creeping over the country as I started off across the misty fields. Little droplets of moisture hung in spiders' webs; and as I thought of spiders, a cold shiver went down my spine. Spiders were too much related to the vampires, in my mind.

The mist was growing thicker all the time as I walked through the long grass. The grass seemed to cling to me, like thin slimy tentacles of an octopus. I looked back at the Tower once; it still stood, a pointing finger, silhouetted against the darkling sky; but there seemed to be a luminosity about it, a strange red glow, lighting it up.

It was eerie, all right, but I had no time to bother about the Asta Tower. My car's plight was more than enough. So I turned my back on it, and kept on across the mist-covered field. As a scream came from above me, I shivered, but it was a vulture, maybe the one I had seen at the Tower. I threw a stone at it, and with another cry, it flew off and disappeared into the mist.

On and on through the dark night I walked, until at last I saw a car in front of me. Then I looked to the left, and knew. The car was my own.

I was lost!

II

As soon as the realisation came to me, I knew it would be no good tiring myself out, and I went to the car and lay on the front seat. Very soon I was asleep.

I can't remember what I dreamed about, except that it was very unpleasant. I woke up screaming. When I saw where I was, it took me a few minutes to discover how I got there. Closed doors opened in my mind, and I remembered. I looked toward the Tower...

The moat was filled.

Filled with green-yellow water that lit up the night with an eerie glow. It was like the glow I had seen emanating from the Tower a few hours ago, except that this was

green and the other had been red. It may not sound beautiful when it is described in words, but... at any rate to me... it had an unearthly beauty; and I knew that, whatever repercussions might result, I must leave the safety of the car to get a closer look at this unnatural phenomenon.

I slammed the door behind me and felt my way for the first few feet. Very quickly I reached the moat, and stood staring into the luminous depths. But before long I *felt* rather than heard a commanding voice; a voice that ordered me to go into the Tower, to ascend the winding stairs to the highest room; a voice of a supernatural Thing, a command that could not be disobeyed. And as I heard that Voice's call, the green water faded and was gone; but the red light around the Tower appeared again. The Voice called again; I walked into the dried-up moat, through the doorway and up the steps...

Up. Up. Up. Higher and higher I went, at every step hearing the Voice ordering me to go to the highest room. And, powerless to disobey its command, I climbed, unaware till afterwards of the aching of my legs, of the trickle of red blood down my arm where I had cut it on a protruding window-ledge.

The door of the topmost room stood open, waiting for me to enter. I entered, and as soon as I was beyond the door, some invisible agency shut it. I looked up and saw It.

It was the figure of a man, a man with red, sunken eyes, a sneering mouth and high cheekbones. He was holding a small red book, and as I came through the door he picked up a quill and wrote something in the book.

Then he waved his hand at me and a few Latin words seemed to burn themselves into my brain; suddenly I felt numb and found I couldn't even move an eyelid, so extensive was the paralysis.

Then I knew that I was up against the roving spirit of Franz Asta, Black Magician and vampire-raiser. And as I saw his hand go into his robe and put something to his lips, I knew also that he would consider me to be a victim, and call up his familiars to kill me... to make me into one of that ghastly league, the Vampires, the Un-Dead.

He blew the whistle.

The door opened to admit a Thing, a Thing of horror, a man; it was dressed in a dark green robe, it had a twisted, dead-white face and... most horrible of all... where its hands should have been, there was empty space; the arms ended in stumps. The face was lacerated and torn; blood ran from newly-made wounds, and as I watched, still unable to move a muscle, the Count wrenched a whip from the wall and cut the Thing across the face with it. The Thing clutched its forehead and staggered through the doorway.

At the same time a huge bat flew in the window, and something told me that *this* was the Vampire, and this frightened me so much that I exerted all my will to call for Divine protection. Apparently I succeeded; the paralysis left my limbs, and I found I was free of the supernatural bond that had been hampering me. Even then, however, I was thinking how to prove the truth of my experience; then acting on a hunch, I said the *Word* mentioned in "Bradmoor." The ghost of the Count seemed to fall apart, and soon all that was left of Franz Asta was a white ivory frame, and even that became dust and blew out of the window as a breeze whispered into the room.

But on the floor, intact though yellowed with the passing of centuries, was the red book in which the Count had been writing when I entered the room...

III

Returning to my hotel, I went up to my room and took out the book. I now saw it was a diary. I give some of the entries here.

They were once again in German, but as before I have given the English translation.

-June 9th, 1695. Max, my familiar, lured an old woman to my castle, where I ate her. She was not very frightened of Max, and did not expect him to

drink her blood...

-January 19th, 1857. Killed three peasants by means of curses and incantations to Zamiel.

-July 26th, 1958. Lured English psychic investigator, John Campbell, to my castle. I am about to put out his eyes and eat him. Have just called Van Haak to the room...

I decided to find out, if possible, who Van Haak was. Going down to the museum, I asked the proprietor who he had been. He knew the story, and answered:

"He was a witch who lived in the same time as Asta. One day Asta invited him to his castle... the Asta Tower, you know... He was never seen again, at least not alive. They found him in the moat with his face covered with raw wounds and his hands cut off. The story says that after death he was doomed to become one of Franz Asta's familiars. Of course, it's only a story..."

Oh, yeah? I thought.

My hotel again. As I crossed the lawn I looked towards the place where, I knew, the Tower would be silhouetted against the skyline. I glanced in its general direction. Then I took a long look. My eyes still registered the same. The Asta Tower was *no longer there*!

I rushed to find somebody who'd tell me that my eyes had gone wrong, that the Tower was still there. A young American, also staying at the hotel, was the first person that I met. "*What's happened to the Tower*?" I cried, catching at his arm. "I left it about four o'clock this morning, and it was still intact. What went wrong?"

He did not ask me what I was doing in a lonely tower at four o'clock in the morning, as I expected him to. He only answered "You were lucky. It couldn't have fifteen minutes after you left that the place started to crumble. About half an hour later the only thing they found was a pile of bricks and the skeleton of a huge bat. They haven't found out yet what it was that caused it to fall apart. Queer affair altogether; if you ask me, I think that... if there were such things... ghosts had something to do with it."

"Maybe," I said numbly. "Uh... thanks for telling me."

I went up to my room and took out my notebook to copy down the entries in Asta's diary. I went over to the drawer in which the little red book lay, and opened it.

The drawer was empty.

I have no proof now, so I don't expect you to believe a word of this. But I've never been able to decide this: did the diary, like the Tower, crumble into nothingness? Or did something... something supernatural... take it into the Beyond? Or was it a thief with an eye for strange loot that took it? I don't know. I never will.

What do *you* think?

Conversation In A Railway Carriage

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DISAPPEARING WIFE
POLICE CANNOT FIND ANY BODY

The mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Gillian Shelton has still not been accounted for. She vanished from her house late last night; no trace of her body has yet been found. Police believe that her husband murdered her and burned the body in the fireplace.

So read Jim Grant, sitting in a third-class non-smoker railway carriage. He was not horrified, as any normal person would be. In fact, he was very pleased. But then, he had good reason to; he had murdered her.

"Hope she rots in hell," he muttered. "Damn her, marrying somebody while I was in the army! I'm glad I killed her! But the police will never find the body..." he gave a grim smile. "...I've seen to that!" He sat back in his seat. "My God, but I'm hungry!"

The train rocked from side to side. A long high scream assailed his ears; an express was sending out its cry as it raced in the other direction, as a gull lets out its shriek as it skims over the surface of the water.

Click! The lights dimmed and went out. The only light in the carriage now was the faint light of twilight. Very soon the train entered a station; the door opened to admit a woman. Grant could not see her face owing to the bad light. She sat down and took out her newspaper, which he had noticed her frantically snatching from a bookstall as the train squealed into the station. For some time the only sound in the carriage was the rustling of paper. Then the woman suddenly ejaculated "Fools!"

Grant jumped at the sudden, sharp sound. Then, regaining his composure, he sat back and said "I beg your pardon?"

"I said 'Fools'!" said the woman. "The police don't know what they're talking about. They say Mrs. Shelton's body was burnt; it isn't true! That's not at all what happened to it!" Grant felt odd; this was getting too near home for his liking. But, still keeping his voice under control, he said: "What did happen, then?"

"He ate the body, of course," she said coolly. "And it wasn't the husband, either; it was somebody else, somebody called Jim Grant." He leapt towards the seat opposite; but at that moment the train stopped with a grinding jerk, and with a "This is my stop," the woman opened the door and climbed out.

He jumped out after her; she knew his secret, she mustn't escape! Then he saw her face... the eyes had been cut out. He hadn't wanted to eat them. He fell on the platform, screaming and foaming at the mouth. Before long everyone in the station was watching him; the police found him dead of a broken blood vessel.

The Mask

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I

The owner of the boarding-house was a rather facetious young man with a drooping moustache. He was the type, Dick Moorhead knew, who would make a standing joke of Moorhead's tendency to write a ghost story whenever he had a moment of spare time, which was often. The young man, who introduced himself as Fred Laird, had noticed the name "Richard P. Moorhead" on Moorhead's luggage, and immediately asked "Are you the ghost-story writer?"

Moorhead didn't like the emphasis on the "you." He answered coldly, "I am that person. Why?" The young man hastened to pacify him with "I've read a lot of your books. I particularly enjoyed *The Prowling Horror of Woodville*. Are you writing one now?"

The conversation continued, and as it unfolded Moorhead began to feel that Laird might not be so cynical, after all, about his stories. Laird, in fact, insisted in taking him into the lounge, where two copies of *Eerie Stories* reposed, hiding shyly in a corner of the scrupulously-polished bookcase. Looking at the numbers, Moorhead found he had contributed to both of them... in fact, they each contained an episode of his two-part serial, *Spawn of Hell*.

"I don't suppose," said Moorhead turning from the bookcase, "I don't suppose that you've got a haunted room here?" *Now* he's got his chance, he thought. But surprisingly. Laird said, "No, we haven't got any ghosts, at least I don't think we have."

"Pity," said Moorhead. "Which room are you giving me?" Then, as Laird reached for a key, "Ah, Number 19, I see." He took it from Laird's outstretched hand, and told him that he would, as it was quite early in the

afternoon, go to his room and unpack. He did so, and the remainder of the afternoon and evening passed uneventfully. At eleven-thirty he went to bed.

Lying in the soft velvet darkness, he remembered the events that had brought him to the small village, Crampton, which was about a half-mile from Laird's boarding-house. Eating his breakfast one morning at his London home, a line in the paper caught his eye. *Strange Happenings in Village*, it said. *Is Crampton A Haunted Village?*

Reading on, he was informed that a huge creature had been seen near the churchyard. It was covered with hair and had a wolf's head, according to witnesses. Old men were filling guns, trophies from some war fought long ago, with silver bullets. "Here," Moorhead said to himself, "is a chance of a lifetime! Maybe I'll even meet the werewolf!" He was one of those people who believe in what they write. So he packed a suitcase and drove to Crampton.

There were no hotels or boarding-houses in Crampton, but after an hour's search Moorhead found Laird's house. The rest has been told.

As Moorhead floated through the strange world of half-sleep, he resolved to make extensive inquiries in the region of the village. He did so, but found out nothing except a rather nasty rumour of the type that breed by the dozen in small villages. He went to the churchyard where the Thing was reputed to have appeared, but it did not materialise for him. No coffins rose out of the earth. No dead bodies lay on the grass. No corpses peered from behind trees. The place was just what it seemed to be: an ordinary cemetery, a place where the dead *stayed* dead. But then, of course, werewolves were, while being supernatural creatures of the worst kind, still alive. Maybe... Moorhead thought suddenly... maybe the Thing was not a werewolf at all, but some witch's familiar! That would mean a search for the "*devil's mark*," a search that would be thought obscene in modern England. But there I go, thought Moorhead ruefully, I run on and on when there isn't even any proof of the Thing's existence. A few old wives' tales... The news papers will fasten their teeth into anything if they're given a chance.

Returning to the boarding-house, he was surprised to find Laird waiting for him at the door. Laird usually had a grin on his face, so it was more of a surprise to see that he looked very worried. Before he knew what was happening, Moorhead found himself sitting in Laird's private room, being offered a cigarette by Laird.

"I hear you've been making inquiries in the village about the thing that was seen by the churchyard," was Laird's opening remark. "Do you know on what date it was seen?"

"Somewhere around the end of October, wasn't it?" came Moor-head's answer. Then he gave a gasp. "I say! Was it Hallowe'en Night?"

"As a matter of fact, it was," confirmed Fred Laird. "And as it was Hallowe'en, I thought I... Well, it seemed... Oh, to hell with it. Come over here... look!" Mystified, Moorhead followed Laird over to a cupboard. As it opened, he bent forward to peer into it... and nearly fainted from the totally unexpected momentary horror.

The werewolf stared out at him with blind, gaping eye-sockets. It was some time before Moorhead realised that it was only the skin that lay at the bottom, an empty hulk. So Laird had killed the werewolf! Moorhead thought, and turned to Laird to ask. "How did you kill it?" But Laird's face had become more worried still, and he only said, "I see that you don't understand yet." "Admittedly, I don't," said Moorhead, "is there something else?"

"*Look*," said Laird fiercely, "I was in London on the twenty ninth. I saw this thing in the window of a junk-shop, and suddenly it struck me that it would be rather good to have a Hallowe'en joke on the villagers, so I went in and got the skin.

"But the newspapers got hold of the story, and of course I didn't say a word to anyone about my part in it, I was too scared. However, I don't want you to go to any further trouble. So now you know. "I am the werewolf!"

Moorhead lay in bed, thinking of every torture to which he would like to subject Fred Laird. Bringing him down to a stinking house like this on a fool's errand... the cheek of it, blast him! Oh well, this was the last night he was going to spend under this roof, thank God. He'd have started out tonight, had his car not refused to start. Still, the garage proprietor had said that the car would be as good as new in the morning.

A sudden noise behind him made him start. He turned over . . .

Standing there, with one skinny hand pointing at him, was the most ridiculous figure that Moorhead had ever seen. It was not the long, flowing garment, quite obviously a sheet, that it wore; though it could be seen as a

crude attempt to portray the traditional robes of the old-time ghost. The thing that made him double up with laughing was the face.

It was the face of a devil. At one part the material had torn, exposing the skin of the wearer. Moorhead knew that if he ripped off the mask, the face of Fred Laird would be underneath. And that was just what he intended to do. To think that the idiot actually thought to scare him with a damn fool get-up like that! *He'd* show him that he wasn't going to play on Moorhead's beliefs. He wasn't getting off lightly either. Moorhead would show him... . With one movement he leapt towards the figure and ripped off the devil-mask.

He stood there with the mask in his hand, too terrified to cry out, paralysed by fear of a Thing not of this world, a Thing from the Great Unknown.

II

The man on the floor was undoubtedly dead. By the expression on his face, he had died of fright. By other signs, he had been throttled. Inspector Swann looked at the body, rather sadly; though his sorrow stemmed more from the fact that he had absolutely no clues than from the loss to humanity that had just taken place.

Of course, there was the disappearance of Laird, the proprietor of the place. That was incriminating enough. Gone without a trace! He hadn't told anyone he was going; nobody had seen him for a few days.

Then there were the floorboards. How did they fit in? They had been thrown up, it seemed, by pressure from below. They were in the room in which the body had been found. Had... *something* come from under the floor and put its hands round the man's neck?

There was some link between these incidents... there *had* to be. "If only we could get hold of Laird," the Inspector remarked to the constable who had been the first agent of the law to see the body. "At least we know who he is," said the Constable pointing at the body on the floor. "Richard P. Moorhead's written his last thriller for *Eerie Stories*. Pity too, I've never missed an issue." He caught the Inspector's eye and suddenly found an enraptured interest in a monstrosity that was intended to be a vase. Finally, he said "Is there a cellar in this place?" "How the hell should *I* know?"

retorted Swann irritably. "We'd better find out, there may be something down there."

Five minutes later, the two men looked at each other in something like horror. They were standing in the cellar, and at their feet lay the body of Fred Laird. The protruding tongue and marks on the throat were indisputable signs that Laird had been throttled.

"What on earth happened?" asked the Constable as they locked up the silent house and prepared to return to the police station. "I suppose we'll never know..."

III

It may be a hard task for my readers to visualise Laird as a murderer. Not an intentional one, maybe; but whether intentional or not, he was definitely a murderer.

When Frank Jameson, a believer in all superstition, found that Laird laughed at his beliefs, he made up his mind to give Laird such a shock as would not be forgotten for many nights. Walking to the village that same evening, he purchased a cardboard devil-mask and a sheet, returning when everybody else. Laird included, was in bed.

So much can be surmised. What took place after that will never certainly be known, but the scene can be constructed, from a bloodstained poker, with one or two strands of human hair still adhering to it, found in Laird's bedroom; also by certain other signs.

What happened after Jameson let himself into Laird's bedroom can be pictured. Laird waking, seeing something leaning over the foot of his bed; something that, by his half-sleeping brain, seemed to be a fiend from the depths of Hell. He clutches up a poker, lying at hand on the hearth by his bed; brings the implement down on the Thing's skull. Sheet and mask fall away, and Laird sees no demon, but only Frank Jameson in his death-throes.

Laird, horrified at what he has done, realises that he must dispose of the body. He tears up the floorboards in one of the rooms, lays the body, with disguise, in the niche. When he is asked "Where is Jameson?" he answers to the effect that he was called away in the night on urgent business. The disappearance made a small stir in the papers at the time, but after a few months the police ended their investigation, no wiser than when they began.

That was three years before Moorhead ever met Laird. A year after the death of Jameson, we come to one of the parts of the affair which seems to admit none but a supernatural explanation; it is recorded in Laird's diary, which he had been writing on the night of his death.

Laird was alone in the house when it happened; he heard strange noises coming from the room in which Jameson's corpse was hidden. Entering the room, he was horrified to see the floorboards being forced up from below; and, according to the appropriate entry in his diary, "I saw a hand reach up; I stamped on it, whereupon its owner retracted it. Then the top of a head came into view; I could not bear to look upon the face, and rushing out of the room, I locked the door."

I will let the last entry speak for itself; the pen lay in a blot across the page, the sentence which he had been writing was only half-finished. The entry I have reproduced below, for the benefit of my readers.

> "August 2nd, 1958. Tonight is the anniversary of the death of Jameson. Will he haunt me? I cannot tell. But if he can only return in the flesh, I shall lock myself in the cellar till daybreak. Will his face be as horrible as the glimpse I got on that night when I saw the boards rising in... that Room? A face like..."

But there the sentence ends. There is no more. And we mortals will never know what horrifying face Moorhead saw when he ripped off the Mask.

No trace has yet been found of the body of Frank Jameson. Did his body crumble to dust when his ghostly revenge had been achieved?

Or was it taken into a Beyond where only the Dead are allowed... a Place which has no name?

Premonition

Written in: 1958
First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #50*, Michaelmas 1987

A human soul in the centre of an oscillating vortex. A disembodied ego, the ego of a mass murderer, a fiend in human shape by the name of Harry Masters.

The ego sensed something materialising in the vortex. It came nearer, and Masters knew. All the strange events of his last week in the world came back in a terrible second of horrible realisation...

It was very cold in the High Street, Masters noted, as he walked to his office. The rain slashed down from the sky in a liquid sheet, running along the gutter and splashing off any obstruction it chanced to meet. A muted rumble of thunder growled across the city; a few minutes later the thought crossed his mind that he had seen no lightning. He saw a fork of lightning a few minutes later; never before had he seen red lightning. He wondered if it would be in the papers that night.

An icy wind followed him into his office as he shut the door against the storm. As he hung up his coat in the hall, he saw another of the uncanny flashes. His body seemed suddenly to be exposed to the heat of a factory furnace. Agonising pains came to his tortured mind from every part of his body, and in horror he looked down at his hands, the only portion of his body visible to him. And then horror and madness claimed his mind, and at last he screamed; for nothing remained of his hands save black, smoking hulks. Then, to the accompaniment of a peal of thunder, blackness enveloped him and he knew no more.

When his eyes opened once more upon the world, it was to see a face looking down on him. Some minutes elapsed before he focused his eyes sufficiently to recognise it as that of his secretary. The memory of the horror he had just experienced came flooding back to him, and he looked down at his hands apprehensively; but there was not a mark on them, they were

perfectly whole. On a minute's hard thinking, a more subtle horror presented itself to him: was he going insane? The red lightning, too, could be but a figment of a crazed mind. He could not stand the uncertainty; he made up his mind to find out the truth, however terrible it might be. Turning to the secretary, he asked her "Did you see any lightning. Miss Woodvine?"

"No, sir! Not a flicker; nor a whisper of thunder. Torrents of rain, though; you never did see..." But here Masters interrupted with "Never mind. That will be all. Miss Woodvine. You can take the day off."

"Take the day off, sir?"

"Yes, I don't feel very well; I think I'll go home," answered Masters. And Miss Woodvine thought that was true; for he was certainly very pale.

Mark Garrett had not liked Masters; and in America, he made this dislike quite plain. He happened to know that Masters had two girl friends at that time, one known as Susan and the other Jill. Garrett rang up Jill and addressed her as Susan, then hung up. He did a similar thing to Susan, both times calling himself Frank.

This trick ruined Masters' relations with both girls, as would be expected. However, Masters resolved to have his revenge on the culprit; and one night in a drugstore, when he was more than a little drunk, he heard Garrett, who was in a similar state, boasting of the trick he had played. Masters rushed outside in a frenzy and set fire to the place. Too late did he realise what he had done, and by that time twenty people had died on the pyre. He flew back to England on the next 'plane, changing his name (his real name was Chatterton) to Masters.

These uneasy thoughts passed through Masters' mind as he twisted uncomfortably in his bed that night. The wind rattled the doors and windows and screamed like a dying beast. Masters gave a final twitch, and at last succumbed to the unaccountable urge to get out of bed.

He walked to the window and leaned his elbows on the sill. Tattered clouds floated across the lurid sky. "I think I'll take a sleeping pill, I need the rest," he said to nobody in particular.

Returning from the bathroom with a glass of water, he saw the heavens open and release a flood. He took the little round box of pills out of its alcove and dissolved one in the glass.

At that precise moment the sky was torn open as a fork of red lightning lanced down. The horror of that morning was upon him again; he knew there would be a second flash of lightning, and that when it came, he would experience the sensation of being burnt alive... He knew that he could still avoid it, however. With one movement he removed the lid of the box of pills and tipped the contents into the glass.

It was only when he felt death numbing his body that he realised that he was going out from his body, only to consign himself to the flames of which he had had a premonition...

...the fires of Hell.

Midnight Appointment

"Two boys arrange to meet at a reputedly haunted spot. Both keep the appointment, one not in corporeal form."—Ramsey Campbell, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1958
First published in *St. Edwards College Magazine 1, No. 4*, Michaelmas 1958

Not yet available.

The Pit

"Campbell seems to have penned an unbelievable quantity of juvenilia in the tender years leading up to his Arkham House break-through *The Inhabitant Of The Lake*. Most of this material is contained in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #50, Ghostly Tales By Ramsey Campbell*. Another appears in the program book of the NecronomiCon 1995 (Necronomicon Press). But here you will find the most ambitious of them all, a Machenesque fragment called *The Pit.*"—Robert M. Price, Introduction to *Midnight Shambler #3, July 1996.*

Written in: 1958
First published in *Midnight Shambler #3*, July 1996

I - The Grating

The house looked quite inviting as they drove up the gravelled drive—much more so than the picture they had examined in the close atmosphere of the agent's office. They were just back from their honeymoon—Jill and John Denniston, John having thirty years' experience of life and his wife a year less. John had been called to this village, Territon, by a tempting offer of an office job with good wages and better hours. The house, which went by the strange name of *Vorli* had been on sale for only a week before Jill and John's arrival at the village on the outskirts of which stood *Vorli*.

The couple had driven to Territon, a village which was surrounded by forbidding moors of the type found in the South of England, on the chance that they might find something like *Vorli*. But even they did not foresee the incredible price of the place; expecting at least one and a half-thousand, they were told three-quarters of a thousand pounds.

"What's wrong with the house?" was Denniston's first remark after he had recovered from his surprise. He half-expected the agent to say indignantly that there was nothing whatever wrong with it and so, indeed , he did.

There was silence for a full minute while John and his wife both thought Was somebody murdered there? Finally the quiet was shattered by the agent saying coldly and finally, "Well, if you don't want it, I have nothing else to offer—"

Denniston and his wife looked at each other; then seeming to come to a decision, he said, "If the house isn't occupied, could we look it over—?" Five minutes later, Jill and her husband were driving toward the house. In his pocket was a key.

Jill was wondering what *Vorli* meant. It had an evil meaning, something terrible that she had experienced long ago subconsciously connected itself to *Vorli*. It conjured up a picture of a dark place, overgrown pillars standing proudly symbolising a bygone age of beauty; and four dark, crouching shapes that lie in wait for unsuspecting travellers who were fools enough to venture in the Place, the Place that called to Jill (for she had read Lovecraft) the poem of the foreboding grove where he—

> "Beheld, upon a crumbling stone
> Set altar-like before the cave, a thing
> I saw not clearly, yet from glimpsing, fled."

But Jill's trail of thought was severed by the sudden disappearance of the sun, and, looking up she saw that, as far as she could see, the sky was concealed from view by blackened trees, devoid of leaf or bird upon their age-rotted branches, corrupt with the passing of time. The darkness necessitated the switching on of both headlamps; the light's probing made yellow pools in the gloom, like baleful eyes peering malevolently out of the stygian blackness. The approach was in no way eerier than the house itself.

The building had a flat roof; but it was very apparent that it was not modern architecture at all, but reminiscent of a bygone age. One window-frame had caved in, like the poor defenceless skeleton damaged by the careless coffin-bearer. Some of the windows at the top of the house were of stained glass; this making the cheapness of the price even more inexplicable.

They walked along the stone path, which was composed of coloured shards of rock woven together to form strange symbols. The door did not yield easily to the key; but finally it creaked open, and the couple stood in the gloom of the hall.

The first thing that struck them was the absence of any light bulbs dangling from the ceiling. The next things they saw were the rows of torches fastened to the walls, one still smouldering. Then Jill made a noise of loathing at the spiders that hung everywhere in their gossamer traps.

Jill had never been able to stand spiders; and if anything convinced her that the place was unfit for human habitation this did. This point she made to John, but instead of giving in to her, as he did over most things, he began to dissent and argue with longer and longer explanations, neither of which were possible to follow.

There might be good about the house, she conceded. But she was not going to risk waking up in the middle of the night and finding one of those crawling up the bed (there she indicated the spiders) so that was that!

"And furthermore," she continued, as she saw John opening his mouth to expostulate, "I'd bet you anything, those... things were the reasons why the place was cheap!"

But John was not taking any notice. He was looking at her, and in his eyes was an expression she had never seen before.

"John!" she said loudly, "Why are you looking at me like that? Her voice rose hysterically. The spiders' webs billowed at her scream. And then, irrelevantly, there came to her eyes the same vision she had had on the way to *Vorli*. The moon had risen and there was something wrong about it.

The estate agent said, "But of course there's nothing strange about the house! It's the best bargain you've ever had in your life!" He hesitated. "By the way, Where's your wife?"

"She's outside in the car," came the immediate answer.

"I see," said the agent. "That's a nasty scratch you have on your face, Mr. Denniston."

This was quite true. Running parallel with his nose, the newly-inflicted wound stood out like a gaping red mouth. It was the kind of scratch that might come from the nails of a woman, fighting for her life.

"Well?" The agent leaned forward over his desk. "What about the house?"

"There was never any doubt about it," said John quietly. "I... we'll take the place."

The night is dark. A thin crescent of moon shines over the sleeping world. A grating is outlined by its glow. The night is still, like an elephant or some other great beast sleeping, yet a feeling of disquiet pervades the darkness.

A figure is seen, dark and vague. It seems to be dragging something along the ground. It reaches the grating, leaves its burden and lifts the bars of the

grating. It seems to be uneasy, for it glances back at the thing, lying still on the strangely-coloured stone pattern. So uncertain is the darkness, that you would think that the shaft beneath the grating was bottomless.

The figure goes back to the object on the floor and drags it to the edge of the grating. It stands there undecidedly. Then, as leaves rustle in the wind, it starts nervously and pushes the thing down the hole. It shakes its head as if in amazement, and then covers the hole again.

It walks away and is lost in the blackness. The brooding night is still once more.

II - Whispers In The House

Of course, in a village of the type that Denniston now resided on the outskirts of, news is always discussed by everybody except the person who figures in the business, and mysterious disappearances are no exceptions. That is why, for the first few months of his stay near the village, Denniston could go nowhere without receiving suspicious looks from everyone he met.

The estate agent was the only one who could boast of having actually met Jill Denniston, although quite a few people could remember having seen her leaving the agent's place of business. The agent had his say on the topic of Denniston's part in the mystery:

"The moment he entered my office, I knew there was something wrong with him... Sort of *shifty* look, you know what I mean."

The object of the gossip, meanwhile, was sorting out some books he had found in one of the rooms with stained glass windows. There, in a world of coloured shadows, he mused over what at first seemed to be an exposure of the internal arrangements of a radio set, but which, he decided, was really a map of the grounds of a house, maybe even those of *Vorli*. In one place, there was something marked "Gr. Sh.," which, as far as he knew, did not exist at his residence.

Later, he made himself a poached egg, with regretful thoughts assailing his mind as he scalded his finger.

That done, he began to peruse the local newspaper. He was wondering whether his name had found its way into the gossip column yet. It hadn't, and he went back to the upstairs room to see if he had missed any books.

His search was rewarded, for in an alcove above the doorway he found a very dog-eared and yellow volume, the title of which he could not manage to decipher.

The contents were unspeakably evil. They told of foul deeds and things that roamed under the earth. On several pages he found notes in red ink; these nearly always referred to something called the "Grat. over Shaft," which his subconscious connected with something he had read before.

Something roused him from the depths into which he had been dragged; he had the impression that someone had whispered in his ear. Starting up, he looked around, but saw nothing that could have made the noise. But the shadows from the stained glass had changed from blues and greens to sombre browns and greys.

He carried the books in a yellowed pile to his room downstairs. Something —he did not know what—made him look out of the window to the grounds beyond.

The moon was swollen out of all proportion, it seemed to him. And on the moonlit lawn was something he was sure had not been there before. It was a stone, like those that mark the place where someone's mortal remains were interred.

He knew that he must go nearer to the stone; see what the vague writing on it said. It was not like any writing that he had seen before; at the top, however, there were English letters, and they were quite clear, for the top was lit by the pale light of the swollen moon. But the three letters that he saw meant nothing.

"DGH." That was all he could make out. But what could it designate? Dee-gee-aich... meaning jumble. He must see the rest of it!

He clattered down the hall. The front door stuck, but he forced it open. He passed the grating and ran on, but *not* before the old feeling of sickness and cold had passed through his body. Then he was racing across the lawn, stumbling over tussocks and sliding on slippery patches. He had a terrible, cold fear that it would be gone when he reached the spot and he would never know...

But when the place was in sight, it was still there. And he could read the lettering. He spoke it out loud.

"Hodgh'phna-ghi dgh's-jorj'nor-dgh."

And the statues moved out of the shadows toward him.

There were few people on the outskirts of Hapton when I was walking, that Tuesday night. I was still out at eleven-forty, on that cold starless night. Nothing stirred; the church clock was standing invisibly near me on its gaunt spire. It chimed the quarter, and at that moment the bushes at the side of the road stirred and parted. The moon slid from its covering of cloud, but by its sulky light and the acrid smell that met my nostrils it was obvious that it was foggy.

I looked in the direction of the foliage that had rustled, but could see nothing. Only there were a few drops of a liquid on the leaves, and where the branch that had stirred had blocked the way of whoever had come from behind the bush, there was a place where globules of water dripped onto the grass below. There was a trail of dampness that led up the road, at the top of which was the church, no longer invisible, and standing looking at it was a peculiar figure with a humped back.

Without warning, there was a scream of horror. Then the figure turned, and at that moment the moon was hidden. The sound of running started at the top of the road; but the noise was more like the padding of an ape or some similar beast. The sound came nearer, and I had the impression that something very evil was about to attack me. My fears were unjustified, however; the sounds passed me. Then there was the rustle of leaves, the crush of stone on stone, and I knew that I was alone.

The moon came from behind its cloud, and my eyes confirmed that I was alone. But I had no intention of remaining in the place, and least of all of trying to find out what caused the crash sound.

However, I did return, but in broad daylight this time. There was no stone; there was no bush.

Denniston sat reading. He was reading the nameless book, reading because he could not stop. There was a section on incantations. They were in the same tongue as the words on the stone; and he noticed that the prevalent letter-group was "*Dgh*." This, he noted, had been the introductory group on the stone.

The cover was strange. Each section of the book had a cover decorated with a black-and-white drawing. This was the strangest of all. It was the drawing of a window looking out into space. In the centre was a box, a box

that had apparently been struck by lightning. On each side of it was a symbol; under it was an eye, and in the bottom left-hand corner was Something that dripped; it was either a spider or a hand with too many fingers. Denniston could find no reference to either in the section. But he did not have any difficulty in finding the reference to the box. "Call the One whose Voice is Thunder and whose Breath is Lightening. Call That which Findeth Everything; it will bring the Coffin of DGH and the One will breath it open." All of which was gibberish to Denniston. "Wait until the Great Darkness is upon the land, and it will be clear to you," said a whisper at his ear. He twisted round, but saw nothing. There was a high thin sound somewhere outside, like the sound of the Pan-pipes. The tune it played was eerie; it had the power to bring visions to the listener's eye. Intermingled with it was a kind of echoing whisper, hissing something rhythmical in time with the tune; but though he strained his ears as hard as he could, he could not make out the words.

Suddenly he realised that night had fallen. He stood up to draw the curtains, and at that moment he chanced to look out on the lawn. He knew what he expected to see; but it was not there. The lawn was bare under a gibbous moon.

He read on until late, then switched out the lights and went to bed. The air was hot and oppressive, but even though he opened the windows he felt as though he was suffocating. The moon seemed to blur, like a light reflected in a rippling pool. There was a frog, or some such creature, croaking under his window. But even so, he had no difficulty getting to sleep.

When he woke, it was to hear the clock's steady ticking. He glanced at it, but it had lost time. Moving to wind it, he heard an answering sound across the room, the scuttle of some creature disturbed by his sudden movement. Unpleasantly, buried memory returned; it was his wife's voice echoing down the corridors of time, and she was saying: "I wouldn't risk waking up one night and finding one of those crawling up the bed!" Though he did not mind the spiders, which he hardly ever saw in the daytime, he did not relish the thought of having them as bedfellows. Neither did he care for the other memory which came to his mind—his wife's face when he put his hands round her throat and...

But this was too much. He stayed awake all that night, seeing the dead face in front of him, however, if he blinked, there would be nothing there. The

whispers came again, this time challenging: "Take out the electric system you have installed," they said. "Can you not forego light?"

"Light is a human requirement," he said. "I don't know who you are, but I don't think you're human. Maybe you *can* forego light, but don't expect me to." He lay there silently, awaiting the answer, but heard nothing, except a mocking hiss of "Animal," and an echoing laugh. He lay there, cold, and toward eight o'clock fell asleep.

"Have you seen that Denniston lately?" an old woman addressed Territon's estate agent.

"No, nor his wife, which is what you want to know," said that person. "I feel more than ever like going to the police. But what holds me back is the thought that if I accused him wrongly, what would he be like towards me?"

"Shouldn't let that hold you back," remarked the old crone. "You live in Hapton, but *I* live right next to Vorli. If I accuse him, he might get ideas about me..." She shuddered at the thought and clumped off over the cobbles, mumbling to herself.

The estate agent suddenly had an idea. He knew that Vorli was reputed to be haunted, but he was anything if not materialistic. "When you're dead," he would remark when on that morbid subject, "poof! That's the end of you." However, he thought, it could be interesting to find out whether there was any superstition about the house. So he began to walk in the direction of the library.

It was crowded in the lending section, and the request for silence was definitely not observed. However he was not concerned with this part of the building and walked until he found the appropriate room. After a few minutes' search, he found the right book. Under Vorli there was an interesting little item. It was a yellowed page that seemed to have been torn from a book, but no source was given.

"There used to be in this plase a huge pach of (*illegible*—probably ground) that was not to be diggen up, nor the soil troden upon or disturbed. The place was called *Vorli*, which meens..."

III - The Horror At Territon

The night is dark, but a gibbous moon sometimes peers round the clouds. The place is filled with vertical or almost vertical stones. A figure is crouched by one of them. It rips at the mound, and there the earth comes away, revealing something dark and humped within the mound...

Then the figure leaps back, as something comes hopping and slithering through the stones. The figure screams and runs through the place. The moon is unveiled for a moment, and the figure's face is seen. It is a human face, though distorted with terror; but the pursuer cannot be seen, for the moon again withdraws.

A hollow crash comes suddenly, and all is again still. The wind cries over the stones.

My friend the estate agent, Moorhead by name, was sitting drinking coffee with me in front of the fire in my lonely little house just outside Hapton. We had been reminiscing about the Hapton Flats affair of some years ago, but had fallen silent. Moorhead broke the silence:

"You know," he said finally, "I'm not at all sure that we've finished with Ba'al—Ball—and his kind. The business with the stake is all right; but it didn't quite allay my fears— I don't, know about you. Now look at this, and you'll see what I mean."

He passed over to me an unsealed packet. Inside were a number of papers, half of them in a separate sealed package. They were labelled, rather pessimistically: See "The Block of Flats."

"Papers, relating to Hodgh; not to be opened until 1983, if anyone is alive at that date." The other documents were loose, one of which was a small but bulky notebook. Glancing through it, I saw to my surprise that It had belonged to Doctor Barrett, a scientist friend—I should have said "late"—with notes in red ink by whoever had acquired the book.

"They belonged to my late uncle," said Moorhead, answering my unspoken question. "He bequeathed me a crate of books, too; oh yes, and his solicitors sent me a letter saying that he sent another crate of books along to Oxford University, saying that the crate was to be locked away and *not opened at any price*. That's all I know, except what's on the loose papers; and you can find that out for yourself."

I did so. The first document was a short article on something "known as Narg, of the Place called Uarle." I pass over this, it contains nothing of real

interest. The next paper, however, was more interesting, and is worthy of reprint.

It was written on plain paper, yellowed with age. No source was given; it was not signed, there was not even a title appended. Here it is in full:

> I suppose I was a fool to walk into the trap. But I could never have forseen the horror that lay in wait for me. The Narg.
>
> I did not know that I had seen them in the ordinary, everyday world. I had. I cannot write their earthly names any more, those connections with the ordinary world have been severed by an outside influence. But I will write their Hodghen name, for what it is worth; they are the Dgh.
>
> You must guard against the Dgh with your life. If you see one, kill it. But as for the Narg proper, in their caverns under the earth... if once you meet a Narg, your whereabouts will not be found by mortal man.
>
> However, I suppose I must tell where I am. I am on the Dark World, where no light ever reaches. [At this point I looked at Moorhead in bewilderment, but he motioned me to go on.] How did I come here? The answer is simple. I, a student of the occult, projected my astral body too far, and when I returned to my physical body it had been feeding graveyard worms for a long time. Dismayed, I started a journey through the universe to find a just-dead body that I could animate, but while in the vicinity of the Dark World I was dragged to it by the powerful evil of the Narg forces that exist there in total darkness.
>
> I cannot describe the utter absence of light. And when I heard the sluggish motions of the Narg as they came towards me, (for what purpose I do not know) the terror was almost too much for me; but being in an astral state, I could not lose consciousness. So I called upon the Brightness to light the world for me.
>
> One of the Spheres I knew so well in my travels burst with a blue light as I called, and I saw the Narg, those filthy monstrosities that breed in darkness. Another was even at this moment writhing from its crater towards me, and I saw a small one, hardly eight feet high, hanging by its teeth to the great one's throat.

I ran down into darkness, but now I dwell with them forever.
Even now they are...

But that was all that was written on that weird document. It had, Moorhead told me, been written by a medium, but whether it was true, was a doubtful point. I put it down on the table, and turned to the other papers.

How can I describe the sensation of horror that passed through my body as I looked at the next paper? It was a portrait of a Thing—the only human aspect was the face, and this was what inspired me with such loathing. The body of the thing was that of one of those gelatinous sea creatures with tentacles. But the face, though distorted with years of evil and corruption, was recognisably that of my friend Moorhead.

I turned to him, but he had turned as white as a sheet. "I'm sure that wasn't in with the other papers when I last looked at them!" he gasped. His hands were shaking. Suddenly I had an idea; was there anything written on the back of the portrait?

Suddenly there seemed to be a shadow of wings in the room. A breath of hot wind came between us, and blew the picture irretrievably into the heart of the fire.

Territon was in an uproar. It had only just been discovered that the local cemetery had been defiled during the night. The graves had been torn up, the crosses wrenched and broken, the headstones smashed, and... most terrible of all... all that remained of the bodies were half-gnawed bones. The more superstitious of the Territon and Hapton people blamed it on a werewolf, and locked their doors more carefully at night. Moorhead and I had different views, but we, too, took more care over the fastening of our doors.

It was about this time that Denniston felt himself attracted towards the grating in the garden. He saw himself forever wandering down, down to the earth's centre, for something, maybe the whispers told him that it was only the door to a strange world. Perhaps there would be humans down there, or maybe it would be a prehistoric world, but he felt sure that somewhere, somewhere not too far that he could not reach it, there would be creatures with intelligence.

He went to sleep that night with dreams of beautiful creatures that lived far down in a place of everlasting sunshine. But when he woke to see his wife's face floating lividly over the bed his dream was gone and all that remained was ghastly reality. However, when the dawn came it was gone.

He peered toward the window as a sound came from it. To his horror he saw the hairy paw of some animal pulsing on the sill. He ran forward, but as he approached it the thing (it was almost as big as a man's head) dropped out of sight; not however, before he had seen what it was.

A spider. *As big as a man's head*.

The wind howled round *Vorli* as Denniston made his preparations. He had a rope, and other things necessary for climbing; also a body stolen from the graveyard in case he was hungry. There was no moon; sometimes there were small rustles in the grass as a nocturnal animal went about its business. Denniston stood for a minute, then shuddered.

His wife was down there.

Finally he pulled himself together and tied the rope to the parcel of things he needed. Down into darkness it went. He waited for the sound as it hit the bottom.

There was no sound.

He leaned a little further but still no bump. He leaned further... Suddenly he slipped and pitched forward into a bottomless void, to his dead wife.

IV - The Pit Below The Grating

When he regained consciousness, it was to find himself in a charnel-smelling tunnel of stygian darkness. He groped for the torch, which had been in his pocket but was no longer there; it was only a few feet away, and he heaved a sigh of relief as the bulb lit and a ray of white light illuminated his surroundings.

The walls were honeycombed with the homes of mice or similar creatures, and every so often he would detect a slight movement within, but never caught a glimpse of the creatures that made the noises. The walls were damp, and in most places overgrown with centuries of moss; but in one place there was an extra wetness, and the moss had been torn away, as if by teeth.

Picking up the various articles which had fallen out of his pack, he strapped it on to his back and began to walk, slipping on the moss. One glance up the incline was enough to assure him that if he had not hit a soft patch, he would undoubtedly have broken his neck in his fall.

There was a short slope first, down which he slid; at the bottom of which was something brown and vague, lying up against the wall of a curve in the tunnel. He shone his torch on it, then he screamed and began to run into the darkness.

Decayed and eaten by worms, his wife's face was still recognisable. The vision of her face that had haunted him had been ghastly enough, but it had not allowed for the horrible, inevitable dissolution that had overtaken it.

The wall into which he crashed brought him to his senses, otherwise he would probably have run insanely on till he died. His hand outstretched and holding the torch, hit the wall first, he dropped the metal cylinder, and stood moaning in the utter darkness. Then his legs gave way, and he fell forward, striking his head and losing consciousness. While he lay at the foot of the wall there suddenly began far away in the black, strange noises like a heavy object being dragged along a hard surface. As he returned to his body, he heard them as a sort of warning, and he only had to listen for a few moments to realise that they were coming nearer, and his fear-crazed mind took only half that time to remember his wife, not so far back as he had thought, his wife who would want revenge with all the hate of the dead. But, not too frightened to remember what he had learned, all at once Denniston was struck by a dim memory, the memory of the book in the upstairs room. "There is an incantation," it said, "to hold back the dead, but it must not be done in darkness which is reserved only for the Achieving of Oneness with Dgh. It is spoken by the Ones of Hph'gna-dgh (the stone *in* the woods) and the Ugly Ones of Algol, the Devil-Star. It is not in the Hodghen language, for in the true Hodgh there are no vowels; nor in that of the Beautiful Ones, who only speak by vowels and the "y" sound. The ones who live in the Ogo-dgh (high and cold Places) do not speak with the Dead; they speak to Dgh, and their Name is not to be spoken. The Words on the Trapdoor are the Words of the Ugly Ones. It tells of the "Per..." I ended here, for the page had been torn, seemed almost deliberately. But on the next page was the incantation, intact, and as he groped for the torch Denniston repeated it over and over in his mind. His hand touched metal,

but it was rusted and broke as he tried to lift it. Groping further, he again felt hard, cold metal, and a minute's trial informed him that he had found the torch. Turning it on, he shot it down the tunnel where the movements were rapidly coming nearer, and frantically whispered the words, staring down the passage. There was a perceptible pause in the sounds, then they began again. Denniston's face in the torchlight had gone grey, "either," he breathed in terror, "that is not a dead person coming down the tunnel, or..." But the thought that the incantation was no use against the dead was too much; and putting out the torch so as not to attract the attention of the thing that moved, he began to walk toward a glow far ahead down a tunnel. He had no idea what it meant, but light might mean the place of sunlight which he had dreamed of, the night before. He went faster than was necessary, but his hurry was necessary to his way of thinking; for now, mixed with the dragging sounds there was a sound like slobbering breath, but so loud that he did not dare to visualise the creature that produced it. He kept on toward the light, but before he reached it he saw with disappointment that the glow was caused by the glowing rottenness that you see on dead things and decaying trees in dark, forsaken places; this light emanated from the rotting moss on the wall at the head of the tunnel — a dead end. No, it only seemed to be a dead end, but was actually a junction. Standing in the green twilight of the luminous fungus, he quickly decided to go down the left passage. The decay had spread some five hundred yards, and he decided that as he could no longer hear the sounds, he would rest in the ghastly glow while he regained some of his energy. Sitting by the wall, he could not stop himself from remembering a story which he had found in the nameless book: it was written on a few musty pages pasted onto the fly-leaf, and it had so affected him that he could almost remember the strange tale word for word. And this is how it started. "In a dead country on Algol, the Devil-Star, there was a mountain, on which the Ugly Ones used to offer up unspeakable things to the green moon. And on the peak of the mountain was set a great ball of crystal, and if they look at it long enough, they see a strange shadow of luminous nature; of a strange and grotesque figure as if of the person who looked into the crystal but stunted and twisted. And he who used the crystal ran into the country of soulless men, where the damned scream in awful agony, for he knew that what he saw in the sphere was his soul. For the sphere of crystal had been cursed by the one who lives in the dead moon; it had the power to eat men's souls. But one day the Elder Priest of the Ugly

Ones decided the one of the dead moon had taken enough souls, and when the moon was at its meridian, the Priest took his book of exorcisms and spoke the necessary words as given in the book; then the mountain split asunder and the circle of stones around the crystal toppled and fell. Then flames of fire burst from the mountain, and the Priest was engulfed; but the crystal burst with a noise of thunder, and a strange thing took place; but it cannot be written here. So the man who now became the Elder Priest made a ring of luminous matter around the place, to mark the passing of a servant of Dgh; and when he finished the circle, no man who had a soul could pass over it, for he had said certain words over it. But nobody would walk near the place on two nights of the year, as once one of them had been found lying just inside the ring; but his eyes had been sucked out. And the morning after, there was something else in place of the body, but nobody went to see what was there the next morning." At the horrible suggestion of this, Denniston got up and began to walk further into the darkness, switching off the torch which he had turned on for a second, for a hundred yards ahead was a similar green glow. The strange noises had ceased, or if they had not were out of his hearing. The light seemed to come from a humped rock in a sort of wide cave approached by a tunnel with an unnecessarily low roof. Denniston could not stand upright at the highest point. He walked a few minutes, then stopped. Surely something had moved in that dimly-lit grotto! A sound, only very slight but still audible, had come to his ears—a small noise, like a sleeping creature that shifts its position slightly. He stood very still, but as no further noise came he walked forward, to the head of a flight of steps roughly hewn in the stone of the wall. But he stood at the entrance, his eyes dilated in horror.

I made a snatch at the slip of paper as it flew into the fire, but to no avail; but I caught hold of the tongs hopefully—however, before I could manipulate them successfully, the only remnants of the drawing were particles of red-hot ash. Looking up, I noticed that the illusion of a shadow of wings had vanished; Moorhead was bemoaning the loss of the portrait. I began to explain what had occurred, but he cut me short, saying that he knew. I had no doubt he held me responsible, but as protests on my part might only worsen the situation, I said no more, turning to the other documents, I found a letter, while attached to the top by a clip was a slip of

paper, apparently appended by the uncle. The paper had a few lines of writing on it:

"This letter was sent from Territon to me by a certain John Denniston. It may be closely tied to the events I am investigating, but it might also be just coincidence, or even the writings of a lunatic. He has obviously killed someone—I prefer to think he means his wife. I will, as soon as I am able, go to see him and if possible, dissuade him from trying to disturb what lies beneath the grating he mentions for the place may be that known to some as U'dde, and to others as Uarle, but to humans as *Vorli*, which means 'a gate'."

"Vorli" struck a chord in my mind, and looking up at Moorhead, who now seemed more ready to continue our conversation, I asked whether he knew either where "Vorli" was, or whether he was acquainted with anyone by the name of Denniston; and as an answer, told me what you already know—that Denniston's wife had vanished, and that everyone in Territon thought he had murdered her. "But this grating?" I said.

"Maybe you'll understand when you've read the letter," he answered. I saw that he would say no more and turned back to the document.

"Dear Sir," it began, "It has come to my notice that you are interested in Dgh. At my house, Vorli, there are relics of Him. I think he has some below Vorli too. I dream of strange places sometimes, but I cannot tell you of them, they are too secret. I came to live at Vorli with the intention of taking a job of which I had heard, but as soon as I came into the entrance hall I became aware of the presence of Dgh; the whispers of His attendants made me realise that I needed a sacrifice if I wished to live at Vorli. I remember there was a woman with me, I think she was in some way related to me. I made her my sacrifice, but I could not do it properly, having no knife. (It said why he would need a knife to do it properly but it cannot be put down here,—J.R.C.) I choked her as slowly as possible, but she made a wound on my face with her nails. Then I hid her body. Do not try to discover anything more; things such as the real nature of spiders—Denniston." That was all, except that, when I referred to the date, I found that the letter had been written two months ago. At the foot of the letter was a postscript; in red ink, written by the uncle. "[I] wrote to Denniston," it said, "asking whether he had the job; he did not answer, but the letter had obviously been opened at the post office, for about a week later I received a post-card from one of the sorters, informing me that Denniston never took the job, and indeed only

left 'Vorli' when circumstances made it absolutely necessary." Turning to Moorhead, I said "I think the best thing we can do is to go down to *Vorli* right away!" Moorhead was not, however, so ready to find out more; he answered, "If we go at all, you know it would be madness after dark." I saw the sense of this, and picked up the next paper. It was quite short:

"Alh'gnoa'dgh-ulo auof'hloj ali'morgo'cas'dgh" I would of course never have known the meaning of this, had it not been for the inevitable red ink addition; the bottom of the page had quite a long note written across it, but I have only copied a little:

"'First there will be a period of darkness, and then a Broken Moon.' This is a quotation from the Book of Dgh, but it is not complete; the actual quotation runs: 'When a man leaves the Gate to the Pit open, there will first be a period of darkness, and then a Broken Moon.'" At the time, the meaning of this did not come to me, but later the pieces of the jigsaw fell into place. However, at the moment, even if I had seen the full and terrible implications of this quotation, it would have been too late to save the world from the reign of horror to which it was about to experience.

Denniston looked down into the dim cavern below the earth with a look of terror in his eyes. There lying sluggishly asleep on the rock floor, was a Thing so awful, in its slumbering brainless evil, that Denniston could not have described it. It was huge—greater than the hugest of the creatures known as dinosaurs. It was evil. Millions of centuries it has festered there; it had existed before time itself, before ever light came to the universe. Denniston put his hand to his head; he reeled and fell on the floor. But in the seconds before he lost consciousness, his terrified mind knew the filthy Thing in the cavern as a Narg.

V - The Young Ones

But as I had no idea what the cryptic quotation meant, I asked Moorhead; he, however, was as much in the dark as I. "Period of darkness," of course, he suggested, might be a long-winded phrase for "night"; "but," as I told him, "why should anyone bother to say 'there will be night'?" Of course, it might mean that this "Broken Moon" would appear at daylight; but all the

same, unless Moorhead's uncle had found somebody's attempt at automatic writing or some such mindless game, I could not explain it.

The next (and last) document was a little different; later, Moorhead informed me that he had included it himself. It was an obituary notice: "We regret to announce," it said, "the death of Mr. Francis Moorhead, who was discovered in the study at his house. He had apparently died of terror, but the postmortem revealed that he had apparently died *from loss of blood*; furthermore, the wounds that caused this were in the throat and wrists. It remarked that the wounds were more those made by teeth than by a weapon. It also came to light that there were marks around the wound *suggestive of suction*, and that there were no traces of blood around the room."

Moorhead said, as I looked up, "The manservant, who broke into the room when my uncle wouldn't answer, said that he felt something push past his foot as he opened the door; but it was too dimly lit for him to see anything."

"A vampire?" I suggested. But he shook his head. "Something *like* a vampire, no doubt; but we're not dealing with dead men who rise from their graves. This is the Evil that existed far before Satan and Ba'al and Mithras... it's the Thing that they serve. Remember, the Scriptures foretell an Anti-Christ, well, we've come to *it*! I'm sure the Scriptures say that this Anti-Christ will eventually make one last try to overcome God... "*He will come not in a manger, but with sound of trumpets and rejoicing among those corrupted and evil*"... Something like that."

"Yes," and I stiffened as a ghastly thought struck me, "and Denniston will let it in! He said that below *Vorli*..." But I stopped for Moorhead's face had changed. All the light and colour had faded out of it.

"It's come" he said quietly. "He's done it already." And he held up one hand. Through the quiet of the night came a sound of trumpets.

Even to this day I do not know whether the sound was real or a figment of our overstrained imagination. Nor do I intend to divulge, at this stage, what it was in the conversation that brought me to realise what had happened to Moorhead. I will only say that, when we thought we heard the sound the thing below *Vorli* was free.

And what of the man that set it free? Denniston still lay at the mouth of the cavern, and below, in the pit before him, the thing that had waited from

before time still wallowed. But the Great One, the other Thing, the Creature banished to the Pit below *Vorli*, millennias ago, by the Power, had risen and gone into the outer world again.

Denniston's slight moan as he moved on the rock floor of the passage, resounded through the chamber, slight as it was. And the Thing below opened its eyes. But they were sightless, unseeing. For the Thing was dead, and had been dead since the beginning of its life.

Denniston's body moved dangerously near to the edge of the pit, and as it did, the thing below stirred as if it had sensed its motion. One claw, large as a table, scraped over its body, over reeking tears in the flesh. Its eyes still oozed blood, and the blood dripped into the foulness on the cavern floor and added to it. These creatures, mindless, rotted, were yet only servants to the Existence at the earth's centre. But these things, too, demanded blood and sacrifice, and this thing smelled blood as yet unspilled. Its whole body oozed mindlessly in the direction of the unconscious almost-human once called Denniston as a plant grows toward the sun.

When Denniston returned from nightmare his senses would not function properly. He seemed to be viewing the world through grey mist, and his mind would not fasten upon a single thought. There were faces floating about him, it seemed; each was his wife's, but in varying stages. One was her face before she had been sacrificed at Vorli; the next was her face as he had seen it when he wrung her last breath out of her body; the rest were in various stages of decay, and the last was a skull.

If Denniston had been able to perceive the Narg, the Thing below him, he would have seen it shrink away from him in mindless terror. It knew what had happened to him.

1960/61

The Tomb-Herd

"Derleth told me to abandon my attempts to set my work in Massachusetts and in general advised me in no uncertain terms how to improve the stories. I suspect he would have been gentler if he'd realised I was only fifteen years old, but on the other hand, if you can't take that kind of forthright editorial response you aren't likely to survive as a writer. I was still in the process of adopting his suggestions when he asked me to send him a story for an anthology he was editing (then called *Dark of Mind, Dark of Heart*). Delighted beyond words, I sent him the rewritten *Tomb-Herd*."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Cold Print*

"A Lovecraft palimpsest, incorporating elements from *The Festival*, *The Rats in the Walls* and *The Call of Cthulhu*. [...] Campbell, with August Derleth's help, revised this story extensively. Under the title *The Church in High Street* it became his first professionally published story."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1961
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> —the Herd that standeth watch at the secret portal each tomb is known to have, and that thrive on that which groweth out of the inhabitants thereof—Alhazred's *Necronomicon*

There are myriad unspeakable terrors in the cosmos in which our universe is but an atom; and the two gates of agony, life and death, gape to pour forth infinities of abominations. And the other gates which spew forth their broods are, thank God, little known to most of us. Few can have seen the spawn of ultimate corruption, or known that centre of insane chaos where Azathoth, the blind idiot god, bubbles mindlessly; I myself have never seen these things—but God knows that what I saw in those cataclysmic moments in the church at Kingsport transcends the ultimate earthly knowledge.

If I had not been the victim of circumstances, I know that I would never have come near rotted, ancient Kingsport. But I had little money in those days, and when I recollected the invitation of a friend, made long past, who resided in Kingsport, to become his secretary, I wondered with scant hope if this post might yet be in need of a tenant. I knew that my friend would not easily acquire any person who would stay with him for long; not many would relish a stay of any length in that place of ill repute.

Thinking thus, I gathered what few belongings I yet possessed into a trunk, loaded them into the back of a small sports car, and set out for Massachusetts. Before I had reached my destination I became disquieted by the general tenor of the surroundings—grim, brooding country, sparse of habitation and densely wooded.

There were certain places which filled me with a stronger unease; the path the macadam took beside the rushing Miskatonic, for instance, so that the reflection of the passing vehicle was distorted oddly by the black scum-covered water; the diversion which caused my conveyance to take a path straight through the middle of a marsh, where the trees closed overhead so that the ooze all around me could barely be seen; and the densely-wooded hillsides, which caused me to recollect certain things hinted about the outposts of cosmic forces in Wilbraham country. It was not that I was terrified by anything I beheld, for I am not—or was not in those days—particularly superstitious; it was simply a vague unease, stemming from the strangely primeval appearance of the surroundings.

Bear this in mind—my nature was not superstitious, and because of this I was not frightened, as some might have been, by certain hints and intimations of my friend's communications with me. He had spoken increasingly of certain things he had learned from readings of various antiquated volumes; he talked of "a forgotten cycle of superstitious lore which would have been better unknown"; and he mentioned strange and alien names, and even toward the last hinted of actual worship of trans-spatial beings still practised in such towns as Dunwich, Arkham, Innsmouth and that in which he resided. In his last letter he had spoken wildly of a temple to Yog-Sothoth, which existed conterminously with an actual church in Kingsport, in which monstrous rituals had been performed, and where "gates", if opened by forgotten alien incantations, would gape to let elder daemons pass from other spheres. There was a particularly hideous legend, so he said, concerning the errand on which these daemons came; but even he forbore to recount this, at least until he had visited the alien temple's earthly location. Since this latter, some three weeks ago, I had heard nothing more from him; and I could only conjecture that, in such a highly nervous state, he might be willing to pay for any companionship. Thus I might yet acquire a post as secretary. Had I realised what monstrous abominations waited in reality upon my journey to Kingsport, I would assuredly have returned to my former mode of existence.

Upon my entrance into the first of Kingsport's archaic, mossy streets, I began to feel a lurking sense of blasphemous terrors ahead. Supposing my friend had already acquired a secretary, at any rate, what would I then do? Supposing he had taken up residence in some other state? A journey made back to my own city now would be made at least partially at night, and I did not find the thought pleasant of taking the hill roads in darkness, when they so often fell sheerly away upon one side into an abyss. But the thought of possible work made me press on.

I turned up Aubray Street, and at once became aware with certainty that something had gone wrong. The house which I knew as my friend's, set well back from the road, overgrown with ivy that twisted in myriad grotesque shapes, was locked and shuttered. No sign of life was discernible inside it, and outside the garden was filled with a brooding quiet, while my shadow on the fungus-overgrown lawn appeared eldritch and distorted, like that of some ghoul-born being from nether pits.

Upon inquiring of this anomaly from the strangely reticent neighbours, I learned that my friend had visited the deserted church in the centre of Kingsport after dark, and that this must have called the vengeance of those from outside upon him. The church was merely a gate through to undreamable dimensions, and those that passed through the gate were in a form that none could look upon. The likeness may be seen carved, so one venerable recluse whispered, in certain vaults in Yuggoth and ancient statues in Zothique. And the house of my friend, too, had become a haven to the ones from beyond, which was the reason why all shunned it.

Even then, I began to wonder at these hideous and abnormal legends which pervaded Kingsport and the neighbouring towns. There was almost a tangible air of lurking alien horror in the place, which might have given rise to these abominable tales. But I disliked the fungoid-white trees which grew in the garden of the house on Aubray Street, and also a certain shape which I seemed to glimpse at an upper window, which gave an amount of credibility to the horrors.

I did not wish to ask whether the old recluse could tell me of the monstrous legend of the church which my friend had refused to recount. So I left the old man to his rambling house and mouldering books, and retraced my path across the lichen-grown lawn to the eldritch building on Aubray Street.

I became aware of the strength of the tales when I saw the open front door, and realised that nobody would dare to enter. As I entered the curiously-shadowed hall, I seemed to perceive something at the top of the staircase; a shadow passed across the crimson-lit wall on the landing. But the shadow was of something so blasphemous and terrible that I can only be thankful that I did not perceive it more clearly, A monstrous sound, as of some fearful and moist body lumbering across the floorboards above, was borne to my ears, and it was some minutes before I could overcome the cosmic horror that gripped me sufficiently to ascend the creaking, slime-exuding stairs and search for that which I suspected. But nothing could be seen in the oak-beamed, twilit upper rooms, and I descended, finally, to explore the lower regions of the storied old building.

It was in the lower regions, I remembered, that the house's absent owner had been wont to peruse certain archaic and terrible volumes, to write notes concerning his findings, and to pursue sundry other pastimes in his rumoured searches. The room which had been his study I discovered without much difficulty; the desk, covered with sheets of notepaper, the bookcases filled with leather-bound and skin-bound volumes, the desk lamp, seeming incongruous in the room full of volumes centuries old—all these bespoke the room's one-time use. I entered, noting the dust which lay over the room and all its contents. The light was dim, and that circumstance alone accounted for my not observing certain bizarre evidence in the room.

I approached the desk, brushing the dust from its surface and that of the seat, and turned on the light. The beams of electricity, streaming out across the room, were very reassuring but there was something not quite pleasant, even so, about the manner in which certain shadows clustered secretly in one or two corners of the room. But I would not allow such things to disturb me, and I turned to the first of the papers.

This bore the heading "Corroborative Evidence", and was clipped to a thick assortment of such papers. The paper which first presented itself to my eye dealt with the Maya tribe of Central America. But what was to be gathered from such annotations as: "Rain gods (water elementals?) have strange trunk-proboscis (as have many of the Great Old Ones) as may be seen in statues. Major Maya deity was Kukulkan (Cthulhu?)."

It appeared that my friend had been attempting to unify various cycles of legend and superstition with one central cycle, which was, if recurrent

references were to be believed, far older than the human race. Whence all his information had been gathered, I did not need to ask, seeing the numerous antiquated volumes set around the walls of the room. If, I considered, I was to read these notes with a degree of understanding, it would be best if I could find some set of notes recounting this hideous legend-cycle.

This I soon discovered, in a rack below the desk. I opened the large set of notes and immediately I gave a gasp of horror. The page upon which the set had opened had a photograph gummed to the page. But how, if the gates of the nethermost gulf had not been opened on Earth, could this abomination have been produced? It showed a reef out in the middle of some oily black expanse of water; in the background were the faint lights of a far-off coastal city. Above, the moon swung in the vault of space, strangely distorted by mist. But how could what that gibbous moon revealed exist?—those slimy things which cavorted in the pitchy water and crawled on the reef, those things with their scaly bodies and webbed fingers, their huge staring eyes and wide mouths and frog-like gills?—those blasphemies which still held a revoltingly half-human appearance, from which came a dread suspicion of the hideous truth?

In that stomach-wrenching moment of horrible knowledge, realisation of the abnormal ghastliness after which my friend had been searching and which perhaps, he had stirred out of aeon-long sleep in the Kingsport church, I closed the book. But I soon opened it again, for even such shockingly conclusive evidence could not quite convince me. And, after all, the strangely absent man had been my friend; I could only attempt to warn others, if I could procure evidence that beings—though perhaps not even of this universe—had absconded with him.

For long hours I pored over my friend's synopsis of this monstrous and alien myth-cycle: the legends of how Cthulhu came down from an indescribable sphere beyond the furthest bounds of this universe, of the monstrous polar civilisations and abominably unhuman races from black Yuggoth on the rim, of hideous Leng and its monastery-prisoned high priest which must needs cover what should be its face, and of multiferous blasphemies whose existence is only rumoured, except in certain legendary places of the world. I read of what Azathoth had resembled before that monstrous nuclear chaos had been bereft of mind and will. I read of many-

featured Nyarlathotep, and learned of the shapes which the crawling chaos could assume which men have never before dared to relate. I became aware of the full shape, and the source, of the unspeakable Hounds of Tindalos, and I learned how one may glimpse a dhole fully, and what one would then see,

But these secret and unwholesome revelations, and even the sketches, reproductions and photographs which accompanied them, were not so shocking as the notes I discovered at the back of the desk. These notes consisted of my friend's personal researches into this ghastly cycle, and the strange personages and, at times, *beings* which he had met. I would not dare to quote much of these notes, with their hideous threats to sanity and order; but I will reveal certain which bear monstrously on my later experiences.

The entries began the winter before, and the relevant details continued thereafter chronologically.

December 17. Today (began the notes) I unearthed an eldritch legend concerning more than one church in Kingsport and the surrounding countryside. My informant spoke of past days when certain churches were meeting places for those practising the worship of morbid and alien gods. Subterranean tunnels were burrowed to hideous onyx temples, and there are rumours that all those that crawled down the tunnels to worship were not human. Other tales mention that the church in Asquith Place, in the centre of Kingsport, was the hub of this ghastly movement, and there are references to *passages to other spheres* connected with the building, now long disused.

December 23. The subject of Christmas brought certain legends to my informant's mind today. A Yule rite practised in the Asquith Place church was long rumoured to occur, and as far as the informant can relate, may still occur. It had to do with something evoked in the buried necropolis below the church, where a great number of Kingsport dead were laid. The rite would be performed tomorrow evening, if such things exist.

December 24. I went down to Asquith Place tonight. A great crowd had already gathered there; they carried no lights, but the whole scene was illuminated by strange floating globular objects, which gave off an eldritch corpse-light and flitted away upon my approach. When the crowd realised that I had not come to join them, they made as if to pursue, and I fled. I believe I was followed, but thank God I did not see what pursued. *Whatever*

it was, it possessed more than four legs. Will I ever dare to leave my house after dark again?

January 13. My informant has not revealed anything further. It seems that he had been drawn into that ghastly gathering on the eve of Yuletide, and he now only offers me the warning that I should leave Kingsport completely. If I visit the church in the daytime, I will find nothing; if I go after dark, I will awaken the lurkers in that abominable buried necropolis. After that, I would be visited; but it would not be by the people of Kingsport. Apparently, once the cosmic lunacies which reside below the church have been awakened on Yuletide, it may be many years before they return to their own sphere.

(Here occurs what is either a hiatus in the notes or a period when none were written. At any rate, the next is dated several months later.)

September 30. I am about to visit Asquith Place's church before I leave Kingsport—tonight seems the best night, or possibly tomorrow night. I *must know if that unspeakable tale is true*! Surely the abominations of those nether regions will not harm me—they feed on other things.

October 1. Tomorrow I will leave never to return. I went to that haunted and ghoulish building tonight. My God, *that abnormality—that cosmic perversion—that I saw*—almost too monstrous for the sake of sanity! I descended those onyx stairs to the subterranean vaults, and saw that herd of horrors in full view, and realised their occupation. I tried to flee the town before returning here. But *why* did all the streets turn back to the church? Has the monstrous thing I saw and guessed indeed unhinged my mind?

October 2. The greatest horror of all has happened. I cannot leave Kingsport. All the roads returned to this house today—I should have realised the power of those from Outside. And now I am prisoned in this house, terrified by those things pressed whitely against the panes, staring in with their lich-like eyes. Where can I turn? A telegram to the one person I can trust may gain results.

(Now followed the section which horrified me more than anything else. My friend must have been preparing the telegram by writing it on the page while outside unspeakable shamblers made their way toward him—as became hideously evident as the writing progressed.)

To Richard Dexter. Come at once to Kingsport, You are needed urgently by me here for protection from agencies which may kill me—or worse—if you

do not come immediately. Will explain as soon as you reach me... But what is this thing that flops unspeakably down the passage toward this room? It cannot be that abomination which I met in the nitrous vaults below Asquith Place... IA! YOG-SOTHOTH! CTHULHU FHTAGN!

But that ended the notes in this stack of my friend's. Whatever he had seen slithering through the doorway in that last moment of horror has carried him away without trace. And I was left with an unexplained affair of half-revealed hideousness.

Ultimately, of course, I realised that there was but one course, if I were to rend this cloaking mass of monstrous hints. I would be forced to visit the antique church on the hill. Even from the Aubray Street residence the black steeple on the hill could be seen, its tip a corpse-white from the pallid light of the peering gibbous moon. The tower, rearing up from the mound in the centre of the town, resembled some cosmic statue or hideous gravestone of an alien titan race.

It was a little time before I could persuade myself to leave that haunted building on Aubray Street. What if my visit to the subterranean vaults stirred whatever abomination lurking down there out of its merciful coma? However horrific might have been my friend's fate, however imperative might it be that others should be warned away from this place of hideousness, it would be futile if I, too, was unable to leave Kingsport ever again. Of what use would the simple notes of my friend be in persuading outsiders to destroy this horror? And finally I left the house to visit the archaic pile on the hill, and what lay beneath.

As I paused at the front entrance of the house, I peered back down the passage for a last glimpse of the place—for, indeed, I would not return here, but leave Kingsport immediately I had seen whatever transdimensional monstrosity lurked below the church. A ray of moonlight from a staircase window illuminated the hall. Did I glimpse something staring through the banisters, something corpse-pale which resembled nothing of this earth? I did not pause to be sure, but slammed the door on that house and all its nighted secrets, and stood staring shudderingly toward that legendary building in Kingsport's centre.

When I reached it the gibbous moon was shining high in the gulf of space, and the tottering gravestones, overgrown with hideously decaying vegetation, cast curious shadows over the fungus-strewn grass. I made my

way through that nightmare landscape and finally reached and closed the rotting portal.

As soon as I closed that door I knew that something was wrong. Hadn't my friend spoken of the place as "long disused"? If this were so, who—or what—had ignited the torches in the verdigris-eaten wall-brackets? As I stared affrightedly at this, I perceived a yawning aperture in the floor which could be nothing but the gate to those unsuspected tunnels to monstrous elder temples deep in the earth.

I remember a hideous scramble down tunnels which seemed at one minute to be carved through solid rock and the next through charnel earth. I can remember the vast space entered by other tunnels, into which I finally plunged. I recollect those twelve monstrous statues which crouched, six at each side, at the entrance of the fabled necropolis—statues which depicted things of which I dare not think. I recollect the *half-sentient* look of those images, as if they but slept in waiting for some abominable awakening. I remember those slabs on the floor, stretching off into blackness, each with its hideously dead once-human tenant. Worst of all, I remember—recalling also certain morbid and whispered words of Abdul Alhazred—the hideous, nauseating *fungi* which grew inches high from each corpse and swayed hideously from some charnel breeze.

This is where the doctors do not believe me. They do not believe that I saw that gate on some other fabulous sphere open—open, not in the wall, but in the centre of empty space. They cannot credit what I saw rolling, flopping, surging monstrously through that portal with its angles which could not exist inside three sane dimensions. But I saw the glistening, gelatinous, amorphous tide that surged over the nitrous floor; I saw them as they flowed toward the inhuman crouching statues. Thirteen ghastly cosmic blights had burst upon the world down in the fungoid vaults under Kingsport. I did not lose consciousness when the things merged with the statues, nor when those statues moved of their own accord toward the slabs of terror. I did not even faint when the titan things began to claw at the fungus growing on the corpses, and tear it off to swallow the nauseating, obscenely-fed vegetation. It was only when the last of the unspeakable shapeless beings started to flop toward me that I finally fell to the slimy stones, unconscious.

Of my flight through the tottering streets, while hideous shapes gibbered above me, I remembered little. If a doctor from Arkham had not discovered me, I shudder to think upon my possible end. But I was taken to St. Mary's hospital in Arkham, whence, after I learned to keep silent concerning my monstrous experience, I was discharged as sane. My fearful questionings elicited that no papers or books were found in the house on Aubrey Street in Kingsport. But why do I have certain unspeakable urges on the sight of a corpse or graveyard?

I know of the evidence of the stain of fungi upon the faces and claws of the statues in the vault. If only this, my mind might yet rest at night. But afterward I began to conjecture what the thirteenth abomination had done after I became unconscious. I think again of those desires which remain with me, and which I dare not relate. And I think of those stains of fungi which I found at the last—*those stains on my own face and hands*.

Illustration by Dave Carson, taken from an unknown source.

The Tower From Yuggoth

"At the time it felt very much like the start of my career as a writer; now it looks more like a phase I needed Derleth to rescue me from. At least it's eldritch—it keeps saying as much—and it also offers cackling trees and curse-muttering streams. The reader may end up knowing how they felt, and my notion of how Massachusetts rustics spoke may also be productive of a shudder. Had I conjured him up from his essential salts for an opinion, Lovecraft would undoubtedly have pointed out these excesses and many other flaws. And watch out for those peculiar erections in the woods!"—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Alone With The Horrors*

"Campbell's first acquaintance with Lovecraft came through his reading of *The Colour out of Space*, the influence of which (along with *The Dunwich Horror*) is obvious here. [...] Campbell later revised this story as *The Mine on Yuggoth*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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I

Of late there has been a renewal of interest in cases of inexplicable happenings. From this it seems inevitable that further interest be shown in the case of Edward Wingate Armitage, who was consigned to St Mary's Hospital, Arkham, in early 1929, later to be taken to an institution. His life had always been, by choice, the life of an outcast and recluse; for the greater part of his life outside the institution he had been interested in the occult and forbidden; and his supposed finding of incontrovertible evidence in his research into certain legendary presences outside Arkham, which sent him into that period of insanity from which he never recovered, might therefore have been a seeming triviality, portentous only to his already slightly deranged mind. Certainly there were, and still are, certain Cyclopean geological anomalies in the woods toward Dunwich; but no trace could be found of that which Armitage shudderingly described as set at the highest point of those strange slabs of rock, which admittedly did

bear a certain resemblance to titan stair-treads. However, there undoubtedly was something more than the vast steps that Armitage glimpsed, for he had known of their existence for some time, and certain other things connected with the case lead an unbiased outsider to believe that the case is not quite so simple as the doctors would have it believed.

Edward Wingate Armitage was born in early 1879 of upper-class parents. As an infant, nothing peculiar may be noted concerning him. He accompanied his parents to their weekly attendance at the Congregationalist church; at home he played, ate, and slept with regularity, and in general acted as a normal child would. However, the house's welfare was naturally attended by servants, most of which, in the manner of servants, had a tendency to talk more to children than the elder Armitages; and so it was that a three-year old was noted to show unaccountable interest in what fell out of space on the Gardner farm in that year of 1882. The elder Armitages were forced to speak more than once to the servants on the subject of what was fitting for discussion with Edward.

A few years later, after a period in which Edward declined to leave the house except for walks with his parents, a change was seen to occur. It was in the summer of 1886 that this became particularly noticeable. He would indeed leave the house, but could not be seen playing anywhere nearby, though servants often saw him leave with a book from the house library under his arm—that library which had been partially built up of books from the inherited property of a grandfather. Certain of these books were on subjects occult and morbid, and Edward had been warned not to touch them —his father often considering their destruction, for he was a definite Congregationalist, and disliked such books being in the house; but never did he put this idea into practice. None of these books appeared to be missing while Edward was away, but the father was unsure quite how many there were; and the boy was never met returning, so that he might have returned whatever books he had taken. He invariably said that he had been "out walking"; but certain newspaper items, dealing with curious signs found scratched in the soil of graveyards, and certain peculiar erections, together with bodies of various wild creatures, found in the woods, gave the parents cause to wonder.

It was at this time, also, that the boy began to be avoided by all the children in the vicinity. This inexplicable avoidance began immediately after a

young girl had accompanied Edward, or rather followed him, on one of his silent trips. She had seen him enter a grove of trees outside Arkham, where a peculiar arrangement of stones in the centre, somewhat resembling a monolith, caught her eye. Characteristic of the cold-bloodedness of children in those times, she did not cry out when he procured a small rat, tied helpless near the monolith, and slit its throat with a pocket-knife. As he began to read in some unknown and vaguely horrible language from the book, an eldritch shadow seemed to pass across the landscape. Then came a sinister muffled roaring sound; sinister because, the girl swore, the roaring followed the syllables shrieked by Edward Armitage, like some hideous antiphonal response. She fled, telling her friends later but not her parents. Both the parents of the various children and Edward's parents inquired into the resultant avoidance, but could elicit no information. Only tales handed down through various families now make this tale available, and it is doubtful how much of it can be believed.

As time passed, Edward's father contracted typhoid fever, further complications assured that it would be fatal, and in 1913 he was taken to St Mary's Hospital (later to see another Armitage's consignment there) where, on the twelfth of May, he died.

After the funeral, Edward was left in the care of his mother. Bereaved of her husband, she had now only her son on whom to lavish affection. Edward's upbringing after this stage was much less strict: he was able to read and use whatever books in the library he wanted; his mother did not object to this, but she disliked his frequent trips at night, whose destination he refused to reveal. It was noticeable that after one of these nocturnal trips the morning paper would be missing; and Edward, who rose before anyone else in the house, denied that it ever arrived on these occasions. One maid who showed a tendency to speak of certain nocturnal atrocities reported in the missing papers, was dismissed after the boy had told his mother of certain thefts which could only have been committed by this maid.

It was in 1916 that Edward left home to enrol at Miskatonic University. For a short time he gave most of his leisure up to study mathematics; but it was not long before he gained access to the restricted section of the library. After this step, his former leisure studying was eclipsed by a feverish perusal of those books residing in the library and about which so much has been written and conjectured. The hellish Necronomicon engulfed his attention in

particular; and the amount of time which he spent in taking notes and copying passages from this tome of terror was only cut short by the repeated adjurations of his tutors to devote more time to his mathematical work.

However, it is obvious that he still found time to peruse these monstrous volumes; and toward such evidence is the curiously hinting tale of his tutor. Calling at the student's study while he was away, the mathematics tutor was constrained to enter and examine a few notebooks scattered over the bed. One of these was taken up with notes on the orthodox studies Edward was following; the tutor glanced through this, noting the care with which the notes had been prepared. A second was composed of passages copied from various sources—a few in Latin, but most in other, alien languages, set off by certain monstrous diagrams and signs. But the notebook which startled the tutor more than the cabalistic signs and non-human inscriptions was that containing certain speculations and references to rites and sacrifices performed by students at Miskatonic. He took this to the principal, who decided not to act as yet, but, since there were numerous references to an "Aklo Sabaoth" to be performed the next night, to send a party of tutors to spy on these proceedings.

The next night certain students were observed to leave their rooms at different hours and not to return; several of these were followed by tutors asked by the principal to report on that night's proceedings. Most of the students made their way by devious routes to a large clearing in the otherwise almost impenetrable woods west of the Aylesbury Road. Edward was noted to be one of those who seemed to be presiding over the strange gathering. He and six others, all wearing strange and sinister objects around their necks, were standing on a huge, roughly circular slab in the centre of the clearing. As the first ray of the pallid crescent moon touched the slab, the seven standing upon it moved to stand on the ground beside it, and began to gibber and shriek strange half-coherent ritual invocations.

It is only believed by one or two of the watching professors that these invocations, in languages meant for no human tongue, elicited any response. Undoubtedly it was a disturbing sight, those seven students yelling sinister syllables at that slab of stone and moving further from it on each chorused reply from the encircling watchers. This being so, the impressions of the hidden tutors may be understood. Probably it was simply

an atmospheric effect which made the vast slab appear to rise, slowly and painfully; and it must merely have been nervous tension which brought one savant to hint at a huge scaly claw which reached from beneath, and a pale bloated head which pushed up the slab. It must certainly have been the marks of something natural which were found by the next day's daylight party, for such marks would lead one to believe that the reaching claw had seven fingers. At a chorused shriek from all the participants, a cloud passed over the moon, and the clearing was plunged into abysmal darkness. When the place was again illuminated, it was totally empty; the slab again was in position; and the watchers stole away, disturbed and changed by this vague glimpse of nether spheres.

The following day saw a terrible interview with the principal, by Edward, among others. His mother, perplexed, was summoned across the city; and after she and Edward had visited the principal's office, when the door was locked, they left the university, never to return. Edward had to be escorted from the office by two of his former, non-decadent fellow-students, during which he screamed curses at the unmoved principal, and called down the vengeance of Yog-Sothoth on him.

The crosstown trip was utterly unpleasant to Mrs Armitage. Her son was continuously mumbling in strange accents and swearing that he would see the principal "visited." The disturbing interview at Miskatonic University had brought on a sickening faintness and weakness of her heart, and the pavement seemed to hump and roll under her feet while the houses appeared to close in on her and totter precariously. They reached their extensive house on High Street only barely before the woman collapsed in her reaction to that terrible interview. Edward, meanwhile, left her in the front room while he repaired to the study. He seemed to be bent on discovering a certain formula; and he returned in a rage when all the forbidden books in his library would not yield it.

For some days after, Armitage, now eighteen years old, went about the house in a state of morbid introspection. From various hints dropped in what little conversation he had, it became obvious that he was mourning his loss of access to the blasphemous Necronomicon. His mother, who was fast succumbing to that heart weakness started by the unpleasant affair at the university, suggested that he should take up research into things a little nearer reality. Showing contempt at first for his mother's naïveté, he began

to perceive possibilities, apparently, in this system, and told her that he might pursue research "a mite closer to home."

It was perhaps fortunate that, on November 17, Mrs Armitage was rushed to the hospital, taken with a bad fit of heart failure, the aftermath of Edward's dismissal. That night, without regaining consciousness, she died.

Freed from her restraining influence, unaffected by long university hours, and having no need to work because supported by the extensive estate he had inherited, Edward Wingate Armitage began that line of research which was to lead to the revelation of so many unsettling facts, and, finally, to his madness in 1929.

II

Christmas 1917 saw Edward Armitage's mourning period end. After the New Year holidays were ended, passers-by would notice him, now equipped with a small sports car—the only luxury he had bought with the recently inherited estate—driving in the direction of the countryside end of High Street. At such times he would start out in the early morning, and not be seen to return until late evening. When met out on the rough country roads outside Arkham, he was seen to drive at the highest speed he could drag out of the car. More than one person recollects that he turned off the road into an even more primitive driveway to a decrepit, ancient farmhouse. Those who were curious enough to inquire as to the owner of the archaic homestead were told that the old man was reputed to have an amazing amount of knowledge concerning forbidden practises in Massachusetts and was even reputed to have participated in certain of these practises. From the notes in that capacious notebook which he always carried, Armitage's trip may be reconstructed. The drive through the brooding country, unchanged for incredible aeons before the advent of civilisation in New England, is recalled in detail in the first pages, as if Edward was afraid that something might prevent him from remembering the route. The exact position of the turning off the Innsmouth road is marked on a small sketch-map.

At this point, the biographer can only imagine Armitage's route. The walks up the muddy pathway to the farmhouse, between tottering, clawing, moss-covered trees, and the reaching of the leaning building on a slight rise, may be conjectured. One can but imagine Armitage's turning to stare back across the undulant fields, colourless under the glaring sun and first mist of

morning. Far off could be seen the steeple of the Arkham Congregational church, towering over the glistening gambrel roofs of the busy town. In the other direction, unseen over the horizon, would lie Innsmouth, with its half-human inhabitants, avoided by normal Arkham folk. Armitage would look out across the lonely landscape, and finally turn to batter on the door of the farmhouse before him. After repeated summonses, the shuffling footsteps of Enoch Pierce, the half-deaf owner, would be heard down the oak floorboards of the passage.

The aspect of this man at their first meeting somehow startled the visitor. He had a long beard, a few straggling strands of hair falling over his forehead. He fumbled senilely as he spoke, but a certain fire in his eyes belied his appearance of senility. But the attribute which so startled Armitage was the curious air which hung about this primitive rustic, of great wisdom and unbelievable age. At first he tried to close Armitage out, until Armitage pronounced certain words in a pre-human language which seemed to satisfy Pierce. He ushered the visitor into the sparsely furnished living room, and began to question him as to his reason for visiting. Armitage, making certain that the old man's sons were occupied out in the fields, turned his own questions on the old rustic. The man began to listen with growing interest, sometimes mixed with unease.

Armitage, it appeared, was desperately in need of a certain mineral, not to be found anywhere on earth except under the ice in certain sunken cities in the Arctic, but mined extensively on Yuggoth. This metal had various peculiar characteristics, and he felt that if he could discover where the crustacean beings of the black world had their outpost on earth, he could have traffic with them by virtue of the most potent incantation in R'lyehian, using the hideous and terrific name of Azathoth. Now that he had lost access to the Miskatonic copy of the Necronomicon, he would first be trying the surrounding country before visiting Harvard to attempt to peruse their copy. He had a feeling that perhaps the ancient rustic, with his reputed store of forbidden knowledge, might enlighten him, either as to the incantation or the location of the Massachusetts outpost of the race from Yuggoth. Could the man assist him?

The old man stared unseeingly at his visitor, as though his vision had suddenly opened on the abysmal, lightless vacuum of outer gulfs. He seemed to recollect something unpleasant from out of the far past. Finally

he shuddered, and, now and then stretching forth a bony hand to grip his listener's lapel, he spoke.

"Listen, young Sir, 'tain't as if I haven't ben mixed up in turrible doin's. I had a friend once as would go down to the Devil's Steps, an' he swore as he'd soon have them Yuggoth ones about him, ministerin' at every word he spoke. He thaought he had words as would overcome them that fly over the steps. But let me tell yew, he went too far. They faound him out in the woods, and 'twas so horrible a sight that three of them as carried him wasn't never the same since. Bust open, his chest and his throat was, and his face was all blue. Said as haow it was ungodly, them from Arkham did. But those as knew, they said those up the steps flew off with him into space where his lungs bust.

"Don't be hasty naow, young Sir. 'Tis too dangerous to go and seek up them Devil's Steps. But there's something out in the woods by the Aylesbury Road that could give you what you want, mebbe, and it ain't so much a hater of men as them from Yuggoth nohaow. You may've ben to it—it's under a slab of rock, and the Aklo Sabaoth brings it—but mebbe ye didn't think of asking for what ye need? It's easier to hold, anyhaow—ye don't even need Alhazred for the right words. An' it might get things from them from Yuggoth for ye. 'Tis worth a try, anyhaow—before ye gets mixed up in what might kill ye."

Armitage, dissatisfied, could gain no more information concerning the outpost at Devil's Steps, that vast geological anomaly beyond Arkham. He left the farmhouse in an uncertain frame of mind. A few nights later, he records, he visited the titan slab in the woods west of the Aylesbury Road. Seemingly the alien ritual had little effect, needing a larger number of participants; at any rate, he heard sounds below as of a vast body stirring, but nothing else.

The next recorded trip is that to Harvard University, where he searched the pages of their copy of Alhazred's massive hideous blasphemy. Either theirs was an incomplete edition, or he was mistaken in thinking that the volume contained the terrible words, for he came away enraged and convinced that he needed the R'lyeh Text, the only copy of which, he was aware, resided at Miskatonic University.

He returned the next day to Arkham, and proceeded to call at the Enoch Pierce homestead again. The old farmer listened uneasily to Armitage's tale

of his lack of success, both in raising the daemon in the clearing and at Harvard. The recluse seemed to have had an even greater change of heart since his visitor had last seen him, for at first he even declined to aid the seeker in raising the thing in the wood. He doubted, so he said, that it would be able to supply Edward with the necessary incantations to subdue the crustaceans from Yuggoth; he also doubted that even two participants would be capable of stirring it from below its slab. Also, quite frankly, he was slightly disturbed by the whole proceedings. He disliked to be connected with anything concerning those Armitage ultimately wished to contact, even so indirectly as this would concern him. And, finally, he might be able to tell Armitage where to procure the incantation.

Armitage, however, was adamant. He meant to call up that below the slab off the Aylesbury Road, and he would try this before following any more of the venerable rustic's doubtful recommendations; and since it was unlikely that anyone else would accompany him to this ritual, it would be necessary to ask the aid of Pierce. When the man further demurred, Armitage spoke a few words, of which only the hideous name Yog-Sothoth was intelligible. But Pierce (so the other recorded in that invaluable notebook) paled, and said that he would consider the suggestions.

The Aklo Sabaoth only being useful for the invocation of daemons on nights of the first phase of the moon, the two had to await the crescent moon for almost a month. 1918 was a year of mist and storm over Arkham, so that even the full moon was only a whitish glow in the sky in that month of March. But Armitage only realised the necessity of deferring the ritual when the night of the first quarter arrived moonless, a definitely adverse condition.

These unfortunate meteorological conditions did not end, in fact, until early 1919, Armitage now being twenty years of age. Not many of the neighbours realised he was so young—the monstrous wisdom he had acquired from reading the forbidden books in his library and that at the Miskatonic—and those who knew about his real age somehow did not dare to speak what they knew. That was why nobody was able to stop him as he left the house at dusk, one night in April 1919.

The wind howled over the countryside as the sports car drew up at the end of the driveway to the Pierce farmhouse. The countryside, in the lurid light across the horizon with faint threads of mist rising from the marshy field,

resembled some landscape out of hideous Leng in central Asia. A more sensitive person might have been uneasy at the brooding eldritch country; but Armitage would not be affected by this, for the sights he was to see that night were far more horrible, such as give threats to sanity and outlook. Muttering certain words at the not-yet-risen sliver of moon, he pounded on the oaken door.

The old man mumbled affrightedly at the sight of his visitor, and tried to turn him away with pleas of something to be done that night which was very pressing. But he had promised Armitage that he would accompany him, and his visitor held him to that promise though it had been made over a year before. He escorted Pierce out to the waiting sports car, in which they drove off across the grim, primeval landscape. All too soon they turned off to reach the Aylesbury Road. The drive down it was a nightmarish affair of close half-demolished lichenous brick walls, grassy verges with huge darkly-coloured pools, and stunted trees, twisted into grotesque shapes which creaked in the screaming wind and leaned terrifyingly toward the road. But however morbid the drive may have seemed, it could have been no consolation to Pierce when the car drew off the road near an especially dense belt of forest.

The trip down the pathway between the towering trees may only be imagined. But the walk through the fungoid-phosphorescent boles and pathblocking twisted roots soon widened out into a clearing—the clearing of that horrible survival from aeons before humanity occurred. Armitage waited impatiently as the moon's thin rays began to trickle across the boundary of the clearing. He had insisted that Pierce stand near the slab of vast mineral, and that person now shuddered as he watched the accursed sliver of moon creep up toward the zenith.

Finally, as the first beam of pallid light struck the circular stone, the searcher began to shriek those mercifully forbidden words in the Aklo language, the terrified farmer joining in the responses. At first, no sound could be heard except certain movements far off among the trees; but as the moonbeams progressed across the pitted grey expanse both Armitage and his disturbed companion began to hear a sound far below in the earth, as of some Cyclopean body crawling from unremembered abysses. The thing scrabbled monstrously in some black pit under the earth, and so greatly was the sound muffled that it was not until the slab began to creak upward

hideously that the watchers realised the nearness of the alien horror. Enoch Pierce turned as if to flee, but Armitage screamed that he should hold his ground, and he turned back to face whatever monstrosity might rise from the pit. First of all came the claws and arms, and when Pierce saw the number of arms he almost screamed outright. Then, as these dug into the soil around that hole into nether deeps, the thing raised itself almost out of the hole, and its head came into sight, pressing up the impossibly heavy slab of unknown material. That bloated, scaly head, with its obscenely wide mouth and one staring orb, was in view for but an instant; for then the arm of the hideousness shot out into the moonlight, swept up the hapless Pierce, and whipped back into the blackness. The stone slab crashed back into place, and a ghastly shriek from the victim yelled out beneath the stone, to be cut off horribly a second later.

Then, however, Armitage, shaken by the horror he had seen but still mindful of his mission, pronounced the final invocation of the Sabaoth. A terrible croaking rang out in the clearing, seeming to come across incredible gulfs of space. It spoke in no human tongue, but the hearer understood only too perfectly. He added a potent list of the powers which he had called out of space and time, and began to explain the mission on which he had sought the abomination's aid.

It is at this point in the notes of Edward Wingate Armitage that an air of puzzlement is remarked by all commentators. He recounts, with a growing air of disbelief and definite unease, that he explained to the lurker below the slab that he wished to learn the long invocation of the powers of Azathoth. On the mention of that monstrous and alien name, the shambler in the concealed pit began to stir as if disturbed, and chanted hideously in cosmic rhythms, as if to ward off some danger or malefic power. Armitage, startled at the demonstration of the potency of that terrific name, continued that his reason for wishing to learn this chant was to protect himself in traffic with the crustacean beings from black Yuggoth on the rim. But at the reference to these rumoured entities, a positive shriek of terror rang out from below the earth, and a vast scrabbling and slithering, fast dying away, became apparent. Then there was silence in the clearing, except for the flapping and crying of an inexplicable flock of whippoorwills, passing overhead at that moment.

III

One can learn little more about the ways of Edward Wingate Armitage for the next few years. There are notes concerning a passage to Asia in 1922; the seeker apparently visited an ancient castle, much avoided by the neighbouring peasantry, for the seemingly deserted stronghold was reputed to be on the edge of a certain abnormal Central Asian plateau. He speaks of a certain tower room in which something had been prisoned, and of an awakening of that which still sat in a curiously carved throne facing the door. To this certain commentators link references to something carried on the homeward passage in a stout tightly-sealed box, the odour of which was so repulsive that it had to be kept in the owner's cabin at the request of other passengers. But nothing could be gleaned from whatever he brought home in the box, and it can only be conjectured what was done with the box and its contents; though there may be some connection with what a party of men from Miskatonic, summoned by an uneasy surgeon at St Mary's, found in Armitage's house and transported out to a lonely spot beyond Arkham, after which they poured kerosene over it and made certain that nothing remained afterward.

In early 1923 Armitage journeyed to Australia, there being certain legends of survivals there that he wished to verify. The notes are few at this point, but it seems likely that he discovered nothing beyond legends of a shunned desert stretch where a buried alien city was said to lie. Upon making a journey to the avoided terrain, he remarked that frequent spirals of dust arose in the place for no visible reason, and often twisted into very peculiar and vaguely disturbing shapes. Often, also, a singular ululation—a fluted whistling which seemed almost coherent—resounded out of empty space; but no amount of invocation would make anything appear beyond the eldritchly twining clouds of dust.

In the summer of 1924 Armitage removed from the High Street residence to an extensive place at the less-inhabited end of the Aylesbury Road. Perhaps he had grown to hate the pressing crowds in the city; more likely, however, he wished to follow certain pursuits that must not be seen by anyone. Frequent trips to that abnormality beneath the stone in the woods are recorded; but presumably the lack of participants made the ritual useless, for no response could be elicited. Once or twice there is a rise of defiance, noticeable in the tenor of the notes, but before he actually visited the Devil's Steps and its monstrous secrets, he would always repent his foolhardiness. Even so, he was becoming desperate with the lack of that

unearthly mineral that he needed. It is better not to think of what his actions and fate might have been, had he not finally discovered a route to learning that long-sought and forbidden incantation.

But it was soon after, in March of the memorable year 1925, that Armitage recollected words of Enoch Pierce before that last horrible April night in the haunted clearing. Perhaps he had been rereading his notes; at any rate, he remembered Pierce's plea that he might be able to tell him where to procure the incantation, one day in 1918. At the time he had believed that this was merely a lie to defer the awful moonlight ritual; but now he wondered if it might not have had some foundation in reality, for the rustic had known a number of people possessing rare occult knowledge. One of these might conceivably know that incantation.

The next day he drove to the homestead, which was even more decayed and tottering than he remembered. Pierce's wife was dead, and the two sons now lived there alone, eking out a meagre income from the pitiful herd of cattle and few poultry. They were extremely displeased to see him, suspecting that their father's inexplicable disappearance had been effected by something which Armitage had "called aout of space"; but their fear overcame their hatred, so that they invited him into the parlour, albeit with unintelligible whisperings to each other. One, the younger, excused himself to tend the herd; the other listened uneasily to the visitor's questions. Who were the friends of his father who might have been connected with witchcraft, black magic and the like? Which, if any, were alive today? Where did they live? And, most important, which would be likely to know more than had Enoch Pierce?

The son's slow response resembled that of his vanished father. Most of the men who had aided Pierce in his forbidden searching were all gone now. He had had one who had only come after his father made certain actions and spoke alien words, and it had once been let drop that he had been hung in that all-embracing purgation at Salem in 1692. The great majority of the rest had also vanished inexplicably after the father had not returned, and his son seemed to consider that these were of the same kind as the fugitive from Salem. One who had come up from Portsmouth, however, kept house just outside Dunwich, or had used to. But he thought that even he might have died, and only been present in the house at Dunwich when called by the vanished Pierce to aid him with the volumes there.

Excitement now began to take hold of Armitage. A man who had come from Portsmouth probably would have been driven to his new home by witchcraft frenzy in 1692, if this peculiar reference to his death before Pierce met him was to be taken literally. Pierce had had a startling amount of knowledge, but if this eldritch being had been called to his aid, it might conceivably be much more wise. And the references to the many tomes in the house outside Dunwich—why, this private library might even include the R'lyeh Text of nameless wisdom! So great was his excitement at the possible long-forgotten vistas that might be opening before him, that Armitage even stopped to thank the plainly hostile being before him as he hurried out to his waiting car.

But disappointment awaited him at the end of his frenzied drive to Dunwich. The house of the Portsmouth refugee was found easily enough, on the crest of a hill—or, rather, what was left of the house. Only three nights before it had caught fire. A party of men, in the vicinity for no particular reason, somehow neglected to call the fire brigade; and the ancient house, with all its rumoured contents, was destroyed except for one or two incombustibles—such as a skeleton, human only as to the skull, but otherwise so unearthly that only voluminous clothing could allow its living counterpart to pass for a human being.

Bitterly disappointed and desperate, Armitage returned to his house off the Aylesbury Road. He began to search, it would appear, for a parallel formula in the books of the library. But even this could not be found; and he began to slip into a lassitude and depression born of desperation.

It is pointed out by those commentators wishing to see a sane and wholesome explanation for that last occurrence in the woods between Dunwich and Arkham that in early 1928 Armitage began to take drugs. Previously he had been without hope of any road to the ritual he wanted; now, with the foolhardiness of his sudden addiction, came a resolve to carry out a quickly-conceived plan to enter Miskatonic University and carry off their copy of the volume he sought. He would need a dark night, and even the March of that year had phenomenally light nights. He was forced to wait impatiently until October, when a series of heavy rainstorms all over the region forced him to procrastinate still further. It was not until December that the series of deluges ended; and on the day before he was to carry out his individual assault on the university, he happened to buy a copy

of the Arkham Advertiser, and in so doing he became aware of the first of a series of events which were to lead to that frightful outcome.

The piece which caught his eye was in the inside pages of the paper, for the editor believed that it was so choked with hellish speculation as to be of little portent. It dealt with a hill in the Dunwich country already known for a disaster in 1925. The lower regions of the hill had been inundated in the phenomenal floods in that region, and when the hill had been revealed fully again by the sinking of the water, a tunnel into inner depths was seen. It led to a door in the rock below the soil, securely sealed, so that the water had not passed it. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood seemed to be afraid of approaching the place; and the reporter said humorously that it was unlikely that anyone from Arkham would be interested in investigating, so that it might remain an unsolved mystery. A rather ironic pronouncement, for Armitage, as soon as he realised what might be in that room, returned home and drove as fast as possible to the hill beyond Dunwich.

He drew up in a side road, which would have led past the hill of the revealed secret but for the lower part of the road's being covered in water. Leaving the car in the higher section of the road, Armitage began to approach the newly-found room, walking on raised ground at the side of the route, dry but slightly yielding. Soon reaching the passage into the hill, he began to walk down the twilit tunnel, which was now completely free from moisture. The door at its end swung open at a touch—for although it was so completely sealed, the portal was balanced, in reality, in a manner once very well known in various pre-human civilisations.

The place was unlit, and the searcher was forced to switch on a torch which he had carried with him. The place revealed was a small room with walls of bare rock, bookcases around three of the walls, that facing the door being piled high with large and peculiarly-shaped boxes, covered with moss, charred earth and other less describable materials. In the higher shelf of the left-hand set were a large number of papers and envelopes. But Armitage's eye did not linger on this, for below were various hide-covered volumes, and in the centre of the shelf was a copy of the aeons-old R’lyeh Text. He took this down, noting that it seemed as complete as that up at Miskatonic, and made to carry it out to the car. As an afterthought, he decided to include the bundles of letters and papers on the top shelf, for the private documents of such a person of wisdom might yield much of interest

to such a delver into fearful knowledge. He was not seen by anyone as he entered the car and drove off—not even that party of men who arrived with dynamite a few minutes after and caused the destruction later reported in a slightly satirical half-column in the Advertiser.

Upon reaching the Aylesbury Road residence, he entered the library and began to examine his acquisitions. First he turned through the Text in an attempt to find the incantation he had sought for so many years. He discovered it easily—it had been underlined, and the former owner had written beside it in the margin: "for traffick with Yuggoth". It was indeed the right chant, and the reader could not hold back a shudder at the hideous cadences and rhythms which it recalled to his mental ear.

He turned to the documents. The man's name, he discovered, had been Simon Frye, and at once it became apparent that the nameless suspicions of the time of death of Frye must have been correct. For the date of that first letter, with its archaic spelling and handwriting, was 1688; and none in the pile bore a later date than 1735. One—addressed, it would seem, to England, but never sent—dated 1723, and so much had it impressed the reader that he had put a large star in red ink at the top of the yellowed missive. It may not be amiss to quote it in full.

> Brother in Azathoth,
>
> Your letter was received by me some Days ago, and so great has been my Excitement that I could not send you a letter to tell you of my good Fortune. I have, as you well must know, a great yearning for ye Text. My half-human Compatriot in Asia has now sent me a Copy of ye Volume of Terror, and if it had been in my possession when Cotton Mather had tried to destroy ye Coven, he would have had some Thing call'd down on him! But I wish to go to ye Steps of ye Devil beyond Dunwich and call those from Yuggoth. So I thank you for ye Vial of Powder of Ibn Ghazi which was enclosed in yr Letter, and send my Hope that ye Box which I enclosed some time ago will help you to invoke Yogge-Sothothe, and no Thing give your Occupation away.
>
> Azathoth ph'nafn Ogthrod
>
> S. Frye.

A second missive was clipped to this by Armitage, and it can be conjectured that the second gave him a different outlook on his forthcoming traffic than did the first. The latter was dated 1723, a few months after the first, and since it came from Asia, it is presumable that the writer was Frye's "half-human Compatriot".

> Brother in Azathoth,
>
> I write this as a warning, and hope that I do not send too late. You know that my Father was one of those from ye black world which you seek, and you must know how many Foulnesses have come down to this Earth from Yuggoth. But for exceeding Horror and Malevolence, those of ye shell-bodies are ye greatest. Tho' my Father indeed was one of those that was call'd long ago, and my Mother liv'd too near to ye terrible Plateau of Leng, I have always avoided the Things which come down from that Globe on ye Rim. I have walk'd with Abominations which come up out of ye Darkness below ye Pyramid, and have had Traffick with those that came down from ye Stars with great Cthulhut, but ye Monsters from Yuggoth are all Horrours of all ye Cosmos, and even Cthulhut did not come from so near ye Rim at first. I would have let them take you off into ye Gulf, because of my Father; but no Man should ever have Traffick with such, and I warn you not to go to ye Steps, or anywhere else which is known to be an Outpost of Yuggoth.
>
> Azathoth mgwl'nglui cf'ayak
>
> James M.

But later documents of Frye show that he did indeed visit the Devil's Steps, though inexplicably not until 1735, after which no more is heard of him. Pierce's references to a friend who "would go down to the Devil's Steps" may be recalled. The description of his fate also returns to mind in hideous detail.

An imaginative person may imagine Armitage as he stared out of the window into the sunset over far-off Arkham's gambrel roofs, making it resemble some fabulous city seen far off in the red dusk of a crystal dream. For a minute, perhaps, he almost wished to be back among the quaint New England scenery and mellow architecture which he used to see from his window on busy High Street. Transiently, he may have felt a hate and

repulsion for the frightful things in which he had dabbled, and the abnormalities he had called out of space and earth. But the dreadful R'lyeh Text lay open before him, and he thought of the legendary powers of the stone which he would gain from traffic with the trans-spatial entities. The warnings of "James M." had had no effect almost two centuries ago; and his warning was unsuccessful on this modern sorcerer.

IV

It was on a day of wailing winds and lurid skies that Edward Wingate Armitage left his house on Aylesbury Road to drive out to the Devil's Steps beyond Dunwich. The Yuletide and New Year holidays did not suit his purpose, for too many people might conceivably take it into their heads to drive in the lonely Dunwich region, and question his drive into the most secluded and shunned part of the woods. For this reason the trip was postponed until a day in early January 1929.

The hitherto invaluable information in Armitage's notebook now gives out, for he was in no condition to note down events when he returned from that frightful experience on that last cataclysmic day which led to his insanity and entrance to an institution. One must now rely on the seeming insane ravings of a madman if one is to learn anything about the journey and its aftermath. When, finally, he was discovered, after passers-by had heard strange sounds from the house on the Aylesbury Road, he had succeeded in destroying most of the volumes in his library, including the fabulous R'lyeh Text. Only a few books of hexerei and other unimportant tomes were left, together with the documents of Simon Frye and, of course, Armitage's notebook. The man babbled of a monstrous focal point of outer-dimensional activity, and screamed that he knew how the abominations from that black sphere on the rim moved between the earth and their terrible home. Under sedatives he calmed somewhat, and began to tell his tale with a little more coherency. He was, it became obvious, hopelessly insane; and little can be believed of what he hints and recounts in his delirium.

Concerning the actual journey he is fairly coherent, and one would not think that anything abnormal had happened. He speaks of the nearing of Dunwich, where the trees rattled and cackled hideously, and pitchy streams flowed by the road and disappeared into unseen and unspeakable gulfs. The wind that dropped into a brooding silence seemed to affect him with unease,

and the shrieking flocks of whippoorwills that were disturbingly silent near his destination, those horrendous Devil's Steps, made him vaguely disquieted. But this was no more than the usual disturbance of the mind of travellers in that witchcraft-haunted region.

When he came to the crossroads near Dunwich, where certain persons had been buried with stakes through their hearts, he left the car and began to follow a curse-muttering stream which flowed through the overgrown forest. On one side was a rough path, leading off into archways of vine-entangled trees; on the other great cliffs towered up to unbelievable heights, with strange signs cut into the rock here and there. He narrowly escaped falling into the hellishly-coloured stream once or twice, and it seemed an aeon before the waters plunged into a curiously artificial-looking tunnel, the path widened out into marshy ground, and he saw the fabled Devil's Steps leading up into mist and seeming to touch the dismal, overhanging sky.

As he crossed the marshy tract of land before his destination, he noticed certain eldritch marks in the soft earth. If they were footprints, they must have been of beings of which it is better not to think. They led back and forth, but they often seemed to disappear into the pit of the stream, and most of them ended at the shunned Steps. But Armitage, determined now to find whatever lay at the top of that Cyclopean stairway of rock and overcome it with his abominable incantation, did not hesitate more than a moment. He reached the first of the strata of unknown mineral and began to climb with the aid of a pickaxe. Only a painful memory remains in his diseased mind of that interminable climb up into space, where the only sounds were the noise of his axe and that unhealthy trickle of water far below. His mind must have been full of conjectures as to what might be seen when he reached the top of the hidden plateau. Possibly some alien onyx temple would come into view, or perhaps a whole windowless city of that trans-spatial race. Possibly a lake might lie in the centre of a horizonless expanse, hiding some ghastly aquatic deity, or conceivably a gathering of the entities might swim into view. How long he struggled upward and occupied himself with speculations born of something like terror can never be known. But it is certain that what he did see was nothing resembling what he imagined, for he recounts that when his head came over the edge of the last step he gasped in amazement—and perhaps a little in loathing. At any rate, it is one of the last things he can recall with complete coherency.

In the centre of a lichen-grown plain stood three closely-set windowless stone towers. All about the rest of the plain grew a fortunately unknown species of vegetation, which resembled nothing which ever spawned on the face of earth elsewhere, with its grey fungoid stem and long twining decayed leaves, which leaned and flapped in Armitage's direction as he clambered over the edge of the plateau.

The half-nauseated searcher reeled between the fungi and leaned over the edge of one of a few pits, gouged so deep into the rock that their lowest point was lost in tenebrous blackness. These, he presumed, must be the mines on earth of the crustaceans from Yuggoth. No sign of movement could be seen, though there were metallic sounds somewhere far down in the dark. There was no evidence beyond this in any of the other pits, either, and he realised that he must seek elsewhere—in other words, in those forbidding black towers in the centre of the plain.

He began to pick his way through the fungi, doing his best to avoid passing near them, for it seemed very repugnant to him that one of those blindly reaching grey members should touch him. Armitage was thankful when the last of the hateful nodding things was out of reach, for there was an extensive cleared space around each tower. The seeker decided to enter the central steeple; they seemed alike, each being about thirty feet high, without windows, as on the lightless planet of their origin, with a peculiarly angled doorway revealing stairs climbing up into total blackness. Armitage, however, had carried a torch with him, and, shining it up the alien passage, he forced himself to enter the somehow terrible building, reminding himself of the incantation. Armitage's steps rang hollowly on the carven stairs, seeming to resound through illimitable gulfs of space. The darkness which barred the way ahead and soon closed in behind seemed to have an almost tangible quality, and the seeker disliked the way the blackness seemed to move and twist beyond the radius of his torch-beam. He knew that the tower was windowless only because the buildings had no windows on lightless Yuggoth, but his mind would persist in conjecturing what blasphemous abnormalities the lack of windows might hide in the tower. One could never be sure what might be standing around the bend in the dizzyingly spiralling steps, and those hieroglyphics and crude drawings of fabulous spheres beyond were not comforting to the thoughts of the climber in the dark.

He had been ascending the lightless stairs for some time when he became aware of a strange feeling, as if he was about to suffer some terrible psychic displacement. There was no apparent reason why he should imagine such eldritch ideas, but it seemed as though he was about to be dragged forth from his body, or fall into some bottomless charnel pit. Those strange hieroglyphic characters all seemed to be indicating something unseen around that ever-present bend in the passageway. Was it simply a trick of light or vision that there appeared to be no steps above a certain point, and nothing except a totally dark expanse which even his torch's light would not penetrate? He drew back in affright, but once again curiosity overcame disquiet, and he continued to ascend the stairs. Upon reaching that anomalous wall of blackness, he closed his eyes involuntarily and rose one more step into the unseen section of the passage beyond the barrier.

Armitage cried out as he fell on the steps at the other side. It was as if his body had been momentarily torn apart into atoms and recombined in an infinitesimal instant. The agony he had suffered had never registered on his brain, but there was a memory of unspeakable psychic torture, resembling a memory from another life. He now lay on stairs seemingly a continuation of the steps on the other side of the barrier, but different in several essential respects. For one thing, the others had been bare and worn away; these, however, were covered with mineral dust. The walls, too, were grown with small glistening fungi, obviously of a type not seen in sane places of the world, instead of the curious, sometimes disturbingly alien hieroglyphics.

When he had recovered from that indescribable sensation, Armitage continued up the stairs. Though he felt as if he had been changed physically in some non-visible way, he noticed that the torch, to which he had clung through all that unendurable instant, still lit when he pressed the stud. He held the torch out in front of him, the beam stretching out some five feet from the ground. He rounded the inevitable bend in the stairs, and shone the ray into a face.

What that face was like, and of what body it was the face, he does not dare to tell. There are certain things which are better known by no sane man. If the whole truth about certain cosmic relationships, and the implication of the beings which exist in certain spheres, were known by the world, the whole of the human race would be shrieking in terror and gibbering for oblivion. And the thing which Armitage saw at last—one of those hideous

crustacean beings which had come through space from the rim-world—was one such cosmically terrible being. But even though his mind shrivelled up inside his skull at the unspeakable sight which leered and hopped before him in the light of the torch, Armitage had enough composure left to scream that painfully sought incantation at the monstrosity. It seemed to cringe—though it was difficult to correlate the motions of something so grotesquely proportioned and abnormally shaped—and clattered off down the steps. As it reached that black barrier across the stairs, it seemed to grow infinitely huge and become something even more monstrous, before it shrank to an infinitesimal point on the ebony curtain and disappeared altogether, as the clattering claws became silent.

Reeling against the lichenous wall, Armitage attempted to forget that fungoid abomination which had burst on him around that corner. As his mind returned to equilibrium from that seething void of suspicion, he began to climb again, not thinking of what might yet lurk in the upper regions of the tower. The darkness now seemed even more material, as if at any moment it might close in on the hapless Armitage.

It was about the time that Armitage began to realise that he had been climbing the darkened stairway far longer than he should have in a thirty foot tower that he saw the ceiling of the tower. The nitrous, dripping rock seemed to meet the stairs with no means of exit, but almost immediately he saw the curiously-angled trapdoor where steps and ceiling met. Now came the time of ultimate hesitation. Why would a trapdoor open out onto a circular roof, thirty feet above the ground, of small diameter? What nameless terror might await the opening of the trapdoor? But, having come this far, he did not wish to pass through that barrier of agony without having glimpsed what might lie above. So he pushed the door open with his shoulders and stepped out on the roof.

Even in his lunacy, Armitage does not pretend to have a plausible explanation for certain aspects of his fantastic tale. He insists that the barrier across the passageway was not as meaningless as sanity would have it appear, and thinks it was in reality a barrier between points that should have been millions of miles apart, had it not been for some awful tampering with the structure of the cosmos. He seems to conjecture that the barrier changed him bodily—otherwise, according to his story, the circumstances in which he found himself would have led to asphyxiation and burst lungs

with the first breath he took on that other side of the barrier. He explains that the abominations of the plateau did not capture him because he shrieked the incantation incessantly as he plunged down the tower's stairway and climbed back feverishly down the Devil's Steps. None of this may be disproved—and as for those disturbing hints concerning "bodily changes", X-ray examinations show certain modifications of the lungs and other organs for which the doctors cannot easily account.

As he clambered on the roof, Armitage wondered if the sight of that stunted horror on the stairs had already unhinged his mind. How could he not have noticed these towers which his torch's beams picked out on every side as far as its light would reach? And how could it now be black night, when he had reached the Devil's Steps well before midday? His torch, shining down the side of his vantage tower, showed black streets where abominable blasphemies moved among hideous gardens of those greyish nodding fungi and vast black windowless towers.

Confused and terrified, he stared out at the ebony void of space which stretched infinitely away from him, and of the crystalline, distorted stars which shimmered in the gulf. Then he stared again in growing, horrible realisation at those far-off constellations—and their positions. For the positions of the constellations were never seen thus on Earth; and Edward Wingate Armitage knew in that cataclysmic instant that this place of fungoid gardens and streets of windowless stone towers, whither he had come through that barrier between dimensions, was none other than Yuggoth.

The Face In The Desert

"This story shows the influence of Lovecraft's *The Nameless City* and possibly Bloch's *The Secret of Sebek* and *The Faceless God*. It is the first story to mention Campbell's contribution to the pantheon of the Old Ones, Glaaki. It was rejected by August Derleth for inclusion in *The Inhabitant Of The Lake And Less Welcome Tenants*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1961
First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #43*, November 1986.

Whatever one may know about the *Necronomicon* and its blasphemous author, the reader must understand that the foolhardily wise Arab, Abdul Alhazred, who penned the volume and was torn to shreds by invisible daemons before witnesses, could never have been wholly human. So much forbidden knowledge could never be borne by any completely sane and human mind; the contents of his book disturb most readers, but it is quite definite that he knew much more than he dared to hint at even obliquely in those pages. That body must have some time been possessed by an alien force, and it is my belief that I could release an account for general publication of how this monstrous possession occurred.

I had journeyed to Araby in that year of 1955 when I had first heard of the legend. My researches into the supernatural and sources of little known cosmic knowledge were undoubtedly in my mind, but the trip was intended primarily for pleasure, together with an examination of certain fabled landmarks, idols and locations. I saw shrines to reptilian Sebek and faceless Nyarlathotep, and once saw a shrivelled thing which had been imbedded in a mummy, said to be one of the sentient spines of Glaaki. I wished to see a little of the exotic east, and to this end I avoided the cities after dark, walking the deserts and sleeping in a tent in the open, even though the night temperatures made this dangerous. But it was in a city, whose name I have forgotten, that an ancient camel-driver happened to notice I was a foreigner, and began to recount a curious legend which the people of the city told to account for their avoidance of a strange and brooding desert to the west.

Of course he spoke in a foreign dialect, but I understood what he said to be roughly this:

"You see that desert over to the east? That's where Irem lies, or rather that's what I've been told. Of course they're very superstitious around here—not like you or me—and the city which does lie out there is nameless, but they say it's Irem all right. They say that the myth of Sebek grew up here—because of the spirits of the alligator-creatures—which are supposed to haunt that city. That's where Abdul Alhazred dreamed his couplet, you know—I suppose you must know the one I mean? Yes—well, all that's common knowledge, but they have their own legends about him here. You've come here after oddities, so perhaps you'll be interested.

"Alhazred didn't go straight to that nameless city, so they say. He went on a pilgrimage first, a pilgrimage that changed him in a very peculiar way. After all, in those days this was a strange land, and they weren't so particular what they worshipped or employed, so maybe there were things around that you'd try to explain away nowadays. Something was out there in that desert off to the west—something that told him things he never dared mention in the *Necronomicon*, unholy as that book is! The legend doesn't say what it was, though—only something, very old and probably not of this earth."

"Sounds very intriguing, " I remarked. "Perhaps I could explore a bit out there while it's still light."

"Oh, no," the man protested, seemingly alarmed. "I only meant it as a story, not to get you out there."

"Why shouldn't I go," I pointed out, "if there's nothing to fear out there? If it's only a story, there can't be any danger in the middle of a desert."

"It may not be as wild a tale as all that," conceded the camel-driver. "The folk around here never go near that desert, and it could be for good reason. Not that I'm superstitious, but I think it's better to heed the legends and not take chances with my life. Besides, it's not just the local people who are scared of that place."

"Who else? " I inquired, suddenly interested again in this new development.

"An Englishman, a tourist like yourself," came the answer. "Oh, I don't know the whole story, but he came here sight-seeing and asked to be shown around. When they refused to take him to the west, he badgered them until

he heard what I told you, and of course he wanted to look round for himself. They didn't expect him to come back, but an hour later he ran into the city. He did tell those who'd listen what he'd seen out there, but it was so long ago that it wouldn't be of any use to tell you what he'd said. Of course they *did* show him a likeness of Abdul Alhazred before he went, so that warned him—but you wouldn't understand even if you saw *that* out in the desert. There aren't any likenesses of Alhazred left now."

I tried to draw him out. "Well, if you can't even tell me what this man's supposed to have seen, I'm certainly going out there to see it for myself. It must be really terrible if it can scare an Englishman and turn an Arab into a madman, I only wish I had a camera to photograph this monster or whatever and bring it back to show you, but I ran out of film miles back. You're sure, now, that you won't tell me anything else?"

But my suggestion did not affect the ancient camel-driver, who shook his head and moved away from me. I could learn no more of the tale from any of those who moved among the antique buildings and down tortuous dim-lit alleys. I felt as if I were in a city on some strange and hostile planet, among beings whose language was unintelligible to human ears. Even the silent, primeval expanse to the west of the city seemed more friendly than the claustrophobic, half-lightless cluster of buildings; and so I started walking across the shifting plain, seeking the unknown.

I had often walked in the desert before, but this place was a landscape out of a hashish-dream. The sun above was a lurid copper colour, and the disk of its light seemed less like a globe than some swollen egg-shaped satellite. The sky on the horizon was darkened strangely, for no clouds were visible, and it almost resembled a band ripping out of the sky in places; I felt that if the desert could be viewed from above, I would realise that these rises and depressions followed the shape of an alien body buried just beneath the sand's surface. My feet seemed nightmarishly heavy, and once or twice I thought of turning back. But I had come so far that I did not wish to make a second journey, and disliked returning to that suffocating city.

The sun was perhaps two-thirds of its way down the dismal sky when I first saw something on the horizon. That disquieting shadow was still the same width, whatever it might be, but for the first time I realised that the band of shade had not been visible until I reached this shunned desert; but it was not this of which I caught sight. For, outlined against that black area

stood out what I for the moment took to be a ring of pillars, set up like a circle of monoliths, such as can be seen in places where forbidden rites have been practised. I stared long at these columns wondering for what purpose they'd been placed there.

It was not until I drew nearer that I realised what these things actually were. Standing in the desert for untold eons and chiseled to an incredible smoothness, these cylinders were forms of statues, something like the anomalous Easter Island figures. The statues were cut from some strange translucent material, which glowed white when viewed from one angle and appeared ebon when seen by another. The main part of each statue was the pillar-like pedestal, which must have been unbelievably hard if it had stood there as long as tales recounted, for it was smooth and totally unmarked. But there all resemblance, both to the Easter Island statues and between the various figures themselves, ended. I have never seen such a monstrous array of cosmic monsters, even in the infamous Rogers' museum in London, for each cylinder bore a sculptured head of something completely horrible. Two cylinders, however, had a bulbous appendage at the peak which might have been sculptured into a head, but which were completely featureless; while a third carried some thing I could not understand among all these other monstrosities. Thank heaven, at least I only considered these things to be products of the morbid imagination of some brilliant but deranged sculptor.

There were twelve of the towering columns, each about twenty feet high. Two of them were surmounted, as I have said, merely by featureless objects perhaps intended to be sculptured later into heads. Others, however, were much more detailed and frightful. There was the gelatinous thing with its octopoid appendages and frequent gaping throats, covering it. Further on, I saw a thing like a human head, with its eyes, ears, nose and bulging crown —it was in fact quite human until one came to the obscene whitish tentacles which protruded from its open mouth. The next pillar held something like the head of a crocodile, but eyeless, with long, many-jointed feelers where the eyes should have been. Neighbouring was another object rather like a human head, but at the tops of the ears the whole skull was formed into a depression; by stepping back I saw what seemed to be some tiny humanoid being in this depression, in an attitude of feeding—on what I would not dare to think. The other monstrosities were yet more abnormal. But the last pillar of all held a completely human head—that of an Arab, with a look of loathing and terror on his face. I somehow considered this inclusion to be

no relief to the horror of the rest. The human face among the hellish host stirred a subconscious fear in me, and I felt that if I understood this inclusion, a half-sensed truth would be revealed. Perhaps, I feebly surmised, the sculptor had intended to convey that man himself is as great an abnormality as those hybrid horrors? But even this thought seemed sane and thinkable when compared to that which tried to crawl out of a slimy pit deep in my mind. I sensed that these cosmic accidents might not have been carved out of that unknown mineral, but existed there by some witchery. It was about this time that I noticed the inscriptions at the bases of the statues. I was facing that depicting the eyeless crocodile blasphemy, and the sunlight, shining from behind me, struck the lower half of the pedestal and outlined the characters thereon. It would be more correct to speak of those forgotten letters as *in* the stone, for when I moved closer I saw that they were actually inscribed below the surface of the stone. I have spoken of the inscription as forgotten, yet now I must own that paradoxically I instinctively knew that the carved characters were incomplete, as if partially erased by the passage of innumerable eons. I make no attempt to explain this, but suggest shudderingly that it bears out certain things I was led to conjecture after what I indubitably saw at the end.

Seeing that these letters were in an alien alphabet, and sensing that they were incomplete, I bent closer to examine the inscription on the new pedestal. It is unnecessary to describe my painful examination of each carving; I need only to state that I found each to be incomplete, except that at the base of one of the blank-faced statues; to be more precise, that next to the pillar bearing the Arabian head. Even the words on the other faceless figure were somehow incomplete; but I believe this was not because they had been effaced in the past, but because they would not become clear *until they needed to be read*.

Immediately I read these lines I knew, through dim racial memory, how to pronounce them. I could set them down phonetically, if I dared; but although I do not know their exact meaning, I realise that it is better that those products of a wisdom of an immemorial sphere should not be generally known. Perhaps the first two words—*shlaax menis*— may convey something to the student; though if the reader recognises them I do not wish him to contact me and tell me of their real purpose.

As the curious cadences throbbed against my mental ear, a peculiar and disturbing vision passed fleetingly across my mind. I saw that same faceless statue standing alone on some colossal plain, above which nebulae and galaxies reeled and spheres and suns burst or swung about some black and lifeless globe. The statue now had a face, and I wished that one of the transiently shattering planets would illuminate the visage now carved atop the pillar. But no light shone upon that unseen face, and in a few seconds the whole scene slid into lightless oblivion.

It was, I suppose, only natural that I should wish to repeat those passages in an alien language. I do not like speculating on what would have occurred if I had not been interrupted in my speech in such a monstrous manner; nor do I feel totally safe because I did not complete the passage. I know now that the author of the *Necronomicon* must have been inhabited by something out of space when he left that awful shrine. The pillars, indeed, must have been alive in some fearful way, and the beings in them were ever ready to possess those who came and wakened them by repeating those chants at the base of each pillar. I suppose that Alhazred was the last to be possessed by one of the abominations; the others who were inhabited before him must have lived on this planet far before the human race—those others whose likenesses leered from the peak of each pillar. I, too, might have been inhabited, had it not been for what I saw at the end.

So it was that I began to repeat those mercifully-forgotten alien words. As I chanted, I noticed that something huge and black was moving near the horizon. I stared in that direction, and saw that the curious lightless band on the edge of the desert was extending a sluggish tentacle across the sky. Perhaps this was in some way connected with the reaching of the pillar-entity into my body, but even this did not account for the lurch of the heart that I experienced. It was what I glimpsed a moment later; and that was what cut off my repetition of the terrible words. I do not know if a portion of that thing which lurked in the star-crested pillar still remains in me, for at times I experience nauseating changes of perspective or sense monstrous hints of truths beyond the veil of every day.

It was as I looked up at the top of the pillar that I saw the final horror. And as the answer to one terrible question—namely, whither did the life-forces of the possessed bodies proceed when displaced?—was borne in on me, the whole truth crashed down on me. For even as I chanted that horrific ritual, a

likeness had been forming to surmount the pedestal. As I stared upwards, I glimpsed a loathsome and foetal replica materialising at the centre of the translucent bulb—*a ghastly but recognisable likeness of my own face*!

The Horror From The Bridge

"*The Horror from the Bridge* is based, like several of these stories, on Lovecraft's Commonplace Book as it appeared in the Arkham House anthology *The Shuttered Room*. It's based on two entries: 'Man in strange subterranean chamber—seeks to force door of bronze—overwhelmed by influx of waters' and 'Ancient (Roman? pre-historic?) stone bridge washed away by a (sudden & curious?) storm. Something liberated which had been sealed up in the masonry thousands of years ago. Things happen.' The story is based to some extent on the chronology of events in Lovecraft's *The Dunwich Horror*, but towards the end I found I hadn't the patience to build as minutely as Lovecraft would have."—Ramsey Campbell, foreword to *Cold Print*

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I

Clotton, Gloucestershire, is not a name which can be found on any map, and of the inhabitants of the few leaning red-brick houses which remain of the uptown section of the once-prosperous town, there is not one person who can remember anything of that period of horror in the town in 1931. Those in Brichester who heard the rumours that filtered out of the terror-clutched town deliberately refrain from recounting what they learned, and they hope that the monstrous series of events will never become generally known. Nobody, in fact, knows quite why that twenty-foot-high concrete building was erected on the bank of the Ton, the tributary of the Severn which flows near what used to be the riverside section of Clotton. Nor can they tell why a band of men tore down all the buildings which lay anywhere near the river, leaving only that sparse remnant of uptown Clotton. And of the eldritch sign which was clumsily engraved in each wall of the concrete riverside building, Brichester folk do not like to think. If one asks the professors at the University, they will answer vaguely that it is an extremely ancient cabalistic symbol, but one is never told exactly what the symbol is supposed to invoke, or against what it may be intended as a protection. The

whole affair, in fact, is a curious conglomeration of hints and avoidances; and perhaps it would never have been known what actually took place in Clotton in 1931, had not a typed document been found in the house of a deceased Brichester recluse. It seems that this recluse had recently been preparing the document for publication, and possibly it may be better that such a document was never published. For, in fact, the document is a description of the horror, by one of those who tore down the riverside buildings; in view of what he recounts, it is understandable that he became reclusive.

The writer, Philip Chesterton, obviously intended his document to be as scholarly a document as possible. His reclusiveness, stemming, for reasons not to be conjectured, from 1931, allowed him a great deal of time to investigate the historical aspects of the affair through his large stock of volumes on the Roman occupation of Britain and following events. Other tomes, indeed, made it possible for him to include a good deal of historical and genealogical data about the people of Clotton, though this does not give more than a composite picture of the small population of the town, and does not add any information for those seeking to learn all factors affecting what erupted at the beginning of that cataclysmic period. Admittedly, however, certain legends and quasi-historical tales about some of the people of Clotton may be taken as hints of the eventual explanation of that problematic flood of 1931, but it is undeniably difficult to assess the true worth of various peculiar tales which Chesterton seems to have believed. The intrinsic value and veracity of several pivotal descriptions in the following transcription, which is a version, in some places severely cut, of the document found in the Brichester house, must therefore be considered carefully by the reader.

In 1800, according to the manuscript, a strange visitor moved into an empty house on Riverside Alley, a little-tenanted street within sight of a bridge over the Ton. The townsfolk could learn little about him, save that his name was James Phipps, and that he had come from Camside because his unorthodox scientific researches were distasteful to the inhabitants. Of course this was when the Reverend Jenner's witch-hunts were at their height, so that these 'researches' may have been taken for witchcraft. People living near the riverside street noticed the anomalous instruments and cases which were carried into the house by two furtive-looking rustics. Phipps seemed to direct operations with singular care, and came near to fury when

one of the men almost slipped while carrying something which appeared to be a statue wrapped in thick canvas. The gaunt, pallid-faced man, with his jet-black hair and long bony hands, must have affected the watchers with strange feelings.

After some days had elapsed since his arrival, Phipps began to haunt taverns near the river. It was noticed that he never drank anything, and was once overheard to remark that he was averse to alcohol. It seemed, in fact, that he came there solely to discuss affairs with the less reputable inhabitants of Clotton—in particular, to learn of the prevalent legends of the countryside. In time, of course, he heard of the legend that a demon had once lurked nearby, and showed great interest in the story. The inevitable elaborations reached his ears—the belief of one or two people that a whole race of abominations was entombed somewhere in the vicinity, and the idea that a monstrous underground city could be discovered if one found the entrance which was reputed to lie submerged under the turbulent river waters. Phipps showed unaccountable interest in the further idea that the alien monster or race had been sealed up in some manner and could be released if the prisoning talisman were removed. He apparently held much stock by these curious legends, for he rewarded his informants very highly. To one or two he even suggested that they should send their sons to him for education in the sciences, but those approached were not interested in offers of this sort.

It was in the spring of 1805 that Phipps left his home one night. At least, he must have moved in darkness, for nobody knew of his temporary removal until the silence and lightlessness of the building on Riverside Alley made them aware of it. The strange tenant, it seemed, did not deem it necessary to set any guard upon his house, beyond locking the doors and shuttering the windows; and, indeed, nobody was sufficiently curious to investigate, for the barred house near the river remained silent and untouched.

Some months later, in early November, Phipps returned to take up tenancy again. This time, however, he was not alone, for during his absence he had taken a wife—a woman with a similar corpse-like pallor, who was heard to speak little and walked with a peculiarly stiff gait. What information could be gathered about her was sparse, only revealing that her husband had met her in Temphill, a nearby town in the Cotswolds, where he had journeyed to procure some extremely rare chemicals. They had met at some unnamed

gathering, and Phipps showed strange caution in speaking of this mysterious gathering.

Nothing more need be noted about the curious couple in the house bordering the river for some time after this. In late 1806 a son was born in that darkly brooding house, and some consider that this was the actual beginning of a series of events to reach so devastating a climax in 1931. The child, who was named Lionel by his science-seeking father, was born on a day in November, of lashing rain and skies ripped by lightning. The people living near Riverside Alley used to say that a throaty and muffled rumbling had seemed to come from below the ground rather than from the throbbing sky; a few would even insist querulously that the lightning, often striking near the river, had once struck, in the form of a scintillating pillar of energy, directly through the roof of the Phipps homestead, even though no marks of such a phenomenon were afterwards found. The son was, at any rate, born of strange parents, and no such superstitious accounting for his abnormal inclinations in later life need be believed.

It was in 1822, when Lionel Phipps would have been seventeen or eighteen years of age, that his rumoured instruction by his father commenced. Definitely passers-by would see faint gleams of light through the shutters which nearly always now were closed over the windows, and frequently muttered discussions or arguments between father and son were overheard. Once or twice these low-voiced conclaves took on a faintly ritualistic flavour, and those hearing the words would experience a vague sense of unease. A few passersby would become sufficiently interested to peer through a crack in the shutter, upon which they might see the younger Phipps poring over some large and ancient tome, or assisting at some unknown and vaguely sinister-looking apparatus. It seemed obvious that the boy was passing through a period of initiation or instruction in some branch of knowledge, of a definitely outré kind, if one were to judge from reports.

This period, it appears, continued well into the late months of 1823, and at its latter end a change was noted by the neighbours of the antique building on Riverside Alley. For one thing, whereas before only the woman of the household had been seen to leave the house, a series of nocturnal journeys now commenced. These were made by father and son with what seemed an extreme degree of caution, and the usual destination was thought to lie near the river. At one time the two were followed by a puzzled passerby, who

returned to report that they had been engaged in some sort of survey of the ancient, moss-grown river bridge. They had even clambered down the banks to balance precariously above the swirling ebon waters, and at one time the father, examining one of the supports by the light of a lantern, let out a cry of what sounded like realisation. His son seemed equally surprised when he joined the seeker, and both disappeared under the bridge. The watcher could not view the proceedings without revealing himself, and he made his way home with a turbulent mind.

Then came that particularly anomalous occurrence which may explain a seemingly inexplicable accident which befell a visitor later. The younger Phipps was seen to leave the house following the strange visit to the bridge, and those who took interest in the actions of this family soon discovered that the young man had visited the local general supplier's to purchase pickaxes and spades—for what purpose he would not tell. Those expecting to see the two secretive tenants of the river-bordering lane engaged in some form of excavation were puzzled when no such occupation was noticed.

While no excavation was visible anywhere on the surface, the peculiar evidence of some occupation of the men and the woman was soon evident. The nearby residents began to hear muffled sounds of digging and the noise of metal striking stone from somewhere adjoining the cellar of that much-discussed house in the alley. This series of sounds was not static in its location, for the sounds of excavating metal moved slowly, it seemed, in the direction of the river. These noises continued for some weeks, during which neither of the men was seen at all outside the house, and the woman only seldom. Finally, one night perhaps two months later, a party of men entered the Riverside Alley building, carrying, among other things, doors and frames and an unaccountable amount of material apparently intended for reinforcing the doors. A great noise of working came from below the ground, mostly located near the house and later near the archaic river bridge. After the cessation of the sounds, lights were seen in the room thought to be the laboratory or room where the men carried out their secretive experiments. Next came a reverberation which suggested that the party was returning to the underground region, following which there was a silence lasting some moments, and finally a sound of rushing waters somewhere below the earth. Shouts of amazement and terror were borne to the ears of those listening above, and a few minutes later a sound of something wooden crashing against stone, while an unpleasant reptilian

odour rose to the shimmering stars. In an hour or so the party of men departed singly as stealthily as they had come.

Early in 1825, the escape of a criminal from the nearby prison on Mercy Hill led a party of searchers from Brichester to come to Clotton, antedating seekers after something much more hideous by over a century. Despite James Phipps' insistence that no refugee was hidden in his house, one of the group would not be satisfied by this reiteration. He went alone into the forbidding house while the others searched nearby, but when the man had still not joined the main party over an hour later they returned precipitously to Riverside Alley. They discovered him lying by the side of the road outside the house, unconscious and covered with water and slime.

Upon regaining consciousness the searcher recounted a strange tale. According to Chesterton's research, his tale ran:

'When you all left, this man Phipps waited till you were out of sight, and then he showed me in. Upstairs there's only bedrooms, and so bare that I didn't even need to go over the threshold to see that there was nobody hiding. Almost too bare—Phipps seems wealthy enough; where's all his money spent, then? Downstairs there's the usual sort of thing, except facing on the street there's some sort of laboratory. He wouldn't show me in there at first, but I insisted. The place was full of machinery and bookcases, and over in one corner there was a glass tank full of liquid, with a—well, something like a green sponge covered with bubbles—floating in it. I don't know what it was, but looking at it almost made me sick.

'I thought I'd seen all the house, and then I heard footsteps coming up from below. A woman appeared in the kitchen—Phipps' wife—and I went in to ask her where she'd been. He gave her a sort of warning look, but she'd already blurted out that she'd been down in the cellar. Phipps didn't seem to want me to go down, but finally he opened a trapdoor in the kitchen floor and we went down some steps. The cellar's quite large and bare. Tools and panes of glass, and what looked like a row of veiled statues; nowhere you could hide.

'I was just making for the stairs when I noticed a door in the wall to the left. There was a lot of carving on it, and a glass window in the top half, but it was too dark for me to see through the glass; anyway, it looked like a good hiding place. When Phipps saw where I was going he yelled out something about its being dangerous, and started down the steps. At first I

didn't see how it opened, because there was no doorknob—then I noticed a brick in the wall just to the right of it which looked loose, and I pushed it in. There was a sort of grating noise, and another I couldn't place at the time, but now I think it was Phipps running back upstairs.

'The rest of what happened I don't understand. The door swung open as I expected when I pushed the brick into position—and then a flood of water poured into the cellar! I don't know what was behind that door—the water threw me backwards too quickly for me to see anything—but for one minute I thought a figure was standing in the open before it floundered into the cellar with the water. I only saw it as a shadow, but it was like something out of a nightmare—towering—neckless—deformed—ugh! It couldn't have been anything like that really, of course. Probably one of those statues I was telling you about. I didn't see it again, and I can't remember anything else till you revived me outside the house. But what sort of man is it who has doors in his house leading to underground rivers?'

No amount of pounding on the door of the house could elicit a response, and those in the party did not particularly like to enter that building of brooding secrets. They went away intending to return later with a warrant, but somehow this intention was forgotten on their return to Brichester. Their later capture of the escaped criminal restored a kind of sanity, and the peculiar rumours of demon-haunted catacombs were almost forgotten.

II

The death of James Phipps came in 1898, on a day of howling wind, on which the hills in the distance muttered subterraneously in curious rhythms; the people of the country spoke of invisible primal mountain presences which chanted in nighted caverns, even though professors at the university in Brichester told them of the probability of underground rivers. The nightjars which now and then skimmed over the hills cried in peculiarly expectant tones, almost as if they expected to capture the soul of the dying man, as the legends told in that countryside hinted. For a long time through that May afternoon Phipps' voice could be heard, strangely distorted, from a shuttered upper-floor window; at times it seemed to address someone, while at others the voice would wail nonsensical fragments in unknown languages. It was not until after the rise of the miasma-distorted moon that an anguished groan came from the dying man, followed by a united rising

of affrighted nightjars, from where they perched lengthwise in the trees and watched the house from across the river with glinting eyes. They flew as if escaping from some pursuing horror, which some believe these psychopomps to have attempted to capture. Close upon this came faintly-heard footsteps upon the stairs in the house, followed by the sound of creaking hinges and a muffled splash rumoured to have been heard in the lower regions of that house.

Nothing was ever heard concerning the burial of any remains of James Phipps, although the son said he preferred to dispose of the corpse himself. The Clotton people could understand this, since the corpse of a man who had apparently lived decades over a century, and practised unknown sciences and experiments in secret, might necessarily be hidden from the eyes of the curious. It is very probably fanciful superstition which leads to scattered references to late travellers glimpsing someone very like Phipps in appearance near various hills topped by rings of monolithic stones, long after his death; but these same stone-capped hills often bore a nauseating reptilian odour which is not so easily explicable when linked with ensuing events.

Lionel Phipps and the unnamed Temphill woman were left in sole possession of the house, and evidently a rift began to open at once between them. For some days a light burned at most times behind the shutters of the laboratory, where the son was thought to be studying whatever books he now inherited. This attracted the attention of the owner of the adjoining house, Mary Allen; and as she could easily hear the conversations from next door through the thin wall when she was interested, her discoveries supplied Philip Chesterton with very useful information. Some days after Phipps' death, for instance, Mrs Allen overheard an interesting altercation. She heard only part of it, actually entering her own house just as Lionel Phipps began to shout angrily.

'I need the tables for the positions of the orbits, I tell you,' he was shouting. 'He must have copied it down somewhere, but there's nothing about it here. If he left it in the laboratory, it's certainly not in there now—are you sure you haven't..?'

'I haven't seen them,' came the terrified answer. 'You know I wouldn't go near them. Maybe I was in the Temphill gathering, but this sort of thing terrifies me more than what I learned—down there... Why do you have to

carry on this meddling? Whoever shut away that from outside must have known what they were doing, so why do you have to be so bent on setting it free?'

'You've taken the chart, haven't you!' threatened Lionel Phipps. 'You've taken it so I can't let them back in!'

'No, no, I haven't,' his mother protested. 'Don't jump to conclusions until you've been through the whole house, at least.'

This temporarily satisfied Phipps, who presumably went to the laboratory, for the lamp in there was lighted again a few minutes later. The search of the house proved unavailing, however, and another furious argument took place. The mother still insisted that she neither knew of the hiding-place of the notes nor did she know the actual information which he sought.

'Well,' Phipps conceded, 'perhaps you don't but anyway it makes no difference now. Before the time comes I'll go down to London and look up the British Museum copy of the Necronomicon; that's bound to have the chart. And don't try to persuade me not to go ahead with Father's work! Of course, you don't have to stay around—it might be better if you went back to your coven in Temphill. Satanism is so much healthier, isn't it?'

'You know I need—' began his listener.

'Oh, of course, I forgot,' admitted Lionel Phipps satirically. 'Well, just don't interfere in my business here—I won't stand for it.'

The expected trip to London and the British Museum came in early 1899, and Lionel Phipps found little difficulty in gaining access to that section of the library which contains the rarer books. The librarian did not like the pallid face and leanness of the visitor, but he unlocked the bookcases containing the restricted volumes readily enough. The seeker speedily realised that the monstrous work of Abdul Alhazred would be useless to him in his quest; while it did contain an astrological table, this was very incomplete and long outdated. The even older tome, the Book of Eibon, appeared to him a possible source, with its records of the knowledge of an elder civilisation. The librarian discovered that Phipps was attempting to find the position of some sphere Glyu'uho in an obscure relationship with a system of orbits on a certain autumn night—Glyu'uho, translated from that terrible primal tongue, being Betelgeuse. That little-known table in the complete Book of Eibon which gives positions of suggestive far worlds was

quickly found by Phipps, from which he copied down parts of the table. The keeper of the books shuddered as he peered over the visitor's shoulder and translated the names of Aldebaran and the Hyades in Phipps' notations. He disliked, too, the walk of the seeker as he left the echoing room, for it appeared that he had some slight difficulty in using his limbs. The librarian might have shivered more had he known of the forthcoming results of this visit.

The return of Phipps, late in the evening, to the house on Riverside Alley, brought the most serious, and last, quarrel between the two remaining inhabitants of the building. Towards its end both were screaming at each other, and the listening Mrs Allen found their remarks terrifying.

Phipps was yelling something which first brought Mrs Allen to listen closely. 'All right, you try and stop me,' he told his mother, 'and I'll forget to operate next time you need it. You have to keep in my good books, or else you won't last out. You wouldn't even be here on this earth if it wasn't for that meeting in Temphill. You'll tell them about my plans, will you? If the people in this town knew what they found in Temphill in 1805 just after the day they met, you might be disposed of quickly...'

She shrieked back: "The people in this town won't be able to do anything if you go on with your father's work—there'll be other tenants in Clotton. Wasn't the tunnel from the gate to the cellar enough?'

'You know I wouldn't be able to protect myself if I let them though the cellar entrance.' Phipps sounded defensive.

'So just because you're a coward, do you have to let them through the other way?' she inquired. 'Once the sign's removed there'll be no way to keep them in check—they'll just multiply until they let the Old Ones back on the earth. Is that what you want?'

'Why not?' suggested her son. 'We both worship the Old Ones; the river-creatures won't harm me. We'll exist side by side as Their priests, until They return to rule the world.'

'Side by side—you're naïve,' Phipps' mother scoffed. Still, perhaps the juxtaposition of Fomalhaut and the Hyades won't be enough; even you may get tired when you have to wait more than thirty years... I'm not staying to see what happens. I'll go back to Temphill and chance what should have come years ago—perhaps it'll be the best thing.'

At about eleven o'clock that night the front door opened, and the strange woman began to walk down the street. A vaguely terrible picture was presented to the warily watching Mary Allen, as James Phipps' widow made her way with that half-paralytic gait which seemed to be a characteristic of all the Phipps family, between the dark houses under a lich-pale moon. Nothing more was ever heard of her, though a woman was seen walking very slowly, and with some difficulty, along a road some miles away in the direction of Temphill. Daylight showed a strange horror; for a little way further on a woman's skeleton was found, as though it had fallen at the side of the road. Body-snatching seemed the most plausible explanation, and the matter was discussed little. Others to whose ears it came, however, linked it indefinitely with references to something that 'should have come a century ago.'

After this breach Lionel Phipps began to make an increasing number of journeys to that immemorially-constructed river bridge, and was noticed to go underneath to peer into the water frequently. At night he would step into the street at various hours and examine the sky with an excessive degree of impatience. At such times he appeared to be interested in a portion of the sky where, from directions given, Fomalhaut would have risen. Towards the end of March 1899, his impatience began to ease, and a light would be seen more often in the library. He seemed to be preparing for something extremely important, and those who heard the sounds which emanated from the shuttered laboratory disliked to consider just what he might be awaiting.

Early that Autumn came the night concerning which the Brichester people begin to grow reticent. Fomalhaut now glared like the eye of some spatial lurker above the horizon, and many tales began to be whispered abroad about the increasingly frequent happenings around Gloucestershire and the Severn. The hill rumblings were louder and more coherent, and more than once people forced to take forest routes had sensed vast and invisible presences rushing past them. Monstrous shapes had been glimpsed scuttling through the trees or flapping above the stone circles on the hills, and once a woman had come fleeing into Brichester, shrieking a tale of something which had looked very like a tree but had suddenly changed shape. On a night at the peak of these bizarre occurrences, Phipps made his first experiment.

He was seen leaving the house on an evening of late October, 1899, and seemed to be carrying a long metal bar of some sort. He arrived on the river-bank near the bridge at about midnight, and immediately began to chant in ritual tones. A few minutes later the hill noises redoubled in intensity, and a peculiar sound started up close at hand, near the bridge—a monstrous bass croaking which resounded across the countryside. What appeared to be a minor earthquake followed closely on the beginning of the croaking, shaking the river-bank and causing slight turbulence in the water, though nothing more. Phipps then disappeared under the bridge, and through his continued chanting rang the sound of metal scraping on stone. Upon this sound came a subterranean commotion, with a rising chorus of voiceless croaking and a sound as if of Cyclopean bodies slithering against one another in some charnel pit, with a nauseating rise of that alien reptilian odour. But nothing came into view, even though the scrape of metal against stone continued with greater ferocity. Finally Phipps appeared above the bridge's shadow again, with an expression of resignation on his face. He made his way back to the house in the alley, as that abominable commotion died out behind him, and entered, closing the door stealthily. Almost at once the light filtered out from the shuttered laboratory where, presumably, he was again studying the inherited documents.

Seemingly, Phipps was becoming unsure whether he was using the right chant, for that was what he told the British Museum librarian, Philip Chesterton, this now being the year of 1900. Phipps preferred not to say which incantation he needed, or what he hoped to invoke by its use. He made use of the Necronomicon this time in his search, and Chesterton noted that the seeker appeared interested in those pages which dealt with the commission of beings in tampering with the elements. The reader copied down a passage and continued to another section of the volume. Chesterton, reading over the other's shoulder, noticed that he showed considerable interest in the following passage, and shuddered to think of possible reasons.

'As in the days of the seas covering all the earth, when Cthulhu walked in power across the world and others flew in the gulfs of space, so in certain places of the earth shall be found a great race which came from Outside and lived in cities and worshipped in dark fanes in the depths. Their cities remain under the land, but rarely do They come up from Their subterranean places. They have been sealed in certain locations by the seal of the Elder

Gods, but They may be released by words not known to many. What made its home in water shall be released by water, and when Glyu'uho is rightly placed, the words shall cause a flood to rise and remove at last the seal of those from Glyu'uho.'

Phipps admitted to his listener that he would have a considerable wait before anything could be done towards the release of what he knew to exist, 'But,' he continued, 'it won't be too long before those in Clotton will see shapes striding down their streets in broad daylight that would drive them insane at night! In the old days the shoggoths used to avoid those places where They peered out of the depths at unwary passers-by—what do you think will be the effect on a man who sees Their great heads break the surface—and sees what they use to view him instead of eyes?'

Then he left, possibly conjecturing that he had said too much; and Chesterton was alone, with various speculations. As time went by, he began to investigate the doings of this eldritch being on Riverside Alley; and as a horrible idea began to form concerning the woman from Temphill, he contacted an acquaintance in that town. Legends, he was told, existed of a monstrous coven in the 1800s, which convened in artificial caverns beneath the graveyards. Often vaults would be opened, and newly buried corpses might be dug forth and reanimated by certain horrendous formulae. There were even hints that these living cadavers were taken as wives or husbands by favoured members of the cult, for the children resulting from such charnel betrothals would have primal powers which properly belonged only to alien deities.

So horrified was Chesterton by what he learned and suspected that he apparently decided to do something about it. In 1901 he resigned from his post at the British Museum and moved into a house on Bold Street in Brichester, working as a librarian at Brichester University. He was bent on preventing Lionel Phipps' intentions; and those who visited Chesterton at his home in Brichester, where he lived alone among his vast collection of books, left oddly disturbed by his outré, half-incoherent ramblings. During library hours at the University he showed no signs of any such aberration as manifested itself in his free conversation, beyond a strange nervousness and preoccupation. But in his free time he tended to speak of nameless things in a frightful manner, half-describing hideous things in a way which promised cosmic revelations if the listener would only be patient.

'God help us—what alien powers has Lionel Phipps got, lying dormant in that mad brain? That woman James brought back from the Temphill meeting of which he never spoke—was she merely one of the coven, or something which they raised from the tomb by their awful rites? Lionel was overheard to say that he had to perform operations so that she would last out—maybe he meant that she would decay away if he didn't preserve her ghastly half-life... And now he's got the information he was after, there's no telling what he may do. What lurking terror is he going to release from wherever he knows it is hidden? He said there would be a considerable wait, though—if one knew the right words, one might be able to seal up whatever is lying in wait... Or perhaps Phipps himself could be destroyed—after all, a being which has been born out of such an abnormal union must be prone to arcane influences...'

As might be expected, those who heard his odd ravings did not act upon them. Such things might happen in Temphill or Goatswood, but they could not affect sane Brichester folk, where witchcraft was not, at least, practised openly.

The period of more than thirty years passed; and nothing occurred which could shake the complacency of those who dismissed Chesterton's theories with such assurance. To be sure, the staff at the University often met with terrors which they had never thought could exist, for they were sometimes called by the frantic inhabitants of various localities to quell phenomena which were rising from hiding. 1928 was a particular year of horror, with inexplicable occurrences in many places, both around the Severn and far beyond; and the professors were more inclined to credit the wild tales of beings from another plane of existence which impinged on this universe. But Chesterton was always very reticent in the presence of authority, and he mistakenly thought they would explain any unnatural situation in a supposedly scientific manner. He read astrological tables and arcane books more and more, and shivered when he noticed how closely the stars were approaching certain positions. Perhaps he was even then formulating a plan for the destruction of the legendary threat which Phipps was to release; his narrative is not specific on this point.

Terror, meanwhile, was increasing among the more credulous Clotton inhabitants. They noted the loudness of the hill noises, and were quick to remark the frequent visits of Phipps to the bridge over the sluggish river,

and the way the lights flashed far into the night in his laboratory. The importance attached to a seemingly trivial find by a child on Riverside Alley was startling; for all that had been found was a hurried sketch on a scrap of paper. The frantic search for this paper made by Chesterton, when he heard of it, startled the more enlightened men who knew him; though those at Brichester University might have been less inclined to scoff, for they were familiar with things whose existence is not recognised by science.

When Chesterton managed to acquire the paper and compare it with an illustration in the Necronomicon, he found that these depicted the same species of incarnate hideousness, though in markedly different postures. The only plausible explanation for the sketch seemed to be that it had been drawn frantically by an eavesdropper outside the Phipps house, copied from some picture glimpsed through the shutters; at least, that was what Mrs Allen suggested when she gave him the paper. From comparison with the sketch, Chesterton used the other picture to form a composite portrayal of the being, though the details of both pictures were vague. The thing had eight major arm-like appendages protruding from an elliptical body, six of which were tipped with flipper-like protrusions, the other two being tentacular. Four of the web-tipped legs were located at the lower end of the body, and used for walking upright. The other two were near the head, and could be used for walking near the ground. The head joined directly to the body, it was oval and eyeless. In place of eyes, there was an abominable sponge-like circular organ about the centre of the head; over it grew something hideously like a spider's web. Below this was a mouth-like slit which extended at least halfway round the head, bordered at each side by a tentacle-like appendage with a cupped tip, obviously used for carrying food to the mouth. The whole thing was more than a simply alien and horrific monstrosity; it was surrounded by an aura of incredible, aeons-lost evil.

The finding of this only roused the fear of the Clotton people to a more hysterical pitch. And they were quick in their perception of Phipps' growing stealth in his nocturnal ventures—the way he took devious routes in his ever-increasing visits to the river. At the same time, though nobody else was aware of it, Philip Chesterton was noting the approaching conjunction of stars and clusters, said to portend terrific influences. More—he was fighting against the urge to destroy the being in the house on Riverside Alley before the hidden primal race could be released. For Chesterton had pieced

together a powerful formula from various pages of Alhazred, and he felt it might both destroy the surviving Phipps and seal the subterranean entities back into their prison. But dared he chance releasing elemental forces, even to prevent such impending hideousness as he suspected? Thinking upon the horribly suggestive illustrations he had acquired, his terror of the powers with which he was to tamper receded.

So it was that on the night of September 2, 1931, two men were attempting to push back the veils which hold the lurking amorphousnesses outside our plane of existence. As nightjars cried expectantly in the hills, and increasing reports of nameless things seen by travellers terrorised the superstitious, the lights burned in the study of Philip Chesterton far into the night, while he drummed on an oddly-carved black drum which he had procured from the University and began to repeat the dreadful formula he had worked out. At the same time, Lionel Phipps was standing on the bridge over the Severn tributary, staring at Fomalhaut where it glared over the horizon and shrieking words which have not been heard on the earth for aeons.

It can only have been a startling coincidence that a party of young men, carrying rifles which they had lent to a rifle range for the day, was walking along the bank of the Ton. Even less believably, they were making for the bridge just as Phipps completed the shocking evocation. At any rate, they saw what happened as the hysterically screaming voice ceased; and they recount things of such horror that one can only be thankful for Chesterton's remote intervention. 'What made its home in water shall be released by water,' Alhazred had said, and the words of the long-dead sorcerer were proved in that chaotic scene.

A bolt of lightning seemed to crash directly on the bridge, and the shattered stonework of a support momentarily revealed a circular seal, carven with an immense star, before the waters rushed to conceal it. Then the flood began, and the watching group had time only to leap back before a torrent of water shattered the banks and thundered repeatedly and with incredible force upon the spot where the carven circle had appeared. There came a shifting sound from under the throbbing waters, and as the three men in the party watching moved backwards, a huge circular disc of stone rumbled through the liquid and smashed against the lower bank. It had been the seal over the legendary entrance to the hidden alien city.

What happened after this transcended in shocking terror everything which had gone before. Chesterton was nearing the completion of his own invocation at this point; otherwise the thing which was found dead on the riverbank could never have been destroyed by the men. It is surprising, indeed, that they could have retained enough sanity to try.

As the waters began to slow their torrential rush, the watching three saw a dark object break the uniformity of the surface. Then a titanic, shadowy thing rose from the water and rushed across the bank with a revolting sucking noise towards the town nearby. The three did not have a great deal of time, however, to concentrate upon that looming figure, for at that moment Phipps turned towards them. In the dim moonlight they saw him sneer dreadfully, and a look of fearful evil started up in his eyes. He began to move towards them, his eyes seeming to stare at each of them; and they noticed him beckoning behind him, after which there came a sound as of something huge splashing out of the river. But they could not see what was behind Phipps.

'So,' sneered that half-human being before them, 'this is the total of the strength which can be mustered by the great Elder Gods!' Apparently he misunderstood the true intentions of the terrified three men. 'What do you know of the Great Old Ones—the ones who seeped down from the stars, of whom those I have released are only servitors? You and your Celaeno Fragments and your puerile star-signs—what can you guess of the realities which those half-veiled revelations hint? You ought to be thankful, you imbeciles, that I'm going to kill you now, before the race below gets back into sway on the earth and lets Those outside back in!' And he moved towards them with the same dreadful look in his eyes.

But it was not upon Phipps that the watchers fixed their eyes in stark terror. For the moonlight, weak as it was, showed them what towered beside him, two feet taller than himself, shambling silently towards them. They saw the shining network of fibres over the one eye-organ, the waving tentacles about the gaping mouth-slash, the shocking alienness of the eight members —and then the two things were upon them.

At that minute, however, in a house in Brichester, Philip Chesterton spoke the last word of his painfully acquired formula. And as the foremost of the men turned his rifle blindly on the two abominations before him, forces must have moved into operation. It can be only this that could account for

the bullets actually penetrating the alien amphibian which Phipps had released; for the thing fell backwards and croaked horribly for some seconds before it writhed and lay still. As Phipps saw this, he launched himself at the foremost of the party, who fired again. The change which took place in Lionel Phipps must indeed have been swift, for the man with the rifle, braced against the impact of the leaping figure, was struck by a skeleton, clothed with rags of flesh, which shattered upon contact.

The half hysterical three turned towards the river, where a greater miracle was taking place. Perhaps moved by Chesterton's invocation, the pieces of the shattered seal were recomposing in their original shape and location. It may only have been imagination which caused the men to think they saw a shape thrust back into the concealed entrance; it is at any rate certain that whatever lay below in its aeons-forgotten prison was now once again sealed into that sunken hideaway.

The nightjars were quietening their expectantly vibrating cries, and the turbulence of the waters had almost ceased. Not just yet could the men bring themselves to look at the monstrosity which they had shot, to ascertain that it was dead. Instead, they stared towards nearby Clotton, towards which they had seen a dim shape plunge some time before. The monster from beyond was at last loose on the world.

III

By the time that Philip Chesterton had reached the bank of the river outside Clotton, some time had elapsed, and during it several events had occurred. Chesterton, hastening to view the effects of his interference, had been delayed by the necessity of buying petrol, and also by his uncertainty where the sorcerer might be; though he knew the man would be somewhere near water, it was some time before the bobbing lights and commotion of the crowd of evacuees who had come from the nearby town attracted him to the bridge. There he found more things than he had expected.

The crowd would in any case have congregated near the bridge, no doubt, since the noise of shots and other things would have drawn them; but actually they had been forced to evacuate from Clotton. Built above the normal flood-plain of the Ton, the town had been partially inundated by the abnormally-provoked flood; the section near the river had become a morass of submerged streets and basements. Those so driven from their homes had

made for the bridge—the banks of the river were actually higher land than the low-lying downtown quarter of Clotton, and the hills which lay on the other side of the town were precarious at night if one wanted to hurry for help to Brichester. At the bridge, of course, the already frenzied townsfolk met with a scene which only aggravated their hysteria; and this was not alleviated by the tales of several people. Chesterton heard clearly the wails of one woman as he came up. She was telling the bystanders:

'I was just goin' up to bed w'en I 'eard these shots an' yells down be the river. I came downstairs an' peeped out o' the front door down the street, but I didn't see anythin'. Anyway, all this runnin' up an' down 'ad woken me up, so I went into the kitchen an' got a sleepin' tablet. Just as I was goin' back through the front room I 'eard this sort o'—well, I don't know; it sounded like someone runnin', but bare feet, an' sort o' wet-soundin'. Looked out o' the winder, but there wasn't anythin'. An' then somethin' went past the winder—big an' black an' shiny, like a fish. But God knows wot 'eight it was! Its 'ead was level with mine, an' the winder's seven foot off the ground!'

Nor was this all Chesterton heard recounted when he arrived. He had not yet seen the horribly incomplete remains of Phipps, nor that other object which lay in shadow some distance away, for the crowd was being skillfully directed away from the two monstrosities by a surprisingly sane three men —the same ones who had been partly responsible for their destruction. Now, however, the three, sensing his instinctive authoritative bearing, converged on him and began to recount their terrible experience, supplementing their account by pointing out the remains of Phipps and his dreadful companion. Even though Chesterton had formed a good idea of the appearance of the river creatures, he could not suppress a gasp of revulsion as the being was revealed. The sketch and the Necronomicon illustration had not reproduced everything; they had not shown the transparency of the half-gelatinous flesh, revealing the mobile organs beneath the skin. Nor had they shown the globular organ above the brain, at whose use Chesterton could only guess shudderingly. And as the mouth fell open when they stirred the body, he saw that the being possessed no teeth, but six rows of powerful tentacles interlaced across the opening of the throat.

Chesterton turned away, nauseated by this concrete symbol of cosmic alienage, to move back and speak to one or two of the affrighted crowd,

who had no idea of what lay nearby. He twisted around again as a choking cry of horror came behind him; and, under the fast-sinking moon, he saw one of the three men struggling with the tentacles of the river monster. It stood semi-erect on its four lower legs, and was dragging the man towards the yearning members about the mouth. The globular device in the head was pulsing and passing through shocking metamorphoses, and even in this position, Chesterton noticed that the river had momentarily washed almost to the edge of the crowd, and the water was being levitated into an orifice in the head above the globe.

The distance between the wide-gaping mouth and the victim was momently lessening, while the companions of the man were standing seemingly paralysed with terror. Chesterton snatched a rifle from the hands of one of them, aimed it, and stood temporarily uncertain. Recollecting that the being had only been put out of action by the other bullet because of his own incantation, Chesterton doubted whether another shot would harm it. Then, as he saw that pulsing sphere in the head, a conjecture formed in his mind; and he aimed the weapon at the organ, hesitating, and pulled the trigger.

There was a moist explosion, and the watchers were spattered with a noisome pulp. They saw the being sink to the ground, its legs jerking in spasmodic agony. And then came an occurrence which Chesterton would not write about, saying only that very soon almost no remains of the monstrosity existed.

And, as if they had reacted in delayed fashion to the destruction of the being, the crowd now shrieked in unity of terror. Chesterton saw before he turned that the intended victim was indeed dead, whether from pure terror or from the embrace of the tentacles—for where these had gripped, the man's flesh was exposed. Then he turned to look where the mob was staring, and as they too stared in that direction, his two companions remembered what they had seen heading for the town in those recent lunatic minutes.

The moon had sunk nearly to the horizon, and its pallid rays lit up the roofs of the Clotton houses behind which it hung. The chimneys stood up like black rooftop monoliths, and so did something else on one of the nearer roofs—something which moved. It stumbled on the insecure surface, and,

raising its head to the moon, seemed to be staring defiantly at the watchers. Then it leapt down on the opposite side, and was gone.

The action was a signal to the waiting crowd. They had seen enough horrors for one night, and they fled along the riverside path which, dangerous as it was, seemed more secure than any other means of escape. Chesterton watched as the lights faded along the black river, and then a hand touched his arm.

He turned. The two remaining members of the party which had killed Phipps stood there, and one awkwardly said: 'Look, you said you wanted t' destroy them things from the river, an' there's still one left. It was them did for Frank here, an' we think it's our—duty—to get 'em for 'im. We don't know what they are, but they went an' killed Frank, so we're bloody well goin' to try an' kill them. So we thought that if you needed any help with killin' that last one...'

'Well, I told you something of what I know,' Chesterton said, 'but—well, I hope I won't offend you, but—you must understand certain things pretty thoroughly, to unite your wills with mine, and I don't know whether you'd— What sort of work do you do anyway?'

'We're at Poole's Builder's Yard in Brichester,' one told him.

Chesterton was silent for so long that they wondered what had occurred to him. When he looked at them again, there was a new expression in his eyes. 'I suppose I could teach you a little of the Yr-Nhhngr basics—it would need weeks to get you to visualise dimensional projections, but maybe that won't be necessary if I can just give you a copy of the incantation, the correct pronunciation, and give you the lenses for the reversed-angle view of matter if I can make any in time—yes, those plain glass spectacles would do if I put a filter over to progress the colours halfway... But you don't know what the devil I'm running on about. Come on—I'll drive you to my house.'

When they were driving down the A38, Chesterton broke the silence again: 'I'll be frank—it was really because you work at Poole's that I accepted your aid. Not that I wouldn't be glad of help—it's a strain to use those other parts of the brain with only your own vitality to draw on—but there's so much I have to teach you, and only tonight to do it in; there wouldn't even be tonight, but it's crazy to attack while it's dark. No, I think I can use you more in another way, though perhaps you can help with the chant. So long as I still have the reproduction of that seal in the river... and so long as you

can get used to artificial reversal of matter—I always do it without artificial help, because then it doesn't seem so odd.'

And as he drew up the car in the driveway off Bold Street, he called back: 'Pray it stays near water to accustom itself to surface conditions. If it doesn't —they're parthenogenetic, all of them, and pretty soon there'll be a new race to clear off the earth. Humanity will just cease to exist.'

IV

The next day was one of sickly-glowing sunlight and impending winds. Chesterton had copied out the formula in triplicate and given a copy to each of the men, retaining one for himself. Now, in mid-morning, the librarian and one of his helpers were going through the streets of Clotton, gradually approaching the riverside section. On the bank waited the third of the party, like his friend wearing the strange glasses which Chesterton had prepared the night before; his was the crucial part of the plan. The riverbank was otherwise bare—the human corpse and the others having been disposed of.

Chesterton concentrated on his formula, awaiting the finding of what he knew lurked somewhere among the deserted red-brick houses. Strangely, he felt little fear at the knowledge that the amphibian terror lurked nearby, as though he were an instrument of greater, more elemental forces. At the conclusion of the affair, upon comparing impressions, he found that his two companions had been affected by very similar feelings; further, he discovered that all three had shared a vision—a strange mental apparition of a luminous star-shaped object, eternally rising from an abyss where living darkness crawled.

Abruptly a gigantic shape flopped out of a side street, giving forth a deafening, half-intelligent croaking at the sight of the two men. It began to retrace its journey as Chesterton's accomplice started to chant the incantation; but Chesterton was already waiting some yards down the side street, and was commencing the formula himself. It gave a gibbering ululation and fled in the direction of the river, where the two followed it, never ceasing their chant. They were slowly driving it towards the riverbank —and what waited there.

That chase must have resembled a nightmare—the slippery cobbles of the water-soaked street flashing beneath their feet, the antique buildings reeling

and toppling on either side, and the flopping colossus always fleeing before them. And so the infamous building on Riverside Alley was passed, and the nightmarish procession burst out on the bank of the river.

The third member of the party had been staring fixedly at the point at which they emerged, and so saw them immediately. He let in the clutch of the lorry in whose cab he sat, and watched in the rearview mirror while the two manoeuvred the thing into the right position. Perhaps it sensed their purpose; at any rate, there was a hideous period when the being made rushes in every direction. But finally the man in the truck saw that it was in the correct position. They could not aim for the head-organ of the being, for the flesh of the head was strangely opaque, as if the opacity could be controlled at will; but a bullet in the body paralysed it, as Chesterton had deduced it would. Then the lorry-driver moved a control in the cab, and the crucial act was performed.

Upon the paralysed body of the river-creature poured a stream of fast-hardening concrete. There was a slight convulsive movement below the surface, suppressed as Chesterton recommenced the incantation. Then he snatched an iron bar which had been thoughtfully provided, and as quickly as possible carved a replica of that all-imprisoning seal below the bridge upon the semi-solid concrete surface.

Afterwards, Chesterton put forward enough money to have the building firm erect a twenty-foot tower over the spot, carved with replicas of the seal on each side—one never knew what agencies might later attempt to resurrect what they had buried. When the Clotton inhabitants began to trickle back, a chance remark by one of the two builders that more than one being could have escaped caused them to tear down the buildings in the riverside quarter, with Chesterton's approval and aid. They found nothing living, although Phipps' homestead yielded enough objects to drive one of the searchers insane and turn many of the others into hopeless drunkards. It was not so much the laboratory, for the objects in there were largely meaningless to most of the seekers—although there was a large and detailed photograph on the wall, presumably the original of that sketch Chesterton had acquired. But the cellar was much worse. The noises which came from beyond that door in the cellar wall were bad enough, and so were the things which could be seen through the reinforced-glass partition in it; some of the men were extremely disturbed by the steps beyond it, going down into

pitch-black waters of terrifying depth. But the man who went mad always swore that a huge black head rose out of the ebon water just at the limit of vision, and was followed by a blackly shining tentacle which beckoned him down to unimaginable sights.

As time passed, the remaining section of Clotton was repopulated, and those who know anything about the period of terror nowadays tend to treat it as an unpleasant occurrence in the past, better not discussed.

Perhaps it ought not to be so treated. Not so long ago two men were fishing in the Ton for salmon, when they came upon something half-submerged in the water. They dragged it out, and almost immediately afterwards poured kerosene on it and set fire to it. One of them soon after became sufficiently drunk to speak of what they found; but those who heard him have never referred to what they heard.

There is more concrete evidence to support this theory. I myself was in Clotton not so long ago, and discovered a pit on a patch of waste ground on what used to be Canning Road, near the river. It must have been overlooked by the searchers, for surely they would have spoken of the roughly-cut steps, each carrying a carven five-pointed sign, which led down into abysmal darkness. God knows how far down they go; I clambered down a little way, but was stopped by a sound which echoed down there in the blackness. It must have been made by water—and I did not want to be trapped by water; but just then it seemed to resemble inhuman voices croaking far away in chorus, like frogs worshipping some swamp-buried monster.

So it is that Clotton people should be wary still near the river and the enigmatic tower, and watch for anything which may crawl out of that opening into some subterranean land of star-born abominations. Otherwise —who knows how soon the earth may return through forgotten cycles to a time when cities were built on the surface by things other than man, and horrors from beyond space walked unrestrained?

Illustration by Randy Broecker, taken from reprint of The Inhabitant of the Lake And Other Unwelcome Tenants, 2011.

The Insects From Shaggai

"*The Insects From Shaggai* is based on another entry in [H. P. Lovecraft's] Commonplace Book, or rather on my misreading of it. Lovecraft wrote 'Insects or some other entities from space attack and penetrate a man's head & cause him to remember alien and exotic things—possible displacement of personality,' a superb idea I rushed at so hastily that I failed to notice he hadn't meant giant insects at all. [...] Of all my stories this is probably the pulpiest. As such it has some energy, I think, but I wish I'd left the note alone until I was equipped to do it justice."—Ramsey Campbell, foreword to *Cold Print*

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Also published in: *Cold Print*

I: The Place Of The Cone

Perhaps it would be better if I enjoyed myself as best as possible in the next few hours, but somehow I feel bound to write down some explanation for my friends, even if they will not believe it. After all, I am not really depressed—it is only because I must not be alive after sunset that I will slit my wrists then. Already, certainly, my reader will feel incredulity, but it is quite true that my continued existence might be a danger to the whole human race. But no more—I will tell my story from the beginning.

When drinking I tend to be boastful and intolerant, so that when I stayed in the hotel in the middle of Brichester I resolved to keep a check on myself; to stay away from the bar, if possible. But one of the residents—a middle-aged teacher who read extensively—had heard of Ronald Shea, and quite liked some of my fantasy stories. So it was that he led me into the bar, with promises that he would tell me all the Severn Valley legends which might form plots for future stories. The first few tales served to get me slightly intoxicated, and then he suddenly started on one which did not sound like the usual witch-story. By the end I was forced to admit that it was at least original.

'In the woods towards Goatswood,' my informant began, 'the trees get very thick towards the centre. Of course not too many people go down there—there are too many stories about Goatswood itself to attract outsiders—but there's a clearing in the middle of the forest. It's supposed to have been cleared by the Romans for a temple to some god of theirs, I think the Magna Mater, but I wouldn't know about that. Anyway, sometime in the 1600s what must have been a meteor fell in the clearing one night. There were quite a few peculiar happenings earlier that night—arcs of light across the sky, and the moon turned red, according to books I've seen. The fall of this meteorite was heard for miles around, but nobody went to investigate; there were attempts to get together a search-party in Brichester and Camside, but that petered out.

'Not long after, people began to go there—but not normal people. The local coven made it their meeting-place; on ritual nights they'd consummate the Black Mass there and make blood sacrifices, and before long the country people began to say that the witches didn't even worship Satan any more; they worshipped the meteorite. Of course, the local clergymen said the thing was probably sent from Hell anyway. Nobody could really say they'd seen these rites in the clearing, but a lot of them still said that something came out of the meteor in answer to the witches' prayers.

'Then someone went down to the clearing, long after Matthew Hopkins had found the coven and had them executed. It was a young man who visited the clearing in daylight on a bet. He didn't come back before dark, and the others began to get worried. He didn't return until after daylight the next morning, and by that time he was completely incoherent—ran screaming into Brichester, and they couldn't get anything out of him.'

'That's where it ends, I suppose,' I interrupted. 'Somebody sees a nameless horror and can never tell anyone what he saw.'

'You're wrong there, Mr Shea,' contradicted the teacher. 'This man gradually calmed down, though for a few days he was so quiet that they were afraid he'd been struck dumb. Finally he *did* calm down enough to answer questions, but a lot was left unexplained. Of course, as you say...

'Apparently he'd been ploughing through the thickest part of the forest when he heard something following him down the path. Very heavy footsteps, he said—with a sort of metallic sound about them. Well, he turned round, but there was a bend in the path that blocked his view.

However, the sun was shining down the path, and it cast a shadow of something which must have been just beyond the turning. Nobody knows exactly what it was; the man only said that while it was almost as tall as a tree, it was no tree—and it was moving towards him. I suppose he would have seen it in a moment, but he didn't wait for that. He ran the other way down the path. He must have run for quite some time, I think, because he ended up in the haunted clearing. Quite the last place he'd have chosen.

'This is the part that rather interests me. The sun was near to setting, and maybe that gave an added luridness to the scene. Anyway, in this glade in the forest he saw a metal cone standing in the centre. It was made of grey mineral that didn't reflect, and was more than thirty feet high. There was a kind of circular trapdoor on one side, but on the other side were carved reliefs. Presumably he was frightened to go near it, but finally he approached it. Over at one side of the space, there was a long stone with a rectangular hollow scooped out of the top. It was surrounded by human footprints—and there was dried blood in the hollow.

'Another hiatus, I'm afraid. He never would describe those carvings on the cone, except to say that some represented the thing he had almost seen on the path, and others were of—other things. He didn't look at them long, anyway, but went round the other side to look at the trapdoor. It didn't seem to have any lock or way of opening, and he was studying it. Then a shadow fell across him. He looked up.

'It was only the sun finally setting, but it did attract his attention away from the trapdoor. When he looked back, it was hanging open. And while he watched, he heard a throbbing noise somewhere above him, in the tip of the cone. He said he thought there was a sort of dry rustling inside, getting closer. Then he saw a shape crawling out of the darkness inside the trapdoor. That's about it.'

'What do you mean—that's all there is?' I said incredulously.

'More or less, yes,' the teacher agreed. 'The man became very incoherent after that. All I can learn is that he said it told him about its life and what it wanted. The legend hints something more, actually—speaks of his being dragged off the earth into other universes, but I wouldn't know about that. He's supposed to have learned the history of these beings in the cone, and some of what's passed down in the legend is remarkably unusual. At sunrise the Daytime Guardians—that's what they're called in the story—come out,

either to warn people away from the clearing or to drive them in there, I don't know which. These were that species of thing that cast the shadow he saw on the path. On the other hand, after dark the others come out of the cone. There was a lot more told him, but the whole thing's very vague.'

'Yes, it *is* vague, isn't it?' I agreed meaningfully. 'Too vague—horrors that are too horrible for description, eh? More likely whoever thought this up didn't have enough imagination to describe them when the time came. No, I'm sorry, I won't be able to use it—I'd have to fill in far too much if I did. The thing isn't even based on fact, obviously; it must be the invention of one of the locals. You can see the inconsistencies—if everybody was so scared of this clearing, why did this man suddenly stand up and go into it? Besides, why's the thing so explicit until it reaches any concrete horror?'

'Well, Mr Shea,' remarked my informant, 'don't criticise it to me. Tell Sam, there—he's one of the locals who knows about these things; in fact, he told me the legend.' He indicated an old rustic drinking a pint of beer at the bar, who I had noticed watching us all through the conversation. He now rose from the stool and sat at our table.

'Ah, zur,' remonstrated our new companion, 'you don't want t' sneer at stories as is tole roun' here. 'Im as you was 'earin' about laughed at wot they said t' him. 'E didn't believe in ghosts nor devils, but that was before 'e went t' the woods... An' I can't tell yer more about wot 'e got from the thing int' cone 'cos them as knew kep' quiet about it.'

'That's not the only one about the clearing in the woods,' interposed the teacher. 'This witch-cult which held their meetings there had their reasons. I've heard they got some definite benefit from their visits—some sort of ecstatic pleasure, like that one gets from taking drugs. It had something to do with what happened to the man when he went in—you know, when he seemed to enter another universe?—but beyond that, I can't tell you anything.

'There are other tales, but they're still more vague. One traveller who strayed down there one moonlit night saw what looked like a flock of birds rising out of the glade—but he got a second look, and even though these things were the size of large birds, they were something quite different. Then quite a few people have seen lights moving between the trees and heard a kind of pulsation in the distance. And once they found someone dead on a path through the woods. He was an old man, so it wasn't too

surprising that he'd died of heart failure. But it was the way he looked that was peculiar. He was staring in absolute horror at something down the path. Something had crossed the path just ahead of the corpse, and whatever it was, it must have been enough to stop a man's heart. It had broken off branches more than fifteen feet from the ground in passing.'

We had all been talking so long that I did not realise how much I had drunk. It was certainly with alcoholic courage that I stood up as my two companions stared in amazement. At the door to the staircase I turned, and unthinkingly declared: 'I've got some days to spare here, and I don't intend to see you all terrified by these silly superstitions. I'm going into the woods tomorrow afternoon, and when I find this rock formation you're all so scared of, I'll chip a bit off and bring it back so it can be exhibited on the bar!'

The next morning brought cloudless skies, and up to midday I was glad that the weather could not be construed an ill omen by the innkeeper or similar persons. But around two o'clock in the afternoon mist began to settle over the district; and by two-thirty the sun had taken on the appearance of a suspended globe of heated metal. I was to leave at three o'clock, for otherwise I would not reach the clearing before dark. I could not back out of my outlined purpose without appearing foolish to those who had heard my boasting; they would certainly think that any argument that the mist would make my progress dangerous was merely an excuse. So I decided to journey a little distance into the forest, then return with the tale that I had been unable to find the clearing.

When I reached the wood after driving as fast as was safe in my sports car, the sun had become merely a lurid circular glow in the amorphously drifting mist. The moistly peeling trees stretched in vague colonnades into the distance on both sides of a rutted road. However, the teacher had directed me explicitly, and without too much hesitation I entered the forest between two dripping trees.

II: The Thing In The Mist

There was a path between the tortuous arches, though it was not well defined. Before long the oppressive atmosphere of the tunnel, distorted through the walls of mist, combined with the unfamiliar sounds which occasionally filtered into the ringing silence to produce a disturbing feeling

of awed expectancy. What I expected, I could not have said; but my mind was full of hints of some impending occurrence of terrible significance. My eyes were strained by my efforts to pierce the drab wall before me.

It was not long before this persistent conviction became unbearable, and I told myself this was the time to return to the inn with my prepared excuse—before darkness. The path had had no others meeting it, so that I could easily retrace my journey, even through the mist. That was when I turned to go back down the path, and stopped in indecision.

I had almost collided, I thought, with a metallically grey tree. Small in comparison with the average in the forest, this tree was about sixteen feet high with very thick cylindrical branches. Then I noticed that the trunk divided into two cylinders near the ground, and the lower ends of these cylinders further divided into six flat circular extensions. This might merely have been a natural distortion, and such an explanation might also have accounted for the strange arrangement of the branches in a regular circle at the apex of the trunk; but I could not reach for a natural explanation when those branches nearest me suddenly extended clutchingly in my direction, and from the top of what I had taken for a trunk rose a featureless oval, leaning towards me to show an orifice gaping at the top.

The mist eddied around me as I ran blindly down the path, which slid from under my feet and twisted away at unpredictable places. I visualised that giant being clumping in pursuit through the forest, its tentacles waving in anticipation, the mouth in the top of that featureless head opening hungrily. The silence of the forest unnerved me; perhaps the monstrosity was not pursuing me, in which case there must be some yet worse fate ahead. How many of the things might inhabit the forest? Whatever they were, surely they could be no acknowledged species. How could I see if they were waiting in silent ambush? The mist would effectively camouflage them, for a pillarlike blur might merely be another tree.

Despair followed upon my terrified imaginings, and finally I fell against a grey oak and awaited whatever terror might come for me. The exhaustion resulting from my frenzied flight dulled the edge of fear, and quite soon I ceased to glare in horror at every sound among the trees. My muscles ached from that mad chase, and muscular weariness soon combined with the tiredness I suddenly felt to produce a troubled sleep. I was soon awakened by a dream that a forest such as that surrounding me had changed to an

army of oval-skulled titans; but the sleep had lasted long enough to refresh me.

I did not feel thankful for the rest, however. The mist had almost lifted; and because of this I could see that the sun was near to setting. I had to leave the forest quickly; sleep had not erased the memory of what I had recently seen, and my mind might not take the strain of being alone at night near such prowling lunacies. But I quickly realised that I no longer knew the way out of this maze of terror, even though the surroundings were easily visible. If I went in the wrong direction, I would not know this until dark, when all the lurking haunters of the forest might close in on me.

However, it was even more obvious that, since no amount of concentration would show me the route, I must waste no more time in futile debate, but go in one direction, praying that it would lead me out of the nightmare into which I had plunged. A vague intuition suggested that the path to the left was my original route, and I hastily began to walk down it, attempting to silence faint premonitions. There was no recognisable landmark anywhere near the route, although once or twice I thought a distorted oak was familiarly shaped; but, considering that the inward journey had been merely a terrified flight, it was not surprising that I remembered nothing. Occasionally despair overtook me, and I was sure that the faceless colossi of the wood never would let me escape; but I shunned such ideas where possible.

Soon my hopes began to rise. Surely the trees were beginning to thin out, and vegetation to become less abundant; as though I were approaching the edge of the forest? It would not be any too soon, either—for, from the position of the sun, night could not be more than a quarter of an hour away. And was that not my car that I saw in the distance among the trees? Certainly something gleamed with a flash of dull metal just where the path seemed to end, though as yet I could not make out any details. I hurried towards the furtive gleam on the road—and reached the clearing I had taken for a road.

The thirty-foot-high metal cone which towered in the clearing reflected the light only because it was covered with moisture, for it was constructed of a dull mineral, pitted and scarred from unimaginable stresses. As yet I could not see the carven side of the cone, and that facing me was bare except for a circular protrusion, surely the trapdoor of the legend. But though those

unholy carvings were not then visible, what I could see in the shunned clearing was disturbing enough. There was a roughly rectangular stone at the opposite side, the top surface of which was hollowed out and darkly stained—and the stains appeared fresher than could be healthily explained, although I did not approach to verify the dreadful idea which occurred to me. No marks of feet, nor of anything else, appeared in the muddy earth; what manner of unnatural prints I had expected I do not know, but their absence did not reassure me. I knew that some species of being lurked here in the haunted clearing—and what being made no mark in passing?

Though my fear had been great when I came upon the hidden place in the forest, my curiosity combined with a certain fatalism to impel me to examine the cone. After all, it would soon be night, long before I found my way to the edge of the wood—it was useless to flee the beings of the forest when they would be awaiting my attempted escape. In the few minutes which remained to me, I determined to see what was carved on the opposite side of the cone; and so I circled the object, noting a faint dry rustling sound which came from somewhere in the clearing.

Immediately I saw the images on the pitted grey expanse, I regretted my wish to view them. I can describe them, and the actions they were shown performing—from which I drew conclusions which were verified dreadfully soon after. But none of these descriptions can convey the sheer abnormality and alienness of those depictions, for the human mind cannot imagine the cosmically unnatural until concrete evidence has been shown undeniably to it.

There were five distinct races of entities pictured in the reliefs. A species of insect appeared most often—an insect with certain alien characteristics marking it as not of this planet. Often these beings would be manipulating peculiar cylindrical appliances, which seemed to project a thin ray disintegrating whatever lay in its path. Another instrument, a box-shaped crystal emitting a scintillating petal-shaped field, was used to subdue the counterparts of that oval-headed faceless being, which apparently were a race of enslaved workers used to perform tasks requiring strength for the relatively weak insect species.

Those were not the only creatures depicted on the surface of the cone—but what use is it to describe them at this point? It was very soon after that I saw such beings in their natural surroundings, and such an experience was

infinitely worse than seeing a mere representation of nightmare. It is sufficient to say that the sculptures were so crude as to cloak the more hideous details of the subjects, for more details had been used in the reproduction of the surroundings. The two suns that ceaselessly orbited above the scenes were startlingly realistic, although for sheer alienness even this could not equal the actual scene. The sky-clawing pylons and disturbingly shapen domes of the cities frequently looming in the distance were not shown from the inside; nor was the utter horror of the interior of the cone ever portrayed.

About then I realised that it was becoming increasingly difficult to see the figures on the cone, and I started in terror as I realised the sun had set upon my engrossed contemplation. The glade had become dreadfully quiet, stressing the sound of rustling which still emanated from somewhere nearby. That dry sound seemed to come from above, and abruptly it came to me that it was the noise of something coming down inside the cone.

Abruptly it ceased, and I tensed, waiting for the thing which would appear around the curved metal at any minute. That it was something which figured in the scenes engraved on that metal I did not doubt; probably one of the omnipotent semi-insect race. But what details of it might blast my mind before the thing fell on me?

And it was at that moment that I heard a clanging sound on the opposite side—the sound of the opening of the circular trapdoor.

III: The Insects From The Cone

That dull noise of the pitted trapdoor beyond my line of vision echoed for a long time, yet when it ceased nothing had appeared around the curve of the cone. All that could be heard was the rustling of the unseen dweller, now mixed with a scrabbling which steadily approached.

At last a shape appeared, flapping above the ground on leathery wings. The thing which flew whirring towards me was followed by a train of others, wings slapping the air at incredible speed. Even though they flew so fast, I could, with the augmented perception of terror, make out many more details than I wished. Those huge lidless eyes which stared in hate at me, the jointed tendrils which seemed to twist from the head in cosmic rhythms, the ten legs, covered with black shining tentacles and folded into the pallid

underbody, and the semi-circular ridged wings covered with triangular scales—all this cannot convey the soul-ripping horror of the shape which darted at me. I saw the *three* mouths of the thing move moistly, and then it was upon me.

I thought it had somehow managed to fly over me, even though the horribly flat face had a moment before been pressed into mine; for I had felt no impact. But when I turned to look behind me, there was no sign of the insect-creature, and the landscape was empty. The others from the cone did not attempt to attack me, but flapped away over the trees. My mind a chaos of speculation, I watched them in their flight, attempting to decide where their companion had gone.

The next moment the whole landscape seemed to ripple and melt, as if the lenses of my eyes had twisted in agonising distortion. Then I felt it—the thing which was distorting my impulses to such an extent—the thing which, in some hideous way, had become a parasite—the thing which, at the moment when it flew in my face, had entered my body and was crawling around *in my brain*.

Now, as I look back upon my first sensation of something worming through the corridors of my brain, with a slightly higher degree of objectivity, I can only surmise that the being cannot have been strictly material—constructed of some alien matter which allowed its atoms to exist conterminously with those of my body. But then I could think of nothing but the frightful parasite which crawled where my clawing fingers could not reach.

I can only try to speak of the other occurrences of that night with some degree of coherency, for my impressions after that became somewhat confused. It must have been that my mind was growing accustomed to the unholy object in my skull—for, unbelievable as it seems, within a short time I thought of this state as perfectly normal. The being was affecting my very thought processes—and even as I stood before the cone, the insect-creature was pouring its memories into me. For as the landscape melted about me, I began to experience visions. I seemed to float above scenes like those of a hashish dream—in a body such as that of the horror from the cone. The worlds swam out of darkness for what seemed an eternity; I saw things of indescribable hideousness, and could not flee from the sight of

them. And as the thing gained a hold over me, I began to see actual scenes from the life of the being which occupied me.

There was a place of green mists through which I flapped, over a boundless surface of pitching water. At one point the mists began to roll back, and I rose through them, the green, attenuated film billowing round me. In the distance a long, vague cylinder poked towards the invisible sky, and as I drew closer I saw that it was a stone pillar, protruding from the swaying water, grown with hard shell-like plants and with curiously shaped projections on each side at regular intervals. There seemed to be no reason for the terror which boiled up in me at the sight of that pillar, but I purposely flew around the object at a distance. As the mists began to conceal it again, I saw a huge leathery hand, with long boneless fingers, reach out of the water, followed by a many-jointed arm. I saw that arm's muscles tense, as if whatever owned the arm were preparing to pull itself out of the sea. I turned away and flew into the mist—for I did not want to see what would appear above the surface.

The scene melted into another. I crawled down a path which snaked between translucent, diamond-like rocks. The path entered a valley, at the bottom of which lay a strange black building, inexplicably luminous under the purple night sky of that far planet. The building was of no recognisable architecture, with its deliriously sloping roof and many-sided towers, and I did not know why I was approaching it so purposefully. My claws clattered over the rock-strewn surface which became a black-tiled pavement before the gaping entrance to the ebon building, and I entered. Many passages twisted before I reached that which I sought—that which was spoken of on Shaggai as so powerful—and I did not like what hung from the ceilings in shadowy corners; but at last I came upon the windowless chamber in a high black tower. I took the strangely shaped piece of metal from where it lay on a central slab and turned to leave the chamber. Then a door in the opposite wall crashed open, and I remembered the whispered legend of the guardian of this weapon of a lost race. But I knew how to use the weapon's fullest power, and through it I focused mental waves to blast apart the many-legged furry thing which scuttled from the opened door, its abominably shrunken heads waving on hairy, scrawny necks. Then I flapped from the haunted lightless tower in terror, clutching the metal weapon—for as I looked back I saw the many-headed thing, all the legs on one side of its body burned away, still dragging itself sideways after me.

Again the vision rippled and changed. I stood on a high slab of some beautifully polished plastic, surrounded by lines of the most nauseous beings imaginable. They were oval, two-legged, dwarved things, scarcely two feet high, without arms or head, but with a gaping moist grey mouth at the centre of their bodies, which were of a spongy white pulp. They were all prostrate in an attitude of worship before me on the fungus which appeared to compose the ground in a solid gelatinous sheet on their side of the slab. My side of that slab was bare rock, covered with huge squat dark-emerald buildings of the same material as the slab. These, I knew, had been constructed by a race other than the pulpy white things, and probably antedating them; the beings that worshipped my hardness could not work such material or even touch it, but lived in repulsively moist burrows in the fungus. Indeed, even as I watched, one of them moved too near to the dais upon which I stood, and in so doing ripped away a sponge-wet portion of itself, which speedily putrefied where it lay.

Yet another scene flashed before me. I skimmed over a plain covered with colossi depicting naked humanoid figures in various bestial attitudes, each statue at least a hundred feet tall; and about them all was some hideous detail which I could not quite place. I disliked the vast footprints which led between the leering figures, and still more disliked the disturbingly *gnawed* bones of huge animals which were strewn across the plain, for I felt that I knew the cause of these horrors, and knew the abnormality of the colossi, if only I could place it. Then came those clumping footsteps behind me, startlingly close; and as I turned and saw what came striding across that field of unholy carvings, I knew the answer to both questions. It was humanoid—almost—as it pounded through the maze of statues; but it towered above the hundred-foot figures. And the atrocious thing which I glimpsed as I fled from that shrine to cosmic accidents was the eyelessness of the living colossus and the way the hair of the scalp grew in the sockets where the eyes should have been.

As the visions began to overtake me in greater quantity, they acquired more definite connection, and it was not long before I realised what was now being put into my brain was a sort of history of the insect-race. Perhaps the most horrible part of the affair was the way I regarded the events and scenes now presented to me, not with the horror and disgust of a sane human being, but with the exact same impersonal observation of the insect-parasite. As the chronicles of the race were passed through my mind, I *was*,

to all purposes, the insect which had become part of me. I write this now with more emotion than when I experienced the memories of the being—and that thought fills me with more terror than did the memories themselves.

So it was that I learned the history of the insect-race, and so it is that I write now what I learned. And horror can still be provoked in me by thoughts of what the insects from Shaggai may yet do on this earth.

IV: The Exodus From The Gulf

The beings had, I learned, originally come from Shaggai, a globe far beyond the reach of any earthly telescope, which orbited a double sun at the edge of the universe. Upon this planet they built their cities, full of globular domes for their habitations and pylons of that grey metal which composed the cone. The main buildings were almost all globular, entered by a doorless orifice at the top of each, through which the insects could fly—but there was one important building which was not globular, but pyramidical: the temple at the centre of each city. And the thoughts of the being grew oddly reticent on the subject of this temple, whence all the inhabitants would go to worship at ritual times; for never could I tap a memory of what was worshipped inside that grey metal pyramid. The only fact which became apparent was that, incredible as it sounds, the tenant of the temple was one living being, but was somehow the *same* being in each temple.

The life of the beings of the grey cities followed no definite pattern, except for certain observances. They would leave their domes as the blinding emerald light of the two suns rose above the horizon, and while a generally avoided group of priests flew to the temple, the rest went about personal business. None needed to eat—they lived by photosynthesis of the green rays of the double star—and so they visited other planets, seeking new abnormalities which they, in their perversion, could aesthetically enjoy. At the time of birth of my informant, the race, needing to do no work, had sunk to an abysmal state of decadence. While on Shaggai they would torture slave-races from other worlds for pleasure; and when on other planets, they sought the most terribly haunted localities to view their horrors—with which pastime the early memories of the insect-being had been occupied. There was another practice of the insects which was not then fully revealed

—but it was connected, it appeared, with what they practised on the witch-cult at their outpost on earth.

At any rate, the beings had set up outposts and built cities on many of the outer worlds, in case anything should ever make Shaggai uninhabitable; for they had had experience of what might crawl over the rim of the universe and conquer their world before then. So they were to some extent prepared when a catastrophe did indeed devastate their world, many aeons before their advent on earth. Even at the time when I visited their shrine, they had very little idea of what had really destroyed Shaggai; they had seen it happen from the beginning, but could only explain the cause vaguely—and, having viewed a vision of what they saw for myself, I did not wonder at their puzzlement.

It was at the dawning of one of those emerald-lit days that the object was first seen. Above the double disc on the horizon, and slowly approaching their planet, appeared a strange semi-spherical red globe. The edges were indistinct, while the centre was a sharply-defined point of crimson fire. At that time the approach of the sphere was so unnoticeable that few of the city's inhabitants remarked it; but by the third dawn the object was much nearer, so that the race's scientists began to study it. They decided, after much speculation, that it was not a star or planet, but some species of body which was composed of no recognisable substance; the spectrum was completely unknown, and the substance must have come from a region where conditions were unlike those anywhere in this universe. Because of this vagueness of its identity they were uncertain of its probable effects on their planet—for the body was heading directly for Shaggai, and should reach it before the suns had set thrice more.

On the third day the globe was a huge red glow in the sky, blotting out the green suns and lighting everything with a crimson flame; but no heat emanated from it, and no other evidence of its existence met the insects besides the blood-red light. They were uneasy, for the menacing sphere in the heavens was very disturbing, and therefore many of them visited the triangular temple frequently for private worship. The being in my body had been one of those frequent visitors, and owed its life to being in the temple when the cataclysm struck. It had entered under the arched portal, where a portcullis-like sheet of translucent mineral would fall at any external threat, to protect the tenant inside. As the insect made to leave the temple after that

act which it must practise before the tenant of the pyramid, it saw a prolonged crimson flash in the sky, speedily approaching the ground, while at the same time the protective shield crashed down in the temple entrance. The forty or so other beings which also were at worship clattered to stare through the shield at what was happening in the city outside.

As the red glow slowly faded, the buildings became again visible, as did the beings in the streets. The creatures and buildings had changed in some way during the cataclysm—for they glowed with that same crimson light, streaming from *inside* each. And the light became every moment brighter, changing from red—orange—blinding yellow to white, as the insect-beings writhed and clawed at themselves in helpless agony.

It was the way in which the temple was fortified that saved those inside. The radiation from the bursting globe was kept from affecting them long enough for them to use certain powers. By some obscure method of teleportation they transported the entire temple, with themselves, to the nearest planet on which they had a colony—the world of the faceless cylindrical beings, called Xiclotl by its inhabitants. As the devastated world of Shaggai faded from outside the shield, the insect-creature saw the buildings reel and the inhabitants burst asunder in momentary incandescence. And its last glimpse was of the globes of light which were now all that remained of the lords of Shaggai, as they sank to fill the ground with crimson radiation.

Upon their arrival on Xiclotl, the insects called the rest of their race from the other planetary colonies to join them. The faceless horrors of the planet were enslaved by the new ruling race, and because of their great strength and little brain-power, were driven to perform all tasks in building the new city of the insects on Xiclotl. These beings, which were subdued by one of the insects' instruments for focusing mind power to promote unpleasant nerve impulses, were naturally carnivorous and, if not enslaved in this way, might have eaten any slow-moving insect. However, it was relatively easy to force them to labour, and under their strivings the city speedily took shape.

The insects did not remain on Xiclotl for more than two hundred years, during which my informant had reached maturity. The reason for their leaving was one about which it would rather not have thought in detail, having to do with the faceless slaves and their somewhat primitive

theology. They believed in a legendary plant-race which inhabited the bottom of a sheer-sided pit in the outer regions of the country in which the city lay. The religion of the planet's race demanded that periodic sacrifices be chosen from the race and throw themselves as food to the plant-gods in the pit. The insects did not object to this practice, so long as it did not remove so many beings as to draw on their labour force—at least, not until a group of insects followed one of the sacrifices to the pit. After that, however, the tale which the returning party told caused the more superstitious—including my informant—to teleport the temple again, together with a number of the race from Xiclotl as a means of labour, to a planet at the centre of the next galaxy. The insect-being which was pouring its memories into my brain had not actually seen what had occurred in the pit, so was not so explicit as usual; but what it remembered having heard was certainly disturbing. The returning party had seen the faceless creature leap from the edge of the pit and fall towards the abysmal darkness of the lower regions. Then came a splashing in that darkness, and a huge purple moist blossom rose from it, its petals opening and closing hungrily. But the greatest abnormality of the thing which splashed out of the pit was its green tentacles, tipped with many-fingered hands of unholy beauty, which it held yearningly towards the point where the sacrifices threw themselves off.

The temple was positioned next at the centre of a city on that planet in the next galaxy—an uninhabited planet, it seemed, which the insect colonists named Thuggon. They stayed here less than a year; for before they had been there ten months, they noticed a steady decrease in the number of slaves on the planet, and learned that the beings had been disappearing after dark, though none was ever seen to leave. When two insect-beings disappeared on successive nights, a party left the city next day to search; and some miles beyond the colony they discovered a huge stretch of marshy ground, at the centre of which lay a vast stone tower, from which led suggestively recent-looking footprints to a black object at the edge of the marsh. And when the black object was seen to be a neat pile, composed of the severed heads of the insects together with their bodies, and when they saw that all the flesh had been sucked out through the gaping gash where the heads should have been, the party were not slow in returning to the city and demanding the speedy removal of the temple from Thuggon.

After the quitting of Thuggon, the insects established themselves on a planet which the inhabitants knew as L'gy'hx, and which is called Uranus

here on Earth. This world became the home of the insects for many centuries, for the native race of cuboid, many-legged metal beings was not openly hostile, but allowed them to build their usual outpost with the labour of the beings from Xiclotl. They built a new temple—the old one having grown dilapidated with so much travelling—and fashioned it in a conical shape, carefully constructing the multi-dimensional gate which must exist in each temple to allow the entry of that which my informant passed off as 'that from Outside'. The city flourished, and the beings native to L'gy'hx gradually came to accept the insects as a race ruling the planet jointly with themselves. The only thing for which the natives did not care was the insects worshipping the hideous god Azathoth. They themselves were worshippers of the relatively insignificant deity Lrogg, which conferred benefits on its worshippers and demanded only annual sacrifice, in the shape of the removal of the legs of a conscious native. The cuboid beings disliked the vague tales of atrocities practised on still-living victims in the conical temple of Azathoth, and when a rebellious set of natives began to visit the insects' city to worship there the elders of L'gy'hx felt that steps should be taken to prevent such unwelcome infiltrations into their theology. But while they did not fear the weapons of the insect-race, they did not like to incur the wrath of the idiot god, and finally decided to do nothing. Some years passed, during which two major sequences of events happened. While a steady hate grew in the majority of the insects for the obscene rites of Azathoth, and a desire for the easy rituals prescribed for Lrogg's worshippers began to rise, the rebel set among the natives grew steadily more fervid in their prostrations before the new god and their hate for their natural god. At last these two feelings publicised themselves at the same time. This double revelation came when a particularly fervent group of native Azathoth-worshippers violated a temple, smashing all the statues of the two-headed bat-deity Lrogg and killing three of the priests. After acid had been poured into the brains of the offenders, the chief priests of Lrogg declared that the temple of Azathoth must be removed altogether from the planet, together with its insect-worshippers, although the insects who would conform to the planetary religion might remain if they wished. The cuboid natives who had become believers in the creed of Azathoth were all treated in the same way as the original offenders, as an example.

Only about thirty of the race from Shaggai left in the temple, but teleporting it in unison they managed to bring it down on a nearby planet—

Earth. They made an imperfect materialisation in the clearing near Goatswood, leaving the best part of the temple underground, and only thirty feet protruding above the surface. In the top of the cone the insects lived, while in the central portion the beings from Xiclotl were stabled; in the lower forty-foot portion was kept that which they worshipped in the temple. During daylight the insects worshipped the tenant of the secret portion of the fane, but after dark they went forth to carry on an insidious campaign to hypnotise selected subjects and lure them to the clearing.

From these hypnotised subjects was formed that decadent witch-cult which grew up around the temple in the clearing. The members of the coven did not merely visit the clearing to worship and sacrifice persons on the altar there; they went there to experience the obscene pleasure of allowing the insects to inject their memories into their brains, which they enjoyed in the same way a drug addict gains pleasure from his induced delirium. And at that moment, God help me, I was experiencing the same sensations—and doing nothing to shake them off.

As the witch-cult grew, the insects began to form a plan. Whereas at the beginning they merely lured humans to their haven in order to explore the perversions of their subconscious for pleasure, they gradually came to the conclusion that, if they handled their victims the right way, they would become the new rulers of the planet. First they could overpower the inhabitants of the nearby countryside and then, as they themselves propagated, the whole of the planet. The humans might either be destroyed utterly or retained as a subsidiary labour force, while the newly-revealed insect race would build cities and temples, and finally, perhaps, the huge multi-dimensional gate which alone will let Azathoth into this universe in his original form.

Thus the final purpose of the cult was shaped. It thus came as a great blow when the local coven was persecuted for witchcraft and all members executed. Worse still, the word got round that the clearing was connected in an unholy manner with this witchcraft, so that those who lived anywhere near it quickly moved to more wholesome surroundings. The insects would have been able to teleport, had it not been for some constituent of the atmosphere which prevented this; the same unallowed-for obstacle made it impossible for the beings to fly any great distance. They therefore declined, using the beings from Xiclotl—which, because of their guarding the

clearing in daylight while the insects worshipped, they called the equivalent in their language of the 'Daytime Guardians'—to drive unwary wanderers in the woods into the glade. The few they managed to lure to the cone they attempted to use as the foundation of the new cult which they tentatively planned, but without success. That young man of whose visit to the clearing the legend told had been the first in many years, and had been such an unwilling subject that attempts to force him into submission led only to his complete insanity. After his visit, the only person actually to be taken over by one of the insect-parasites had been myself.

And so the history of the insects from Shaggai had been brought into the present. For the minute I wondered what memories the being in my cranium would now let flow into my brain, but almost immediately afterwards I knew what I was next to see. The insect had decided to make the supreme revelation—it was going to unveil one of its hidden memories of a visit to *the lower regions of the temple*.

Immediately the creature was in the tip of the cone, lying on a grey metal slab in its quarters. It was awakening at that moment, sensing the rise of the sun outside, and it then extended its legs and clattered off the slab, over to the sliding door. It inserted its leg tip into one of the pits in the door and slid it back, turning to look back at the bare semi-circular chamber and the flashing light over the slab, set where it would hypnotise the slab's occupant to immediate sleep.

The insect joined the ritual procession of its fellows which were preparing to descend into the lower regions. Those at the head carried long pointed rods of that inevitable grey metal, while the rest held portions of the corpse of a native of Xiclotl. The rods, it seemed, were to drive the secret tenant of the temple back when it became too desirous of sacrifice; the only victim to be offered it would be the dismembered faceless being, a member of the labour force which had grown too weak to be of further use.

Adjusting their weapons, the leaders of the procession moved off down the spiral down-slanting passage. The creature, staring fixedly ahead as prescribed, followed them, carrying a group of severed tentacles as offering. They passed down the grey corridor, not noting the daily-seen bas-reliefs on the walls, representing the denizens of caves and ruins on far worlds. Nor did they turn in passing the cells of the Xiclotl labour force, even when the beings in them crashed themselves against the doors and extended their

tentacles in helpless fury upon sensing the portions of their fellow slave. They did not turn when they clattered through the souvenir room, where they kept the preserved eyeless corpse of one specimen from each race subject to them. The first halt in their ritual march was at the carven door of the inner sanctum of the temple, over which certain representations leered down, at which every member of the procession folded its wing-case and prostrated itself for a moment. Then the foremost insect-creature extended its jointed antenna and gripped a projection on the surface of the door—hesitating a ritual instant, while its three mouths spoke three alien words in unison—and then slid the door open.

The first object which came into view beyond the sliding panel was a squat twenty-foot statue, a hideously detailed figure which resembled nothing remotely humanoid—and the information was immediately injected into my brain that this object represented the god Azathoth—Azathoth as he had been before his exile Outside. But the eyes of my informant speedily swung away from the alien colossus to the vast door behind it—a door bordered with miniature representations of insect-beings, all indicating something beyond that door. And the leaders picked up their pointed weapons and approached the final door, followed by the forward-staring procession.

One of the leaders now raised his rod in a curious gesture, while the others prostrated themselves in a semicircle before the bordered door, writhing their antennae in concerted and vaguely disturbing rhythms. Then, as the prostrate crescent rose again, the other leader put forth his tendrils and clasped a projection on the door. Unhesitatingly he drew the portal open.

V: Beyond The Final Door

I was alone in the glade, lying in the dew-wet grass before the cone. There was no sign of any living being in the clearing besides myself, not even of the being which, I felt certain, had just withdrawn from my brain. The whole glade was exactly as it had been when I entered it, except for one important difference—that the sun had not yet risen. For this meant that the inhabitants of the cone would still be absent from it, searching for victims; and it meant that I could enter the untenanted temple and open that bordered door, on whose opening the insect's memory had ended.

If I had been able to think without external hindrance, I would immediately have realised that the memory had ended at that point simply as a subtle

method of luring me to the underground sanctum. It is less likely that I would have realised that I was being directed to do this by the being which still inhabited my brain. But I still clung to the possibility that I had been dreaming. There was only one way to find out; I must enter the cone and see what lay behind that final door. So I made for the circular entrance in the grey wall of the cone.

Beyond the foot-long passage inside the trapdoor, a diagonally slanting metal corridor led upward and downward. Upward, I guessed, lay the semicircular quarters of the insect-beings, where I had no wish to go; downward lay the temple proper. I started downward, doing my best to avoid looking at the abnormal bas-reliefs which covered the walls.

The passage was less strongly lit than it had seemed in the being's memory, so that at first I did not notice the point where the bas-reliefs ended and a line of doors, containing heavy grilles, began. Not until a grey metal tentacle whipped through a grille to quiver within an inch of my face did I realise that here was the passage of the Xiclotl labour force cells. I cowered back, trembling, to edge along the opposite wall, jerking at the frequent infuriated crashings of the faceless beings against their cell doors, and yearning for the end of the journey. I finally passed the last locked portal and continued on down the spiralling ramp.

The memory of the injected recollections of the insect-creature was already dimming, so that I could hardly explain the premonition I felt a little further on. I gasped in shock when I rounded a curve and saw an eyeless figure standing with bony arms reaching—all the more hideous because, although the corpse was otherwise human, there were three arms held out. The unwavering posture which the thing held gave me the courage to approach it, as I suddenly remembered the vision of the room where the insects kept preserved specimens of their subjects. What sphere had spawned this object I did not think; nor did I linger to stare at the corpse, but passed by quickly between the others. I attempted not to look aside at what I hurried by, but my eyes persisted in straying to things—a frog-flipper attached to a tendrilled arm in one place, an insanely situated mouth in another—so that I was very relieved to quit that room.

When I came to the temple door and saw that it stood open, I hesitated expectantly. Glancing only once at the metal heads which leered, all joined to one body, over the open portal, I entered. I stopped short, for the memory

of that huge image of Azathoth had grown dim. I did not look long at it; I would only have seen worse details with every glimpse, and the first view was bad enough. I will not describe everything about it; but basically it consisted of a bivalvular shell supported on many pairs of flexible legs. From the half-open shell rose several jointed cylinders, tipped with polypous appendages; and in the darkness inside the shell I thought I saw a horrible bestial, mouthless face, with deep-sunk eyes and covered with glistening black hair.

I almost turned and fled from the temple, thinking of the door that lay beyond the statue, and speculating over what the idiot god might *now* resemble. But I had come this far unharmed, and, noticing the sharpened rods propped against the base of the idol, I did not think that whatever lay beyond the bordered door could harm me. And so, conquering my revulsion at what leered frozenly above, I took up one of the weapons and made for that door. As I reached for the protrusion on the sliding grey panel I hesitated, for I heard a curious sound inside the hidden room—like the washing of the sea against black piles. It ceased immediately, but for some minutes I could not bring myself to draw the door open. In what form would Azathoth manifest itself? Might there not be some reason why the being was only worshipped during daylight? But all the while my hand was moving towards the projection, almost as though another will besides my own were directing it; so that when it dragged the sanctum door open, I battled to stop its progress. But by then the door was completely open, and I was standing staring at what lay beyond.

A long passage of the omnipresent grey metal stretched away for ten feet or so, and at its end stood, on first glance, a blank wall. Yet not quite blank —for a little way up there was a triangular metal door with a bar held across it in brackets. The passage was deserted, but from beyond the triangular door came a sound which I had remarked before—a liquid rolling.

I had to know the secret of the temple, and so stealthily approached the door and lifted the bar, which grated slightly. I did not open the door, but backed down the passage and stood at the other end. The wave-sound was rising now, as if something at the other side was approaching. Then the triangular portal began to rattle in its frame, and slowly it moved outward on its hinges.

And as I saw that metal triangle shifting with pressure from the other side, a wave of terror engulfed me. I did not want to see what lay on the other side of the door, and I turned and slammed the outer door without giving myself time to think. Even as I did so, a grating sound reverberated down the passage and the triangular door crashed open. Through the crack as I slammed the door I saw something ooze into the corridor—a pale grey shape, expanding and crinkling, which glistened and shook gelatinously as still-moving particles dropped free; but it was only a glimpse, and after that it is only in nightmares that I imagine I see the complete shape of Azathoth.

I fled from the pyramid then. It was just daylight, and over the trees black shapes were flapping home. I plunged through the corridors of trees, and at one point one of the beings from Xiclotl started out into my path. What was worse, it *drew back* at my approach.

Though some of my possessions were left in my room there, I never returned to the inn at Brichester, and no doubt they still speak of me there as having died horribly. I thought that in this way I could make sure the insects could not harm me—but the first night after the experience in the clearing, I felt again that crawling in my brain. Since then I have frequently caught myself seeking persons gullible enough to be lured to the clearing, but always I have been able to fight off such impulses. I do not know how long I can continue to fight—and so I am going to use the one method to end this unholy preying on my mind.

The sun has sunk below the horizon now, leaving only a lurid glow which shines on the razor lying on the table before me. Perhaps it is only imagination which makes me seem to feel a restless, blinding stirring in my brain—at any rate, I must hesitate no longer. It may be that the insects will eventually overpower the world; but I will have done all that is possible for me to do to prevent the release of that whose shape I once glimpsed, and which still awaits impatiently the opening of the multidimensional gate.

Illustration by Randy Broecker, taken from reprint of The Inhabitant of the Lake And Other Unwelcome Tenants, 2011.

The Room In The Castle

"Campbell credits Robert Bloch's story *The Shambler From The Stars* for supplying him with Byatis, but the story, based on entries from Lovecraft's Commonplace Book, also shows familiarity with Lovecraft's *The Shunned House*. It was to be the title story of Campbell's first collection."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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Also published in: *Cold Print*, *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

Is it some lurking remnant of the elder world in each of us that draws us towards the beings which survive from other aeons? Surely there must be such a remnant in me, for there can be no sane or wholesome reason why I should have strayed that day to the old, legend-infected ruin on the hill, nor can any commonplace reason be deduced for my finding the secret underground room there, and still less for my opening of the door of horror which I discovered.

It was on a visit to the British Museum that I first heard of the legend which suggested a reason for the general avoidance of a hill outside Brichester. I had come to the Museum in search of certain volumes preserved there—not books of demonic lore, but extremely scarce tomes dealing with the local history of the Severn valley, as visualised in retrospect by an 18th-century clergyman. A friend who lived in the Camside region near Berkeley had asked me to look up some historical facts for his forthcoming article in the *Camside Observer*, which I could impart to him when I began my stay with him that weekend, since he was ill and would not be capable of a London visit for some time. I reached the Museum library with no thoughts other than that I would quickly check through the requisite volumes, note down the appropriate quotations and leave in my car for my destination straight from the Museum.

Upon entering the lofty-ceilinged room of carefully tended books, I found from the librarian that the volumes I wished to study were at that moment in

use, but should soon be returned, if I cared to wait a short time. To spend this time I was not interested in referring to any historical book, but instead asked the keeper of the volumes to allow me to glance through the Museum's copy of the almost unobtainable Necronomicon. More than an hour passed in reading it, as best I could. Such suggestions concerning what may lie behind the tranquil façade of normality are not easily dismissed from the mind; and I confess that as I read of the alien beings which, according to the author, lurk in dark and shunned places of the world, I found myself accepting what I read as reality. As I pressed deeper into the dark mythos which surrounds those terrors from beyond—bloated Cthulhu, indescribable Shub-Niggurath, vast batrachian Dagon—I might have been sucked into the whirlpool of absolute belief, had my engrossment not been interrupted by the librarian, bearing an armful of yellowed volumes.

I surrendered the copy of the Necronomicon to him, and so great was the lurking terror that had been aroused in me that I watched to be certain that the book of horror had been locked securely away. Then I turned to the historical volumes I had requested, and began to take notes from the passages in which my friend had expressed interest. As was inevitable, I could not help reading a large proportion of useless matter in my quest for connected material; and it was in a section I had considered useless that my eye noted in passing a reference which was in some way reminiscent of the book I had been reading. At first I thought that my concentration on alien cult practices had metamorphosed a harmless and quaint country legend into something abnormal and disturbing, but on reading further I realised that this was indeed a rather unconventional legend.

> 'Yet be it not thought,' the Berkeley clergyman had written, 'that Satan does not send Trouble betimes to put Fear in those who lived by God. I have heard that Mr Norton was sorely troubl'd by Cries and horrid Roars from the Woods when he liv'd nearby, and that one Night the Drums were so loud that he could not return to his Farming for a Month from then. But, not to burden my Reader, I will recount the Tale of what a Farmer told me not two Years ago.
>
> 'One Night, when I was walking the Road outside Berkeley, Farmer Cooper came upon me out of the Field upon the left Side, much begrimed and filled with Fear at what he had seen. He

spoke at first as if his Mind was unsettl'd, as does poor Tom Cooper when he is overcome by his Sickness, but I took him into the Church, and the Presence of God heal'd his Mind. He ask'd if I were willing to hear of the Blasphemous Vision which had come upon him, for he thought that indeed the Divell must have sent a Daemon to turn him from good Christian Ways.

'He swore that he had chas'd a Fox which had troubl'd his Livestock, hoping that he could end its Nuisance; but it had led him such a Dance around the Properties of Farmers King and Cook that he had lost it, and coming near the River he turn'd homeward. Upon coming to the Crossing over Cambrook Stream which he us'd to take homeward, he was dismay'd to find it smash'd in the Middle. While he was making for the Ford near Corn Lane, he saw upon a Hill a Figure of no little Strangeness. It seem'd to Glow with a Light that did not stay one Colour, but did indeed act like a veritable Kaleidoscope which the Children use in their Play. Farmer Cooper did not like it, but he drew near to the Hill and climb'd until he was nigh unto the horrid object. It was of a clear Mineral, the like of which Farmer Cooper has not seen. When I pray'd him to Tell me of its Appearance, he star'd at me strangely and said that so Evill a Monster was not to be talk'd of by Christian Men. When I press'd him that I must be arm'd against such Daemons by full Knowledge, he said that it had but one Eye like the Cyclops, and had Claws like unto a Crab. He said also that it had a Nose like the Elephants that 'tis said can be seen in Africa, and great Serpent-like Growths which hung from its Face like a Beard, in the Fashion of some Sea Monster.

'He calls upon the Redeemer to witness that Satan must have taken his Soul then, for he could not stop touching the Claw of the pestilential Image, though he said angelic Voices bade him draw back. Then a huge Shadow cross'd the Moon, and though he determin'd not to look above he saw the horrid Shape cast upon the Ground. I do not Think he blasphem'd in saying that Heaven would not protect me if I heard the Relation of the Shape of that Shadow, for he says that he felt as if God had forgotten his Welfare when he saw it. That was when he fled the Hill, swimming through the Cambrook Stream to escape; and he says

that some Thing pursu'd him part of the Way, for he heard the clatter of great Claws on the Ground behind. But he repeat'd the Prayers as he is Wont to do when he fears some Evill, and the Scuttling soon fad'd away. So he had come upon me as I walk'd on the Berkeley Road.

'I told him to go home and comfort his Wife, and to pray the good Lord would help him against Evills which the Divell might Plan against him to turn him from the Proper Way. That night I pray'd that these terrible Dealings of Satan might soon quit my Parish, and that the Pit might not take the wretch'd Farmer Cooper.'

Reaching the bottom of this page, I immediately continued on the opposite leaf. But I quickly realised that something was amiss, for the next paragraph treated of something entirely different. Noting the page numbers, I discovered that the page between the two was missing, so that any further references to the alien figure on the hill were unobtainable so far as I was concerned. Since nothing could now be done to rectify this—and, after all, I had come to the Museum originally to look up quite different information—I could only return to my original research. However, a few pages on I noticed an irregularity in the edges of the pages, and on turning to that point I discovered the missing leaf. With a strange feeling of jubilation, I fitted it back into place and continued my interrupted reading.

'But this is not the end of the Tale of Farmer Cooper. Two months from then, Farmer Norton came to me sorely troubl'd, saying that the Drums in the Woods beat louder than ever before. I could not Console him further than by saying that he must keep his Doors clos'd, and watch for Signs of the Works of Satan. Then came the Wife of Cooper, saying that her Husband had on a sudden been Took ill, for he leap'd up with a Shriek most horrid to hear, and ran away towards the Woods. I did not like to send Men into the Woods when the Drums beat so fierce, but I call'd a Party of the Farmers to go through the Woods, watching for signs of the Divell, and seek Farmer Cooper. This they did, but soon came back and arous'd me, telling a very curious and horrid Tale of why they could not bring poor Cooper back, and why he was assuredly Took by the Divell.

'Where the Woods grew thickest, they began to hear Drums beating among the Trees, and approached the Sound fearfully, for they knew what the Drums had herald'd before now. When they came upon the Source, they found Farmer Cooper sitting before a huge black Drum, staring as if Mesmeriz'd and beating upon it in a most savage Way, as 'tis said the natives do in Africa. One of the Party, Farmer King, made to speak to Cooper, but look'd behind him and shew'd to the Others what he saw. They swore that behind Cooper was a great Monster, more Horrid even than the toad of Berkeley is relat'd to be, and most Blasphemous in its Shape. It must have been the Monster which serv'd to model the Figure on the Hill, for they say it was somewhat like a Spider, somewhat like a Crab, and somewhat like a Horror in Dreams. Now, seeing the Daemon among the Trees, Farmer King fled, and the Others follow'd him. They had not gone far when they heard a Shriek of great Agony in the voice of Farmer Cooper, and another Sound which was like the Roaring of some great Beast, while the Beating of the black Drum was ceas'd. A few Minutes after then, they heard a Sound of Wings, like the Flapping of a great Bat, which died away in the Distance. They managed to get to Camside Lane, and soon return'd to the Village to tell of the Fate of the wretch'd Cooper.

'Though this was two Years ago, I do not Doubt that the Daemon still lives, and must roam the Woods in wait for the Unwary. Perhaps it still comes into the Village; for all those who went seeking Farmer Cooper have dream'd of the Monster ever after, and one died not long ago, swearing that some Thing peer'd at the Window and drew his Soul from him. What it is, I do not know. I think it is a Daemon sent from Hell by Satan, but Mr Daniel Jenner, who reads many books of the History of the Region, says it must be what the Romans found behind a stone Door in a Camp which was here long before the Invasion. At any rate, Prayers against Satan seem to have little Effect on it, so that it must be some Thing far different from the Monsters which are Wont to trouble good Christian Communities. Perhaps it will die if my Flock keep away from the Woods. But I hear strange Rumours that Sir Gilbert Morley, who came to live near Severn Ford some

> Years ago, counts himself able to Subdue the Divell by Black Arts, and is said to hope that his Blasphemous Dealings may give him Control of the Monster of the Woods.'

This ended the references to the legendary haunter of the woods, but to me it did not seem likely that this was the only probable legend concerning it. The mention at the last of the attempts of some 18th-century warlock to subdue the being sounded like an indication of some tale of the actual outcome of Morley's experiments, and I could easily spare an hour to search for references for the further myth. Not, of course, that my reading of the Necronomicon had made me credulous about fictitious monsters, but it would be a topic of conversation for when I visited my Camside friend, and perhaps I could even visit the home of Sir Gilbert Morley, if anything remained of the building—and if, indeed, such a person had ever existed.

Determined to make a search for the legend which, I felt sure, would be recounted somewhere, I had the librarian select all the volumes which might be of interest to me in my quest. The final selection included Wilshire's *The Vale Of Berkeley*, Hill's *Legendry and Customs of the Severn Valley*, and Sangster's *Notes on Witchcraft in Monmouthshire, Gloucestershire and the Berkeley Region*. My original research forgotten, I began to peruse the books, not without a shudder at certain passages and illustrations.

The Wilshire volume I soon dispensed with. Apart from the usual stories about female apparitions and earthbound monks, the only legends which touched on the supernatural were those of the Witch of Berkeley and the Berkeley Toad. This last, though a hideous one dealing with an inhuman monstrosity which was kept in a dungeon and which fed on human corpses, did not appear to help me in my search. The Hill and Sangster volumes were more productive, however. Various passages, some occupying over one complete page, told of strange things glimpsed by unwary travellers in the Severn region. Still, I could not think that everything reputed to exist in the surrounding countryside could bear on my present quest. Then I chanced upon a passage in Sangster's work which could be nothing but a reference to the case with which I was concerned. It began by describing almost exactly the occurrences of which I had already read, and continued in the following manner:

'What this being actually was, whence it originally came, and why no legends concerning it are heard before this point, are questions which the reader will ask. There are vague answers for all. The being was supposedly Byatis, a pre-human being which was worshipped as a deity. It was released, according to the legend, by Roman soldiers, from behind a stone door in a camp of indeterminate origin, built long before the advent of the Romans in Britain. As to why there are no legends antedating that of Farmer Cooper's discovery—it is said that there were indeed legends, but in a form so unrecognisable that they were not connected with the later tales. Apparently the terrifying Berkeley Toad was the same being as the deity Byatis; indeed, though the being has only one eye, it does, when its proboscis is retracted occasionally, resemble the general shape of the toad. How it was imprisoned in the Berkeley dungeon, and how it eventually escaped, is not told in the legend. It had some hypnotic power, so that it may have hypnotised someone to open the cell door, though it is likely that this power was used only to render its victims helpless.

'After its encounter with the farmer, it had finally been called from its place in the woods by one Sir Gilbert Morley, who owned a Norman castle, long uninhabited, outside Severnford. The said Morley had been shunned for quite a time by all those living nearby. There was no specific reason why; but he was reputed to have made a pact with Satan, and people did not like the way bats seemed to cluster at the window of one particular tower room, nor the strange shapes which formed in the mist which often settled into the valley.

'At any rate, Morley had stirred the horror in the woods out of its festering sleep, and imprisoned it in a cellar room in his great mansion off the Berkeley Road, no trace of which remains nowadays. As long as it was under his power, he could tap its inherent cosmic vitality and communicate with the sendings of Cthulhu, Glaaki, Daoloth and Shub-Niggurath.

'He was supposed to lure travellers to his homestead, where he would manage to bring them near the cellar and lock them inside;

> when no victims were forthcoming he would send the thing out to feed. Once or twice late homecomers would be struck speechless with terror by the spectacle of Morley in flight, with a frightful winged thing flying ahead of him. Before long he was forced to remove it and imprison it in a hidden underground room at the castle; forced to do this because, according to the legend, it had grown too vast for the cellar room, growing out of all proportion to the food it ate. Here it remained in the daytime, while after dark he would open the secret door and let it free to feast. It returned before dawn, and he would also return and re-imprison it. If the door were closed, the creature would not be free to roam, by virtue of some seal on the door. One day, after Morley had closed the door on the horror inside (his closing the door was apparent, since searchers found no trace of an open door) he disappeared and did not return. The castle, now unattended, is slowly decaying, but the secret portal has apparently remained intact. According to the legend, Byatis yet lurks in the hidden room, ready to wake and be released if someone should open the hidden lock.'

This I read in the Sangster volume. Before proceeding any further, I had the librarian search for data on the being Byatis in the various books in the locked bookcase. Finally he brought forth the following, which he discovered in Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis*:

> 'Byatis, the serpent-bearded, the god of forgetfulness, came with the Great Old Ones from the stars, called by obeisances made to his image, which was brought by the Deep Ones to Earth. He may be called by the touching of his image by a living being. His gaze brings darkness on the mind; and it is told that those who look upon his eye will be forced to walk to his clutches. He feasts upon those who stray to him, and from those upon whom he feasts he draws a part of their vitality, and so grows vaster.'

So I read in Ludvig Prinn's volume of horrifying blasphemies, and I was not slow in shutting it and returning it to the librarian when I was sure that nothing more on Byatis could be found in the book. This was also the last reference to this terrifying enigma that I could discover in any volume I had selected, and I handed them back to the custodian. I happened to look at the

clock at that moment, and saw that I had spent far more time in my researches than intended. Returning to the original volume by the Berkeley clergyman, I quickly noted down the points named by my friend which I had not already copied, and then left the Museum.

It was about noon, and I intended to drive from the Museum straight to Camside, covering as much distance as possible during daylight. Dropping my notebook in the dashboard pocket, I started the engine and moved out into the traffic. Less vehicles were driving in the direction I took than in the opposite direction, but some time passed before I found myself on the outskirts of London. After that, I drove without giving much thought to the landscape flashing past the windscreen, nor did I particularly notice the approach of darkness, until I realised, upon leaving a roadside café where I had drawn up for a meal, that night had fallen. The landscape following my stop at the café became merely a view of two discs of yellow hurrying along the road ahead or sliding across the hedge at each bend. But as I neared Berkeley I began to be haunted by thoughts of the unholy practices which had been carried out in this region in olden times. As I passed through Berkeley, I remembered the horrible stories which were told about the town—about the leprous, bloated toad-monster which had been kept in a dungeon, and about the Witch of Berkeley, off whose coffin the chains had inexplicably fallen before the corpse stepped forth. Of course, they were merely superstitious fancies, and I was not really troubled by them, even though the books I had read that afternoon had mentioned them with such credulity, but the glimpses which the headlights now gave of the surroundings, of unlit black houses and moistly peeling walls, were not reassuring.

When I finally drew into the driveway of my friend's house, he was there to guide me in with a flashlight, my headlamps having given out between Camside and Brichester. He ushered me into the house, remarking that I must have had a difficult journey towards the last along the lanes without lights, while I could only agree with him. It was quite late—later than I had intended to arrive, but the unallowed-for research at the Museum had taken some time—and, after a light meal and a conversation over it, I went to my room to sleep off the effects of the somewhat hectic day.

The next morning I took from my car the notebook containing the information I had acquired at the Museum, and this reminded me of my

intention to visit the ruin of Morley's castle. My friend, though able to move about the house, was not fit to leave it for long periods; and since he would be working on his forthcoming article that afternoon, I would have a chance to seek out the castle. After I had given him the notebook, I mentioned casually that I intended to take a stroll through the nearby countryside after dinner, and asked him whether he could suggest any localities that might interest me.

'You might drive down to Berkeley and take a walk round there,' he advised. 'Plenty of survivals from earlier times there—only I wouldn't stay too long, because of the mists. We'll probably have one tonight, and they're really bad—I certainly wouldn't want to drive in a mist like we get.'

'I had thought,' I said tentatively, 'of going along to Severnford to try and find this castle where a warlock's familiar was supposed to have been sealed up. I wonder if you know where it is? It was owned by someone named Morley—Sir Gilbert Morley, who was apparently in league with the devil, or something of the sort.'

He seemed rather shocked, and looked strangely disturbed by my mentioning the place. 'Listen, Parry,' he said, 'I think I may have heard of this Morley—there's a horrible tale which connects him with the disappearance of new-born babies around here in the 1700s—but I'd rather not say anything more about him. When you've lived down here a bit, and seen them all locking their doors on certain nights and putting signs in the earth beneath the windows because the devil's supposed to walk on those nights—and when you've heard things flying over the houses when everyone's locked in, and there's nothing there—then you won't be interested in tracking down things like that. We've got a home help who believes in such things, and she always makes the signs for our house—so I suppose that's why it always flies over. But I wouldn't go searching out places that have been polluted by witchcraft, even protected as I may be.'

'Good God, Scott,' I rebuked—laughing, but rather disturbed by the way he had changed since coming to live in the country, 'surely you don't believe that these star signs they make around here can have any effect, for good or for evil? Well, if you're so set on preserving my neck, I'll just have to ask one of the villagers—I don't suppose they'll have such a misplaced protective instinct as you seem to have.'

Scott remained unconvinced. 'You know I used to be as sceptical as you are now,' he reminded me. 'Can't you realise that it must have been something drastic that changed my outlook? For God's sake believe me—don't go looking for something to convince you!'

'I repeat,' I said, annoyed that my intended pleasant afternoon should provoke an argument, 'I'll just have to ask one of the villagers.'

'All right, all right,' Scott interrupted, irritated. "There is a castle on the outskirts of Severn ford, supposed to have belonged to Morley, where he kept some sort of monster. Apparently he left it locked away one day and never returned to let it out again—got carried off by an elemental he called up, I believe. It's still waiting, so they say, for some imbecile to come along looking for trouble and let it out again.'

Not missing the last remark's significance, I asked, 'How do I get to the castle from Severnford?'

'Oh, look, Parry, isn't that enough?' he said, frowning. 'You know the legend of the castle's true, so why go any further?'

'I know the story that the castle exists is true,' I pointed out, 'but I don't know if the underground room exists. Still, I suppose the people at Severnford would know...'

'If you have to go and sell yourself to the devil,' Scott finally said, 'the castle is on the other side of Severnford from the river, on a rise—a small hill, I suppose you'd call it—not far from Cotton Row. But look, Parry, I don't know why you're going to this place at all. You may not believe in this thing, but the villagers wouldn't go near that castle, and neither would I. That being is supposed to have some unbelievable attributes—if you just glance at its eye, you have to offer yourself to it—not that I believe all this literally, but I'm sure there's something in the castle that haunts it horribly.'

It was quite obvious that he sincerely believed all he was saying, which only strengthened my resolve to visit the castle and make a thorough search. After the end of our argument, the conversation became somewhat strained, and before dinner was served we were both reading books. As soon as I had finished dinner, I collected a flashlight from my room, and, after making other preparations for the journey, drove off in the direction of Severnford.

After a short drive along the A38 and the Berkeley Road, I found that I would have to pass through Severnford itself and double back if the car

were to be parked near the castle. As I was driving through Severnford I noticed, over the church porch, a stone carving depicting an angel holding a large star-shaped object in front of a cowering toad-like gargoyle. Curious, I braked the car and walked along the moss-covered path between two blackened pillars to speak to the vicar. He was pleased to see a stranger in his church, but became wary when I told him why I had approached him.

'Could you tell me,' I asked, 'the meaning of that peculiar group of carvings over your porch—the one depicting the toad-monster and the angel?'

He seemed slightly worried by my question. 'Obviously the triumph of good over evil,' he suggested.

'But why is the angel holding a star? Surely a cross would be more appropriate.'

The vicar nodded. 'That disturbs me, too,' he confessed, 'because it seems to be a concession to the superstitions round here. They say it was originally not part of the church, but was brought here by one of the early parish priests, who never revealed where he found it. They say that the star is the same one they have to use on All Hallows' Eve, and that the angel isn't an angel at all, but a—being—from some other world. And as for the toad—they say it represents the so-called Berkeley Toad, which is still waiting to be released! I've tried to take the thing off the porch, but they won't have it—threaten not to attend church at all if I remove it! Was there ever a priest in my position?'

I left the church, feeling rather unsettled. I did not like the reference to the carving's not being part of the church, for this would surely mean that the legend was more widespread than I had thought. But, of course, the relief was part of the building, and it was only a distortion of the legend that spoke of its once being separate. I did not look back at the carven scene as the car moved away, nor at the vicar who had left the building and was staring up at the top of the porch.

Turning off Mill Lane, I cruised down Cotton Row. The castle came into view as I turned the corner and left behind me a row of untenanted cottages. It was set on the crest of the hill, three walls still standing, though the roof had long ago collapsed. A lone tower stood like a charred finger against the pale sky, and I momentarily wondered if this were the tower around whose window bats had clustered so long ago. Then the car stopped and I withdrew the key, slammed the door and began to climb the slope.

The grass was covered with droplets of water, and the horizon was very vague from the oncoming mist. The moistness of the ground made progress uphill difficult, but after a few yards a series of stone stairs led to the castle, which I ascended. The stairs were covered with greenish moss, and in scattered places I seemed to detect faint marks, so indistinct that I could not determine their shape, but only have the feeling that there was something vaguely wrong about them. What could have made them, I had no idea, for the absence of life near the castle was extremely noticeable, the only moving object being an occasional bloated bird which flapped up out of the ruins, startled by my entry into the castle.

There was surprisingly little left of the castle. Most of the floor was covered with the debris of the fallen roof, and what could be seen under the fragments of stone gave no indication of the location of any secret room. As a possibility struck me, I climbed the stairway which led into the tower and examined the surface at the bottom of the circular staircase, but the steps were mere slabs of stone. The thought of the tower suggested another idea —perhaps the legend lied when it spoke of the monster's prison as being underground? But the door of the upper tower room swung open easily enough, revealing a narrow, empty chamber. My heart gave an unpleasant lurch when, moving further in to survey the entire room, I saw, in place of a bed under the window, a coffin. With some trepidation, I moved closer and peered into the coffin—and I think I must have given a sigh of relief when I saw that the coffin, whose bottom was spread with earth, was empty. It must have been some bizarre kind of burial vault, even though it was certainly unorthodoxly situated. But I could not help remembering that clouds of bats used to collect at the window of some tower in this castle, and there seemed to be a subconscious connection which I could not quite place.

Leaving the tower room rather quickly, I descended the stairs and examined the ground on all sides of the castle. Nothing but rubble met my gaze, though once I did see an odd sign scratched on a slab of rock. Unless the door to the secret room lay under the remains of the collapsed roof, it presumably did not exist at all; and after ten minutes of dragging the fragments of stone to other positions, the only effects of which were to tear my fingernails and cover me with dust, I realised that there was no way of discovering whether the door did, in fact, lie beneath the debris. At any rate, I could return to the house and point out to Scott that no malevolent entity

had dragged me off to its lair; and, as far as I was able, I had proved that there was no evidence of a hidden room at the castle.

I started back down the stone stairs which led to the road, looking out across the gently curving green fields, now fast becoming vague through the approaching mist. Suddenly I tripped and fell down one step. I put my hand on the step above me to help me rise—and almost toppled into a yawning pit. I was tottering on the brink of an open trapdoor, the step forming the door and the stone which I had kicked out of place forming the lock. A stone ladder thrust into the darkness below, leading down to the unseen floor of a room of indeterminate extent.

Drawing out my flashlight, I switched it on. The room now revealed was completely bare, except for a small black cube of some metal at the foot of the ladder. Square in shape, the room measured approximately 20' x 20', the walls being of a dull grey stone, which was covered with pits out of which grew the fronds of pallid ferns. There was absolutely no evidence of any sort of animal life in the room, nor, indeed, that an animal of any kind had ever inhabited it—except, perhaps, for a peculiar odour, like a mixture of the scents of reptiles and decay, which rose chokingly for a minute from the newly-opened aperture.

There appeared to be nothing to interest me in the entire room, barring the small black cube which lay in the centre of the floor. First ensuring that the ladder would bear my weight, I descended it and reached the cube. Kneeling beside it on the pock-marked grey floor, I examined the piece of black metal. When scratched with a penknife it revealed a strange violet lustre which suggested that it was merely covered with a black coating. Inscribed hieroglyphics had been incised upon its upper surface, one of which I recognised from the Necronomicon, where it was given as a protection against demons. Rolling it over, I saw that the underside of the cube was carved with one of those star-shaped symbols which were so prevalent in the village. This cube would make an excellent piece of evidence to show that I actually had visited the supposedly haunted castle. I picked it up, finding it surprisingly heavy—about the weight of a piece of lead the same size—and held it in my hand.

And in doing so, I released the abomination which sent me leaping up the creaking ladder and racing madly down the hill, on to Cotton Row and into my car. Fumbling at the ignition key which I had inserted upside down, I

looked back to see an obscene reaching member protruding from the gulf against the fast-misting sky. Finally the key slipped into its socket, and I drove away from the nightmare I had seen with a violence that brought a scream from the gears. The landscape flashed by at a nerve-wrenching pace, each shadow in the dim headlights seeming a hurtling demon, until the car swung into the driveway at Scott's house, barely stopping before smashing into the garage doors.

The front door opened hurriedly at my violent entry. Scott hastened out of the rectangle of light from the hall lamp. By that time I was half-faint from the hideous sight in the pit and the frantic journey after it, so that he had to support me as I reeled into the hallway. Once in the living room and fortified with a long drink of brandy, I began to recount the events of that afternoon. Before I had reached the terrors of the castle he was leaning forward with a disturbed air, and he uttered a groan of horror when I spoke of the coffin in the tower room. When I described the horrible revelation which had burst upon me in the underground room, his eyes dilated with terror.

'But that's monstrous!' he gasped. 'You mean to say—the legend spoke of Byatis growing with every victim—and it must have taken Morley at the last—but that what you say could be possible—'

'I saw it long enough before I realised what it was to take in all the details,' I told him. 'Now I can only wait until tomorrow, when I can get some explosives and destroy the thing.'

'Parry, you don't mean you're going to the castle again,' he demanded incredulously. 'My God, after all you've seen, surely you must have enough evidence without going back to that place for more!'

'You've only heard about all the horrors I saw,' I reminded him. 'I saw them so that if I don't wipe them out now they're going to haunt me with knowledge that one day that toad-creature may smash out of its prison. I'm not going back there for pleasure this time, but for a real purpose. We know it can't escape yet—but if it's left it might manage to lure victims to it again, and get back its strength. I don't have to look at its eye for what I'm going to do. I know nobody around here would go near—even the cottages nearby are empty—but suppose someone else like me hears of the legend and decides to follow it up? This time the door will be open, you know.'

The next morning I had to drive for some miles before discovering that there was nowhere I could buy explosives. I finally bought several tins of petrol and hoped that the inflammable liquid would destroy the alien monster. Calling in at Scott's house for my luggage—I was returning to London after finishing my task at the castle, for I did not want to be connected when the local police made their inquiries—I was accosted by the home help, who pressed upon me a curiously-figured star-shaped stone, which, she said, would keep off the power of Byatis while I used the petrol. Thanking her, I took my leave of Scott and went out to the car, which I turned out into the roadway. On looking back, I saw both Scott and the woman watching me anxiously from the living room window.

The petrol cans on the back seat jangled together abominably, unnerving me as I tried to think of my best plan of action at the castle. I drove in the opposite direction on this journey, for I did not want to pass through Severnford; for one thing, I wanted to reach the castle as soon as possible and end the abnormality which scratched at my mind, and, besides, I disliked passing that carving of the toad-horror over the church porch again. The journey was shorter, and I soon was lifting the petrol cans on to the grass at the side of the road.

Lifting the cans near the gaping pit under the lifted stone slab took a great deal of labour and no little time. Placing my cigarette lighter at the edge of the stairway, I prised the caps off the petrol cans. I had taken them around the pit to the next higher step, and now I dipped a piece of plywood from Scott's garage into the petrol in one tin and placed it on the step above. Then, lighting the wood with my cigarette lighter, I hurriedly kicked the tins over the edge of the gulf and dropped the blazing wood in after them.

I think I was only just in time, for as I pushed the open cans into the pit a huge black object rose over the edge, drawing back as the petrol and wood hit it, as a snail retracts its eye organs at a touch of salt. Then came a protracted hissing sound from below, coupled with a terrible bass roaring, which rose in intensity and pitch before changing to a repulsive bubbling. I did not dare to look down into what must be seething in fluid agony at the bottom of the pit, but what rose above the trapdoor was dreadful enough. Thin greenish spirals of gas whirled out of the aperture and collected in a thick cloud about fifty feet above. Perhaps it was merely the effect of some anaesthetic quality of the gas which augmented my imagination, but the

cloud seemed to congeal at one point of its ascent into a great swollen toad-like shape, which flapped away on vast bat-wings towards the west.

That was my last sight of the castle and its morbidly distorted surroundings. I did not look back as I descended the stone stairs, nor did I glance away from the road ahead until I had left the glistening of the Severn far above the horizon. Not until the London traffic was pressing around me did I think of the monster as behind me, and even now I cannot stop thinking of what I saw after I lifted the metal cube from the floor of the castle room.

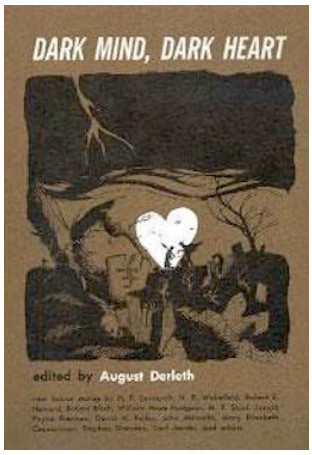
As I had picked up the cube from the floor a strange stirring had begun beneath my feet. Looking down, I saw that the join of floor and wall on one side of the room was ascending the stone, and I managed to clutch a stone rung just before the floor slid away altogether, revealing itself to be a balanced door into a yet vaster room below. Climbing until I was halfway up the hanging ladder, I peered warily into the complete darkness below. No sound came from the blackness, and as yet there was no movement; not until I attempted to get a firmer grip on the ladder and, in so doing, dropped the metal block with a moist thud on something in that blackness, did anything occur.

A slithering sound began below me, mixed with a rubbery suction, and as I watched in paralytic terror a black object slid from underneath the edge of a wall and began to expand upward, slapping itself blindly against the sides of the smaller room. It resembled a gigantic snake more than anything else, but it was eyeless, and had no other facial features. And I was confused by the connections this colossal abnormality could have with Byatis. Was this the haven of some other entity from another sphere, or had Morley called up other demons from beyond forbidden gates?

Then I understood, and gave one shriek of horror-fraught realisation as I plunged out of the room of malignancy. I heard the thing dash itself flabbily against its prison walls, but I knew the ghastly reason why it could not escape. I looked back once. The obscene black member was reaching frantically around the edge of the pit, searching for the prey it had sensed in its lair a moment before, and at this I laughed in lunatic glee, for I knew that the thing would search mindlessly until it found that it could reach nothing. 'It had grown too vast for the cellar room,' Sangster had written—but had not mentioned just what growth had taken place with each living sacrifice...

For the snake-like thing that had reached for me, that thing as wide as a human body and impossibly long, had been merely the face-tentacle of the abomination Byatis.

The Church In High Street



"I sent [August Derleth] the rewritten *The Tomb-Herd* which he accepted under certain conditions: that the title should be changed to *The Church In High Street* [...] and that he should be able to edit the story as he saw fit. The story as published, there and here, therefore contains several passages that are Derleth's paraphrases of what I wrote. Quite right too: as I think he realised, it was the most direct way to show me how to improve my writing, and selling the story was so encouraging that I completed my first book a little over a year later."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Cold Print*

Written in: 1961
First published in *Dark Mind, Dark Heart*, 1962
Also published in: *Cold Print*

> "...the Herd that stand watch at the secret portal each tomb is known to have, and that thrive on that which groweth out of the inhabitants thereof..."—Abdul Alhazred: Necronomicon

If I had not been a victim of circumstances, I would never have gone to ancient Temphill. But I had very little money in those days, and when I recalled the invitation of a friend who lived in Temphill to become his secretary, I began to hope that this post—open some months before—might still be available. I knew that my friend would not easily find someone to stay with him long; not many would relish a stay in such a place of ill repute as Temphill.

Thinking thus, I gathered into a trunk what few belongings I had, loaded it into a small sports car which I had borrowed from another friend gone on a sea voyage, and drove out of London at an hour too early for the clamorous traffic of the city to have risen, away from the cell-like room where I had stayed in a tottering, blackened backstreet house.

I had heard much from my friend Albert Young, about Temphill and the customs of that decaying Cotswold town where he had lived for months during his research into incredibly superstitious beliefs for a chapter in his forthcoming book on witchcraft and witchcraft lore. Not being superstitious

myself, I was curious at the way in which apparently sane people seemed to avoid entering Temphill whenever possible—as reported by Young—not so much because they disliked the route, as because they were disturbed by the strange tales which constantly filtered out of the region.

Perhaps because I had been dwelling upon these tales, the country seemed to grow disquieting as I neared my destination. Instead of the gently undulating Cotswold hills, with villages and half-timbered thatched houses, the area was one of grim, brooding plains, sparsely habited, where the only vegetation was a grey diseased grass and an infrequent bloated oak. A few places filled me with a strong unease—the path the road took beside a sluggish stream, for instance, where the reflection of the passing vehicle was oddly distorted by the green, scum-covered water; the diversion which forced me to take a route straight through the middle of a marsh, where trees closed overhead so that the ooze all around me could barely be seen; and the densely wooded hillside which rose almost vertically above the road at one point, with trees reaching toward the road like myriad gnarled hands, all wearing the aspect of a primeval forest.

Young had written often of certain things he had learned from reading in various antique volumes; he wrote of "a forgotten cycle of superstitious lore which would have been better unknown"; he mentioned strange and alien names, and toward the last of his letters—which had ceased to come some weeks before—he had hinted of actual worship of trans-spatial beings still practised in such towns as Camside, Birchester, Severnford, Goatswood and Temphill. In his very last letter he had written of a temple of 'Yog-Sothoth' which existed conterminously with an actual church in Temphill where monstrous rituals had been performed. This eldritch temple had been, it was thought, the origin of the town's name—a corruption of the original 'Temple Hill'—which had been built around the hill-set church, where "gates", if opened by now long forgotten alien incantations, would gape to let elder demons pass from other spheres. There was a particularly hideous legend, he wrote, concerning the errand on which these demons came, but he forebore to recount this, at least until he had visited the alien temple's earthly location.

On my entrance into the first of Temphill's archaic streets, I began to feel qualms about my impulsive action. If Young had meanwhile found a secretary, I would find it difficult, in my indigence, to return to London. I

had hardly enough funds to find lodging here, and the hotel repelled me the moment I saw it in passing—with its leaning porch, the peeling bricks of the walls, and the decayed old men who stood in front of the porch and seemed to stare mindlessly at something beyond me as I drove by. The other sections of the town were not reassuring, either, particularly the steps which rose between green ruins of brick walls to the black steeple of a church among pallid gravestones.

The worst part of Temphill, however, seemed to be the south end. On Wood Street, which entered the town on the northwest side, and on Manor Street, where the forested hillside on the left of the first street ended, the houses were square stone buildings in fairly good repair, but around the blackened hotel at the centre of Temphill, the buildings were often greatly dilapidated, and the roof of one three-story building—the lower floor of which was used as a shop, with a sign—Poole's General Store—in the mud-spattered windows—had completely collapsed. Across the bridge beyond the central Market Square lay Cloth Street, and beyond the tall, uninhabited buildings of Wool Place at the end of it could be found South Street, where Young lived in a three-story house which he had bought cheaply and been able to renovate.

The state of the buildings across the skeletal river bridge was even more disturbing than that of those on the north side. Bridge Lane's grey warehouses soon gave way to gabled dwellings, often with broken windows and patchily unpainted fronts, but still inhabited. Here scattered unkempt children stared resignedly from dusty front steps or played in pools of orange mud on a patch of waste ground, while the older tenants sat in twilit rooms, and the atmosphere of the place depressed me as might a shade-inhabited city ruin.

I entered into South Street between two gabled three-story houses. Number 11, Young's house, was at the far end of the street. The sight of it, however, filled me with foreboding—for it was shuttered, and the door stood open, laced with cobwebs. I drove the car up the driveway at the side and got out. I crossed the grey, fungus-overgrown lawn and went up the steps. The door swung inward at my touch, opening upon a dimly-lit hall. My knocks and calls brought no answer, and I stood for a few moments undecided, hesitant to enter. There was a total absence of footprints anywhere on the dusty floor of the hall. Remembering that Young had written about conversations he

had had with the owner of Number 8, across the road, I decided to apply to him for information about my friend.

I crossed the street to Number 8 and knocked on the door. It was opened almost immediately, though in such silence as to startle me. The owner of Number 8 was a tall man with white hair and luminously dark eyes. He wore a frayed tweed suit. But his most startling attribute was a singular air of antiquity, giving him the impression of having been left behind by some past age. He looked very much like my friend's description of the pedantic John Clothier, a man possessed of an extraordinary amount of ancient knowledge.

When I introduced myself and told him that I was looking for Albert Young, he paled and was briefly hesitant before inviting me to enter his house, muttering that he knew where Albert Young had gone, but that I probably wouldn't believe him. He led me down a dark hall into a large room lit only by an oil lamp in one corner. There he motioned me to a chair beside the fireplace. He got out his pipe, lit it, and sat down opposite me, beginning to talk with an abrupt rush.

"I took an oath to say nothing about this to anyone," he said. "That's why I could only warn Young to leave and keep away from—that place. He wouldn't listen—and you won't find him now. Don't look so—it's the truth! I'll have to tell you more than I told him, or you'll try to find him and find—something else. God knows what will happen to me now—once you've joined Them, you must never speak of their place to any outsider. But I can't see another go the way Young went. I should let you go there—according to the oath—but They'll take me sooner or later, anyway. You get away before it's too late. Do you know the church in High Street?"

It took me some seconds to regain my composure enough to reply. "If you mean the one near the central square—yes, I know it."

"It isn't used—as a church, now," Clothier went on. "But there were certain rites practised there long ago. They left their mark. Perhaps Young wrote you about the legend of the temple existing in the same place as the church, but in another dimension? Yes, I see by your expression that he did. But do you know that rites can still be used at the proper season to open the gates and let through those from the other side? It's true. I've stood in that church myself and watched the gates open in the centre of empty air to show visions that made me shriek in horror. I've taken part in acts of worship that

would drive the uninitiated insane. You see, Mr. Dodd, the majority of the people in Temphill still visit the church on the right nights."

More than half convinced that Clothier's mind was affected, I asked impatiently, "What does all this have to do with Young's whereabouts?"

"It has everything to do with it," Clothier continued. "I warned him not to go to the church, but he went one night in the same year when the Yule rite had been consummated, and They must have been watching when he got there. He was held in Temphill after that. They have a way of turning space back to a point—I can't explain it. He couldn't get away. He waited in that house for days before They came. I heard his screams—and saw the colour of the sky over the roof. They took him. That's why you'll never find him. And that's why you'd better leave town altogether while there's still time."

"Did you look for him at the house?" I asked, incredulous.

"I wouldn't go into that house for any reason whatever," confessed Clothier. "Nor would anyone else. The house has become Theirs now. They have taken him Outside—and who knows what hideous things may still lurk there?"

He got up to indicate that he had no more to say. I got to my feet, too, glad to escape the dimly-lit room and the house itself. Clothier ushered me to the door, and stood briefly at the threshold glancing fearfully up and down the street, as if he expected some dreadful visitation. Then he vanished inside his house without waiting to see where I went.

I crossed to Number 11. As I entered the curiously-shadowed hall, I remembered my friend's account of his life here. It was in the lower part of the house that Young had been wont to peruse certain archaic and terrible volumes, to set down his notes concerning his discoveries, and to pursue sundry other researches. I found the room which had been his study without trouble; the desk covered with sheets of notepaper—the bookcases filled with leather- and skin-bound volumes—the incongruous desk lamp—all these bespoke the room's onetime use.

I brushed the thick dust from the desk and the chair beside it, and turned on the light. The glow was reassuring. I sat down and took up my friend's papers. The stack which first fell under my eye bore the heading *Corroborative Evidence*, and the very first page was typical of the lot, as I soon discovered. It consisted of what seemed to be unrelated notes referring

to the Mayan culture of Central America. The notes, unfortunately, seemed to be random and meaningless. 'Rain gods (water elementals?) Trunk-proboscis (ref. Old Ones). Kukulkan (Cthulhu?)'—Such was their general tenor. Nevertheless, I persisted, and presently a hideously suggestive pattern became evident.

It began to appear that Young had been attempting to unify and correlate various cycles of legend with one central cycle, which was, if recurrent references were to be believed, far older than the human race. Whence Young's information had been gathered if not from the antique volumes set around the walls of the room, I did not venture to guess. I pored for hours over Young's synopsis of the monstrous and alien myth-cycle—the legends of how Cthulhu came from an indescribable milieu beyond the furthest bounds of this universe—of the polar civilisations and abominably unhuman races from black Yuggoth on the rim—of hideous Leng and its monastery-prisoned high priest who had to cover what should be its face—and of a multitude of blasphemies only rumoured to exist, save in certain forgotten places of the world. I read what Azathoth had resembled before that monstrous nuclear chaos had been bereft of mind and will—of many-featured Nyarlathotep—of shapes which the crawling chaos could assume, shapes which men have never before dared to relate—of how one might glimpse a dhole, and what one would see.

I was shocked to think that such hideous beliefs could be thought true in any corner of a sane world. Yet Young's treatment of his material hinted that he, too, was not entirely sceptical concerning them. I pushed aside a bulky stack of papers. In so doing, I dislodged the desk blotter, revealing a thin sheaf of notes headed *On the legend of the High Street Church*. Recalling Clothier's warning, I drew it forth.

Two photographs were stapled to the first page. One was captioned *Section of tessellated Roman pavement, Goatswood*, the other *Reproduction engraving p. 594 'Necronomicon'*. The former represented a group of what seemed to be acolytes or hooded priests depositing a body before a squatting monster; the latter a representation of that creature in somewhat greater detail. The being itself was so hysterically alien as to be indescribable; it was a glistening, pallid oval, with no facial features whatsoever, except for a vertical, slit-like mouth, surrounded by a horny ridge. There were no visible members, but there was that which suggested

that the creature could shape any organ at will. The creature was certainly only a product of some morbid artist's diseased mind—but the pictures were nevertheless oddly disturbing.

The second page set forth in Young's all too familiar script a local legend to the effect that Romans who had laid the Goatswood pavement had, in fact, practised decadent worship of some kind, and hinting that certain rites lingered in the customs of the more primitive present-day inhabitants of the area. There followed a paragraph translated from the Necronomicon. 'The tomb-herd confer no benefits upon their worshippers. Their powers are few, for they can but disarrange space in small regions and make tangible that which cometh forth from the dead in other dimensions. They have power wherever the chants of Yog-Sothoth have been cried out at their seasons, and can draw to them those who will open their gates in the charnel-houses. They have no substance in this dimension, but enter earthly tenants to feed through them while they await the time when the stars become fixed and the gate of infinite sides opens to free That Which Claws at the Barrier.' To this Young had appended some cryptic notes of his own—'Cf. legends in Hungary, among aborigines Australia.—Clothier on High Church, Dec. 17,' which impelled me to turn to Young's diary, pushed aside in my eagerness to examine Young's papers.

I turned the pages, glancing at entries which seemed to be unrelated to the subject I sought, until I came to the entry for December 17. 'More about the High Street Church legend from Clothier. He spoke of past days when it was a meeting-place for worshippers of morbid, alien gods. Subterranean tunnels supposedly burrowed down to onyx temples, etc. Rumours that all who crawled down those tunnels to worship were not human. References to passages to other spheres.' So much, no more. This was scarcely illuminating. I pressed on through the diary.

Under date of December 23, I found a further reference: 'Christmas brought more legends to Clothier's memory today. He said something about a curious Yule rite practised in the High Street Church—something to do with evoked beings in the buried necropolis beneath the church. Said it still happened on the eve of Christmas, but he had never actually seen it.'

Next evening, according to Young's account, he had gone to the church. 'A crowd had gathered on the steps leading off the street. They carried no light, but the scene was illuminated by floating globular objects which gave off a

phosphorescence and floated away at my approach. I could not identify them. The crowd presently, realising I had not come to join them, threatened me and came for me. I fled. I was followed, but I could not be sure what followed me.'

There was not another pertinent entry for several days. Then, under date of January 13, Young wrote: 'Clothier has finally confessed that he has been drawn into certain Temphill rites. He warned me to leave Temphill, said I must not visit the church in High Street after dark or I might awaken them, after which I might be visited—and not by people! His mind appears to be in the balance.'

For nine months thereafter, no pertinent entry had been made. Then, on September 30, Young had written of his intention to visit the church in High Street that night, following which, on October 1, certain jottings, evidently written in great haste. 'What abnormalities—what cosmic perversions! Almost too monstrous for sanity! I cannot yet believe what I saw when I went down those onyx steps to the vaults—that herd of horrors! ... I tried to leave Temphill, but all streets turn back to the church. Is my mind, too, going?' Then, the following day, a desperate scrawl—'I cannot seem to leave Temphill. All roads return to No. 11 today—the power of those from outside. Perhaps Dodd can help.' And then, finally, the frantic beginnings of a telegram set down under my name and address and evidently intended to be sent. *Come Temphill immediately. Need your help...* There the writing ended in a line of ink running to the edge of the page, as if the writer had allowed his pen to be dragged off the paper.

Thereafter nothing more. Nothing save that Young was gone, vanished, and the only suggestion in his notes seemed to point to the church in High Street. Could he have gone there, found some concealed room, been trapped in it? I might yet then be the instrument of freeing him. Impulsively, I left the room and the house, went out to my car, and started away.

Turning right, I drove up South Street toward Wool Place. There were no other cars on the roads, and I did not notice the usual pavement loafers; curiously, too, the houses I passed were unlit, and the overgrown patch in the centre, guarded by its flaking railing and blanched in the light of the moon over the white gables, seemed desolate and disquieting. The decaying quarter of Cloth Street was even less inviting. Once or twice I seemed to see forms starting out of doorways I passed, but they were unclear, like the

figments of a distorted imagination. Over all, the feeling of desolation was morbidly strong, particularly in the region of those dark alleys undulating between unlit, boarded houses. In High Street at last, the moon hung over the steeple of the hill-set church like some lunar diadem, and as I moved the car into a depression at the bottom of the steps the orb sank behind the black spire as if the church were dragging the satellite out of the sky.

As I climbed the steps, I saw that the walls around me had iron rails set into them and were made of rough stone, so pitted that beaded spiders' webs glistened in the fissures, while the steps were covered with a slimy green moss which made climbing unpleasant. Denuded trees overhung the passage. The church itself was lit by the gibbous moon which swung high in the gulfs of space, and the tottering gravestones, overgrown with repulsively decaying vegetation, cast curious shadows over the fungus-strewn grass. Strangely, though the church was so manifestly unused, an air of habitation clung to it, and I entered it almost with the expectation of finding someone—caretaker or worshipper—beyond the door.

I had brought a flashlight with me to help me in my search of the nighted church, but a certain glow—a kind of iridescence—lay within its walls, as of moonlight reflected from the mullioned windows. I went down the central aisle, flashing my light into one row of pews after the other, but there was no evidence in the mounded dust that anyone had ever been there. Piles of yellowed hymnals squatted against a pillar like grotesque huddled shapes of crouching beings, long forsaken—here and there the pews were broken with age—and the air in that enclosed place was thick with a kind of charnel musk.

I came at last toward the altar and saw that the first pew on the left before the altar was tilted abnormally in my direction. I had noted earlier that several of the pews were angled with disuse, but now I saw that the floor beneath the first pew was also angled upward, revealing an unlit abyss below. I pushed the pew back all the way—for the second pew had been set at a suitably greater distance—thus exposing the black depths below the rectangular aperture. The flickering yellow glow from my flashlight disclosed a flight of steps, twisting down between dripping walls.

I hesitated at the edge of the abyss, flashing an uneasy glance around the darkened church. Then I began the descent, walking as quietly as possible. The only sound in the core-seeking passage was the dripping of water in the

lightless area beyond the beam of my flashlight. Droplets of water gleamed at me from the walls as I spiralled downward, and crawling black things scuttled into crevices as though the light could destroy them. As my quest led me further into the earth, I noticed that the steps were no longer of stone, but of earth itself, out of which grew repulsively bloated, dappled fungi, and saw that the roof of the tunnel was disquietingly supported only by the flimsiest of arches.

How long I slithered under those uncertain arches I could not tell, but at last one of them became a grey tunnel over strangely-coloured steps, uneroded by time, the edges of which were still sharp, though the flight was discoloured with mud from the passage of feet from above. My flashlight showed that the curve of the descending steps had now become less pronounced, as if its terminus was near, and as I saw this I grew conscious of a mounting wave of uncertainty and disquiet. I paused once more and listened.

There was no sound from beneath, no sound from above. Pushing back the tension I felt, I hastened forward, slipped on a step, and rolled down the last few stairs to come up against a grotesque statue, life-size, leering blindly at me in the glow of my flashlight. It was but one of six in a row, opposite which was an identical, equally repulsive sextet, so wrought by the skill of some unknown sculptor as to seem terrifyingly real. I tore my gaze away, picked myself up, and flashed my light into the darkness before me.

Would that a merciful oblivion could wipe away forever what I saw there! —the rows of grey stone slabs reaching limitlessly away into darkness in claustrophobic aisles, on each of them shrouded corpses staring sightlessly at the ebon roof above. And nearby were archways marking the beginning of black winding staircases leading downward into inconceivable depths; the sight of them filled me with an inexplicable chill superimposed upon my horror at the charnel vision before me. I shuddered away from the thought of searching among the slabs for Young's remains—if he were there, and I felt intuitively that he lay somewhere among them. I tried to nerve myself to move forward, and was just timidly moving to enter the aisle at the entrance of which I stood, when a sudden sound paralysed me.

It was a whistling rising slowly out of the darkness before me, augmented presently by explosive sounds which seemed to increase in volume, as were the source of it approaching. As I stared affrightedly at the point whence the

sound seemed to rise, there came a prolonged explosion and the sudden glowing of a pale, sourceless green light, beginning as a circular illumination, hardly larger than a hand. Even as I strained my eyes at it, it vanished. In a few seconds, however, it reappeared, three times its previous diameter—and for one dreadful moment I glimpsed through it a hellish, alien landscape, as if were I looking through a window opening upon another, utterly foreign dimension! It blinked out even as I fell back—then returned with even greater brilliance—and I found myself gazing against my will upon a scene being seared indelibly on my memory.

It was a strange landscape dominated by a trembling star hanging in a sky across which drifted elliptical clouds. The star, which was the source of the green glowing, shed its light upon a landscape where great, black triangular rocks were scattered among vast metal buildings, globular in shape. Most of these seemed to be in ruins, for whole segmentary plates were torn from the lower walls, revealing twisted, peeling girders which had been partially melted by some unimaginable force. Ice glittered greenly in crevices of the girders, and great flakes of vermilion-tinted snow settled toward the ground or slanted through the cracks in the walls, drifting out of the depths of that black sky.

For but a few moments the scene held—then abruptly it sprang to life as horrible white, gelatinous shapes flopped across the landscape toward the forefront of the scene. I counted thirteen of them, and watched them—cold with terror—as they came forward to the edge of the opening—and across it, to flop hideously into the vault where I stood!

I backed toward the steps, and as in a dream saw those frightful shapes move upon the statues nearby, and watched the outlines of those statues blur and begin to move. Then, swiftly, one of those dreadful beings rolled and flopped toward me. I felt something cold as ice touch my ankle. I screamed —and a merciful unconsciousness carried me into my own night...

When I woke at last I found myself on the stones between two slabs some distance from the place on the steps where I had fallen—a horrible, bitter, furry taste in my mouth, my face hot with fever. How long I had lain unconscious I could not tell. My light lay where it had fallen, still glowing with enough illumination to permit a dim view of my surroundings. The green light was gone—the nightmarish opening had vanished. Had I but fainted at the nauseating odours, at the terrible suggestiveness of this

charnel crypt? But the sight of a singularly frightening fungus in scattered patches on my clothing and on the floor—a fungus I had not seen before, dropped from what source I could not tell and about which I did not want to speculate—filled me with such awful dread that I started up, seized my light, and fled, plunging for the dark archway beyond the steps down which I had come into this eldritch pit.

I ran feverishly upward, frequently colliding with the wall and tripping on the steps and on obstacles which seemed to materialise out of the shadows. Somehow I reached the church. I fled down the central aisle, pushed open the creaking door, and raced down the shadowed steps to the car. I tugged frantically at the door before I remembered that I had locked the car. Then I tore at my pockets—in vain! The key ring carrying all my keys was gone—lost in that hellish crypt I had so miraculously escaped. The car was useless to me—nothing would have induced me to return, to enter again the haunted church in High Street.

I abandoned it. I ran out into the street, bound for Wood Street, and, beyond it, the next town—open country—any place but accursed Temphill. Down High Street, into Market Square, where the wan moonlight shared with one high lamp standard the only illumination, across the Square into Manor Street. In the distance lay the forests about Wood Street, beyond a curve, at the end of which Temphill would be left behind me. I raced down the nightmarish streets, heedless of the mists that began to rise and obscure the wooded country slopes that were my goal, the blurring of the landscape beyond the looming houses.

I ran blindly, wildly—but the hills of the open country came no nearer—and suddenly, horribly, I recognised the unlit intersections and dilapidated gables of Cloth Street—which should have been far behind me, on the other side of the river—and in a moment I found myself again in High Street, and there before me were the worn steps of that repellent church, with the car still before them! I tottered, clung to a roadside tree for a moment, my mind in chaos. Then I turned and started out again, sobbing with terror and dread, racing with pounding heart back to Market Square, back across the river, aware of a horrible vibration, a shocking, muted whistling sound I had come to know only too well, aware of fearful pursuit...

I failed to see the approaching car and had time only to throw myself backward so that the full force of its striking me was avoided. Even so, I

was flung to the pavement and into blackness.

I woke in the hospital at Camside. A doctor returning to Camside through Temphill had been driving the car that struck me. He had taken me, unconscious and with a contusion and a broken arm, taken me from that accursed city. He listened to my story, as much as I dared tell, and went to Temphill for my car. It could not be found. And he could find no one who had seen me or the car. Nor could he find books, papers, or diary at No. 11 South Street where Albert Young had lived. And of Clothier there was no trace—the owner of the adjacent house said he had been gone for a long time.

Perhaps they were right in telling me I had suffered a progressive hallucination. Perhaps it was an illusion, too, that I heard the doctors whispering when I was coming out of anaesthesia—whispering of the frantic way in which I had burst into the path of the car—and worse, of the strange fungus that clung to my clothes, even to my face at my lips, as if it grew there!

Perhaps. But can they explain how now, months afterward, though the very thought of Temphill fills me with loathing and dread, I feel myself irresistibly drawn to it, as if that accursed, haunted town were the Mecca toward which I must make my way? I have begged them to confine me—to imprison me—anything—and they only smile and try to soothe me and assure me that everything will "work itself out"—the glib, self-reassuring words that do not deceive me, the words that have a hollow sound against the magnet of Temphill and the ghostly whistling echoes that invade not only my dreams but my waking hours!

I will do what I must. Better death than that unspeakable horror...

—Filed with the report of P.C. Villars on the disappearance of Richard Dodd, 9 Gayton Terrace, W.7. Manuscript in Dodd's script, found in his room after his disappearance.

1962

The Render Of The Veils

"Written during the composition of *The Inhabitant Of The Lake*, based on an observation from Lovecraft's Commonplace Book. The first of Campbell's stories to develop its plot largely through dialogue."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1962
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At midnight the last bus to Brichester had gone, and it was raining heavily. Kevin Gillson bitterly considered standing under the marquee of the nearby cinema until morning, but the high wind was driving the rain under it so that it provided no shelter. He turned the collar of his raincoat up as water began to ooze down his neck, and slowly walked up the hill away from the bus stop.

The streets were virtually deserted; a few cars which passed did not respond to his signals. Very few of the houses he passed were even lit; it depressed him to walk along the wet-black pavement which reflected wavering images of street lamps back at him. He met only one other person —a silent figure leaning in the shadow of a doorway. Only the red glow from a cigarette persuaded Gillson that anyone was there at all.

At the corner of Gaunt and Ferrey Streets he saw a vehicle approaching him. Half-dazzled by the reflection of the headlights, he made out that it was a taxi, travelling the streets for a final passenger of the night. He waved the bedraggled *Camside Observer* he was still clutching, and the taxi drew to a stop beside him.

'Are you still taking passengers?' he yelled through the partition.

'I was goin' home,' called back the driver. 'Still—if you've got some way to go—I wouldn't want you walkin' the streets on a night like this. Where to?'

Gillson ordered 'Brichester,' and made to get in. At that moment, however, he heard a voice calling something nearby; and turning, he saw a figure running through the rain towards the taxi. From the cigarette between his fingers and the direction from which he had come, Gillson guessed that this was the man he had noticed in the doorway.

'Wait—please wait!' the man was shouting. He clattered up to the taxi, splashing Gillson in the process. 'Would you mind if I shared your taxi? If you're in a hurry, it doesn't matter—but if I take you out of your way, I'll pay the difference. I don't know how I'll get home otherwise, though I don't live far from here.'

'Where *do* you live?' Gillson asked cautiously. 'I'm not in any hurry, but—'

'On Tudor Drive,' the man replied eagerly.

'Oh, that's on the way to Brichester, isn't it?' said Gillson, relieved. 'Sure, get in—we'll both catch pneumonia if we stand here much longer.'

Once in the taxi, Gillson directed the driver and sat back. He did not feel like talking, and decided to read a book, hoping the other would take a hint. He took out the copy of *Witchcraft Today* he had bought on a bookstall that morning and flipped the pages a little.

He was just beginning a chapter when a voice broke in on him. 'Do you believe in that stuff?'

'This, you mean?' Gillson suggested resignedly, tapping the cover of the book. 'In a way, yes—I suppose these people believed that dancing naked and spitting on crucifixes would benefit them. Rather childish, though—they were all psychopathic, of course.'

'Fit to be consigned to a lurid book like that, I'd say,' agreed the other.

There was silence for a few minutes, and Gillson contemplated returning to the book. He opened it again and read the suitably garish blurb inside the cover, then put it down irritably as a trickle of water ran down his sleeve on to the page. He wiped this, then felt beside him for the book.

'But do you know what was behind all these witch-cults?'

'How do you mean?' Gillson inquired, leaving his book where it was.

'Do you know about the *real* cults?' continued the voice. 'Not the medieval servants of Satan—the ones who worship gods that exist?'

'It depends what you mean by "gods that exist",' replied Gillson.

The man did not appear to notice this remark. 'They formed these cults because they were searching for something. Perhaps you have read some of their books—you won't find them on the stalls like you did that one, but they are preserved in a few museums.'

'Well, I was once down in London, and I took a look at what they had in the British Museum.'

'The *Necronomicon*, I suppose.' He seemed almost amused. 'And what did you think of it?'

'I found it rather disturbing,' Gillson confessed, 'but not as horrifying as I'd been led to expect. But then I couldn't understand all of it.'

'Personally, I thought it was ludicrous,' the other told him. 'So vague... But of course if it had described what's only hinted at in there, no museum would touch it. I suppose it's best that only we few know... Forgive me, you must think me queer. Come to think of it, you don't even know who I am. I'm Henry Fisher, and I suppose you could call me an occultist.'

'No, please go on,' said Gillson. 'What you were saying there interested me.'

'What, about people searching for things? Why, are you searching for something?'

'Not really, though I have had a sort of persistent conviction since I was young. Nothing to bother about, really—just a kind of idea that nothing is really as we see it: if there were some way of seeing things without using your eyes, everything would look quite different. Weird, isn't it?'

When no answer came, he turned. There was a strange expression in Henry Fisher's eyes; a look of surprised triumph. Noticing Gillson's puzzlement, he seemed to control himself, and remarked:

'It's queer you should say that. I've had the same idea for a long time, and quite often I've been on the brink of finding a way to prove it. You see, there is a way to see as you would without using your eyes, even though you're actually using them—but not only can it be dangerous, it needs two people. It might be interesting for us to try... But here's where I get out.'

They had drawn up before a block of flats. Behind dripping trees a concrete path stretched to where yellow-and-black-painted windows

mounted upward. 'Mine's on the ground floor,' Fisher remarked as he got out and paid the driver.

Gillson rolled the window down. 'Wait a minute,' he said. 'Did you mean it—what you said about seeing things as they really are?'

'Are you interested?' Fisher bent down and peered into the taxi. 'Remember I told you it might be dangerous.'

'I don't mind,' replied Gillson, opening the door and getting out. He waved the driver to leave, and it was not until they were standing and watching the tail-lights dwindle that he remembered he had left his book on the seat.

Although the trees still dripped, it had stopped raining. The two men walked up the concrete path, and the wind eddied around them, seeming to blow down from the frosty stars. Kevin Gillson was glad when they closed the glass doors behind them and entered a flowery-papered hall. Stairs led upward to other flats, but Fisher turned to a door to the left with glass panels.

Gillson had not really expected anything specific, but what he saw beyond that glass-panelled door amazed him. It was a normal living room, with contemporary furnishings, modernistic wallpaper, an electric fire; but some of the objects in it were not at all normal. Reproductions of paintings by Bosch, Clark Ashton Smith and Dalí set the abnormal mood, which was augmented by the esoteric books occupying a case in one corner. But these could at least be found elsewhere; some of the other things he had never seen before. He could make nothing of the egg-shaped object which lay on the table in the centre of the room and emitted a strange, intermittent whistling. Nor did he recognise the outlines of something which stood on a pedestal in a corner, draped with a canvas.

'Perhaps I should have warned you,' Fisher broke in. 'I suppose it's not quite what you'd expect from the outside. Anyway, sit down, and I'll get you some coffee while I explain a little. And let's have the tape-recorder on—I want it running later so it can record our experiment.'

He went into the kitchen, and Gillson heard pans rattling. Over the clanking Fisher called:

'I was a rather peculiar kid, you know—very sensitive but oddly strong-stomached. After I saw a gargoyle once in church I used to dream it was chasing me, but one time when a dog was run over outside our home the

neighbours all remarked how avidly I was staring at it. My parents once called in a doctor, and he said I was "very morbid, and should be kept away from anything likely to affect me." As if they could!

'Well, it was at grammar school that I got this idea—in the Physics class, actually. We were studying the structure of the eye one day, and I got to thinking about it. The more I looked at this diagram of retinas and humours and lenses, the more I was convinced that what we see through such a complicated system must be distorted in some way. It's all very well saying that what forms on the retina is simply an image, no more distorted than it would be through a telescope. That's too glib for me. I almost stood up and told the teacher what I thought, but I knew I'd be laughed down.

'I didn't think much more about it till I got to the University. Then I got talking to one of the students one day—Taylor, his name was—and before I knew it I'd joined a witch-cult. Not your naked decadents, but one that really knew how to tap elemental powers. I could tell you a lot about what we did, but some of the things would take too long to explain. Tonight I want to try the experiment, but perhaps afterwards I'll tell you about the things I know. Things like what the unused part of the brain can be used for, and what's buried in a graveyard not far from here...

'Anyway, some time after I joined, the cult was exposed, and everybody was expelled. Luckily I wasn't at the meeting that was spied on, so I stayed on. Even better, though, some of them decided to give sorcery up entirely; and I persuaded one of them to give me all his books. Among them was the *Revelations of Glaaki*, and that was where I read of the process I want to try tonight. I read of this.'

Fisher had entered the living room, carrying a tray on which were two cups and a pot of coffee. Now he crossed the room to where the object stood veiled on a pedestal, and as Gillson leaned forward, pulled the canvas off.

Kevin Gillson could only stare. The object was not shapeless, but so complex that the eye could recognise no describable shape. There were hemispheres and shining metal, coupled by long plastic rods. The rods were of a flat grey colour, so that he could not make out which were nearer; they merged into a flat mass from which protruded individual cylinders. As he looked at it, he had a curious feeling that eyes gleamed from between the rods, but wherever he glanced at the construction, he saw only the spaces between them. The strangest part was that he felt this was an image of

something *living*—something from a dimension where such an example of abnormal geometry could live. As he turned to speak to Fisher, he saw out of the corner of his eye that the thing had expanded and occupied almost the whole side of the room—but when he swung back, the image, of course, was the same size. At least, he was sure it was—but Gillson could not even be sure how high it had originally been.

'So you're getting illusions of size?' Fisher had noticed his puzzlement. 'That's because it's only the three-dimensional extension of the actual thing—of course in its own dimension it looks nothing like that.'

'But what is it?' asked Gillson impatiently.

'That,' said Fisher, 'is an image of Daoloth—the Render of the Veils.'

He went over to the table where he had placed the tray. Pouring the coffee, he passed a cup to Gillson, who then remarked:

'You'll have to explain that in a minute, but first I thought of something while you were in there. I'd have mentioned it before, only I didn't feel like arguing between rooms. It's all very well saying that what we see is distorted—say this table really isn't rectangular and flat at all. But when I touch it I feel a flat rectangular surface—how do you explain that?'

'Simple tactile hallucination,' explained Fisher. 'That's why I say this might be dangerous. You see, you don't really feel a flat rectangular surface there at all—but because you see it the way you do, your mind deludes you into thinking you feel the counterpart of your vision. Only sometimes I think—why would the mind set up such a system of delusion? Could it be that if we were to see ourselves as we *really* are, it might be too much for us?'

'Look, you want to see the undistorted thing,' Gillson said, 'and so do I. Don't try and put me against it now, for God's sake, just when you've got me interested. You called *that* Daoloth—what's it mean?'

'Well, I'll have to go off at what may seem a tangent,' apologised Fisher. 'You've been looking at that yellow egg-shaped thing there, off and on, ever since you came in—you've read of them in the *Necronomicon*. Remember those references to the crystallisers of Dream? That's one of them—the device that projects you when asleep into other dimensions. It takes a bit of getting used to, but for some years I've been able to enter nearly every dimension as high as the twenty-fifth. If only I could convey to you the sensations of that last plane, where it is the space which exists and matter

can have no existence! Don't ask me where I got the crystalliser, by the way—until I can be sure its guardian will not follow, I must never speak of it. But never mind that.

'After I read in the *Revelations of Glaaki* about the way to prove this idea of mine, I determined to see for myself what I would be invoking. It was mostly trial and error; but finally, one night, I found myself materialising in a place I'd never been before. There were walls and columns so high I couldn't even see where they ended, and in the middle of the floor was a great fissure running from wall to wall, jagged as if from an earthquake. As I watched, the outlines of the crack seemed to dim and blur, and something rose up out of it. I told you that image looks very different in its own dimension—well, I saw the living counterpart, and you'll understand if I don't try to describe it. It stood there swaying for a moment and then began to expand. It would have engulfed me in a few minutes, but I didn't wait for that. I ran off between the columns.

'I didn't get far before a group of men stepped out in front of me. They were dressed in metallic robes and hoods, and carried small images of what I'd seen, so that I knew they were its priests. The foremost asked me why I had come into their world, and I explained that I hoped to call on Daoloth's aid in seeing beyond the veils. They glanced at each other, and then one of them passed me the image he was carrying. "You'll need this," he told me. "It serves as a link, and you won't come across any on your world." Then the whole scene vanished, and I found myself lying in bed—but I was holding that image you see there.'

'But you haven't really told me—' began Gillson.

'I'm coming to that now. You know now where I got that image. However, you're wondering what it has to do with tonight's experiment, and what Daoloth is anyway?

'Daoloth is a god—an alien god. He was worshipped in Atlantis, where he was the god of the astrologers. I presume it was there that his mode of worship on Earth was set up: he must never be seen, for the eye tries to follow the convolutions of his shape, and that causes insanity. That's why there must be no light when he is invoked—when we call on him later tonight, we'll have to switch out all the lights. Even that there is a deliberately inaccurate replica of him; it has to be.

'As for why we're invoking Daoloth, on Yuggoth and Tond he's known as the Render of the Veils, and that title has a lot of meaning. There his priests cannot only see the past and future—they can see how objects extend into the last dimension. That's why if we invoke him and hold him by the Pentacle of Planes, we can get his aid in cutting out the distortion. And that's about all the explanation I can give you now. It's almost 2:30 already and we must be ready by 2:45; that's when the openings will align... Of course, if you don't feel like going ahead, please tell me now. But I don't want to get everything into place for nothing.'

'I'll stay,' Gillson told him, but he glanced at the image of Daoloth a little uneasily.

'All right. Give me a hand here, will you?'

Fisher opened a cupboard door next to the bookcase. Gillson saw several large crates, set in neat order and marked with painted symbols. He held one up as Fisher slid another from beneath it. As he closed the door, Gillson heard the other lifting the lid; and when he turned, Fisher was already laying the contents out on the floor. An assortment of plastic surfaces came to light, which were assembled into a distorted semi-solid pentagram; and it was followed by two black candles formed into vaguely obscene shapes, a metal rod carrying an icon, and a skull. That skull disturbed Gillson; holes had been bored in its cranium to hold the candles, but even so he could tell from its shape and lack of mouth that it had not been human.

Fisher now began to arrange the objects. First he pushed chairs and tables against the walls, then shoved the pentagram into the centre of the floor. As he placed the skull, now carrying the candles, inside the pentagram, and lit the candles, Gillson asked behind him:

'I thought you said we mustn't have any light—what about those, then?'

'Don't worry—they won't illuminate anything,' Fisher explained. 'When Daoloth comes, he'll draw the light from them—it makes the alignment of the openings easier.'

As he turned to switch the lights out, he remarked over his shoulder: 'He'll appear in the pentacle, and his solid three-dimensional materialisation will remain in there all the time. However, he'll put forth two-dimensional extensions into the room, and you may feel these—so don't be afraid. You

see, he'll take a little blood from both of us.' His hand moved closer to the switch.

'What? You never said anything—'

'It's all right,' Fisher assured him. 'He takes blood from any that call him; it seems to be his way of testing their intentions. But it won't be much. He'll take more from me, because I'm the priest—you're only here so I can draw on your vitality to open the path through for him. Certainly it won't hurt.' And without waiting for further protests, he switched off the lights.

There was a little light from the neon sign of the garage outside the window, but hardly any filtered through the curtains. The black candles were very dim, too, and Gillson could make out nothing beyond the pentagram, from his position by the bookcase. He was startled when his host slammed the icon-bearing rod on the floor and began to shout hysterically. 'Uthgos plam'f Daoloth asgu'i—come, o Thou who sweepest the veils of sight aside, and showest the realities beyond.' There was much more, but Gillson did not notice it specially. He was watching the luminous mist which appeared to arch from both him and Fisher, and enter the misshapen cranium of the skull in the pentacle. By the end of the incantation there was a definite aura around the two men and the skull. He watched it in fascination; and then Fisher ceased speaking.

For a minute nothing happened. Then the arcs of mist vanished, and there was only the light of the candles; but they glowed brighter now, and a misty aura surrounded them. As Gillson looked at them, the twin flames began to dim, and suddenly winked out. For a moment a *black* flame seemed to replace each—a sort of negative fire—and as quickly it was gone. At the same moment Gillson knew that he and Fisher were not alone in the room.

He heard a dry rustling from the pentacle, and sensed a shape moving there. At once he was surrounded. Dry, impossibly light things touched his face, and something slid between his lips. No spot on his body was touched for long enough for him to snatch at what felt at him; so quickly did they pass that he remembered rather than sensed the touching feelers. But when the rustling returned to the centre of the room, there was a salt taste in his mouth—and he knew that the feeler entering his mouth had tapped his blood.

Above the rustling, Fisher called: 'Now Thou hast tasted of our blood, Thou knowest our intentions. The Pentagram of Planes shall hold Thee until

Thou shalt do what we desire—to rend the veil of belief and show us the realities of unveiled existence. Wilt Thou show it, and thus release Thyself?'

The rustling increased. Gillson wished the ritual would end; his eyes were becoming accustomed to the glow from the garage sign, and even now he could almost see a faint writhing in the darkness within the figure.

Suddenly there was a violent outburst of discordant metal scraping, and the entire building shook. The sound whirred into silence, and Gillson knew that the pentacle's tenant had gone. The room was still dark; the candlelight had not returned, and his sight could not yet penetrate the blackness.

Fisher said from his position by the door: 'Well, he's gone—and that figure is constructed so he couldn't go back without doing what I asked. So when I turn on the light you'll see everything as it *really* is. Now if you feel your way, you'll find a pair of eyepatches on top of the bookcase. Put them on and you won't be able to see anything—that's if you don't want to go through with it. Then I can turn the light on and see all I want to see, and then use the icon to nullify the effect. Would you rather do it that way?'

'I've come all this way with you,' Gillson reminded him, 'and it wasn't to get scared at the last moment.'

'Do you want to see now? You know once you've seen, the tactile delusions won't ever operate again—are you sure you can live with it?'

'For God's sake, yes!' Gillson's answer was barely audible.

'All right. I'm turning on the lights—*now!*'

When the police arrived at the flats on Tudor Street, where they had been summoned by a hysterical tenant, they found a scene which horrified the least squeamish among them. The tenant, returning from a late party, had only seen Kevin Gillson's corpse lying on the carpet, stabbed to death. The police were not sickened by this, however, but by what they found on the lawn under the broken front window; for Henry Fisher had died there, with his throat torn out by glass slivers from the pane.

It all seemed very extraordinary, and the tape-recorder did not help. All that it definitely told them was that some kind of black magic ritual had been practised that night, and they guessed that Gillson had been killed with the pointed end of the icon rod. The rest of the tape was full of esoteric references, and towards the end it becomes totally incoherent. The section after the click of the light switch on the recording is what puzzles listeners

most; as yet nobody has found any sane reason for Fisher's murder of his guest.

When curious detectives play the tape, Fisher's voice always comes: 'There—hell, I can't see after all that darkness. Now, what...

'My God, where am I? And where are you? Gillson, where are you—where are you? No, keep away—Gillson, for Christ's sake move your arm. I can see something moving in all this—but God, that mustn't be you... Why can't I hear you—but this is enough to strike anyone dumb... Now come towards me—my God, that thing is you—expanding—contracting—the primal jelly, forming and changing—and the colour... Get away! Don't come any closer—are you mad? If you dare to touch me, I'll let you have the point of this icon—it may feel wet and spongy and look—horrible—but it'll do for you! No, don't touch me—I can't bear to feel that—'

Then comes a scream and a thud. An outburst of insane screaming is cut short by the smashing glass, and a terrible choking sound soon fades to nothing.

It is amazing that two men should have seemingly deluded themselves into thinking they had changed physically; but such is the case, for the two corpses were quite unchanged except for their mutilations. Nothing in the case cannot be explained by the insanity of the two men. At least, there is one anomaly; but the chief of the Camside police is certain that it is only a fault in the tape which causes the recorder to emit, at certain points, a loud dry rustling sound.

Illustration by Randy Broecker, taken from reprint of The Inhabitant of the Lake And Other Unwelcome Tenants, 2011.

The Inhabitant Of The Lake

"Based upon another entry in Lovecraft's Commonplace Book, the story also shows the influence of *The Whisperer In Darkness* and *The Colour Out Of Space*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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After my friend Thomas Cartwright had moved into the Severn valley for suitable surroundings in which to work on his macabre artwork, our only communication was through correspondence. He usually wrote only to inform me of the trivial happenings which occur in a part of the countryside ten miles from the nearest inhabited dwelling, or to tell me how his latest painting was progressing. It was, then, somewhat of a departure from the habitual when he wrote to tell me of certain events—seemingly trivial but admittedly puzzling—which culminated in a series of unexpected revelations.

Cartwright had been interested in the lore of the terrible ever since his youth, and when he began to study art his work immediately exhibited an extremely startling morbid technique. Before long, specimens were shown to dealers, who commended his paintings highly, but doubted that they would appeal to the normal collector because of their great morbidity. However, Cartwright's work has since been recognised, and many aficionados now seek originals of his powerful studies of the alien, which depict distorted colossi striding across mist-enshrouded jungles or peering round the dripping stones of some druidic circle. When he did begin to achieve recognition, Cartwright decided to settle somewhere which would have a more fitting atmosphere than the clanging London streets, and accordingly set out on a search through the Severn area for likely sites. When I could I accompanied him, and it was on one of the journeys when we were together that an estate agent at Brichester told him of a lonely row

of six houses near a lake some miles to the north of the town, which he might be interested in since it was supposed to be haunted.

We found the lake easily enough from his directions, and for some minutes we stood gazing at the scene. The ebon depths of the stagnant water were surrounded by forest, which marched down a number of surrounding hills and stood like an army of prehistoric survivals at the edge. On the south side of the lake was a row of black-walled houses, each three storeys high. They stood on a grey cobbled street which began and ended at the extremities of the row, the other edge disappearing into the pitchy depths. A road of sorts circled the lake, branching from that patch of street and joining the road to Brichester at the other side of the lake. Large ferns protruded from the water, while grass grew luxuriantly among the trees and at the edge of the lake. Although it was midday, little light reached the surface of the water or touched the house-fronts, and the whole place brooded in a twilight more depressing because of the recollection of sunlight beyond.

'Looks like the place was stricken with a plague,' Cartwright observed as we set out across the beaded stones of the segment of road. This comparison had occurred to me also, and I wondered if my companion's morbid trait might be affecting me. Certainly the desertion of this forest-guarded hollow did not evoke peaceful images, and I could almost visualise the nearby woods as a primeval jungle where vast horrors stalked and killed. But while I was sympathetic with Cartwright's feelings, I did not feel pleasure at the thought of working there—as he probably did—rather dreading the idea of living in such an uninhabited region, though I could not have said why I found those blank house-fronts so disquieting.

'Might as well start at this end of the row,' I suggested, pointing to the left. 'Makes no difference as far as I can see, anyway—how are you going to decide which one to take? Lucky numbers or what? If you take any, of course.'

We had reached the first building on the left, and as we stood at the window I could only stare and repeat 'If any.' There were gaping holes in the bare floorboards in that room, and the stone fireplace was cracked and cobwebbed. Only the opposite wall seemed to be papered, and the yellowed paper had peeled off in great strips. The two wooden steps which led up to the front door with its askew knocker shifted alarmingly as I put my foot on the lower, and I stepped back in disgust.

Cartwright had been trying to clear some of the dust from the window-pane, but now he left the window and approached me, grimacing. 'I told him I was an artist,' he said, 'but that estate agent must think that means I live in the woods or something! My God, how long is it since anyone lived in one of these?'

'Perhaps the others may be better?' I guessed hopefully.

'Look, you can see from here they're all as bad,' complained Cartwright.

His complaint was quite true. The houses were very similar, surprisingly because they seemed to have been added to at various periods, as if they were always treated alike; all had unsightly stone roofs, there were signs that they might once have been half-timbered, they had a kind of bay window facing on to the street, and to the door of each led the creaking wooden steps. Although, now I came to stand back, and look up the row, the third from the left did not look as uninviting as the others. The wooden steps had been replaced by three concrete stairs, and I thought I saw a doorbell in place of the tarnished knocker. The windows were not so grimy, either, even though the walls were still grey and moist. From where I stood the lake's dim reflection prevented me from seeing into the house.

I pointed it out to Cartwright. 'That one doesn't look so bad.'

'I don't see much difference,' he grumbled, but moved boredly towards it.

'Well, the estate agent gave you one key to what he said was the only locked house—that must be the one.'

The house was indeed locked, and the key fitted—opening the door easily, which surprised us because of the rustiness of the other locks. On the other hand, the door did not look unpainted or dirty close up; it was merely the artificial twilight which made everything grey. Still, we were not expecting the clean wallpaper in the hallway, and still less the lampshades and stair carpet. The light went on as Cartwright touched the switch inside the door, destroying the dimness, and as I looked up the stairs I thought something peculiar was visible through the open bedroom door at the top.

'*Look* at this lot!' he was saying from where he peered into the first room off the hall. 'Carpet, table, chairs—what the hell's happened? What could have made anyone leave all this here—or is it included in the price or what?'

'It did say "furnished" in the estate agent's window,' I told him.

'Even so—' We were in the kitchen now, where a stove stood next to a kitchen cabinet. From there we went upstairs and found, as I had thought, a bed still standing, though bare of blankets, in the bedroom and the landing. The whole house, notwithstanding the outside, was almost as one would expect a Brichester house to be if the occupants had just gone out.

'Of course I'll take it,' Cartwright said as we descended. "The interior's very nice, and the surroundings are exactly what I need for inspiration. But I do intend to get to the bottom of why all this furniture's included first.'

Cartwright had not risked skidding into the lake by driving over the slippery cobbles; the car was parked at the end of the Brichester road where it reached the lakeside street. He turned it and we drove leisurely back to town. Although usually I like to be in the country away from civilisation, I was rather glad when we reached the area of telegraph-poles and left behind those roads between sheer rock surfaces or above forested hillsides. Somehow all this had an aura of desolation which was not relieved until we began to descend the hill above Brichester, and I welcomed the sight of red-brick houses and steeples which surround the central white University building.

The estate agent's was among the cluster of similar buildings at the western end of Bold Street. As we entered, I noticed again that the postcard advertising the houses by the lake was almost hidden in the upper corner of the window. I had meant to point this out to Cartwright, but that could wait until later.

'Oh, yes,' the estate agent said, looking up from a pile of brochures on the counter. 'You two gentlemen went to view the lakeside property... Well—does it interest you?' His look made it obvious what answer was expected, and Cartwright's 'Yes—where do I sign?' visibly startled him. In fact, he seemed to suspect a joke.

'£500 is the price on the repaired one, I think,' Cartwright continued. 'If you'd like to fix things up, I'll move in as soon as you give the word. I can't say it looks haunted to me, even if that *does* explain the price—still, so much the better for inspiration if it is, eh, Alan?'

He turned back as the man behind the counter spoke. 'I'll put the deal through for you, and drop you a line when it's done.'

'Thanks. Oh, just one thing—' a look of resignation crossed the other's face '—who left all the furniture?'

'The other tenants. They moved out about three weeks ago and left it all.'

'Well, three weeks is a bit long,' conceded Cartwright, 'but mightn't they still come back for it?'

'I had a letter about a week after they left,' explained the estate agent—they left during the night, you know—and he said they wouldn't come back even in daylight for the stuff they'd left! They were very well off, anyway—don't really know why they wanted to take a house like that in the first place—'

'Did he say why they went off in such a hurry?' I interrupted.

'Oh, some rigmarole that didn't make sense,' said the agent uncomfortably. 'They had a kid, you know, and there was a lot about how he kept waking them up in the night screaming about something "coming up out of the lake" and "looking in at the window." Well, I suppose that was all a bit harassing, even if he was only dreaming, but that wasn't what scared him off. Apparently the wife found the writer of this letter out about eleven o'clock one night a fortnight after they came—that's as long as they stayed—staring into the water. He didn't see her, and nearly fainted when she touched his arm. Then he just loaded everything there was room for into the car, and drove off without letting her know even why they were going.

'He didn't tell her at all, and didn't really tell me. All he said in the letter was that he saw *something at the bottom of the lake, looking at him and trying to come up*... Told me to try to get the lake filled in and the houses pulled down, but of course my job's to sell the place, not destroy it.'

'Then you're not doing it very well,' I remarked.

'But you said you'd rather have a haunted house,' protested the agent, looking hurt as if someone had tricked him.

'Of course I did,' Cartwright reassured him. 'Kearney here's just a bit touchy, that's all. If you let me know when everything's ready, I'll be happy to move in.'

Cartwright was not returning to London, and as I wanted to get back that day, he offered to run me across town to Lower Brichester Station. As we passed between the stores and approached the railway, I was deep in thought—thoughts of my friend's living alone in that twilit clearing ten

miles outside Brichester. When we drew up in the taxi-rank, I could not leave him without yelling above the echoes of the station:

'Sure you don't want to look round a bit more before you come to live here? I don't much like the look of that place so far away from everything—might prey on your mind after a few weeks.'

'Good God above, Alan,' he remonstrated, 'you were the one who insisted on looking at all the houses when I wanted to leave. Well, I've got it now—and as for preying on my mind, that sort of place is just what I need for inspiration.' He seemed offended, for he slammed the door and drove away without farewell. I could only enter the station and try to forget that shrine of desolation in the mindless echoes of the terminus.

For some weeks afterwards I did not see Cartwright at all, and my job at the Inland Revenue was so exacting that I could not spare the time to call at his home. At the end of the third week, however, things slackened at my office, and I drove up from Hoddesdon, where I live, to see if he had yet left. I was only just in time, for two cars were parked outside his house on Elizabeth Street; in one was Cartwright and a number of his paintings while behind it his friend Joseph Bulger was bringing out easels, paints and some furniture. They were ready to move off as I arrived, but Cartwright stopped to talk for a few minutes.

'I've got rid of most of the furniture at this end,' he told me. 'Might as well use what that family left, but there were one or two things I wanted to keep. Well, it's a pity you can't call round at weekends any more—anyway, maybe you could come down at Christmas or sometime like that, and I'll write you when I get settled in.

Again I heard nothing from him for a few weeks. When I met Bulger on the street he told me that Cartwright had shown every sign of enjoyment when left in the lakeside house, and had announced his intention of beginning to paint that night, if possible. He did not expect to hear from Cartwright for some time, as once he began work on a picture he would let nothing distract him.

It was about a month later that he first wrote. His letter contained nothing extraordinary, yet as I look back on it I can see in almost everything intimations of things to come.

Thomas Cartwright,

Lakeside Terrace,
c/o Bold St Post Office,
Brichester, Glos.
3 October 1960

Dear Alan:

(Notice the address—the postman doesn't come anywhere near here, and I've got to go up to Bold Street every week and collect on a poste restante basis.)

Well, I've settled in here. It's very comfortable, except it's a bit inconvenient having the toilet on the third floor; I may have that altered one day—the place has been altered so much that more won't make any difference. My studio's upstairs, too, but I sleep downstairs as usual. I decided to move the table out to the back room, and between us we managed to get the bed into the front room, facing on to the lake.

After Joe left I went for a walk round. Took a glance into the other houses—you've no idea how inviting mine looks with all the lights on in the middle of those deserted shacks! I can't imagine anyone coming to live in them again. One of these days I really must go in and see what I can find—perhaps the rats which everyone took for 'ghosts.'

But about this business of haunting, something just struck me. Was what that family said they saw the first hint of the supernatural round here—because if it was, why are the other houses so dilapidated? It's all very well saying that they're so far away from everything, but they've been altered right and left, as you saw. Certainly at one time they were frequently inhabited, so why did people stop coming? Must tackle the estate agent about this.

When I'd finished peering round the houses, I felt like a walk. I found what looked like a path through the woods behind the house, so I followed it. I won't try *that* again in a hurry!—there was practically no light in there, the trees just went on into the distance as far as I could see, and if I'd gone much farther in I'd certainly have been lost. You could picture it—stumbling on and

on into the dark, nothing to see except trees, closing in on every side... And to think those people brought a kid here!

Just finished my new painting. It shows these houses, with the lake in the foreground, and the bloated body of a drowned man at the edge of the water—*Relentless Plague*, I think. I hope they like it.

Yours, Thomas

P.S. Been having nightmares lately. Can never remember what they're about, but I always wake up sweating.

I wrote back an inconsequential reply. I deplored the macabre nature of his latest work—as I had always done—although, as I said, 'no doubt it will be appreciated for its technique.' I offered to buy anything he might be unable to get in Brichester, and made a few uninspired observations on life in Hoddesdon. Also, I think, I remarked: 'So you're having nightmares? Remember that the business with the last owners began with their boy having dreams.'

Cartwright replied:

10 October 1960

You don't know how lucky you are, having a post-box almost on your doorstep! My nearest one's nearly four miles away, and I get out there only on my way to Brichester, on Mondays and Saturdays—which means I have to write letters on Monday morning (as I'm doing now) or Sunday, and collect the replies on Saturday up at Bold Street.

Anyway, that's not what I wanted to write to you about. I've gone and left some sketches in a cupboard in the studio of the Elizabeth Street house, and I was wondering if you could drop round there and perhaps drive up with them. If you can't, maybe you could call on Joe Bulger and get him to bring them up here. I'm sorry to be such a hell of a nuisance, but I can't do one of my paintings without them.

Yours, Thomas

My job was again very demanding, and I replied that I could not possibly leave town for some weeks. I could not very well refuse to contact Bulger,

and on Wednesday evening on my way home from work I detoured to his house. Luckily, he had not left for his weekly cinema jaunt, and he invited me in, offering me a drink. I would have stayed longer, but my job was consuming even spare time, so I said:

'This isn't really a social call. I'm afraid I'm passing you a job which was detailed to me. You see, Cartwright wanted me to collect some drawings from his London studio in a cupboard, but my job's getting in the way—you know what it can be like. So if you could do it for me, and take a train down there with them..?'

Bulger looked a little reluctant, but he only said: 'All right—I'll try and save your face. I hope he doesn't want them in a desperate hurry—I'll be able to get them to him within the week.'

I got up to leave. At the door I remarked: 'Better you than me. You may have a bit of trouble in Elizabeth Street, because someone new's already moved in there.'

'You didn't tell me *that* before,' he protested. 'No, it's all right, I'll still go—even though I don't much like the idea of going to that lake.'

'How do you mean?' I asked. 'Something you don't like down there?'

Bulger shrugged. 'Nothing I could put my finger on, but I certainly wouldn't like to live down there alone. There's something about those trees growing so close, and that black water—as if there were things watching, and *waiting*... but you must think me crazy. There is one point, though—why were those houses built so far from everywhere? By that lake, too—I mean, it's hardly the first place you'd think of if you were going to build a row of houses. Who'd be likely to live there?'

As I drove back to Hoddesdon I thought about this. Nobody except someone seeking morbid inspiration, such as Cartwright, would live in such a place—and surely such people were not numerous. I planned to mention this to him in my next letter; perhaps he would discover something thus of why the houses had become untenanted. But as it happened, I was forestalled, as I discovered from his letter of the following Sunday.

16 October 1960

> Well, Joe's come and gone. He couldn't get into my studio at first —the new people thought he made it all up so he could get in and

steal the silver! Anyway, the Walkers next door knew him, so he finally got my sketches.

He was wondering why these houses were built in the first place. I don't know either—it never struck me before, but now I come to think about it I must find out sometime. Maybe I'll ask that estate agent about it next time I'm up Bold Street way. This may tell me why the places got so dilapidated, too. I get the idea that a band of murderers (or highwaymen, perhaps) could have operated from here, living off the passers-by; sort of L'Auberge Rouge stuff.

Joe left this afternoon... Sorry for the break, but actually I just broke off writing because I thought I heard a noise outside. Of course it must have been a mistake. Nobody could possibly be out there at this time (11 p.m.)—Joe left about seven hours back—but I could have sworn that somebody was yelling in the distance a few minutes ago; there was a sort of high-pitched throbbing, too, like an engine of some sort. I even thought that there was something white—well, a few white objects—moving on the other side of the lake; but of course it's too dark to see anything so far off. Certainly a lot of splashing began in the water about the same time, and it's only just dying down as I write this.

I'd still like you to come down for a few days. Christmas is getting near—maybe..?

Yours, Thomas

I was rather disturbed that he should imagine sounds in such a lonely area, and said as much. Although I, like Bulger, did not relish the idea of going to that half-lit woodland lake, I thought it might be best for me to visit Cartwright when I could, if only so he could talk to me and forget his pocket of desolation. There was less work for me now at the Inland Revenue, but it would be some weeks before I could visit him. Perhaps Bulger's call had lessened his introspection a little, though from his latest imaginings it did not seem so. I told him of my proposed stay with him when I wrote that Thursday.

His reply which I received on the 25th I believe to be the first real hint of what Cartwright unwittingly brought on himself.

24 October 1960

Haven't had time to get down to Bold Street yet, but I want to find out about these houses all the more now.

However, that's not really why I wanted to write to you. Remember I kept on about these nightmares which I could never remember? Well, last night I had a series of long dreams, which I remembered on waking. They were certainly terrifying—no wonder I kept waking up sweating, and no wonder that kid kept screaming in the night if he had the same dreams! But what am I saying—that's hardly likely, is it?

Last night I went to bed around midnight. I left the window open, and I noticed a lot of—splashing and disturbance on the surface of the lake. Funny, that—there was hardly any wind after 6 o'clock. Still I think all that noise may have caused my dreams.

My dream began in the hall. I was going out the front door—seemed to remember saying goodbye to someone, who I don't know, and seeing the door close. I went down the steps and across the pavement round the lake. Why I can't imagine, I passed the car and began to walk up the Brichester road. I wanted to get into Brichester, but not in any hurry. I had a peculiar feeling that someone should have driven me there... Come to think, that's the way Joe must have felt last week! He had to walk to Brichester, because I was right out of petrol and the nearest garage is a few miles down the road.

A few yards out of the glade I noticed a footpath leading off among the trees to the left of the road. That's the direct way to Brichester—at least, it would be if it kept on in its original direction—for the motor road curves a good deal. While I wasn't in a hurry, I didn't see why I should walk further than necessary, so I turned off the road on to the path. I felt a bit uneasy, heaven knows why—I wouldn't normally. The trees were very close and not much light got through, so that might have contributed to the feeling. It was very quiet, too, and when I kicked loose stones out of the way the sound startled me.

I suppose it must have been about fifty yards in that I realised the path wouldn't take me back to Brichester at all if it kept on the way it was tending. In fact, it was curving back to the lake—or at

least following the lake shore, I'd guess with about twenty yards of forested ground between the path and the open shore. I went a few yards further to make sure; it was definitely curving round the lake. I turned to go back—and glimpsed a blue glow a little ahead. I didn't know what to make of it, and didn't particularly like the idea of going closer, but I'd time to spare, so I conquered this irrational fear (which normally I'd never feel) and went forward.

The path widened a little, and at the centre of the wider space stood an oblong piece of stone. It was about seven feet long, two wide and three high, and it was cut out of some phosphorescent stone which gave out the blue light. On top were inscribed some words too worn away to be legible, and at the foot of the writing the name 'Thos. Lee' was roughly chipped. I wasn't sure whether it was a solid piece of stone or not—a groove ran round the sides about two inches from the top which might have denoted a lid. I didn't know what it was, but immediately I got the idea that there were others along the path. Determined to see if this were true, I walked away up the path—but with my determination was mixed an odd unaccustomed fear of what I was doing.

Twenty yards on or so I thought I heard a sound behind me—first a hollow sliding, then what sounded like measured footsteps following me. I looked back with a shiver, but the bend in the path blocked my view. The footsteps weren't coming very fast; I began to hurry, for oddly I didn't want to see who was making them.

Seventy or eighty yards, and I came into a second space. As I noticed the glowing stone in the centre a blind terror rose up in me, but I continued to stare at it. There came a muffling shifting sound—and then, as I watched, the lid of that stone box began to slide off, and *a hand came scrabbling out to lever it up!* What was worse, it was the hand of a corpse—bloodless and skeletal, and with impossibly long, cracked nails... I turned to run, but the trees were so thick-growing that it would have been impossible to flee through them quickly enough. I began to stumble back up the path, and heard those horribly deliberate footfalls close at hand.

When a yellow-nailed hand appeared round a tree, gripping the trunk, I screamed hopelessly and awoke.

For a minute I considered getting up and making some coffee. Dreams don't usually affect me, but this one was terribly realistic. However, before I could attempt to hold my eyes open, I fell asleep again.

Straight into another nightmare. I was just coming on to the lake shore from among the trees—but not voluntarily; I was being led. I looked once at the hands gripping my arms, and afterwards stared straight ahead. Yet this wasn't reassuring, either. There was a little moonlight coming from behind me, and it cast shadows on the ground where I glanced. That intensified my resolution not to look to the side. There were more figures behind me than my captors, but those two were bad enough—abominably thin and tall, and the one on the right had only one hand, but I don't mean the other arm ended at the wrist.

They shoved me forward to where I could look down into the lake. The ferns and water were unusually mobile tonight, but I didn't realise what was making them move until an eye rose above the surface and stared moistly at me. Two others followed it—and, worst of all, none of them was *in a face*. When the body heaved up behind them I shut my eyes and shrieked for help—to whom I don't know; I had a weird idea that someone was in the house here and could help me. Then I felt a tearing pain in my chest, neutralised by a numbness which spread through my whole body. And I regarded the object I had seen rising from the lake with no horror whatever. And that moment I woke again.

Almost like an echo from my dream, there was still a loud splashing from the lake outside. My nerves must have been on edge, for I could have sworn that there was a faint sound just under the window. I jumped out of bed and shoved the window further open, so I could look out. There was nothing moving in sight—but for a moment I thought I heard something scuttling away along the line of houses. There might even have been a door closing quietly, but I can't be sure of that. Certainly the moonlight was wavering on the lake's surface, as if something had just sunk.

It's all rather queer now I look on it in broad daylight, but just then everything seemed to have an added significance—I almost expected the monstrous shape of my dream to rise from the water and squat before me in the street. I suppose you rather wonder whether I'm going to describe what I saw. You can't imagine how difficult that would be—maybe I'll make it the subject of my next painting. I only got one glimpse, though, even if it was so terribly detailed. It'll be best if I don't lose what inspiration there is by describing it now, anyway.

Yours, Thomas

I would not give him the satisfaction of knowing he had interested me; I did not refer to his vision of the haunter of the lake. Instead, I advised him to contact the estate agent and find out the original purpose of the lakeside property. 'Maybe,' I suggested, 'you'll learn of some hideous deed which has left a residue.' I did not add that I hoped he would discover something utterly prosaic, which would destroy the place's unfortunate hold over him and get him away from its morbid atmosphere. I did not expect him to find out anything extraordinary, and so was startled by his reply.

30 October 1960

Last Friday I made a special journey down to Bold Street, and found out quite a bit about my lakeside street. The agent wasn't particularly pleased to see me, and seemed surprised when I told him I hadn't come for my money back. He still was wary of saying much, though—went on a bit about the houses being built 'on the orders of a private group.' It didn't seem as though I'd get much out of him, and then I happened to mention that I was having dreams like the earlier tenants. Before he could think, he blurted out: 'That's going to make some people a bit happier, then.'

'What do you mean by that?' I asked, sensing a mystery.

Well, he hedged a bit, and finally explained: 'It's to do with the "haunting" of your lake. There's a story among the country people—and it extends to them in the suburbs around Mercy Hill, which is nearest your place—that *something* lives in the lake, and "sends out nightmares" to lure people to it. Even though the nightmares are terrifying, they're said to have a hypnotic effect. Since the

place became untenanted, people—children particularly—in the Mercy Hill area have been dreaming, and one or two have been admitted to the Hill hospital. No wonder they have nightmares around there—it used to be the site of a gallows, you know, and the hospital was a prison; only some joker called it "Mercy Hill", and the name stuck. They say the dreams are the work of what's in the lake—*it's* hungry, and casting *its* net further out. Of course it's all superstition—God knows what they think *it* is. Anyway, if you're dreaming, they'd say *it* won't need to trouble them any more.'

'Well, that's one thing cleared up,' I said, trying to follow up my advantage. 'Now, why were the houses really built? What was this "private group" you're so secretive about?'

'It'll sound crazy to you, no doubt,' he apologised. 'The houses were built around 1790, and renovated or added to several times. They were put up on the instructions of this group of about six or seven people. These people all disappeared around 1860 or 1870, apparently leaving for another town or something—anyway, nobody around here heard of them again. In 1880 or so, since there'd been no word from them, the houses were let again. For many reasons, people never stayed long—you know, the distance from town; and the scenery too, even if that was what got you there. I've heard from earlier workers here that the place even seemed to affect some people's minds. I was only here when the last tenant came in. You heard about the family that was here last, but this was something I didn't tell you. Now look—you said when you first came that you were after ghosts. You sure you want to hear about this?'

'Of course I do—this is what I asked for,' I assured him. How did I know it mightn't inspire a new painting? (Which reminds me, I'm working on a painting from my dream; to be called *The Thing In The Lake*.)

'Really, it wasn't too much,' he warned me. 'He came in here at nine o'clock—that's when we open, and he told me he'd been waiting outside in the car half the night. Wouldn't tell me why he was pulling out—just threw the keys on the counter and told me

to get the house sold again. While I was fixing some things up, though, he was muttering a lot. I couldn't catch it all, but what I did get was pretty peculiar. Lot of stuff about "the spines" and "you lose your will and become part of it"—and he went on a lot about "the city among the weeds." Somebody "had to keep the boxes in the daytime," because of "the green decay." He kept mentioning someone called—*Glarky*, or something like that—and also he said something about Thomas Lee I didn't catch.'

That name Thomas Lee sounded a bit familiar to me, and I said so. I still don't know where I got it from, though.

'Lee? Why, of course,' he immediately said. 'He was the leader of that group of people who had the houses built—the man who did all the negotiating... And that's really about all the facts I can give you.'

'*Facts*, yes,' I agreed. 'But what else can you tell me? I suppose the people round here must have their own stories about the place?'

'I could tell you to go and find out for yourself,' he said—I suppose he was entitled to get a bit tired of me, seeing I wasn't buying anything. However, he went on: 'Still, it's lucky for you Friday is such a slack day... Well, they say that the lake was caused by the fall of a meteor. Centuries ago the meteor was wandering through space, and on it there was a city. The beings of the city all died with the passage through space, but *something* in that city still lived—something that guided the meteor to some sort of landing from its home deep under the surface. God knows what the city would've had to be built of to withstand the descent, if it were true!

'Well, the meteor crater filled with water over the centuries. Some people, they say, had ways of knowing there was something alive in the lake, but they didn't know where it had fallen. One of these was Lee, but he used things nobody else dared to touch to find its whereabouts. He brought these other people down to the lake when he got to know what was in there. They all came from Goatswood—and you know what the superstitious say comes out of the hill behind that town for them to worship... As far as I can

make out, Lee and his friends are supposed to have met with more than they expected at the lake. They became servants of what they awoke, and, people say, they're there yet.'

That's all I could get out of him. I came back to the house, and I can tell you I viewed it a bit differently from when I left! I bet you didn't expect me to find that out about it, eh? Certainly it's made me more interested in my surroundings—perhaps it'll inspire me.

Yours, Thomas

I confess that I did not write a long reply; I suppose because my plan to break the lake's hold over him had gone awry. It is regrettable that I was so abrupt, for the letter which reached me on the 8th was his last.

6 November 1960

...Have you seen Joe around lately? I haven't heard from him since he left here about three weeks ago, and I'm wondering what's happened to him—he used to write as regularly as you. Still, maybe he's too busy.

But that's unimportant, really. So much has been happening down here, and I don't understand all of it yet. Some of it, maybe, doesn't matter at all, but I'm sure now that this place is a focal point of something unexpected.

Working till about 3 a.m. on the 31st, I finished my new painting. I think it's my best yet—never before have I got such a feeling of alienness into my work. I went to bed around 3:30 and didn't wake up till 5 in the afternoon, when it was dark. Something woke me up; a sound from outside the window. Loud noises of any kind are rare around here, and this wasn't like anything I'd ever heard before. A high-pitched throbbing noise—quickening in vibration and rising in pitch till it hit a discord, when it would drop to its original pitch and begin the cycle again. I couldn't see anything, but I got a peculiar idea that it was coming from *in the lake*. There was an odd rippling on the surface, too, where it reflected the light from the window.

Well, on the 1st I did what I kept saying I'd do (and this is where the interesting part begins)—namely, explore the other houses

along the street. I went out about three and decided to try the one directly on the left. Did you realise that the front door must have been ajar when we first came?—oh, no, you didn't get that far along the line. It was, and once I'd managed to get over those rickety steps it was easy to get into the hall. Dust everywhere, wallpaper hanging off in strips, and as far as I could see there was no electric light fitting. I went into the front room—the one looking on to the lake—but could see nothing. The floorboards were bare, cobwebs festooned the fireplace, there was no furniture—the room was almost unlit with the grimy windows. Nothing to see at all.

The next room on the left was almost as bad. I don't know what it was used for—it was so bare nobody could have known. But as I turned to leave, I noticed something protruding from between the floorboards, and, going over, I found it was the page of a book; it looked as if it had been torn out and trodden into the niche. It was dirty and crumpled, and hardly seemed worth looking at, but I picked it up anyway. It was covered with handwriting, beginning in the middle of one sentence and ending in the middle of another. I was going to drop it, but a phrase caught my eye. When I looked closer I realised that this was indeed interesting. I took it back to my house where I could see better, and finally got it smoothed out and clean enough for reading. I might as well copy it out for you —see what you make of it.

> sundown and the rise of *that from below*. They can't come out in the daytime—the Green Decay would appear on them, and that'd be rather unpleasant—but I couldn't walk far enough for them not to catch me. They can call on the tomb-herd under Temphill and get them to turn the road back to the lake. I wish I hadn't got mixed up with this. A normal person coming here might be able to escape the dream-pull, but since I dabbled in the forbidden practices at Brichester University I don't think it's any use trying to resist. At the time I was so proud that I'd solved that allusion by Alhazred to 'the maze of the seven thousand crystal frames' and 'the faces that peer from the fifth-dimensional gulf'. None of the other cult-members who understood my explanation could

> get past the three thousand three hundred and thirty-third frame, where the dead mouths gape and gulp. I think it was because I passed that point that the dream-pull has so strong a hold on me. But if this is being read it means that there must be new tenants. Please believe me when I say that you are in horrible danger. You must leave now, and get the lake filled in before *it* gets strong enough to leave this place. By the time you read this I shall be—not dead, but might as well be. I shall be one of the servants of *it*, and if you look closely enough you might find me in my place among the trees. I wouldn't advise it, though; although they'd get the Green Decay in broad daylight they can come out in the daytime into the almost-darkness between the trees. You'll no doubt want proof; well, in the cellar

That's where it ended. As you can imagine, I wanted nothing better than to go down to that cellar—I presumed it must mean the cellar of the house I'd been exploring. But I felt particularly hungry, and by the time I'd prepared a meal and eaten it, it was pretty dark. I didn't have a flashlight, and it'd have been useless to go into a cellar after dark to look for anything. So I had to wait until the next day.

That night I had a strange dream. It must have been a dream, but it was very realistic. In it I was lying in bed in my room, as though I'd just woken up. Voices were speaking under the window—strange voices, hoarse and sibilant and somehow *forced*, as if the speakers found it painful to talk. One said: 'Perhaps in the cellar. They will not be needed until the pull is stronger, anyway.' Slowly the answer came, '*His* memory is dimming, but the second new one must remedy that.' It might have been the first voice or another which replied, 'Daylight is too near, but tomorrow night we must go down.' Then I heard deliberate, heavy footsteps receding. In the dream I could not force myself to look and see who had been under the window; and, in a few minutes, the dream ended in uneasy sleep.

The next morning, the second, I visited the house again. The door to the cellar's in the kitchen, like my house. There wasn't much

light down there, but some did come in from the garden outside. When I got used to it, I saw a flight of stone steps going down into a large cellar. I saw what I wanted immediately—there wasn't really anything else to see. A small bookcase of the type open at the top and front, full of dusty yellowed books, and with its sides joined by a piece of cord which served as a handle for easier carrying. I picked up the bookcase and went back upstairs. There was one other thing which I thought odd: an archway at the other end of the cellar, beyond which was a steep flight of stairs—but these stairs led *down* as far as I could see.

When I got back to my house I dusted the books off and examined the spines. They were, I found, different volumes of the same book, eleven of them in all; the book was called *The Revelations of Glaaki*. I opened Book 1, and found it was an old type of loose-leaf notebook, the pages covered with an archaic handwriting. I began to read—and by the time I looked up from the fifth book it was already dark.

I can't even begin to tell you what I learned. When you come down at Christmas maybe you can read some of it—well, if you start it, you'll be so fascinated you'll have to finish it. I'd better give you briefly the history of the book, and the fantastic mythos of which it tells.

This *Revelations of Glaaki* has been reprinted elsewhere according to notes, or perhaps I'd better say pirated. This, however, is the only complete edition; the man who managed to copy it down and 'escaped' to get it printed didn't dare to copy it all down for publication. This original handwritten version is completely fragmentary; it's written by the different members of a cult, and where one member leaves off another begins, perhaps on a totally different subject. The cult grew up around 1800, and the members almost certainly were those who ordered the houses built. About 1865 the pirated edition was published, but because it referred frequently to other underground societies they had to be careful where the book was circulated. Most of the copies of the very limited edition found their way into the hands of members of

these cults, and nowadays there are very few complete runs of all the nine volumes (as against eleven in the uncut edition) extant.

The cult worships something which lives in the lake, as the agent told me. There's no description of the being; it was made out of some 'living, iridescent metal,' as far as I can make out, but there are no actual pictures. Occasionally footnotes occur, such as 'cf. picture: Thos. Lee pinxit', but if there ever was a picture it must have been torn out. There are numerous references to 'the sentient spines', and the writers go into great detail about this. It's to do with the initiation of a novice into the cult of Glaaki, and explains, in its own superstitious way, the legends of the 'witch's mark'.

You've heard of the witch's mark—the place on the body of a witch that wouldn't bleed when cut? Matthew Hopkins and his kind were always trying to find the mark, but not always successfully. Of course they often got hold of innocent people who'd never heard of Glaaki, and then they had to resort to other means to prove they were witches. But those in the cult certainly were supposed to have the real witches' marks. It was the long, thin spines which are supposed to cover the body of their god Glaaki. In the initiation ceremony the novice was held (sometimes willing, sometimes not) on the lake shore while Glaaki rose from the depths. It would drive one of its spines into the chest of the victim, and when a fluid had been injected into the body the spine detached itself from the body of Glaaki. If the victim had been able to snap the spine before the fluid entered his body he would at least have died a human being, but of course his captors didn't allow that. As it was, a network spread right through the body from the point of the spine, which then fell away where it entered the body, leaving an area which would never bleed if something were jabbed into it. Through the emission of impulses, perhaps magnetic, from the brain of Glaaki, the man was kept alive while he was controlled almost completely by the being. He acquired all its memories; he became also a part of it, although he was capable of performing minor individual actions, such as writing the *Revelations*, when Glaaki was not emitting specific impulses. After about sixty years of this

half-life this 'Green Decay' would set in if the body was exposed to too-intense light.

There's some confusion about the actual advent of Glaaki on this planet. The cult believes that it didn't reach the earth until the meteor hit and formed the lake. On the other hand, the book does mention 'heretics' who insist that the spines can be found buried in certain hybrid Egyptian mummies, and say that Glaaki came before—through 'the reversed angles of Tagh-Clatur' which the priests of Sebek and Karnak knew. There are suggestions that the zombies of Haiti are the products of a horrible extract from early cult-members who got caught in sunlight, too.

As for what was learned by the initiate—well, there are references to the '48 Aklo unveilings' and a suggestion that 'the 49th shall come when Glaaki takes each to him'. Glaaki seems to have crossed the universe from some outer sphere, stopping on worlds such as Yuggoth, Shaggai and even Tond. On this planet it occasionally draws new members to the cult by the 'dream-pull', which I've heard about before. These days, however, the lake is so far away from everything that the use of the 'dream-pull' takes time, and without the vitality it's said to draw from the initiation it gets too weak to project the dreams to any great distance. The cultists can't come out in the daylight, so the only thing left is for people to come spontaneously and live in the houses. Like me!

That isn't all that's in the book, by any means; the cult believed a lot of other things, but some of them are so incredible and unconventional that they'd just sound ridiculous if I wrote them down. Somehow they don't seem so idiotic in that simple style of the Revelations, perhaps because they're written by an absolute believer. You must read some of them this Christmas. If you could imagine what they suggest causes volcanic eruptions! And their footnote to atomic theory; what the scientist will see who invents a microscope which gives a really detailed view of an atom! There are other things, too—the race 'of which Vulthoom is merely a child'—the source of vampires—and the pale, dead things which walk black cities on the dark side of the moon...

But there's no use my going on like this. You'll see all this in a few weeks, and until then my hints won't mean much to you. I promised you a quotation, so I'll copy down a passage at random:

Many are the horrors of Tond, the sphere which revolves about the green sun of Yifne and the dead star of Baalblo. Few come near to humanity, for even the ruling race of yarkdao *have retractable ears in humanoid bodies. Their gods are many, and none dares interrupt the priests of Chig in their ritual, which lasts three years and a quarter, or one* puslt. *Great cities of blue metal and black stone are built on Tond, and some* yarkdao *speak of a city of crystal in which things walk unlike anything living. Few men of our planet can see Tond, but those who know the secret of the crystallisers of Dreams may walk its surface unharmed, if the crystalliser's hungry guardian does not scent them.*

Actually that isn't the best quotation to take—others are much less vague, but mightn't have so much impact if you read them out of context. Now you really *must* come down at Christmas, if only to read the book.

Yours, Thomas

I did not reply to his letter until the 12th. I had intended to reply sooner, if only to take his mind off this latest focus of his morbidity, but this had been a particularly crowded week at the Inland Revenue. Now, at about ten o'clock, I sat down to write to him. I meant to point out that before he had thought all this mere superstition, and that he had only discovered proof of the superstitious beliefs of a few people.

I was just putting down the date when the telephone rang. I was not expecting anyone to call, and momentarily thought it must be a wrong number. When it had rung three times, I wearily stood up to answer it.

'Alan? Thank God!' said a hysterical voice at the other end. 'Drop everything and come in your car—and for God's sake make it quick!'

'Who is that—who's speaking?' I asked, for I was not sure if I recognised the voice.

'Thomas—Thomas Cartwright!' screamed the voice impatiently. 'Listen, there's positively no time for explanation. You must come down here now in your car, at once—or it'll be dark and I'll never get out. I'm in a phone box

on the road some miles from the lake, and I'll stay in here till you get here. You can't miss it—just take the lake road from Brichester; it's not as far, that's all.'

'But *why* have I got to come?' I persisted, exasperated.

'Because *they've* wrecked my car engine.' He was becoming very nervous; I could tell from the noticeable shaking of his voice. 'I've found out a lot more since I wrote, and *they* know I know it all. *They* don't even bother to hide, now.'

'I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but why can't you call a taxi instead of bringing me all this way?'

'I can't call a taxi because I don't know the number!' shrieked Cartwright. 'And why can't I look it up? Because last night *they* must have been here before me—*they've* taken the directory. I'd walk to Brichester—I don't think *their* influence extends any further—but if *they* don't call on the tomb-herd under Temphill to turn space back, the tree-creatures a couple of miles up the road might take their real shapes, and it needs the union of two wills to overcome them. Now, for God's sake, will you get your car down here, or do you want Glaaki to rise from the lake again? Perhaps this will give it the strength to broadcast further.' And immediately there came a click as the receiver was replaced.

For some moments I stood by the telephone table. I could not telephone the police, for it would be useless to send them to Cartwright only to find circumstances which would make them think him mad. Certainly his ravings about *them* were not to be taken seriously. On the other hand, if the lake were having such a pronounced effect on his mind, I should surely drive down to Brichester at once. And so I did.

I had only been to the lake once, and on reaching Brichester I had completely forgotten the route. None of the passers-by could help me; in fact, by their expressions I was almost sure that some of them could help me, but for some reason would not. Finally I asked a policeman to direct me to Bold Street, where the estate agent could tell me the way to the lake.

He looked up as I entered, but did not seem to recognise me. 'Can I help you?' he asked.

'About Lakeside Terrace—' I began.

'Lakeside Terrace? No, not one of ours, sir.'

'Yes, it is one of yours,' I insisted. 'You sold it to a friend of mine a few weeks back—a Mr Cartwright—it's supposed to be haunted. Look, you *must* remember; I've got to see him as soon as possible.' Some of Cartwright's nervous impatience had affected me, and the estate agent's continued puzzled expression caused me to think he could not help me.

'Will you be at the lake after dark, then?'

His pointless-seeming question infuriated me, particularly as I had no definite answer. 'I don't know yet. Yes, maybe. Damn it, do you know the way to the lake or don't you? I can't waste any more time. It's—what, 3:20 already, and I ought to be there by now.'

As I drove out of Bold Street, I was still surprised by his sudden decision to direct me. I was relieved to drive away from the small building, for I had been strangely worried by the unaccustomed slowness of his speech and the rigidity of his limbs; still more by the way he would finger a spot on his chest and wince. I still could not imagine why should he ask whether I was to be at the lake after dark.

I reached the top of Mercy Hill a few minutes later. As the car slowed at the bend which takes one past the grey hospital building, I had a view both ahead and behind, and I very nearly turned back. The red-brick houses looked far more inviting than the steep hillsides, between which plunged roads bordered by leafless trees. I remembered what the people of Mercy Hill said inhabited the lake. But I had come to rid Cartwright of his superstitious morbidity, and could not do this while I was myself superstitious.

When I rounded the curve which brought me in sight of the telephone box, the door swung open and Cartwright ran into the road. He reached the car as I began to slow and, running alongside, he yelled through the open window: 'Open the door on this side! Keep driving—I can jump in at this speed.'

I did not intend him to be injured, and stopped the car. 'Now will you stop acting like someone in a movie and explain?'

'All right, I'm in,' he assured me. 'Now let's get down to the lake.'

'To the *lake?*' I repeated, surprised. 'The way you were going on, I thought... Oh, all right, if you're in such a hurry.'

As I was starting the engine, I heard him muttering beside me. Some of it escaped me, but I caught: '—tried to phone the police, but I couldn't get

through—wires must have been down. Must have been an accident, though. Couldn't have been *their* work—*they* could never get that far in the sunlight. The Green Decay—it's in the *Revelations*... Could they?'

I ignored this, not turning to look at him. 'Listen, Thomas, I'd like some explanation. I thought you wanted to get away from the lake before nightfall? What's happened up there that's scared you off so suddenly?'

He left my second question for a moment. 'I certainly must get away before nightfall, but I want to bring the *Revelations* with me. If I leave the house empty tonight and come back tomorrow *they'll* get in and take it. We can get down there before 4 o'clock and grab the bookcase. We'll be well towards Brichester before dark. The tree-creatures up the road may get more active after dark, but there's a ritual which I can repeat to subdue them if I can draw on your consciousness. Once we're in Brichester, we ought to be beyond *their* influence.'

'But you weren't like this before. You may have believed in all this, but you weren't frightened of it. What's happening to change your feelings?'

He fumbled a little, then: 'One of them *might* have been a dream, but the other... As for the thing I might have dreamed, it happened about one o'clock this morning. I was only half-asleep—I kept dreaming of strange things: that black city among the weeds down there, with a shape under a crystal trapdoor, and further back to Yuggoth and Tond—and that kept me awake. At the time I'm speaking of I kept half-opening my eyes; I got the feeling that someone was watching me, but I could never see anyone. Then I started noticing something pale which seemed to float at the edge of my vision. I realised it was near the window. I turned quickly and saw a face staring in at me.

'It was the face of a corpse; what was worse, it was the face of Joe Bulger.'

We had reached the last stretch of road towards the lake before he continued. 'He didn't look at me; his eyes were fixed on something at the other side of the room. All that was over there was that bookcase containing the eleven volumes of the *Revelations of Glaaki*. I jumped up and ran over to the window, but he began to move away with that horrible deliberate tread. I'd seen enough, though. His shirt had been torn open, and on his chest was a livid red mark, with a network of lines radiating from it. Then he moved off between the trees.'

I stopped the car at the beginning of the lakeside pavement. As I approached the house, he was still muttering behind me: '*They'd* taken him to Glaaki—that must have been all the splashing that night. But that was at eleven o'clock and Joe left about four. My God, what were *they* doing to him in the other seven hours?'

I stood back to let him open the front door; he had even found a padlock somewhere and augmented the lock's strength with it. As we entered the front room I noticed the canvas-covered painting in one corner. I began to lift the canvas off, but Cartwright stopped me. 'Not yet—that's part of the other. I want to show you something else when you see that.'

He went over to the bookcase which stood on the floor opposite the window, and took out the last book. 'When—Joe—had gone, I finally had a look at these books. I had a good idea of what he'd been looking at, but I wanted to make sure. Somehow I knocked the lot down. No damage, luckily, except to the eleventh book; but that one had fallen so that the cover had been torn off. As I was trying to fit it together again, I noticed the back cover was bulging outward a lot. When I looked closer, this is what I found.'

He passed me the volume he had selected. Opening the cover, I saw that the back had been slit open; a sort of pocket existed, and inside it I found a folded sheet of canvas and a piece of cardboard.

'Don't look at those for the moment,' ordered Cartwright. 'Remember I painted *The Thing In The Lake* from my nightmare? This is it. Now, go ahead and compare it with those two.'

By the time I had unfolded the canvas, he had uncovered the painting. The piece of canvas was also a painting, while the card was a photograph. The background of each was different; Cartwright's depicted the lake as surrounded by a black pavement in the middle of a desolate plain, the painting I held—inscribed 'Thos. Lee pinxit'—possessed a background of half-fluid demons and many-legged horrors, while the photograph simply showed the lake as it was now. But the focus of each was the same totally alien figure, and the one that disturbed me most was the photograph.

The centre of each picture was, it was obvious, the being known as Glaaki. From an oval body protruded countless thin, pointed spines of multicoloured metal; at the more rounded end of the oval a circular, thick-lipped mouth formed the centre of a spongy face, from which rose three yellow eyes on thin stalks. Around the underside of the body were many

white pyramids, presumably used for locomotion. The diameter of the body must have been about ten feet at its least width.

Not only the coincidence of the pictures, but also the total abnormality of the creature, disturbed me. However, I tried to sound unconvinced as I remarked, 'Look, you said yourself that the other business was only a dream. As for the rest—what does it amount to, anyway? A few nightmares and the documents of a superstitious cult whose beliefs happen to coincide with your dreams. The photograph's very realistic, of course, but these days you can do almost anything with special photography.'

'You still think it's my imagination?' he inquired. 'Of course you don't explain why anyone would go to the trouble of faking a photograph like that and then leave it here. Besides, remember I did that painting from my dream *before* I saw those. It's Glaaki sending his image from the lake.'

I was still searching for an answer when Cartwright looked at his watch. 'Good God, it's after four o'clock! We'd better get going if we want to leave before dark. You go and start the car while I get the bookcases. I don't think they'll touch my pictures, except the latest one, and I'll bring that one with me. Tomorrow, maybe, we can come back from Brichester and get them.'

As I climbed into the driving seat I saw Cartwright struggling across the pavement with the bookcase-handle over one arm and the picture held in front of him. He slid into the back seat as I turned the ignition key.

There was no sound from the engine.

Cartwright ran and threw up the bonnet. Then he turned to stare at me, his face pale. 'Now will you bloody well believe!' he screamed. 'I suppose it's my imagination that wrecked your engine!'

I got out to look at the mass of torn wires. He did not notice whether I was listening as he continued:

'*They've* been at it—but how? It's not dark yet out here, and *they* can't come by daylight—but *they* must have done it—' This seemed to worry him more than the engine's actually been wrecked. Then he slumped against the car. 'My God, of course—Joe only just joined *them*, and the Green Decay doesn't affect *them* for sixty years or so. He can come out in the light—he can follow me—he is part of Glaaki now, so he won't spare me—'

'What do we do now?' I interrupted. 'According to you it's insane to start walking so close to nightfall, so—'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'We must barricade ourselves in. The upper floors aren't so important, but every window and door on the ground floor must be blocked. If you think I'm crazy, humour me for your own sake.'

Once inside, we managed to block the front-room window by upturning the bed. The back-room window was fortified with a wardrobe. When we had moved this into the room from the front, Cartwright left me to position it while he went out the back door. 'There's a hatchet lying around out here,' he explained. 'Best to have it in here—it may be useful as a weapon, and otherwise *they'll* get hold of it.' He brought it in and stood it by the hall table.

He helped me to barricade the back door, which opened out of the kitchen; but when we had shoved the kitchen cabinet against it, he told me to take a rest. 'Go ahead, make some coffee,' he suggested. 'As for me—there's a few minutes of daylight left, and I want to take a look in the lake to see what's down there. I'll take the hatchet in case... Joe comes. Anyway, *they* can't move very fast—their limbs soon become half-rigid.' I began to ask what protection I would have, but he had already gone.

He was so long away that I was beginning to worry, when I heard him knocking at the back door. I called, 'You've a short memory—go round the front,' but when no answering footsteps came I began to pull the cabinet out of position. At that moment a shout came from behind me: 'What are you doing?'

I had the kettle ready to throw when I turned and saw Cartwright. As calmly as I could, I said: 'Somebody is knocking at the back door.'

'It's *them*,' he yelled, and smashed the cabinet back into place. 'Quick—maybe it's only Joe, but it may be dark enough for the others to come out. Got to block the front door, anyway—what the hell is there?' The hall was bare of all furniture except a small table. 'Have to get the wardrobe out of my bedroom.'

As we entered a number of noises began. Far off came a sliding sound from several directions. A muffled discordant throbbing was also audible, water was splashing nearby, and round the side of the house someone was slowly approaching. I ran to the crevice between window and upturned bed and looked out. It was already quite dark, but I could see the water rippling alarmingly at the shore near the window.

'Help me, for God's sake!' called Cartwright.

As I turned from the window I glimpsed something moving outside. Perhaps I only imagined that glistening shape which heaved out of the water, with long stalks twisting above it; but certainly that throbbing was much nearer, and a creaking, slithering object was moving across the pavement.

I rushed over and helped shove the wardrobe towards the door. 'There's something living out there!' I gasped.

Cartwright looked half-relieved, half-disgusted. 'It's the thing from the picture,' he said breathlessly. 'I saw it before, when I went outside. You've got to look into the lake at a certain angle, otherwise you can't see anything. Down on the bottom, among the weeds—stagnant water, everything dead, except... There's a city down there, all black spiralling steeples and walls at obtuse angles with the streets. Dead things lying on the streets—they died with the journey through space—they're horrible, hard, shiny, all red and covered with bunches of trumpet-shaped things... And right at the centre of the city is a transparent trapdoor. Glaaki's under there, pulsing and staring up—I saw the eye-stalks move towards me—' His voice trailed off.

I followed his gaze. He was looking at the front door; and, as I watched, the door bulged inward from pressure from outside. The hinge-screws were visibly tearing free of the door frame. That alien throbbing cry sounded somehow triumphant.

'Quick, upstairs!' Cartwright shouted. 'Can't get the wardrobe there now—upstairs, I'll follow you.'

I was nearest the stairs, and jumped for them. Halfway up I heard a rending crash behind me, and turning I saw with horror that Cartwright was not behind me. He was standing by the hall table, clutching the hatchet.

Through the front door came the dead servants of Glaaki, skeletal arms outstretched to grab him. And behind them a shape towered, pulsing and shaking with deafening vibration. The dead ones were only a few feet from Cartwright when he ran—straight into their midst. Their arms swung slowly in ineffectual attempts to stop him. He reached the front door, but at that moment one of them stepped in front of him. Cartwright did not stop; he swung the hatchet-blade up between its legs until it cut free.

Now he was beyond the slowly turning corpses, and he plunged towards the pulsing shape of Glaaki. A spine stiffened towards him. As he ran on to the point of the spine Cartwright brought the hatchet down and severed it from the body. The throbbing became a discordant shrieking, and the oval body thrashed in agony back into the lake. The dead creatures made purposeless movements for a while, then shuffled away towards the trees. Cartwright, meanwhile, had fallen on the pavement and did not move. I could stand no more; I rushed into the first upstairs room and locked the door.

The next morning, when I was sure it was daylight, I left the house. Outside I picked up Cartwright's body and left it in the front seat of the car. I did not look back at what lay near the front door; the walking corpse he had destroyed. It had been exposed to daylight. I managed not to vomit until I reached the car. Some time passed before I was able to begin walking to Brichester.

The police did not believe all I told them. The bookcase had gone from the back of the car, and nothing could be seen among the trees—or in the lake, though this was too deep to be dragged. The estate agent on Bold Street could tell them nothing of a 'haunting' of the lake. There was the painting in the car—a painting which has since been pronounced Cartwright's most powerful—but it was only the product of an artist's imagination. Of course, there was that metal spine embedded in his chest, but that could have been an ingeniously contrived murder weapon.

When I had the Brichester University professors examine the spine, however, the results were very different. The case was hushed up in the newspapers, and while the professors have not yet got a permit to fill the lake in, they agree with me that something very strange happened that night in the hollow. For the spine, with its central orifice running through it, was formed not only of a metal completely unknown on this planet; that metal had recently been composed of *living cells*.

Cover Plate illustration by Randy Broecker, taken from the 2011 reprint.

The Mine On Yuggoth

"Revised extensively by Campbell from *The Tower From Yuggoth*. Taylor's name has been changed from Edward Wingate Armitage, the milieu has been changed from Lovecraft's Arkham and Dunwich to a Severn Valley setting, and the central necromantic text is Campbell's *Revelations*, not Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*. The story is improved considerably by a shortened account of Taylor's childhood, and a clearer objective for Taylor's travels to Yuggoth."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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Edward Taylor was twenty-four years old when he first became interested in the metal mined on Yuggoth.

He had led a strange life up to that point. He was born, normally enough, of Protestant parents in Brichester Central Hospital in 1899. From an early age he preferred to sit reading in his room rather than play with the neighbourhood children, but such a preference is not remarkable. Most of the books he read were normal, too, though he tended to concentrate on the more unusual sections; after reading the Bible, for instance, he startled his father by asking: "How did the witch of Endor call the spirit?" Besides, as his mother remarked, surely no normal eight-year-old would read *Dracula* and *The Beetle* with such avidity as Edward.

In 1918 Taylor left school and enrolled at Brichester University. Here the stranger section of his life began; his tutors soon discovered that his academic studies frequently gave way to less orthodox practices. He led a witch-cult, centring round a stone slab in the woods off the Severnford road. The members of the cult included such people as the artist, Nevil Craughan, and the occultist, Henry Fisher; all members being subsequently exposed and expelled. Some of them gave up sorcery, but Taylor only became more interested. His parents were dead, his inheritance made work unnecessary, and he could spend all the time he wished in research.

But although he had enough normal possessions, Taylor was still not satisfied. He had borrowed the *Revelations Of Glaaki* from another cultist, and had visited the British Museum twice to copy passages from the *Necronomicon*. His library included the horrible untitled Johannes Henricus Pott book which the Jena publishers rejected, and this was the book which gave him his final interest. That repulsive immortality formula which Pott wrote was more than half true, and when Taylor compared certain of the necessary ingredients with references by Alhazred, he put together a hitherto unconnected series of hints.

On Tond, Yuggoth, and occasionally on Earth, immortality has been attained by an obscure process. The brain of the immortal is transplanted from body to body at thirty-five-year intervals; this otherwise impossible operation being carried out using a *tok'l* container, in which the naked brain is placed between bodies. *Tok'l* is a metal mined extensively on Yuggoth, but neither exists nor can be created on Earth.

"The lizard-crustaceans arrive on Earth through their towers," Alhazred tells us; not *in* their towers, Taylor noted, but through them, using the method of turning space in on itself which has been lost to men since Joiry. It was dangerous, but Taylor only had to find an outpost of the Yuggoth-spawn and pass through the barrier in the transport tower there. The danger did not lie in the journey to Yuggoth; the barrier must change the organs of bodies passing through it, or else the lizard-crustaceans could never live in their outposts on Earth, where they mine those metals not to be had on their planet. But Taylor disliked the miners; he had once seen an engraving in the *Revelations Of Glaaki* and been repelled by it. It was unlike anything he had seen before; the body was not really that of a lizard, nor did its head too closely resemble that of a lobster, but those were the only comparisons he could make.

For some time Taylor could not have gone among the Yuggoth-spawn, even if he had found one of their outposts. But a page reference in the *Revelations* led him to the following in the *Necronomicon*:

> "As Azathoth rules now as he did in his bivalvular shape, his name subdues all, from the incubi which haunt Tond to the servants of Y'golonac. Few can resist the power of the name Azathoth, and even the haunters of the blackest night of Yuggoth cannot battle the power of N—, *his other name*."

So Taylor's interest in travel to Yuggoth was renewed. The lizard-crustaceans were no longer dangerous, but occasionally Taylor felt twinges of unease when he thought of certain hints in the *Revelations*. There were occasional references to a pit which lay near one of the cities—a pit whose contents few lizard-crustaceans cared to view, and which was avoided during certain periods of the year by all. No description of what lay in the pit was included, but Taylor came across the words: "at those times of the year the lizard-crustaceans are glad of the lightlessness of Yuggoth." But the hints were so vague that he usually ignored them.

Unfortunately, the 'other name' of Azathoth was not given in the *Necronomicon*, and by the time he needed to know it, the exposure of the cult had placed the *Revelations Of Glaaki* beyond his reach. In 1924 he began a search for some person with the complete edition. By chance he met Michael Hinds, one of the former cultists, who did not have a copy but suggested a visit to a farmhouse off the Goatswood road.

"That's Daniel Norton's place," Hinds told him. "He's got the complete edition, and a lot more items of interest. He's not very bright, though—he remembers all the Tagh-Clatur angles, but he's content to live the way he does and worship rather than use his knowledge to better himself. I don't like him particularly. He's too stupid to harm you, of course, but all that knowledge going to waste annoys me."

Thus it was that Taylor called on Daniel Norton. The man lived with his two sons in an old farmhouse, where they managed to exist off a small herd of sheep and a few poultry. Norton was half deaf and, as Hinds had mentioned, not too intelligent, so that Taylor irritated himself by speaking slowly and loudly. The other had begun to look disquieted during Taylor's speech, and remained uneasy as he answered:

"Listen, young zur, 'teant as if I haven't bin mixed up in terrible doin's. I had a friend once as would go down to the Devil's Steps, an' he swore as he'd zoon have them Yuggoth ones about him, ministerin' at every word he zpoke. He thought he had words as would overcome them on the Steps. But one day they found him in't woods, and 'twas so horrible that them who carried him warn't the same ever agin. His chest an' throat wuz bust open, an' his face wuz all blue. Those as knew, they do zay those up the Steps grabbed him an' flew off with 'im into space, where 'is lungs bust.

"Wait a minute, zur. 'Tis dangerous up them Devil's Steps. But there's zumthin' out in't woods by the Zevernford Road that could give you wot you want, maybe, and it don't hate men zo much as them from Yuggoth. You've maybe bin to it—'tis under a slab o' rock, an' the Voola ritual brings it—but did you think of askin' for what you need? 'Tis easier t' hold—you don't even need Alhazred fer the right words, an' it might get to them from Yuggoth fer you."

"You say they have an outpost on the Devil's Steps?" Taylor persisted.

"No, zur," the farmer replied. "That's all I'll zay till you've bin an' tried me advice."

Taylor left, dissatisfied, and some nights later visited the titan slab in the woods west of the Severnford Road. But the ritual needed more than one participant; he heard something vast stirring below his feet, but nothing more.

The next day he drove again to the farmhouse off the Goatswood road. Norton did not conceal his displeasure on opening the door, but allowed the visitor to enter. Taylor's shadow flickered across the seated farmer as he spoke. "You didn't think I'd leave you alone when it didn't awaken, did you?"

"What'd be the use if I come with you to it? If one don't raise it, nor will two. An' anyway, maybe you like t' mess about wit' them from Yuggoth, but I don't. They zay they carry you off to Yuggoth an' give you t' what they're afraid of. I don't want to come near sumthin' that might go t' them. In fact, I want t' give it all up fer good."

"Something which *they're* afraid of?" repeated Taylor, not remembering.

"It's in the *Revelations of Glaaki*," explained the other. "You saw mine—"

"Yes, that's a point," Taylor interrupted. "If you're really going to give up witchcraft, you won't be needing that book. My God, I'd forgotten all about it! Give me that and maybe I won't ever bother you again!"

"You can have it an' welcome," said Norton. "But you mean that? You'll keep away an' let me stop playin' round with things from Outside?"

"Yes, yes," Taylor assured him, took the pile of dusty volumes which the farmer toppled into his arms, and struggled with them to the car. He drove

home and there discovered that the book contained what he sought. It contained other relevant passages also, and he reread one which ran:

> "Beyond the Zone of the Thirteen Faveolate Colossi lies Yuggoth, where dwell the denizens of many extraterrestrial realms. Yuggoth's black streets have known the tread of malformed paws and the touch of misshapen appendages, and unviseagable shapes creep among its lightless towers. But few of the creatures of the rim-world are as feared as that survival from Yuggoth's youth which remains in a pit beyond one of the cities. This survival few have seen, but the legend of the crustaceans tells of a city of green pyramids which hangs over a ledge far down in the dark. It is said that no mind can stand the sight of what occurs on that ledge at certain seasons."

(But nothing can battle the power of the other name of Azathoth.)

So Taylor ignored this; and two days later he drove with climbing tools to the rock formation beyond Brichester. It stretched fully two hundred feet up in a series of steps to a plateau; from some way off the illusion of a giant staircase was complete, and legend had it that Satan came from the sky to walk the earth by way of those steps. But when Taylor parked in the road of which they formed one side, he saw how rough they were and how easy ascent would be. He left the car, stood staring up for a moment, and began to chip footholds.

The climb was tedious and precarious. Sometimes he slipped and hung for a minute over nothing. Once, a hundred feet up, he glanced down at the car, and for the rest of the climb tried to forget the speck of metal far below. Finally he hooked his hand over the edge, pulled himself up and over. Then he looked up.

In the centre of the plateau stood three stone towers, joined by narrow catwalks of black metal between the roofs. They were surrounded by fungus —an alien species, a grey stem covered with twining leaves. It could not have been completely vegetable, either, for as Taylor stood up, the stems leaned in his direction and the leaves uncurled toward him.

He began to pick his way through the avenues of fungus, shrinking away when the clammy leaves stroked him, and at last hurrying into the cleared space around the central steeple. The tower was about thirty feet high, windowless and with a strangely angled doorway opening on stairs leading

into blackness. However, Taylor had brought a torch, and shone it up the stairs as he entered. He did not like the way the darkness seemed to move beyond the torchlight, and would have preferred an occasional window, if only to remind him that he had not already reached Yuggoth. But the thought of the *tok'l*-bought immortality drove him on.

He had been ascending for some time when he noticed the hieroglyphics on the walls—all apparently indicating something around the bend in the passage. He turned the bend, and saw that the steps ended some feet above —not at a wall or solid barrier, but the torch-beam would not penetrate beyond. This must be where the lizard-crustaceans connected Earth with Yuggoth; and the other side was Yuggoth itself.

He threw himself at the barrier, plunged through, cried out and fell. It was as if his body had been torn into atoms and recombined; only a memory remained of something he had no conviction of undergoing. He lay for a few minutes before he was able to stand up and look about.

He was on a tower roof above a city. He directed the torch-beam downward, and realised that there was no way down the smooth wall, but, remembering the catwalks, he guessed that the building at the end of each row would afford some means of descent. This seemed the only way the crustaceans could descend, for the *Revelations* engravings had shown no method of flight. He was unnerved by the abyss below the catwalk, but could not relieve it by his torch.

There were five narrow metal walks to be traversed. Taylor did not notice their odd shape until he was out on the first. It was slightly convex in section, and at intervals there protruded outward corrugated sections at an angle. He found it very difficult to change from equilibrium on the convex portions to balance on the angled stretches, and often slid to one side, but he reached the end finally, rounded the gaping blackness in the centre of the roof and set out on the next walk. He had got the knack by now, and slipped less.

One thing disquieted him; the total silence of the nighted city. The clang of his footsteps broke the silence like pebbles dropped into some subterranean sea. Not even distant noises were audible, yet it seemed impossible that such a densely-populated world should be so silent. Even if, improbably, all the citizens were on Earth, surely some sound should occasionally drift

from the distance. It was almost as if the inhabitants had fled some nightmare invasion of the city.

As he reached the centre of the fifth catwalk, a raucous croaking rang out behind him. He tottered and slammed down on the metal, clawed and scrabbled to the last roof and looked back.

The noise came from a speaker vibrating atop a grey metal pylon. It seemed purposeless, unless it were a warning, or an announcement of his own arrival. He ignored it as a warning, not wishing to return to Earth after coming so far; and even if they realised his presence, they would flee before the name of Azathoth. He walked to the roof's edge and peered for a way down.

It consisted of an unprotected stairway which led around the outer wall of the tower, spiralling steeply to the street. He started down as the shrieking speaker quietened, and realised that the steps were set at a definitely obtuse angle to the wall, so that only their pitted surface prevented him from plunging to the street below. Ten feet down a piece of stone slid away under his foot, and had he not clutched the step above he would have toppled into the darkness. He made the remainder of the streetward journey more slowly, his heart pounding.

So he finally came to that pavement of octahedral, concave black stones. He shone the slightly-dimmed torch beam down the thoroughfare. Ebon steeples stretched away on both sides into night, and on Taylor's left was a right-angle intersection. The buildings were all set in the centres of individual ten-yard squares, through which cut paths of a blackly translucent mineral, and in which grew accurately-positioned lines of that half-animal fungi which he had seen on the plateau. As he left the tower his torch illuminated a fork in the road, at the intersection of which stood a squat black building shaped like a frustum, and he decided to take the left branch of this fork.

The metal which he sought was so brittle that it was not used for construction in the city. To gather specimens he would have to visit the actual mines, which were habitually set close to the crustaceans' settlements. But he was unsure of the city's layout. Nothing could be seen from the roofs, for his torch-beam did not reach far, nor did he know how far the settled area extended. Not even the *Revelations Of Glaaki* gave maps of the cities on Yuggoth, so that his only plan was to follow some street at

random. However, it was usual for such cities to be encircled by mines at quarter-mile intervals, so that once he reached the city's edge he would be fairly near a mine. These mines mainly produced the black stone used for building, but a certain percentage of the ore was extracted from the stone and refined in factories around the mine-pits.

Five hundred yards along the left fork he noticed a change in the surroundings. While the towers still occupied one side of the street, the right side's steeples now gave way to an open space, extending along the street for fully two hundred yards and inward fifty yards, which was filled with oddly-shaped objects of semi-resilient deep-blue plastic. Despite their curious shape, he could see they were intended as seats; but he could not understand the disc-shaped attachments which rose on metal rods on each side of each seat. He had never read of such a place, and guessed that it might be the crustaceans' equivalent of a cinema. He saw that the space was littered with thin hexagonal sheets of blue metal covered with raised varicoloured symbols, which he took for documents. It looked as if the space had recently been hurriedly vacated. This, coupled with that warning siren, might have hinted something to him; but he only began to continue down the street.

The open space, however, interested him. The discs might be some form of receiver, in which case the transmission might give him an idea of the direction of the mines. Perhaps the crustaceans were able to transmit mental images, for some of the legends about their outposts on Earth spoke of their using long-range hypnosis. If the discs worked on a variant of this principle, the power ought not to harm him, for since passing through the barrier he should have the metabolism of a crustacean. At any rate, he had three batteries left for his torch, and could afford to waste a little time, for he could protect himself with the feared name if any of the citizens came upon him.

He sank into the plastic of one of the deep-blue seats. He leaned back in it, placing the torch on the ground beside one of the batteries which had fallen out of a pocket. He sat up a little in the chair, and his head came between the metal discs. A deafening whine came from these, and before he could move a bright orange spark flashed from one disc to the other, passing through his brain.

Taylor leaped up, and the orange ray faded. A metallic odour came from his left pocket, where he had placed the other two batteries. He slid in his hand, and withdrew it covered with a dull-grey fluid which was plainly all that remained of the batteries. The torch and one battery, which had not been in contact with his body, still stood nearby, and the bulb was still lit. But in spite of what the ray had done to the batteries, he was untouched; and he wanted very much to return to the chair, so that he turned off the torch to conserve the battery and sat back on the plastic. For that ray had the property of forming images in the mind, and in that moment between the discs Taylor had seen fleetingly a strange vision of a metal-grilled gateway, rusted and standing alone in the middle of a desert, lit by a setting green moon. What it had been he did not know, but it had an air of distinct and unknowable purpose.

The ray began to pass even before he came between the discs, and an image formed, only to fade and be replaced by another. A series of unconnected visions paraded and blurred the surrounding darkness. A snakelike being flew across a coppery sky, its head and tail hanging limply down from its midsection, where a single bat-wing rotated. Great cobwebbed objects rolled from noisome caverns in the centre of a phosphorescent morass, their mouths opening wetly as they hastened toward where a figure screamed and struggled in the mud. A range of mountains, their peaks ice-covered, reached almost to the sky; and as he watched, a whole line of peaks exploded upward and a leprously white, faceless head rose into view.

Rather disturbed, Taylor thought defensively, "What a waste of time!" and began to stand up.

Immediately on the word "waste", a new picture formed. A close-up of one of the crustaceans appeared, and what it was doing was nauseatingly obvious, even with its unaccustomed shape. What was unusual was that it was performing this act in the garden of one of the towers, by a specimen of the ever-present fungus. When the crustacean had finished, it stood up and moved away, while Taylor received a close view of what it had left behind. As he watched in horrified fascination, the leaves of the nearby fungus bent and covered the offal; and when it rose from this position, the ground was bare at that spot. He now saw the purpose of the lines of fungi.

More important, however, he realised that he had just discovered the method of referring to the knowledge stored in this library. He must think of some key word—that was how "waste" had evoked such an unfortunate vision. Now, swallowing his nausea, Taylor thought: "mines connected with this city."

The vista which now appeared to him was an aerial view of the city. It was totally lightless, but in some way he sensed the outlines of the buildings. Then the point of view descended until he was looking down from directly above the library; and it gave him an odd vertigo to see, in the seat from which he was viewing, a figure seated. Whatever was transmitting the images began to move along the street bordering the library, traversed a straight road directly to a widening of the road, and showed him the mine-pit a few yards further on.

The transmitter, however, now seemed to be working independent of his will. Now it tracked back six hundred yards or so up the road, to a junction with a wider street at the right. Taylor realised that something important was to follow. It moved up the branching street, and he saw that the buildings ended a few yards further on; from there a rougher path stretched to the edge of a pit, much larger than the first. The transmitter moved forward, stopping at the edge of the buildings. He willed it to go closer, but it remained in that position. When he persisted, a loud noise made him start; it was only part of the transmission—not like a voice, it resembled glass surfaces vibrating together, but forming definite patterns. Perhaps it was a voice, but its message was meaningless—what did *xada-hgla soron* signify? Whatever it meant, the phrase was repeated seven times, then the image disappeared.

Baffled, he rose. He had been unable to glean any further information from the discs. The larger pit was further, but it would contain more mineral; and the buildings did not crowd so close to it, hence the danger of interruption was less likely. He decided to head for it.

When he reached the junction, he hesitated briefly, then remembering the squat black towers which had encircled the nearer mine, he turned off to the right. His shoes clanked on the black pavement and crunched on the rocks of the continuing path. The beam of the torch trembled on the crumbling rim, and then he stood on the edge of the pit. He looked down.

At first he saw nothing. Dust-motes rising from below tinted the beam a translucent green, but it showed nothing except a wavering disc of black rock on the opposite wall. The disc grew and dimmed as it descended, but dim as it was it finally outlined the ledge outcropping from the rock, and what stood upon it.

There is nothing horrible about a group of tall deserted pyramids, even when those pyramids are constructed of a pale green material which glitters and seems to move in the half-light. Something else caused Taylor to stare in fascination; the way the emerald cones were drinking in the light from his torch, while the bulb dimmed visibly. He peered downward, awaiting something which he felt must come.

The torch-bulb flickered and went out, leaving him in total darkness.

In the blackness he unscrewed the end of the torch and let the dead battery clatter far down the rock surface. Drawing the last battery from his pocket, he fumbled blindly with the pieces of metal, squinting into the darkness, and saw the torch in his hands. It was faintly limned by the glow from beneath, growing clearer as he watched. He could see the distant side of the pit now, and, noting the grating metallic sound which had begun below him, he looked down into the green light.

Something was climbing toward him up the rock face; something which slithered up from the rock ledge, glowing greenly. It was vast and covered with green surfaces which ground together, but it had a shape—and that was what made Taylor flee from the miles-deep pit, clattering down the ebon pavements, not switching on the torch until he collided with a black spire beyond the widening radius of the green light, not stopping until he reached the frustum-shaped building he remembered and the tower near it. He threw himself up the outer steps recklessly, crawled on all fours and swung from the catwalks, and reached the last roof.

He glanced across the tower roofs once, then heaved open the trapdoor and plunged down the unlit steps, through the searing barrier across the passage and clattered down into the blinding daylight, half-fell down the Devil's Steps and reached the car. Somewhere what he had glimpsed at the last was still moving—that green-radiating shape which heaved and pulsed above the steeples, toppling them and putting forth glowing arms to engulf fleeing dwarved forms...

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When passers-by telephoned the Brichester police after hearing unusual sounds from a house on South Abbey Avenue, few of the documents in that house had not been destroyed by Taylor. The police called in the Mercy Hill doctors, who could only take him to the hospital. He became violent when they refused to explore the Devil's Steps, but when they tried to reassure him with promises of exploration he protested so demonstratively that he was removed to the Camside Home for the Mentally Disturbed. There he could only lie repeating feverishly:

"You fools, why don't you stop them going up the Steps? They'll be dragged into space—lungs burst—blue faces... And suppose *It* didn't destroy the city entirely—suppose *It* was intelligent? If *It* knew about the towers into other parts of space, *It* might find its way through onto the Steps —*It's* coming down the stairs through the barrier now—*It'll* push through the forest and into the town . . . Outside the window! *It's rising above the houses!*"

Edward Taylor's case yet stirs controversy among doctors, and is a subject for exaggerated speculation in Sunday newspaper features. Of course the writers of the latter do not know all the facts; if they did their tone would certainly be different, but the doctors felt it unwise to reveal all that had happened to Taylor.

That is why the X-ray photographs taken of Taylor's body are carefully restricted to a hospital file. At first glance they would seem normal, and the layman might not notice any abnormality even upon close examination. It takes a doctor to see that the lungs, although they function perfectly, do not resemble in any respect the lungs of a human being.

Illustration by Randy Broecker, taken from reprint of The Inhabitant of the Lake And Other Unwelcome Tenants, 2011.

The Plain Of Sound

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> Verily do we know little of the other universes beyond the gate which YOG-SOTHOTH guards. Of those which come through the gate and make their habitation in this world none can tell; although Ibn Schacabao tells of the beings which crawl from the Gulf of S'glhuo that they may be known by their sound. In that Gulf the very worlds are of sound, and matter is known but as an odour; and the notes of our pipes in this world may create beauty or bring forth abominations in S'glhuo. For the barrier between haply grows thin, and when sourceless sounds occur we may justly look to the denizens of S'glhuo. They can do little harm to those of Earth, and fear only that shape which a certain sound may form in their universe.—Abdul Alhazred: Necronomicon

When Frank Nuttall, Tony Roles, and I reached the Inn at Severnford, we found that it was closed. It was summer of 1958, and as we had nothing particular to do at Brichester University that day we had decided to go out walking. I had suggested a trip to Goatswood—the legends there interested me—but Tony had heard things which made him dislike that town. Then Frank had told us about an advertisement in the *Brichester Weekly News* about a year back which had referred to an inn at the centre of Severnford as "one of the oldest in England." We could walk there in the morning and quench the thirst caused by the journey; afterward we could take the bus back to Brichester if we did not feel like walking.

Tony was not enthusiastic. "Why go all that way to get drunk," he inquired, "even if it is so old? Besides, that ad in the paper's old too—by now the place has probably fallen down?" However, Frank and I wanted to try it, and finally we overruled his protests.

We would have done better to agree with him, for we found the inn's doors and windows boarded up and a nearby sign saying: "Temporarily closed to the public." The only course was to visit the modern public house up the street. We looked round the town a little; this did not occupy us long, for Severnford has few places of interest, most of it being dockland. Before two o'clock we were searching for a bus-stop; when it eluded us, we entered a newsagent's for directions.

"Bus t' Brichester? No, only in the mornin's," the proprietor told us. "Up from the University, are you?"

"Then how do we get back?" Tony asked.

"Walk, I s'pose," suggested the newsagent. "Why'd you come up anyway—oh, t'look at the Inn? No, you won't get in there now—so many o' them bloody teenagers've been breakin' the winders an' such that Council says it'll only open t' people with special permission. Good job, too—though I'm not sayin' as it's kids like you as does it. Still, you'll be wantin' t' get back t' Brichester, an' I know the shortest way."

He began to give us complicated directions, which he repeated in detail. When we still looked uncertain he waited while Frank got out notebook and pencil and took down the route. At the end of this I was not yet sure which way to go, but, as I remarked: "If we get lost, we can always ask."

"Oh, no," protested our informant. "You won't go wrong if you follow that."

"Right, thanks," Frank said. "And I suppose there will be passers-by to ask if we *do* go wrong?"

"I wouldn't." The newsagent turned to rearrange papers in the rack. "You might ask the wrong people."

Hearing no more from him, we went out into the street and turned right toward Brichester. Once one leaves behind the central area of Severnford where a group of archaic buildings is preserved, and comes to the surrounding red-brick houses, there is little to interest the sight-seer. Much of Severnford is dockland, and even the country beyond is not noticeably pleasant to the forced hiker. Besides, some of the roads are noticeably rough, though that may have been because we took the wrong turning—for, an hour out of Severnford, we realised we were lost.

"Turn left at the signpost about a mile out, it says here," said Frank. "But we've come more than a mile already—where's the signpost?"

"So what do we do—go back and ask?" Tony suggested.

"Too far for that. Look," Frank asked me, "have you got that compass you're always carrying, Les? Brichester is almost southeast of Severnford. If we keep on in that direction, we won't go far wrong."

The road we had been following ran east-west. Now, when we turned off into open country, we could rely only on my compass, and we soon found that we needed it. Once, when ascending a slope, we had to detour round a thickly overgrown forest, where we would certainly have become further lost. After that we crossed monotonous fields, never seeing a building or another human being. Two and a half hours out of Severnford, we reached an area of grassy hillocks, and from there descended into and clambered out of miniature valleys. About half-a-mile into this region, Tony signalled us to keep quiet.

"All I can hear is the stream," said Frank. "Am I supposed to hear something important? You hear anything, Les?"

The rushing stream we had just crossed effectively drowned most distant sounds, but I thought I heard a nearby mechanical whirring. It rose and fell like the sound of a moving vehicle, but with the loudly splashing water I could distinguish no details.

"I'm not sure," I answered. "There's something that could be a tractor, I think—"

"That's what I thought," agreed Tony. "It's ahead somewhere—maybe the driver can direct us. If, of course, he's not one of that newsagent's wrong people!"

The mechanical throbbing loudened as we crossed two hills and came onto a strip of level ground fronting a long, low ridge. I was the first to reach the ridge, climb it and stand atop it. As my head rose above the ridge, I threw myself back.

On the other side lay a roughly square plain, surrounded by four ridges. The plain was about four hundred yards square, and at the opposite side was a one-storey building. Apart from this the plain was totally bare, and that was what startled me most. For from that bare stretch of land rose a deafening flood of sound. Here was the source of that mechanical whirring;

it throbbed overpoweringly upward, incessantly fluctuating through three notes. Behind it were other sounds; a faint bass humming which hovered on the edge of audibility, and others—whistling and high-pitched twangs which sometimes were inaudible and sometimes as loud as the whirring.

By now Tony and Frank were beside me, staring down.

"Surely it can't be coming from that hut?" Frank said. "It's no tractor, that's certain, and a hut that size could never contain anything that'd make that row."

"I thought it was coming from underground somewhere," suggested Tony. "Mining operations, maybe."

"Whatever it is, there's that hut," I said. "We can ask the way there."

Tony looked down doubtfully. "I don't know—it might well be dangerous. You know driving over subsidence can be dangerous, and how do we know they're not working on something like that here?"

"There'd be signs if they were," I reassured him. "No, come on—there may be nowhere else we can ask, and there's no use keeping on in the wrong direction."

We descended the ridge and walked perhaps twenty yards across the plain.

It was like walking into a tidal wave. The sound was suddenly all around us; the more overpowering because though it beat on us from all sides, we could not fight back—like being engulfed in jelly. I could not have stood it for long—I put my hands over my ears and yelled "Run!" And I staggered across the plain, the sound which I could not shut out booming at me, until I reached the building on the other side.

It was a brown stone house, not a hut as we had thought. It had an arched doorway in the wall facing us, bordered by two low windows without curtains. From what we could see the room on the left was the living room, that on the right a bedroom, but grime on the windows prevented us from seeing more, except that the rooms were unoccupied. We did not think to look in any windows at the back. The door had no bell or knocker, but Frank pounded on a panel.

There was no answer and he knocked harder. On the second knock the door swung open, revealing that it opened into the living room. Frank looked in

and called: "Anybody at home?" Still nobody answered, and he turned back to us.

"Do you think we'd better go in?" he asked. "Maybe we could wait for the owner, or there might be something in the house that'd direct us."

Tony pushed past me to look. "Hey, what—Frank, do you notice anything here? Something tells me that whoever the owner is, he isn't house-proud."

We could see what he meant. There were wooden chairs, a table, bookcases, a ragged carpet—and all thick with dust. We hesitated a minute, waiting for someone to make a decision; then Frank entered. He stopped inside the door and pointed. Looking over his shoulder we could see there were no footprints anywhere in the dust.

We looked round for some explanation. While Frank closed the door and cut off the throbbing from outside, Tony—our bibliophile—crossed to the bookcases and looked at the spines. I noticed a newspaper on the table and idly picked it up.

"The owner must be a bit peculiar... *La Strega*, by Pico della Mirandola," Tony read, "—*Discovery of Witches—The Red Dragon*—hey, *Revelations of Glaaki*; isn't that the book the University can't get for their restricted section? Here's a diary, big one, too, but I hadn't better touch that."

When I turned to the front page of the newspaper, I saw it was the *Camside Observer*. As I looked closer, I saw something which made me call the others. "Look at this—December 8, 1930! You're right about this man being peculiar—what sort of person keeps a newspaper for twenty-eight years?"

"I'm going to look in the bedroom," Frank declared. He knocked on the door off the living room, and, when we came up beside him, opened it. The room was almost bare: a wardrobe, a hanging wall-mirror and a bed were the only furnishings. The bed, as we had expected, was empty, but the mark of a sleeping body was clearly defined, though filled with dust. We moved closer, noting the absence of footprints on the floor, and, bending over the bed, I thought I saw something besides dust in the hollows left by the sleeper—something like ground glass, sparkling greenly.

"What's happened?" Tony asked in a rather frightened tone.

"Oh, probably nothing out of the ordinary," said Frank. "Maybe there's another entrance round the back—maybe he can't stand all the noise,

whatever it is, and has a bedroom on the other side. Look, there's a door in that wall; that may be it."

I went across and opened it, but only a very primitive lavatory lay beyond.

"Wait a minute, I think there was a door next to the bookcase," recollected Tony. He returned to the living room and opened the door he had noticed. As we followed him, he exclaimed: "My God—*now* what?"

The fourth room was longer than any of the others, but it was the contents that had drawn Tony's exclamation. Nearest us on the bare floor was something like a television screen, about two feet across, with a blue-glass light bulb behind it, strangely distorted and with thick wires attached. Next to it another pair of wires led from a megaphone-shaped receiver. In between the opposite wall and these instruments lay a strange arrangement of crystals, induction coils, and tubes, from which wires hung at each end for possible attachment to the other appliances. The far corner of the ceiling had recently collapsed, allowing rain to drip onto a sounding-board carrying a dozen strings, a large lever and a motor connected by cogs to a plectrum-covered cylinder. Out of curiosity I crossed and plucked a string; but such a discord trembled through the board that I quickly muffled it.

"Something *very* funny is going on here," Frank said. "There's no other room, so where can he sleep? And the dust, and the newspaper—and now these things—I've never seen anything like them?"

"Why don't we look at his diary?" suggested Tony. "It doesn't look like he'll be back, and I for one want to know what's happened here."

So we went back into the living room and Tony took down the heavy volume. He opened it to its last entry: December 8, 1930. "If we all try and read it, it'll take three times as long," he said. "You two sit down and I'll try and read you the relevant bits." He was silent for a few minutes, then:

"Professor Arnold Hird, ex-Brichester University: never heard of him—must've been before our time.

"Ah here we are—

" 'January 3, 1930: Today moved into new house (if it can be called a house!). Noises are queer—suppose it's only because there's so much superstition about them that nobody's investigated before. Intend to make full study—meteorological conditions, &c: feel that winds blowing over ridges may vibrate and cause sounds. Tomorrow to look round, take

measurements, find out if anything will interrupt sounds. Peculiar that sound seems to be deafening in certain radius, relatively faint beyond—no gradual fading.'

" 'January 4: Sleep uneasy last night—unaccustomed dreams. City on great mountain—angled streets, spiralling pillars and cones. Strange inhabitants; taller than human, scaly skin, boneless fingers, yet somehow not repulsive. Were aware of me, in fact seemed to await my arrival, but each time one approached me I awoke. Repeated several times.

" 'Progress negative. Screens on top of ridges did not interrupt sound; undiminished though little wind. Measurements—northwest ridge 423 yards?' Well, there's a lot more like that."

"Make sure you don't miss anything important," Frank said as Tony turned pages.

" 'January 6: Dreams again. Same city, figures as though waiting. Leader approached. Seemed to be communicating with me telepathically: I caught the thought—*Do not be afraid; we are the sounds*. Whole scene faded.

" 'No progress whatever. Unable to concentrate on findings; dreams distracting.'

" 'January 7: Insane perhaps, but am off to British Museum tomorrow. In last night's dream was told: *Check Necronomicon—formula for aiding us to reach you*. Page reference given. Expect and hope this will be false alarm—dreams taking altogether too much out of me. But what if something on that page? Am not interested in that field—impossible to know in normal way?'

" 'January 9: Back from London. Mao rite—on page I looked up—exactly as described in dream! Don't know what it will do, but will perform it tonight to find out. Strange no dreams while away—some influence existing only here?'

" 'January 10: Didn't wake till late afternoon. Dreams began as soon as sleep after rite. Don't know what to think. Alternatives both disturbing: either brain receiving transmission, or subconsciously inventing everything—but wd. sane mind act thus?

" 'If true that transmission external, learned following:

" 'Sounds in this area *are equivalents of matter in another dimension*. Said dimension overlaps ours at this point and certain others. City and

inhabitants in dream do not appear as in own sphere, but as wd. appear if consisting of matter. Different sounds here correspond to various objects in other dimension; whirring equals pillars & cones, bass throbbing is ground, other varying sounds are people of city & other moving objects. Matter on our side they sense as odours.

" 'The inhabitants can transmit whole concepts mentally. Leader asked me to try not to make sounds in radius of point of connection. Carried over to their dimension. My footsteps—huge crystals appeared on streets of city. My breathing—something living which they refused to show me. Had to be killed at once.

" 'Inhabitants interested in communication with our dimension. Not dream-transmission—frequent use of Mao rite dangerous. *Translator* to be built on this side—enables sound to be translated into visual terms on screen, as in dream, but little else. When they build counterpart link will be effected—complete passage between dimensions. Unfortunately, their translator completely different from ours and not yet successful. Leader told me: *Look in The Revelations of Glaaki for the plans*. Also gave me page reference & said where to get copy.

" 'Must get copy. If no plan, all coincidence & can return to normal research. If plan, can build machine, claim discovery of other dimension!' "

"I've been thinking," I interrupted. "Arnold Hird—there was something—wasn't he asked to leave the university because he attacked someone when they disagreed with him? Said he'd return and astonish everybody some day, but was never heard of again."

"I don't know," said Tony. "Anyway, he continues: " 'January 12: Got *Revelations of Glaaki*. Had to take drastic measures to obtain it, too. Plan here—book 9, pp. 2057-9. Will take some time to build, but worth it. To think that besides me, only superstitious know of this—but will soon be able to prove it!'

"Hmmm—well, there don't seem to be any very interesting entries after that, just 'not much progress today' or 'screen arrangement completed' or here 'down to Severnford today—had to order strings at music shop. Don't like idea of using it, but must keep it handy in case.'"

"So that's it," Frank said, standing up. "The man was a lunatic, and we've been sitting here listening to his ravings. No wonder he was kicked out of

the University."

"I don't think so," I disagreed. "It seems far too complex—"

"Wait a minute, here's another entry," called Tony. '—December 7.' " Frank gave him a protesting look, but sat down again. " 'December 7: Got through. Image faint, but contact sufficient—beings aware. Showed me unfinished translator on their side—may take some time before completion. Few more days to perfect image, then will publicise.'

" 'December 8: Must be sure about weapon I have constructed. *Revelations* give reason for use, but way of death is horrible. If unnecessary, definitely will destroy. Tonight will find out—will call Alain.' "

"Well, Frank?" I asked as Tony replaced the diary and began to search the shelves. "Crazy, maybe—but there are those sounds—and he called *something* that night where his diary ends—and there's that peculiar stuff all over the bed—"

"But how will we know either way?" Tony asked, removing a book.

"Set up all that paraphernalia, obviously, and see what comes through on the screen."

"I don't know," Tony said. "I want to look in the *Revelations of Glaaki*—that's what I've got here—but as for trying it ourselves, I think that's going a bit far. You'll notice how careful he was about it, and something happened to him."

"Come on, let's look at the book," interrupted Frank. "That can't do any harm."

Tony finally opened it and placed it on the table. On the page we examined diagrams, and learned that "the screen is attached to the central portion and viewed, while the receiver is directed toward the sounds before attachment." No power was necessary, for "the very sounds in their passing manipulate the instrument." The diagrams were crude but intelligible, and both Frank and I were ready to experiment. But Tony pointed to a passage at the end of the section:

"The intentions of the inhabitants of S'glhuo are uncertain. Those who use the translator would be wise to keep by them the stringed sounding-board, the only earthly weapon to touch S'glhuo. For when they build the translator to complete the connexion, who knows what they may bring through with

them? They are adept in concealing their intentions in dream-communication, and the sounding-board should be used at the first hostile action."

"You see?" Tony said triumphantly. "These things are unfriendly—the book says so."

"Oh, no, it doesn't," contradicted Frank, "and anyway it's a load of balls—living sounds, hah! But just suppose it was true—if we got through, we could claim the discovery—after all, the book says you're safe with this 'weapon.' And there's no rush back to the University."

Arguments ensued, but finally we opened the doors and dragged the instruments outside. I returned for the sounding-board, noticing how rusted it was, and Tony brought the volume of the Revelations. We stood at the edge of the area of sound and placed the receiver about midway. The screen was connected to the central section, and at last we clipped the wire from the screen to the rest.

For a minute nothing happened. The screen stayed blank; the coils and wire did not respond. Tony looked at the sounding-board. The vibrations had taken on a somehow expectant quality, as if aware of our experiment. And then the blue light bulb flickered, and an image slowly formed on the screen.

It was a landscape of dream. In the background, great glaciers and crystal mountains sparkled, while at their peaks enormous stone buildings stretched up into the mist. There were translucent shapes flitting about those buildings. But the foreground was most noticeable—the slanting streets and twisted pillar-supported cones which formed a city on one of the icy mountains. We could see no life in the city brooding in a sourceless blue light; only a great machine of tubes and crystals which stood before us on the street.

When a figure rose into the screen, we recoiled. I felt a chill of terror, for this was one of the city's inhabitants—and it was not human. It was too thin and tall, with huge pupil-less eyes, and a skin covered with tiny rippling scales. The fingers were boneless, and I felt a surge of revulsion as the white eyes stared unaware in my direction. But I somehow felt that this was an intelligent being, and not definitely hostile.

The being took out of its metallic robe a thin rod, which it held vertically and stroked several times. Whatever the principle, this must have been a summons, for in a few minutes a crowd had formed about the instrument in the street. What followed may only have been their method of communication, but I found it horrible; they stood in a circle and their fingers stretched fully two feet to interlace in the centre. They dispersed after a short time and spread out, a small group remaining by the machine.

"Look at that thing in the street," said Tony. "Do you suppose—"

"Not now," Frank, who was watching in fascination, interrupted. "I don't know if it'd be better to switch off now and get someone down from the University—no hell, let's watch a bit longer. To think that we're watching another world!"

The group around the machine were turning it, and at that moment a set of three tubes came into view, pointing straight at us. One of the beings went to a switchboard and clutched a lever with long twining fingers. Tony began to speak, but simultaneously I realised what he was thinking.

"Frank," I shouted, "that's their translator! They're going to make the connexion!"

"Do you think I'd better switch off, then?"

"But suppose that's not enough?" yelled Tony. "Do you want them to come through without knowing what they'll do? You read the book—for God's sake use the weapon before it's too late!"

His hysteria affected us all. Frank ran to the sounding-board and grabbed the lever. I watched the being on the machine, and saw that it was nearly ready to complete the connexion.

"Why aren't you doing anything?" Tony screamed at Frank.

He called back: "The lever won't move! Must be rust in the works—quick, Les, see if you can get them unstuck."

I ran over and began to scrape at the gears with a knife. Accidentally the blade slipped and twanged across the strings.

"There's something forming, I can't quite see," Tony said—

Frank was straining so hard at the lever that I was afraid it would snap—then it jerked free, the gears moved, the plectrum cylinder spun and an atrocious sound came from the strings. It was a scraping, whining discord

which clawed at our ears; it blotted out those other sounds, and I could not have stood it for long.

Then Tony screamed. We whirled to see him kick in the screen and stamp ferociously on the wires, still shrieking. Frank shouted at him—and as he turned we saw the slackness of his mouth and the saliva drooling down his chin.

We finally locked him in the back room of the house while we found our way back to Brichester. We told the doctors only that he had become separated from us, and that by the time we found him everything was as they saw it. When they removed Tony from the house, Frank took the opportunity to tear a few pages out of *The Revelations of Glaaki*. Perhaps because of this, the team of Brichester professors and others studying conditions there are making little progress. Frank and I will never go there again; the events of that afternoon have left too deep a mark.

Of course, they affected Tony far more. He is completely insane, and the doctors foresee no recovery. At his worst he is totally incoherent, and attacks anyone who cannot satisfactorily explain every sound he hears. He gives no indication in his coherent periods of what drove him mad. He imagines he saw something more on that screen, but never describes what he saw.

Occasionally he refers to the object he thinks he saw. Over the years he has mentioned details which would suggest something incredibly alien, but of course it must have been something else which unbalanced him. He speaks of "the snailhorns," "the blue crystalline lenses," "the mobility of the faces," "the living flame and water," "the bell-shaped appendages," and "the common head of many bodies."

But these periods of comparative coherency do not last long. Usually they end when a look of horror spreads over his face, he stiffens and screams something which he has not yet explained:

"I saw what it took from its victims! *I saw what it took from its victims!*"

BROECKER

Illustration by Randy Broecker, taken from reprint of The Inhabitant of the Lake And Other Unwelcome Tenants, 2011.

A Madness From The Vaults

"This transcription of one of the legends of Tond tells of the despotic rule of the governor Opojollac and his ill-fated consultation with the oracular Globes of Hakkthu to find what he can do to thwart a monster killing the citizens of Derd. This story was rewritten by Campbell in 1971."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1962
First published in *Doubt #1*, November 1964.

(Author's note: Readers of this, and of any other transcriptions of the legends of Tond, may wonder how any earthly author can be so informed. For those not familiar with the Secret Revelations of Glaaki or the Necronomicon, I can only say that I have reached Tond, Shaggai, Yuggoth and other worlds through a Crystalliser of Dream. Readers of the above works will recognise that I cannot be more explicit.

I have translated from the Tond as as far as possible (including measurements of time, distance, etc.), with certain exceptions. Yarkdac—plural, yarkdao—signifies one of the humanoid ruling race of the planet. Yarkdapl is therefore their equivalent of "human".)

Beneath the city of Derd on the planet of Tond are a number of vaults, stretching further than exploration parties have ever gone. They were built long before the yarkdao found the ruins of a pyramid-city and constructed Derd on its site, and were never used to any great extent. Some of the citizens preferred to be entombed in these catacombs rather than to rot on the peak of Liota above the city, but such rebels were uncommon. The openings from the vaults onto some of the streets were ignored by the multitude, and most exploration was deterred by the tales that, on certain nights, the corpses interred below would rise from their alcoves and tramp through the streets.

The vaults were as unnoticed in the twenty-fourth year of Opojollac's governorship as in any other year. The people of Derd had little time to notice such things, indeed, for Opojollac was the most tyrannical governor they had ever known. He exacted higher and higher taxes to furnish his palace in the centre of the city. He demanded that all young males be brought before him at the age of thirteen years, so that he could decide

which would best satisfy his abnormal instincts. There were rumours that he would order a temple built to himself. Worst of all, he did not allow names to be given by lot, but instead named the newborn as he saw fit, thus ensuring that nobody would overthrow him.

Early on the sixty-first day of the year, Opojollac was dining on the tongues of the preceding day's criminals. He found this meat excellent when boiled all night, and did not understand the aversion of other governors to such fare. He was reflecting that the mere identity of meat often caused regrettable repulsion when the nine bells inside the door began to chime softly, indicating that somebody wanted audience. He rapped on the table, and a hesitant servitor entered through the black metal curtains.

"O omnipotent and gracious Opojollac," began the servitor, bowing repeatedly. "O omnisapient—"

"I find your praises gratifying," Opojollac said, "but very tedious during my meal. Cease your preamble and explain why you have disturbed me. But first show me your tongue—yes, it appears tender, and if your explanation is not satisfactory I may well transfer it to my plate."

"Be it so, O benevolent Opojollac," said the servitor, shuddering. "A yarkdac is outside, saying that he must speak with you immediately of some danger to your glorious self."

"Then let him enter," ordered the governor. "Be sure he will be suitably rewarded. As for you—you may retain your tongue, until, perhaps, I fancy it."

The servitor exited, bowing feverishly, and returned soon with a ragged yarkdac, obviously from the poorest quarter of Derd. The latter bowed once, approached to a disrespectful distance and began:

"O governor, there is a yarkdac dead in the Street of Whores—"

"I am alive," interrupted Opojollac. "Therefore you are referring to the death of someone else, which does not concern me. I am not interested in the whores' methods of extracting payment."

He took up a spoon from which a bell hung, and shook it. The metal curtains moved again, and two giant yarkdao entered, robed in red metal. With the skill of long practice, they each took one of the yarkdac's legs, ready to break them outward at the governor's order.

"I feel in a lenient mood," Opojollac mused. "Remove the skin from his genitals and set him free."

It was coincidental that Beav Lanpbeav, one of the governor's chief assistants, had to pass down the Street of Whores that day to extract taxes on the inhabitants' earnings. About halfway down, where the entrance to the vaults gaped between the buildings, Lanpbeav noticed something lying in the gutter. It had been a yarkdac, but had been so treated that it was almost unrecognisable. Lanpbeav had not heard of the fate of his predecessor when he entered Opojollac's gaming room to inform him.

"I have heard of the Whore Street once today," the governor said, looking up from the parchment on which he was playing a fifth-dimensional game, "and repetition tires me. But you know well enough not to trouble me with trifles, so speak on."

"Certainly, O beneficent one," said the other. "The yarkdac had been killed by no whore. He was shapeless and covered with marks, and there was no blood! It was as if something had drunk it all, but there were no tracks."

Opojollac pushed away the parchment. "Doubtless some sorcerer released his familiar to forage. However, this corpse may inspire some new torture, and, besides, sorcery I punish by flaying alive and boiling water. And my spies are so inefficient that the sorcerer will be apprehended sooner if I view for myself."

But halfway between the governor's palace and the Street of Whores, Opojollac's green crystal carriage was stopped on the Avenue of Coprophiles. Beav Lanpbeav opened the front window and bellowed: "Clear the road there! Clear the road for governor Opojollac! "

A crowd was circling something in the road ahead. A few yarkdao moved out of the coach's way, but when most remained around the object, Lanpbeav left the carriage, carrying a barbed whip. Opojollac called him back. "They have seen my carriage, and would not block my way for any ordinary reason. Let us see what they are looking at."

The crowd fell back, some of them retreating into the nearby vault entrance. Opojollac and Lanpbeav saw a black, wet mass on the road; fully ten feet in diameter, very flat, and covered with circular depressions. Insects were crawling blackly over it.

"What offal is this?" demanded the governor. "Who has befouled the street?'

"This is no droppings," Beav Lanpbeav told him. "There is the same thing in the Street of Whores—the remains of a yarkdac."

Four more deaths of this sort occurred before Opojollac showed real interest. He instigated a search for a sorcerer who, he was sure, had released a demon on the city, but the deaths did not concern him, except as tax-losses; he merely forbade sorcery in Derd for it might be a weapon against him. But his spies informed him of a rumour, whose source they could not trace, that some monster came forth from the underground vaults and preyed vampirically on the citizens. Opojollac disliked this, for there was a vault entrance near the palace and one never knew what might crawl up from the vaults and enter the palace. He finally assembled an unwilling party of spies and sent them down to explore.

They had not gone far when they discovered something which sent them hurriedly back. All the tombs in the vaults had been broken open, and now contained only a bloodless coating of black fluid, covered with circular marks, and containing an occasional organ telling of the original identity. No tracks lead into the silent vaults, but they were sure that something had come from them.

"I was already sure of that," Opojollac told them. "Now return and find what lives below."

Not without terror the yarkdao entered the vaults a second time. They did not return before the two suns had set, and the governor began his evening meal without thinking of them. He was interrupted when a shrieking figure burst through the metal curtains. The yarkdac was covered with cobwebs, and there was madness in his eyes, but the governor recognised Crifte, the leader of the exploring party. The giant red-robed torturers entered and made to bear him away, but Opojollac stopped them.

"Wait," he ordered, laying down his spoons. "What did you discover in the vaults? Where are the others?"

"It took them," moaned Crifte. "We went far into the vaults, until we came to steps that led down into black water, water that splashed—there was a bridge—and then a circular passage going far into the dark, where we had to stop—on and on through the dark—we came to a great circular chamber,

girders leading high over a stone floor—we came to where the girders joined, and far below an enormous lever with a platform—and then the sound, and it came from a passage—"

"What sound?" Opojollac demanded. "What did this thing look like?"

"Squawking—screaming, all around us—and then it took them... I ran to the passage, then looked back—indescribable, two yarkdao smashed on the stones below—I only saw the shadow on the wall, madness to look—many arms and legs, parts moving up and down, squat body, long neck, round head with things jerking up and down, and jaws longer than the neck—opening and closing, and the squawking—"

"Deal with this fool," Opojollac told the torturers, and they dragged Crifte out with their thumbs hooked in his eye-sockets.

The next day Beav Lanpbeav entered the gaming room.

"The citizens are restless, O Opojollac, " he said. "They barricaded all the vault entrances last night, but this morning six more yarkdao are dead. I fear they will revolt."

"Let them revolt," the governor said. "I have my spies and my guards, and the palace is secure."

"Your spies and guards support the revolution," informed Lanpbeav, "and even your palace is no fortress against what comes from the vaults. I think there is only one place to seek help: the Globes of Hakkthu."

"Very well, you must tap their wisdom, " said Opojollac.

"No, indeed," Lanpbeav protested. "Surely someone else less important, in case—"

Opojollac touched a projection on the wall. A spike slammed down from the celling and cleft Lanpbeav's skull. Opojollac went past the corpse, out of the palace and into his carriage. Usually his assistant powered the coach mentally, but the governor soon had it driving through the streets of many-sided pillars and square grey buildings, and reached the edge of the raised causeway to Hakkthu. He ascended the many white stone steps and began to walk along the blanched causeway.

He passed through strange country. Towering mountain peaks glittered to the distance, while nearby he sometimes passed fields of pale stalks carrying soft threads, which swayed and rustled although there was no

wind. He saw enormous ruins of fortresses and pagodas resembling no yarkdapl city, above which many-eyed gargoyles stared frozenly. Once he saw a tree fully seven hundred feet tall, in whose branches translucent fruit turned slowly back and forth, hypnotically, and once something fluttered invisibly out of long grass, piping shrilly.

When he came to the point where the causeways joined the bridge to the plain of Hakkthu, he saw a figure approaching in another direction. He did not wish to talk, being intent on preparing his speech to the Globes; he knew that if disturbed for any reason they considered trivial, they would devour their disturber.

But he heard running footsteps behind him, and presently someone tried to push by him.

"Get back," the governor ordered. "Do you not know I am Opojollac, governor of Derd—"

The yarkdac raised a knife, and by his speech Opojollac knew him for one of the decadent yarkdao of the east.

"You want me ghostise you?" inquired the newcomer. "You knifesurround, maybe?"

"If you were of Derd—" Opojollac caught the blade's flash, and controlled himself. "Who are you, and what is your mission?"

"Globeapproach," explained the other. "Selfcall Pl'gom. Problem citydefend of which selfruler. Globeconsult foreyou, yes?"

The knife forced the governor to agree, and, besides, he saw that the Globes' reaction to Pl'gom would indicate his own best method of approach. He stood aside and followed the other down the pillared white bridge across the sand. Presently they saw a huge shape moving on the horizon, and knew they were near Hakkthu. The bridge rose as they neared the plain, so that at the end they looked down on the fifty-foot metal spheres which rotated incessantly on the circular plain. None knew why they rotated, or who had built the bridge, but all knew that the Globes were alive, and that they engulfed anyone who disturbed them for any unimportant reason.

Pl'gom quickly descended the white steps to the plain, and, making the sign which was handed through generations, stood before one of the Globes. A grumbling bass note came from it, and its rotation slowed.

"Owncity attack bynother," Pl'gom shouted. "Wantknow defence—"

The sphere began to rotate again. It rolled toward Pl'gom, who screamed as the sand it raised flew into his eyes. The sand and the frenzied spinning hid the scene for a moment, then there came a metallic crash, the Globe spun away, and Pl'gom had gone. Before the settling sand covered it, Opojollac saw a severed hand twitching on the ground.

Not without fear, he came to the plain below the steps. He avoided the sphere from which blood dribbled, and made the sign at another, which spun to a standstill.

"O mighty Globe of Hakkthu,' he said, bowing as so many had done to him. "A monster has risen from the vaults below Derd, a monster which mutilates and sucks dry its victims. If it overcomes the citizens of Derd—as it will without your aid—it may come here and attack you. I beg you to say what we can do."

A bass voice rumbled from the Globe, shaking the ground. "A yarkdac must enter the vaults and find the chamber where a lever rises from the floor below girders. When he presses down the lever, that is protection from the madness from below." And with that the Globe went back to its rotation.

Opojollac returned to Derd, and managed to quiet the rebels by telling them his plan. An earless prisoner below the palace, who had been lowered into the maggot-pit before the affair of the vaults, was still whole and would be sent into the catacombs. He would be told what to do, and promised a pardon if successful. So, the following day, Opojollac remained in his palace and listened to the yarkdac's voice from the palace's communication crystal.

"The floor is slippery now," said the voice of Og, the prisoner. "The walls are narrowing, and the ceiling is too low for me to stand upright. Now I can see where it widens ahead into a chamber... Ah!—something is moving there—a great flickering shadow… Shub-Nigurrat help me, why could you not tell me more? I can hear nothing you say now. Nothing further moves. This must be the chamber you spoke of—slimy rusted girders leading into darkness where I can see nothing, and below the lever—"

Over the crystal came a nearby squawking; Og did not hear it.

"At the centre of the girders—but how can I get to the lever? There is no way down!"

Suddenly the squawking blasted from the crystal. Og screamed once —"The shadow-Shob-Nigurrat—" and then came a long shriek and crunching thud. Opojollac thought he heard a metallic sliding begin, but silence ensued from the receiver.

The governor heard other sounds, however. A strange muffled whistling shook the ground, and Opojollac heard his crystal carriage jangling outside the palace. Then a confused shouting came from the multitude outside. Opojollac hurried to one of his observation towers. He did not know what was wrong, but knew that sorcery had come to Derd, for the wind which had been howling around the city a moment before had ceased completely.

He stared numbly from the tower at what lay beyond. A massive transparent dome encircled and covered the entire city. Already a crowd had gathered at one point along the translucent wall and were hurling stones at it, but to no effect. Then a shape appeared on the horizon and approached Derd; and Opojollac recognised one of the Globes of Hakkthu. It spun beyond the dome, and a voice thundered from it:

"It is a pity, but this was necessary. You of Derd cannot escape the madness from the vaults, and it cannot escape when it has devoured you. For this is the only way we of Hakkthu can control this, which is older even than ourselves."

The globe spun away over the horizon. The crowd below had heard its pronouncement, and began to pelt stones at the palace and scream for the gates to be opened. But at that moment a huge shape floundered out of the nearby vault entrance, and Opojollac turned from the window as the crowd shrieked louder. He turned to the crystal and reversed it, so that his voice was received in the nearby city of Carc.

"I want to warn you all never to come near Derd. You cannot enter, and what you see will be unpleasant... But there are no more screams outside. Is that the palace gates opening? Padding across the forecourt—up the stairs, rubbing against the walls... The door! Bulging inward!"

Then Opojollac screamed. That scream went on and on, and rose to such a pitch that all the listeners in Carc retracted their ears. When they again tentatively put them forth, there were no yarkdao in Derd.

No yarkdac goes near Derd now. The governor's last cry is a whispered legend, and those who glimpse Derd from the horizon say that huge

shadows flicker over the dome. On Tond, until the dome shatters, the madness from the vaults has become merely a legend.

1963

The Return Of The Witch

"Another story based on an idea from Lovecraft's Commonplace Book. Campbell notes that it resembles Henry Kuttner's *The Salem Horror*, a story he did not read until some years later. A reference in the story anticipates *The Stone on the Island*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1963
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Few outsiders passed through the Mercy Hill area of Brichester at the end of the first World War, for it was notorious for crime, and routes through it led nowhere important. Those who entered that area of narrow streets and tall red-brick houses with their hostilely peering tenants might vaguely notice that the streets toward the hilltop, around the hospital, were less crowded and dirty, but that was all. Hardly any remarked the desertion of Victoria Road as a thoroughfare, and the furtiveness of the tenants in the buildings there, but, of course, they were outsiders. Nobody living on Mercy Hill would have gone down Victoria Road so nonchalantly. For everyone in the area knew that Gladys Shorrock, who lived at no. 7 in that road, was a witch.

She had come to no. 7 in the late 1910's with her son Robert, and soon after they had settled in the dull red-brick house everybody knew what she was. Nobody noticed the lesser details at first, until later when they assumed a new importance; they overlooked the way the shutters went up at the first-floor window of no. 7 overlooking the street during the first week, and did not come down. They even tried not to notice when bushes grew in the garden of no. 7 to a height of three feet from seed inside a month, and did not heed the insistence of Mrs. Hancock next door that "it rains on't garden at them Shorrocks, though there ain't no wet ground anywhere else!"

It was Robert Shorrock who made the mistake. Later people said that his mother must have realised he had to work, to avert suspicion which would

have arisen if they had lived without external earnings. Robert was not intelligent, and did not know enough to conceal his dabblings in witchcraft. He went to work on rebuilding a street at the foot of the Hill, and would have made a competent worker, had not the owner of a nearby house complained that her black cat had disappeared—for Robert Shorrock finally confessed that he had walled it up in imitation of an ancient street-christening ceremony. They did not demolish the wall after what he hinted of the consequences, but quickly took his job from him.

After that, many tales grew up around the tenants of no. 7, many of them probably exaggerated, but the Shorrocks' neighbours now consisted only of scoffers at sorcery, people surely unlikely to invent wild stories. Everyone saw something amiss around the red-brick building, and all scraped the signs under their windows which had hitherto been necessary only on a few nights of the year. In 1924 Robert died, and the undertaker who came from Camside to attend to the funeral suddenly left his profession and took to drink. An expectant terror took hold of Mercy Hill.

1925 saw the climax. That year people said many things: what flapped from the roof of no. 7 were not birds; that the vines which climbed that wall swayed back and forth on windless nights; and once someone saw Gladys Shorrock leave the house, mutter something, and the gate open and close itself behind her. Toward the end of October the tales became hysterical, especially that of one man who had boldly followed her toward Severnford and fled a gigantic glowing figure which strode after him through the forest. The inhabitants of Mercy Hill felt sure that she was preparing for something, and waited trembling for the outcome.

It came when, on October 31, Gladys Shorrock died. It must have been that day, for the people opposite saw her sit down facing the window, her lips moving, and stare out, with occasional glances upward—where was the room with the shuttered window. Next morning they saw she was in the same position, and on November 2 a passer-by noticed her glazed eyes and called a doctor. She had been dead two days, but the doctor, a Brichester man, did not ask why he had not been informed sooner. He merely diagnosed heart failure—for, after all, she exhibited all the symptoms—and arranged a quick funeral.

On November 4 two men entered the Shorrock house. Braver than the rest, they had determined to see what lay inside, but they soon left hurriedly,

Nothing in the front room horrified them; most of the titles in the bookcase were foreign, and the searchers did not know enough to fear the queerly shaped, highly polished objects in glass cases round the room. On the stairs something scurried into the shadows, but one said it was only a mouse, although the other had seen characteristics of something less pleasant. But they could not stand the locked door at the top of the stairs, the door which they could not bring themselves to break down, because it led into the shuttered room.

Before long terror had risen around the house again. Late home- comers would go out of their way to avoid passing down Victoria Road, and many would take another route even in the daytime. The terror centred around that shuttered window above the street, and nearly everybody passed on the other side of the road, looking away from no. 7. Those who dared to go near said that while the witch might be dead, something lived in that house, for if one listened outside the window, one could hear a hollow murmuring from behind the shutters.

So no. 7 fell into disuse. No Brichester person would take it, and the Mercy Hill area did not appeal to outsiders. Few people entered the house, even thirty years later, and its history was gradually forgotten, except that it should still be avoided.

Until, on February 1, 1960, Norman Owen came to Brichester.

Owen was a novelist who had grown bored with life in Lancashire's Southport, and sought a change. The Severn area had appealed to him, and after reading an advertisement in the Brichester Weekly News he had bought no. 7 Victoria Road outright. Unfortunately, the Southport train came in at Lower Brichester, rather than the Mercy Hill station; and bystanders seemed to be as uncertain as he how to reach his destination.

"Victoria Road, please," he ordered one taxi-driver.

"Sorry, can't say as I've heard of it," said the driver. "—Mercy 'ill? No road called that up there as I know of."

"Excuse me—did you say you were looking for Victoria Road?" Owen turned and saw a middle-aged man in a tweed suit, with his hand on a car door.

"Yes—I've bought a house there, actually, but this man doesn't seem to know where it is."

"Well, I'm going up Mercy Hill," the other told him, "and I could drop you off if you want a lift." As Owen got into the car, the driver muttered: "But there's no empty house on Victoria Road, except—"

They drove out of the station, and Owen saw the many converging streets rising to meet at the grey hospital. He turned as the man beside him remarked:

"I'd better introduce myself—I'm Stanley Nash, a doctor at the hospital... Would I be right in thinking that you've bought no. 7?"

"Well, I'm Norman Owen—an author, I have to admit—and you're right about the address. But how did you guess—do you live next door or something?"

"No," said Nash, "I live in Gladstone Place at the bottom of the Hill. It's just that this house you've bought has something of a reputation—rather infamous round here. You see, not so long ago it belonged to a witch."

"Really! Well, I ought to write something good here!"

"I wouldn't joke about it," reproved the doctor. "There's often something of truth in these stories, you know."

"I thought you were a doctor," Owen said.

"I think you ought to take notice of what they say about your house," Nash told him. "It's seldom that these stories are entirely imaginary—and there's a widespread fear of a shuttered room overlooking the street, which I'd advise you to remember. It's never been opened since Gladys Shorrock's death—she was the witch—and why would anyone lock and shutter a room as soon as they bought a house?"

"That's simple; either she was mad, or if she was cleverer than you think, perhaps she *wanted* to be thought a witch—nobody would bother her, after all... Oh, is this it?"

Owen found the building which he saw vaguely repellent. The dull red-brick walls, the dark vines, the thinly-painted window- frames and door, all depressed him. On the other hand, he had bought it cheaply, and it might be better inside. But although the rooms were clean and well lighted, as soon as he entered the house a shadow of depression fell across him. The rows of books and Victorian furniture must have caused it; certainly it was nothing to do with lingering influences.

"How is it there's no dust?" Owen inquired.

"I think the estate agents get someone from the... more enlightened part of town to clean up," said Nash. "I come in here now and then myself—well, my brother works at the agents' and gives me the key. The books interest me, so I'll be tactless and ask if I could drop around occasionally..."

They had reached the first-floor landing. "Call round whenever you like—I don't know anybody here yet. And this is the famous sealed room, I suppose."

Owen stared at the brown-painted door at the top of the stairs for so long that Dr Nash said:

"Well, I'm off now. Are you getting a telephone?—yes, you'll be able to keep in touch with your friends that way. I'll ring you up in a few days, then."

Owen did not notice the doctor descending the stairs. He was searching among his keys for one to fit the door, but the agents had not sent it. Some half-sensed intolerance made him kick at the lock until the door swung inward. He stepped forward and peered in, but no light entered between the shutters, and most of the room was in darkness. He felt for the light switch and turned it.

Dr Nash was opening his car door when he heard a sound. A shadow whirred over him and into the house. He saw nothing, but got the impression of an oval winged shape, with something nevertheless human about it. He slammed the door and ran up the stairs. Owen was leaning against the door-frame of the shuttered room, apparently supporting himself, but straightened when the doctor called out.

"What—I must have gone dizzy for a moment," Owen said. "Everything went black, and I seemed to be falling."

"I told you not to open that door."

"I bought this house," Owen reminded him, "and I'm not starting off with a room I can't enter. Anyway, it's done now—but what do you make of this?"

Dr Nash looked in. The room was still in darkness, although the switch was turned. He pulled out his cigarette lighter and entered cautiously. Light flickered on bare walls and floor, and then picked out what hung from the ceiling. It resembled a neon tube formed into a pentagram, and so

surrounded by mirrors that no light escaped into the room—almost as though it radiated darkness. He had seen something like it in one of the books downstairs, but did not remember its purpose. But he saw that it was arranged so anyone entering the room would activate it by the light switch, and knew some force had just been set in motion.

"Well, what is it?" Owen asked behind him.

"I'm not sure," said the doctor, "but I've a feeling you may have started something." He looked Owen over carefully and decided that he was unharmed. "You look all right, but don't hesitate to call me if you feel ill. Of course, you can't phone from here—but never mind, I'll be going down that way, and maybe I can hurry them up getting the phone put in. Here's my card with the number."

After Dr Nash had left, Owen closed the door on the landing and went out for a meal. Returning after dark, he was again depressed by the sight of the house, black against the almost-moonless sky. He found himself looking at the shuttered window; no sound came from it, but he had an odd conviction that the room was inhabited. There was little to do in the house; he could have read one of the earlier tenant's books, but preferred to sleep after his journey.

He did not usually dream, but tonight was different. He dreamed of wanderings through space to dead cities on other planets, of lakes bordered by twisted trees which moved and creaked in no wind, and finally of a strange curved rim beyond which he passed into utter darkness—a darkness in which he sensed nothing living. Less clear dreams occurred, too, and he often felt a clutching terror at glimpses of the shuttered room amid bizarre landscapes, and of rotting things which scrabbled out of graves at an echoing, sourceless call.

He was glad to rise the next morning. After breakfast he tried to work on his new novel, but found it too laborious. About eleven o'clock he was interrupted by a party of workmen come to put in the telephone, and welcomed the company. They seemed a little uneasy, and he avoided referring to the house. They left around three o'clock, and Owen telephoned the doctor to thank him. During their conversation Owen mentioned that he would have liked to leave the house more, but did not like walking.

"Well, borrow my car," suggested Dr. Nash. "I can always get one at the hospital when I need it—I only use my own at weekends. If you wait I'll

drop round about six o'clock with it."

At 6:15 the doctor arrived. They left the car on the street, for no. 7 had no garage.

"No, I'm quite all right," Owen answered the doctor's question. "What do you expect to be wrong with me anyway?"

Soon after, Owen remarked that he wanted to get to bed. Dr Nash was puzzled by the other's desire for sleep, but saw nothing ominous in it. Owen waited until the doctor had been gone a few minutes, and hurried upstairs to his bedroom. He did not fight this urge, but wondered at it, for he was not tired.

He fell asleep immediately, and began to dream. Something was stirring under the ground, was calling him imperatively, and in his dream he rose, dressed, and went downstairs to the car. Before leaving he took a spade from the back garden and placed it on the back seat. Then he drove off toward that voiceless call.

He drove downward along half-lit streets, past occasional figures walking the pavements, past other cars whose drivers glanced uninterestedly at him, and reached a street at the bottom of the Hill whose one side was bordered by a railing. He rolled the window down and looked out, saw the street was deserted, got the spade and climbed out. Pushing the spade through the railings, he clambered over and jumped down into the graveyard.

In the dream he did not question that he knew where to go. He picked his way among the leaning stones and crosses to a grave near the far end of the cemetery, overgrown with weeds and grass. He tore the vegetation off, shuddering at the small things which scuttled over his hand, and began to dig.

Some hours passed before the spade struck a solid object. He dropped into the hole the rope he had brought and tied it to the handles of the coffin, then climbed out and strained at the rope. The coffin came quite easily, almost as if it were being lifted from below, and thudded on the edge of the grave. Somehow he dragged it to the railing and got it over, then followed it. He heaved it onto the car's back seat and drove it back to the house on Victoria Road. Few people were on the streets now, and they did not notice the back seat's charnel contents.

Victoria Road was completely deserted, and the houses were lightless. He opened the front door, returned to drag the casket into the house, and dropped it in the living room. He got a hammer from the kitchen and began to prise the nails out of the lid, until it was free. He lifted it and looked in.

An atrocious stench rose from the box. In the dream Owen felt no horror at the grey thing which stared up at him, but when a strange hypnosis rose from his mind, nausea started to bubble. Then he heard a movement in the coffin, and a rotting hand appeared over the edge. He screamed when the corpse rose and turned its head stiffly to look at him with yellow eyes. The peeling lips shifted, and a faint painful croaking moved the throat.

For a moment it held this position. Then the lower jaw dropped from the face with a sickening tearing of flesh, the head twisted at a greater angle and ripped from the neck to thud into the coffin. The headless object tottered for a moment, then it, too, collapsed into a black tangle already beginning to liquefy. The hypnosis was suddenly on Owen again, and he merely picked up the lid and began to nail it into place.

It did not take so long to fill in the grave, and he soon drove back to no. 7 and returned to his bedroom. At this point the dream ended, and he fell into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning Owen awoke, sleepily swung his legs over the side, and stared at them in bewilderment. He turned toward a full-length mirror—and saw that he was fully dressed, down to his shoes, which were caked with earth. He knew that he had undressed the night before, but refused to accept the explanation his mind offered. Instinctively he went down to examine the car, stopping when he saw the vaguely rectangular six-foot depression on the back seat.

There was only one thing to do, and so Owen drove along the route of last night's dream. He tried not to think that no dream could so point routes in an area he had never frequented, but could not avoid noticing that the graveyard was where he had dreamed it. He entered through the gateway and approached along the tombstone alleys. He found the stone easily enough; and though an inscription was roughly chipped"*—Gladys Shorrock —died 1924: God grant she stay dead*"—no weeds grew on the grave, and the earth had been freshly dug.

Some hours later, Dr Nash arrived at no. 7 in answer to Owen's telephone call, and listened to his story.

"I don't quite know what you've done," the doctor told him. "If I could look through these books... No, you read a paper or something. This isn't the sort of thing you should read in your— condition."

After a search of one nine-volume book, Dr Nash looked up. "I think I've got it," he said. "But you won't find it very pleasant —nor, perhaps, very credible."

"Well, get it over with," suggested Owen.

"It's like this, then: since you entered that locked room, the— soul, spirit, life-force, whatever you like—of the witch has been co-existing in your body."

"What?" exclaimed Owen, not quite incredulous. "But that can't be! I—I don't feel any different!"

"It's the only thing that explains both these 'dreams' and that pentacle. I think this influence is relatively dormant in the daytime, but at night it's more potent, and seems to be using you actively. Now it must be finding you a bad host—after all, your decisions oppose it—and now it's looking for another body. Gladys Shorrock wants to return—she tried to resurrect her own body first, but it was too far gone—"

"But how in hell can it be true? Nobody could know how to do this!"

"Gladys Shorrock was a witch, remember," remarked Dr Nash. "She knew of a lot of things we can't even imagine. I've been through these books of hers, you know, and read of some of the places she visited. She went to the lake in the woods some miles from here, and watched—from a distance—what happens at Goatswood... There were other places, too—like the island of the white stone beyond Severnford which nobody visits; and she knew the secret of the evil clergyman at Severnford—that's where she got the knowledge to make this—return."

"And if this were true, what would this life-force do now?"

"Well, it can't use its own body, and doesn't seem to find you very accommodating, so obviously it'll have to find *another* body." "But then what can we—what should we do?"

"I had thought of smashing that pentagram, but I don't think that's a very good idea. The *Revelations*—that book I had there— doesn't say what would happen, and it might harm you, as any great shock would. But it'll

probably send you out again, so I'd better take my car back—I don't think there's anywhere nearby that could harbour a body."

"Oh, no, you don't," contradicted Owen. "I want to be able to get away from here quickly if I have to. Unless, of course, you stay with me—but you can't do that every night."

"I'm afraid I can't even do it tonight," said the doctor. "I have to go to Camside tonight—nobody else can go, and I certainly won't get back before nine o'clock. Tell you what, though—as soon as I get back I'll phone, and if you don't answer I'll come round at once. Hell, look at the time—I've got to go now. See you later, perhaps, and until then I'd advise you to drink as much black coffee as you can hold."

Owen stood at the window, watching Dr Nash turn the corner, and repressing an urge to call him back. Suddenly the street lamps awoke, and he realised how near was the night.

He entered the kitchen and brewed a cup of black coffee. He returned to the living room, sat down and reached for the cup on a nearby table. His hand slipped, the cup smashed on the floor, but he was all at once too weary to pick it up, and could only fall back in the chair, his eyes closing.

Soon he rose, started the car and drove away up the Hill. He reached a large building which he guessed was the hospital, and turned right. After that the road led him deeper into the country, through tree-colonnades and between green-white hills under a pallid half-moon. Then, instinctively, he pulled up the car between a dark wood and a hill. Taking a torch from the glove compartment, he began to climb the hill.

He reached a crudely rectangular entrance about halfway up, the interior in darkness. He glanced without revulsion at the gargoyle horror carved over the doorway, switched on the torch and started along the passage. He went along that passage for some time, noticing that the passage did not turn in its slight descent, but merely dwindled beyond his sight; and that the roughly chiseled marks on the walls pointed upward, as if carved from below.

Eventually he reached an alcove in the wall, and saw that in it lay a tightly fastened circular chest. He moved the chest, and innumerable long-legged spiders scurried out of a nest behind it, running over his hands into the darkness beyond. The chest was not three feet in diameter, but heavier than

it appeared, yet he lifted it easily and soon carried it along the passage, down the hill and onto the back seat of the car, then driving back to Victoria Road.

Under the pale moon, he lifted the wooden chest and hurried with it into the living room. He began to turn the strangely-hinged lever on the lid in a way that was somehow obvious to him, but the exertion he had undergone had taken its toll, and he let it snap back into place, exhausted.

At that moment the telephone rang, and he awoke.

So it *was a dream!* Then his eyes cleared, and he found himself standing in the living room near the telephone—close to a circular wooden chest.

For the moment he could only lunge for the telephone which had suddenly become his one hold on sanity, though something briefly tried to restrain him, and grab up the receiver.

"Owen? So you're all right, after all!" said the doctor's relieved voice.

"No, I'm not," Owen forced out. "It happened again—brought something back—in the room now—" Unable to say more, he dropped the receiver into place.

He suddenly felt an urge toward the circular chest; to lift the lid and see what lay inside. Already one hand was twitching in its direction. Viciously he drove his fist into the edge of the table, causing such pain that the impulse subsided.

His concentration arranged itself around the throbbing hand, but was interrupted by an impatient battering at the front door. Owen staggered into the hall and with his uninjured hand let Dr Nash in.

(Look at the bastard! He tells you you're possessed, but you know what he really means, don't you? That you're schizophrenic... Push him out, quick! Don't let him come poking round your mind!)

"Quick—upstairs, for God's sake!" Owen screamed. "Smash that pentacle, no matter what happens!"

Dr Nash hesitated a moment, staring at him, then peered closer. What he saw Owen never discovered, but the doctor pushed him away and clattered upstairs. There came a sound of glass breaking, and something seemed to pass from Owen; a shadow which fluttered against the ceiling faded away

murmuring. He felt very weak, and all urge to open the chest had disappeared.

The doctor hurried anxiously into the hall. "Where is the—the thing you brought back?"

Owen led him into the living room, and they stood over it. "What do we do with it?"

"Burn it, I suppose," replied Dr Nash. "And I don't think we'd better open it, even though I don't know what's in it."

"I do," said Owen, shuddering, and began to drag it into the hall. "There was something carved over—where I found it... not quite a spider, not quite a snake, and it had a face that... Come on, for God's sake let's get it out."

They carried the chest into the back garden and lit the petrol they poured over it, standing ready with pokers for anything that might struggle out. But only a long white member fell out as the lid warped, and then the contents began to bubble, but they watched until nothing remained except ashes which wheeled away on the night wind. Then they drove to Gladstone Place and fought sleep until the night had passed.

Owen left Victoria Road the next day, and now writes in a room looking out on Southport beach. He has not forgotten, however; and particularly when the sea is lashing blackly in the night he remembers a crudely-chipped gravestone, and echoes: "God grant she stay dead."

Illustration by Randy Broecker, taken from reprint of The Inhabitant of the Lake And Other

Unwelcome Tenants, 2011.

The Moon-Lens

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Sitting in his office in Mercy Hill hospital, Dr James Linwood read the headline again:

PROMINENT BRICHESTER SURGEON TO
ADVOCATE EUTHANASIA AT CONVENTION

...*Prominent*, eh? And on the front page too! But it was the *Brichester Weekly News*, of course, and anything local had automatic preference.

He glanced at his watch and saw that it showed five past midnight. Out of habit, he changed his desk calendar from April 2 to April 3, 1961. He leaned back in his desk and considered: should he go home to bed or stay to work on his convention speech? He decided on the latter, and switched on the tape-recorder.

At that moment there came a tap on the door—someone else working late, no doubt. He called out 'Good night,' but the shadow on the frosted glass panel did not move. Dr Linwood stood up and opened the door.

A man he had never seen before was standing outside. The doctor felt somehow instinctively repelled; whether by the man's dirty, ridiculously baggy trousers and long raincoat, or by a faint reptilian odour which he caught, he could not say. The other did not speak—and the silence began to unnerve Dr Linwood.

'Visiting time's over, I'm afraid,' he finally said.

'I'm not a visitor,' said the other in an abnormally deep and slow voice.

'Well, if you're a patient, you want the other side of the building.'

'No, I don't,' contradicted the visitor. 'I want to see you, Dr Linwood—you are *the* Dr Linwood? The one who's in favour of mercy killing?'

'That's correct,' confirmed the doctor, 'but at this time of night—'

'I want you to kill me,' the other said.

The doctor regarded him carefully, and decided he was not joking. 'I'm sorry—I *advocate* it, I don't carry it out—not yet, anyway. And I must say that you don't look like a euthanasia case.'

'But surely—if you thought somebody really needed it, you might... do it privately so nobody would know? I'd do it myself, but the thought of pain... I thought maybe an overdose of chloroform—'

'I'm sorry,' repeated the doctor more coldly, 'it's impossible at the moment, and anyway I do *not* intend it to make suicide legal.'

'But I need it,' insisted the man. 'I have a condition which makes living completely unbearable.'

'Maybe if I examined you—' suggested Dr Linwood.

The visitor shrank away from the doctor's hand. 'You mustn't see—it'd be too much... But perhaps I could convince you. If I can just tell you what's happened to me—'

'I don't really have the time—' protested the doctor, but the other had already pushed into the office and sat down before the desk. Well, perhaps he could use this in his speech to stress his aversion to legalised suicide. He sat down and motioned for the man to begin.

'My name is Roy Leakey,' began the other...

On April 1, 1961, Roy Leakey had set out for Exham. He had already visited all of Brichester's antiquarian bookshops; and, hearing that many fruitful second-hand shops existed in Exham, he decided to explore the town. Few people went there, and there was no direct railway line between the two towns, and no bus route whatever. He disliked train journeys, especially when changing trains was necessary, but here this seemed unavoidable. At the station he learned that only one train left for Exham that day, at 11:30; he would have to change at Goatswood at approximately 12:10 and wait perhaps twenty minutes for the connection.

The train left Lower Brichester station five minutes late and rushed to keep to schedule. Leakey jolted uncomfortably in his seat, staring uninterestedly out of the window. He found nothing interesting in the red brick houses which rocked by below, advertisements painted in crude white letters on their railway-facing walls, nor even the gentle Cotswold hills which surrounded the line once it escaped the dismal cuttings. Soon the grass on the hills gave way to trees; close bare trunks which huddled closer until the

entire landscape was wooded. He saw no houses among the trees, and sensed no life in the woods. Once he thought for a second that he saw a strange grey cone far off in the forest, then it was gone, but the sight filled him with an odd disquiet.

This far the line had been almost straight, except for the slight curves round the hills. Then, about half an hour out of Brichester, the train slowed to take a more pronounced bend in the track. Leakey's carriage reached the bend. The left-hand side, where he was sitting, was on the inside of the curve; and as he looked out, for the first time he saw Goatswood.

The impression he got from that first glimpse was of furtiveness. The close-set dull-red roofs, the narrow streets, the encircling forests—all seemed somehow furtive. Then his carriage passed the bend, and the train plunged down again through the bleak woods.

Five minutes later, Leakey watched the last carriage dwindle up the line, then looked about the platform.

Nobody else had alighted at Goatswood, and he could see why. The platform consisted of bare slippery boards, the waiting-room windows were dirty and inscribed with obscenities, the hard wooden seats were unpainted; the whole place seemed dead. Out of habit Leakey approached the station master's office to ask when the connecting train would arrive. The man who appeared repelled him at once; he wore a grotesquely voluminous uniform, and his face was revoltingly goat-like—resembling some medieval woodcut of a satyr, Leakey thought.

'Train won't be along fer quarter of an 'our yet,' said the station master, and went back into his office.

Leakey sat on an unpainted seat and stared over the wooden railing at the street a few yards below. Occasionally a passer-by would glance up, but most merely strolled past without seeing him. It struck Leakey that they were preoccupied; with what he could not know, but everybody who went by had an expectant air.

He grew tired of watching after a few minutes, and looked away over the roofs—to where something towered at the centre of town, between the station and a large hill, bare of trees, which rose behind the town. Leakey could not make it out, for the sunlight reflected dazzlingly from it, but it was shaped rather like a flagpole, with a round object atop it.

Still watching, he was vaguely aware of the station master answering his office telephone, listening and then coming towards him.

"Fraid there won't be a train t'Exham t'day,' the man said behind him. 'Tree's fell an' blocked the line.'

Disappointed, Leakey did not look forward to a sojourn in Goatswood. 'What time's the next one back to Brichester, then?'

'Oh, there's only one t'day, an' that went about 'alf an 'our ago.'

Leakey did not recall passing a train on the opposite line, but at that moment he could only think of being stranded. 'But then—what am I going to do?'

'Only one thing y' *can* do—Stay at an 'otel in town fer the night.'

To give himself time to think, Leakey left the station and went for a meal at the Station Café opposite. The meal—sausage, egg and chips, all over-raw—was barely palatable, but he would not have enjoyed a better meal. The faces of the other customers were too grotesque, and he felt under the bulky suits and long dresses might lie the most revolting deformities. More, for the first time he was served by a waiter wearing gloves—and by what he could make out of the hands under them Leakey thought they were deservingly worn.

At the cash desk, he asked for directions to a hotel where he could spend the night.

'We've only one good hotel in town,' the cashier replied. 'That's in Central Place. No, you wouldn't know where that is; well, it's a square with an island in the middle, and a p—Anyway, you go along Blakedon Street—'

Leakey followed the cashier's directions and approached the town centre. He saw offices, department stores, public houses, cinemas, parked cars, all the attributes of any town centre; but he felt something unusual here—perhaps merely a strengthening of that expectancy he had remarked at the station.

Eventually he reached a large square, read the street sign and saw the neon *Central Hotel* at the other side. But his attention was immediately drawn to the metal pylon, fifty feet high, which rose from the centre of the square. At the top he saw a large convex lens surrounded by an arrangement of mirrors, and all hinged on a pivot attached to the ground by taut ropes.

Leakey stared at the object for so long that he caught someone watching him. He turned to the watcher and remarked: 'I'm curious because I'm from out of town—do you happen to know what that thing is?'

But the other merely peered at him wordlessly until Leakey glanced away in embarrassment, then hurried away. Baffled, Leakey made for the nearby hotel.

Once inside he felt relieved. The reception desk, the large foyer, the wide red-carpeted staircase, all seemed welcoming. He crossed to the reception desk and rang the bell.

'A room for the night?' repeated the middle-aged man who answered it. 'Yes, we do have one or two—I'm afraid they look out on the square, so you may be a bit troubled by noise. Twenty-seven and six bed and breakfast, is that all right?'

'Yes, that's fine,' Leakey replied, signing the book. He followed the manager upstairs.

On the landing, he asked: 'What's that thing in the square outside?'

'What?—oh, that? Just a local relic. You'll probably find out about it tonight.'

He opened a door marked *no.7* and ushered Leakey into a thick-carpeted room furnished with a bed, dressing-table, bedside table with a framed photograph in the middle, and two wardrobes. Leakey entered and turned to ask the meaning of his remark, but the manager was already heading for the stairs. Shrugging, he went to the window and watched the crowd below. Strange, he thought—he had brought no luggage, yet the manager had not asked him to pay in advance.

He heard a train whistle, and idly looked towards the pillar of smoke. Then he threw up the window as he realised—the train had just left the station, and was speeding *towards Brichester*!

He ran for the door, but in his hurry knocked the table to the floor, and he delayed to right it. His foot crunched on glass. It was the framed photograph, the glass smashed but the picture intact. He picked it up, turned it upright, and recoiled.

The thing in the picture was standing in a doorway. He could not believe it was alive—that pillar of white flesh supported on many-jointed bony legs

tipped with great circular pads could never move about, let alone think. It had no arms, merely three spines which dug into the ground. But the head was worst—formed of thick coils of white jelly, covered with grey watery eyes, and at the centre was a huge toothed beak. And the thing that most troubled Leakey was none of these details, but only the idea that he had recently seen the doorway; not open as in the picture, but closed.

He threw open the bedroom door and thudded downstairs. The manager was standing by the reception desk, talking to a younger man behind it.

"There's a picture in my room! Did you put it there?' Leakey demanded.

'Why, no,' answered the manager. 'What sort of picture is this? I'd better have a look.'

He examined the photograph. 'This *is* peculiar, I must admit, but I didn't put it there. I wonder what it's supposed to be... Well, if it's getting on your nerves, I'll take it away.'

'No—no, don't do that,' Leakey told him. 'I'd like to examine it a bit more closely.'

When the manager had left, Leakey crossed again to the window. Looking out, he had the odd feeling that the crowd below were not passing through the square; more milling about to give that impression, but really awaiting something—and watching covertly. He noticed suddenly that all of them avoided the road opposite his window; a road which he saw was unusually wide and bordered by obviously disused buildings. Raising his gaze, Leakey discovered that the road connected the square to the large bare hill behind the town. There was a trail of faint marks on that road, but he could not make out any shape.

He looked towards the hill again, and saw the railway stretching into the distance. Then he remembered, and turned angrily to leave for the station.

At that moment the door slammed and a key turned in the lock.

Leakey threw his weight against the door, but he could hear at the same time something heavy being shoved against it from the outside. Nobody answered his irate shouts, and he ran for the window. Looking down he saw the wall below was smooth, devoid of handholds, and escape upward was just as difficult. He drew back at the thought of jumping to the street, and wondered frantically how he could escape. What lunatic had imprisoned

him, and why? But the people of Goatswood were surely not *all* lunatics—perhaps he could attract the attention of someone in the street.

'Do you know how Goatswood got its name?' said a voice behind him.

Leakey whirled. Nobody was in the room with him.

'Did you ever hear of the Goat of Mendes?' continued the voice slowly, he realised, from beyond the door. 'Do you know what used to appear at the witches' sabbaths? Do you know about the Land of the Goat in the Pyrenees, or the Great God Pan? What about the Protean God? *And the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young?*'

Leakey battered the door again, then hurried back to the window. He yelled to the people below, and one looked up. Even at that distance Leakey saw his expressionless face—and the surreptitious movement of his hand. When a crowd began to form directly below the window and stare at him expressionlessly, Leakey threw himself back trembling and glancing wildly round the room.

'The goat's been there all through the ages, you know,' went on the voice. "The black goat which appeared in the circle of the sects in Spain—the Meadow of the Goat where the Basque magicians used to meet—and always the devil appears as a hybrid animal... Why do you think the priests of Jupiter offered a white goat on the Ides?—but you wouldn't know of the cosmic complements... And you've no idea of the basis of the Haitian goat-girl ritual, or what horror lies behind the myth of the Golden Fleece...'

'What's all this you're saying?' screamed Leakey. 'Let me out, will you!' but when no answer came he subsided and collapsed on the bed.

'Oh, you won't understand it all yet—not yet... All I'm trying to tell you is that *he* is here, very near at this moment—he has been here since before the human race... Maybe he has always been here, or maybe he came from *out there*, but the Others—those from Glyu'uho—imprisoned him within the star-signs, and only on nights of the moon can his body come out inside their boundary. But he goes forth if you call through the reversed angles, though then he's only partly corporeal—that's what'd appear at the sabbaths.

'They wouldn't tell all that happened at the Black Mass, of course. *He* came, but not in his real shape—that'd be too much even for the worshippers—but he retained certain portions of his real form. I suppose you've heard how they used to kiss his arse? Well, that wasn't just to be

dirty—he's not built like a goat, and from there he puts things forth to draw off blood. But you'll know more about that tonight.

'You may get a bit of a shock tonight when you see us naked, though. We've gone down below his place, to a region I won't describe to you, and to live longer we've had to... to change. You've probably heard about it in a different way, though—the young of the Black Goat? *Gof'nn hupadgh Shub-Niggurath?* But the dryads and fauns and satyrs are a lot different from the classical descriptions, so don't think you're prepared—'

As suddenly as it had begun, the voice ceased. Leakey stared out of the window; the sun had almost set. He glared at the door, the window, the walls, but could see no avenue of escape. The crowd still waited below; an unintelligible muttering drifted up. Suddenly he felt very tired, and sank back on the bed.

When he awoke, the moon had risen.

It shone whitely on the street below as he craned out the window. The crowd below were passive no longer; they were standing in a stiff semi-circle around that central pylon, staring towards the hill opposite. He raised the window-frame more, and it rattled—but nobody looked up. He could hear a chorused murmur from below, a chant whose words were inaudible, and he began to realise just how serious his position was. Were they all insane? Was he trapped after dark in a town of lunatics? Clutched by sudden terror, he pushed the wardrobe against the door, and reinforced it with the bed.

What had the man who had imprisoned him said—'you'll know more about that tonight'? Surely the whole town couldn't be caught up by this mad belief. A god that came into the town on moonlit nights—and that wasn't all. If he was right, there was a cult of Satanists in this town—and they were supposed to make a sacrifice to Satan on ritual nights. A human sacrifice—was that what they wanted him for?

At a shout from below, Leakey rushed to the window and looked down. A figure in black robes was standing by the pylon with his back to Leakey. He was adjusting the ropes tied to the pivot, and as he did so the lens and mirrors shifted, and a concentrated beam of moonlight moved up the road towards the hill. This must be the lunatic who had imprisoned him—but who..?

Then the figure turned. The man was wearing a robe covered with phallic designs, and round his neck hung a necklace of small pink cylinders—whose identity Leakey sickly suspected—but he was still recognisable as the manager of the Central Hotel.

'*He* is coming! *She* is coming!' he shouted in that slow, thick voice. 'Make the way easy!'

Then, to Leakey's horror, the crowd began to chant: 'Astarte—Ashtaroth—Magna Mater... *Ia! Shub-Niggurath!* Gorgo, Mormo, thousand-faced moon, look favourably on our sacrifices... Ram with a Thousand Ewes, fill us with thy seed that more may come to worship at thy shrine... *Gof'n hupadgh Shub Niggurath...'*

The disc of concentrated moonlight was now steadily creeping up the hill as the robed priest manipulated the ropes. Suddenly it wavered and stopped, the priest gave an inarticulate cry, and the crowd fell silent. In that silence Leakey heard a faint restless stirring, as of something distant—and vast.

Then the hill burst open.

That was how it seemed to Leakey. Almost at once he realised that a door had opened in it; a door which occupied the whole side of the hill. The little moonlight that shone beyond the gaping hole revealed the beginning of an immense passage. Back in the darkness, something pale and enormous shifted and glistened with reflected light.

Suddenly Leakey turned and ran for the door. He did not want to see what would come forth from that passage. He wanted to escape from this room and into the street, even if the crowd killed him. He struggled to move the bed, but it would not shift. He had only just managed to heave it into position—escape that way was impossible.

At that moment the crowd in the square cried out hysterically. Slowly, reluctantly, Leakey turned to look out of the window.

Something was standing in the doorway of the hill. It was the thing in the photograph; but that photograph had been too small to show all the details, and it had not been alive or moving. The head was worst of all, for those great yellow eyes peered in different directions, and all the coils were twisting and jerking, sometimes transparent so that he could see into the head.

The thing moved out of the doorway, and the three spines moved with a grotesque rowing motion to heave the body forward. The beak opened, and from it a voice issued—sibilant and high-pitched, it spoke to its worshippers who now swayed back and forth in the square to the chant. They were becoming frenzied—here and there one would feverishly strip, but Leakey turned nauseated from these sights.

Suddenly his numb composure broke, and he screamed and battered the door, tore at the immovable bed, and looked vainly around for some weapon. Outside he heard the priest yelling incomprehensibly, and a whistling voice answering him.

The priest yelled: '*Ia! Shub-Niggurath!* The Goat accepts our sacrifice!'

Leakey knew instinctively what he meant. He risked a glance out of the window—and stared straight into those yellow eyes, far above the rooftops, watching him avidly. It stood swaying at the other side of the square, and was even now moving towards the hotel...

He looked down. The worshippers had approached the being, and directly below was an empty strip of ground. With terrified desperation, Leakey climbed over the sill, hung by his fingers for a moment, and let himself fall.

The creature must have been capable of great speed. Leakey heard a slithering sound; then fell straight on to the squirming coils of the thing's head.

He struggled desperately, but the gelatinous coils dragged him down, and he was enveloped. He was held inside transparent walls which pulsed and gripped him firmly, but not tightly enough to injure him. His hands slipped off the jelly when he clawed at the walls, and when he kicked out the gelatin only gave and returned to position. He could move his head, and straining to look upward he realised that he was imprisoned in a pocket of air, which he did not doubt was intentional. So he was not to die yet—but then what worse thing was to happen to him?

The landscape he glimpsed dimly through the transparent coils was jolting now; the colossus was moving forward, towards the hill. It reached the enormous doorway and passed within. Leakey heard a dull crash of stone, then he was jolted on through half-darkness.

The passage seemed to plunge downward for miles, but at last the creature swayed to a standstill. Leakey sank towards the ground, the prisoning coils

oozed away, and hands grabbed him. He was pushed forward towards an immense archway. He glanced round frantically, but had time only to glimpse a gigantic cavern, hexagonal in shape, with droplets of moisture streaming down the walls and gleaming on carvings which stared from the shadows. And the pallid colossus was still swaying after him. Then he was hustled under the archway.

After that he stumbled down an interminable staircase, twilit from some source he could not see. The stairway did not turn from its downward path, but the twilight was too dim to show him the bottom.

'The Romans built this, you know,' said a voice at his ear in a horribly conversational tone. 'They built the lens, too, when they came here and recognised their Magna Mater... But these stairs lead much further down, perhaps to the place *he* came from originally—'

Leakey had an inkling what sort of place they were approaching when the light began to strengthen and they continued to walk downward *though no steps were visible*. Terrifying sounds rose from below—bass trumpetings and hollow ululations—but a flickering mist hid the region from above.

Then they were standing on solid ground—at least, it felt like solid ground, but to Leakey it appeared as if they were standing on empty air. The region was no longer hidden, and what he could see was not reassuring. Distances were variable, and he was never sure whether an object was large and far off, or small and close at hand. The more recognisable living bodies were dissociated alarmingly without any noticeable injury, while some others were composed of parts of varying familiarity, together with portions that did not seem to belong at all. A few feet away he noticed an isolated path of glistening metal leading to a distant flight of upward-heading stairs.

'This is where we come to gain immortality,' whispered the priest, 'and now you will become like us—'

They moved back, still encircling him. Above him he heard the monstrosity ululate, and the coils began to descend towards him.

Abruptly Leakey smashed his fist into the priest's throat and leapt for the metal path.

The unnatural properties of the place, for once, aided him. Almost at once he was standing at the foot of the steps, while behind him the pursuers were struggling dissociatedly amid a mass of strangely angled walls which had

suddenly appeared. He clattered up the stairs into half-darkness, listening for sounds behind him. A few hundred stairs up, he stumbled over a line of star-shaped bas-reliefs.

A little further up, he heard something huge and ponderous squelching up the stairs after him.

He ran faster, though he was gasping for breath, and his hands were cut from falls. He looked back and whimpered in horror, for a shape was swaying dimly upward not six hundred feet below. He tried to take three steps at a time, slipped—and began to tumble back down the staircase.

He grabbed at the slick stone and managed to check his fall about fifty stairs down. There was no sound from below, but when he turned his head to look, a baffled whistling broke out. The being was swaying back and forth two hundred feet below, as if fighting an invisible opponent. It was, Leakey saw, at the line of bas-reliefs; and he abruptly remembered something the priest had said—about 'star-signs'...

He fled upward again, stopping only five hundred yards up when there was no sign of pursuit. He struggled upward for what seemed—and may have been—hours, and finally reached a high-arched passage which ended, he could see, in the open. He ran down it and emerged in daylight.

Then he looked down at his body.

'And what did you see?' Dr Linwood prompted.

'I'd become like them, you see,' Leakey told him. 'Not altogether, but it was already taking effect—I think I can still die, though. In fact, immortality is the worst thing that could happen to me this way...'

'Well,' the doctor said, 'let me take a look.'

'Are you out of your mind? The only reason *I* didn't go mad was because my mind must have changed as well!'

'Listen,' Dr Linwood said, 'I've seen a great many horrible things in my time, things that would turn your stomach. I once saw a cyclist whose head had been run over by a lorry and burst open... I'm not easily revolted, and if you don't let me examine you I certainly won't believe your story—you'll admit it's not very credible—and I won't be able to do anything for you.'

Leakey was silent for a long time.

'All right,' he replied at last. 'But first—' And he switched the tape-recorder off.

At 3:17 on April 3, 1961, everybody in Mercy Hill Hospital was startled by a hysterical screaming from the office block. The cries were so shocking that even the patients on the other side of the building were awoken, and all those who heard it were troubled by nightmares long after. Such was the terror in those cries that practically all the nurses ran to find the cause, leaving the wards almost unattended.

When they broke into Dr Linwood's office, he was lying on the floor with his hands over his eyes. He was alone, and there were no signs that he had been attacked. Under sedation he stopped screaming, but said nothing that revealed the cause of his insanity. He seemed to be obsessed with something that had happened in his office, but what he imagined he had seen is not clear. All he could say was that something about the patient he had examined—who, from the tape of the interview, was dangerously obsessed, and has not been caught yet—was 'horribly changed,' and seemed to be connected with the 'Great God Pan,' 'a rebirth in the vagina of Shub-Niggurath,' 'a fluctuation of form,' and something which was 'half a dryad.' The popular opinion is that Dr Linwood had been unbalanced by the strain of his work, together with the stress of preparing his speech for the coming convention, and had been affected by a species of contagious hallucination.

If the testimony of Dr Whitaker, the house surgeon, is to be believed, this hallucination may have had some basis in fact. He had been on his way to consult Dr Linwood over a medical matter when the screams broke out, and thus reached the office before anyone else. As he entered the corridor he saw someone opening the exit door—someone who must have been the patient whom Dr Linwood examined. Dr Whitaker did not see the man's face, but he particularly noticed the hand as the patient opened the door.

'It was black, shiny black,' he told the others, 'covered with lines—shaped like a bird's claw made out of wood. In fact, it didn't look like a human hand at all.'

BROECKER

Illustration by Randy Broecker, taken from reprint of The Inhabitant of the Lake And Other Unwelcome Tenants, 2011.

The Will Of Stanley Brooke

Written in: 1963
First published in *The Inhabitant Of The Lake And Less Welcome Tenants*, 1964
Also published in: *Cold Print*

As a close acquaintance of Stanley Brooke's rather than a friend, Ernest Bond probably noticed his oddities the more readily.

These oddities became apparent soon after Brooke learned that he was dying of cancer. First he sent out to the libraries for medical books and journals, in an obvious attempt to find some cure the doctors had overlooked. Then, when he found no solace in orthodox medicine, he began to search volumes of faith-healing, and Bond realised how desperate he was becoming. It was not until the final phase that Bond began to worry; but he was disturbed by Brooke's quest through ancient grimoires for some answer. He watched Brooke slide gradually into depression, and knew of nothing he could do to help.

He was all the more surprised, therefore, when he arrived at Brooke's house one afternoon in response to a call, and found the owner sitting up in bed smiling.

Brooke placed a bookmark in the yellowed volume he had been reading, and put it down beside him. 'Sit down, Bond, sit down,' he grinned. 'I'm afraid I didn't ask you round just for your company—there's some business we have to discuss, but I told you that on the 'phone.'

'Yes—well, what can I do for you?'

'I want to dictate a will,' Brooke told him.

Bond wondered if the man's condition had brought on amnesia. 'But you've already made one.'

He had indeed made a will, and at his death five people would receive an appreciable legacy. His three sisters and his brother would come into a few

thousand pounds each—while Emily, one of the sisters, and his niece Pamela, who had insisted on being his housekeeper for some years, would also come into possession of the large house. Strangely, Brooke was notoriously mean, and remarked that the vultures could pick up what they liked once he was dead, but he could not afford to be generous while alive.

'I know I've already made one,' he said impatiently. 'My mind hasn't gone yet, you know. I want to make a new one. The people next door are going to act as witnesses—they're probably downstairs now. It's completely different from the old one—you see, I've found out something—'

He reached for the book beside him, hesitated, and left it where it was.

'But first you must promise not to tell anyone any of the terms of the will until after I'm dead... All right? Good. Now let's get the witnesses up here.'

As Brooke dictated, the lawyer realised why he had been made to promise. The terms of the will shocked him exceedingly; and for some time he debated whether he should keep that promise—whether he should not at least hint the amendments to Brooke's sister Emily. But she would be bound to have it out with Brooke, and, besides revealing Bond's indiscretion, this was surely not the kind of barrage to which a dying man should be subjected. So the lawyer continued to debate.

The decision was taken out of his hands when, on August 6, 1962, Brooke died.

He was buried four days later in St Mark's churchyard, Brichester, and on the afternoon of that day Bond described the general terms of the will to the expectant relatives.

'Impossible,' said Terence Brooke, the dead man's brother. 'I flatly refuse to believe it.'

'I'm afraid it's true all the same,' the lawyer insisted. 'I can't give you the details until the beneficiary arrives, but I can tell you that under the terms of the new will none of you will benefit—'

'The worm!' Emily said. 'After all I did for him, and what my daughter did too—'

Pamela James, her daughter, was obviously upset by the whole business. 'I wish you wouldn't use that horrible word, mother,' she protested. 'After all, this man's going to get Uncle's money, and there's nothing we can do—'

'Oh, shut up, girl!' snapped Emily. 'I don't know about the rest of you, but *I'll* be here when Mr Bond reads the will—maybe when this man sees how we were all expecting something, he'll give us all some money. I think that's the least he can do.'

'And how are you going to recognise this fellow,' Terence Brooke inquired, 'when nobody's ever seen him before?'

'That's the queerest thing about all this,' Bond replied. 'This man—William Collier, he calls himself—is the exact double of the late Mr Brooke. If that isn't enough, he'll be carrying a letter proving his identity written by Mr Brooke, in an unfranked envelope with his name on it also in Brooke's script.'

'When are you expecting him to arrive?' Joyce, another of the sisters, put in.

'That's odd, too,' said Bond. 'I asked him that—because, as you know, I can't open the will until Collier arrives—and he just said "*he'll be here about a week after the burial.*" What that means I don't know.'

On August 17 the lawyer was invited round to the house on King Edward's Way, into which, in spite of protests, Emily and Pamela James had moved. He arrived just before five o'clock, and joined them at tea. Not long after, Terence, Joyce and Barbara, the third sister, arrived.

Quite soon the real reason for this gathering became apparent.

'Mr Bond,' asked Emily, 'do you think it would be ethical for you to point out to this man how distressed we all are by this new will? We don't want all his legacy—it wouldn't be right to interfere with Stanley's wishes like that—but maybe if the six of us got equal shares—'

'Oh, *please*, mother!' Pamela cried. 'Must you be such a vulture?'

'I must say I agree with the girl,' Terence said. 'We didn't know we were coming to this, you know.'

'Will you all please be *quiet!*' Emily shouted, striking the table. 'Mr Bond, what have you got to say?'

The lawyer was saved from the quarrel he would have caused by a knock at the door.

'Don't get up—I'll go,' he said quickly, and opened the door for William Collier.

Bond recognised him at once, yet for a moment it had been as if the dead had returned. Every detail was reminiscent of the dead man except one, and that only added to the unpleasant illusion, for the man's skin was almost white, and abnormally translucent.

'I'm William Collier,' he introduced himself. 'I heard Stanley Brooke was dead, and came as soon as I could.'

'Yes—won't you come in?' Bond invited. 'Have you had a long journey? Perhaps you'd like something to eat—we're just having tea.'

"Thank you, but first—' Collier hesitated. 'Well, I *have* had a long journey, and I'd like to, ah—'

'Yes, of course,' said the lawyer. 'It's the door right at the top of the stairs. But here, let me take your coat.'

As he hung up the coat, Terence Brooke appeared in the dining-room doorway. They watched the figure to the top of the stairs.

'I like the way you make him feel at home!' Brooke remarked. 'So that's the new tenant, is it? My God, it's going to be like dining with a corpse!'

'The resemblance certainly is striking,' Bond began, but was interrupted by the arrival of Emily.

'You two can go back inside,' she told them. 'I want to meet him when he comes down, and then introduce everybody.'

As he sat down again at the table the lawyer heard footsteps on the stairs, then an inaudible conversation outside the door. Soon Emily ushered in Collier, and introduced those present, adding: 'We all expect to get something under the will,' at which Collier's face briefly took on an odd expression.

A rather uncomfortable silence ensued. Barbara, who was notoriously fond of macabre humour, took advantage of an offer from Emily of cold meat to remark:

'No, thanks, I don't care for meat very much. I always think that if you eat pieces of animal, you'll get to look like them.'

'How do you make that out?' Pamela prompted.

'Well, you know... if you eat too much pork you'll get like a pig, and I suppose you'll get pretty fishy if you eat nothing but fish... In fact, if you concentrate on one food, I think pretty soon you'll look exactly like it.'

There was a thud. Everybody looked up.

'It's all right,' Collier said with a curious expression, 'I just dropped my spoon, that's all. If I could have another one—'

'I always like vegetables,' Bond interrupted quickly, 'so what does that make me?'

'Well, Mr Bond,' said Barbara, 'nobody could call you exactly *vital*...'

'Here's a spoon, Mr Collier,' Emily said. 'Have all the rest of you finished? —What, don't want any more either, Mr Collier? In that case, we may as well all go into the lounge.'

The lawyer was the last to leave the dining-room, and he found Terence waiting for him in the hall.

'You know, I think there's something wrong about that fellow,' Brooke confided. 'I have a feeling he may be an imposter.'

'But what about his appearance? And the letter, if he has it.'

'As for the letter—' Brooke lowered his voice. 'Suppose if when we went upstairs, he got it from somewhere Stanley had hidden it?'

'Hardly. Besides,' Bond pointed out, 'surely that proves his claim must be genuine, or he wouldn't have known where to find the letter.'

They entered the lounge. Bond decided to get the night's business over at once.

'Mr Collier,' he asked, 'do you have any proof of your identity?'

'Why, yes. I believe this is what you want.' And the lawyer took from the pale fat hand an envelope which, he found, contained the appropriate document.

'Yes, this seems right enough,' he admitted. 'Well, then, I'd better get the reading over with.'

Collier showed no emotion when Bond reached the relevant passage:

'*To my closest friend, William Collier: the property at 19 King Edward's Way, the furnishings thereof, and any others of my possessions remaining after payment of death duties, &c.*'

'But—is that all?' Emily asked, seemingly incredulous.

'Yes,' replied Bond rather coldly, 'I'm afraid it is.'

'You were his closest friend?' Emily said to Collier. 'Surely you're shocked that he was so mean—I realise it's natural to see your friends are provided for, but we were his family, and we did quite a bit for him too...'

'Oh, please don't try to be subtle,' Collier advised her. 'I know what you're after, and I can tell you now that I wouldn't dream of splashing my money about.'

'Why, you worm—' began Emily. Collier recoiled and collided with the sideboard, overturning a vase.

'My God,' Bond said tonelessly.

'What's wrong, Mr Bond?' asked Pamela.

'It doesn't matter now—nothing... I don't think you need me here any more tonight—I'd better be off... But could I just speak to you a minute, Mr Collier? Alone?'

Collier followed him into the hall, and the lawyer remarked:

'I'm afraid they don't feel very friendly towards you at the moment. I'm driving into the town centre, so if you'd like a lift somewhere to let them simmer down... Yes?' He called into the lounge: 'Mr Collier's leaving with me—he'll be back in a couple of hours.'

They drove away into the night. Collier dozed in the back seat but woke when the car began to slow down.

'But surely we're not in Brichester now! Haven't you come the wrong way?'

'Oh, no,' Bond said, stopping the car at the edge of a quarry. 'I assure you this is the right way.'

Two weeks later, Terence Brooke arrived at the lawyer's house in Almshouse Gardens, and found the owner at work in the greenhouse.

'Why, hello,' Bond greeted him. 'Any word about Collier yet?'

'No, none,' said Brooke. 'Nobody seems to know what to do about it.'

'Well, as I told the police at the time,' Bond went on, 'I took him to my office and told him how generally hated he'd be if he did you all out of your legacies, and he left, and that was the last I saw of him.'

'Somehow,' Brooke mused, 'I have the feeling he won't be back... But anyway, I didn't really come here about that—what—?'

'Bloody worms,' said Bond, driving his spade down again and again while something pale writhed. 'I can't stand the things... Oh, sorry. Go on.'

'I was going to say that my car's broken down just at the end of the road,' continued Brooke, looking away from the still descending spade, 'and I was wondering if you had a spanner I could borrow.'

'Well, I've got a heavy one in the back of the car,' began the lawyer, '...oh—oh, no, I'm afraid I lost it some time ago.'

'Never mind,' Brooke said, 'I'll have it towed to the nearest garage. But you ought to get yourself a new spanner, you know.'

'Oh, it doesn't really matter,' Bond assured him, wrenching his spade at last out of the ground. 'I never use it except in an emergency.'

The Stone On The Island

H.P. LOVECRAFT, H.R. WAKEFIELD, JESSE STUART,
JOHN METCALFE, CLARK ASHTON SMITH,
FRITZ LEIBER, ROBERT E. HOWARD, CARL JACOBI,
WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON, J. RAMSEY CAMPBELL,
FRANK BELKNAP LONG, J. VERNON SHEA,
JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN, JOHN POCSIK and others.
OVER THE EDGE
NEW STORIES OF THE MACABRE
Edited by AUGUST DERLETH

"The first of Campbell's modern stories, in which the safe mundanity of everyday life is used as a counterpoint to the bizarre experiences of the narrator."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1963
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Arriving home that night, Michael Nash thought at first that his father was asleep. Dr. Stanley Nash, his father, was lying back in an armchair in the living room. On the table beside him stood an empty glass, propping up a sealed envelope, and near these lay a library book. It was all quite ordinary, and Michael only glanced at him before entering the kitchen in search of coffee. Fifteen minutes later he tried to wake his father, and realised what the contents of the glass must have been.

Nash sensed the events of the next few days with numbed nerves. While he realised that any further evidence he might give would be disbelieved, he heard the words "suicide while the balance of the mind was disturbed" with a feeling of guilt; he fingered that envelope in his pocket, but forced himself to keep it there. After that arrived those people who saw the admiration of Nash's medical ability as a pretext for taking a half-day off work; then the largely incomprehensible funeral service, the rattle of earth on wood, and the faster journey home.

Various duties prevented Michael from examining his father's papers until October 27, 1962. He might not have plunged into them even then but for the explicit injunction in his father's final note. Thus it was that as the sun flamed redly on the windows of Gladstone Place, Nash sat in the study of No. 6 with the envelope before him on the desk and the enclosed sheet spread out for reading.

"My recent research" (Michael read) "has pried into regions whose danger I did not realise. You know enough of these hidden forces which I have

attempted to destroy to see that, in certain cases, death is the only way out. Something has fastened itself upon me, but I will suicide before its highest pitch of potency is reached. It has to do with the island beyond Severnford, and my notes and diary will furnish more details than I have time to give. If you want to carry on my work, confine yourself to other powers—and take my case as a warning not to go too far."

That was all, and no doubt many people would have torn up the letter. But Michael Nash knew enough of the basis of his father's beliefs not to treat them lightly; indeed, he held the same creeds. From an early age he had read his father's secret library of rare books, and from these had acquired an awareness which the majority of people never possess. Even in the modern office building where he worked or in the crowded streets of central Brichester, he could sense things drifting invisibly whose existence the crowd never suspected, and he knew very well of the hidden forces which clustered about a house in Victoria Road, a demolished wall at the bottom of Mercy Hill, and such towns as Clotton, Temphill and Goatswood. So he did not scoff at his father's last note, but only turned to the private papers kept in the study.

In the desk drawer he found the relevant documents, inside a file cover covertly removed from his office building. The file contained a photograph of the island beyond Severnford by daylight, snapped from the Severn bank and hence undetailed; another photograph, taken by a member of the Society for Psychical Research, of the island with dim white ovals floating above it, more likely reflections on the camera lens than psychic manifestations, but inexplicable enough to be reported in the *Brichester Weekly News*; and several sheets of notepaper inscribed in vari-coloured inks. To these pages Michael turned.

The writing consisted of a description of the island and a chronology of various events connected with it. "Approx. 200 ft. across, roughly circular. Little vegetation except short grass. Ruins of Roman temple to unnamed deity at centre of island (top of slight hill). Opp. side of hill from Severnford, about 35 ft. down, artificial hollow extending back 10 ft. and containing stone.

"Island continuously site of place of worship. Poss. pre-Roman nature deity (stone predates Roman occupation); then Roman temple built. In medieval times witch supposed to live on island. In 17th cen. witchcult met

there and invoked water elementals. *In all cases stone avoided*. Circa 1790 witchcult disbanded, but stray believers continued to visit.

"1803: Joseph Norton to island to worship. Found soon after in Severnford, mutilated and raving about 'going too near to stone.' Died same day.

"1804: Recurring stories of pale object floating over island. Vaguely globular and inexplicably disturbing.

"1826: Nevill Rayner, clergyman at Severnford, to island. ('I must rid my flock of this evil'). Found in church the day after, alive but mutilated.

"1856: Attempt by unknown tramp to steal boat and spend night on island. Returns frantically to Severnford, but will only say something had 'fluttered at him' as he grounded the boat.

"1866: Prostitute strangled and dumped on island, but regains consciousness. Taken off by party of dockside workers and transported to Brichester Central Hospital. Two days later found horribly mutilated in hospital ward. Attacker never discovered.

"1870: onward: Recrudescence of rumours about pale globes on island.

"1890: Alan Thorpe, investigating local customs, visits island. Removes a stone and takes it to London. Three days later is found wounded horribly—and stone is back on island.

"1930: Brichester University students visit island. One is stranded by others as a joke. Taken off in morning in hysterical condition over something he has seen. Four days later runs screaming from Mercy Hill Hospital, and is run over. Mutilations not all accounted for by car accident.

"To date no more visits to island—generally shunned."

So much for the historical data; now Nash hunted for the diary to clarify this synopsis. But the diary was not to be found in the study, nor indeed in the house, and he had learned very little about the island. But what he had learned did not seem particularly frightening.

After all, perhaps his father had "gone too near the stone", whatever that meant, which he was not going to do; further, he would take some of the five-pointed stones from the study cupboard, and there was always the Saaamaaa Ritual if things got too dangerous. He most certainly must go, for this thing on the island had driven his father to poison himself, and might do worse if not stopped. It was dark now, and he did not intend to make a

nocturnal trip, but tomorrow, Sunday, he would hire a boat and visit the island.

On the edge of the docks next day he found a small hut ("Hire a boat and see the Severn at its best!") where he paid 7/6 and was helped into a rather wet, rather unpainted motorboat. He spun the wheel and hissed through the water. Upriver the island climbed into view and rushed at him. At the top of its hill stood an isolated fragment of temple wall, but otherwise it was only a green dome round which water rippled, with faint connotations of a woman in the bath. He twisted the wheel and the island hurried to one side. The boat rounded the verdant tip; he switched off the motor, pulled the boat inshore and grounded it; he looked up, and there, glimmering faintly from the shadowy hollow, was the stone.

It was carved of some white rock, in the shape of a globe supported by a small pillar. Nash noticed at once its vaguely luminous quality; it seemed to flicker dimly, almost as if continually appearing and vanishing. And it looked very harmless and purposeless. Further up the hill he momentarily thought something pale wavered, but his sharp glance caught nothing.

His hand closed on the five-pointed star he carried, but he did not draw it out. Instead, a sudden feeling engulfed him that he could not approach that stone, that he was physically incapable of doing so. He could not move his foot—but, with a great effort, he managed to lift it and take a step forward. He forced himself toward the stone, and succeeded in pushing himself within a foot of it. However, while he might have reached it, he was unable to touch it. His hand could not reach out—but he strained it out trembling, and one finger poked the hard surface. A shiver of cold ran up his arm, and that was all.

Immediately he knew that he had done the wrong thing. The whole place seemed to grow dark and cold, and somewhere there was a faint shifting noise. Without knowing why, Nash threw himself back from the stone and stumbled down the hill to the boat. He started the motor, slammed the wheel left and cut away through the water—and not until the island had dropped out of sight did he begin to approach the bank.

"You didn't have to come back to work so soon, you know."

"I know," Nash said, "but I think I'll feel better here," and he crossed to his desk. The post had mounted up, he noted disgustedly, though there were few enough pieces to suggest that someone had tried to help him out—Gloria, probably. He began to sort the bits of paper into order; Ambrose Dickens, F. M. Donnelly, H. Dyck, Ernest Earl—and having married the post with the relevant files, he sat down again. The first one only required issue of a form, but one of which he had no stock.

"Baal," he remarked to some perverse deity, and immediately afterward discovered that Gloria also lacked the form. A search around the office gained him five or six, but these would not last long.

"I think this calls for a trip downstairs," he remarked to Gloria.

"Not today," she informed him. "Since you've been away, they've brought in a new arrangement—everybody makes out a list of what they want, and on Wednesdays one person goes down and gets the lot. The rest of the time the storeroom is locked."

"Great," said Nash resignedly, "so we have to hang on for three days... What else has happened?"

"Well, you've noticed the new arrival over there—her name's Jackie—and there's someone new on the third floor too. Don't know his name, but he likes foreign films, so John got talking to him at once of course..."

"Jackie—" he mused. "...Oh hell, that reminds me! I'm supposed to be calling on Jack Purvis today where he works in Camside to collect some money he owes me!"

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"Take the afternoon off, maybe—" and he began to fill in his leave sheet. He passed the new girl's desk where John was unsuccessfully attempting to discover any interest in Continental films ("No, Ing*mar*.") and continued to a slight argument with Mr. Faber over his projected leave, finally granted because of his recent bereavement.

That afternoon he collected the debt in Camside and caught the bus home. It was dark by the time the vehicle drew up at the bottom of Mercy Hill, and the streets were almost deserted. As he climbed the hill his footsteps clattered back from the three-storey walls, and he slipped on the frost which was beginning to glisten in the pavement's pores. Lunar sickles echoed from Gladstone Place's window and slid from the panes of the front door as he

opened it. He hung up his coat, gathered the envelopes from the doormat and, peeling one open, entered the living room and switched on the light.

He saw immediately the face watching him between the curtains.

For a minute Nash considered the courses open to him. He could turn and run from the house, but the intruder would be free in the building—and besides he did not like to turn his back. The telephone was in the study, and hence inaccessible. He saw the one remaining course in detail, came out of his trance and, grabbing a poker from the fireplace, slowly approached the curtains, staring into the other's eyes.

"Come out," he said, "or I'll split your head with this. I mean that."

The eyes watched him unmoving, and there was no motion under the curtain.

"If you don't come out now—" Nash warned again.

He waited for some movement, then he swung the poker at the point behind the curtain where he judged the man's stomach to be. There was no response from the face, but a tinkle of glass sounded. Confused, Nash poised the poker again and, with his other hand, wrenched the curtains apart.

Then he screamed.

The face hung there for a moment then fluttered out through the broken pane.

Next morning, after a sleepless and hermetic night, Nash decided to go to the office.

On the bus, after a jolt of memory caused by the conductor's pale reflection, he could not avoid thoughts of last night's events. That they were connected with the island beyond Severnford he did not doubt; he had acted unwisely there, but now he knew to be wary. He must take every precaution, and that was why he was working today; to barricade his sanity against the interloper. He carried a five-pointed star in his pocket, and clutched it as he left the bus.

The lift caught him up and raised him to the fourth floor. He returned greetings automatically as he passed desks, but his face stiffened any attempted smile, and he was sure that everybody wondered "What's wrong

with Mike this morning?" Hanging up his coat, he glanced at the teapot, and remembered that he and Gloria were to make it that week.

Many of the files on his desk, he saw bitterly, related to cases needing that elusive form. He wandered down to the third floor, borrowed a few copies, and on the way out noticed someone's back view which seemed unfamiliar —the new arrival, he realised, and headed for the lift.

"Well," Gloria broke in some time later, "I'd better collect the cups."

Nash collected the teapot and followed her out. In a room at the end of the passage water bubbled in a header, and the room's doorway gaped lightlessly. His thoughts turned to his pocket as he switched on the light. They filled up the pot and transferred the tea to the cups.

"I'll take our end of the office," he remarked, and balanced the tray into the office.

Two faces were pressed against the window, staring in at him.

He managed to save the tray, but one cup toppled and inundated Mr. Faber's desk. "Sorry—I'm sorry—here, let me mop it up, quick," he said hurriedly, and the faces rippled horribly in a stray breeze. Thinking in a muddled way of the things outside the window, the pentacle in his pocket, and the disgust of Mr. Faber's client on receiving tea-stained correspondence, he splashed the tray to the remaining desks and positioned his and Gloria's cups atop their beermats.

He glared for a minute into the bizarrely-set eyes beyond the pane, noticed a pigeon perched on the opposite roof, and turned to Gloria. "What's wrong with that pigeon?" he inquired, pointing with an unsteady finger. The faces must block any view of the bird from her desk.

"What, that one over there? I don't see anything wrong with it," she replied, looking straight through the faces.

"Oh, I... thought it was injured," answered Nash, unable to frame any further remark (*Am I going mad or what?)*—and the telephone rang. Gloria glanced at him questioningly, then lifted the receiver. "Good morning, can I help you?" she asked and scribbled on a scrap of paper. "And your initials? Yes, hold on a minute, please? G. F. E. Dickman's one of yours, isn't it, Mike?"

"What... Oh, yes," and he extracted the file and, one eye on the silent watchers outside, returned to his desk. (For God's sake, they're only looking... not *doing* anything!) "Hello—Mr. Dickman?"

"... My... married recently..." filtered through office murmur and client's mumble.

"Would you like to speak up, please? I'm afraid I can't hear you." The faces wavered toward the point where his gaze was resolutely fixed.

"My son Da—..."

"Could you repeat your son's name, please?" The faces followed his furtive glance.

"What d'ya say?"

"Could you *repeat* that please!" (Leave me alone you bastards!)

"My son *David* I said! If I'd known this was all I'd get, I'd of come round meself!"

"Well, I might suggest that the next time you call, you take a few elocution lessons first!—Hello?"... He let the receiver click back listlessly, and the faces were caught by the wind and flapped away over the rooftops.

Gloria said: "Oh, Mike, what did you do?"

The rest of the morning passed quickly and unpleasantly. Mr. Faber became emphatic over the correct way to treat clients, and several people stopped in passing to remark that they wished they had the courage to answer calls that way. ("Everyone seems to have forgotten about your father," said Gloria.) But one o'clock arrived at last, and Nash left for the canteen. He still looked around sharply at every reflection in a plate glass window, but managed to forget temporarily in a search around the bookshops for a new Lawrence Durrell, with the awareness of his pocket's contents comforting him.

At two o'clock he returned to the office. At three he managed to transport the tray without mishap; at four, unknown to Nash, a still enraged G. F. E. Dickman arrived, and at four-thirty left, a little mollified. A few minutes later came a phone message from Mr. Miller.

"Well, Mr. Nash," said Mr. Miller, sitting back in his chair, "I believe you had a little trouble this morning. With a Mr. Dickman, I think. I hear you got a bit impatient with him."

"I'm afraid that's true," Nash agreed. "You see, he was mumbling so much I couldn't make it out, and he got disagreeable when I asked him to speak up."

"Ah... yes, I know," Mr. Miller interrupted, "but I think you said a little more to him than that. Er—abusive language. Well, now I know I feel myself like saying a few things to some of the people who phone, but I feel this isn't the way... Is something the matter?" He followed Nash's gaze to the window and turned back to him. "Anything wrong?"

"No... no, nothing at all." (*Three* now? God, how many of them are there?)

"Well, as I was saying, there's a right and a wrong way to handle clients. I know 'the customer is always right' is a stock phrase—it often isn't true here anyway, as you know—but we must try and avoid any direct offence. That only leads to ill feeling, and that won't do anybody any good. Now I had Mr. Dickman around here this afternoon, and I found it quite hard to smooth him down. I hope I won't have to do it again."

"Yes, I realise how you feel," Nash answered, peering frantically at the window, "but you must understand my situation."

"What situation is that?"

"Well, since my father died... That is, the way he died—"

"Oh, of course I realise that, but really you can't make it the excuse for everything."

"Well, if that's your stupid opinion—!"

Mr. Miller looked up, but said nothing.

"All right," Nash said wearily."I'm sorry, but—you know—"

"Of course," Mr. Miller replied coldly. "But I would ask you to use a little more tact in the future."

Something white bobbed outside the pane and disappeared in the distance.

That night, despite the strain of the day, Nash slept. He woke frequently from odd dreams of the stone and of his father with some mutilation he could never remember on waking. But when he boarded the bus the next day he felt few qualms when he remembered the haunters; he was more disturbed by the tension he was building up in the office. After all, if the

faces were confining themselves to mental torture, he was growing almost used to them by now. Their alienness repulsed him, but he could bear to look at them; and if they could attack him physically, surely they would already have done so.

The lift hummed sixty feet. Nash reached his desk via the cloakroom, found the Dickman file still lying before him and slung it viciously out of his way. He started at the heap of files awaiting forms to be issued, then involuntarily glanced out of the window.

"Never mind," Gloria remarked, her back to the radiator. "You'll be able to stock up on those forms today."

At ten o'clock Mr. Faber looked up over the tea-tray: "I wonder if you'd mind going down for the stock today?"

At 10:10, after spending ten minutes over his own cup, Nash rose with a wry grin at Gloria and sank in the lift. The storeroom seemed deserted, brooding silently, but as the door was open he entered and began to search for items on the list. He dragged a stepladder into one of the aisles and climbed to reach stocks of the elusive forms. He leaned over, looked down, and saw the fourth face staring up at him from the darkness of the other aisle.

He withdrew his hand from the shelf and stared at the pale visage. For a moment there was total silence—then the thing's lips twitched and the mouth began to open.

He knew he would not be able to bear the thing's voice—and what it might say. He drew back his foot and kicked the watcher in the eye, drew it back and kicked again. The face fell out of the orifice and Nash heard a thud on the other side of the shelves.

A faint unease overtook Nash. He clattered down the ladder, turned into the next aisle and pulled the hanging light cord. For a moment he glared at the man's body lying on the floor, at the burst eyeball and the general appearance which too late he vaguely recognised, and remembered Gloria's remark: "There's somebody new on the third floor"—and then he fled. He threw open the door at the far end of the room, reeled down the backstairs and out the rear entrance, and jumped aboard the first bus out of Brichester. He should have hidden the body—he realised that as soon as he had paid his fare, for someone (please, not Gloria!) would soon go to the storeroom

in search of Nash or the other, and make a discovery—but it was too late now. All he could do was get out at the terminus and hide there. He looked back as if to glimpse the situation in the office building, and saw the four faces straggling whitely after him over the metal bus roofs.

The bus, he realised on reaching the terminus, went as far as Severnford.

Though it lost him all sharp outlines, he removed his spectacles and strolled with stiff facial muscles for some time. On the theory that anything in plain sight is invisible to the searcher, he explored bookshops and at twelve o'clock headed for the Harrison Hotel at the edge of dockland. Three-and-a-half hours went quickly by, broken only by a near-argument with a darts-player seeking a partner and unable to understand Nash's inability to see the board. Nash reminded himself not to draw attention in any circumstances, and left.

A cinema across the road caught his eyes, and he fumbled with his wallet. It should be safe to don his glasses now, he thought, put them on—and threw himself back out of sight of the policeman talking at the paybox.

Where was there left to hide? (And what about tomorrow?) He hurried away from the cinema and searched for another bookshop, a library even—and two streets away discovered a grimy library, entered and browsed ticketless. How long, he wondered, before the librarian approached with a "Can I be of any assistance?" and acquired an impression which he might later transmit to the police? But five-thirty arrived and no help had been offered; even though he had a grim few minutes as he passed the librarian who, seeing him leave with no book apparent, might have suspected him of removing a volume under cover of his coat.

He continued his journey in the same direction, and the lampposts moved further apart, the streets narrowed and the roadways grew rougher. Nearby ships blared out of the night, and somewhere a child was crying. Nobody passed him, though occasionally someone peered languidly from a doorway or street-comer.

The houses clustered closer, more narrow arched passages appeared between them, more lampposts were twisted or lightless, and still he went on—until he realised with a start, on reaching a hill and viewing the way ahead, that the streets soon gave out. He could not bring himself to cross open country at night just yet, and turned to an alley on the left—and was confronted with red-glowing miniature fires and dull black-leather shadows.

No, that was not the way. He struck off through another alley, past two high-set gas lamps and was suddenly on the bank of the Severn.

A wind blew icily over the water, rippling it and stirring the weeds. A light went out somewhere behind him, the water splashed nearby, and five faces rose from the river.

They fluttered toward him on a glacial breeze. He stood and watched as they approached, spreading in a semicircle, a circle, closing the circle, rustling pallidly. He threw out his arms to ward them off, and touched one with his left hand. It was cold and wet—the sensations of the grave. He screamed and hit out, but the faces still approached, one settling over his face, the other following, and a clammy film choked his mouth and nose so that he had no chance to scream, even to breathe until they had finished.

When the Severnford police found him, he could do nothing but scream. They did not connect him at first with the murderer for whom the Brichester constabulary were searching, and when the latter identified him he could not, of course, be prosecuted.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Inspector Daniels from Brichester.

"Well, we try to keep these dockside gangs under control," said Inspector Blackwood of Severnford, "but people get beaten up now and then—nothing like this though... But you can be sure we'll find the attacker, even so."

They have not yet found the attacker. Inspector Blackwood suspected homicidal mania at first, but there was no similar crime. But he does not like to think that even Severnford's gangs would he capable of such a crime. It would, he contends, take a very confirmed and accomplished sadist to remove, cleanly in one piece, the skin of a man's face.

The Childish Fear

"*The Childish Fear* was written in 1963, immediately after I'd completed *The Inhabitant of the Lake and Other Unwelcome Tenants* (as it was meant to be called) and a tale that read less like Lovecraft, *The Stone on the Island*. I'd intended *Fear* to fit into *Inhabitant*, but August Derleth thought not, finding that "it requires too much knowledge of certain films on the part of the reader to make it effective." He was right, and I should explain that Val Guest directed the first two *Quatermass* films. Too much of the tale is straight autobiography, even if my childhood habit of turning over stones in search of insects has some thematic relevance. I used to judge the effectiveness of horror films by how much they quickened my pulse, if they managed to. The narrator's opinions of films were all mine at seventeen years old. I disliked *Them* on a first viewing, although not now, and remain bored by *The Blob*. I shouted at noisy audiences, which would surprise them into silence the first time but not on repetition, and often sat through films twice: double bills allowed this as well as tempting some viewers to come in before the end (alas, my mother would insist on our doing so). The tale does convey some sense of the period, when the Liverpool suburbs were still full of cinemas in their decline, and perhaps it vaguely prefigures *The Show Goes On* of fifteen years later."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Inconsequential Tales*

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In a way I suppose it began in Camside. That was where I was born, and perhaps when I was younger I realised things that I'd forgotten by the time I came to work in Brichester. Perhaps we're all aware of certain things when we're younger, and forget them later so as not to be ridiculed? After all, you and I—and everyone else—have lain awake at night and seen misshapen things peering out of the shadows. There used to be an ornament on the top of my bedroom wardrobe that cast an outline on the wall like a leering demon. I couldn't bear to look at it after dark, but during the day it was just an ornament—nothing more. Certainly not terrifying. It was only during the night that I used to think: suppose that face comes down from the wall at me? The night was the catalyst.

Well, maybe I was more imaginative than most. That's why I didn't care to join in the idiotic games the neighbourhood children played, but instead wandered into the woods behind Camside. I could lie for hours in the grass there in summer, staring into the water, watching the streams and the river

rush by, or further into the woods just peering into the stagnant pools and watching the pebble-ripples glitter. But I didn't like the frogs. I didn't mind the croaking that drifted out of the night through my window, but those unblinking things that pulsed at me in the grass were somehow horrible. I kept watching them, though—always ready to jump back if they moved.

That was my trouble; I was fascinated by those moist scuttling, hopping things in the woods. Particularly, I noticed, they'd collect in dark places—in the marshy ground among the trees, or under the flat stones that lay around in the woods. I used to get a horrible sort of thrill from turning those slabs over and watching the white things stir slowly and scatter into the darkness under the stone again; then I'd wait for days and return to throw the rock back onto its original side, and tremble back as the many-legged horrors hurried out of sight. It was a perverted pleasure, too. I knew I'd scream if one of those things scrabbled onto me. They repelled me, but I couldn't keep away from them.

This sort of thing happened all the time during the school holidays, and even during term time I tried to spend a half-hour watching the inhabitants of the dark woods. Then I reached grammar school, homework began to pile up, and there was less spare time in the evenings. So I had to confine myself to looking at the woods from my bedroom window at night, and that was how I got to thinking about the crawling things from another angle. They had to stay away from the light, I thought—that was why they hid under the stones—but at night darkness covered everything. Suppose they crawled into the houses? Suppose armies of them were creeping through the grass down there? I couldn't keep the light on until morning, but I made sure the doors and windows were closed tight.

Meanwhile I was doing well at Ordinary Level, six passes, which would have been enough to get me a decent job had my guardian not been one of the biggest bastards I know. In 1955 he died, I moved out of grammar school into the Ministry of Labour and leaving his house to the rats I found myself a flat on North Abbey Avenue. I didn't have a great amount of money to spend, and most of that went on books and beer.

Then, one day in 1960, someone got me interested in films. I occasionally visited a cinema, but usually I preferred to read. Anyway, this winter morning I walked into the office with my nose in "Casting the Runes", and

Bill Henty—one of my friends there—glanced at it as he passed me on the way to the washroom, and remarked casually on the title.

"Yes, it's very good," I said, having lost the thread of the story. "Have you read it?"

"No, but I've seen the film," he answered. "Excellent film."

"Didn't know there was one," I told him, not especially interested. "I can't recall seeing the title around."

"Oh, it isn't around under that title. The film's called *Night of the Demon*—I believe it's coming to the Capitol, and isn't that on your road?"

There was a cinema opposite my flat called the Capitol, a rather decrepit exterior that had always suggested to me one of those places where the audience take seats home for souvenirs. "Yes, the Capitol's just across from me," I confirmed.

"Well, I think it's on there next weekend. I would advise you to go and see it—it is most definitely recommended."

I hadn't finished reading the story, but when I got through with it I liked it very much and wondered about seeing the film version. The weekend came. Saturday night I'd intended to join a drinking party at the Queen's Arms on Bentley Road, but three of the party were in a car accident that afternoon, and the beer session was called off—out of sympathy, I suppose. So I was left in my room with nothing to do, staring out at the red neon Capitol and the procession of couples passing under it for 3/6, and before very long I slipped across the road with the wind slashing my ears and followed the rest out of the sleet into the cinema.

I was the only person in the front row of the circle, since I'm taller than most and could see over the too-high bar. The second feature came on and the audience (including myself) yawned, scratched and visited the ice-cream girl or the toilet. At the end of that there seemed to be a general rush in the stalls to get to other places. When the lights came up the stalls were about half as crowded as I had taken them to be in the dim light. Then the lights dimmed again, leaving a queue around the ice-cream tray, and the seats began to fill up again as the main film appeared.

I was very impressed, too. It brought screams from the stalls and a quickened pulse from me. I was determined to see if I could track down any others like this. The curtains drew together and the scramble to beat the

National Anthem began, mostly in the stalls. However, the Queen briefly blinked at us from behind the curtains and vanished with a baleful growl from the soundtrack.

I hurried downstairs to the toilet, noticing that already the stalls were almost empty, although they had seemed crowded. Two students from Brichester University were standing against the wall as I entered, presumably drawn to this district by Jacques Tourneur.

"How about that fellow next to you?" one remarked.

"Yes, I know," said the other. "How could anyone fall asleep in a film like that—and I couldn't even hear him breathing."

"Maybe he was dead—of fright perhaps."

"Possibly," agreed the other, laughing. "He jumped up in the interval, anyway, and ran out somewhere—ran for it again at the end."

They moved toward the door, and I lost interest. Looking around, I thought how ignorant of human anatomy the amateur artists responsible for the surrounding murals must be—or perhaps this was their way of expressing their disgust for the female. Some of these outlined figures looked hardly human.

Next morning I made straight for Bill Henty's desk to agree about the previous night's film, and after that I quickly became addicted. Before, I hardly ever visited a cinema unless I'd made an appointment with someone who hadn't turned up, but now I wandered into the Brook Street-Gushing Avenue area at the centre of Brichester twice a week to catch some film at one of the five cinemas there. Henty gave me some guidance, but it was against his warning that I caught a bus the week before Christmas to the Granada, to see Terence Fisher's *Dracula*. I'd never been so terrified by a movie as I was that night. Wednesday night I visited Taylor Gardens to see it again.

Saturday night found me in a quandary. Either *Dracula* for the third time or a party at the Cock and Bottle down the road, and I couldn't decide which. But there were people at the party who I'd have liked to speak to over various matters and didn't normally see, and no doubt the film would turn up elsewhere. So I left about half-seven for the Cock and Bottle.

By the time I arrived the party had begun and four or five people were in the mood for buying acquaintances drinks, so I circulated around the bar a

little and found someone who insisted on paying for my beer. Someone from the Customs who'd come to stay with friends in Camside was remarking about Ultimate Press books in the distance, and I struggled across the room to take this in.

"—pages of sheer obscenity," he was saying with a thick Lancashire accent as I approached "I can tell you, it even shocked me. I mean, that's not art or anything—just damned filth—"

"Did you mention Ultimate Press?" I broke in.

"Yes, we had some of their things in the other day from Paris, in the middle of some other goods, and I was just talking about them."

"What did you do with them?"

"Threw them on the fire. I'm telling you, you wouldn't believe the sort of things that was in them."

"But for God's sake," I protested, "how do you know how these scenes fitted in if you didn't read them right through? It's people like you who make sure there's no future for art at all!"

"Aren't they trying to print a different sort of book soon?" said Bill Henty, coming up behind me. I suspect he interrupted on purpose—he knew how I was if anybody started defending censorship.

"Don't know—what book is that?" said the Customs officer's original listener, probably also glad to turn the subject.

"Oh, it hasn't got a title," Henty informed us, "but it's a black magic symposium which has been banned for hundreds of years—the publishers in Jena originally refused to print it. I've read extracts from another book by this man Henricus Pott, and that was sick as hell— sort of thing Ultimate might well do."

"What's this other one about?" I asked, giving up the argument.

"Well, I'm not too sure. But there is one idea running through a lot of it that I know about—you know the way insects crawl into damp places and under stones? This man's idea—bit twisted, I know, but still—his idea was that if dark places teem with insects like this—as they do!—mightn't it be reasonable to suppose that larger dark places might be inhabited by larger creatures?"

"What—giant slugs and things, you mean?" I put in.

"No, not necessarily—just larger... creatures. Things that'd keep to the darkness because it mightn't be pleasant for people to see them. Freaks, cripples, and worse, from what I can make out. They wouldn't do much—they might or might not be intelligent, but all they'd want would be to stay in the darkness. Only—they might venture out at night. But no, I don't think he meant insects."

"Somebody talking about insects?" a middle-aged man called, pushing through the crowd. "We've got ants at our place—the house is crawling with them. Anyone know what to do with the damn things?"

The month after Christmas was crowded with films to see, and I journeyed all over town to catch up on the Hammer films I'd missed. But I still hadn't seen *Dracula* again. Bill Henty and I argued violently over that one—he'd found it rather cheap with only a couple of good moments. I retaliated by hating *Them!* which he'd called a "damn good film" and which I thought was utter crap. The visitors at the other side of the counter frequently had to wait during office hours, as one of us was struck by a point in our respective favourite movies and cornered the other with "But surely you must have liked..?"

Then, in early February, *Dracula* reappeared; at the Capitol opposite me, in fact.

"Well," I said that morning, "I'm off to *Dracula* again tonight."

"Best of luck," he replied, and didn't speak to me the rest of the day.

Of course, if I confined myself to a snack at the fish-and-chip café down the road from the cinema, I could make the six o'clock performance and sit the film round again till half-ten. And I did. Of course there had to be a staff shortage at the café, and even my worried glances between wall-clock and waitress weren't effective, but finally I escaped and pounded up the road towards the cinema.

As I clattered up the steps a teenager with attendant mistress asked for two stall seats, was answered inaudibly to me, and wearily paid for entry into the balcony. The foyer walls were crowded with intimations of coming pleasures, but no time to examine these now, I thrust silver through the glass archway and had a ticket flicked back at me. I plunged up the stairs and into the darkened auditorium. "This film has been passed for exhibition

when no child under 16 is present," remarked the screen. ("You mean there are children over sixteen?" an irate voice muttered behind me.)

The loudspeakers crashed and the camera tracked into the vault to a close-up of a blood-spattered inscription, which brought defensive laughter from higher up the balcony but no reaction whatever from the stalls. Wait for fifteen minutes, I thought, then you'll react. Apart from a couple of gasps behind me, however, the terrible entry of Christopher Lee fell flat. I wondered if the customers in the stalls had seen the film before—but of course, at this early hour the cinema would be almost empty. Satisfied, I sat back to watch and await the nine o'clock performance's effect.

But during a lull in the cinematic action, with Peter Cushing and Michael Gough creeping around the grounds of a house, I realised that the stalls were not empty. Somebody (perhaps the attendants—it wouldn't be the first time these people had annoyed me) was whispering audibly down there. I couldn't catch the words, but that sibilance filtering through the soundtrack was enough to distract me. Occasionally there came a faint scuttling and thumping—couples coupling on the back row, conceivably. At a fade to black I leaned over the rail, but only dark forms were visible, and small too, from what I could see.

The lights glowed at last and the rumble of people who "didn't want to see the ending first" began. Nobody I knew, however. A few tried to join me in the front row, muttered together and moved back, not wanting to risk a dislocated neck. The light withdrew as the last party thudded down the steps, and *The Mummy* began. Several seconds later the curtains drew belatedly apart.

I've never seen such an unreceptive audience. They didn't scream, they didn't even laugh—though there was an intake of breath somewhere further up the balcony at the tongue-cutting scene. And somebody was whispering again in the stalls, more of them by the sound of it.

Well, I sat the main film through again, and enjoyed it—but I'd have got pleasure from screams from the audience, which didn't occur. Afterward I lingered in the foyer to glance over the posters (*Quatermass II* was on its way, I noticed) and, out of curiosity, I watched the stalls exit to see what sort of people didn't react in any way to *Dracula*. But it looked as if the stalls had emptied before I'd reached the foyer, for the exit doors remained closed.

In the following week I went to the Superior in Binns Crescent to a double bill, the names of whose films I've fortunately forgotten. All I remember is seeing them because Bill Henty advised me against it. The next day the Magnet outside Camside closed down. On Saturday, passing the boarded-up front with its dead neon and peeling posters, for no reason I thought how little I'd like to be in the silence and darkness of that place. I thought of living among the rows of seats in blackness, feeling my way around dimly-glimpsed shapes, and abruptly I forced myself to think of something else.

Monday brought *Quatermass II* to the Capitol. I arrived in the interval at half-seven, and was immediately caught up in the unexpected twists of the plot. I was very impressed indeed. Then came *The Blob*, another Bill Henty recommendation, another load of rubbish. I yawned my way through it once the promising first scene was over. My spirits sank lower as Steve McQueen accepted a challenge to a backward car race, having no bearing whatsoever on the plot.

Then a girl screamed.

That rather woke me up. Had I missed something worthwhile on the screen? But no, McQueen was still acting moronically, and nothing terrifying had occurred. Then, as an altercation in the back circle became audible; I realised that perhaps the girl's boyfriend had explored too far. Whatever had upset her, she continued to argue hysterically, drowning the soundtrack.

The balcony doors swung open. "Will you be quiet there, please!" ordered the manager. But the girl had obviously had a pronounced shock; she went on babbling without answering him.

"Please keep quiet," the manager insisted, "or I'll have the film stopped. We can't have the audience disturbed by this commotion."

The girl's cries did not cease; and a few minutes later, to a chorus of protests from the balcony and a loud clattering from the stalls, the film flickered off and the lights went up. Looking back, I saw that the argumentative couple were standing in the aisle; apparently they had begun their clamour on reaching the end of the row. The manager and an attendant hurried down the stairs.

"Now, what's all the row about?" inquired the manager. "Oh, it's nothing," the girl's companion replied uncomfortably. "She just put her hand on

someone's ice-cream in the dark, that's all, and—well, she's rather nervy, and it upset her."

"I did not," the girl cried "I touched someone in the dark—but he's gone now..."

"I'm not sure I understand," interrupted the manager. "What do you mean, you touched someone in the dark?"

The girl was obviously becoming more hysterical. "We were on our way out," she gulped, "and I was going first—and someone was sitting between us and the aisle, so I said excuse me, but he didn't move. I thought he was asleep at first, so I asked him again, but nothing happened... so I put out my hand to shake him..."

"And then?" the manager had to prompt.

"I couldn't see him in the dark except a vague shape, but his head seemed to have dropped forward, and I touched him where his shoulder looked like it should be. And my hand slipped, and touched his neck—only he hadn't got a neck, and he hadn't got a head..."

"Come on," the young man said, "I'll take you home."

"Yes," she agreed breathlessly, "yes, let's get away from this horrible place —" and without another word to the manager they climbed the steps, she muttering what sounded like "all wet and slippery" as they passed through the exit.

The manager looked at the attendant; then he made a remark that struck me as very peculiar. "My God," he said, "they're coming into the balcony now!"

Thursday night *Suddenly Last Summer* arrived at the Odeon in central Brichester, and so did I. Though not a horror film, this terrified me as much as any I'd seen, and the rest of the audience seemed to agree. I leaned over the rail to discover if there were any acquaintances down there—and it hit me that practically nobody down there had gone out. Why, then, was the interval always the signal for the audience in the Capitol stalls to migrate? Well, I knew the audiences were different, but that didn't mean they had to act differently in the intervals. I'd noticed this before, but only now did I begin to wonder why it happened.

Friday I had a splitting headache. Saturday a cold had set in, and I spent the weekend and Monday catching up on some paperbacks. Tuesday I

found out that Bill Henty hated Tennessee Williams. He wanted to know what the Capitol had to offer; I didn't remember (they were showing a season of horror films, I recalled, but the titles that night eluded me). As I turned away he called out. "Damnation, I'd forgotten!" he said. "I wanted to go to that radio shop next to the Capitol—there's a torch there that's in the sale—but I won't be able to make it. Hell!"

"Well, that's all right," I replied (perhaps I could persuade him to like *Dracula*). "Give me the money and I'll bring this torch in tomorrow if you can give me the details."

He scribbled the details on the back of a form; and that night I pulled the form out with my bus fare and remembered his request. The bus stopped outside the wireless shop, just past the cinema—and that was how, standing on the platform, I caught sight of a poster: for one night only—*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Suddenly Last Summer*. Hell, I thought, jumped off the bus and hurried into the shop. The assistant squinted at the form; "Oh, I know—last one, too," he told me and insisted on unpacking the torch, demonstrating its efficiency, and wrapping it indifferently. It was just before six o'clock. I paid, fidgeted until the change arrived, ran out and clattered into the foyer next door. "You're all right, it hasn't started yet," I was informed. Above the pay-box a leering skull proclaimed that the management would not be responsible for deaths by fright during the night's performance. I rushed upstairs just as the lights began to dim.

Invasion was a splendid film, as good as my Val Guest favourite, but marred by one thing, the audience in the stalls. They were whispering again. The soundtrack was loud, luckily, and the film was so fascinating that I didn't unduly notice the whispers. The end came unexpectedly, but the lights didn't go up. There was a spate of switch-clicking behind me, but nothing happened. I heard the thud of people standing up in the stalls—and then they sat down again. For some reason, that worried me. They ran out every other night in the interval; why not tonight?

In a couple of minutes the balcony had filled up, and the second feature appeared on the screen. There were a few yawns from around me during the first scene, then interest began to rise—everywhere but in the stalls. Down there someone was as loquacious as ever, and the soundtrack was faint, so that I had to strain my ears. My face was getting hot. Suddenly I leaned over the rail and yelled "Shut up!" in a voice that must have carried to the

foyer. There was a startled silence below me, then the whispering broke out afresh.

I'd had enough. I turned back toward the projectionist and shouted "Are there no attendants in this bloody place?" Apparently there weren't, for nobody answered my call. To some eloquent glances from the upstairs audience, I stumped up the stairs and down into the foyer. The manager was talking to the pay-box girl.

"Is it possible for you to keep the people in the stalls quiet?" I called from under the Circle sign.

"Very possible, I'd say," he answered laughing, and pointed.

I couldn't imagine what he found to laugh at till I looked where he was pointing. The double doors at the far end of the foyer were closed and hung with a sign: STALLS CLOSED—NO ADMITTANCE.

"It's the teenagers," the manager said. "They've been tearing up the seats—we've closed up the stalls, and we're only letting selected people upstairs. We may have to shut the place up for a few weeks for refitting, but if we do I'm getting a few more attendants. The audience upstairs are only just keeping us going."

"But there's someone in the stalls now," I interrupted.

"There isn't, you know," he contradicted. "It's all locked up."

"But I can hear them talking," I insisted.

'Tm afraid you're wrong," he said. "It may be soundtrack noise—I know it crackles sometimes. That's probably what you can hear."

It wasn't, but I didn't feel like arguing. I returned to my seat and tried to concentrate; quite impossible with the voices down there. I yelled again: "Shut up, I said!" but the silence was shorter this time. I fumed, kicked something on the floor, and had an idea. Watching the screen, I felt about in the dark and came up with Bill Plenty's torch. The film had reached one of its less important scenes. I leaned over the edge of the balcony and switched on the torch. The disc of light wavered over the seats, and reached a seated figure. The man was asleep; his head leaned on his chest.

Then the figure looked up and turned around.

And I knew what that girl had touched in the dark. It had no head—it had eyes, but I won't say where they were located—it was white and terribly

thin, and it had the wrong number of fingers, and there was no flesh on its arms and legs as it scuttled away sideways. And it was dressed in a man's suit and raincoat, but I've never tried to guess where it found them. Then the torch fell, and the manager and an attendant were barely in time to stop me following it.

The next few weeks I spent in hospital. Hardly anyone visited me—except Bill Henty, and he was more interested in his goddamn torch than what I'd seen down there in the dark. Anyway, there was only one visitor I wanted to see, and they finally brought him along.

"Do you remember that night a girl caused a row in your cinema?" I asked. He did. "Well, you said something to an attendant when she'd left—something like 'they're coming into the balcony now.' What did you mean by that?"

"Why, the teenagers," the manager replied. "They're always starting trouble in the stalls, and I thought they were trying it on upstairs."

"You're lying!" I cried. "You meant those things that live in the dark, and you know it."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," he said. "I meant the teenagers, and that's all." And he left.

So I said I'd had a fainting fit while leaning over the balcony, and pleaded amnesia about what had happened, and at last they turned me loose. And I might have believed my own story—even forgotten it—if it hadn't been that, as soon as I'd asked my question, the manager had looked away and not met my eyes again.

So now—especially on windy nights, or when the house is full of inexplicable creaks, or when I'm near an unlit streetlamp—I have a childish fear.

I am afraid of the dark.

The Offering To The Dead

"*The Offering to the Dead* [...] like *The Stone on the Island*, and just about as awkwardly, [conveys] a naïve sense of an unconsummated office romance. The clumsy introverted swain was of course the author, who did indeed pretend to be asleep if anyone (his mother) entered his room when he was abed. Alas, the prose is clumsy too, and holds the narrative at arm's length, although it has its inadvertent moments: "David found his way into a pair of her father's pyjamas," for instance, and what seems to be the thickest carpet in all literature. Radio Luxembourg was a pirate radio station of the time, and stop press reports in newspapers were printed in thick messy type. None of this took Derleth's fancy, and quite right too. 'This one does nothing for me, I'm sorry,' he wrote. 'It seems to be in the tradition of the olde Gothick rather than in your better vein, though it's told well enough—I've no quarrel with its style, though I think you may be mixing your liking for [Henry] Miller and [William] Burroughs with your penchant for the weird, an insoluble combination, unfortunately.'"—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Inconsequential Tales*

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Whenever he went to an unfamiliar place, David Maxwell always alighted at the wrong bus stop, and 19 November, 1962 was no exception.

Being normally nervous, he was uncertain when, that night, he called at Iris Glendenning's home for the first time. He realised, of course, that the visit had probably been engineered by Iris's parents to give them a chance to examine him, or rather her parent, for her mother had died some six months before. He had known Iris at that time and had been startled by her lack of distress after the first two or three days. Obviously, she had not liked her mother.

He crossed a blackly wet bridge over railway lines and entered a narrow alley between high brick walls. Four minutes to seven; seven o'clock being set for the meeting. Across a cul-de-sac yellow-lit by occasional lamps he plunged into a second alley from which slanted others, unevenly paved. At one point the wall had collapsed into somebody's garden, and over the crumbled gap and a hedge he glimpsed a low building, shaped somewhat like a garage. He immediately knew that it was not a garage or shed, but no

time for speculation about sheds; he had two minutes to reach his destination punctually. He hurried to the end of the alley; Brice Street, an askew metal sign informed him, and that was the road in which Iris lived. Now it only remained to locate her house, and here it was, no. 17, the first on the right.

The rusty metal gate squealed open. He crossed the concreted path, and behind the house glimpsed a looming oblong outline. He had seen it before, across the hedge, but still could not identify it. He reached the front step and rang the bell.

A warm dazzling hall received him, and he was ushered in by a thickset man, slightly beyond middle age. "You'll be—David?"

"Yes, that's right. And I suppose you'll be Iris's father."

"I am, but we'll be seeing each other a lot—so you just call me Bill. Iris tells me I have to entertain you in the living room. Well, I'll be with you in a minute, so perhaps you'd like to make yourself comfortable in there." He hurried away down the hall.

The living room door stood open on the left, but David did not notice it. He made for a heavy panelled door in the right wall.

"Not that one! The living room's behind you." Mr. Glendenning—Bill—had turned back, but too late. David had already had time to turn the knob and push against the door. It was locked, he found.

"That's, um, the dining-room," Mr. Glendenning informed him. "We're decorating it. No, this is the room I meant."

They entered a chandelier-lit room, and David sat by the television. Mr. Glendenning faced him across the fireplace. David glanced round frantically for a newspaper, but saw none. He began to trace the convolutions of the wallpaper design. Well, *say* something!

"I see Brichester won four-one," Mr. Glendenning remarked. He had said something. Unfortunately, David detested all sports, and thought of football as the most inane.

"Oh, yes?" He continued to search for some conversation piece. He might ask, *did you decorate this room yourself?...* and might be answered, *why, does it look as though I did?*

"Where are you two going tonight?"

"Oh, the ABC Bowl," David answered, grabbing the bait, "the one they've just opened at the centre of town. Of course, we're not very good at it yet but better than when we started. I remember, the first time—" But by his listener's occasional pause-filling sounds, he realised he had over-answered. His roving gaze travelled along the mantelpiece and braked at an odd-looking ornament. He pointed. "What's that?"

"That?—Oh, just an ornament."

It was a triangular bowl on three short metal legs. "What do you use it for?"

"Why, as a—an ashtray. It's an old family possession, as a matter of fact."

"Well," David said, "it looks like—"

"Hi, Dave! Sorry I kept you waiting."

Forgetting what the triangular bowl looked like, he rose. "That's okay—we've plenty of time. Bowl doesn't fill up till about half-nine... Well, goodnight, Mr. Glendenning."

"*Bill*," corrected Mr. Glendenning as they entered the night.

At nine o'clock they were sitting at a table inside the Bowl, drinking coffee from shallow glass cups and waiting for an alley to empty.

"Where shall we go Saturday night?" he inquired.

"Didn't we say we'd try the dance at the Locarno?" she reminded him. She looked away, stared into her coffee.

"Hey—is something the matter?"

"Not really. I was just thinking about that ornament you were so interested in—"

"Yes, what about it?" he prompted.

"Well, it shouldn't have been there. It was my fault—I put it there by mistake."

"But surely it's not all that important—"

"*Alley no. 9*," a loudspeaker blared, "*your game should now be finished.*" They left the table and headed for the alley.

Saturday night, at the Locarno, they tired each other out and left about 11:30. Stopping occasionally, they progressed through the infrequently-lit alleys to her home, and there Iris realised she had left her key inside. What was she going to do, she wondered.

"Ring the bell," David suggested.

"I can't—I told you, Daddy's away in Severnford tonight. But I may have left a window open round the back. Let's go and see."

There was a small window open on the ground floor. He supported her while she reached in and, straining, knocked the lower pane open. She levered herself through, leaving him to experience her perfume and the glacial night air. "Hold on and I'll open the door," she called distantly. Glancing round, he saw a dark bulk nearby—that unidentifiable building. He hurried across the uneven grassy ground and stared at it

The building was low, flat-roofed, shaped of stone with an iron-grilled gate in the side facing him. It had been unevenly painted in an obvious attempt to camouflage it as wood; in the other side there were even two clumsily painted 'windows'. Beyond the grille he could make out the beginning of a downward-plunging flight of steps, but nothing else inside was visible.

"Here we—" remarked Iris from the back door—"*Dave?*" He hurried back to the luminous rectangle and joined her inside.

"I think we both deserve a coffee for that," she said, and turned to prepare the drink.

His eyes flicked across hanging utensils, pale blue cooker and washing machine. "What's that building out in the garden?" he enquired finally.

"What? Oh, just the garden shed." There was no hesitation in her answer. "Daddy keeps gardening tools and things in there."

David wandered into the living room, noticed a radio with its lid folded back atop a low table. "Could we listen in to Luxembourg while I'm here, do you think?" he called through the rooms.

"Well, we could normally," Iris replied over the bubbling of the percolator, "but that radio's blown a fuse or something and it'll have to be fixed tomorrow. Tell you what, there's a portable in my bedroom, if you'd like to get it. First door across the landing."

He clambered up the stairs, which doubled back on themselves between floors. Bathroom walls glared whitely at him from the top. He crossed the landing and opened a door. Wrong room: a football rattle proclaimed Brichester's colours from the seat of a chair, an orphan electric razor lay on the dressing-table. He eased the door shut and moved on. The second bedroom was Iris's; dresses stirred faintly as he pushed the door wide open, lipstick and powder and perfume bottles were scattered across a glass surface, a paperbacked romance with its cover peeled back lay on the bed. David entered and found the radio sunk into the carpet, below a bedside table carrying a framed photograph. The same woman in a different pose stared from the mantelpiece with glazed eyes: obviously the late Mrs Glendenning. He swung the radio up by its handle and closed the door, its lower edge whispering over the carpet. He turned down the passage—

Two photographs? Of her *mother*?

He swung the door open again and entered, his footsteps muffled (the percolator still throbbing downstairs). Yes, the photographs were indeed of Iris's mother, a signature—Moira Glendenning—slashed the lower left-hand corner of each. Some detail essential to his understanding was absent, he thought. She showed no reaction to her mother's death, yet kept photographs of her in the bedroom? Of course he had heard of people 'going into shock' in such circumstances, but not in the way Iris must have. No, there was something she was concealing—something besides the identity of the building in the garden.

The radio creaked from its handles as he descended the stairs. He entered the living room, placed the portable on the low table, and glanced towards the mantelpiece. The triangular bowl had vanished. He stared at the empty spot for a few minutes, clicked the radio into life. Music rose into sound as Iris elbowed open the door, a tray between her hands, and distributed cups of coffee.

"Where to next?" he asked. He liked to clarify vague details as quickly as possible.

"I thought we agreed to see that film Kev recommended," Iris reminded him.

"Yes, sure, that's fine," he put in. He was wondering how direct a question she would be prepared to answer frankly; he considered that he knew her well enough to ask. He regarded her with receptive eyes.

"Iris," he plunged, "what's that thing in the garden *really?*"

There followed a few minutes of mutual gazing. "But I already told you," Iris said finally. "The shed."

"No, Iris, you didn't tell me," he contradicted. "I was up close, you know—that shed exterior's only painted on, and I saw those steps going down. That's no shed."

"Oh, why shouldn't I tell you, anyway?" demanded Iris. "You'd have to know sooner or later; it might as well be now... It's a tomb."

"It's a—?'

"Tomb," she repeated. "It's the Glendenning vault, so to speak."

A throbbing silence commenced, thoughts crossing it in arbitrary arcs. David scrabbled frantically for a question. The pendulum of the wall-clock ticked back and forth. "Who's down there?" he ventured.

"The Glendennings—oh, way back into the seventeenth century. My mother was the last, about six months back, but you know that."

"Your *mother* is out there? But how can you—"

""Get away with it?" We've patronised the same family of undertakers since the vault was built, so Daddy tells me, and they know about it—only they're paid not to talk about it. They put slate or something in the coffin. The person everyone thinks is in it never goes out of the house."

"You must wonder sometimes if someday someone will let it out—" He stopped. "No, about your mother, what I meant was—isn't it a little bit... hell, don't you think it's morbid?"

"Morbid? *Dave*... I prefer to know she's nearby. We don't think of—death—as apparently everyone else does."

He broke his gaze and turned to the clock: preferable to look at anything rather than the honesty in her eyes. "My God, my last bus has gone!

"Oh, Dave, t... Well, there's only one thing you can stay here for tonight. You can't walk home."

What else could he do but stay? (And really he wanted to, anyway, tomb or no tomb...) He thanked her very much and wildly emitted something to push away that still-disquieting family vault. "Your father looks a lot like Ustinov," he remarked, which broadened into a discussion of the relative

merits of Peter Sellers and Ustinov as they ascended the stairs, their arms vaguely linked. They said goodnight at last and David found his way into a pair of her father's pyjamas. He lingered in the bathroom (disinfectant and after-shave lotion cutting the air) and finally returned to his bedroom for that night. He pondered in front of the dressing-table, rattling his nails on the glass top ("You can use the electric razor if you like" Iris had remarked through the closing bedroom door) and turned to the door to switch out the light, throwing the furniture into vague visibility with sides of moonlight. His feet brushed through the carpet as he crossed to the bed.

He stayed a minute to peer out the window. A church spire poked upward beside the moon; a garage's neon sign spread crimson across the sky. He slid the sash open a little, and stared down at the burial vault, crouching in the darkness below him. No sound except the usual churning throb of night; no sound from the tomb down there—and, indeed, how could there be? How could the tenants of that place move? He stepped back and slammed the window down.

The sheets had a keen cold edge. He stretched out and his feet entered areas of unqualified frost. From the bathroom came a gurgle as Iris unplugged the washbowl; she was crossing the landing and entering her room. A few confused sounds escaped the room as she tidied up, then the creak of a bed. David sank further into sleep.

Suddenly he stiffened a turn through the sheets and stopped breathing. Iris's door had opened again; she had padded across the landing and was standing outside his door.

David had acquired the habit of pretending sleep when anyone entered his room; so that his breathing now deepened and slowed. The doorknob turned with a slow squeak and a thin blade of light opened along the floor. He sensed her gaze drawing along the bed, then the door clicked quietly shut.

What had she wanted? he suddenly wondered. Had she something important to tell him? He slid into a sitting position and listened, trying to locate Iris. A bedroom door—not her own—softly closed and she passed his room with a muted jingling of keys. She was slowly descending the stairs, probably supporting herself with one hand on the banister. He levered himself out of bed, left the room and crossed to the edge of the landing, unthinkingly imitating her silent tread.

Iris had reached the heavy locked door in the lower hall—to the room Mr. Glendenning had explained they were 'decorating'—and was easing a large key into its lock. She was holding something under her left arm that David could not see. She pushed the door wide and entered. Between closing door and frame he glimpsed what appeared to be an unfurnished room, then it was blocked from his sight.

For a long time he leaned on the landing rail, wondering whether to wait, go down, or perhaps return to his room and forget the whole thing. Metallic sounds came from the locked room. David redistributed his weight against the rail. The landing was freezing rapidly. He stared out the window as a car coasted by, trailing rectangular echoes of light, tightened his grip on the banister and turned to go at last. At that moment the locked door opened and Iris came out, turning the key behind her. The razor-sharp knife in her left hand split the light into fragments. Blood trickled from a knife-wound in her wrist.

He clattered down the stairs, thudded into the hall. "What have you done to yourself?" he demanded.

"What are you doing up, Dave?" She clasped one hand around the wound, but a thread of crimson escaped. "Oh, it's nothing—just an accident..."

"Is there any Elastoplast round here?"

"In the kitchen—cupboard on the left as you go in. But really, Dave, it doesn't matter—"

He urged her ahead of him into the living room and stretched the plaster round her wrist. Spots of red burst through the dressing. "How did you manage to cut yourself, anyway?"

She glanced at a corner of the ceiling while he waited. Into the silence fell the sound of soft padding footsteps in the next room.

He held up one finger for silence. "There's someone messing around in there," he whispered. "I'm going in. Give me the key, quick." He slid the key from the mantelpiece.

"No, you can't go in!" protested Iris, leaping up. "It's all right, there's no need to go in."

"Of course there is!" he hissed, entering the hall. "It can't be your father, and who else could be in there for any good reason?"

She clutched his arm. The dressing had wrinkled and blood was beginning to trickle again. "Dave, this cut—" She pulled at his sleeve. "I did it deliberately."

He withdrew the key with a click and turned slowly. "What for?" he asked.

Iris stared between his eyes. "You'll have to promise," she told him, "that whatever I tell you—and this time I'm going to tell you everything—you won't try and go into that room. Whatever I tell you."

A scrape of metal and an odd liquid sound filtered from behind the locked door. "All right," he agreed, and followed her into the living room.

"All right. Now why did you do it?" he asked, lowering himself into an armchair.

"I'll have to go back a bit," began Iris. "Everybody in the family's told this as soon as they can understand, so they won't be scared of dying. We've always lived on this site, only different houses have been built on it from time to time—we couldn't move away, you see—or at least you don't see yet, but you will..."

Flat footsteps receded down what sounded like a long corridor.

"It probably began when one of the Glendennings—don't know what relation he was to me—went to Hungary in the seventeenth century. I don't know why he went, but while he was there he picked up ideas he'd never thought of before. The Hungarians believe in things like that—they had inklings of the real nature of death, Daddy says. The story's got very confused by the time it reached me, but this ancestor of mine met someone who took him to some forest or other— took him down some steps, a long way, into this place where a race of people lived in the dark after they were supposed to be dead. When he came back to England he built the vault out there in the garden. It's been there ever since. I know you don't see what this has got to do with this cut, but you'll get it in a minute.

"After that all the Glendennings were entombed down there. We wouldn't be buried in an ordinary grave under any circumstances; there's got to be the connection with the house. I mean—there's a tunnel which joins the vault and the room next door, you know. That's because we still don't like to go down into their place; we'd rather do our bit in that room—it gives us the time to get out. Because I imagine they don't look very nice after they've been down there for some time. It's enough to know they're all right."

"But what are you talking about?" demanded David wildly. "What do you mean about the vault? What's it got to do with you?"

"Well, you see," Iris continued, her eyes cutting arcs between the fire and his face, "the people down there aren't really dead, as you understand the word."

"Not dead? You mean you bury them alive?"

"No, they're not buried alive either," Iris assured him. "They're not buried at all—there are alcoves in the walls where they lie. No, they're not alive as we are alive, but they are alive in a different way. They sleep down there until they're brought up, and if they're not brought up every so often they stiffen: don't move, just lie in the darkness trying to get up... They only come up to take blood."

"Take blood? You mean they *drink* blood?"

"Well, yes—that's what I was doing in there; you make a cut and fill the bowl. Oh, yes, the bowl that was the ornament you saw on the mantelpiece; that's what it's used for; You fill the bowl and call the name of the person you want to take it. Daddy does it more often than I do, but since he's away tonight I didn't want Mummy to go without... Only you have to call the person's name. The vault's much longer than it looks from above ground; the 'shed' used to be the only entrance to this long passage down there with all alcoves along it, but in eighteen-sixty-something someone went down by and they all started to paw him—he said he couldn't see anything, but he felt all these cold slippery hands grabbing him. Moss grows on them after a bit, you see ... They don't usually attack people, but there were some rather nasty types in the family in those days. So they opened up the tunnel again and used that."

"And so this is why you cut yourself..." said David flatly. "Tell me, where'd you get all this?"

"Why, Daddy told me," she reminded him. "So I wouldn't be frightened."

"I see," he mused. "Will he be home tomorrow night?... Well, in that case, Iris, don't cut yourself tomorrow night. You never know—you might slip and hit an artery. Give yourself time to recuperate."

"Oh, I wouldn't cut my artery," she assured him. "I've done it too often." And she pointed out the evidence on her wrist.

Surprisingly enough, David slept that night. Even the teeming vault below his window faded into the vortex. But about dawn he jerked from a dream in which he was pursued down subterranean tunnels by skeletal shrouded figures covered with a phosphorescent green moss, and he lay after that, watching the sky break into day. He wondered how he could face Iris.

But at the breakfast table she acted as if nothing had happened, because nothing had happened, he realised, as far as she was concerned. She had merely revealed a family secret to her friend, but the secret seemed to her quite normal. He watched her numbly as she made breakfast, small-talking, ate with him, and afterward conducted him to the bus-stop. As the bus drew away he looked back and saw her waving happily. The Elastoplast shifted with her movement.

That afternoon David set out on a walk in the country outside Brichester. He often strolled in the area beyond Mercy Hill, where the houses gave out and only the road and telephone wires were unnatural. He slid a cigarette from the packet and began to trail smoke. An occasional car rumbled past. Wind rippled the moist grass, disturbed droplets in the black branches of the trees, dripping out of a metal sky. He looked down at his feet, monotonously levering him across the ground. He stared toward the hills, above which birds fluttered. But he could not lose himself. Inevitably the Glendennings vault intruded.

The worst thing was Iris's unquestioning acceptance of the whole business. She would have to be convinced that death was final, not just a transition to a less active life—but how to convince her? David's parents believed in cremation; perhaps that was the answer. Take her to a crematorium and force her to watch the whole process; did she hear any screams from these "living" corpses? Even, if necessary, cremate one of the late Glendennings —no cries of pain there, either. But first of all she must be removed from the atmosphere of that house on Brice Street; the whole building was saturated with belief. More important, her father must be out of the way. But how was his influence to be eliminated? Murder? By marrying Iris? Hardly! Perhaps the law could be called in to help. Surely this back-garden tomb was illegal; maybe Iris's father could be prosecuted for pretending that the coffins buried at the various funerals were occupied—or conceivably

the Public Health people would have something to say about burying corpses so close to the houses. Yes, this was more feasible. He'd put in an anonymous telephone call to the police—Iris might suspect him, since she'd so recently told him about the vault, but he'd have to chance that. One day she might thank him.

He turned back toward Mercy Hill and began to hurry toward the glinting snake of the Severn beyond the hospital building. Monday morning he would lay some sort of foundation for this operation to convert Iris.

Monday morning, someone mentioned that Iris was dead.

David had reached his desk, noting the empty desk opposite him (Iris was late; good—it would give him time to frame some remark) and was sorting his files to discover why he had put them aside on Friday, when Jack Dixon —someone he had always passively disliked: trailed a swathe of sweat— approached rather awkwardly. Had David heard about Iris? No, what did he mean? Why, he said, "she had an accident last night; it's in the stop press." And he flapped open the newspaper before David, one yellow nail pointing with a crescent of dirt. David bent closer and there, behind the uneven print, was Iris, dead. Fallen on a knife. Died in the ambulance howling its way to hospital.

The sounds of the office seemed to jumble and retreat down a muffled corridor. David stared at the square of print until it lost all significance and was tentatively removed. Dixon obviously wanted to speak, but David did not look up. The other finally left, leaving sweat curling in the air, and David stared ahead at the files. He could not picture Iris as a skewered corpse, only as a lack. His eyes moved across the bare desk top opposite. He stared at the telephone.

He lunged at the receiver, dialled, listened to the throb of the bell at the other end. It repeated its sequence several times; then the line clicked open. A weary voice said "Hello?"

"Mr. Glendenning? This is David Maxwell." This fact was vaguely acknowledged. "What happened last night, for God's sake?"

"It was an accident," Mr. Glendenning began slowly. "She was cutting the Sunday joint, you see, and the knife slipped and went into her. The doctor

couldn't save her."

But David's preoccupation cut through this façade. "I know everything, Mr. Glendenning," he threw out. "I know about the vault and the tunnel to that locked room—everything, so you needn't be afraid of giving anything away. What really happened? She fell on that sacrificial knife, didn't she?"

Mr Glendenning's grief obscured any unease he might feel at David's revelation. He seemed glad of someone to whom he could speak freely; he plunged into an embarrassingly hysterical account. He had not arrived home until early Monday morning, after all. It had been past time to feed the things in the vault. Iris must have determined to give them blood, entered the room of the sacrificial bowl with the knife, and at that moment Mr. Glendenning had rung the doorbell. She had run to admit him, had tripped over a hummock in the hall carpet and driven the knife into herself. She had died conscious. She had died, David realised, because of the legend of the undead Glendennings; the legend which he might so soon have disproved for her. The thought cut him open.

"You did it!" he screamed into the telephone. "You and your stupid fucking beliefs!"

Mr. Glendenning's breathing cut off. The office had gone quieter, too. Some people twisted round to raise eyebrows; the backs of other heads moved slightly. David slammed the receiver down against them all.

He somehow fought through the rest of the morning. Nobody spoke to him; the sound of the whole office, in fact, was subdued. David closed files at intervals and raised them to a pigeon-hole in slow arcs. At ten past eleven Jack Dixon made a wide detour around his desk.

It was approaching twelve-thirty when David saw the writing on the file cover. It was Iris's usual thick pencilled script: "you wanna check for mathematical errors?" it inquired. She always wrote that type of direction on the cover; or at least, had always used to... The voices in the office were receding again; the pencilled note was blurring. Suddenly he slid the file cover away and stood up. His teacup splintered on the floor.

The week dragged by. David sat in various rooms in his home, staring at objects; trying vainly to lighten the shadow of Iris that was paralysing his thoughts, slowing his limbs. Wednesday he received and tore up a curt invitation to her funeral; what emotions was he supposed to feel while

staring at an empty coffin? She was at home, with her father—her father with whom she had perhaps shared God knew what perverted relationship—indeed, only he could prove or disprove the manner of her death; how could anyone know whether he had not killed her himself to drag their relationship into yet more abnormal regions? But David could do nothing now. He couldn't see Iris again, therefore the only sane action was to forget. To that end he avoided the Brice Street area, prolonging his walks outside the town, and finally in desperation swept custom and opinion aside and began to frequent public houses regularly.

It was in one of these that he met Jack Dixon. At about nine o'clock that Saturday night, Dixon and a party of friends entered the bar; from overheard references David gathered that Dixon had cashed a bet and was celebrating. They noticed him sitting in the corner at once, and somebody offered him a drink. He accepted, joined them at a table, finished his pint, crossed to the bar for a refill. While he stood there muttered remarks drifted in and out of his consciousness: "You'd think he was celebrating it"... "bloody disgusting, if you ask me"... "and he reckoned to fancy her..." He could have attacked them, but he preferred to force politeness from them. He returned to the table and began to drink in earnest.

So it was that by ten-thirty he was determined to wake Iris.

After all, he mused as he unsteadily approached a telephone booth on the corner of Brice Street, she had believed it; she had died while resurrecting her mother to drink her blood, and she was down in that vault of half-life now. So it was logical that his blood would bring her back. And when she returned, she would recognise him, speak to him, perhaps leave the tomb altogether—that was logical enough. Or so it seemed to David as he thumbed through the directory after a number that had slipped his memory. He dialled, waited until the other receiver was wearily lifted.

"Is that Mr. William Glendenning?" David inquired, deepening his voice with a Scottish accent (which Iris had always said he could do well). "I thocht I'd better warn ye that they're digging up yer daughter's grave at St. Michael's. Something about 'investigation'. Mebbe ye'd better get down there quick." He replaced the receiver.

He watched no. 17. Soon the lights blinked out and Mr. Glendenning hurried down the path, slamming the door behind him. He disappeared around the corner furthest from the telephone booth, and at that point David

pushed himself away from the booth and swayed toward the house. The front door had locked itself, which he expected; but the window at the back was open again, and after some manoeuvring he succeeded in levering himself through the lower pane.

The house was silent except for the ticking of a clock somewhere in darkness. There was no time to waste. He entered the hall, switched the light into a brief flare and glanced from the locked door to the telephone—beside which flashed a keyring. He plunged for the keys, knocked the telephone to the floor, and made for the door. In the darkness he fumbled for the keyhole and missed it, returned to the light switch, finally selected the appropriate key and, opening the door, clicked on the room's light. He darkened the hall again and entered.

It was a small square room; uncovered plaster formed its walls, a light-bulb without shade hung from the ceiling by a dusty cord. An unsteady table stood in the centre of the bare tiled floor, between the door and an uncurtained archway in the opposite wall, leading into an arched passage of chipped red brick. The knife and bowl caught the light on the table. There was nothing else, and no sound at all.

David's heels fell flatly against the tiles as he approached the table and picked up the knife. The blade was quite clean, but there was a flaking brown ring around the inside of the triangular bowl. He looked away quickly and examined the weapon. Both edges of the blade had obviously been recently sharpened. The handle was carved with odd images; a black sea under a gigantic oval light (suggestion of some flickering shape inside it) and many heads rising from the water and long thin arms reaching toward the light with dripping fingers. He looked away from that too, glanced at his watch, and began to search for a place to cut. Veins throbbed in his wrist, but, as he remembered, a wound in the wrist often proved fatal. He noticed blue tendrils on the ball of his thumb, but this struck him as probably painful. At last he closed his fist, stuck out his thumb and sliced open the first joint.

Blood broke from the slit at once. Ignoring the cold pain, David dragged the bowl toward him and let the stream trickle down the side. A shivering reflection of the lightbulb formed in the pool. What else had be to do? He remembered, and called "Iris—Iris—it's me, Dave..." He resisted a drunken inclination add "come and get it", and listened for some sound. His call

returned muffled by the walls, but nothing else was audible. He waited, his thumb resting on the edge of the bowl. There came a faint shifting rustle, but that could have been one of many night noises. His thumb continued to stream. He leaned on the table and stared through the arch in the wall, but nothing moved beyond...

Suddenly he heard footsteps approaching. He strained toward the archway but though he was unsure, he thought the sound came from the region of the hall. Mr. Glendenning must have returned! What would he do if he discovered David? David pinched the edges of the wound together; the pain rose and he bit down on the thumb. He peered again at the arched tunnel; no movement there. He hurried to the door, hesitated a last moment and switched the light off. At that moment the footsteps—bare feet slapping the tiles—entered the room from the other side.

He grabbed at the light switch, missed, stumbled and fell, cracking his forehead against the edge of the door. The door slammed, and the key thudded outside on the hall carpet. The pain in his head faded, and David levered himself to his feet by the doorknob. He could see nothing in the darkness, but could hear: slow footsteps, a soft thud, hands brushing wood, then a metallic sound and a cat-like licking. He felt along the wall for the switch. His other hand clenched with concentration and a nail scraped open his thumb. Then he had the switch, pressed it down and turned round.

Iris had her back to him. She was thinner now, paler, and the hem of a translucent white dress stirred below her knees, but it was she. He knew the hair and the earrings that swung the light back and forth. "Iris!" he called, but she did not turn. She was holding the triangular bowl up to her face, and he caught a muffled sucking.

"Iris? Iris, it's Dave..." he told her, raising his voice. She did not respond. Her head was thrown back now; she had inserted one corner of the bowl into her mouth. Her inverted face was whiter than he remembered. The lightbulb glistened moistly in her eyes.

"*Iris,*" he shouted. "It's Dave—why don't you speak? Don't you recognise me?" and he swayed forward and shook her shoulder. It was cold and slightly damp, like moss. Something plunged into the pit of his stomach. She's dead, he thought numbly. Then she turned round.

If David had gone to her by means of the other entrance—that in the vault outside the house—perhaps he could have reached her. If she had awakened

into that half-life of hers and seen him waiting for her, perhaps some vestige of affection, of memory, might have broken forth. Perhaps he could even have brought her up from the vault to stay with him. But she had not come up to stay with him; she had come up after the blood—to the exclusion of all else. Too late he saw that as he stared at last into her eyes; eyes that, although set in a face he knew, he could not recognise—eyes which brushed across his face and turned toward the line of red across his left hand; her eyes in which there was not a trace of recognition—only the all-excluding desire of a thirsty, savage, and quite unconquerable *animal.*

Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt, taken from Inconsequential Tales, 2008.

1964

The Reshaping Of Rossiter

"*The Reshaping of Rossiter* (1964) is the first version of *The Scar*. It and its much improved rewrite were both produced for Arkham House anthologies, although they could equally well have been destined for *Demons by Daylight*."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Inconsequential Tales*

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Someone—probably the English master at school so long before—thought of the perfect word to describe Lindsay Rice: he was an 'oblique' person. "Take his essays, for example," the English master used to say. They were excellently constructed, the smooth flow of their concepts was extraordinary, and the reader would be so caught up by the flow that he might read two pages before noticing that the whole thing had no connection with the title. The persistent reader would eventually uncover the topic, approached through this labyrinth of ideas. "It's very well written, but I don't think you quite do justice to your title," the teacher frequently remarked—while at the same time the mathematics master might be wearily tracing Rice's calculation of some problem through a maze of figures to—inevitably—the correct solution. Rice's name was repeatedly mentioned in the staffroom as "a borderline case".

"Oh, he gets there in the end," someone always remarked, "but the way he does it is useful only to himself. Any guesses what he'll be when he leaves school?"

Surprising those who swore he would never gain a worthwhile position, Rice entered the Brichester branch of one of the larger banks. His oblique approach carried over into his life there; his explanations to clients, for example, were intelligible only to those who had the patience to hear him out. If he wanted to speak to anyone otherwise engaged, he had a habit of watching the other in the lid of his cigarette case, and if someone entered the washroom while he was at the sink, his eyes would flick up to catch the

passing reflection in the mirror. He had a special fixation about mirrors and mirror surfaces. The most notable example of this was on the bus which took him to and from the bank, for when he had nothing to read on the journey, instead of watching the streets and pedestrians flashing by he would carefully spy on the other passengers in the glass of the window. "It's amazing what you get to see that way," he said once.

One day in February 1963 he boarded the vehicle at the usual time and hooked himself along the upper-deck aisle to a midway seat. He leaned back in the seat to slide money from his pocket, and began to cough. He was unpleasantly ill with influenza; he had been coughing unhappily all night, and now felt only half-awake.

The conductor arrived, stood clicking change in his hand. Rice paid him, plucked the ticket from his fingers, and shifted toward the window. (Ask for eight, get a nine—hell, it's not worth bothering about.) He peered into the window. The seat opposite him was unoccupied. That ahead of him was filled by two old women, sporting headscarves and curlers, who were carrying on a loud conversation punctuated with shrill bursts of laughter. Ahead of them sat a young man and presumably his girlfriend, arguing—the question apparently being who should pay the fare, to judge from the way the young man pushed his friend's hand away from the conductor.

The bus slowed to a stop, several passengers were urged aboard by the conductor, and it moved into the traffic again. A patch of waste ground slid by beyond the window, so that momentarily the reflection was lost. Someone lowered himself into the seat opposite. The reflection returned, and Rice saw that the man seated across the aisle was Jack Rossiter, a friend who worked in a travel agency on Harrison Avenue. Odd, Rice thought; Jack always boarded this bus, but on every occasion he caught it three stops further on. He must have been visiting early. Rice decided he should put out some greeting, and turned toward the other. He stretched his arm across the aisle and tapped the man on the elbow.

Then he retreated to the window, reddening with embarrassment. The other had turned in his direction, so that his full face was visible, and Rice saw that it was not Rossiter at all. The left side of his face resembled Rossiter's, but a livid scar ran down the right side from temple to jaw—cut by something rusty, Rice deduced—and the man was paler and thinner than Jack. But from a distance—Rice peered at the reflection—yes, from a

distance one would be deceived. The two men were not identical, but they could be taken for twins.

He found the resemblance more striking when Rossiter himself boarded the bus at his usual stop. Rossiter clattered up the aisle, not noticing his friend, and plumped into the left front seat. As he passed in a reflection, for one moment Rice glimpsed the two men simultaneously, and realised that if Jack were thinner, paler, and scarred, he would look exactly like the man opposite. Rice's concentration moved away from the duplicated world of the window, toward this unusual fact.

A few stops towards Brichester's city centre, the streets darkened into an area of slum tenements and derelict houses. As the bus drew to a stop where stood a group of overalled factory-workers, the man opposite Rice hooked himself into the aisle and clattered down to the lower deck. Rice's gaze focused on the street below. The man strolled across the pavement and turned up an alley between two houses. The bus re-entered the traffic, and as it passed the opening Rice glimpsed the other hurrying up the alley, which was black with rain and walled by blackened houses as far as he could see. Then the view was behind him, leaving him with an odd feeling of depression.

The bus cruised down Harrison Avenue and Rossiter alighted, noticing Rice for the first time as he entered the aisle and remarking "Hello there—see you at lunch." The two men often met for dinner at the Queen's Restaurant, which was midway between their respective places of work and which they both patronised. That day Rice, having dealt with what few callers arrived at the bank, reached the restaurant first, and was thus able to prepare some opening remark. The appearance of the figure on the bus had been inexplicably troubling him all morning, and he felt he must mention it. Typically, however, when his friend arrived Rice did not refer to this; instead, he eased into a discussion of the *doppelgänger* legend, and only when Rossiter showed signs of boredom did he mention the morning's incident.

"I saw someone this morning who looked very like you," he remarked finally.

"Oh, did you?" Rossiter replied. "Then, according to you, I'm going to die soon. Yes. Anyway, about that fishing-rod I bought..."

Rice could have steered the conversation back to his subject, but that was not his way. If someone chose to monopolise the conversation, Rice would accommodate him. So he merely agreed to visit his friend's house the following night to inspect the fishing-rod, and left the incident on the bus to itself.

The next morning, his cold was worse. He could think of little else except the cigarette-smoke which persisted in drifting toward him, but as riding on the lower deck inevitably brought on his travel sickness, there was no escape downstairs. At intervals he blew his nose hopefully. If there were no improvement during the night, he decided, the bank would have to manage without him for a few days.

The bus turned into the stream past a rectangle of waste ground, where, Rice realised, Rossiter's double had boarded the vehicle the day before. He squinted into the window; the seat opposite him was empty. He shifted and took in several more reflections; no sign of the other. He then did something unusual for him; he turned in his seat and quickly took in the faces behind him, then scanned the passengers ahead. None of them was the one he sought.

Rossiter arrived at the usual point along the route, noticed him and crushed him against the window. Rice coughed out answers to his friend's remarks as he stared at the glass, his eyes focused somewhere between the surface and the exterior. When they reached the slums and finally an alley that he remembered, he strained his gaze for scarcely any reason, and made out that the alley ended on a distant waste; nothing more. A severe cough at that moment cut through his throat, and he lost interest.

His cold thickened during the morning, and by lunchtime he had decided to break off the evening's visit. But Rossiter was not in the Queen's Restaurant, and Rice disliked breaking appointments without notice. So it was that he walked that night the length of Ferris Drive and reached the Rossiters' semi-detached.

"Yes, it's a very good buy," Rice commented nasally, spinning the fishing-rod's reel.

Julie, Rossiter's wife, glanced up in simulated interest. Her husband was not listening; he was standing at the window and holding the curtain aside a little. "Jack, you're not listening to Lindsay," she said.

"What? ...Oh, yes, I heard," replied Rossiter, and let the curtain fall. "I was just watching that fellow under the lamppost. No, too late, he's gone now," he waved her back. "He's been there ever since I came home tonight, watching the house, I thought... Funny thing, I've felt all day as though I was being watched."

"What did he look like?" Rice asked, laying down the rod.

"Tall, about my height. Very pallid complexion."

Rice glanced round, opened his mouth, and Julie stood up: "I'll go and make us all some coffee."

"Oh, no, you won't," corrected her husband. "*I'll* go and make it. You stay here and entertain Lindsay. God knows we've been boring you all night. And if you don't feel more alive by the weekend, I'll cut out that fishing trip," and he was gone.

For some moments a smothering silence hung round the plush armchairs and walnut bookcase. "Happy home life," ventured Rice disconnectedly.

"Yes," Julie agreed, leaping into the opening. "...If you could be too good to someone, Jack would be to me."

The morning after, Rice's head felt as if it were swelling out of bed. He shivered in the cold of dawn, pulled himself further under the blankets and sank back into sleep. Waking past three o'clock, he telephoned the bank, tasted a cup of coffee and poured it down the sink, and finally crawled back into bed.

Sometime later—it must have been the following afternoon—a persistent doorbell arrested his drifting. He struggled into his dressing-gown, padded coughing into the next room, and opened the apartment door. Two people pressed in: an apologetic police officer following a distraught Julie Rossiter.

"No, I haven't seen Jack since Tuesday night," Rice told the officer. Here Julie broke in to explain. Jack had not come home the previous evening, there had been no phone message, no hint beforehand that he might be late, but he had not been home all night. It wasn't his way to do such a thing. "I've a feeling that something—I don't know—*horrible* has happened to him," she said.

Rice could only repeat his denial and stand awkwardly before her anxiety, until at last she turned away. He began to close the door, and she switched

back to face him: "You'll let me know if he gets in touch with you?" Rice confirmed that he would and, closing the door, lurched back to bed.

Days passed before he was ready to return to work, but when he did, he began really to be affected by Rossiter's absence. An empty seat on the morning bus, an unoccupied place at his table at the Queen's Restaurant—these were sinister reminders and provoked speculation about the disappearance. The police had dismissed suicide as an explanation, so did he; nor did he think, as some passing acquaintances had suggested, that Rossiter had deserted his wife—his last visit to Ferris Drive convinced him against that. But his own suspicions were formless and menacing. He found himself looking in vague apprehension down an alley off the route into Brichester.

Toward the end of the third week since the disappearance, Rice left his Douglas Road apartment in search of the entertainments of central Brichester. As he emerged from the street door, a pale figure met him: Julie Rossiter in a white overcoat, breathless from running. He waited at the foot of the wide stone steps as she summoned her breath and gasped "They've found Jack—will you come?"

On the bus to Ferris Drive she sketched in details: how Rossiter had staggered out of the woods on the Camside-Clotton road and been driven home in a passing car; how pale and emaciated he had been as he strained out directions to the driver; how he had been the victim of some insane crime. And yet, after all this, he refused to—but perhaps Rice should hear it from Jack.

And Jack told his story at length, now and then leaning from his supporting mound of pillows to stress a point to Rice, sunk in the bedroom armchair. "It began the day after you came round here," Rossiter commenced. "Just when I was off to lunch I had a telephone call—said it was from you: it wasn't? No, I know that now—but at the time I wasn't sure, you with a cold and so forth. The voice was thick and forced, and it said I was to go to Potter's Crossing—said there was something very interesting there. No time to explain, or there wouldn't be time in the lunch hour to look it over. You know Potter's Crossing—that place on the Ton we went beyond Clotton?"

Rice remembered Potter's Crossing well enough. It was difficult to reach; one took the bus through the deserted remains of Clotton, dismounted at the first stop beyond, and followed the path that led to the Ton through a small

tangled wood. The path was hard under Rossiter's feet, and frost penetrated his soles. He had rather expected Rice to meet him at the bus-stop, but he had not been visible there, nor did he appear through the marching trees. Rossiter could not make out the guiding gleam of water and, glancing back, he saw that the trees had closed off the road. He quickened his pace toward the Ton, and a blow on the back of his neck knocked him unconscious.

He found himself eventually lying in semi-darkness on damp boards, walls closing him in on every side. He drew himself up to survey his surroundings and one supporting hand sank into something spongy. He recoiled and frantically glared around; his eyes were not receiving details of the enclosure, but he could focus no looming shape of another tenant. The dimness of the room and a pounding agony in his head made him squeeze shut his eyes for as long as he dared, and at last they snapped open on the interior of a hut; mossy but stout-looking walls, opposite him a stubborn-looking door, above him a thickly-raftered roof with here and there a gap of sunlight, splashing its pool of radiance on a floor of muddy boards on which were isolated three dimly unappetising pieces of bread that he had earlier touched and near them a tin of some liquid.

Having oriented himself, he quietly approached the door. His trouser cuffs swung wetly against his ankles, and when he reached down to finger them his hand came away covered with grit and mud; he realised that he must have been dragged here. And perhaps his attacker—whoever he was, whatever his motive—was waiting outside the door; Rossiter's right hand closed round a cigarette case which might be used to lethal effect. His left caught hold of a flaking ring set into the door; he raised the case high and wrenched at the ring. But not this, nor repeated onslaughts with his shoulder, affected the immobile door.

Only when the night outside strengthened the hut's gloom did he become really worried. Until then his battering on the moss-softened walls and cries for help, while urgent in tone, had been soothed by a conviction that aid would soon arrive, but who would take the forest path after dark, and how distant might that path be? He could no longer see the wood against which he lay; the door might well be open but invisible against the forested darkness, so that he could not be certain that faintly audible creaks did not mark the progress of his unseen attacker toward him. And oddly enough, all

at once it no longer mattered. He must close his eyes to relieve the pain in his skull. He was overpoweringly tired.

When he awoke the light was dimming again: the late afternoon of the following day. He examined the walls; there was no crack to be widened. There were those chinks of sky above him, but his fingers alone could not enlarge them. He kicked at the wood, called out hoarsely, but no sound filtered in from outside and nobody came to release him. He lay down again, staring at the door with eyes that grew heavier—and so it continued. Gradually he became hungry, but only one of the pieces of bread was palatable; the others were white with mould. The odour of the liquid in the tin was disgustingly familiar, and he tipped it out. Sometimes when he awoke he broke open the remaining pieces of bread and found that their untouched cores briefly numbed the gnaw of hunger. Once it began to rain, and he slid the empty tin under a dripping hole in the roof, but from the tang which persisted through the rainwater he knew he had been right about the previous liquid, and he spat it out revolted and lay down to catch the rain directly in his mouth. All too soon the drumming faded from the roof, and he wearily sat up again to watch the door or batter on the walls until sleep came.

Time had almost lost its meaning when he woke one afternoon to face an open door. Instinctively he clutched his cigarette-case as he tottered dizzily toward release; but the empty woods were silent save for the opposing notes of birds above him. Rejecting caution, he stumbled down the arcades, tripping over fallen branches and reeling against trunks until he fell into the road outside Clotton. As he slumped to his knees at the kerb, a car screeched stationary close by.

"But after all that, he won't go to the police," Julie complained as her husband went silent.

Rice stared at Rossiter, who returned the stare and nodded with weak obstinacy. "That's right," he said. "Whoever did it all, I think he's through with me. That sort of warped mind works in odd ways—if we called in the police, he might get enraged and do something worse. But if he intended to do something more violent even without provocation, why didn't he attack me while I was softened up? It might even be one of those teenage gangs the Severnford police are after who got the wrong victim. Anyway, I'm

recovering—I don't have much reason to prosecute." But he seemed almost to be struggling to convince himself.

"Lindsay, will you go for the police?" pleaded Julie when Jack had subsided.

"Nobody's going for them!" croaked Jack. "They're not coming in here! I won't answer their questions!"

Rice saw that he was about to be involved in an argument. He didn't think he could be of any help with things as they were, he informed them both, and since only silence met this remark, he let himself out into Ferris Drive. Rossiter plunged determinedly under the sheets; Julie began various domestic actions and left each for visions of what might yet happen to Jack. But as the night progressed, emotion dulled in the semi-detached.

Next morning Rossiter threw off the bedclothes and declared he was off to the office; he eased himself upright, crossed the carpet jauntily, reached the landing—and ran into the bathroom barely ahead of a rush of vomit. All his odd determination could not carry him to work that day, nor the next, for it was Saturday. But by Monday he was sufficiently recharged to leave for Harrison Avenue after a tentative breakfast. The frosty air twinged his face; his footsteps on the arctic pavement sounded close and flat. From the front door Julie called "Do you feel all right?" but retired inside as he glared it her.

Somewhere a car engine was refusing to start. Two hundred yards ahead a red bus bound for Brichester appeared and vanished at the junction with Thornhill Road. Around the left-hand corner was his stop. With a glance at his watch, he hurried along the right side of Ferris Drive, glanced left and right some yards further on—the glistening road was deserted—and strode toward the opposite pavement. He was not halfway across when a figure appeared in a right-hand driveway and threw itself toward him. Turning, Rossiter glimpsed the rusted lid of a tin can a second before it slashed open the right side of his face. Gasping in agony, he was easy to trip so that his mutilated cheek and forehead ground into the gravel of the road.

Julie fainted when she swung open the front door to reveal Jack, his face gashed and blackened and pouring blood. He staggered back down the path, half-blind with pain, and gripped the thin painted bars of the gate. The nearby car was finally persuaded to start, pulled out into Ferris Drive and drew to a shocked halt level with him. Rossiter felt hands which he saw

only as pink blurs help him into the car's back seat, heard a voice: "Christ, what happened? No, don't talk—don't touch it! I can't do anything for you —try to hang on, I'll get you to Mercy Hill hospital." He managed to gasp out something about Julie lying inside the open house, and the driver clattered away up the path. His footsteps returned accompanied, and Julie's cool hand gripped Jack's. The car door chopped shut and the vehicle jerked forward.

The doctors at Mercy Hill met his mutilation with all the calmness of efficiency, and surprisingly soon one of them informed the waiting Julie that she might visit her husband. He was propped up by white pillows before a colourless ward wall, and his complexion toned alarmingly with the surroundings. A shocked expression was thawing from his face. There was nothing he wanted, he replied to her anxious questions; she should go home and get something to eat. "The doctors will do all that can be done," he reassured her. But she lingered until their conversation lost all impetus; and even while she descended the antiseptic stairs, she was convinced that Jack had had something urgent to communicate, something lurking just below his trivial words and strained expression.

No doubt it was this which, two hours later, made him throw back the sheets, drag on his shoes and clatter down those same stairs, knocking an unwary nurse and her tray down ahead of him. A doctor who raced after him but stayed to aid the sobbing nurse noticed that Rossiter was yelling something, apparently intended for anyone within earshot; and purposeful as his flight seemed, his words were definitely "Stop me! For God's sake, stop me!" But he was outside the hospital before the doctor had decided to obey, and by then it was too late.

The new vacancy was filled before the almoner had time to notice. A bruised and bleeding taxi-driver was discovered in an alley near Mercy Hill's taxi-rank, where he had been overpowered from behind and kicked unconscious by an unseen assailant. It transpired that it had been his taxi standing outside the hospital when Rossiter rushed out; the taxi into which, according to a doctor who had watched from the ward window above, Rossiter had slid or been dragged by the hands of someone unseen. Then the car roared away without leaving its number with any alert onlooker, and was found hours later—empty, of course—on a slum street at the edge of lower Brichester.

Julie Rossiter insisted on returning home unaided when she recovered from the hospital's latest bulletin, but this was only because she refused to break down in anyone's presence. She controlled herself as far as the bus shelter on Thornhill Road, but tears began to trickle as she made her way up Ferris Drive against an icy breeze. The house lock blurred before her, and she had to squeeze her eyes shut before the key would fit. The carpeted hall was dumb and unsympathetic as she hung her coat on a squealing hanger, and hence she heard the footsteps on the floor above. Fear of the unknown made her tiptoe upstairs with a heavy poker poised for action.

The surgical dressing that turned toward her as the figure straightened up from the bedroom mirror was looser and grubbier than before, but she recognised its wearer readily enough. "Jack, why did you run off? Where did you go?" she cried, and he replied in a strained voice "Why do you want to bother me in my condition?" interspersed with several words she had never before heard from him. She blamed his recent experiences, however, and continued "Are you going to Mercy Hill to have your face seen to, or shall I get in touch with the doctor?" to which he responded "It doesn't need a doctor! With what they've already done, it'll heal by itself!" again tricked out with foul adjectives. Julie felt too unsettled to survive any more of this, and when she had cooked a meal for her husband she left to contact Lindsay Rice.

Rice was perhaps more disturbed by the change than she was, for he felt without knowing why that it was not so inexplicable as it seemed. He was unable to persuade the hostile man before him into hospital: he soon left, apologising to Julie and shamefacedly assuring her that all would right itself in time, with obscene directions still ringing in his ears. Early to bed, he was prevented by speculations from sleep for some time.

All the rest of that week Rice did not speak to Rossiter on the bus. The other remained at the back of the deck and never glanced up when Rice passed; sometimes his hand was pressing that revolting bandage against his face. Robbed of companionship on the downtown journey, Rice returned to the world outside and within the window. It was Thursday when a daily view down an alley to slum waste ground took on a beckoning air, and Friday before he determined—for no coherent reason—to explore.

After all, he thought as he boarded the bus the following morning, he was going to Brichester anyway. Half-an-hour's delay was negligible. Not that

he expected to discover anything specific; he was merely exploring. The more one knew about one's town the better. And he got down at the Farriday Avenue stop just ahead of the alley. A few grimy children splashing in the gutter and numbering the pavement for hopscotch contributed a questionable life to the dingy street. Back several buildings, he saw a draper's next to a fish-and-chip shop, its windows opaque with grease. On the corner of the alley hung a torn and pencilled cinema poster, two weeks out of date. He turned the corner. Alternate wooden doors in the walls hid back yards from intruders. A black cat pounced down, saw Rice approaching and hurried ahead of him, paused before the end of the passage and leapt aboard the wall again. Rice overtook its point of departure and reached his destination.

The waste ground fell away into the urban valley of a disused railway cutting; the ideal playground in the eyes of the local children, Rice would have thought—but none played here. Grass and broken bricks choked the rusty tracks. Houses walled in the rectangular cutting, all dilapidated, some disused; the left and right walls had once been undercut by the railway tunnel, but now the right-hand opening was sealed, though that on the left still gaped. There seemed to be nowhere else to go, and Rice clambered over the debris and into the mouth of the tunnel. It faded into darkness round the bend. The grass thinned and the sharp stones became infrequent, so that he was able to reach the darkness quickly and then feel his way, half-lit by a cigarette-lighter, along the cold wall. There was no sound except the occasional clatter of a kicked brick.

Around the curve, a collapsed roof blocked his progress. He touched the join of this accidental seal to his guiding wall and wondered what to do next; cross to the other wall and work his way back, he supposed, since the lighter did not reach across the tunnel. Halfway across the roof-fall, he came upon a gap above him; he pulled himself up to it—which proved easier than he had expected, since the heaped debris had formed into steps level enough to be constructed—but his eyes declined to penetrate the darkness within. He jumped down again and continued toward the wall.

When the lighter's aura included the further corner, it picked out several objects: most notably a man dressed entirely in red, lying against the wall. Rice approached cautiously, anxious not to wake the sleeper—presumably more poverty-stricken than the average local—and in the silence of his

approach he thought he heard a sound; something stirring into wakefulness. It was not the figure in the corner; he felt it came from the blocked-off portion of the tunnel. His lighter preceded him and glistened on the sleeper's skin. The red was not something he wore, after all; the man was covered in red paint. Rice leaned closer before he jerked away and began to vomit.

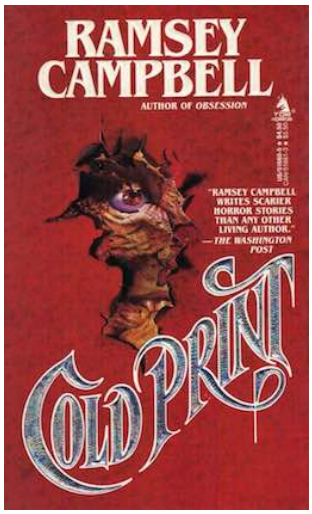
He stood just inside the cool mouth of the tunnel, and wondered what to do. The police must be informed, but then they would question him—and how could he explain his presence there when he was unsure himself? At last he made his way up the bank of the cutting, down the alley and out again into Farriday Avenue, glancing to right and left as he emerged. The few passers-by were intent on other matters. He sneaked into a telephone box beyond the cinema poster and dialled BRI-chester 1000. At that moment a downtown bus appeared on the street's horizon; Rice hastily described his find and its location, rang off, and ran.

The rest of it he read in the newspapers. The body was totally unidentifiable; the police surgeon stated that a knife, a broken bottle, and a heavy iron bar had mutilated the man at length, but neglected to say which had been used on a living man and which on a corpse. Julie Rossiter read the account in a horrified tone across the breakfast table, and was met by callous indifference. Over his own meal Rice examined the report, and recalled a glimpse of crimsoned glass and iron bar in the tunnel. The uncertain light had also shown several curved fragments of white material that could have been eggshell, but in that case the reconstructed shell would have been half as large as Rice, and what could hatch from such an egg? In any case, no light on this anomaly was reported in the newspapers.

Rice ignores Rossiter these days on the bus, and avoids the Queen's Restaurant, so that Rice has little chance to contact Julie and tell her of his surviving unease, always supposing he could coherently describe his feelings. Julie is still nervous, too, but Jack's voice is less strained than it once was, she assures herself, so he must be recuperating. The bandage is off now, leaving a long ugly facial scar. So Julie pursues married life as though nothing has happened and patiently waits for her husband to regain his old self, and Lindsay Rice searches the columns of each *Brichester News* and *Camside Observer* for a Ferris Drive address and the report of an occurrence whose nature he will not admit even to himself.

1965

Before The Storm



"Campbell employs a dual perspective in this story to heighten the main character's sense of alienation. The banality of the office in which he finds himself contrasts sharply with the world of his inner mind, where he is literally inhabiting another dimension coincident with ours."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written In: 1965
First published in *Cold Print*, 1985

Above the town the sun strained behind grey blankness; thunder rumbled wakefully on the horizon. Along Walton Street the flocking crowds escaped into the open to catch their breaths, tried vainly to avoid their own throbbing heat. A blinding stasis held the buildings.

He knew suddenly that before the storm broke, the heat would release the life which even now he felt stirring in the darkness. Where could he hide? Not beyond the plodding shoppers, whose lightest touch released a twist of pain in him; but then how could he leave the burning street? He turned to stare at the blurred buildings, and managed to focus an entrance to the left. He plunged, kicking the tin of money to spill across the newspapers, through a low vestibule, into an elevator on the right.

The walls were featureless except for a row of buttons before his face. Instinctively he pressed the highest, with a finger through which pain blazed. The doors met and the lift jerked upward, and the man's hands moved unoccupied at his sides. His streaming eyes bent the ceiling; he thought something small and round ran up against the roof. He was crawling through a cavern whose roof pressed down less than a foot above him. The place was lightless, but somehow he could see the spiders which swarmed overhead, covering the entire roof, at intervals falling softly on him. Then the end of the cave appeared: a pitted wall from floor to ceiling, cutting off all escape. There came a vast rustling. He turned on his back and saw the globular bodies dropping, rushing across the cavern towards him, biting. He hit out in black despair as they prised their way into his mouth.

His flailing hand struck the opening elevator door. He fell out into an empty vestibule. Windows shone ahead of him, but at least the sun's rays turned down beyond the panes. A pointing finger with, to him, illegible words above it on the wall directed him. This was better than the street—there was even the suggestion of a breeze through one open window. He obeyed the finger and limped down a short passage, at whose end he followed a second digital instruction. The latter brought him into what seemed to be a waiting-room.

A door faced him, on his right a second invited. A partition slammed left of him, and a face bobbed in the opening. Was there any shelter in that direction? No, the opening was too high for access, and he turned, a coil of vertigo twisting up, and stumbled through the right-hand doorway.

He had no clear picture of the room beyond, nor did he care. He had an impression of cabinets close to him, a long high room, at a great distance a murmur as of conversation, muted. There was only one thing of importance: the chair ahead of him, by a table. He staggered sickly forward and painfully lowered himself into the chair. Then he closed his eyes. He remembered at once and snapped them open, yet in that instant he had been sucked downward to a pitted plain of crumbling spires, out of which groped tentative hands. Feverish heat burned through him. He blinked about him in despair and discovered a young man seated nearby at a desk, perhaps the closest of many. He called out as best he could, and saw the young man look enquiringly towards him, stand up slowly, approach, emerging gradually from the liquid haze.

'Who's that? Oh, sorry,' Joan added as she realised Bob was answering the phone. He confirmed something and replaced the receiver, signalled to her that he was open to remarks. 'It's just that someone odd seems to want an interview,' she said. 'Down by the interviewing table. He looks really ill.'

'Yes, the switchboard told me. Seems he ignored the girl at the enquiry window and came straight in. Sounds like a difficult taxpayer. Better not be one of mine. If he is, I'm not taking the interview.'

'Well, you can't expect me to do this one! Anyway,' she pointed out, 'it looks as if he's roped in Bernie.'

This was going to be difficult and unpleasant, thought Bernard Cohen as he sat down across the table. At least that was a barrier between him and the man opposite. Bernard had seen him come in; it would have been

impossible not to notice the arrival, with his boots awkwardly thumping the floor in a ridiculously bowlegged walk. Up close, Bernard's dislike hardened. There were unshaven men scattered across the town, but surely more shaven than this; the newcomer's coat was filthy; his whole form was pale and greasily swollen, with almost the fatness of a drowned corpse, and the bulging eyes were cracked by crimson veins. He seemed in the last stages of some foul disease.

'Do you have a query about your income tax?' enquired Bernard.

And he saw that the interview would be worse than he had anticipated. The man's hand came up and flapped loosely at his nearest ear; the mouth opened and hung that way. Bernard wondered with a shock of revulsion whether the other was mentally defective. Then the mouth moved and loud petulant sounds issued from it. Down the office people looked up or around. 'Wa-uh... eer,' throbbed through the office, and Bernard did not understand.

He tried again. 'Would you like to give me your name? That'd be a help.'

But now the corners of the mouth turned downward and the hands fluttered flabbily, wildly. The sounds came again, thick, more petulant. Bernard cleared his throat. 'Excuse me,' he said, and hurried away down the room.

Alone again, isolated by walls of optical fog, the man rested his chin on his hands; even this action pricked his elbows. His clothes had shrunk to a second skin, and pulled free stickily whenever he moved. He looked about, straining at the vagueness. Ahead of him, on the left, was the recently vacated form-strewn desk; beside which closed curtains hung wearily. His head wavered right; his eyes managed to isolate a metal cabinet with high double doors. High double doors—like those in that house...

He had believed when first he had been drawn into the Society, one night in a pub; all scepticism vanished when, outside one of the small nearby towns, they led him down steps into a pit. By the time he came up from that pit, from the touch and the whispers of unseen inhabitants of black pools down there, he was insulated from any kind of mundane knowledge. So when he walked down South Street that night and came to the house beyond the road, he accepted as truth the tales hinted by the local people, of vast faces that peered from the windows of that house, of shapes seen on the roof by moonlight—for this had been the residence of a witch, a witch who had run screaming from it one night decades ago, screaming and clawing at the shapes that swarmed on her body as she vanished into the nearby

woods. But if he had gone with doubts in his mind, such doubts would have disappeared at the sight of the house. The distortedly peaked roof and tottering chimney loomed against the blackened sky, the front door leaned open on twisted hinges, the windows peered at the sky; all bespoke the gateway the building was.

He entered under an oddly carved overhang, and it was as if he had turned over a stone in some dark moist place; he felt things come alive and retreat into the dark. He was engulfed by a fear overcome only by knowledge of the bargain he was here to make. The place was alive—he sensed that life pulsed and watched from every unlit room. As he passed the iron balustrade of the stair, something moved above him in the filtered moonlight, and he thought he saw an object like the tail of something huge drawn quickly round the bend of the staircase. The doors in the hall beyond the balustrade were closed; perhaps they had only just been closed, for from one room there came a flapping as of wings straining for release. The door of the last room gaped lightlessly; he hastened past it, but could not avoid glimpsing a bed in the depths of the room and a pale motionless figure propped up in that bed. Now he was facing the high double doors at the end of the hall. He hesitated, and as he did so, he heard something heavy begin to rumble down the stairs. He pulled open the doors and plunged beyond.

He fell into total darkness, screamed as his foot went down to avoid a tumble and found no floor to hold it. He fell until it seemed he would never stop, vainly trying to catch his breath as unseen gusts howled over him, down tunnels lined with a soft substance whose nature he did not care to consider. But he hit bottom at last: a circular area of some rubber material, away from which he crawled down a passage, feeling shapes in the dark which throbbed and recoiled from his hands. He emerged in a great vault with an arched ceiling; countless passages entered the vault and converged on a dark well in the floor. He went cold at the sight of that well, and while he yet wavered he saw the bobbing white things stream out of the passages to the cavern rim and felt those which pushed him from his refuge. Then came pale movement in the wall, and something clambered up from the dark—a bloated blanched oval supported on myriad fleshless legs. Eyes formed in the gelatinous oval and stared at him. And he prostrated himself as he had been told, and called the horror's name—Eihort—and under the arched roof amid the nighted tunnels, the bargain was sealed.

He became aware once more of the table before him, the seat under him, the voices that ebbed and the heat that pricked—and as suddenly all these retreated. He tried to hold on, but this was no memory like the well and the tunnels—this was *real*.

He was clawing his way up a spiral ramp of some gleaming metal, to what end he did not know. He levered himself to the edge, his body responding with unfamiliar movements, and looked over for one vertiginous second. The ramp climbed the interior of a tower which extended downward and upward further than he could see. At the limit of his downward vision, a shape was rushing with appalling speed around the spiral, gaining on him as he watched. He pulled himself upward in blind terror. No window broke the walls, and he was somehow glad not to see what lay outside, for in his flight he passed murals depicting a city of towers which rose from a marsh—a city in whose streets walked tall skeletal figures whose faces were always obscured. A faint hope pushed him again to the edge to peer upward, but the roof was not in sight, and as he turned back, the climbing ramp reflected both what he was and what now stood one step behind him. He shrieked.

Bernard looked up from complaining to Joan and Robert. 'We've got a nut on our hands.'

Mr Weedall hurried over to them. 'What on earth is wrong with that fellow? Who's dealing with him?'

'I was, but I found him impossible to deal with,' Bernard said.

'Well, somebody must be able to deal with him! My God!' Mr Weedall hissed. 'What must the taxpayers at the other interview table think? Whose taxpayer is he anyway?'

'I didn't even find that out—or rather, I couldn't—'

'Surely you've been in the department long enough to master that much procedure. Very well, I'll conduct the interview.' He strode on down the room, glancing back until the group dispersed, and reached the table. But the eyes of the seated man were glazed and did not fill with awareness. This was a very sick man, Mr Weedall decided, and touched the other's wrist to recall him—but he drew back his hand in dismay, for the man's skin throbbed as though all the nerves and muscles had come alive.

The night sky was not that of Earth. The black city around him was ruined; its pillars lay on stone stairways, its walls with their minute windows were

jagged against the glacial void. Whatever his mission had been, he should not have entered these labyrinthine streets, for the more dead a city the more life it conceals. Something peered around a pillar; there was a rustle of debris behind him, and he whirled to see a hooded ragged figure in pursuit. While he stood helpless it skimmed nearer, the hood half open and revealing a head of flying cobwebs. He had no chance to scream as the head pressed into his face.

The hand on his wrist created the table and chair. Opposite him a figure swam on his vision; it enquired something of him. It was not like his earlier questioner; its manner was purposefully official. It leaned closer and asked in a whisper that sliced through him: 'What seems to be the trouble, please?'

Could this be a minion of Eihort or perhaps a member of some cult? If so, it might turn him out of his shade into the sun—he must play for time. Explain. But his throat had thickened and no word bubbled up. He twisted dizzily in the chair and found a desk, scraps of paper, scattered ballpoint pens. With a hand that twinged like a plucked tooth he groped at them, so desperately that eventually they were placed in front of him.

His flesh was crawling, but he dared not scratch. Sensation in his hand had subsided into a pounding ache. He fumbled with the pen and tried to think, to select items from his memory that would help describe his plight. But other images crowded in, things he had seen, places he had visited: the colossi guarding black canals on Yuggoth—the whistling heads—the horn-notes which pursued through the forests of Tond—the giant eye which peered between trees—the face which mouthed in the gulf beyond the rim—the dead things in orbit around the worlds beyond Shaggai—the shuttered storehouses hidden in a dockland town—the last revelation by the lake of Glaaki—the sun-bleached buildings of a forgotten city whose walls throbbed a word T R A K and in whose corners white shapes shifted feebly—

Mr Weedall was uncomprehendingly disturbed. The man before him would begin to write, his face twisted with exertion—then his eyes would dim and he would stiffen with panic. This became almost a rhythm as the pen struggled over the paper, slowly forming words:

> Made bargein with Eihort God of the Labyrinth Gave me other lives Life selling papers didnt matter because i could go into other bodies leave mine behind to sell papers But people told me i didnt

know all about the bargein Nobody made it any more and when they did years after Hed use them to send His children into the world Now i cant control places i go When His servants die they come into my body and make me go into theirs and die in thier place Got no control His children will come through if you dont let me stay

The pen faltered; there was nothing more to be said, and the swollen hand laid it down on the table. Mr Weedall reread the tottering letters, which dimmed under the onrushing storm outside, and found no sense among them. He was sure that the man was both physically and mentally in need of medical attention, and that he should be escorted from the office, one way or another, in early course. He leaned down and said 'I think I understand now. Hold on, and I'll contact someone who can help you.'

So he *was* one of the servants of Eihort, and calling others to close in for the breakthrough. The man lurched to his feet, feeling as if pain were slashing open his limbs. He must escape, find another shelter. The room was growing darker, as though someone was engulfing the walls. He reeled to the door and threw it open, swayed sickly through the waiting-room, into the vestibule. A voice called behind him. Which way? The lifts would take time to respond. He saw a door on the right, rushed at it, his legs leaden and boiling.

'Not that way!' Mr Weedall shouted.

Emerging from the office with a file, Robert saw what happened. He did not faint, but threw himself back into the waiting-room and wrenched open the office door. Joan was on her way out, but he pushed her back and somehow managed to persuade her and the rest not to approach the door. At last Mr Weedall appeared, very pale, attempting calmness as he told them he had called an ambulance. He would let nobody leave the room.

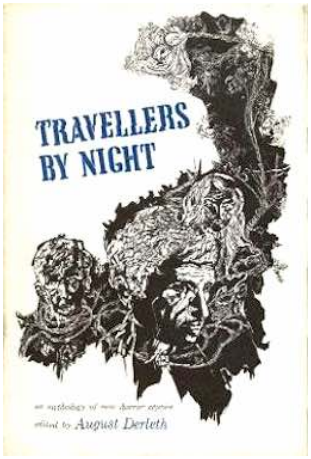
But before long he motioned Robert outside and suggested vaguely that they search the open rooms, staircases and halls of the building for something he did not specify. Strings of rain writhed on the windows as they searched; the storm exploded triumphantly overhead. They found nothing. Nevertheless, Mr Weedall arranged himself a transfer to another office, and Robert persuaded him to obtain transfers for himself and Joan. For the others in the office, who had not even glimpsed the object from which the ambulance men turned their eyes as they lifted it from the

vestibule floor, nothing could be done. Robert does not like to think of what may threaten those working in that high office building, especially after dark.

For the crippled visitor had swung open the door despite Mr Weedall's warning—and been confronted by the roofs beyond the fire escape. Stagnant air pressed in through the opening, and a last pure ray of sunlight had struck in, so accurate in its aim as to seem deliberate. It caught the man, who let out a dreadful glutinous howl and staggered round to confront them, his head shaking insanely. Then Mr Weedall went sick, and Robert fled back to sanity and what he had once accepted as the everyday.

Perhaps he had not seen what he spent the rest of his life trying to forget: the man's face tearing, a rent appearing from temple to jaw, opening the cheek to hang revealed; for there had been no blood—only something pale as things that had never seen the sun, something that poured down the man's body, which collapsed like a balloon. Surely Robert could not have had time to see the flood separate into moving objects that rolled away down the stairs into the depths of the building, but that was the memory he always shrank from focusing; for some instinct told him that if he ever remembered clearly what he had seen, it would be something even worse than a swarm of enormous fat white spiders.

The Cellars



"Campbell had originally intended for this story to appear in *Demons by Daylight*. Its juxtaposition of images of death and decay to the repressed sexuality of its characters is seen in several other stories in that book."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written In: 1965
First published in *Travellers By Night*, 1967
Also published in: *The Height Of The Scream*

Julie felt no precise emotion at the sight of Vic, approaching up the office. The lunch hour had dawdled by; she had nothing to read, nothing to chat about to her colleagues, and was bored—but Vic would hardly have been her choice of a visitor to relieve her boredom. She turned from the window and the dandruff of snow slipping from the ruined church's shoulders as he rounded her desk.

"I say!" he began. "I'll bet you didn't know there were catacombs in Liverpool? Down near the river, off a cul-de-sac, steps leading underneath the street—I'd never have known they were there if one of my friends didn't work nearby. Most extraordinary, though. Heaven knows what they're used for."

She found herself becoming interested, and regarded him expectantly.

"Do you want to explore them sometime?" he asked after a pause. "Tomorrow lunchtime?"

She considered. Agreement committed her to nothing: no more than she had committed herself by giving Vic a photograph of her at his request. "Yes," she said eagerly. "See you here one o'clock tomorrow."

Several minutes later he left reluctantly, detaching himself from her presence as though from a fly-paper, and she imagined him making his way down the office, round the corner at the end, across the bridge linking the two halves of the building which were divided by a well up to the fourth floor where they worked, down his leg of the floor and sitting at his desk. Across the well, through the coinciding windows opening onto it, she could have viewed him seated opposite her, had she wished. But the division

across which they had used to wave had widened into a gulf which she had no inclination to bridge. Some months ago he had become her regular escort to the cinema; this had been well enough, but she'd wondered why he never put his arm round her, never even spoke during the film unless she spoke to him. He was too engrossed, she decided, but she could not invoke this theory when he was as frozen as ever in a movie she knew he was attending under protest. She assumed outright that he felt nothing for her, and ceased to go out with him. She supposed he might be shy, but shyness for her was evidence of effeminacy. Why he continued to visit her she did not attempt to deduce; his visits, in any case, were often a nuisance and sometimes a bore. But this time he had aroused her.

Nevertheless, on the following day her anticipation of their trip to the vaults had palled before one o'clock. Once there the vaults would no doubt excite her enthusiasm, but how to alleviate her tedium while she waited? She had ten minutes to kill. She reached for the phone and dialled Alan, her call was batted back and forth between extensions at the factory, and it was three minutes to one before she heard him speak and, her hand deafening the telephone, called to Alice at the next desk: "Ring Vic and tell him to come round at five past, will you?"

Vic had her coat over one arm when he arrived. On the other hand, he lacked a torch with which to guide their exploration, but Julie solved this problem by commissioning a candle from the stock kept in the office against a power cut. "There'll never be another cut so soon after the last one," she affirmed, leaving one candle asleep by itself in the storage box. He held the door for her and they emerged before the lift.

Her nose against the crack between the doors, she watched the elevator's steady ascent of the shaft. Behind her Vic offered: "Cigarette?" His hand curved into view around her face, a hopeful box of his usual Turkish brand on his open palm. When she had begun going out with him she had expressed a taste for these Turkish cigarettes. "No thanks," she replied. He shrugged; smoke creamed from his mouth.

The lift's lips closed behind them. She leaned against the back wall and watched the floor numbers wink at her: 4, 3, 2... "Of course different people may react to the vaults in different ways—said, warningly," Vic was saying from his post at the controls. "I went out of curiosity, morbid of course, seeing it's me, but as for your reaction—romanticist that you are..."

This image of her he had derived from her fondness for slushy Hollywood movies. She asked: "What's that mean?"

"A romanticist—well, someone whose outlook is—you view the world through rose-coloured glasses, one might say. This place isn't romantic. It may do something for you, all the same." Having flaked all colour from the sky, the snow had stopped, but an insistent rain troubled the pigeons picking their way among the debris of St. Luke's Church. Vic jerked Julie's umbrella and it bloomed above them, the same sunny orange as her coat. They started out; she walked on his left while he balanced the umbrella in his left hand. Above them the rain tapped for admission. They crossed into Bold Street and passed the sonorous entrance of the Odd Spot Club— "Have you ever been there?" Vic asked.

"I don't know anyone who'd take me," she replied. Vic was about to speak when a furtive-looking man with an armful of bottles pushed between them and was lost in the vestibule of 69A.

"Where is this place anyway?" Julie demanded, returning under the taut shade of the umbrella.

"Ah, no—*that* you must wait and see in due course."

The flowing arrow-headed ripples in the gutter accompanied them into Church Street, where commuters ventured from the cold grey bulk of Central Station and ducked back. An icy wind slanted the rain toward them down the narrow two-way street; Julie plunged her hands into her damp pockets. The drenching gusts raised goose-pimples on the cars and herded the pedestrians into shop doorways to choke on the stench of raincoats. A soaking dog, with wetly lolling eyes and tongue, flinched among the darting feet. Julie ostentatiously averted her gaze as they approached. "I don't like to look at things like that," she explained.

"There's a hell of a lot worse than that in the world, and you can't look away from it all."

"But if you think about that all the time, how are you going to have any fun?" she retorted, and without warning darted across the road. Car wheels screeched in fury. Vic grimaced and waited with the army at the curb for the traffic-lights to permit him to join battle with the mob across the street, each seeking gaps in the press through which he could slip. The drivers sat and cleaned their windscreens with their hands. When he reached her Julie was

enjoying the brief plush warmth of the Tatler Cinema entrance, before the padded splendour of the House of Bewlay and the Kardomah Coffee House. He urged her on. The rain still streamed down the toadstool-buff or sooty buildings to the kaleidoscopic shops which served as their foundations, their windows full of lifeless shoes and dresses; over all, detached, the streetlamps pored, and above the roofs the Liver Building clock stood with hands on hips.

Fewer feet splashed through the dirty puddles at the end of Church Street. They skirted the cloaked black figure among the Victoria Monument's pillars and hurried down the line of parking meters like hooded cobras. On either side the discrete life insurance buildings with their golden nameplates mounted to wild turrets. Vic led the way below the regimented windows and cream rain-striped walls of Exchange Flags; scattered men and women, dwarfed by the ebon figures chained below a wartime motto, ran from the scything rain. Here Julie lost her way; they wandered through a maze of streets whose sides descended to unlabelled blackened doors, past makeshift bookstalls cloaked in drooling oilskin, between opaque windows and boarded doors. Very far away, it seemed, a steamer blew its nose. Then, when she was least expecting it, she was led through a gaping arch between two silent storage houses into an inner court, across the slimy cobbles to a railing which boxed in a heavy long trapdoor, hooked back to show treacherous stone steps burrowing into rectangular darkness. Vic sheltered some steps down to light the candle, then looked up at her. "Right, Juliette," he said, using her full name by which few people called her however much she pleaded. "Down we go—said ominously," and he reached up for her hand. Briefly hesitating, she clasped his hand and let him draw her down into the blackness.

The rain's persistent patter faded. Down some twenty feet the stairs came on a corridor; it stretched both ways to unlit depths. Vic steered her to the left. The candle's aura pulsed on pock-marked walls, the floor carpeted with moss like ancient flesh, the beaded ceiling. The silence had already closed around them, bespeaking secret lightless halls. "*Une fois de plus—le long de ces mêmes couloirs*," intoned Vic, and urged her through an archway beyond which the light expanded dimly to suggest low vaulted rooms on every side. They stooped beneath an entrance on the left and flat black walls again enclosed the flame.

A table slumped against the wall on dislocated legs, and in the corners cartons massed, almost shapeless in the shadows. Vic rummaged in his pockets for a pen and notebook and copied down the number of the telephone abandoned on the table, while Julie tried to open an enigmatic spongy crate in the half-dark, and failing kicked it viciously. She wandered over to the phone as Vic, becoming interested in the crate, drew away the candle's circle and left her groping through the murk. Julie stretched out her hand to determine whether the phone still rang—and pulled back with a squeak of horror; for the receiver was enveloped in yielding moss and fungus—it was like blindly touching a drowned corpse. Vic's shadow loomed and billowed as he returned to protect her, but she refused to explain what had happened.

He took her hand again and together they came out into the widening subterranean night. Grey curves against the depths implied archways beyond archways, an emptiness expanded through long-forgotten dusty echoing rooms. Vic strode ahead. Hinted cracks between the bricks shifted and flickered as they explored. In the vague distances of alcoves off the passages they glimpsed grim rusted cogs and levers of some disused machinery, the strained-back lids of grimy tins, the minute reflection of the candle flame in a black sheet of broken glass as if across a spatial gulf. From one red-brown nail on a door a *Danger* sign still hung, but Julie, hoisted up by Vic, could not see what lay beyond the insecure grille. They meandered on, avoiding the black pools which formed beneath the ceiling's sweat, beneath a beam from which grime-weighted cobwebs hung like distended stomachs, and beyond it stretched their destination.

The limits of the place hung back from the light; they could sense oppressive walls on either side and saw the start of lines of iron pillars which supported the roof as they dimmed into the depths, but what lay at the extent of the hall Julie did not know. Somewhere a shrill drip of water stressed the silence. Chunks of moss-smoothed rubble caught their feet as they moved toward the right-hand wall; the candle's luminous wand conjured the stone out of the blackness and picked out an oval pallid shape at eye-level. Julie's grip tightened.

"It's a face," Vic whispered.

It was in fact a patch of mould; the walls were soft as those of some decaying padded cell. Vic stumbled onward and Julie almost tripped over

piled shards of wet green stone; as she regained her balance Vic was already peering into what appeared to be a cupboard in the rock, half-revealed by a creaking stout wood door. The niche was shallow, slightly over six feet high and two feet wide. Vic held the candle close to the uneven rheumy brick; the space's floor was hidden by a tangle of what might have been hair and fungus, and up in the left-hand corner was a bulge of something white. Julie poked it with her umbrella and it peeled away, dragging pale strings which held it to the stone. She brought it near her face to squint at it then, shuddering in revulsion, scraped it off against the edge of the door. It oozed down to the floor.

"And what's this cupboard for?" mused Vic as Julie tried to drag him away. "You could be shut in here with the mould—how would you come out?"

"Don't be soft," she rebuked, prying him away at last. They continued forward and were blocked by the boundary wall. They inched along it hand in hand, uncertain of what lay ahead, the cloying smell of candle wax blanketing them in the dripping quiet. The featureless grey rock gave way to rust-scaled iron; the yellow glow gradually included the lower regions of a pair of metal doors, towering above them. A heap of rubble blocked the foot of the portal, and the way was further sealed by a massive iron bar, cemented to the wall across the doors. One end of the bar hung loose, however, and the other rested only in a powder of cement, but the bar was held by supports set in the rusted pane. Handing Julie the candle, Vic clambered over the jigsaw of stone and reached the iron beam. He had his shoulder under it before she realised his intention; and instantly she saw herself, at the wrong end of a maze of lightless underground tunnels, before a pair of giant doors deliberately sealed up, cut off from the city far above and unaware of her. "Vic, don't!" she said.

"But this is why we've come down here," he protested. One end of the bar grated from its socket and clanged reverberantly on the pile of rubble.

"No, Vic, it's time we got back," she reasoned desperately. "We've got half of town to cross even once we're out of here."

He slipped along the shifting fragments to the other door. 'Perhaps you're right," he said at last, "but we'll have to come again to see beyond those doors. Or I will anyway." He slithered down to join her. "After all, what can be the connection between them and that cupboard? It's as though something came from that place beyond, whatever's through those doors,

and shut people in with the mould... Made pets of them, perhaps, or collected them... Imagine what they'd look like if they ever escaped—it ought to be easy enough to get that cupboard door off its hinges once they'd finished screaming for help... You could scream all you liked down here, nobody would hear you..."

"Shall I scream?" she suggested.

"Go ahead."

"Do you dare me?"

"Sure."

"No," she decided after surveying the dark bulks swelling the shadows which must be passed before they escaped. Vic held up the candle and his other hand in warning—"Scream *now*," he told her—and blew out the flame. The echoes of his voice raced down the pitch-black corridors and into alcoves, awakening them. Julie stood awkwardly, her hands clutching empty air, and somewhere in the silence pressing round her she heard a muted grind of metal, as of a rusty surface rumbling over rock. It came, she thought, from behind her. "Vic," she called and realised that she could not feel him at her side. Something near her rattled sharply. Something scraped and light exploded silently, revealing Vic who watched her quizzically from behind the candle.

She did not speak, but grabbed his hand and made for the yawning arch beyond the glistening pillars. Sinking in mould and toppling balanced debris, they ducked out of the hall, and Julie glanced back at last to the double doors: they appeared to stand further ajar, but by the sickly light she could not be sure. She turned quickly and they hastened through the maze of passages past half-glimpsed rooms. With every step she sensed the unknown depths behind and ahead of her.

The stairs stretched up into a washed-out sunlight. Vic and Julie rested for a minute on the swimming cobbles at the top; Julie tentatively stretched her fingers and Vic immediately released her hand. She started for the exit of the court and heard his call behind her; looking back, she was met by his other hand which clawed toward her face, white tentacles protruding from its leprous peeling fingers. It was only icicled and embalmed in candle wax, but her scream was genuine enough.

The next day she was short of money, and Vic seemed the obvious person to approach. Leaving her desk she stared through the building's windows and found him seated in the distance. Clear and minute as an image in a reversed telescope, he was dialling the telephone. She determined to contact him later, but when she went out for a time-passing walk she chanced upon Frank in a crowd. His feeling for her was not dead, and she speedily forgot about borrowing from Vic—and, as the days dragged onward, about Vic as well.

"Got two bob?" asked Julie. Alice rummaged in her handbag. They stood like mannequins just inside the entrance to the store; the doors swung back and forth as customers pressed past each other, ruffling the receipts dropped by the clientele before they reached the street. Julie gazed across the counters. Above the hubbub rose the howls of babies in distress. Purchasers waved merchandise in vain attempts to catch the shop-assistant's eye; register drawers slammed and rang; samples of stock were hoisted like severed heads on steel poles above the crowd, which forced its sluggish way through gaps, met and engulfed itself in avenues, leaving its moraine of customers before displays. Detached from the commotion, an amplified voice proclaimed from above: "Reported missing in the store—a small boy aged four, royal blue overcoat, blue eyes, fair hair—"

"Look for a kid with fair hair," ordered Alice, extracting her purse.

"You mean *fur hur*," said Julie, catching and exposing the suggestion in Alice's speech of the thick Liverpool accent. "Found the money yet?" She strode to the automatic photograph booth guarding the basement escalator and ripped aside its half-length curtain. Faces of previous subjects, smiling, romantic or preoccupied, were exhibited on the outside of the booth. "It's something to do," she explained, climbing into the cramped cell and seating herself. "From now on anybody who takes me out can bring me to one of these."

'I'd rather have one boy than look at a lot of pictures. What'd you want them for?"

"Souvenirs. Besides, you can do what you like with them. Anyway, so long as he's paying, he could have one too."

"Do they have to pay to get pictures of you or something?"

"They should be interested in me, not a bit of cardboard. It's been ages since I gave one to anyone—the last one must have been—um—Vic."

Snap-closing her bag, Alice handed over the coin and squeezed in beside Julie. "What's with him these days anyway?" she enquired.

"How should I know?"

"Well, didn't you hear what happened? I thought it went all round the building. Jackie told me all about it. She was really messed up over it—well, you know how she used to fancy Vic but he never knew about it. Anyway, she comes up to me—'Alice,' she says—"

The rejected coin clattered in the basin. Julie slipped it out. "Got another one?"

"I should coco, I just gave you one."

"Give me another and I'll give you this one back." Julie dropped the coin she held to waste a mite more time; they heard it totter and fall on its face. "Now, where'd that go?"

"Here it is, there." Alice retrieved her initial outlay in exchange for a thicker copy, which fell within the slot and was rewarded by a whirr and click of levers; Julie and Alice embraced, disclaimed, grimaced and were seeking inspiration when the camera's fourth flash faded. They piled out and waited for the photos to develop.

"Anyway, Jackie comes up to me the other day— Hey, Julie, do you want me to tell you about this or not?"

"If you get to the point, yes. What did Jackie say happened to Vic?"

"Well, she says he hasn't been in since weeks ago and he didn't ring up to say what was wrong. Last anyone saw of him he was at his desk phoning someone, they didn't hear who, and it looked like it was urgent or something, 'cos he got a funny look on his face and just walked out and didn't come back the rest of the afternoon. So that was weeks ago, and then they got round to sending somebody round to see what was up. Well, his mother answers the door and she looks nervous as anything. You met her once, didn't you?"

"Yes—she was all right, as mothers go. She wasn't the nervous type at all, though—wonder what changed her?"

"She didn't say. No, they asked her what was wrong with Vic, and she wouldn't let them in; She says he won't be coming back to work and it's none of their business why, and they'll be getting a letter of resignation if that's what they want, then she slams the door in their face and leaves them there."

The booth put out its tongue of photographs and Julie giggled over them. Alice interrupted: "Jackie told me one thing that was funny. Vic's mother was sort of, you know, blocking the doorway so they couldn't see into the house, but they thought Vic must be in there, 'cos they could hear someone sort of gargling in the bathroom."

"Someone *what*?"

"Well, Jackie says that's how she heard it, supposed to be upstairs somewhere, only it sounded like he was trying to talk while he was at it. And they looks up past her. and thinks they see at the top of the stairs—Look, are you *interested*?"

"Not really." Julie consulted her watch. "Come on, we've got to get back."

St. Valentine's was a day like any other, only worse. So Julie thought as she was borne along by the press of passengers boarding the 5:30 ferry. A young man on the landing-stage was shouting to his mate on the boat as he cast off to him. "Seen any muddy hunchbacks tonight?" he shouted. "Or do you reckon that one the other night was some rain in your eye?"

Aboard the boat she climbed to the upper deck; it was her habit to avoid the crowded lounges, enveloped in tobacco-smoke obscuring people fighting down nausea—but though she usually enjoyed the view of the far white lights drawn up to define the Mersey banks off into space, this evening they looked as miserable as she behind a sheet of drizzle. As the ferry tamed the river's surge and began to ride across it, she gazed down into the thick wrinkled water from which the rain extracted bubbles like the last breaths of the drowned. Nobody had asked her out that night, and the hours before sleep promised unrelieved monotony. The sooner she was home the sooner she could read her Valentines, but by the same token, the longer she would have to sit and cast about for entertainment until she tired enough for bed. She blinked at the stark Birkenhead landing stage as it rocked toward her, and received the stinging raindrops on her cheeks.

Once inside the bus at Woodside she was at least able to relax in its shelter. She craned to watch the commuters below; darting around or colliding with each other with an apology or glare, they sought their transport with downcast heads like fleeing spectres of the drowned through the black glistening night of the terminus. It was like watching the antics of fish, she thought, and acknowledged Vic's authorship of the image: "well, back to the aquarium" he had remarked to her once as he quitted the bus. Now Julie's vehicle took a deep breath and ground away at last, its headlamps catching drops of rain in flight. The drenched disorder of the terminus quickly fell behind and was forgotten.

Set down at the end of her road she struggled through the half-seen rain to her house, the last in the row. On her right the first residence, its brown and orange bricks, its stern rectangular frames imprisoning windows and doors, its suppressed flowered curtains behind greyish panes, was duplicated down to hers at the end; here and there a street lamp's nimbus staged an example. On her left a green, which on fine days children trampled, curved easily to the river; occasional shrubs poked through it, and Julie was surprised to note that the bush nearest her house had under the downpour acquired a dim shape as if a figure were peering from behind it, watching her. She pulled open the black creaking gate and ran to the front door; behind her rainfall rattled on the adamant board fence through which the privet hedge clawed for release. She managed to unlock the door, which swept the morning's mail before her as she staggered inside, shutting the storm behind her at last. The coloured lines and angles of the wallpaper seemed almost welcoming, but she did not expect them to stay so for long.

Towelling her hair, she returned to the hall, picked up the envelopes and carried them back to the kitchen, where her discarded coat drooped over a chair. On this entrance she noticed the note propped against a cup on the table, facing her. She read her mother's message, black against the sheet of paper and the larger white of the kitchen: *Sorry, must leave you to your own devices 'till 11 or after. Eat well. Books in the bookcase should you fancy a read. No men friends whilst I'm out, please*. Julie looked away to the percolator as if for companionship, but the jug was engrossed in its own attempts to boil. She rapped the envelopes into line but instead of examining their contents, let them slap loose on the table and left them for the hall. The open left-hand door of the sitting-room attracted her briefly, but she did not enter; the pale-green armchairs and abstract pictures on the

walls would not welcome her—there was nothing of her in that room. She knew all that the bookcase had to offer without approaching it: the blocks of authors—Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Mary McCarthy, Penelope Mortimer—did not appeal to her. Instead she chose the right-hand room; the mushroom-coloured furniture was faintly hostile, but at least she had made the record-player virtually her own. She caught up a pile of naked records, slipped them on the spindle and waited while a disc dropped from the bottom of the column and was taken by the turntable.

The room had two windows, equidistant from the far right hand corner, each titled on the outside with a different street name. As the music started with a trill of strings, Julie stared out upon the darkened green and the oily river beyond. The rain which lashed the privet leaves had slackened, but veins of water still rolled down the glass, so that the view through it rippled and was obscured; and Julie therefore was unsure whether she saw an unusually plump figure slowly making its way over the green in her direction. She rubbed her breath from the pane to sharpen her vision, and above the music the percolator cried for help. Julie switched out the light, setting the door ajar to give the tunes the run of the house, and having sipped at her cup of coffee, sat down at the kitchen table to give the Valentines her attention at last.

A long thin rectangle bore Alan's signature; two amorous skeletons declared undying love. She smiled at that and went on. Frank had mailed a crimson heart and on the back a lengthy scribble requested, in as many words as possible, that she get in touch with him. Lovesick teenagers Dave and Chuck had settled for drawings of lovesick teenagers. The largest she had saved until last. The unstamped envelope bore only her name, written in a hand so magnified and unsteady that she assumed it was the work of an illiterate or cripple, and she did not admit to knowing either. She turned it over. The back flap had been shoved clumsily inside; she inserted a finger to extricate it, but froze in that position—for looking closer she saw adhering to the sharp edge of the envelope's V a blob of white mould. She shuddered and in a flurry withdrew the card. It showed a couple arm in arm against a sunset idyll, and inside a romantic verse, but no signature. She hurriedly laid down the card, for it felt oddly slippery to her touch, and she was remembering that a nearby card shop had been broken into before the dawn of a recent day, though nothing had apparently been stolen.

Having stared into her cup until it cooled, she finished off the coffee and stood up. The white planes and surfaces of the kitchen were serving only to reflect her confusion back to her. Swinging her handbag, she climbed the stairs, below the china dogs enshrined up to the landing, and entered her room. Corners of pop singers peeled from the walls as she opened the door. Sitting on the bed and reaching under it, she came up with her scrapbook. She leafed through it, every so often glancing up to catch herself watching, mirrored in the panel of one of the wardrobes, listening to the last squeezed-out patter of the rain; finally she went through her bag and found the strip of photographs of herself and Alice as they had been taken two weeks before. She taped it to the page; her hand resting on the paper pressed through it on various versions of Vic.

The record-player, its repertoire exhausted, clicked silent. Julie groaned and went out onto the landing. Silence hung about the house, weighted with raindrops suspended at the tips of leaves; and in that silence she heard someone padding slowly round the building. Julie listened down the stairwell, and the footsteps stopped. Viewed from above, the china dogs seemed as intent as she. Her breathing tightened painfully, but she tiptoed down to arrive before the doorway of the record-player's lounge.

Inside, along the wall to the left of the door, electric flickers from a fake coal fire spread out to illuminate the shadowed room. The cold pulsating flame lit up the window which confronted her, and picked out the indistinct mass of a face peering in. Julie's heart contracted. She reached around the doorframe to switch on the light, and the watching figure withdrew. But she thought there was something wrong even as she rushed forward and came close enough to see that the face had left upon the pane an imprint, with gaping holes for eyes, like a mask of some dull white substance glued to the glass. She knew without approaching closer what that substance was. She started back with a moan of horror—and as she did so she felt a shape appear at the window nearest the river, look in at her, and pass on.

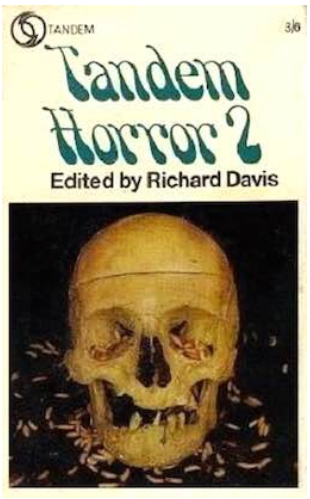
She stood there for a moment, trapped and helpless, thinking frantically—whatever happened, she could not leave the house, she could not even bear to stay downstairs so near what plodded about the garden, though there was a telephone in the hall—and without conscious volition she dashed for the stairs, fell into her bedroom and slammed the door. Her breathing slowly eased. Then she looked toward the curtains. A fear of what she might see

should she pull them apart gradually took hold of her. She told herself that this was the upper floor, unreachable via the slick wall outside. Yet that window was directly above that at which she had last sensed a bulky form watching her. She forced herself forward and ripped back the curtains. Then she released and pushed open the halves of the casement, flinching back as her hand crossed the sill, and at last she leaned out into the wind and its hint of spray, and looked.

The filtered light of a still tearful moon and the restrained glow of the streetlamps laid vague pale patches on the green, and across the flattened grass Julie made out a humped figure progressing painfully away from her, toward the river. Its ill-defined shape seemed swollen, and she thought that parts of it protruded lumpily as if it were the victim of some deforming malady. Her terror had dissipated, leaving only nausea; secure in her warm room, she felt detached from the spectacle below. Revolted yet fascinated, she watched as with an agonising slowness, as if crushed by knowledge as well as cumbered by its body, it approached the river's edge and swayed there as if uncertain, then it fell forward with a distant splash, disturbing the moon's path on the black water, and sank. The last trace of the ripples which it caused to spread was soon absorbed by the glassy surface, but by that time Julie was already downstairs, listening impatiently as Alan's number rang.

1966

The Stocking



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The phone rang.

'Phone's ringing,' Tom said.

'Yes, well?' Shiela countered.

'You get it, I'm too tired.'

'Are you tired, Tompuss?' called Tina in mock sympathy.

'Let's toss for it.'

'Go on, Tom, answer it,' said Shiela. 'You'll have Mr Tubb telling us off again.'

Wearily he lifted the receiver. A girl repeated: 'Hello? Hello?' He brandished the receiver: 'It's for you, anyway.'

'Bridget?' Shiela greeted, lowering her voice. 'And where were *you* last night? ... Now you know I don't like to go out on my own... Well, you'll never guess who I went out with!... Yes, that's right... Oh, fabulous, he took me to that club... Yes, he drove me home... You know I wouldn't normally, but he's different... And how did you go on?...'

Tom fixed his eyes on his work; he always felt depressed by these conversations of Shiela's. But he was not to be left undisturbed. Tina was in a happy mood today; obviously she'd 'had a good night', as she was fond of telling them. Now she called: 'Why are you tired, Tompuss?'

'Lack of sleep, Mrs McLaine.'

'Hectic night?'

'Now, Tina, don't corrupt Shiela.'

'No, but seriously, Tom, have you ever?' She raised an eyebrow.

'What?' He felt trapped.

'Do you often?'

'Often what?'

'Can you?'

'*Can't* you, Tom?' said Shiela in his ear, having finished her conversation.

'Now, don't be naughty.' He spanked her and she squealed. He was released. Tina arched her eyebrows. 'Kinky,' she commented. 'Yes,' said Shiela with a long look at Tom, and went back to her desk.

When he left for home that night, Tom dawdled on the pavement near the entrance to an alley which he knew Shiela used as a short cut. He saw her leave the building, and ducked into the alley. Soon he heard her high heels on the cobbles, overtaking him. 'Aren't you speaking to me?' he asked as she passed.

'Oh, hello, Tom, I didn't see you.' They picked their way between the dustbins, crushed cartons and locked back doors of two main streets. One black door, half off its hinges, creaked in shadows. Shiela pressed close to Tom. 'What's wrong?' he enquired.

'Oh, that door. It's always open when I come by. It frightens me. Silly, really.'

'I didn't know you were the nervous type.'

'I am, you know.' They emerged into a square, bright as day between blazing store windows. Shiela's bus was swallowing its queue. 'See you tomorrow,' she said, and ran. Tom began to walk to the traffic-lights where the bus might be halted. It was, and he waved, but Shiela did not see him.

Next morning she had made the coffee; a cup awaited Tom when he arrived. He sipped it down, his eyes on Shiela, then carried it round to her desk. 'Thanks, kitten,' he said.

'Ready for work?' Mr Tubb called, striding past.

Tom and Shiela swapped grimaces. She stretched back in her chair, arms behind her head, closed her eyes and yawned. He tickled her armpit. She squeaked and squirmed out of reach. His fingers followed.

'At it early, children?' Tina commented, sitting down to repair one eyebrow before her compact mirror.

'Never miss an opportunity,' Tom replied. His fingertips continued. Shiela had worked herself almost into a knot, one leg hooked around the corner of her desk. 'Oo—' she protested yet again. Then: '*Oh!*'—a genuine protest.

She shoved back her chair and gazed at her leg. 'Now look, my stocking's laddered.'

'I'm sorry, Shiela,' Tom apologised, trying to insinuate regret into his gaze as he took in her legs. 'Get some at dinner time and I'll give you the money.'

'It's all right, Tom, I had to buy a pair anyway.'

'No, come on, I insist.'

'Thanks, Tom, but I'd really rather you didn't.'

'You're just finishing your break, are you?' suggested Mr Tubb.

Shiela stretched the laddered stocking before her face and peeked at Tom. 'Thanks,' he said, holding out his hand. She hesitated. 'Go on, Shiela, if he wants it,' Tina urged. Shrugging, Shiela balled the stocking and tossed it to him. Smiling at her, he impaled it with a pin and hung it from the corner of his desk. Mr Tubb cleared his throat. Shiela's head went down. Now and then Tom fingered the stocking, glancing up at Shiela. Tina watched him.

'Make me some coffee, Tompuss,' Tina said.

He was spooning the ingredients from jars on the window-ledge; blank morning fog walled them in. 'I can only carry two cups,' he explained.

'Well, I'm here, you're here, so make ours.'

'No, I must look after Shiela,' and he did so. She was at her desk when he returned, leafing through a women's magazine with Tina. Tom waited for her to turn to him, then handed her the cup. His fingers lingered among hers.

'Are you holding my hand, Tom?' she asked.

His hand, found out, retreated and was suspended for a moment in mid-air. Her neck showed between her cardigan and hair. Tom's fingers found the gap and stroked. They progressed upward, lifting her hair; it was a gesture such as he might have used to sweep up her skirt.

Tina's fingers closed round her cup as she rose. 'I'm embarrassed,' she told them. 'It's like watching you courting.'

'We were innocent until you came, Mrs Libido,' he replied.

'At least I brought you two together, then. When are you getting married?'

'Oh, sure!' said Shiela.

'You really killed that,' Tom followed, and sat down with his coffee. Tina smiled mysteriously. At that moment Mr Tubb entered through the door beneath the clock; his temper and his winter cold were suffering from fog. Tina sat down again.

Later, gusts of rain cleared away the fog and plastered newspapers against the pane. Nobody went out at lunch-time. Tom unpacked his sandwiches and ate, trying to conceal the sound of chewing. Shiela rustled pages in the silence; Tina stubbed out a cigarette and began to knit. Mr Tubb coughed. Tom heard only the pages turning onward. The thought possessed him that both he and Shiela had scoffed at Tina's observation; could Shiela be concealing a desire as deep as his?

'That'll go stale,' Shiela said beside him. He started; he could not remember how long he'd been holding the half-eaten sandwich. He gnawed at it and she picked up the phone.

'Is that Bridget?... Look, I can't make it tomorrow... No, it's terrible, he's in hospital... Appendix... Yes, I'm going tonight... Of course, except Thursdays, because then visiting's in the afternoon... The hospital across the field... I *do* get frightened!... Yes, seriously! Thinking of what happened to that girl last week, and that was in the street... I'm still as frightened, but this is different. I've got to go...'

'Why don't you ask Shiela out?'

Tom went cold. Tina had whispered the question, and he could not be sure if Shiela had heard. He forced himself to look; she seemed intent on the receiver. Tina was watching for an answer. 'Yes, why not?' he managed, and smiled and nodded violently. Then he picked up a sandwich and began to chew, keeping his eyes on the food, feeling mercilessly exposed to Tina's gaze. Shiela replaced the phone and left his side. Slowly his face cooled, but he could not think. He reached out and caressed the stocking.

That night he loitered at the mouth of the Shiela's alley, but in vain. Eventually he turned down the alley, walking slowly, letting the wall of fog precede him and reveal each remembered door and cobblestone. Silence isolated his footsteps. Suddenly he stopped; a black door had loomed up on his left, rustily ajar. The shifting obscure walls cut them off together. Tom hesitated, then he took out a box of matches and, dragging the door further open, squeezed inside.

'I hope you two enjoyed yourselves last night?' Tina smiled radiantly at Tom and Shiela as she combed the fog from her hair.

'Of course,' Tom said.

'I went to the hospital,' explained Shiela, 'then back across the field. It was terribly creepy. Sort of thing you'd have liked, Tom. But I didn't really mind.'

'How was he?' Tina asked.

Tom stirred his coffee, deliberately blotting out their conversation. When he put down the cup, Tina was remarking: 'New perfume?'

'Yes, *L'Imprevu*.'

Later, Mr Tubb coughed over next week's time-sheet and pinned it up. Tina rose to scrutinise it. Returning, she called: 'That reminds me, Shiela, did you realise you'd be working alone tomorrow night? I can't work Thursdays.'

'Oh, no.' Shiela's eyes widened. 'Tom, work tomorrow night.'

'Well, I don't know.' He did, but liked to be persuaded.

'Go on, Tom, keep Shiela company.'

'All right, pussycat, I'll stay with you,' he said, not minding Tina's knowing grin.

The moon grinned down mysteriously. Lying in the stripe of moonlight painted on his bed, Tom closed his eyes; behind his eyeballs all was white, as if before a vision. He thought of Thursday night. Then he frowned. Why had Tina been unable to work? He could not recall that she had previously said so. He sorted through the last few days, and, as he drowsed, a pattern seemed to form. Was Tina giving him a chance to ask Shiela out? Could Shiela have herself arranged for him to be alone with her? He had never considered that she might want to go out with him. But as he searched—the way she let him touch her, the way she laughed off Tina's suggestions of a relationship between them, the perfume she wore to the office (surely only for him, for Tina, married, wore none when at work)—each incident yielded

evidence. Tomorrow night. He must not let this opportunity pass. They would be alone, and he would ask her casually to meet him Friday night. He slept. The moon still grinned.

The morning chilled him. Last night's resolution seemed as distant as the sun behind the fog, visible when he squinted as a white-hot sixpence dulled by grey breaths. But at work, snug with Shiela while the fumes receded deceptively outside the window, he began to anticipate the evening. There was no call for Shiela, nor did she touch the phone; this seemed a favourable sign. The day drew on; the fog crept back, unnoticed. It was almost five o'clock. 'Make some coffee, Tom,' called Shiela, 'to keep us awake.'

'See you in the morning, children,' said Tina, bundled up inside her coat, as she returned to collect her handbag. 'Don't do anything I wouldn't do.' She winked at them, then frowned at Mr Tubb, and left.

'Want a sandwich, Shiela?'

'No thanks, got my own.'

'Come here a minute.' He pulled her down toward him. Surprised, she resisted briefly. 'What about old Peeping Tom there,' he hissed, 'When's *he* going?'

Shiela glanced at Mr Tubb, now caressing his nostrils with a handkerchief. 'I thought you knew,' she whispered back. 'He's not. He'll be on till eight o'clock like us.'

'*What?* But you said you'd—you said you'd be alone...'

'Well, I would be if I was alone with him! He's looking, I'd better get back.' And she abandoned Tom to his thoughts. At first he felt tricked, and hated Shiela; he began to curse her under his breath as his nails scraped on the mesh of the stocking. Then Mr Tubb coughed, recalling Tom; it wasn't Shiela's fault, she'd wanted to be with him, it was that swine Tubb's for staying. Surely he would leave the two of them together before eight o'clock. Tom settled down to wait.

He looked up. It was five to seven. Shiela's head was bent upon her writing; Mr Tubb had disappeared. Tom watched Shiela's long blonde hair, brushed back, shining; out of the corner of his eye he sensed the lurking fog. Now was the time to ask. He would have to speak her name; would he be able to bring out the invitation when she looked up? Unsureness gagged

him. But if he did not speak she might glance up and destroy the moment. 'Shiela,' he called; he tried to catch it, but too late. She met his gaze. He struggled. I was wondering if you'd—'

'Spare me a minute, Shiela, will you?' Mr Tubb rose from behind his desk, returned triumphant from a search for his Vick inhaler.

'Hang on, Tom.' Tom's expression did not change as he watched her cross to Mr Tubb, but out of sight his nails ground into his palms. He glared blindly at his desk. 'All right, just as soon as I've finished what I'm doing,' Shiela said. Then Mr Tubb called after her: 'Oh—if you're making coffee, would you get me a cup?'

My God, no, it's too ludicrous, thought Tom. 'What were you saying?' Shiela asked, taking his cup.

The opportunity was past. 'I forget,' he said.

The first gulp of coffee burned his throat; he gritted his teeth and enjoyed the pain. Then he began to work obsessively, unable to dull his awareness of Shiela as she rustled papers, picked up her drink and after a dainty sip set it down with a clunk, dropped her pen and retrieved it, tripped away to the washroom. When she returned Tom reached for his coffee, found it stagnant, and was able to look up at her. Behind her Mr Tubb was struggling into his overcoat. As he passed them he croaked: 'Now, don't get into mischief.' This effort proved too much; coughing, he exited beneath the clock, which showed a quarter to eight. The door caught his cough and muffled it.

'Well, if he's going, I'm off,' Shiela said. With a lurch of the heart Tom realised that a quarter of an hour was left to him, which he must grasp. Shiela was stretching and yawning preparatory to getting up. Tom wrenched out the pin from which the stocking dangled and moved behind her, the nylon taut between his hands. 'Are you going to strangle me, Tom?' she asked. He held the top of the stocking and fitted it over her forehead.

'Don't, Tom, you'll mess my hair.'

'Come on, put your nightcap on.'

'No, you wear it.' She stood up, pushing him back, removed the stocking and lifted it over his head. Her arms were high, delicious with perfume; for a second her breasts touched him. His hands hung loosely at his sides. She pulled the stocking down over his eyes.

'You think I'm going to commit a crime or something?' The nylon cramped the bridge of his nose, but he could not take off the stocking; it was Shiela's, she had put it there. Instead, he began to draw it over his face.

'Now you can go out and frighten someone.'

'Maybe I will.' As she made for the cloakroom she glanced back to see him standing undirected, fingering the edge of the stocking.

She lifted her coat from the hook; her fingers brushed the cloth of Tom's. She waited to hear his footsteps approaching, but there was only silence. She was a little disappointed, for she had had the impression at least twice tonight that Tom was about to kiss her. In fact, just before she had tried to make it easy for him; she felt rather sorry for Tom—she was sure he had no girlfriend—and if he wanted to kiss her, she would let him now and then, while making it clear that she could not go out with him. As a matter of fact, she was rather excited by the idea of such a secret relationship; she and Tom would be secretly united against Tina's morning reports. Where *was* Tom? Perhaps she could take his arm as they left. She returned to the office; it was empty. She peeked under the desk; Tom might be planning to leap out at her. But he was nowhere to be found. Well, she could play games too; she turned off the light. He would scarcely have gone home without his coat.

But she reached the street without finding Tom. Momentarily, as she imagined him standing silently beyond the edge of the lurid fog beneath the sodium, she shivered. Then the blurred hands of a clock which hung above the alley across the street caught her eye; it was eight o'clock. If she hurried she could catch the early bus. She ran across the road, no car engines threatening the fog, and into the alley.

Her heels clipped on the cobbles. The fog edged in front of her, darkening, drawing back along the walls, passing over drainpipes climbed by rusty barbed wire like vines; then something loomed behind it, blocking at least half the alleyway. Shiela stopped but almost falling, was carried forward, and the shape resolved into a door and the figure which held it wide open; a figure with a crushed face.

'Tom, what are you doing?'

Without speaking, he indicated the open doorway. The stocking, now pulled down to his chin, dragged his features out of shape. Shiela told herself that Tom was still there beneath the mask. Why should she hesitate?

What could there be beyond the door to harm her? The mouth moved; the lower section of the nylon billowed out.

'Don't be frightened,' he said, 'Shiela.'

She stepped forward to the doorway; the fog peered over her shoulder. In the dimness she made out the beginnings of what appeared to be an abandoned storage room, shattered beer-barrels, broken bottles, misshapen lengths of wood and metal against the wall. She entered a few paces, and the door closed behind her.

She froze; her sense of direction had deserted her, and she no longer knew where she might step without falling on glass. Then she heard movement behind her, approaching. 'Where are you?' asked Tom.

'I'm here, Tom.' Her voice was in front of him. He advanced one foot; it kicked a piece of glass, which tinkled in the silence. If only there were some light! He searched for his matches, then remembered that they were in his overcoat pocket. He lifted his hands and shuffled forward. Her perfume reached him, almost suffocated by a stench of stale alcohol which had been shut in with them. Then his hands found her body.

No! Shiela screamed, her lips pressed tight in horror. This was not what she had meant. She tried to wrench his hands away, but he was already pulling her toward him. She forced her hands up between his arms and reached his face. She expected to encounter the stocking, but he had rolled it up to his forehead. Before she knew what she was doing, she had raked his face.

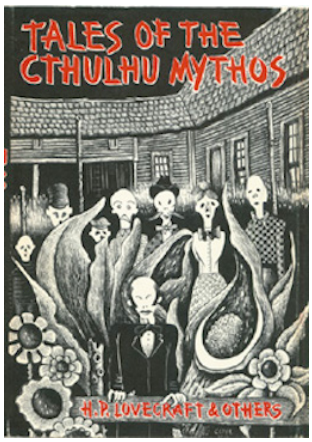
Pain seared his cheeks like trickles of acid. He backed away toward the wall, and tripped.

Shiela heard something fall, and a crack of glass. She whirled, but no glimmer of light outlined the door. She bit her lip. 'Tom, let me out,' she called desperately, 'or I'll scream.' A piece of wood clattered, and again glass cracked.

His silence terrified her; she thought she could hear him breathing painfully. Suddenly it occurred to her that he might be injured. 'Tom, I'm sorry,' she said. Still there came no answer; another plank fell to the floor, and she thought she could glimpse a shape rising to its feet. A final intuition came to her. 'Come on, Tom, I won't tell anyone,' she called. The movement stopped; so did the breathing. At last feet shuffled toward her, and she heard

a tight brushing followed by an elastic snap, as of a garment being pulled off; it was the stocking.

Cold Print



"This story contains allusions to the events of the earlier stories *The Inhabitant of the Lake*, *Before the Storm*, *The Moon-Lens* and *The Room in the Castle*, and anticipates *The Franklyn Paragraphs*. In its first draft in 1964 it was entitled *The Successor*, referring to Strutt's anticipated replacement as high priest of Y'golonac."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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> "...for even the minions of Cthulhu dare not speak of Y'golonac; yet the time will come when Y'golonac strides forth from the loneliness of aeons to walk once more among men..."—Revelations Of Glaaki, Volume 12

Sam Strutt licked his fingers and wiped them on his handkerchief; his fingertips were grey with snow from the pole on the bus platform. Then he coaxed his book out of the polythene bag on the seat beside him, withdrew the bus ticket from between the pages, held it against the cover to protect the latter from his fingers, and began to read. As often happened the conductor assumed that the ticket authorised Strutt's present journey; Strutt did not enlighten him. Outside, the snow whirled down the side streets and slipped beneath the wheels of cautious cars.

The slush splashed into his boots as he stepped down outside Brichester Central and, snuggling the bag beneath his coat for extra safety, pushed his way towards the bookstall, treading on the settling snowflakes. The glass panels of the stall were not quite closed; snow had filtered through and dulled the glossy paperbacks. "Look at that!" Strutt complained to a young man who stood next to him and anxiously surveyed the crowd, drawing his neck down inside his collar like a tortoise. "Isn't that disgusting? These people just don't care!" The young man, still searching the wet faces, agreed abstractedly. Strutt strode to the other counter of the stall, where the assistant was handing out newspapers. "I say!" called Strutt. The assistant, sorting change for a customer, gestured him to wait. Over the paperbacks,

through the steaming glass, Strutt watched the young man rush forward and embrace a girl, then gently dry her face with a handkerchief. Strutt glanced at the newspaper held by the man awaiting change, *Brutal Murder in Ruined Church*, he read; the previous night a body had been found inside the roofless walls of a church in Lower Brichester; when the snow had been cleared from this marble image, frightful mutilations had been revealed covering the corpse, oval mutilations which resembled—The man took the paper and his change away into the station. The assistant turned to Strutt with a smile: "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Yes," said Strutt. "Do you realise those books are getting snowed on? People may want to buy them, you know."

"Do *you*?" the assistant replied. Strutt tightened his lips and turned back into the snow-filled gusts. Behind him he heard the ring of glass pane meeting pane.

Good Books on The Highway provided shelter; he closed out the lashing sleet and stood taking stock. On the shelves the current titles showed their faces while the others turned their backs. Girls were giggling over comic Christmas cards; an unshaven man was swept in on a flake-edged blast and halted, staring around uneasily. Strutt clucked his tongue; tramps shouldn't be allowed in bookshops to soil the books. Glancing sideways to observe whether the man would bend back the covers or break the spines, Strutt moved among the shelves, but could not find what he sought. Chatting with the cashier, however, was an assistant who had praised *Last Exit to Brooklyn* to him when he had bought it last week, and had listened patiently to a list of Strutt's recent reading, though he had not seemed to recognise the titles. Strutt approached him and enquired "Hello—any more exciting books this week?"

The man faced him, puzzled. "Any more—?"

"You know, books like this?" Strutt held up his polythene bag to show the grey Ultimate Press cover of *The Caning-Master* by Hector Q.

"Ah, no. I don't think we have." He tapped his lip. "Except—Jean Genet?"

"Who? Oh, you mean *Jennet*. No, thanks, he's dull as dishwater."

"Well, I'm sorry, sir, I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Oh." Strutt felt rebuffed. The man seemed not to recognise him, or perhaps he was pretending. Strutt had met his kind before and had them

mutely patronise his reading. He scanned the shelves again, but no cover caught his eye. At the door he furtively unbuttoned his shirt to protect his book still further, and a hand fell on his arm. Lined with grime, the hand slid down to his and touched his bag. Strutt shook it off angrily and confronted the tramp.

"Wait a minute!" the man hissed. "Are you after more books like that? I know where we can get some."

This approach offended Strutt's self-righteous sense of reading books which had no right to be suppressed. He snatched the bag out of the fingers closing on it. "So you like them too, do you?"

"Oh, yes, I've got lots."

Strutt sprang his trap. "Such as?"

"Oh, *Adam and Evan*, *Take Me How You Like*, all the Harrison adventures, you know, there's lots."

Strutt grudgingly admitted that the man's offer seemed genuine. The assistant at the cash-desk was eyeing them; Strutt stared back. "All right," he said. "Where's this place you're talking about?"

The other took his arm and pulled him eagerly into the slanting snow. Clutching shut their collars, pedestrians were slipping between the cars as they waited for a skidded bus ahead to be removed; flakes were crushed into the corners of the windscreens by the wipers. The man dragged Strutt amid the horns which brayed and honked, then between two store windows from which girls watched smugly as they dressed headless figures, and down an alley. Strutt recognised the area as one which he vainly combed for backstreet bookshops; disappointing alcoves of men's magazines, occasional hot pungent breaths from kitchens, cars fitted with caps of snow, loud pubs warm against the weather. Strutt's guide dodged into the doorway of a public bar to shake his coat; the white glaze cracked and fell from him. Strutt joined the man and adjusted the book in its bag, snuggled beneath his shirt. He stamped the crust loose from his boots, stopping when the other followed suit; he did not wish to be connected with the man even by such a trivial action. He looked with distaste at his companion, at his swollen nose through which he was now snorting back snot, at the stubble shifting on the cheeks as they inflated and the man blew on his trembling hands. Strutt had a horror of touching anyone who was not fastidious. Beyond the doorway

flakes were already obscuring their footprints, and the man said "I get terrible thirsty walking fast like this."

"So that's the game, is it?" But the bookshop lay ahead. Strutt led the way into the bar and bought two pints from a colossal barmaid, her bosom bristling with ruffles, who billowed back and forth with glasses and worked the pumps with gusto. Old men sucked at pipes in vague alcoves, a radio blared marches, men clutching tankards aimed with jovial inaccuracy at dartboard or spittoon. Strutt flapped his overcoat and hung it next to him; the other retained his and stared into his beer. Determined not to talk, Strutt surveyed the murky mirrors which reflected gesticulating parties around littered tables not directly visible. But he was gradually surprised by the taciturnity of his table-mate; surely these people (he thought) were remarkably loquacious, in fact virtually impossible to silence? This was intolerable; sitting idly in an airless back-street bar when he could be on the move or reading—something must be done. He gulped down his beer and thumped the glass upon its mat. The other started. Then, visibly abashed, he began to sip, seeming oddly nervous. At last it was obvious that he was dawdling over the froth, and he set down his glass and stared at it. "It looks as if it's time to go," said Strutt.

The man looked up; fear widened his eyes. "Christ, I'm wet," he muttered. "I'll take you again when the snow goes off."

"That's the game, is it?" Strutt shouted. In the mirrors, eyes sought him. "You don't get that drink out of me for nothing! I haven't come this far—!"

The man swung round and back, trapped. "All right, all right, only maybe I won't find it in this weather."

Strutt found this remark too inane to comment. He rose and, buttoning his coat strode into the arcs of snow, glaring behind to ensure he was followed.

The last few shop-fronts, behind them pyramids of tins marked with misspelt placards, were cast out by lines of furtively curtained windows set in unrelieved vistas of red brick; behind the panes Christmas decorations hung like wreaths. Across the road, framed in a bedroom window, a middle-aged woman drew the curtains and hid the teenage boy at her shoulder. "Hel-*lo*, there they go," Strutt did not say; he felt he could control the figure ahead without speaking to him, and indeed had no desire to speak to the man as he halted trembling, no doubt from the cold, and hurried onward as Strutt, an inch taller than his five-and-a-half feet and better built, loomed

behind him. For an instant, as a body of snow drove towards him down the street, flakes overexposing the landscape and cutting his cheeks like transitory razors of ice, Strutt yearned to speak, to tell of nights when he lay awake in his room, hearing the landlady's daughter being beaten by her father in the attic bedroom above, straining to catch muffled sounds through the creak of bedsprings, perhaps from the couple below. But the moment passed, swept away by the snow; the end of the street had opened, split by a traffic-island into two roads thickly draped with snow, one curling away to hide between the houses, the other short, attached to a roundabout. Now Strutt knew where he was. From a bus earlier in the week he had noticed the *Keep Left* sign lying helpless on its back on the traffic-island, its face kicked in.

They crossed the roundabout, negotiated the crumbling lips of ruts full of deceptively glazed pools collecting behind the bulldozer treads of a redevelopment scheme, and onward through the whirling white to a patch of waste ground where a lone fireplace drank the snow. Strutt's guide scuttled into an alley and Strutt followed, intent on keeping close to the other as he knocked powdered snow from dustbin lids and flinched from backyard doors at which dogs clawed and snarled. The man dodged left, then right, between the close labyrinthine walls, among houses whose cruel edges of jagged windowpanes and thrusting askew doors even the snow, kinder to buildings than to their occupants, could not soften. A last turning, and the man slithered onto a pavement beside the remnants of a store, its front gaping emptily to frame wine-bottles abandoned beneath a *Hein 57 variet* poster. A dollop of snow fell from the awning's skeleton to be swallowed by the drift below. The man shook, but as Strutt confronted him, pointed fearfully to the opposite pavement. "That's it, I've brought you here."

The tracks of slush splashed up Strutt's trouser legs as he ran across, checking mentally that while the man had tried to disorient him he had deduced which main road lay some five hundred yards away, then read the inscription over the shop: *American books bought and sold*. He touched a railing which protected an opaque window below street level, wet rust gritting beneath his nails, and surveyed the display in the window facing him: *History of the Rod*—a book he had found monotonous—thrusting out its shoulders among science-fiction novels by Aldiss, Tubb, and Harrison, which hid shamefacedly behind lurid covers; *Le Sadisme au Cinema*;

Robbe-Grillet's *Voyeur* looking lost; *The Naked Lunch*—nothing worth his journey there, Strutt thought. "All right, it's about time we went in," he urged the man inside, and with a glance up the eroded red brick at the first-floor window, the back of a dressing-table mirror shoved against it to replace one pane, entered also. The other had halted again, and for an unpleasant second Strutt's fingers brushed the man's musty overcoat. "Come on, where's the books?" he demanded, shoving past into the shop.

The yellow daylight was made murkier by the window display and the pin-up magazines hanging on the inside of the glass-panelled door; dust hung lazily in the stray beams. Strutt stopped to read the covers of paperbacks stuffed into cardboard boxes on one table, but the boxes contained only Westerns, fantasies, and American erotica, selling at half price. Grimacing at the books which stretched wide their corners like flowering petals, Strutt bypassed the hardcovers and squinted behind the counter, slightly preoccupied; as he had closed the door beneath its tongueless bell, he had imagined he had heard a cry somewhere near, quickly cut off. No doubt round here you hear that sort of thing all the time, he thought, and turned on the other. "Well, I don't see what I came for. Doesn't anybody work in this place?"

Wide-eyed, the man gazed past Strutt's shoulder; Strutt looked back and saw the frosted-glass panel of a door, one corner of the glass repaired with cardboard, black against a dim yellow light which filtered through the panel. The bookseller's office, presumably—had he heard Strutt's remark? Strutt confronted the door, ready to face impertinence. Then the man pushed by him, searching distractedly behind the counter, fumbling open a glass-fronted bookcase full of volumes in brown paper jackets and finally extracting a parcel in grey paper from its hiding-place in one corner of a shelf. He thrust it at Strutt, muttering "This is one, this is one," and watched, the skin beneath his eyes twitching, as Strutt tore off the paper.

The Secret Life of Wackford Squeers. "Ah, that's fine," Strutt approved, forgetting himself momentarily, and reached for his wallet; but greasy fingers clawed at his wrist. "Pay next time," the man pleaded. Strutt hesitated; could he get away with the book without paying? At that moment, a shadow rippled across the frosted glass: a headless man dragging something heavy. Decapitated by the frosted glass and by his hunched position, Strutt decided, then realised that the shopkeeper must be in contact

with Ultimate Press; he must not prejudice this contact by stealing a book. He knocked away the frantic fingers and counted out two pounds; but the other backed away, stretching out his fingers in stark fear, and crouched against the office door from whose pane the silhouette had disappeared, before flinching almost into Strutt's arms. Strutt pushed him back and laid the notes in the space left on the shelf by *Wackford Squeers*, then turned on him. "Don't you intend to wrap it up? No, on second thoughts I'll do it myself."

The roller on the counter rumbled forth a streamer of brown paper; Strutt sought an undiscoloured stretch. As he parcelled the book, disentangling his feet from the rejected coil, something crashed to the floor. The other had retreated towards the street door until one dangling cuff-button had hooked the corner of a carton full of paperbacks; he froze above the scattered books, mouth and hands gaping wide, one foot atop an open novel like a broken moth, and around him motes floated into beams of light mottled by the sifting snow. Somewhere a lock clicked. Strutt breathed hard, taped the package and, circling the man in distaste, opened the door. The cold attacked his legs. He began to mount the steps and the other flurried in pursuit. The man's foot was on the doorstep when a heavy tread approached across the boards. The man spun about, and below Strutt the door slammed. Strutt waited; then it occurred to him that he could hurry and shake off his guide. He reached the street and a powdered breeze pecked at his cheeks, cleaning away the stale dust of the shop. He turned away his face and, kicking the rind of snow from the headline of a sodden newspaper, made for the main road which he knew to pass close by.

Strutt woke shivering. The neon sign outside the window of his flat, a cliché, but relentless as toothache, was garishly penned against the night every five seconds, and by this and the shafts of cold Strutt knew that it was early morning. He closed his eyes again, but though his lids were hot and heavy his mind would not be lulled. Beyond the limits of his memory lurked the dream which had awoken him; he moved uneasily. For some reason he thought of a passage from the previous evening's reading: "As Adam reached the door he felt Evan's hand grip his, twisting his arm behind his back, forcing him to the floor—" His eyes opened and sought the bookcase as if for reassurance; yes, there was the book, secure within its covers, carefully aligned with its fellows. He recalled returning home one evening to find *Miss Whippe, Old-Style Governess*, thrust inside *Prefects*

and Fags, straddled by *Prefects and Fags*; the landlady had explained that she must have replaced them wrongly after dusting, but Strutt knew that she had damaged them vindictively. He had bought a case that locked, and when she asked him for the key had replied "Thanks, I think I can do them justice." You couldn't make friends nowadays. He closed his eyes again; the room and bookcase, created in five seconds by the neon and destroyed with equal regularity, filled him with their emptiness, reminding him that weeks lay ahead before the beginning of next term, when he would confront the first class of the morning and add "You know me by now" to his usual introduction, "You play fair with me and I'll play fair with you," a warning which some boy would be sure to test, and Strutt would have him; he saw the expanse of white gym-short seat stretched tight down on which he would bring a gym-shoe with satisfying force—Strutt relaxed; soothed by an overwhelming echo of the pounding feet on the wooden gymnasium floor, the fevered shaking of the wall-bars as the boys swarmed ceilingwards and he stared up from below, he slept.

Panting, he drove himself through his morning exercises, then tossed off the fruit juice which was always his first call on the tray brought up by the landlady's daughter. Viciously he banged the glass back on the tray; the glass splintered (he'd say it was an accident; he paid enough rent to cover, he might as well get a little satisfaction for his money). "Bet you have a fab Christmas," the girl had said, surveying the room. He'd made to grab her round the waist and curb her pert femininity—but she'd already gone, her skirt's pleats whirling, leaving his stomach hotly knotted in anticipation.

Later he trudged to the supermarket. From several front gardens came the teeth-grinding scrape of spades clearing snow; these faded and were answered by the crushed squeak of snow engulfing boots. When he emerged from the supermarket clutching an armful of cans, a snowball whipped by his face to thud against the window, a translucent beard spreading down the pane like the fluid from the noses of those boys who felt Strutt's wrath most often, for he was determined to beat this ugliness, this revoltingness, out of them. Strutt glared about him for the marksman—a seven-year-old, boarding his tricycle for a quick retreat. Strutt moved involuntarily as if to pull the boy across his knee. But the street was not deserted; even now the child's mother, in slacks and curlers peeking from beneath a headscarf, was slapping her son's hand. "I've told you, *don't* do that.—Sorry," she called to Strutt. "Yes, I'm sure," he snarled, and tramped

back to his flat. His heart pumped uncontrollably. He wished fervently that he could talk to someone as he had talked to the bookseller on the edge of Goatswood who had shared his urges; when the man had died earlier that year Strutt had felt abandoned in a tacitly conspiring, hostile world. Perhaps the new shop's owner might prove similarly sympathetic? Strutt hoped that the man who had conducted him there yesterday would not be in attendance, but if he was, surely he could be got rid of—a bookseller dealing with Ultimate Press must be a man after Strutt's own heart, who would be as opposed as he to that other's presence while they were talking frankly. As well as this discussion, Strutt needed books to read over Christmas, and *Squeers* would not last him long; the shop would scarcely be closed on Christmas Eve. Thus reassured, he unloaded the cans on the kitchen table and ran downstairs.

Strutt stepped from the bus in silence; the engine's throb was quickly muffled among the laden houses. The piled snow waited for some sound. He splashed through the tracks of cars to the pavement, its dull coat depressed by countless overlapping footprints. The road twisted slyly; as soon as the main road was out of sight the side street revealed its real character. The snow laid over the house-fronts became threadbare; rusty protrusions poked through. One or two windows showed Christmas trees, their ageing needles falling out, their branches tipped with luridly sputtering lights. Strutt, however, had no eye for this but kept his gaze on the pavement, seeking to avoid stains circled by dogs' pawmarks. Once he met the gaze of an old woman staring down at a point below her window which was perhaps the extent of her outside world. Momentarily chilled, he hurried on, pursued by a woman who, on the evidence within her pram, had given birth to a litter of newspapers, and halted before the shop.

Though the orange sky could scarcely have illuminated the interior, no electric gleam was visible through the magazines, and the torn notice hanging behind the grime might read closed. Slowly Strutt descended the steps. The pram squealed by, the latest flakes spreading across the newspapers. Strutt stared at its inquisitive proprietor, turned and almost fell into sudden darkness. The door had opened and a figure blocked the doorway.

"You're not shut, surely?" Strutt's tongue tangled.

"Perhaps not. Can I help you?"

"I was here yesterday. Ultimate Press book," Strutt replied to the face level with his own and uncomfortably close.

"Of course you were, yes, I recall." The other swayed incessantly like an athlete limbering up, and his voice wavered constantly from bass to falsetto, dismaying Strutt. "Well, come in before the snow gets to you," the other said and slammed the door behind them, evoking a note from the ghost of the bell's tongue.

The bookseller—this was he, Strutt presumed—loomed behind him, a head taller; down in the half-light, among the vague vindictive corners of the tables, Strutt felt an obscure compulsion to assert himself somehow, and remarked "I hope you found the money for the book. Your man didn't seem to want me to pay. Some people would have taken him at his word."

"He's not with us today." The bookseller switched on the light inside his office. As his lined pouched face was lit up it seemed to grow; the eyes were sunk in sagging stars of wrinkles; the cheeks and forehead bulged from furrows; the head floated like a half-inflated balloon above the stuffed tweed suit. Beneath the unshaded bulb the walls pressed close, surrounding a battered desk from which overflowed fingerprinted copies of *The Bookseller* thrust aside by a black typewriter clogged with dirt, beside which lay a stub of sealing-wax and an open box of matches. Two chairs faced each other across the desk, and behind it was a closed door. Strutt seated himself before the desk, brushing dust to the floor. The bookseller paced round him and suddenly, as if struck by the question, demanded "Tell me, why d'y read these books?"

This was a question often aimed at Strutt by the English master in the staffroom until he had ceased to read his novels in the breaks. Its sudden reappearance caught him off guard, and he could only call on his old riposte. "How d'y mean, why? Why not?"

"I wasn't being critical," the other hurried on, moving restlessly around the desk. "I'm genuinely interested. I was going to make the point that don't you want what you read about to happen, in a sense?"

"Well, maybe." Strutt was suspicious of the trend of this discussion, and wished that he could dominate; his words seemed to plunge into the snow-cloaked silence inside the dusty walls to vanish immediately, leaving no impression.

"I mean this: when you read a book don't you make it happen before you, in your mind? Particularly if you consciously attempt to visualise, but that's not essential. You might cast the book away from you, of course. I knew a bookseller who worked on this theory; you don't get much time to be yourself in this sort of area, but when he could he worked on it, though he never quite formulated—Wait a minute, I'll show you something."

He leapt away from the desk and into the shop. Strutt wondered what was beyond the door behind the desk. He half rose but, peering back, saw the bookseller already returning through the drifting shadows with a volume extracted from among the Lovecrafts and Derleths.

"This ties in with your Ultimate Press books, really," the other said, banging the office door to as he entered. "They're publishing a book by Johannes Henricus Pott next year, so we hear, and that's concerned with forbidden lore as well, like this one; you'll no doubt be amazed to hear that they think they may have to leave some of Pott in the original Latin. This here should interest you, though; the only copy. You probably won't know the *Revelations of Glaaki*; it's a sort of Bible written under supernatural guidance. There were only eleven volumes—but this is the twelfth, written by a man at the top of Mercy Hill guided through his dreams." His voice grew unsteadier as he continued. "I don't know how it got out; I suppose the man's family may have found it in some attic after his death and thought it worth a few coppers, who knows? My bookseller—well, he knew of the *Revelations*, and he realised this was priceless; but he didn't want the seller to realise he had a find and perhaps take it to the library or the University, so he took it off his hands as part of a job lot and said he might use it for scribbling. When he read it—Well, there was one passage that for testing his theory looked like a godsend. Look."

The bookseller circled Strutt again and placed the book in his lap, his arms resting on Strutt's shoulders. Strutt compressed his lips and glanced up at the other's face; but some strength weakened, refusing to support his disapproval, and he opened the book. It was an old ledger, its hinges cracking, its yellowed pages covered by irregular lines of scrawny handwriting. Throughout the introductory monologue Strutt had been baffled; now the book was before him, it vaguely recalled those bundles of duplicated typewritten sheets which had been passed around the toilets in his adolescence. "Revelations" suggested the forbidden. Thus intrigued, he

read at random. Up here in Lower Brichester the bare bulb defined each scrap of flaking paint on the door opposite, and hands moved on his shoulders, but somewhere down below he would be pursued through darkness by vast soft footsteps; when he turned to look, a swollen glowing figure was upon him—What was all this about? A hand gripped his left shoulder and the right hand turned pages; finally one finger underlined a phrase:

> Beyond a gulf in the subterranean night a passage leads to a wall of massive bricks, and beyond the wall rises Y'golonac to be served by the tattered eyeless figures of the dark. Long has he slept beyond the wall, and those which crawl over the bricks scuttle across his body never knowing it to be Y'golonac; but when his name is spoken or read he comes forth to be worshipped or to feed and take on the shape and soul of those he feeds upon. For those who read of evil and search for its form within their minds call forth evil, and so may Y'golonac return to walk among men and await that time when the earth is cleared off and Cthulhu rises from his tomb among the weeds, Glaaki thrusts open the crystal trapdoor, the brood of Eihort are born into daylight, Shub-Niggurath strides forth to smash the moon-lens, Byatis bursts forth from his prison, Daoloth tears away illusion to expose the reality concealed behind.

The hands on his shoulders shifted constantly, slackening and tightening. The voice fluctuated. "What did you think of that?"

Strutt thought it was rubbish, but somewhere his courage had slipped; he replied unevenly "Well, it's—not the sort of thing you see on sale."

"You found it interesting?" The voice was deepening; now it was an overwhelming bass. The other swung round behind the desk; he seemed taller—his head struck the bulb, setting shadows peering from the corners and withdrawing, and peering again. "You're interested?" His expression was intense, as far as it could be made out; for the light moved darkness in the hollows of his face, as if the bone structure were melting visibly.

In the murk in Strutt's mind appeared a suspicion; had he not heard from his dear dead friend the Goatswood bookseller that a black magic cult existed in Brichester, a circle of young men dominated by somebody

Franklin or Franklyn? Was he being interviewed for this? "I wouldn't say that," he countered.

"Listen. There was a bookseller who read this, and I told him you may be the high priest of Y'golonac. You will call down the shapes of night to worship him at the times of year; you will prostrate yourself before him and in return you will survive when the earth is cleared off for the Great Old Ones; you will go beyond the rim to what stirs out of the light..."

Before he could consider Strutt blurted "Are you talking about me?" He had realised he was alone in a room with a madman.

"No, no, I meant the bookseller. But the offer now is for you."

"Well, I'm sorry, I've got other things to do." Strutt prepared to stand up.

"He refused also." The timbre of the voice grated in Strutt's ears. "I had to kill him."

Strutt froze. How did one treat the insane? Pacify them. "Now, now, hold on a minute..."

"How can it benefit you to doubt? I have more proof at my disposal than you could bear. You will be my high priest, or you will never leave this room."

For the first time in his life, as the shadows between the harsh oppressive walls moved slower as if anticipating, Strutt battled to control an emotion; he subdued his mingled fear and ire with calm. "If you don't mind, I've got to meet somebody."

"Not when your fulfilment lies here between these walls." The voice was thickening. "You know I killed the bookseller—it was in your papers. He fled into the ruined church, but I caught him with my hands... Then I left the book in the shop to be read, but the only one who picked it up by mistake was the man who brought you here... Fool! He went mad and cowered in the corner when he saw the mouths! I kept him because I thought he might bring some of his friends who wallow in physical taboos and lose the true experiences, those places forbidden to the spirit. But he only contacted you and brought you here while I was feeding. There is food occasionally; young boys who come here for books in secret; they make sure nobody knows what they read!—and can be persuaded to look at the *Revelations*. Imbecile! He can no longer betray me with his fumbling—but I knew you would return. Now you will be mine."

Strutt's teeth ground together silently until he thought his jaws would break; he stood up, nodding, and handed the volume of the Revelations towards the figure; he was poised, and when the hand closed on the ledger he would dart for the office door.

"You can't get out, you know; it's locked." The bookseller rocked on his feet, but did not start towards him; the shadows now were mercilessly clear and dust hung in the silence. "You're not afraid—you look too calculating. Is it possible that you still do not believe? All right"—he laid his hands on the doorknob behind the desk—"do you want to see what is left of my food?"

A door opened in Strutt's mind, and he recoiled from what might lie beyond. "No! No!" he shrieked. Fury followed his involuntary display of fear; he wished he had a cane to subjugate the figure taunting him. Judging by the face, he thought, the bulges filling the tweed suit must be of fat; if they should struggle, Strutt would win. "Let's get this clear," he shouted, "we've played games long enough! You'll let me out of here or I—" but he found himself glaring about for a weapon. Suddenly he thought of the book still in his hand. He snatched the matchbox from the desk, behind which the figure watched, ominously impassive. Strutt struck a match, then pinched the boards between finger and thumb and shook out the pages. "I'll burn this book!" he threatened.

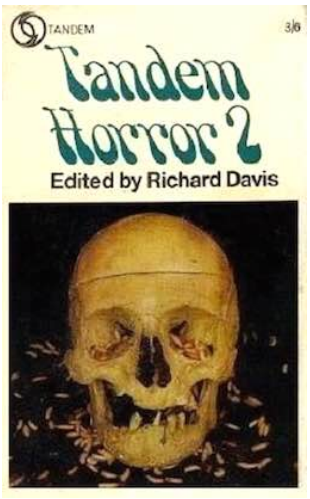
The figure tensed, and Strutt went cold with fear of his next move. He touched the flame to paper, and the pages curled and were consumed so swiftly that Strutt had only the impression of bright fire and shadows growing unsteadily massive on the walls before he was shaking ashes to the floor. For a moment they faced each other, immobile. After the flames a darkness had rushed into Strutt's eyes. Through it he saw the tweed tear loudly as the figure expanded.

Strutt threw himself against the office door, which resisted. He drew back his fist, and watched with an odd timeless detachment as it shattered the frosted glass; the act seemed to isolate him, as if suspending all action outside himself. Through the knives of glass, on which gleamed drops of blood, he saw the snowflakes settle through the amber light, infinitely far; too far to call for help. A horror filled him of being overpowered from behind. From the back of the office came a sound; Strutt spun and as he did so closed his eyes, terrified to face the source of such a sound—but when he

opened them he saw why the shadow on the frosted pane yesterday had been headless, and he screamed. As the desk was thrust aside by the towering naked figure, on whose surface still hung rags of the tweed suit, Strutt's last thought was an unbelieving conviction that this was happening because he had read the *Revelations*; somewhere, someone had *wanted* this to happen to him. It wasn't playing fair, he hadn't done anything to deserve this—but before he could scream out his protest his breath was cut off, as the hands descended on his face and the wet red mouths opened in their palms.

1967

Reply Guaranteed



"Campbell originally intended to include this tale in *Demons by Daylight* but was discouraged by the criticism of Alan David Price, and substituted *The Lost* instead."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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"I peeled off one of my nails once," Viv said, "to see what was underneath."

A bee buzzed in the warm evening. "And?" asked Jack finally.

"Hurt like hell."

A screen of sunlight cast through the open window behind her bed caught a metal trolley wheeled by a nurse and kindled it; Viv squeaked and squeezed her eyes shut. Photographed upon her eyes, Jack leaned forward from the chair against the ward; she pressed darkness down upon the image to blot it out and to bring Jack's departure nearer. Mary, her flatmate, had not visited her tonight, and Tony had gone off in a huff on meeting Jack at her bedside. She opened her eyes; Jack was still there. A bee rose from the graveyard further down Mercy Hill and searched among the flowers on the table between the beds; a nurse, apologising to the patient whose temperature she was taking among the visitors, pursued and slapped down the insect. Several of the parties round the beds applauded; laughter passed along the aisles and was absorbed into continued conversations. "Good shot," Jack said limply. The remark hung in their ears.

"Oh, yes," he said some moments later, "most bizarre ad in this morning." He rummaged in his raincoat pocket and brought out the evening's copy of the *Brichester Herald*, the paper for which he worked, together with a notebook page which he unfolded. "Listen: *Unconventional man-about-town would like to meet girl who values intellect more than good looks and adventure more than conservativism. Anyone who thinks she may be in a*

position to satisfy, write—and there's the address, on Mercy Hill somewhere, with a postscript: *Reply guaranteed*."

Viv had yawned through the text, giggled at 'position to satisfy.' "Let's see," she said, then protested: "Why, you wrote this!"

"I copied it from the ad in Cooper's office. You'd have complained if I'd brought the real thing; it was typed, but the letters jumped so much you'd think his fingers had been falling off. I suppose it'll be in the *Herald* on Friday; Cooper won't know what he's let himself in for."

"Wonder who'll answer it."

A bell shrilled for the end of visiting. "Why don't you?" Jack said and bent to kiss her forehead; she submitted. She watched him make his way down the ward, bumping into the ward sister and apologising with a blush, and as he shoved between the double doors the screen around the last bed in the aisle rattled and an old man eased himself out, his face pale. Birds sang and somewhere children scampered, shouting. Then Viv made a grab at her *Woman's Own* as it was slid from the bed-table by her neighbour, Mavis.

"Don't worry, I only want to read it," explained Mavis, snatching the magazine out of reach. Viv strained to retrieve it and the sister rebuked: "Your appendix won't heal that way, you know." She included them both in a reproving look and moved on to ask after the health of Mavis' neighbour, who answered "I feel a little better" with a weak smile and at once was dramatically sick.

Viv stuck out her tongue at the crisp rustling figure. Mavis tittered, then hissed: "Who was that gorgeous boy who came to see you? Not Jack, he's like you said: the other one."

"Who, Tony? He's not gorgeous, he's horrible. He has one side of his face higher than the other."

"No, honestly?" They both giggled. 'He must have had his best side turned to me," Mavis spluttered. When they had recovered she opened *Woman's Own*; Viv recalled with a wry grin Tony's confrontation with Jack at her bedside and his 'I haven't come all this way to face a selection committee!" As he had turned to leave he'd thrown at Jack "I wouldn't stay either if I were you," to which Jack had replied "Oh, I don't know," thus proving that his stock of repartee had fast declined since Viv had hurled a bowl into his lane at the bowling alley six weeks ago and he had returned it saying with

reference to her name "For Vivacious, I suppose." Tony hadn't been bad, really; pity it hadn't been Jack who had taken offence. Still, there were always other boys.

'I'm going to listen to the radio," Mavis declared, distracted from her reading by the nurses leading the old ladies, blinking in the evening sunlight on the whitewashed walls and snorting at the smell of ether, to the Ladies'. The two girls fitted on their headphones through which filtered tinnily the tail end of the News; the announcer read: "The body of a six-year-old girl was found today in the Manchester area, where she disappeared from home three days ago." "God; isn't that terrible?" Viv said. "I can't bear to think of that poor kid, how she must have suffered. They should shoot men like that." They stared at each other, depressed, then Viv brightened: 'Listen, this record's great!"

Some records later the sister switched off the radio. "I think you can walk to the toilet by yourself," she told Viv, meeting her furious glare. On the way back Viv felt as if she were being sawn in half; she bit her lip preparatory to screaming. Then, as the lights progressed through the hospital, darkening the dusk outside, she saw, in the beds opposite, eyes watching her with senile calm. She gritted her teeth and clutched the bed-rail. As she climbed into bed she had a brief glimpse of the warm dusk through the pane in the cold white wall. Over the sill she saw in the cemetery below a few white crosses like half-erased chalk signs, and a pale figure in a wheelchair drifting from the graveyard to a house beyond. She thought of being old and ill, and shivered; she would rather be dead.

"I'm going to live with Roy," said Mary.

Viv glanced across the bed at Jack; she felt the remark had been aimed at him to test his reaction. Ignored by the two girls, he had been patting his forehead with a handkerchief in the heat which settled into the ward as the sunlight dulled, looking up as a trolley's wheels squealed distantly, casting a hungry gaze at the pack of cigarettes on Viv's bed-table awaiting the visitors' departure. Now he was staring down the Hill to cover his embarrassment. Viv studied him, amused; but as the subdued hubbub from the other beds grew in her ears, she realised that Mary had not continued. "You're not serious?" she asked.

"I'm moving in with him this week."

"But you've only known him a month!" Viv's voice rose. Jack's head bowed lower; others turned to look. "What do you want to do that for?"

"You can be sure in less than that. Anyway, I can't say no. There mightn't be another chance."

"But what about me?" Viv demanded shrilly. "I cant pay all the rent by myself! Don't be mean, Mary. *I'd* stay if *you* wanted me to."

"I'll bet. Sorry, Viv, I didn't mean that. But I love Roy. You don't know what it's like."

"Oh, go to hell!" It might have been hysteria which edged Viv's voice. A nurse frowned at her before vanishing behind the screen around the last bed.

Mary went. Jack looked up eventually: "Er—" he said. Behind him a nurse bent over Mavis with, to judge by Mavis' expression, good news. Viv's eyes searched the groups around the other beds soothing the patients with murmurs of hope.

"Cooper didn't print that ad," Jack muttered. "More with-it than I thought."

"Well, I'm going to answer it," decided Viv, grappling with her depression, and took Jack's copy from the bedside drawer. The exertion made her feel a little sick, but she was determined not to weaken before Jack. " 'Dear—' How do I start? I don't know his name."

" 'Dear Friend.' "

" 'Dear Friend, I was pleased to read your advert—' "

"How about 'Your ad rekindled my hopes, for I too am seeking unconventional companionship'?"

"All right... What comes after that?"

" 'My many bedfellows have educated me in their various requirements—no, desires, desires—but until now I have sought in vain.' " Viv giggled and wrote. " 'For despite my wide experience I have yet to find love.' " He bowed an invisible violin.

"That's a bit much, isn't it?"

"No, no, must sound sincere. How to end? 'I feel in my heart that we can build a relationship that will satisfy us both.' "

Viv signed with a flourish, which wobbled as the bell shrilled. Some of the bedside groups speeded up their conversations as they waited for the nurses

to usher them out. "Wait a minute," Viv said, "I'll do the envelope and you can post it."

"Not likely."

"Hang on, it won't take a minute."

"You don't think I'm going to post that? Suppose he took you at your word!"

"Well, it might be interesting. Anyway, he won't. It's got the hospital address on it. It's only for a laugh."

"In that case you should think of the effect a letter like that would have on him. He's obviously lonely."

"Oh, forget it," Viv said and slipped the letter beneath the magazines littering her bed-table.

"Can't I have it?"

"No, I want it." She shut her eyes while he kissed her, so that she would not see his face looming up.

When the visitors had been cleared out and newspapers were unfolding and pillows being patted, Viv said to Mavis: "Mary left me, you know."

"I thought that was what was going on. I'm going out tomorrow."

"Are you?" Viv made a decision. "Do you still want to leave your parents?"

"Well, I don't know..."

"Come on, Mavis, *please*. I've got half a flat going begging and I can't afford it. The rent's not much—your money from the store must cover it. They can't make you stay at home if you can keep yourself,"

"No, I know that."

"And I don't want to be all by myself."

"I don't know, Viv, I'd like to."

A suspicion came to Viv. "You don't *like* your parents, do you?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, then?"

"I told my parents last night," Mavis said. "We had a terrible row."

An approaching storm weighted the sheets on Viv's damp limbs, stifling her; in the false dusk gravestones glimmered. "Never mind," she advised,

"you'll feel a lot freer when you move in with me."

"I wonder what they feel?" Jack broke in.

"Who cares?" responded Mavis fiercely. "My father's busy with his accounts and my mother's got her social club, so they only come to see me twice while I'm here. They think I can look after myself. Well, now I'm going to show them how far I can go."

"There, you see!" Viv said triumphantly. "When are you moving in?"

"Tomorrow, if you're coming out tomorrow. I'd better go now, I've got to finish packing. Oh—I forgot about your letter, but I remembered to post it yesterday. And here's a letter to the flat that wasn't forwarded."

"It's from Tony," Viv announced. "Says he wants to be the only man in my life. Well, he's had that."

"Yes, the flat's only big enough for two," Mavis agreed. "I'll meet you here tomorrow, Viv."

"See you, Mavis." Viv stared down the Hill, waiting for Jack's question; in the deceiving twilight, one gravestone seemed to shift, teeter, thrust upward. She turned away from Jack to watch Mavis leave the ward; as the girl neared the screen by the door it was wrenched apart and the old man fell out, gasping wordlessly; as if at a cue nurses converged and swirled about each other with balletic timing, instruments in hand. Viv watched in unwilling fascination; behind her Jack mumbled something. A stern doctor strode to the screen and drew it gently to behind him, like a sheet across a face. The old man sat on an empty bed and gazed at nothing, and Mavis returned with the news: "The woman in the end bed's died."

"God, isn't that terrible," Viv said. "God, I hope we don't see her."

"I suppose they'll keep the screen in the way while they take her out. I feel all creepy. Just think, that'll be us one day. My father always used to say you've got to make the most of life, and for once I couldn't agree with him more. But that can't be all there is—you can't just end like that..."

"Oh, Mavis, shut up and stop being bloody morbid!" Viv cried. "I'll see you tomorrow morning!"

As Mavis strode past the screen and wheels screeched toward the ward Jack asked sombrely: "What letter?"

"What are you on about?"

"You know. The letter Mavis posted for you!"

"Nosy, aren't you?" But why shouldn't she tell him? Let *him* try to order her about! "The letter I wrote to that ad in the paper."

"You haven't! Don't you realise he could find you here? I can't watch over you till you leave!"

"And I don't bloody well expect you to!" exploded Viv.

Jack was stunned into silence; the screeching wheels halted at the screen. At last he said: "I'm going to try to track him down."

"I'm not stopping you."

Jack hurried out, and Viv grinned wryly as she watched him go. Everyone seemed to be walking out on her today; well, what the hell. The cry of the wheels faded into distance, and the storm seemed to have passed.

But early next morning Viv awoke, sure that she had heard some sound inappropriate to this hour. She could visualise the ward, the empty bed by the door, the shapes turning beneath sheets in the subdued light like the clients of some uneasy morgue; she kept her eyes closed, wooing sleep, and listened. Down the corridor someone coughed painfully; a lavatory flushed. Then she heard wheels squealing slowly, softly, toward her. She could not judge their distance; perhaps she was dreaming. She fumbled a blanket over her ear, but the sound pierced the material, and a sickening smell of ointment and disinfectant reached into her retreat. The wheels approached her stealthily, then stopped. She was certain that a shape bent over her, peering down; nothing on earth would have persuaded her to throw back the blanket and open her eyes. She imagined she heard laboured breathing, as from an open mouth; a stronger wave of the stench turned her stomach. One more second and she'd scream to wake up the hospital. At that moment the figure withdrew; another wave of the suffocating odour found her, and she thought she heard a creaking as of a figure settling into a chair. What was it doing now? Was it at her bedside locker? Before she could summon up the courage to confront it, the wheels whined off down the ward, carefully, with sinister stealth. As soon as she could no longer hear them beneath the blanket, she pushed back the covering and sat up. The ward was as she had imagined it; silent, huddled shapes, someone moving in a nightmare, a snore or two, but for an instant she thought the doors were swinging to a standstill, and through their glass a pale head moved out of sight as if

propelled in a wheelchair; a trick of the light, perhaps. She glanced at her locker; the drawers had not been touched, and on top was nothing important; a glass, a bottle of Lucozade propping up the envelope from Tony. Awake alone among the beds, Viv shivered and snuggled down to sleep.

"I love this flat," Mavis said. "You're right, I do feel free."

"Do you want to unpack before we go out? You can have this wardrobe. Mary used to have it."

"That'll be great. Some of these need washing—I've never been to a laundrette before. Hope it'll be all right. Which is my bed? Oh, that's fine. Aren't they a bit close together? Maybe we can shift them when we have time. I don't know how to use these gas cookers, you'll have to show me. This was the bathroom, wasn't it? God, Viv, you dirty pig! Don't you ever clean it out?"

"You can clean it out when you need it."

"You know, I'm sure this wallpaper gets depressing. Look where it's coming off. Couldn't we get some new? I'm sure we could find someone to put it up. Jack any good at that sort of thing? Well, you never know. Say, aren't these curtains weird. Did you make them out of blankets?"

"I made them," Viv told her. "I bought the material. I like them."

Mavis giggled. "What're you sniggering about?" Viv demanded, but Mavis only sucked her breath in harshly and giggled afresh. She could get on your nerves after a while, Viv thought. "Look, Mavis—" Someone rang the bell, which clattered and swung further askew. Mavis howled with laughter. Viv glared at her and opened the door.

"Thank God you're in," Jack said.

"Oh, it's you. Mavis is just unpacking."

"Well, I'll help if you like. I've got something to tell you."

"What about?" Viv said with obvious boredom, closing the door and glancing at her watch; half-seven, and she and Mavis had agreed to reach the Bowl by eight.

"One of you ill?" Jack asked. "Smells like someone spilled a jar of ointment in the hall."

"Nothing wrong with either of us," said Viv. "What were you going to say? We're going out in a minute." She began to brush her hair.

"It's about that letter."

"Oh, go home, Jack, will you." Viv groaned. "I want to enjoy myself tonight."

"No, listen, it's damned odd. The house from which the letter to the Herald was addressed—it's an empty house on Mercy Hill just below the graveyard: you must have been able to see it from the window at the hospital."

"If it was an empty house he must have been playing a joke too, so he deserved all he got," Viv said. "Are you taking a coat, Mavis? We said we'd leave at half-seven, and it's past that now."

"Will you *listen!* I told Cooper—I said I'd just been passing the house and remembered the ad—and he told me he thought there was something fishy when he saw the ad, because he remembered the address from years ago. Seems the owner of the house used it as a sort of one-man brothel, and when the police clamped down on that he started to lure in the neighbourhood girls. When that got around the girls of the district wouldn't go out alone after dark—you know the Mercy Hill people would rather keep that sort of thing among themselves than call the police—and so he started cutting keys to people's back doors and getting in that way, even though by that time he couldn't get about on foot—you can guess why. The way Cooper heard it the people finally broke into the house, but they found him dead—you can guess of what."

"Are you coming, Mavis?" Viv called, grabbing her handbag. "You can finish unpacking when we get back."

"I don't know if Jack's finished. It's interesting."

"Well, *I'm* not interested!" Viv cried. 'I think it's morbid! You've got a twisted mind, Jack, if you want to know about things like that. Come on, Mavis, let's go and have some fun!"

"But what about that letter?" Jack expostulated as Viv wrenched open the door and thrust him out. "Suppose some maniac is using that house for the same reasons?"

"I think you're a maniac, wallowing in that muck," Viv told him. She slammed the door and, head held high, marched downstairs.

"Who's got my comb?" a girl yelled. "Some bitch's nicked it."

"Maybe you've lost it," suggested one of her companions.

"Lost it balls," and she shoved open the cubicles to peer inside, kicking the doors of the *Engaged*. Viv and Mavis exchanged looks and ignored her, ostentatiously chatting louder as they retouched their faces, then emerged into the Bowl. Before them stretched the high clean walls and the alleys echoing to the reiterated hollow fall of pins, but first they had to pass through the gangs of girls waiting beyond the playing area to be picked up by their opposite numbers, and between the tables, treading on crushed paper cups, where groups dawdled over cold coffee and were moved on by an unsmiling waitress as she sponged the stained plastic. Viv and Mavis pushed through to an empty alley; two boys were standing near it, talking. "Are you playing?" Viv called.

"You go right ahead, kid. Age before beauty," the heftier boy laughed in reply, and continued to his thin swarthy friend: 'Don't think you could bowl from a wheelchair."

'He must have been waiting outside for someone," the other commented, and watched Viv bowl. Conscious of being observed, she managed to twist the bowl into the trough beside the alley.

"You'll never make the title that way, kid." He swung his jacket from his shoulder and dropped it by the seat where Mavis sat watching. 'Come on, Les, come and talk to dream-girl here," he called back, indicating Mavis to his friend, and crossed to stand by Viv while the bowl returned. "All mod cons," he said, slipping his arm round Viv's waist as the bowl came to rest beside them. "Go ahead, pick it up and I'll show you. What do they call you, kid? I'm Brian and that's Les chatting up your friend." As she fitted her fingers into the bowl he laid his hand under hers and drew her arm back; she felt his muscle swell. "Back here a bit." He positioned her legs with his other hand and patted her thigh.

"Watch it," warned Viv.

"Now don't you worry about me, kid. Viv, is it? Well, you bowl hard and get thirsty and I'll buy you a drink."

"This must be that girl's comb," said Mavis. "God, don't like to touch it." With her foot she pushed it under the pipe beneath the washbowls. "What do you think of them? You don't mind I got Les, do you? He's gorgeous. Anyway, Brian is too if it comes to that. God, isn't he big."

"I know. Listen, Mavis, where are we going?"

"For a drink, we said."

"No, I mean after. I mean—Brian said something about going back to their place..."

"Well, I hope so. What's wrong, Viv, don't you want to?"

"Oh, I suppose I don't mind if there's four of us. But—you know— Brian seems... I mean, I hope they wont expect us to... you know..."

"No, I don't. What're you on about?"

"Go all the way with them!" Viv forced out.

"I should think they will. That's the idea we've been giving them all night. God, Viv, you had plenty of chances to say if you didn't want to."

"You mean you've done it before? Well, I haven't and I won't!"

"Viv, you can't go now!" Mavis blocked the closing door with her elbow and hurried after her. 'You bloody traitor! Don't you come to me for anything again! I'll ring someone and get her to make up a fourth and I bet Brian likes her better!" But Viv did not look back until she reached the exit escalator; she glimpsed Brian pointing angrily in her direction and Mavis gesticulating in explanation before she clattered down the moving staircase, fearful of pursuit, and out into the night.

Her bus was waiting patiently for an unsteady passenger. Viv ran wildly; her handbag clicked open and Tony's letter fell on the pavement. So what, she thought distractedly—but she stooped to retrieve it, and straightened up in time to watch the dwindling of the disinterested bus. Twenty minutes' wait for its successor. She'd walk; Brian might come out and find her at the stop.

As she set out beneath the suffused purple sky she found herself glancing back; she could not imagine what she sought. Though the night was humid she shivered once, then hurried onward. This was the area of transition

between Brichester and Lower Brichester; the bowl represented an attempt to rake in the money from the Lower Brichester people on their own doorsteps, along with the odd Chinese fish-and-chip shops, the boutique in St. Anne's Gardens, the record shops, all angling for the enthusiasms of the students and other tenants of the flats which composed the dilapidated three-storey streets between the city proper and the "desirable residences" at the edge of country. From an upper window roared concerted laughter, drowning the clink of glasses; on the ground floor of the next house figures sat intently round a TV screen, dead blue light playing stroboscopically on their faces. Viv wished she were home; she wondered whether she would have the energy to brew herself a coffee, or simply fall into bed.

Something hung from a telephone wire above the street and flapped in a stray breeze across the rooftops; Viv peered upward, then abruptly hurried past. A group of youths idling on the other pavement heard her and whistled; Viv smiled secretly—one up to me, Mavis. Then they were gone and once more she was alone beneath the buzzing streetlamps, dwarfed by the streets from which echoed her heels.

She passed the wrought-iron gates of Ellis Park; her feet were caught in the intricate shadow. Beside her railings multiplied to the corner of St. Anne's Gardens; above them a few packed fans of leaves, glazed by the electric light, swayed stealthily. Close to Viv a squealing sound began. She turned nervously; the street was deserted. Though the air seemed still, Viv told herself that some quiet breeze must be troubling the rusty hinges of the gates. But as she hurried to the corner, some part of her listened to determine whether the sound kept pace with her. As it would if it were coming from the gates, it faded. She turned right into St. Anne's Gardens, and saw that the gleam of railings was interrupted just before they ended at the slope down to the shops which rounded off the Gardens; a gap had been forced through the railings by nocturnal users of the park—in fact, several bars had been removed. She had passed it many times, even used it once or twice with Mary; now it yawned, sinister. She recalled that a path led inside the park from the gates round the corner, curved away from the street until an unofficial shortcut joined this gap. Was the squealing louder? Had it moved away around the curve and now was closing in on her? She peered in panic through the railings into the trees and beyond them the enigmatic silver shadows; for one moment she was sure that something moved rapidly ahead of her between the trees, gaining on the gap. She moaned and ran,

past the end of the railings, down the hill between the first shops. Pain lanced her side; not from her appendix, which hadn't bothered her for days, not even at the bowl—but the nagging pain which weighs down flight. She had to stop, panting, beside the boutique.

In the distance a car screamed round the corners; someone played a tune upon its horn. Otherwise the night was soft and silent, soothing. Viv's sweater stuck beneath her armpits. Breathing normally once more, she took in the boutique display before strolling onward. Bloody Mavis, leaving her alone like this, letting her get frightened! Not that she was as bad as Jack with all that morbid drivel; if he hadn't come round she wouldn't have got herself scared just now. And by what? Grow up, girl, you'd think this was the first time you'd been out by yourself after dark.

She reached the junction at the bottom of the hill, and looked both ways; nobody in sight. Opposite her an alley led behind the buildings and came out just beyond 16 Desmond Street, where she lived, but inside the alley an angle of shadow cut off vision, and she turned left to take the long way round. Beside the alley was a record shop; she surveyed the covers as she passed. Then, in the depths of the display, something caught her eye; a picture, somehow illuminated, of a figure seated atop a hill. What record was this? Then it moved; the chair plunged down the hill; the figure raised its arms and from them tattered bandages flew; at her back the wheels shrieked closer.

Viv cried out and fled round the corner into Desmond Street, struggling with her bag to find her key. A few upper rooms were lit; light streamed from a garage beyond her door. But she had not reached the comforting light when she heard the sound ahead of her.

She backed into a doorway, grinding her knuckles into her teeth. If only she had the courage to ring the doorbell! But what could she say if someone came down? She wasn't even sure if there had been a lighted room in this house. She trembled, frantically seeking sanctuary. Beyond her house the squealing continued; it seemed to move no nearer. Then a car drew into the garage and an attendant emerged from the office. Viv tried to call out but could utter no sound; instead she ran blindly toward the light—and toward the squealing, which came from the garage's OPEN/CLOSED sign, pivoting back and forth.

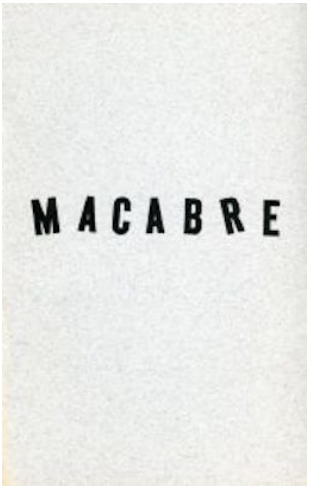
A breath touched Viv's neck. She wheeled in horror. There was nothing but the deserted street and a night breeze. Terror filled her of some menace from some new direction, and she shouldered open the front door of 16 and fell into the hall. It was dark; the house was silent; the open door awaited the returning tenants. She fumbled for the light switch. The car pulled out of the garage and poured its beams through the front-door pane to show an empty hall. Before the beams had withdrawn Viv was upstairs.

Her flat was on the right; at the end of the passage a tree waved in a window. Viv extracted her key with shaking fingers, and her eyes were drawn to the window; were the lines across it only those between the panes —or was there an extra bar, like the arm of a wheelchair? Was the vague darkness which moved against the night merely that of the tree? And where was that smell of ointment coming from? She thrust her key in upside down, tore it out and dropped it. Almost in tears, she stooped and clutched the glimmering key; a shadow brushed across it, perhaps her own. She froze, unable to look round, then with a last surge of panic leapt up, found the keyhole, wrenched open the door and slammed it behind her.

It took courage to switch on the light; but when she did her first sight was of Mavis' dresses in disorder on the bed. That bitch! Leaving her alone after she'd promised to stay with her! Well, this was *her* flat and she decided who was coming in—and that went for wheelchairs too. She began to giggle a little hysterically. She'd show Mavis. She locked the door and jammed a chair beneath the handle. Not that Mavis would be coming home tonight— but when she did, she could plead to be let in. Now Viv was going to bed, and to hell with everything; this was *her* flat and she was in control. She pulled off her sweater, skirt and stockings and threw them on the chair at the door; she was too hot and exhausted to do more. It was too hot even to be weighed down by sheets. She dragged the window down, sucked in the night air to clean her nostrils of the thick stench of ointment which seemed to fill the room, and climbed on her bed in her slip, catching her toenails on one of Mavis' dresses. Untidy bitch—did she expect her unpacking done for her? Tomorrow she could move her bed over, too. Viv lay down, yawning; she stretched one arm above her head to pull the cord for her own familiar domestic darkness, and throwing her legs wide kicked Mavis' offending dress. The cord clicked the light off and swung out of reach; the dark descended; Mavis' dress slid to the floor, and as the other dresses moved as they should not have, in the last split-second of light Viv saw that on the

space where the dress had lain had been exposed a slowly moving strip of discoloured bandage.

The Drowned Car

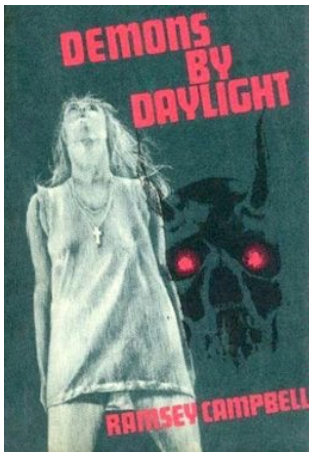


Written In: 1967
First published in *Macabre #21*, 1970

When dreams are shaped by conscience
There's nothing you can do but stay awake.
At first he thought he'd read the Bible for his sins
(Last night one hundred miles back he'd fought
sleep
With nothing but the tapping on the pane—
And this hotel room was featureless,
And if he looked at it for long the lined wallpaper stirred like disturbed
water)
But he'd proved he could condemn "fornication" for himself,
Yet "Thou shalt not kill" was barbed.
He sought peace in the wall,
But the lines were now of print which he tried to tread,
And then, abruptly, didn't.
Then the blankets round his his feet—they didn't change, exactly,
But were a face clubbed out of shape,
Down to the hanging flap of skin.
He wriggled free, and the face caved in.
He couldn't find the garage light (In the dark
Something touched him)
He struggled: then kicked out: the gears caught: the garage was swept
behind.
Below the city glittered like the sea beneath the moon
And once the night was formed upon the neon
Like some disposal on the moon-track.
The roads were bare as bone, no sign of help.
Obsessively the blackness yielded up leaves packed vast and swaying
Which never, as they passed, maintained their threatened distant shapes.
But he was sure that from the sockets of an intersection diagram
Burned accusing eyes.

Leaves again, hissing like the sea, like tongues.
In an ebon lake beside the road, inverted, a drowned car paced him patiently;
He trembled, but its door stayed close, black, waiting.
Then light stabbed round the bend ahead
From two dead, pitiless eyes which floated closer.
He threw out a hand to blind the eyes,
And his other missed the wheel.
The last thing he heard was a woman's scream
(From the car ahead, its headlights undimmed)
Then he was falling, and the drowned car rushed to meet him.

Concussion



Written In: 1967
First published in *Demons By Daylight*, 1973

For some weeks Kirk Morris had been gnawed by the knowledge that he must die. He had tried to feign indifference; then, when he realised that at his death Liverpool, if not the rest of the world, would cease to exist, he had determined to return for one last confrontation of his memories.

That day a few private vehicles were coasting in the streets; he signalled one and heaved his case onto the seat beside him. The new transport must have hit a snag again, calling forth these vehicles in imitation of the bygone taxis. He sped across London. The high concrete-and-metal buildings were mobiles of sunlight which ached in his eyes. Since weather control had cleared the city skies the bleached bone streets had become yet more unreal to Kirk; his journeys through them had the obsessive quality of a flight down the corridors of some surrealist film. Nowhere could he find the overpowering solidity of the black grime-encrusted buildings, surrounding one reassuringly for miles, for which he had moved so long ago to London in an attempt to be convinced by his surroundings of their reality. Instead, he existed, robbed of referent and drained of emotion, on a lower floor of a stark rectangular housing block in the suburbs, occasionally meeting families in the lift or young couples at the meal dispenser round the corner, and it was partly the conviction that he would die unnoticed that had persuaded him to undertake this journey into nostalgia. Of course, he thought, shaking himself awake, this was nonsense; when he died they would cease to be, as much illusion as the GLCPT which had pensioned him off when the buses ceased to run. But if Liverpool was illusion, why did he need to spend time and energy on the illusion of returning?

The vehicle drew up beside the gap in the buildings like slabs of sand which denoted Victoria Coach Station. Kirk handed a note over the driver's shoulder; the man hesitated, looking unsure whether to be grateful for or

insulted by the size of the tip—after all, he'd picked up Kirk out of sympathy, not to profit. But Kirk couldn't believe in his indecision; it had been decades since Kirk had trusted anyone. He dragged his case onto the pavement. The passers-by looked shifty, as if smug with a knowledge they thought withheld from him. He'd buttonhole one and worm the truth out of him—then suddenly he giggled: non-existent money to a non-existent driver!

He had to drop the case three times before he reached what had been the coach station; a sheltered square of concrete approached by two lanes between the buildings flecked as tweed which rose toward another square, one of blue sky stained with spilled milk, invisible from beneath the shelter. Queues stamped, swayed and complained on the four platforms closing in the square, and Kirk joined that for Manchester and Liverpool. Preceding him was a young man, glancing frequently at the entrances, waiting for someone or perhaps merely keeping their place. He unbuttoned his 1960-style sports jacket—nostalgia was all the rage these days among the younger set—and cast it over his shoulder, flicking Kirk's face like a challenge. Kirk recoiled grumbling and touched his cheek, feeling wrinkles which could never now be smoothed. He sat down on the concrete bench against the building; the stone was cold as a tomb through his trousers. Across the square a bus snored awake. It caught at Kirk's throat with nostalgia, and after all the presence of the bus could only be related to the nostalgia of Kirk's generation who were sick in other than surface transport and prepared to pay extra for comfort and the sight of a bus still on the ground. It was comfort Kirk sought—but the comfort of remembering the day he met Anne.

The young man with the sports coat turned from the exhaust and coughed; Kirk adjusted his glasses, held together for a year with tape, to focus on each detail of the vehicle, to realise memory. Through the grey fumes a girl, mysteriously glimpsed, was shoving her luggage aboard the rack, and when Kirk woke Anne was struggling with her case above him. He'd fallen asleep before the coach moved out; this girl must have arrived at Victoria after he'd dozed off, to materialise above him now as from a dream. He blinked through the windows: a country lane at speed, somewhere near Stratford; a mauve mist of flowers skimmed by. 'Did I wake you?' she said. 'I'm ever so sorry.'

'Not at all,' Kirk said, and grimaced inwardly at his swift response; why must he always cap their remarks so finally, never *talk* to them? He stood up, tottering as the driver wrenched the wheel at a curve. 'Let me help,' and he jammed the case into place.

'Thanks, you're awfully good,' Anne said and smiled into his eyes; he sat down beneath the smile. At last she seated herself and picked up a book.

If only this were real! It had never returned to Kirk so vividly since he had ridden the bus down to London, abandoning Liverpool after all was over. He could feel her body warm on his, her tongue—as he'd felt it while he waited for her during their lost week, when time had seemed annihilated; for a moment Anne might have appeared on the concrete platform and run to greet him. As if to mock him, the young man in the queue leaned out and scanned the grey square for his girl; Kirk closed his eyes and reached back to Anne for consolation. What had come next? The hot coach upholstery—hushed conversation round him, laughter—pages turning—

Anne's reading speed astonished him. The pages passed almost as swiftly as the flowers. The book, too, fascinated him; bound in bright plastic, the corners of its pages rounded off—but his eyes strayed to her bare neck, her sleek piled blonde hair, and framed in the space between the headrests her fresh flowered cotton frock, the creases in its short sleeves flattening and sharpening as she flipped rapidly onward. If he could make her speak to him again—She put up her hand to adjust her glasses; the bus squealed to a stop at a roundabout; the book was torn from her hand. Of course it hadn't been so satisfyingly timed; he'd shifted in his seat as with insomnia, searching for words which eluded him like a dream; but memory had edited, tightening up the cues. He almost fell into the aisle and had the book before she could stoop.

'Oh, aren't you good,' praised Anne. He held the book a second after she had taken it; their fingers touched. He'd read about that somewhere.

'Lousy driver,' he said, glaring up the coach. Cars chased their tails around the roundabout. 'I could do better myself. I mean really—I'm sure I could manage a bus.' God, you cretin, he snarled at himself, why should she be interested? But apparently she was.

'Can you drive, then?' she asked as if enthralled.

'I often drive. But I don't have a car.'

'Nor do we. I'd love to have one.' The driver saw a gap and rammed in the bus; Kirk almost fell. 'Don't kill yourself for me,' she implored. 'Why don't you join me?'

Across the aisle a middle-aged couple nodded to each other like disapproving puppets, but Kirk was too contented to care. 'Are you from London, then?' she asked.

'Me? No, I'm from Liverpool. I can tell you're London, of course.'

'Actually I'm Southend. Why, you mean the accent? I put that on a lot because it makes me think of flower-sellers and all that sort of thing. You know—all the past. I love the past. Sometimes when I'm going to sleep I think I'll wake up—oh, before I was born, when everything was lovely—well, not everything, there were the wars, but I don't know, the past seems awfully romantic. Sometimes when I woke up and found I was still me I used to cry. When I was younger. But Liverpool has lots of the past still preserved, doesn't it? That's why I'm staying there.'

Kirk had been basking in her monologue. Somehow she was the first girl with whom he'd felt at ease since his trauma with Shirley. Liverpool has lots of the past still preserved? He thought of the ossified spire which rose above the roof of Owen Owen's in imitation of the GPO Tower in London, of the boutiques on Bold Street emulating Chelsea, of the garish 'Meal in a Moment' hamburger cafés on Lime Street, vanguards from London of a life lived at such speed as to outdistance emotion. 'There are pockets of the past round Liverpool, you're right,' he told her, remembering lonely walks in Bidston, West Kirby, Frankby. 'I've visited most of them. You know, in search of atmosphere.'

'Have you honestly? How marvellous!' she cried. 'You'll have to be my cicerone!'

This time they both saw Punch and Judy draw together. 'This'll never do,' she declared. 'Us sitting together and not even introduced. I'm Anne and I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance.'

'I'm Kirk,' he searched, 'and I'm a student. What are you?'

'Kirk what a lovely name,' said Anne. 'Like an actor. For the cinematograph. Isn't that a wonderful word, cinematograph? Much nicer than—' something which eluded Kirk; but he'd always been shy of asking for words to be repeated, preferring to agree or grunt intelligently. 'Oh, what

am I. A romantic little girl, wouldn't you say? And in term time I'm a student too. My question. In what are you a student?'

'French is my main subject.' Memory dashed like water in his face; Adrienne's letter in his pocket, still to be answered. And on the cold stone bench Kirk's fingers clutched the letter, rubbing against the other later letter he wanted still more to forget, tufted both with the fluff of decades. Somewhere in there was her photo, too; head and shoulders, a little askew, a touch of soft-focus by virtue of inexpert lensmanship, lending her long blonde hair a delicate glow and her eyes a hint of moisture above her smile. And never a photograph of Anne; he tried not to think about that. Adrienne, with whom he'd corresponded for years, promising finally to visit her in Paris if he could collect the money, Adrienne to whom he'd written with a kind of desperate passion after the Shirley incident, calling her 'cherie' and 'ma petite chou' and all the other words he'd learned outside the French class and believed in because he'd never been to France. Adrienne, and then he thought of Anne's Auntie Ethel: the second time he'd killed. He shrugged them off. Anne—what's your subject? He couldn't think of them all the time; he'd go mad. 'Anne?'

'But we've been introduced. We know each other. You mean to say you can't guess my subject? History! You knew all along, really.' She touched his arm; her skin was warm on his. 'Here, look at my history book.'

She found the plastic cover in her flowered lap. Ahead a car shot from a turning; the coach driver stood on the brake; Kirk was thrown forward as he turned to Anne and his head thudded on the seat in front. Something cracked.

'Oh, your poor head!' cried Anne. 'Are you all right, darling?'

Was that what happened? Did she really call him 'darling' so soon? Yes, he was sure she did. Perhaps there was more dialogue, but again memory was speeding up the action. Certainly he never saw her book. He sat back stunned, examining his divided spectacles.

'My wounded Kirk!' mourned Anne, then became more serious: 'Can't you see very well? Look, let me put them in my bag. This lens has smashed. It didn't go in your eye? Have you any others?'

'No, unfortunately,' said Kirk, eyes closed, waiting for the rhythm to weaken. 'I can't see a yard without them, either.'

'That's terrible. Can't you even see me? I'll be so sad if you can't.'

'I can see that far, don't worry,' he told her, and at once realised what he'd done. He cursed himself; Shirley had tied his tongue for ever. No doubt Anne didn't think he cared about her now. Perhaps she'd find another cicerone. She might even have been joking, unaware of how his mind had brightened. He strained to speak: too late.

'I think you look handsome without them, anyway,' she continued. 'But with them you look more studious, so either way is fine. I'll take them to the optician's tomorrow for you. You probably wouldn't be able to find the door! Just think, going into a museum by mistake! They'd probably buy them: unique Victorian eyeglasses, slightly damaged. Glasses can be awfully stupid sometimes, don't you think? I mean when you're kissing sometimes: clink-clink! The boy I was going out with in Southend said I looked like an owl. We broke it off the other day. He seemed awfully hurt. Still, 'twas but infatuation. How do I get your glasses back to you?'

'You could bring them round.' That's not what she means! he moaned at himself. 'No, now I think about it, I'd better know how much they're going to cost. Why don't we meet somewhere tomorrow?'

The young man in the coach queue—who might have been strategically placed on stage to represent Kirk's younger self—patrolled the platform for his girlfriend, brushing from his sports coat dust sneezed away by the exhaust, and Kirk glanced down at his sagging grey suit as he hurried toward the Pier Head. The Liver Clock above him tolled eleven. He'd taken everything he could out of the pockets to give the suit some shape—including Adrienne's letter, now a fortnight old, which he must answer as soon as he had time—but the trousers still bulged shapelessly at the knee, his wallet still outlined a rectangle of grey on his jacket; for too long he'd had nobody for whom to dress. He plunged beneath the shadow of the long Pier Head bus station hall, pale as the bore of a blown bone; about him milled a vague crowd, prams, motorcyclists scented with petrol manoeuvring their machines to the ferry, a hive of shade and colour. A smell of hot pastry lured him to the baker's stall. At the adjacent bookstall a figure in white moved away and blurred completely; next second it had run to him and focused. Anne smiled apologetically. 'I shouldn't tease you when you can't see,' she apologised. 'I won't do it again, I promise. I found an optician's near Bidston, such a lovely one, all antique! You must see it

sometime. He said your glasses won't be ready for a week, so you won't be able to see me really at all. It's terribly sad.'

She was wearing a white sweater, white sharply pleated skirt, white patterned socks. Or was that the next day? It was all so long ago. He clutched the stone bench: let her be wearing these, he liked them best. 'Don't worry, I can see you,' he replied, and his toes squirmed. 'You look great,' he said.

'You're nice. Where shall we go?'

He hadn't thought. 'Having fun'—where did you go for that? What could you do in Liverpool on a summer morning? The art gallery, the parks, to which he'd gravitate in London, seemed a little cheerless; the cinemas weren't open—besides, he couldn't see. 'Let's walk down and I'll think,' he said, and led the way down the ramp to the river, where figures fuzzed against the dazzling water. Anne took his arm: 'You don't mind, do you?' 'On the contrary,' he responded, immediately bitter at his stock response, his inaction. 'There's always New Brighton fairground,' he said, and swore at himself: you provincial idiot, that's not the place to take a London girl!—not London, Southend, whose fairground must long ago have earned her contempt. But Anne clutched his arm: 'That'd be fabulous, I love fairgrounds, so nostalgic!'

He couldn't see the coloured lights above the fairground; he imagined them set in a velvet sky. Blocks of paint whirled and lifted screaming. A few couples sat on warm benches; others sought the shade of the amusement arcade, drawn by the purr of fruit machines and the infrequent rush of coins. Kirk took Anne's hand and settled her in a Ghost Train car. They plunged into darkness; the car jerked back from death-grins—Kirk saw only luminous clothed eggs. Anne huddled closer and he put his arm around her, inhaling the scents of talc and laundered wool. Her hair lay light and warm against his cheek.

'But ghosts aren't really like that,' she insisted as they came to rest in sunlight. 'I think they'd be just like people, and you wouldn't know what they really were until afterward. Those things in there are straight out of a Gothic novel. Mind you, I don't mind Gothic novels. Being carried away by a horseman in a black cloak over the mountains under the moon to a castle! —No, I'm only joking, I'd rather be with you. My turn now.' And she pulled him toward a circular platform. The car whirled about, was lifted spinning

and suddenly was hurled almost from its axis. The fairground tilted, fell away. Kirk closed his eyes. The sky was swimming; he couldn't move for fear of being thrown clear, though Anne weighed on his arm and sand rubbed between his fingers.

'Wasn't that marvellous?' Anne panted. 'Where shall we go next? Oh, poor Kirk, don't you feel well?'

'Not very. Maybe because I haven't got my glasses.'

'Oh, dear, and I was going to buy you an ice-cream. Sorry, darling, shouldn't have said that. Come on, I'll get you a drink. It'll do you the world of good.'

Reaching the main street, they found themselves opposite the Court Cinema, dwarfed by a poster for taxis; two children ran by with propellors. 'What a strange little place,' said Anne. '*Vertigo*, what's that? Oh, I'm sorry, that wasn't exactly in good taste.'

'No it's all right,' mumbled Kirk. '*Vertigo*—it's the Alfred Hitchcock film about James Stewart becoming obsessed with Kim Novak, I should say the girl he thinks she is, and in trying to mould her into his dream of her, he causes her death.'

'That's awfully sad. I wish we could see it. Come on, I'm going to give you your medicine.'

The Scotch settled Kirk's stomach, but not his thoughts; perhaps he should suggest a visit tonight to *Vertigo*, even though it would be invisible to him. He felt ill at ease in the empty parlour, holding hands with Anne, watched by the barman as he polished glasses and flicked flies; he'd rather be showing Anne off to the crowds. Again the move was hers. 'Do you think we could go to Ellesmere Port?' she said. 'I'd so like to see the docks before they're all demolished.'

On the bus to Ellesmere Port she caught his eye. 'You like my pleats, don't you? I think you'd like to touch them. But that'd be wicked.' So that was what she'd been wearing. She'd said that on the bus that day. He was sure she had.

Their visit to Ellesmere Port had faded; it jerked from image to image like an old film. The stern of a ship behind high stern grey buildings, the grey seeping into the sky; Anne waving to someone at the ship's rail. 'Now, I'm only teasing,' she told Kirk as he tensed. 'Let's go back to my auntie's. You

do know how to get to Bidston from here?' Unfortunately, Kirk couldn't correlate the bus routes this side of the Mersey; he suggested they walk for a while. Along the road they reached a gate into a field. 'Look, marvellous, a bridle-path,' cried Anne. Kirk thought it more likely the path of tractor-treads, but let himself be led. Then the grey sky darkened and pattered on the grass; they piled beneath the shelter of a tree. Kirk's arm was round Anne's shoulders; she was silent, regaining her breath. He felt the bark rough against his back; he stared across the field, trying to forget that the next move was his, but the dull green was curtained by indolent raindrops against a faster distant mist, and he sensed rather than saw that the indistinct horizon was blocked off by the squat curves of an oil refinery. As if of its own accord, his hand edged round and stroked Anne's soft warm cheek. The rain slowed. 'We'd better go before it starts again,' Anne said. 'I like it here,' Kirk protested weakly; he'd tried and failed, he knew. 'I know, darling,' and she smiled up at him, 'but it'd be nicer at home.'

'Auntie Ethel, come and meet Kirk.' They stood in a hall bright as an aquarium; Kirk was aware of surfaces of glass and plastic, the open treads of a staircase, what seemed to his limited vision like indirect lighting. A door opened at the end of the hall; a figure in slacks moved toward them, graceful yet shy as a tropical fish, halted and said in a voice a little cracked by age: 'He's gorgeous, You'd better watch out or I'll have him for myself. Hello, Kirk, can you see me from there? Then I'd better warn you that you may get a shock.' The face swam forward; the projectionist focused, and Kirk saw that beneath the grey hair and eyes, one side of Auntie Ethel's lined yet lively face was covered by a purple birthmark. 'Now why on earth should I get a shock?' he asked, shaking hands. 'Unless you mean because you're nicer-looking than your niece.' Anne kicked his ankle, but not hard. 'There you are, men are fickle,' said Auntie Ethel. 'Sorry if I embarrassed you, Kirk. I go like that sometimes. Ever since someone—well, I won't bore you. It's odd, you remind me of him. I know your face, I'm sure. It's all right, Anne, I'm not trying a line.' She seemed to recollect herself. 'Now you children go and get dry and I'll make you something to eat. You're not going to help, Annie, you're too wet. It's been a long time since I've got dinner for more than one.'

'It *is* sad, Kirk,' Anne said, taking his coat and leading him into the sitting-room. 'Auntie Ethel's husband was killed in a car crash before they'd had children, and I know she so wanted children. She was ever so worried about

my coming down by bus, in case—you know. Well, we'll be her children all this week, won't we?'

Kirk, trying to settle himself on an odd curved couch made of cane, agreed, but his thoughts were elsewhere: how long before he had to kiss Anne? The aquarium seemed timeless, unreal; he couldn't ponder properly. 'I'll help her set the table, anyway,' Anne said, and leaned down to kiss his cheek. He remembered *Brighton Rock*, more strongly than when he'd been with Shirley; Pinkie kissing a girl and missing her mouth—he couldn't see that Graham Greene had been at his shoulder, whispering doubts. He thrust his fingers through Anne's hair and pulled her down to him, kissed her mouth, which was scented and moist. Then he let go, waiting. 'Gosh, you're strong,' Anne said, 'but let's eat first, darling.'

'This is a marvellous house,' Anne told Auntie Ethel. Though the latter had protested, Anne had insisted on sitting with her to keep her company, leaving Kirk facing them as at an interview. 'All these lovely things,' and she looked to Kirk for confirmation, but he was still adjusting to the plates and tablecloth, both made of paper. The latest trend, he supposed, and realised that Anne was deliberately suppressing her love of the antique.

'I've only been here once before, you know,' she told Kirk, who was struggling to saw his lettuce with a plastic knife. 'I haven't even been to Bidston Village.'

'No, so you haven't. You'll have to escort her there, Kirk.'

'I certainly will.' His knife slipped and tomato-seeds glittered on the paper cloth like coloured tears. 'Don't be so tidy,' Auntie Ethel rebuked as he tried to scoop them up, 'you'll show up the rest of us. Plenty more cloths where that came from.'

'I stayed with Auntie Ethel just for a day last year. They drove me down from Manchester because they couldn't put me up there. Manchester's too modern, anyway. I was asleep in the back all the way here. I wished I hadn't been, I like night driving—' She stopped. 'I was in Manchester for a wedding.'

'They say one wedding leads to another,' said Auntie Ethel, smiling.

The sitting-room again; Anne lifted the lid of a red record player. 'I'd like to dance with you.'

'I can't,' said Kirk.

'Never mind, darling,' and she put her arms round his neck. Her perfume was as subtle as her outline in the evening. There was a brief struggle; he tried to pull her aboard his knee, she was lifting him. 'Wait a minute,' she said, and pulled away. She collected cushions from the furniture and arranged them expertly on the floor. 'Lie down,' she told him, and as he did so: 'Darling, take my glasses off.' He wished she wouldn't direct so much; it was like a rehearsal. Then she knelt above him, stroked his hair, brushed her lips down from his forehead to his mouth. He drew her down to him. He was filled with a timeless peace; so much for Shirley and for Graham Greene! When he felt her tongue he was suddenly dismayed; but tenderness passed through the slow luxurious movement of her mouth and gradually formed into his caresses, tenderness which drifted through them and became the dusk which merged their bodies, their warmth like a cocoon, until the coach roared round the concrete courtyard and out into the world.

Kirk blinked weakly; the dust lay on his lips like tasteless salt. Why must the future drain his last days of Anne? The Liverpool queue had lengthened, but the young man with the sports coat still turned at each new footstep. Sadly Kirk closed his eyes, but Anne had gone. Some link was needed. Kirk touched his pockets, his trousers full of change; he jangled the money—

Next day the sun was a golden coin; the last few patches of rain were dwindling, like continents eroded by time. Kirk waited outside Woolworth's on Church Street; for some reason Anne had suggested they meet there. Blobs of flesh rushed headlong past, hot cloth waited at the crossing. For a moment he wanted to cut this scene; it was too full of a lost future. But then he gave the cue; to skip it would be to lose part of Anne. Coins. As the doors of Woolworth's were unbolted to give vent to the chatter of counted change like the musings of a vast computer, Anne was at his side. 'I'm ever so sorry I'm late, darling. You can slap me if you like,' and when he aimed, 'No, not *here*, darling!' She pulled him into the store and across to the jewellery counter; a lesser mathematician was still counting, a coin rang for each digit. 'Please buy me a ring,' she pleaded, 'just a little one.'

'Which one do you like?' He was playing for time, but she'd already chosen. God, which hand? He had never before had occasion to look. He couldn't close his eyes; he closed his mind. The odds were even: left hand. But which finger? The overalled assistant's eyes were on them; no doubt in her mind she was already describing the scene to her colleagues. 'Want

some help, luv?' she called. Kirk slid the ring down the only finger it fitted, Anne's third. 'I don't think so,' he replied, and led Anne toward the door with an obscure sense of victory. 'Is this a holiday engagement?' he could not help asking.

'That's up to you, Kirk, isn't it?' For a moment her eyes were as lifeless as her glasses. She caught sight of the photo booth near the basement staircase. 'I've never seen one of those before,' she said, but her voice was sinking. 'Let's, Kirk.'

'There we are, together for ever.' She examined each blurred shot of her ring held toward the camera. 'Let's have half each. Then we'll each have part of each other.' And she tore off two for Kirk like an inexperienced film editor cutting shots which made nonsense of the climax.

He took her to Bidston Hill. The grass was damp as reeds. They admired the proud white windmill on the Hill, to Kirk a rough white texture of stone; they progressed through the marshy grass to the cock-pit further down the slope, where Anne said: 'The past must have been cruel sometimes.' Kirk knew why but couldn't act; he wasn't sure of her. They passed the futuristic house at the bottom of the Hill, as full of bright rectangles as a Mondrian painting. 'If only,' Anne said, 'I could go back into the past.' She wasn't speaking to him, he knew; her hand was limp in his. He showed her Bidston Village: stone walls, old grey houses, a little shop, a lamp-post before the church porch, the occasional car roaring by unheeding. 'It'll be swallowed up by a council estate any day now,' he told her. 'Poor village,' she said, but it wasn't there for her. 'Anne darling,' he said; the first time. She rushed into her eyes. 'If we go up to Caldy Village we can have tea on the lawn. If you'd like to.'

'Oh, darling,' she told the countryside, 'you made the effort for me!'

He led her through the woods to Caldy Hill; clusters of leaves hung aloft like clouds. From the rocks, carved with initials which perhaps had survived their authors, she took in the sunset; Kirk visualised Hilbre Island far below in the Dee, holding its place in the waters, if it were not Hilbre which forged forward through a static medium. At last they returned to the bench to join a presumed series of lovers before sunsets. If only he could tell her why he'd brought her here—to exorcise Shirley; Shirley, the student from his course who'd come with him one evening to Caldy, the only haunt of his which freed him to enter the glittering water, the distant trees on the edge of

the universe. He'd cast his gaze into the feathers of colour laid along the horizon for minutes before he'd slid one arm round Shirley's shoulders and leaned across to kiss her. For a moment she had stared at him; then she'd burst out laughing. No, he couldn't tell Anne; she might resent this substitution; besides, he didn't feel ready to trust such a secret to her. He covered her face; her eyes closed.

Among the trees the shadows shaped the passing of a breeze. 'Sometimes I wonder where you go when you dream,' said Anne. 'Do I go into the past, do you think? Just now I feel I'm in a dream. A lovely dream.'

'Yes, I know.'

Anne watched her feet flicker through the bars of shadow like a film about to stop. 'I wish you knew what to say to girls,' she said.

A colossal green leper stood on the horizon; the Liver Clock, flaking off each second from the future. Kirk paced the bare wood of the Woodside landing-stage and peered at the bilious lights floating with the current. He *did* know what to say to girls, it was simply that he couldn't often verbalise; he sought peace, not to strain for words. What about his letters to Adrienne? But of course writing in French was different; to declare love in a language other than your own was like placing it in quotes—you weren't emotionally committed. Adrienne. No, Anne; he loved Anne; was he still flinching from Shirley's laughter? But his hand was groping in his pocket for Adrienne's letter; if he must exorcise her too before he could reach Anne, then he would. Hurriedly he stuffed back the other letter with the note attached and placed the envelope on the stone bench, perhaps hoping that it would blow away. 'My dearest Kirk—I was so glad to hear that you intend to come to Paris. I hope you will be able to ——— the money (decades of pockets had erased that word: 'gather,' if he recalled correctly). If you could find a job here—' No, that was enough; he settled himself on the stone bench, finding new areas of cold, fighting cramp. Time might have frozen on this concrete square like a film; no direct sunlight told the time of day. Victoria Station—No, that took him back before Anne—or afterward. The light behind his memories went out. Anne had gone. He could remember his love for Anne, like a film he'd once seen. 'I love you, Anne,' he whispered to the dust. And, jerked out of sequence, their last scene lit up in his memory.

A pub on the approach to the Pier Head; lights like inverted hanging wineglasses; maritime prints of outward-bound ships; from one table a rush

of laughter; Anne sitting chin on hand, sipping a vodka. 'What will you do eventually, Kirk?' That could mean anything; he chose one meaning. 'I hope I'll make London sometime in the future,' he said, Paris forgotten; after all, he mightn't be equipped to earn a living there, and he'd never even met Adrienne. 'I hope you do,' Anne said. 'And please come and see me in Southend. You remember how to reach me? But until you do, you will write to me, won't you?'

'Of course I will. Do you mind them typed? I type faster than I can write.'

'Oh, don't. I want them in your writing.'

'All right.' The bell for closing time pealed between them. Kirk helped her don the jacket of the suit she'd worn for him; he didn't look down at his own. They left without speaking, struggling through the maze of tables from which a girl collected glasses of soap-suds. The night was chill; a drunk yelled after them and gesticulated, almost overbalancing. As they waited at the traffic-lights on the last stretch to the Pier Head, Anne gripped Kirk's arm. They stepped on the disused railway track between the cobbles and Anne turned: 'Kirk, I love you. Please—' He knew what she was forbidden to say; he was on the edge of acting out so many movies that he'd seen. The lights blazed down into his face. 'Je t'adore,' he said. It was the best he could do; he didn't know whether it was enough, he felt the light fading. But at once she looked up at the clock; he couldn't be sure if she'd even heard.

They had crossed the river; it rushed by unobstructed. As they climbed the Woodside ramp, past a newspaper flattened on the grey wall like a poster, Anne said: 'I can't pay for a taxi and I suppose you can't either Kirk?' 'I can't,' he told her; he didn't like to add that she had cleaned him out. 'Oh, Kirk, five minutes to my last bus,' she mourned. They kissed feverishly in the bus shelter, then on the platform, beneath averted eyes; then the engine snarled. Anne moved up the aisle; Kirk's hand clung limply to the pole. Suddenly she cried his name and running back, pressed something into his hand: 'My darling, your glasses, I almost forgot!' The bell rang. The bus pulled out. Anne waved as she was drawn away, blurred, was gone. A light was carried off into the night. He couldn't see. He struggled with the case, opened it, fumbled on his glasses; but the bus had turned a corner, the street was dark, cold, empty.

His glasses brought the pavement closer, sharp as the sights of a delirium —but why go on? If only that was how it had ended!—on one last luminous image which he gave himself of a tiny Anne borne waving away around the corner. The pain of parting was more bearable than the dull ache of disillusionment, which itself was preferable to the all-embracing horror of disorientation. But his memories were headlong in their flight from happiness; already they'd rushed through the Liverpool coach station at Edge Lane, bypassing a tableau of a man with a hose and the grey trails of buses like snail-tracks, and had dumped him on the coach to Southend, his first visit to Anne. Penniless, he'd sold his typewriter; the girls in the downstairs flat on Smithdown Road had complained of its nocturnal tapping—not that he cared, but Anne had said she wanted him to write. And allowing for the remainder of the month he'd still realised enough to pay his fare to Southend. He'd written to Anne two days ago to herald his arrival, but she hadn't replied yet. The letter from Adrienne lay in his flat unanswered. But he knew how to reach Anne, and next week he'd be back to class and Shirley.

The doubts commenced on the edge of Southend; as in a film, he glanced up and gazed out across the first laps of sand. *Had* it been a holiday romance? Had she called him 'darling' in the casual London way? Had she declared her love to intensify their parting, to create a scene for her album? He wished he'd waited for a reply to his letter. If she were eager to show him the door, if there were someone else sitting in the front room waiting for him to leave, it would annihilate him. Trivial, trivial, his future self scoffed on the bench, but doubt now was all he could trust. He willed it to dissipate like morning mist over Southend: the amazingly protracted pier, thrusting entertainment seaward to hold steady on the water, faceted yet featureless as time; the sea unfolding sibilantly on the sand; the flowers bordering the streets; the street-names elevated on poles like varieties of flowers. Flowers for love or for a wedding. A wedding night on Mount Pleasant, street of Liverpool's hotels and 'of all the Mr and Mrs Smiths of the world', as he'd told Anne. Having wavered and chosen a hotel, they found the desk-clerk suspicious; but Anne in her white skirt looked too innocent to be guilty. The desk-clerk smiled, perhaps at some remembered escapade, and unlocked the double room. As soon as the door had closed Kirk stroked Anne's hair, found the fastening of her dress, opened it and led her to the bed. Gently he pushed her back and lifted her legs onto the

coverlet. As he began to draw her dress down from her shoulders he realised she was trembling. He glanced at her face. She was shaking with laughter.

A girl laughed in the dry square; Kirk awoke. He kept his eyes closed; he was afraid to open them on tears. 'Don't be long for heaven's sake, the bus must be due,' said the young man in the coach queue. High heels clicked away. How could he have dreamed that of Anne? Of course they'd never been to a hotel; he'd never seen a girl naked; but if it had been Anne, she'd never have done that to him. She couldn't do that to me, he told himself, passing an old man wheeling his wife along Southend promenade. And he turned up the side street leading to Arlen Street, where Anne lived.

Down the blazing street came two figures, arms about each other. Even with his glasses and in the piercing sunlight, he could not make out their faces. Kirk's fist clenched in his pocket. They came closer; a young bearded man strolling with a girl Kirk had never seen before. His fist opened, already feeling Anne's fingers between his, and he ran to the end of the street, to Arlen Street, and was confronted by a desert of waste ground.

That image was clearest of all: the humps of spewed earth, the ruts and folds of bulldozer treads like the gums of a toothless mouth, a dog urinating brightly in the sunlight against the notice-board which claimed the wasteland; the abandonment, the disorientation. Kirk moaned. He must have been mistaken. He stumbled back toward the promenade and overtook the couple; he put his hand on the girl's warm shoulder to make them turn and to feel a human body. 'I'm wrong for Arlen Street, aren't I?' he pleaded. 'Can you put me right?'

'Allen Street you want, mate,' suggested the girl's escort.

'No, *A-r-l-e-n*,' Kirk spelled desperately, hearing Anne say: 'Like Michael Arlen, you know.'

'Wrong town, I'd say,' the girl broke in. 'You're not from round here, are you?'

'Are *you* from round here?' Kirk caught at the possibility.

'I'm half-a-mile up the front, mate, and Anne's in the next street.' Kirk's stomach twisted; then he saw that the other was referring to the girl on his arm. Kirk moved away, almost fleeing; sand stung his cheeks. As he

reached the promenade they called behind him: 'There's a map up the prom if you don't believe us.'

Of course no Arlen Street was noted on the map. Chaos churned in Kirk like the breeze-blown sand. He shuffled toward a group of shops; beside one a staircase led beneath a dead electric sign to a basement coffee-bar. He took one step toward it; Anne might be there—then a pang shot up from his stomach, blocking his way. He no longer wanted to meet her. He wanted to go home. He made for the bus-station, past inverted chairs defending café tables, signs on stalls: 'Novelty Hats', 'Torture Thro' the Ages'; the illuminations hung lifeless in sunlight, and 'The Longest PIER in the World' had been drained of all but a pink tinge. The next bus was for London; but anything to escape Southend.

The sight of Victoria Station as it had once been, movie posters vast against the sky, actresses of cardboard, drivers sipping coffee from paper cups beside a photo booth (of course, thought future Kirk, he should have known then) was superimposed over the sounds of the concrete square, like a film whose dubbing emphasises its unreality; on the stone bench Kirk felt the world receding, revealing itself as his hallucination. If he opened his eyes he might find figures mouthing like fish, their dialogue continuing unsynchronised—while in his memory, more vivid, more intense and more convincing, he found he had three hours to wait for the Liverpool coach. He lost himself in the night. Presently, the lights of a cinema blazed; the film was *Vertigo*. No, it was too cruel. But he refused to tire himself for three hours in pursuit of a memory when he could be grappling with it. The film had started; the camera moved alluringly through the shadows of a nightclub, and suddenly, bright in a blonde aura, there was Kim Novak. Kirk watched wide-eyed; then he shook and buried his face in his hands. Inexorably the film continued. A giant kiss filled the screen: flaps of skin engulfing each other like the jaws of cannibal snails, thought Kirk, still shaking. Beneath the kiss the audience rustled and coughed; neither was real. Abruptly Kirk stood up. Above him in the circle a couple took the cue; as they stood, silhouetted on the fan of light which was Kim Novak, they kissed luminously. Kirk spun about, rammed into a vacated seat and stumbled blindly out. At Victoria Station a man staggered into the bar, stuttering that life was a bad joke played on humanity, and Kirk directed him out with such force that even this man's fervour failed. Kirk found a stained table, its plastic top decorated with linked brown rings like a

Chinese puzzle, arranged his plate of sandwiches and glass of Coca-Cola and threw his coat on the next chair. Before his slumped coat stood a half-empty glass, stained with drink like dismal clouds. A waitress somnolently sponged the tables, shovelling the debris onto a single plate as if to feed a dog; she saw the half-drained glass and left it for Kirk's girlfriend, whose place he must be keeping with his coat. Oh God, he said, realising. He wondered what he'd do until the coach arrived; sit and stare at the bare bar, people the seat beside him and weep if necessary; another drunk, they'd think.

The coach seemed stalled for ever; the air-conditioning insinuated a faint nauseating whine into Kirk's ears. Muted conversations hemmed him in as at a sick-bed. Just before he leapt up and screamed, the coach pulled out. He couldn't sleep; Anne was there. He stared out with burning eyes at cardboard houses exhibited beneath sodium lighting, then at last the first unlit road where the headlights wiped darkness from vignettes of lonely mansions, caught scurrying small forms and brushed over mysteriously empty cars in laybys, and suddenly he remembered: he could question Anne's Auntie Ethel and discover Anne's address!—if Anne hadn't warned her in advance. He gripped the stone bench to absorb its chill and be weighed down by what reality was left, but already he was flying helpless through the Pier Head on the Sunday afternoon, past old women screaming at old women screaming the Gospel, youths jeering as they aimed from the roof of the police station, unwashed waiting children dragged along by unwashed parents, over the worn boards littered with cigarette-packets and knot-holes surrounded by arrested ripples, onto the bus to Bidston, where the 'No Spitting' sign had received the obvious amendment, and out into the sun; for a moment the leaf-shadows which strayed about the pavement were the dapplings of light on the Dee beneath Caldy Hill. He strode toward the house, but his steps faltered. The memorable cry of the gate's hinges was silent, the empty socket of the bell-push was somehow filled by a new screw. The door opened.

A girl of Kirk's age smiled and turned her head shyly; she was not Anne. 'Could I speak to Mrs Ethel..?' More than that he didn't know.

'I'm an Ethel but I'm not married yet! Who told you I was?' She wavered so near the edge of shrillness that she must be compensating; she looked

directly at him, and he saw why. One side of her face was covered by a purple birth mark.

He caught at the burning wood of the door-frame and managed not to fall; he clutched the concrete bench and fell, knowing what was to come. His mouth opened and forced deeper into chaos, like a kiss. 'You don't have relations—in Southend?'

'Why yes, my sister's there.'

'Married with a daughter?' The door-frame flaked beneath his fingers like a block of salt; the grit of the concrete bench coated his hands—he was merging into it, a memorial to chaos.

'Good Lord no, not yet! She's younger than I am, she's staying with our friends down there. Though I do hope she will be married one day. Me too if it comes to that. Did you meet her on holiday? I think she's got her eye on our friends' son. She didn't tell you about me, did she? You must come in and have a cup of tea.'

'I have to go. It's the wrong address,' Kirk faltered and almost ran from the garden. On the pavement he looked back. She was staring at him sadly. He closed his eyes and stepped into the road. She must think he'd fled the birthmark, but there was nothing he could say. A car swept by on each side of him, and he remembered: thus she would lose her husband. He beat at the wake of the car and staggered gasping to the pavement. What could he say? She'd think he was insane. At last, from the shadow of the trees, he glanced back. The door was closed.

The bus back to Woodside felt more solid now than when he'd caught it, perhaps draining its solidity from the concrete bench, in which, like everything, he'd once again ceased to believe. As he was carried from Bidston to his flat he began to suspect how all was staged for him. That night he prowled, even though term began next day, until the night-rain lashed him back; he started at laughing girls on motor-cycles borne by a V-shaped spray, he stared into the black hypnotic mirrors of the flagstones, seeking Anne, who was nowhere. He couldn't understand; he was no scientist or mystic; the knowledge that Anne had never been filled him with a doubt of everything he'd taken for granted. At last he sank into bed and was whirled into sleep, dreaming of Anne so vividly that her smile, her voice, her scent, her warmth were more real than the jagged alarm, the slits of light in his room and the hall, and the two letters on the hall table.

One he knew: his only letter to Anne. A blotched grid ('No Such Address', 'Gone Away') had encroached on his careful writing, and beside it someone had scribbled: 'Arlen Street not built yet!!' No, it wasn't possible; if he hadn't been with Anne for a week, where had he been? Had he strode round Liverpool arm in arm with air, talking to himself? Then he chilled; without his glasses he couldn't have known if the crowds had edged away from him and branded him insane. But no, this betrayed Anne. He'd held her, felt her tongue, her body; no ghost could be so solid. Or if her body had been illusion—He didn't want to think; he rushed upstairs, the letters crushed in his hand, and wrested open the wardrobe door. The brown back of the wardrobe was still solid. He found the shirt into whose pocket he'd thrust the photographs Anne had given him. The pocket was empty. As he fought the nylon folds a hint of Anne's perfume seemed to touch the air. He lifted the shirt and inhaled; no perfume—only a trace of his own sweat. He slumped on the bed. Before him lay the ruthless grid. His hand crept toward it. No, don't! he cried on the concrete bench. But already he'd torn the letter to shreds, and on the bench his hand went limp in his pocket, its fingers slackly touching the other letter, Adrienne's.

On the bed he opened the letter; the writing on the envelope was not Adrienne's, but the postmark he knew. Inside was a folded note in French and another envelope, addressed to him by Adrienne. He didn't feel equal to the French; he wrenched open the second envelope. 'My dearest Kirk—you have not yet written, and I have been thinking; I would not want you to come to Paris without knowing all about me. I should have said before. I cannot get about so well, that is what I want to say. You have seen my photograph and I hope you like it, but maybe you did not guess that I have to use a wheelchair—' Trembling, Kirk laid the letter on the tangled sheet and unfolded the note. It was from Adrienne's father: she had been rushing to post this letter to Kirk; the road had been busy, and when the wheelchair had overturned, the car had been unable to brake—On the bench he stuffed the letter back into his pocket, certain once more that all was illusion. Everything was too pat. Adrienne's death was the ending of a movie, Auntie Ethel was the stock sympathiser with romance, Anne was his true love—it was all too scripted for words, he thought, not realising that only life dares stage such coincidences. When he left the flat as if stepping from one dream to another, he was overwhelmed by unreality: twigs intricately depicted on the sky; a milk-van rounding the corner on cue; a train drawing its whistle

along the skyline—you couldn't tell him all that wasn't staged to impress him. By his own mind, of course: a brilliant hallucination. No wonder he felt sick on the bus to college; his body was fighting to correlate the illusion of movement with the conviction of stasis, as in a Cinerama film. The college corridors were prolonged into the impossible perspectives of a surrealist painting. In the classroom, between the black speckled plane of the blackboard and the canted dim reflection of the chatting groups, he was amazed by the talent that had contrived the improvised conversations: six separate improvisations, all for him. Then Shirley entered through the doorway, left. He beckoned her over, anxious to know what lines she'd been given. As she approached he lost control; he burst out laughing. 'How very intriguing,' she said, turning away; she shouldn't have said that, he'd have liked his moment of triumph. When the lecture began—

No, that was enough. There was no need to recall how absurd he'd found the idea of being taught by an hallucination, how he'd fled Liverpool and the ghost of Anne in every street, taken refuge in London where at least he'd never seen her—for he could only fall through his memories of her into a void; if she had not been real, how could he trust any evidence presented by his senses? Yet he was troubled to recall that he'd had the illusion of starving in London until he'd taken a job on the buses, a choice whose source he couldn't determine. Sometimes he felt that he'd dreamed Anne, and sometimes, on the rim of the void, that she'd dreamed him. If so, she'd abandoned him to decades swept bare as by a night-wind, walks through streets where light existed only to carve shadows, glimpses of couples, always young, meeting outside cinemas which he would never enter. By now the void was visible through her; soon she would tatter and fade like mist, and the void would close in. He was dying.

'I'm ever so sorry I was so late,' Anne said. 'You know I don't like travelling in London. I just had to wait for one of those lovely taxis.'

Kirk's eyelids trembled. The young man with the sports coat was no longer alone; Anne was with him, swinging one leg and clapping her hands as the Liverpool coach entered the square. She wore her cotton frock, each flower as Kirk remembered it; it was like emerging from darkness into sunlight. For a moment he thought he'd gone mad. 'I'll be leaving before you know,' Anne told the young man, 'it's ever so sad.' And instantly the continuity clarified. The young man's hand covered a flower. For a second Kirk was

ready to fight him for Anne. But he knew he was powerless. They had yet to meet.

The coach dozed to a halt and the queue shuffled forward. Kirk stood up and almost fell; his stone legs had disintegrated. He dragged his case through the concrete dust. Anne's escort lifted her luggage onto the rack as she seated herself behind the driver. An old couple sat in the seat behind Anne; Kirk knew he must sit there. He groaned; his toes scrabbled like imprisoned insects. The old couple conferred over the view across the aisle and moved to the seat opposite. Kirk plunged into the place they had vacated. He struggled with his case, and a hand took the handle from him. 'Allow me,' said the young man. Anne smiled and waited until the case was safe. Crushed, Kirk sank into his place.

The driver slammed his gate. From the front seat came an outburst of confused and hurried leave-taking, silenced by a kiss. Kirk closed his eyes. When he opened them at the first jerk of the bus, he met Anne's gaze. But it was merely passing over him as she craned to wave to the young man. She hadn't recognised Kirk; she couldn't. The bus rushed through the pale planed streets and Anne regarded herself in a pocket mirror. Had her ghost cast a reflection? He would never know. It was unimportant; here she was before him in the flesh; he had only to lean forward and speak, the one thing he couldn't do. Though he knew her love she had never met him; she was a stranger. And he no longer trusted strangers.

Half-an-hour later, in a landscape of lopped trees grey as the pedestals of monuments, he leaned forward. One of Anne's fingers followed the curved corner of her book, lifting to turn; the golden sunlit down on her forearm was warm as her arm in his. His hand lost its grip between the headrests; his lips collapsed together as he fell back, aching. His breath proved the window. Something should happen to bring them together, but he knew nothing would; she wouldn't drop the book, this time it was up to him to plunge into the past, to reinstate reality. 'Excuse me—' he cried, thrust forward by the brake. Anne's face appeared in the gap; her eyes were wide; she smiled encouragement. Perhaps she saw him as a cache of memories, of the past she loved. His mouth worked. 'Do you—do you know where we are?' he stammered. 'I think we're in Stratford,' she said, and returned to her book as he muttered thanks. Oh, God, he thought, she was close enough to touch and yet he'd lost her for ever.

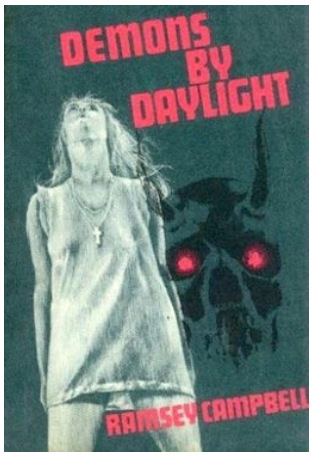
Metal glinted in the sky; a steel curve formed on the horizon and passed above them with a sigh. The streets of the new Stratford were lifeless: slabs of concrete left to whiten in the sun; the silver panels of the meal dispensers flashed cold as scalpels as they passed. A love song ebbed from a portable TV; an athlete padded alongside the coach for a few seconds before falling back. For Kirk he, at least, had not been robbed by time of familiarity. It was time which had thrust between them, wearing out his body, setting Anne before him like a fragile perfect doll. Yet for a week they had wandered outside time. If only he could release them once more—

Then he thought he knew. Firm as it had felt, it had not been Anne's body he had held to him; it had been their spirits, essences—he couldn't find the right expression—which had met, somewhere outside time. Their bodies were the clocks which marked the end of their love. Destroy their bodies and they would be reunited. But could he take the final step? He answered himself: what other step could he take? He stood up tottering behind Anne; each limit of him was trembling as if ready to release him. Ahead green grassy banks streamed toward him and were gone, like time; beyond the grey stumps started into sight. 'Anne,' he whispered. She glanced up from her book, puzzled. He clutched the head-rest; if only he could touch her, just her hair! 'Anne, I know you don't know me—' Her mouth opened. He stammered out: 'We met fifty years ago! You went back into the past somehow and we met on a coach, maybe it was here—your case was falling off the rack and I helped you—I love you, Anne!' It's no use, he thought. Her eyes widened; her pink parted lips moved—and Kirk stumbled forward, drove his elbow into the driver's face and wrenched the wheel hard over.

When they'd asked the last question Anne lay back and tried to sleep. She hated the hospital ward, the glass panels round each bed as if to enclose a vacuum, the curtains which drew together at the touch of a button, the beds which could turn traitor and convert into stretchers within a minute; she hoped she would dream of the past. The doctor had disliked her being questioned, but she'd insisted on the facts. They told her of the man who'd caused the crash by attacking the driver, killing himself and concussing the driver and several passengers, including Anne. They said he had spoken to her, but she didn't remember; one never remembers the events before concussion. They showed her a photograph of the old man, but she'd never seen him; so they left her to rest. And yet—Somehow, as she drifted, she felt she'd met him; somehow she referred this to the week she'd lost under

concussion. Poor old man, she thought, he must have been miserable to do what he did; mad with his memories, perhaps, now all destroyed. She hoped his last thoughts had been of something beautiful. And quietly, as she hovered on the edge of dream, she began to weep.

The Franklyn Paragraphs



Written In: 1967
First published in *Demons By Daylight*, 1973
Also published in: *Cold Print*

> *Errol Undercliffe is a Brichester writer whose work has only recently begun to reach a wider public. Apparently a recluse, he often wrote for the Brichester fanzine* Spirited*, whose editors, however, never met him. Rumour has it that he spoke on a literary panel at the Brichester Fantasy Convention in 1965, but a photograph taken of him on that occasion has yet to be traced. In 1967, aged about 30, he disappeared after an attempt at amateur psychical research. His stories, most of them contemporary treatments of traditional macabre themes, have been edited into an omnibus collection,* Photographed by Lightning*, and the Korean film director Harry Chang, an Undercliffe admirer of long standing, has completed a triptych film of his stories,* Red Dreams.

The disappearance of Errol Undercliffe in 1967 from his flat in Lower Brichester was not widely reported. The little speculation provoked by the mystery was soon resolved by the belief that Undercliffe had 'disappeared' in search of publicity. While he has not reappeared, his public seems still to be waiting for him to produce himself out of a hat. At the time I hinted in print that I could supply evidence of something more sinister, but I fear that the general branding of Undercliffe as charlatan was sufficiently persuasive to dissuade me from publishing evidence in case Undercliffe reappeared and objected to my making public letters written privately to me. By now, however, I should be more than pleased if Undercliffe declared both his absence and his last letter a hoax.

Undercliffe first wrote me in 1965, when my first book had just become available from Brichester Central Library. Typically, he enclosed a cutting from the letter-column of the *Brichester Herald*; under the heading 'Can

Ghost Stories be Libellous?' one 'Countryman' had written: 'I have recently perused a book of ghost stories by a Mr J. Ramsey Campbell, mainly located in Brichester. Mr Campbell seems to look upon the citizens of our town as either witches, warlocks, or illiterate "country folks". The advertising for the book makes much of the fact that the author is still an infant; since this is obvious from the contents, I would scarcely have thought it necessary to advertise the fact. I would suggest that before he writes another such book Mr Campbell should (1) visit Brichester, where he has clearly never set foot, and (2) grow up.' And so on. I could have replied that on the basis of my several visits to Brichester I didn't consider it the sort of town where I'd care to spend a night; but I find this kind of letter-column duel a little childish, and didn't feel disposed to join swords or even pens. For the record, these days Brichester has an impressively mundane surface, but I still sense that it may crack. When I and Kirby McCauley passed through the area in 1965, a month or so before Undercliffe's first letter, I was disturbed to be unable to find the turn-off to Severnford and Brichester, and the groups of youths inert in the sun outside a shack-like cinema in Berkeley (showing, oddly enough, Jerry Lewis' one horror film) proved less than helpful. Hours later, after dark, we were directed by a roundabout policeman, but without conferring we sneaked around the roundabout—only to find ourselves somehow on the road originally indicated and to stay at an inn whose sign we discovered in the dawn to be that of a goat!

However, I digress. I quote the letter from the *Herald* at length because it seems to me to demonstrate some aspects of Undercliffe's character; not that he wrote it (at least I shouldn't think so), but he did enclose it with his first letter to me, though it is hardly the sort of enclosure most of us would choose when initiating a correspondence. However, Undercliffe's sense of humour was wry—some might call it cynical or cruel. I'm inclined to believe it was the product of a basic insecurity, from what little I know of his life. I never visited him, and his letters were rarely self-revelatory (though the first of the batch here published is more so than he might have wished). Most of them were first drafts of stories, signed and dated; he kept a copy of every letter he wrote—these were carefully filed in his flat—and several of the incidents which he described to me in the two years of our correspondence turned up virtually verbatim in his short stories. In

particular the description of the disused station in *The Through Train* was lifted bodily from his letter to me of 20 November 1966.

If this says little about the man himself, I can only maintain that for the rest of us Errol Undercliffe was the Mr Arkadin of the horror-story world. 'Errol Undercliffe' was almost certainly not his christened name. His refusal to provide biographical details was not as notorious as J. D. Salinger's, but it was fully as obsessive. He seems to have been educated in or near Brichester (see the first letter here) but I cannot trace his school, nor the friend whose engagement party he describes. I never saw a photograph of him. Perhaps he thought the aura of mystery with which he surrounded himself carried over to his stories; perhaps, again, he was bent on preserving his own isolation. If so, he served himself ill as far as his final ordeal was concerned; he had nobody to whom he could turn.

When I went down to Undercliffe's flat on hearing that he'd disappeared, I was less surprised than saddened by the experience. The Lower Brichester area, as I've mentioned elsewhere, is the sort of miniature cosmopolis one finds in most major English towns: three-storey houses full of errant lodgers, curtains as varied as flags at a conference but more faded, the occasional smashed pane, the frequent furtive watchers. Somebody was tuning a motorcycle in Pitt Street, and the fumes drifted into Undercliffe's flat through a crack in the pane and clouded the page in his typewriter. The landlady was making ready to dispose of this, together with Undercliffe's books and other possessions, as soon as the rent gave out at the end of the month. I finally persuaded her to let me handle the disposal, after a good deal of wrangling and invocation of August Derleth (who'd never published Undercliffe), the Arts Council (who'd never heard of him, I imagine) and others. Having ushered her out at last, well aware that she'd be prepared to search me before I left the house, I examined the flat. The wardrobe and chest-of-drawers contained two suits, some shirts and so forth, none of which could have looked particularly stylish at an engagement party. The bed commanded a fine view of an arachnidial crack in the ceiling (clearly that crack which 'suddenly, with a horrid lethargy, detached itself from the plaster and fell on Peter's upturned face' in *The Man Who Feared to Sleep*). The wallpaper had a Charlotte Perkins Gilman look; once Undercliffe complained that 'such an absurd story should have used up an inspiration which I could work into one of my best tales'. The window looked out on the fuming motorcycle, now stuck stubbornly in first gear, and its fuming

owner; at night I suppose Undercliffe, seated at his typewriter before the window, might have waved to the girl slipping off her slip in the flat across the street, and I carried on his neighbourly gesture, though without much success. On the sill outside his window cigarette stubs had collected like bird droppings; he tended to cast these into the night, disliking the sight of a brimming ashtray. He'd go through a packet per thousand words, he once told me; he'd tried chewing-gum once, but this drew his fillings, and he was terrified of the dentist (cf. *The Drill*). All this, of course, is trivial, but I needed—still need—distraction. I'd already followed Undercliffe's search through the first three letters printed here, and that page still in the typewriter—a letter to me, probably the last thing he wrote—told of what he found. I removed it, unwillingly enough, and left; the landlady let it go. Later I arranged for transportation of the contents of the flat. The books—which seemed to be Undercliffe's treasured possessions, books of horror stories bought with the profits from his horror stories, a sad and lonely vicious circle—are now held in trust by the British Science Fiction Association library; the rest is in storage. I wish more than ever that Undercliffe would come forward to claim them.

Undercliffe's first letter to me (15 October 1965) contains a passage which in retrospect seems informed by a macabre irony. 'The implicit theme of your story '*The Insects from Shaggai*' he writes, 'is interesting, but you never come to grips with the true point of the plot: the horror-story author who is sceptical of the supernatural and finally is faced with overwhelming evidence of its reality. What would be his reaction? Certainly not to write of "the lurid glow which shines on the razor lying on the table before me"!! This is as unlikely as the ending of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. I'd be interested to hear whether you yourself believe in what you write. For myself, I think the fact that I take great pains to check material on the supernatural here in our Central Library is eloquent enough. By the way, have you come across Roland Franklyn's *We Pass from View*? The author is a local man who has some quite arresting theories about reincarnation and the like.'

Which brings us to Franklyn and *We Pass from View*, in themselves as mysterious as the fate of Undercliffe; but I suspect that the two mysteries are interdependent, that one explains the other—if indeed one wishes to probe for explanation. Before discussing Franklyn, however, I'd like to note some of Undercliffe's work; I feel obliged to bring it to the notice of a wider public. His favourites of his own work were *The Drains* (the blood of a

bygone murder drips from the cold tap), *The Carved Desk* (the runes carved on what was once a Druid tree call up something which claws at the ankles of anyone foolish enough to sit down to write), and *The Drifting Face* (never published: originally intended for the ill-fated second issue of *Alien Worlds*, it now cannot be traced). I favour his more personal, less popular work: *The Windows in the Fog* (in which the narrator's glimpses of a girl across the street mount to an obsessive pitch until he accosts her one night and rebuffed, murders her), *The Steeple on the Hill* (where a writer fond of lonely walks is followed by the members of a cult, is eventually drawn within their circle and becomes the incarnation of their god), and *The Man Who Feared to Sleep*, which lent its title (*Peur de Sommeil* in France) to Undercliffe's best collection, under the imprint of that excellent publisher who rediscovered such writers as Purse-warden and Sebastian Knight and made again available Robert Blake's legendary collection *The Stairs in the Crypt*. It is amusing to note that the entire contents of Undercliffe's collection—including the title story, which is surely a study of insanity—listed under 'Supernatural Phenomena' in the H. W. Wilson *Short Story Index* (in an earlier volume than that which placed my own *Church in High Street* under 'Church Entertainments', making it sound like a parish farce or a Britten mystery play). Undercliffe was latterly working on a script for Delta Film Productions, but producer Harry Nadler reports that this was never completed; nor was his story *Through the Zone of the Colossi*, a metaphysical piece based on a reference in my *Mine on Yuggoth* coupled with material from *We Pass from View*.

Which brings me back to the necessity of discussing Franklyn's book, a duty which I fear I've been avoiding. I've never seen the book, but I have little desire to do so. I refrained from consulting Brichester Central Library's copy when I went to Undercliffe's flat; I suppose I could obtain this through the National Central Library, though I suspect that in fact the copy (like all others, apparently) has mysteriously disappeared.

Although, as Undercliffe points out, *We Pass from View* displays marked affinities with the Cthulhu Mythos in certain passages, such Lovecraft scholars as Derleth, Lin Carter, Timothy d'Arch Smith and J. Vernon Shea can supply no information on the book. I understand that it was published in 1964 by the 'True Light Press', Brichester; references in Undercliffe's letters suggest that it was a duplicated publication, originally circulated in card covers but probably bound by libraries taking copies. I have not been able

to discover where, if anywhere, it was on sale. An odd rumour reached me recently that almost the entire edition was stolen from the 'True Light Press'—actually the house of Roland Franklyn—and has not been heard of since; perhaps destroyed, but by whom?

Here is the little information I've obtained from various sources. The British National Bibliography gives the following entry:

> 129.4—Incarnation and reincarnation FRANKLYN, Ronald We pass from View. Brichester, True Light Press, 9/6. Jan 1964. 126 p. 22 cm.

However, the Cumulative Book Index, which lists all books published in English, does not acknowledge the book; at least, neither I nor the staff of Liverpool's Picton Library can trace the reference.

While correlating notes I was surprised to turn up in my commonplace book the following review, which might have been copied from the *Times Literary Supplement*:

> PSEUDOPODDITIES
>
> The last few decades have seen the emergence of many disturbing pseudo-philosophies, but *We Pass from View* must rank lowest. The author, Roland Franklyn, has less idea of style than most of his kind; however, the ideas behind the writing are expressed with less ambiguity than one might wish. His basic thesis seems to be that the number of souls in the universe is limited, by some illegitimate application of the conservation of energy principle, and that humanity must therefore acknowledge an infinite number of simultaneous incarnations. The last chapter, *Toward the True Self*, is a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the theory, concluding that the 'true self' is to be found 'outside space', and that each human being is merely a facet of his 'self, which is itself able to experience all its incarnations simultaneously but unable to control them. There is a suggestion of Beckett here (particularly *L'Innomable*), and Mr Franklyn has infused enough unconscious humour into many passages to cause hilarity when the book was read aloud at a party. But a book which advocates the use of drugs to achieve fulfilment of black-magic rites is worth attention not so much as humour (and certainly not as it was intended) as a sociological phenomenon.

Laughter at a party, indeed! I still find that remark rather frightening. What copy was being read aloud? The *TLS* review copy, perhaps, but in that case what happened to it? Like so much in this affair, the end fades into mystery. I doubt that many indignant letters replied to the review; those that were written probably weren't printable. In 1966, I heard vaguely of a book called *How I Discovered my Infinite Self* by 'An Initiate', but whether it was ever published I don't know.

Undercliffe quoted several passages from *We Pass from View* which, though I find them faintly distasteful, I had better include. I still have all of Undercliffe's letters; some day I may edit them into a memorial article for *The Arkham Collector*, but it seems in rather bad taste to write a memoir of a man who may still be alive somewhere. The letters printed here are, I think, essential.

In his letter of 2 November 1965 Undercliffe wrote: 'Here's a bizarre passage which might set you off on a short story. From the first page of *We Pass from View*: "The novice must remind himself always that the Self is infinite and that he is but one part of his Self, not yet aware of his other bodies and lives. REMIND YOURSELF on sleeping. REMIND YOURSELF on waking. *Above all, REMIND YOURSELF* when entering the First Stage of Initiation". As for this first stage, I've traced references later in the text, but nothing very lucid. Franklyn keeps mentioning "the aids" which seem to be drugs of some sort, usually taken under supervision of an "initiate" who chants invocations ("Ag'lak Sauron, Daoloth asgu'i, Eihort phul'aag"—that ought to ring a bell with you) and attempts to tap the novice's subconscious knowledge of his other incarnations. Not that I necessarily believe what Franklyn says, but it certainly gives you that sense of instability which all good horror stories should provide. I can't discover much about Franklyn. He seems in the last year or two to have drawn together a circle of young men who, from what I hear, visit Goatswood, Clotton, Temphill, the island beyond Severnford, and other places in which you're no doubt as interested as I am. I'd like to get in on the act.'

I replied that he surely didn't need drugs for inspiration and that, warnings from Dennis Wheatley aside, I didn't feel it was advisable to become involved in black magic. 'Experience makes the writer,' Undercliffe retorted. Subsequently he avoided direct quotation, but I gathered he had not joined Franklyn's circle; his own decision, I think. Then, in September

1966, when he was writing *The Crawling in the Attic* (I'd just started library work and sent him the manuscript of *The Stocking* to read, which he didn't like—'elaborately pointless'), he quoted the following:

> 'Today's psychologists are wrong about dreams coming from the subconscious mind. Dreams are the links between us and the experiences of our other incarnations. *We must be receptive to them*. TELL YOURSELF BEFORE YOU SLEEP THAT YOU WILL SEE BEYOND YOUR FACET. The initiate known as Yokh'khim, his name on Tond, came to me describing a dream of long tunnels in which he was pursued but could not see his body. After several sessions, he managed to see himself as a ball of hair rolling through the tunnel away from the Trunks in the Ooze. The ball was known on Tond as Yokh'khim. He has not attained the stage of Black Initiate and spends his time beyond his facet, having set aside all but the minimum of his life on Earth.'

I hadn't much to say to that except to suggest that Franklyn had plagiarised the 'Tond' reference, provoking Undercliffe to reply: 'Surely Franklyn has undermined your complacency enough to make complaints about copyright a little trivial. Anyway, no doubt he'd point out that you knew of Tond through your dreams.' I couldn't decide whether his tongue was in his cheek; I passed over his comment, and our correspondence fell off somewhat.

In February 1967 he quoted a passage which is significant indeed. 'What about a story of a writer who haunts his own books?' he suggested. 'Franklyn has a paragraph on ghosts: "The death of a body does not mean that the soul will leave it. This depends on whether there is an incarnation for it to pass into. If not, the body continues to be inhabited until it is destroyed. The initiate knows that Edgar Allan Poe's fear of premature burial was well-founded. If the death is violent, then it is more difficult than ever for the soul to leave. FOR HIS OWN SAFETY, THE INITIATE MUST INSIST ON CREMATION. Otherwise he will be hopelessly attracted back to Earth, and the burrowers of the core may drag off his body from the grave with him still in it to the feast of Eihort."'

Interesting, I said somewhat wearily. I was rather tired of this sort of verbal delirium. On 5 July 1967 Undercliffe reported that the Brichester Herald

had noted Franklyn's death. This meant little to me at the time. Then came the final sequence of letters.

7 Pitt Street
Lower Brichester, Glos
14 July 1967 1.03 a.m.
slightly intoxicated

Dear JRC:

Always this point at a party where the beer tastes like vomit. Pretty putrid party, actually. Friend of mine from school who got engaged and sent me an invite. Can't think why, I'd just about forgotten him myself, but I wanted to meet him again. Didn't get near. Great fat bluebottle of a woman he got engaged to pawing over him all the evening and wanting to be kissed, messily at that, whenever he tried to act the host. Good luck say I. So I had to make my own way round the conversations. I just don't know where he got them from. All bow ties and 'God, Bernard, surely you realise the novel is absolutely *dead*' and banging down tankards of ale which they'd bought to be all boys together, sloshing them over and making little lakes down these trestle tables in the Co-op Hall (another blow for the old town and the Brichester folks—our engaged friend kept patting his bluebottle and bellowing 'I had a wonderful childhood in Brichester, absolutely wonderful, they're fine people', no Palm Court for *him*). Whole place murky with smoke and some tin band playing in the fog. Hundreds of ashtrays surrounded by those pieces of ash like dead flies. Finally our friend fell to his feet to give thanks for 'all the superb presents', which didn't make me feel any more accepted, since I hadn't known it was done to bring one. I feel a little

Better. Repartee: the morning after. Beg pardon, I shouldn't have mentioned engagements and fiancées. Still, I'm sure you're better off. Writers always bloom better with elbow room. I have your letter by me. You're right, your last argument with your girlfriend in Lime Street Station cafeteria with bare tables, balls of cellophane and someone next to you trying not to listen—it'd never come off in print, even though it happened to you they'd be

sure to scream Graham Greene was here first. And then her calling down 'I love you' through the rain before her mother dragged her back from her window—yes, it's very poignant, but you'll have to rewrite before you can print. More on our wavelength, what you say about this other girl running out of your haunted Hornby Library in panic certainly sounds promising. You going to lock yourself in there overnight? I'd give a lot for a genuine supernatural experience.

There was this idiot at the party wanting to know what I did. Horror stories I said. Should have seen him blanch. 'Why do you write those things?' he asked as if he'd caught me picking my nose. 'For the money,' I said. A young couple sliding down the wall behind us laughed. Great, an audience I thought. No doubt if I'd said I wasn't joking they'd have laughed harder. 'No, but seriously,' said this poor man's F. R. Leavis (you couldn't write for anything as base as money, you see) 'would you not agree that the writer is a sort of Christ figure who suffers in order to cohere his suffering for the reader's benefit?' The extent of his suffering was his bank manager calling him on his overdraft, I'll bet. 'And don't you think the horror story coheres (I wasn't cohering myself by that time) an experience?' 'Are you telling me you believe in what you write?' he demanded as if it'd been *Mein Kampf*. 'You don't think I'd write something in which I didn't believe?' I retorted, carefully placing the preposition. The young couple left; the show was over. He stalked off to tell Bernard about me.

At least the streets were clean and empty. Remarkable girl in the flat across the street. You should come down. Anyway, to bed. Tomorrow to work on *Through the Zone of the Colossi* and check the library.

Best,
EU

Pitt of Hell
Lowest Brichester, Glos
14 July 1967
later!

Dear JRC:

I don't normally write twice in a day. Today's events, however, are too important to let fade. I have had my experience. It will unquestionably form into a short story, so forgive me this first draft. I trust you not to use it.

Today, as anticipated, I visited the library. After last night/this morning, I felt somewhat sick, but that's the penance. On the bus I was trying to cohere *Zone of the Colossi*, but they wouldn't let me; you must know how it is. Half the passengers were ducking and screaming beneath the flight of a wasp, and the other half were sitting stoically pouring forth clouds of tobacco-smoke, which curled in the hot air. I sat next to some whistling fool and my thoughts kept getting sidetracked into a search for the lyrics in order to fit them to his tune and be rid of it. Not an auspicious start, but *Zone of the Colossi* was forgotten when I left the library. I couldn't find *We Pass from View* on the shelf in the Religion section; mind you, some cretin in an aged mac was pottering round the shelves and sampling books and replacing them at whatever position he'd pottered to, earning himself glares from the staff. Someone else had erected a fortress of books on one of the tables and behind it was completing his football coupon. He cursed me visibly when I examined his barricade; I've rarely felt so self-conscious as then, his gaze on my canted head. But there it was: *We Pass from View* beneath *The Mass in Slow Motion* and *The Catholic Marriage Manual* and Graham Fisher's *Identity and Awareness*. I pulled out the foundation, but the wall held.

The book was bound in bright blue. The table-top was pastel green. The room was warm and sunny, if a little stifling. At the further end, behind a creamy desk, one of the staff was recounting his adventures in a branch library, how he'd been plagued by old ladies pleading for what he called 'cheap novelettes'; I could tell he looked upon all fiction as the poor relation of non-fiction, like all academic librarians—so much for our writing. You couldn't get further from a Lovecraft setting, but then this was the real thing.

I turned back the cover; it slapped the table-top. Silence fell. A blade of sunlight moved along the floor, intensifying cracks. Then

the pages of *We Pass from View* began to turn of their own accord.

At first I thought it must be a draught. When you're sitting in a bright new library among books and people you don't think of the possibility of the supernatural. When the book exhibits traces of its readership (chewing-gum on one page, a dead fly on another) it's difficult to view it as haunted. And yet I couldn't take my eyes from those moving pages. They turned up the dedication ('to my faithful friends') and for a second, as though my vision were failing, I saw lines of some other print waver as if superimposed on the text. The page turned to the next, a blank leaf. I put out my hand, but I couldn't quite bring myself to touch the book. As I hesitated, lines of print appeared on the blank paper.

HELP ME

It stood out starkly on the paper, next to the fingerprint of some unclean reader. HELP ME. The letters held for several seconds: great black capitals which seemed to burn my eyeballs as I stared at them. And I was overwhelmed by the sense of an appeal, of someone trying desperately to contact me. Then they blurred and faded.

FEEL SOMEONE READING MUST BE

That flashed and disappeared; I read it in a second. The room seemed airless; I was sweating, my ribs were closing on my lungs. I could see only the book open on the table and feel a terrible, tortuous strain, as of a mind in torment trying to communicate its suffering.

SHE HAD ME BURIED HER REVENGE TOLD HER CREMATE BITCH WOMEN CANT TRUST HELP ME

That HELP ME was molten.

FEEL THEM COMING SLOWLY BURROWING WANT ME TO SUFFER CANT MOVE GET ME OUT SAVE ME SOMEWHERE IN BRICHESTER HELP ME

And the page, which had been lifted trembling, fell back. I waited. The room assembled round me in the merciless sunlight. The page remained blank. I don't know how long I waited. At last it occurred to me that the setting was wrong; back in my room I

might be able to re-establish contact. I picked up the book—holding it rather gingerly; somehow I expected to feel it move, struggle between my fingers—and carried it to the desk and back into mundanity.

'I'm afraid this is a reference copy only,' said the girl at the desk, flashing a smile and her engagement ring at me.

I told her that it seemed to be their only copy and that there were various of my books in the fiction section and that I knew the chief librarian (well, I'd glimpsed him enthroned in his office as someone bore in his coffee the day I was invited by his secretary to sign my books). I could have told her that I felt the book throbbing in my hand. But she replied 'Well, *personally* I know we can trust you with it and if it were up to me I'd let you have it, but—' and much more of the I'm-only-doing-my-job speech. I set the book down on the desk in order to wave my hands about and she handed it to a girl who was replacing books on the shelves, belatedly asking 'You didn't want it again, did you?'

I saw it carried away on the toppling pile; already the transcendental was being erased by the mundane; Franklyn would be filed carefully and forgotten. And that showed me what I must do. Of course I knew that it was Franklyn whose paragraphs I had been reading from beyond the grave, indeed, from in the grave. But I didn't know how to find him. The *Brichester Herald* had given neither his address nor where he was buried. 'Do you know anything about Roland Franklyn himself?' I enquired.

'Yes, he used to come in quite often...' but she obviously didn't want to talk about it. 'Eric, don't let Mary do all the clearing,' she said to her companion at the desk, who was building a house of holiday postcards.

'Franklyn, the little queer in the cloak?' he addressed me. 'You're not a friend of his, are you? Good job. Used to come in here with a whole crowd of them, the Twelve Disciples we used to call them. One of them came up to the desk one day because we were talking about his master and waved his great emaciated fist at us—you could see the drugs running out of his eyes. Why are you interested in that queer? Can't think what attracted them all, what

with that moth-eaten cloak and that huge bald head—he'd probably pulled out the last few hairs to stick on that spidery beard. He had a wife too, I think—must've been before he came to the crossroads. What's the matter, Mary, you want me to rupture myself?'

'Do you know where he lived?' I stayed him.

'Bottom of Mercy Hill. House looked like Satan was in residence. You can't miss it.' He knocked down the house of cards and walked away, and so, feeling rather adrift, did I.

I suppose I could have tried to find Franklyn today, but I wanted to crystallise the experience, to preserve it before it lost its form. I came home and set this down; I think it needs rewriting. Reality always does; I suppose we have to give it some form, even while paying the price of distortion. I keep thinking of Franklyn in his coffin, aware of something tunnelling toward him, unable to move a muscle but still capable of feelings. But it's dark now; I couldn't find him in the dark. Tomorrow, more. Goodbye, girl in the window.

EU

a fixed point
15 July 1967

Dear JRC:

Today has been disturbing.

I knew Franklyn lived on Mercy Hill, but the Hill covers a lot of ground; I couldn't search it for his house. Finally I thought of the street directory—odd I didn't think of that before—and called at the library today to check. There was only one R. Franklyn on Mercy Hill. I did return to the Religion section but they couldn't find *We Pass from View*; I suppose they're classifying me as one of their regular cranks.

I caught a bus to Mercy Hill. High sun, slight breeze; a bluebottle was patting its reflection on the window, trying to escape. In the streets couples were taking their ice-creams for a walk; toward the Hill tennis-balls were punctuating their pauses, girls were leaping, bowls were clicking, and from the houses behind a

procession was bearing trays of cakes to the pavilion. It was one of those days when if anything is to happen you have to make it happen; or for me to complete the next episode of my short story.

I dismounted at the foot of the Hill and climbed the piled terraces. At one corner they were erecting a new school; workmen were sunning themselves on girders. Two levels further up I came into Dee Terrace, and at once saw Franklyn's house.

It was unmistakable. The personality which gave that house its final form was not the architect's. One chimney had been built into a frustum of white stone; an extra room had been added on the left, and its window had been blocked with newer brick; all the curtains, except those of one ground-floor window draped in green, were black. The house looked deserted, the more so for its garden, which could not have been tended in years; grass and weeds grew knee-high. I brushed through, imagining things crawling into my shoes. A bustling cloud of flies rose from something to one side. I reached the front door and saw the green curtain move; a face peered and drew back. I knocked. There was silence for a moment. Then inside a woman's voice screamed: 'Oh, lie down with you!' Before I could ponder on that, the door was open.

The woman was certainly not in mourning—which was encouraging, for I hadn't known quite what approach to make. She wore a red dress, which looked pale against the crimson wallpaper of the hall. She was heavily, if inaccurately, made up, and her hair was rather arbitrarily bleached. She waited.

'Would you be Mrs. Franklyn?'

She looked suspicious, as if I'd intended a threat. 'Roland Franklyn was my husband,' she admitted ungraciously. 'Who are you?'

Who indeed. It didn't seem as though I'd get far by declaring the supernatural nature of my quest. 'I'm a writer,' I compromised. 'I've read your husband's book several times. I was shocked to hear of his death,' I added to get it over with.

'Well, you don't have to be. Come in, anyway,' she said. She looked round the hall and grimaced. 'Look at this. Would you live with this? Not likely. Getting them in the right mood—half of them didn't know what they were being got in the mood for. Nice boys, some of them, to begin with.' She kicked the crimson wall and ushered me into a room on the right.

I wasn't prepared—I couldn't have been. A ground-floor room with wardrobe, dressing-table complete with cob-webbed mirror, a bed beneath the window, piles of women's magazines, some thick with dust, and a cat chained to the leg of a chair in the middle of the floor; it wasn't a sense of evil or fear that choked me, it was a sense of something locked away, forgotten and gone bad. The cat padded up to meet me; its chain gave it freedom of the room, but it couldn't quite reach the door.

'Pussy likes you,' said Mrs Franklyn, closing the door and sinking into a chair amid a haze of dust; her dress drew up her thighs, but she didn't pull it down. 'That could be a good sign, but don't they say only effeminate men can make friends with cats? Why are you looking at me like that?' I hadn't realised I was looking like anything in particular; I was carrying the cat, chain and all, to the chair I took opposite her. 'Don't like the chain, is that it? But me and my cat, we're all we've got—I'm not letting her out so they can carry her off and sacrifice her. They would, you know, on their nights. I take her in the garden, that's all; wouldn't trust them further than that.' I remembered the flies. 'What do you write?' she demanded.

In this context it seemed a little pale to say 'Stories of the supernatural.'

'Stories, eh? Yes, we all like stories,' she mused. 'Anything's better than the real thing. Do you want some tea? I'm afraid that's about all I have to offer.'

'It's all right, thank you,' I refused; I could see cracked cups in the kitchen behind her head. She caught my eye; she was always doing that, damn her.

'Oh, I can't blame you for thinking,' she said. 'But it gets you down after a while. After he took the house over—you didn't

know that, did you?—yes, he did, Re-married me and then he encroached on every room, keeping things I wouldn't touch all over the house, until I took this room and the kitchen and I told him if you try anything in my rooms *I'll kill you!*' She thumped the chair-arm and dust flew out.

'But why did you put up with it?' I had to ask.

'Why? *Because I married him!*' The cat fled, knocked over a pile of magazines, sneezed and jumped back; she reeled it in and fondled it. 'Now, pussy's not scared of mummy,' she soothed and put it down. It began to scratch at her shoe. 'Lie down with you, for God's sake,' she hissed. It came to me for comfort.

'When I married him,' she returned to me, 'he promised I'd have all this house to entertain, to do all the things I never could. I believed him. Then I found out how he really was. So I waited. Every day I wished him dead, so I'd have my house, what was left of my life. I haven't spoken to him for years, did you know that? —hardly even seen him. I used to leave his meals outside his room on a tray; if he didn't eat them that was up to him. But when he didn't touch them for three days I went into his room. No, I didn't go in—all those filthy statues and lights and books—but I could see he wasn't there. He was in his stupid little printing press room. He was dead all right. There was a book—he must have been going to copy something—but I didn't read it; the way his face looked was enough. I threw it in the bin. Didn't touch him, though—oh, no, they're not going to say I killed him after all the years I've suffered.'

'But how did you stand it?' Of course the answer was—she didn't.

'Oh, he made me long ago. We met when we were students—I was impressionable then, I thought he was a good man, the best—and later we got married. I ought to have known; there was a rumour he'd been expelled from the University even then, but when he swore he hadn't I trusted him. Then his parents died and left him this house and we got married. My husband—' Her face contorted as if she'd put her hand in something foul. 'He took me down to Temphill and made me watch those things dancing on the graves. I didn't want to but he said it was for a book he was

writing. He held my hand, then. And later we went down the steps below Glotton—oh, you may write, but you'd never dare to write about... I don't want to think about it. But it hardened me. It made me tough when he began his mummery back here, trying to stop me destroying all his muck...'

That sounded like a cue. 'If you haven't thrown away all his books do you think I could look them over? Purely from a writer's viewpoint,' I tacked on, why I'm not sure.

'But you're a nice young man, you don't want to become another of his,' she said, and sat down on the bed; her dress rose again like a curtain. She began to clear piles of magazines festooned with dust away from the bed; atop one was a vase of dandelions—'Just a touch of colour, what's it matter what they are, no-one ever comes,' she explained, though the petals had curled and dulled in the flecked light. 'Did you ever write from experience? How could you, you've never had what I'd had to put up with. The things he's doing even now to hinder me—Only yesterday I picked up one of his books to throw it out and it went sticky and soft things started pushing between my fingers—God!' She wiped her hands down her dress. 'I used to lie awake listening to him going to the bathroom and wishing he was dead—and last night I heard him flopping round his room, beating on the walls. And this morning I woke early, I thought the sun was coming up—but it was his face floating over the rooftops... It came to the windows, filled them, it followed me from room to room, mouthing at me—God! You'd never write about it, you'd never write about anything again. But he can't get me down, and he knows it. He was always scared of me. That's why he kept me here, to keep me quiet. But he can't have left many of his little tricks behind him. He knows I'll win. But you don't want to get mixed up with the wrong things. You're a nice young man.'

She swung her legs up and lay back on the pillow, where I could see imprints of hair-dye.

For some time now I'd had the impression that my short story was taking over its own writing; now we seemed to be building to a

climax I hadn't foreseen. I had to be direct. 'Your husband was buried, wasn't he?' I asked. 'Didn't he want to be cremated?'

She seemed to take an age to sit up; her eyes were on me all the while. 'How did you know that?' she demanded softly. 'You gave yourself away there, didn't you? You are one of his! I knew it before you got to the door! Yes, he's buried, where you all should be. Go on, go up and be with him, I'm sure he'd like you to be. He must be able to feel them coming by now—I hope he can. Yes, he was always on about his Eihort, but he doesn't like it when they come for him. You go and look after him, you—'

I didn't know what she might be capable of; I retreated hastily, seeing her watching in the mirror and sneering when she caught my eye. Somehow I dislodged a heap of magazines and buried the cat, which fought its way out and tangled my feet in its chain. 'Don't you touch my cat!' she screamed. 'She's worth a million of you! What is it, darling, come to mummy—' and I escaped, running down the hall, an inflamed intestine, and through the grass, careless of what I might tread in unseen.

Suddenly I was on solid pavement. Down the street an ice-cream van was playing *Greensleeves*. This time the intrusion of mundanity didn't seem so tasteless. I walked home.

By the time I reached the typewriter I'd glimpsed the paradox. Even the supernatural-story writer who believes what he writes (and I'm not saying I don't) isn't prepared for an actual confrontation. Quite the reverse, for every time he fabricates the supernatural in a story (unless based on experience) he clinches his scepticism; he knows such things can't be, because he wrote them. Thus for him a confrontation would be doubly upsetting. It would at least force him to rethink all his works. Is this desirable? From the self-completion angle I suppose it is. At any rate, I'm going. 'Go up and be with him,' she said—it must be the cemetery on Mercy Hill.

Tomorrow.
EU

(Undated, unaddressed)

I don't know what (Foregoing deleted, does not appear on carbon; page apparently withdrawn, carbon attached, reinserted into typewriter) Nonsense. Of course I can write about it. The very fact that I can write proves that I'm still functioning.

I took the bus up Mercy Hill at the height of the day. Few things moved; flies and pedestrians crawled, and the workmen climbed sluggishly on the skeletal school. At the intersection with Dee Terrace I saw the house; it seemed swallowed up by grass, forever isolated from its surroundings.

I want to get this over. The caretaker directed me down an avenue, and when I reached—No. Description of graveyard. Why write as if this were my last page? Willows, their branches glowing stippled curves, were spaced carefully toward the Hill out of which the cemetery was carved; in the Hill itself were catacombs, black behind ivy or railings, and above stood the hospital, a grey reminder of hope or despair. What awful iron juxtaposed hospital and graveyard? The avenues were guarded by broken-nosed angels yearning heavenward; one showed a leprous patch where her left eye and cheek had sloughed away. Urns stood here and there like empty glasses at a sick-bed, and a young woman was kneeling with a wreath at a shining memorial; I wonder how long before she shakes him off? And then, toward the catacombs, I saw the new headstone and its bed of pebbles. They gleamed behind the high sun. I read Franklyn's name and the framing dates, and waited.

It eventually occurred to me that I didn't quite know what I was waiting for; not in that sunlight. Yet the air had hushed. I paced around the grave, and the pebbles shifted. My shadow had moved them. I'm still capable of an anticlimax! My God. I thought: Franklyn is alive down there—or perhaps no longer. Then I saw a possibility. I looked back down the perspective. The young mourner was passing through the gates. I lay down on the grass and put my ear to the pebbles. They ground together, then there was nothing. I felt vilely uncomfortable. Suddenly I realised that I was visible all the way down the avenue to the gates. I went hot all over and scrambled to my feet.

And on the way up I heard something. Something. If only I knew. It'd be better if I had something to confront, anything but this uncertainty which sucks the confidence from me. It could have been the foreman at that school calling over the noise of riveting. Or it could—yes, must write—it could have been someone imprisoned, paralysed, summoning a last muscular spasm, screaming thickly for help and beating his fists in the dark as he was dragged downward, downward...

I couldn't run; it was too hot. I walked. When I reached the school the girders were rippling in the heat haze, as if they were alive. I wish I hadn't seen that. No longer could I trust the surface of the world. It was as though it had been instantaneously revealed to me that there were countless forces awake in everything, invisible, things lurking in daylight, shifting, planning—What had they built into the school? What would stalk unseen among the children?

I walked. Of course I was visualising too much, but I could imagine, I could feel the pavement thin as ice, ready to engulf me in a world where life crawled. I sat in the parks. It was no good; I didn't know what watched from the trees; I didn't know how many of the passers-by might be masked, agents not of this world, preparing the way for—what? Who had Franklyn left behind? The peril of the writer: he can't stop thinking. He may survive by writing, but he doesn't really survive. Why am I no—mustn't give in—I wandered until dark, found a café, I don't remember. I was in a deserted street of shops with one red window lit above a darkened store. I don't know why, it seemed evil. Franklyn's hall, I suppose.

So I came back and typed this. The street is empty; only the shadow of the streetlamp seems to move. The window opposite is dark. What may be there, waiting?

I can't turn round. I stare at the reflection of the room behind me. The reflection—like a framed photograph about to be split open by something climbing forth. When I've written this I shall turn round.

'I don't dare,' I have just said aloud.

Where can I go where I don't sense movement behind the scenes?
(Unsigned)

The Scar

"Tightened up considerably from its initial incarnation as *The Reshaping of Rossiter*. The story is told almost entirely from Lindsay's point of view, rather than the perspectives of both Lindsay and Jack as in the first draft. Campbell has also devised a horrifying suggestion for the origins of Jack's doppelgänger."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1967
First published in *Startling Mystery Stories*, Summer 1969
Also published in: *The Height Of The Scream*, *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

"It was most odd on the bus today," Lindsay Rice said.

Jack Rossiter threw his cigarette into the fire and lit another. His wife Harriet glanced at him uneasily; she could see he was in no mood for her brother's circumlocutions.

"Most odd," said Lindsay. "Rather upsetting, in fact. It reminded me, the Germans—now was it the Germans? Yes, I think it was the Germans—used to have this thing about doppelgangers, the idea being that if you saw your double it meant you were going to die. But of course you didn't see him. That's right, of course, I should explain."

Jack moved in his armchair. "I'm sorry, Lindsay," he interrupted, "I just don't see where you're tending. I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Lindsay," Harriet said. "Jack's been a bit tired lately. Go on."

But at that moment the children tumbled into the room like pierrots, their striped pyjamas bold against the pastel lines of wallpaper. "Douglas tried to throw me into the bath, and he hasn't brushed his teeth!" Elaine shouted triumphantly.

"There'll be spankings for two in a minute," Jack threatened, but he smiled. "Good night, darling. Good night, darling. No, you've had a hard day, darling, I'll put them to bed."

"Not so hard as you," Harriet said, standing up. "You stay and talk to Lindsay."

Jack grimaced inwardly; he had wanted Harriet to rest, but somehow it now appeared as if he'd been trying to escape Lindsay. "Sorry, Lindsay, you were saying?" he prompted as the thumping on the staircase ceased.

"Oh, yes, on the bus. Well, it was this morning, I saw someone who looked like you. I was going to speak to him until I realised." Rice glanced around the room; although his weekly invitation was of some years' standing, he could never remember exactly where everything was. Not that it mattered: the whole was solid. Armchairs, television, bookcase full of Penguins and book-club editions and *Shorrock's Valuer's Manual*—there it was, on top of the bookcase, the wedding photograph which Jack had carefully framed for Harriet. "Yes, he was as thin as you've been getting, but he had a scar from here to here." Rice encompassed his left temple and jawbone with finger and thumb like dividers.

"So he wasn't really my double. My time hasn't run out after all."

"Well, I hope not!" Rice laughed a little too long; Jack felt his mouth stretching as he forced it to be sociable. "We've been slackening off at the office," Rice said. "How are things at the jeweller's? Nothing stolen yet, I hope?"

"No, everything's under control," Jack replied. Feet ran across the floor above. "Hang on, Lindsay," he said, "sounds like Harriet's having trouble."

Harriet had quelled the rebellion when he arrived; she closed the door of the children's room and regarded him. "Christ, the man's tact!" he exploded.

"Shh, Jack, he'll hear you." She put her arms around him. "Don't be cruel to Lindsay," she pleaded. "You know I always had the best of everything and Lindsay never did—unhappy at school, always being put down by my father, never daring to open his mouth—darling, you know he finds it difficult to talk to people. Now I've got you. Surely we can spare him kindness at least."

"Of course we can." He stroked her hair. "It's just that—damn it, not only does he say I'm losing weight as though I'm being underfed or something, but he asks me if the shop's been broken into yet!"

"Poor darling, don't worry. I'm sure the police will catch them before they raid the shop. And if not, there's always insurance."

"Yes, there's insurance, but it won't rebuild my display! Can't you understand I take as much pride in my shop as you take in the house?

Probably some jumped-up little skinheads who throw the loot away once their tarty little teenyboppers have played with it!"

"That doesn't sound like you at all, Jack," Harriet said.

"I'm sorry, love. You know I'm really here. Come on, I'd better fix up tomorrow night with Lindsay."

"If you feel like a rest we could have him round here."

"No, he opens out a bit when he's in a pub. Besides, I like the walk to Lower Brichester."

"Just so long as you come back in one piece, my love."

Rice heard them on the stairs. He hurried back to his chair from the bookcase where he had been inspecting the titles. One of these days he must offer to lend them some books—anything to make them like him more. He knew he'd driven Jack upstairs. Why couldn't he be direct instead of circling the point like a wobbling whirligig? But every time he tried to grasp an intention or a statement it slid out of reach. Even if he hung a sign on his bedroom wall—he'd once thought of one: "I shall act directly"—he would forget it before he left the flat. Even as he forgot his musings when Jack and Harriet entered the room.

"I'd better be off," he said. "You never can tell with the last bus round here."

"I'll see you tomorrow night, then," Jack told him, patting his shoulder. "I'll call round and pick you up."

But he never had the courage to invite them to his flat, Lindsay thought; he knew it wasn't good enough for them. Not that they would show it—rather would they do everything to hide their feelings out of kindness, which would be worse. Tomorrow night as usual he would be downstairs early to wait for Jack in the doorway. He waved to them as they stood linked in their bright frame, then struck off down the empty road. The fields were grey and silent, and above the semi-detached roofs the moon was set in a plush ring of cold November mist. At the bus-stop he thought: I wish I could do something for them so they'd be grateful to me.

Harriet was bending over the cooker; she heard no footsteps—she had no chance to turn before the newspaper was over her face.

"I see the old Jack's back with us," she said, fighting off the Brichester Herald.

"You haven't seen it?" He guided her hand to the headline: youths arrested—admit to jewel thefts. He was beaming; he read the report again with Harriet, the three boys who'd hoped to stockpile jewellery but had been unable to market it without attracting the police. "Maybe now we can all get some sleep," he said. "Maybe I can give up smoking."

"Don't give it up for me, Jack, I know you need it. But if you did give it up I'd be very happy."

Douglas and Elaine appeared, pummelling towards their tea. "Now just you sit down and wait," Jack said, "or we'll eat it for you."

After tea he lit a cigarette, then glanced at Harriet. "Don't worry, darling," she advised. "Take things easy for a while. Come on, monsters, you can help clear up." She knew the signs—spilled sugar, dropped knife; Jack would turn hypertense with relief if he didn't rest.

But ten minutes later he was in the kitchen. "Must go," he said. "Give myself time for a stroll before I meet Lindsay. Anyway, the news ought to give the conversation a lift."

"Come back whole, darling," Harriet said, not knowing.

Yes, he liked to walk through Lower Brichester. He'd made the walk, with variations, for almost two years; ever since his night out drinking with Rice had settled into habit. It had been his suggestion, primarily to please Harriet, for he knew she liked to think he and Lindsay were friends; but by now he met Lindsay out of a sense of duty, which was rarely proof against annoyance as the evening wore on. Never mind, there was the walk. If he felt insecure, as he often did when walking—the night, Harriet elsewhere—he gained a paradoxical sense of security from Lower Brichester; the bleared fish-and-chip shop windows, the crowds outside pubs, a drunk punching someone's face with a soft moist sound—it reassured him to think that here was a level to which he could never be reduced.

Headlights blazed down a side street, billowing with mist and motorcycle fumes. They spotlighted a broken wall across the street from Rossiter; a group of girls huddled on the shattered bricks, laughing forth fog as the motorcycle gang fondled them roughly with words. Rossiter gazed at them; no doubt the jewel thieves had been of the same mould. He felt a little

guilty as he watched the girls, embracing themselves to keep out the cold, but he had his answer ready—nothing would change them, they were fixed; if he had money, it was because he could use it properly. He turned onward; he would have to use the alley on the right if he were not to keep Rice waiting.

Suddenly the shrieks of laughter behind the roaring engines were cut off. A headlight was feeling its way along the walls, finding one house protruding part of a ruined frontage like a piece of jigsaw, the next dismally curtained, its neighbour shuttered with corrugated tin, its makeshift door torn down like an infuriating lid. For a moment the beam followed a figure: a man in a long black coat swaying along the pavement, a grey woollen sock pulled down over his face. The girls huddled closer, silently. Jack shuddered; the exploratory progress of the figure seemed unformed, undirected. Then the light was gone; the girls giggled in the darkness, and beyond a streetlamp the figure fumbled into the tin-shuttered house. Jack turned up his coat collar and hurried into the alley. The engines roared louder.

He was halfway up the alley when he heard the footsteps. The walls were narrow; there was barely room for the other, who seemed in a hurry, to pass. Jack pressed against the wall; it was cold and rough beneath his hand. Behind him the footsteps stopped.

He looked back. The entrance to the alley whirled with fumes, against which a figure moved towards him, vaguely outlined. It held something in its hand. Jack felt automatically for his lighter. Then the figure spoke.

"You're Jack Rossiter." The voice was soft and anonymous yet somehow penetrated the crescendi of the motorcycles. "I'll be visiting your shop soon."

For a moment Jack thought he must know the man, though his face was merely a black egg in the shadows; but something in the figure's slow approach warned him. Suddenly he knew what that remark implied. Cold rushed into his stomach, and metal glinted in the figure's hand. Jack retreated along the wall, his fingers searching frantically for a door. His foot tangled with an abandoned tin; he kicked it towards the figure and ran.

The fog boiled round him; metal clattered; a foot hooked his ankle and tripped him. The engines were screaming; as Jack raised his head a car's beam thrust into his eyes. He scrabbled at potato peelings and sardine tins, and struggled to his knees. A foot between his shoulders ground him down.

The car's light dimmed and vanished. He struggled onto his back, cold peel sticking to his cheek, and the foot pressed on his heart. The metal closed in the figure's palm. Above him hands displayed the tin which he had kicked. The insidious voice said something. When the words reached him, Rossiter began to tear at the leg in horror and fury. The black egg bent nearer. The foot pressed harder, and the rusty lid of the tin came down towards Jack's face.

Though the bandage was off he could still feel the cut, blazing now and then from his temple to his jawbone. He forced himself to forget; he stuffed fuel into the living room fire and opened his book. But it failed to soothe him. Don't brood, he told himself savagely, worse is probably happening in Lower Brichester at this moment. If only Harriet hadn't seen him unbandaged at the hospital! He could feel her pain more keenly than his own since he'd come home. He kept thinking of her letting the kettle scream so that he wouldn't hear her sobbing in the kitchen. Then she'd brought him coffee, her face still wet beneath her hair from water to wash away the tears. Why had he told her at the hospital "It's not what he did to me, it's what he said he'd do to Douglas and Elaine"? He cursed himself for spreading more suffering than he himself had had to stand. Even Rice had seemed to feel himself obscurely to blame, although Jack had insisted that it was his own fault for walking through that area.

"Go and say good-night to Daddy," Harriet called.

The children padded in. "Daddy's face is getting better," Elaine said.

He saw the black egg bearing down on them. God, he swore, if he should lay one finger—! "Daddy's surviving his accident," he told them. "Good night, children."

Presently he heard Harriet slowly descending the stairs, each step a thought. Suddenly she rushed into the room and hid her face on his chest. "Oh please, please, darling, what did he say about the children?" she cried.

"I won't have you disturbed, my love," he said, holding her as she trembled. "I can worry enough for both of us. And as long as you take them there and back to school, it doesn't matter what the sod said."

"And what about your shop?" she asked through her tears.

"Never mind the shop!" He tried not to think of his dream of the smashed window, of the foul disorder he might find one morning. "The police will

find him, don't worry."

"But you couldn't even describe—" The doorbell rang. "Oh God, it's Lindsay," she said. "Could you go, darling? I can't let him see me like this."

"Oh, that's good—I mean I'm glad you've got the bandage off," said Lindsay. Behind him the fog swallowed the bedraggled trees and blotted out the fields. He stared at Jack, then muttered "Sorry, better let you close the door."

"Come in and get some fire," Jack said. "Harriet will have the coffee ready in a minute."

Rice plodded round the room, then sat down opposite Jack. He stared at the wedding photograph. He rubbed his hands and gazed at them. He looked up at the ceiling. At last he turned to Jack: "What"—he glanced around wildly —"what's that you're reading?"

"The Heart of the Matter. Second time, in fact. You should try it sometime."

Harriet looked in, dabbing at one eye. "Think I rubbed in some soap," she explained. "Hello, Lindsay. If we're talking about books, Jack, you said you'd read The Lord of the Rings."

"Well, I can't now, darling, since I'm working tomorrow. Back to work at last, Lindsay. Heaven knows what sort of a state the shop will be in with Phillips in charge."

"You always said you could rely on him in an emergency," Harriet protested.

"Well, this is the test. Yes, white as usual for me, please, darling."

Harriet withdrew to the kitchen. "I read a book this week," Rice caught at the conversation, "about a man—what's his name, no, I forget—whose friend is in danger from someone, he finds out—and he finally pulls this someone off a cliff and gets killed himself." He was about to add "At least he did something with himself. I don't like books about people failing," but Jack took the cue:

"A little unrealistic for me," he said, "after what happened."

"Oh, I never asked," Rice's hands gripped each other, "where did it?"

"Just off the street parallel to yours, the next but two. In the alley."

"But that's where"—he lost something again—"where there's all sorts of violence."

"You shouldn't live so near it, Lindsay," Harriet said above a tray. "Make the effort. Move soon."

"Depressing night," Jack remarked as he helped Rice don his coat. "Drop that book in sometime, Lindsay. I'd like to read it."

Of course he wouldn't, Rice thought as he breathed in the curling fog and met the trees forming from the murk; he'd been trying to be kind. Rice had failed again. Why had he been unable to speak, to tell Jack that he had seen his double leave the bus and enter an abandoned house opposite that alley? The night of the mutilation Rice had waited in his doorway, feeling forsaken, sure that Jack had decided not to come; ashamed now, he blamed himself—Jack would be whole now if Rice hadn't made him feel it was his duty to meet him. Something was going to happen; he sensed it looming. If he could only warn them, prevent it—but prevent what? He saw the figures falling from the cliff-top against the azure sky, the seagulls screaming around him—but the mist hung about him miserably, stifling his intentions. He began to hurry to the bus-stop.

The week unfolded wearily. It was as formless in Rice's mind as the obscured fields when he walked up the Rossiters' street again, his book collecting droplets in his hand. He rang the bell and waited, shivering; the windows were blurred by mist.

"Oh, Lindsay," said Harriet. She had run to the door; it was clear she had been crying. "I don't know whether—"

Jack appeared in the hall, one hand possessively gripping the living room door-frame, the cigarette upon his lip flaking down his shirt. "Is it your night already?" he demanded of Rice. "I thought it'd be early to bed for us. Come in, for God's sake, don't freeze us to death."

Harriet threw Lindsay a pleading look which he could not interpret. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know you were tired."

"Who said tired? Come on, man, start thinking! God, I give up." Jack threw up his hands and whirled into the living room.

"Lindsay, Jack's been having a terrible time. The shop was broken into last night."

"What's all that whispering?" a voice shouted. "Aren't I one of the family anymore?"

"Jack, don't be illogical. Surely Lindsay and I can talk." But she motioned Lindsay into the living room.

"Treating me like a stranger in my own house!"

Lindsay dropped the book. Suddenly he realised what he'd seen: Jack's face was paler, thinner than last week; the scar looked older than seemed possible. He bent for the book. No, what he was thinking was absurd; Harriet would have noticed. Jack was simply worried. It must be worry.

"Brought me a book, have you? Let's see it, then. Oh, for God's sake, Lindsay, I can't waste my time with this sort of thing!"

"Jack!" cried Harriet. "Lindsay brought it specially."

"Don't pity Lindsay, he won't thank you for it. You think we're patronising you, don't you, Lindsay? Inviting you up the posh end of town?"

This couldn't be, Rice thought; not in this pastel living room, not with the wedding photograph fixed forever; their lives were solid, not ephemeral like his own. "I—don't know what you mean," he faltered.

"Jack, I won't have you speaking to Lindsay like that," Harriet said. "Lindsay, would you help me make the coffee?"

"Siding with your brother now," Jack accused. "I don't need him at a time like this, I need you. You've forgotten the shop already, but I haven't. I suppose I needn't expect any comfort tonight."

"Oh, Jack, try and get a grip on yourself," but now her voice was softer. Don't! Lindsay warned her frantically. That's exactly what he wants!

"Take your book, Lindsay," Jack said through his fingers, "and make sure you're invited in future." Harriet glanced at him in anguish and hurried Lindsay out.

"I'm sorry you've been hurt, Lindsay," she said. "Of course you're always welcome here. You know we love you. Jack didn't mean it. I knew something would happen when I heard about the shop. Jack just ran out of it and didn't come back for hours. But I didn't know it would be like this—" Her voice broke. "Maybe you'd better not come again until Jack's more stable. I'll tell you when it's over. You do understand, don't you?"

"Of course, it doesn't matter," Lindsay said, trembling with formless thoughts. On the hall table a newspaper had been crumpled furiously; he saw the headline—jeweller's raided—displays destroyed. "Can I have the paper?" he asked.

"Take it, please. I'll get in touch with you, I promise. Don't lose heart."

As the door closed Rice heard Jack call "Harriet!" in what sounded like despair. Above, the children were silhouetted on their bedroom window; as Rice trudged away the fog engulfed them. At the bus-stop he read the report; a window broken, destruction everywhere. He gazed ahead blindly. Shafts of bilious yellow pierced the fog, then the grey returned. "Start thinking," was it? Oh yes, he could think—think how easy it would be to fake a raid, knowing the insurance would rebuild what had been destroyed —but he didn't want the implications; the idea was insane, anyway. Who would destroy simply in order to have an excuse for appearing emaciated, unstable? But his thoughts returned to Harriet; he avoided thinking what might be happening in that house. You're jealous! he tried to tell himself. He's her husband! He has the right! Rice became aware that he was holding the book which he had brought for Jack. He stared at the tangled figures falling through blue drops of condensation, then thrust the book into the litter-bin between empty tins and a sherry bottle. He stood waiting in the fog.

The fog trickled through Rice's kitchen window. He leaned his weight on the sash, but again it refused to shut. He shrugged helplessly and tipped the beans into the saucepan. The tap dripped once; he gripped it and screwed it down. Below the window someone came out coughing and shattered something in the dustbin. The tap dripped. He moved towards it, and the bell rang.

It was Harriet in a headscarf. "Oh, don't come in," he said. "It's not fit, I mean—"

"Don't be silly, Lindsay," she told him edgily. "Let me in." Her eyes gathered details: the twiglike crack in one corner of the ceiling, the alarm clock whose hand had been amputated, the cobweb supporting the lamp-flex from the ceiling like a bracket. "But this is so depressing," she said. "Don't stay here, Lindsay. You must move."

"It's just the bed's not made," he tried to explain, but he could see her despairing. He had to turn the subject. "Jack all right?" he asked, then

remembered, but too late.

She pulled off her headscarf. "Lindsay, he hasn't been himself since they wrecked the shop," she said with determined calm. "Rows all the time, breaking things—he broke our photograph. He goes out and gets drunk half the evenings. I've never seen him so irrational." Her voice faded. "And there are other things—that I can't tell you about—"

"That's awful. That's terrible." He couldn't bear to see Harriet like this; she was the only one he had ever loved. "Couldn't you get him to see someone, I mean—"

"We've already had a row about that. That was when he broke our photograph."

"How about the children? How's he been to them?" Instantly two pieces fitted together; he waited, chill with horror, for her answer.

"He tells them off for playing, but I can protect them."

How could she be so blind? "Suppose he should do something to them," he said. "You'll have to get out."

"That's one thing I won't do. He's my husband, Lindsay. It's up to me to look after him."

She can't believe that! Lindsay cried. He tottered on the edge of revelation, and fought with his tongue. "Don't you think he's acting as if he was a different person?" He could not be more explicit.

"After what happened that's not so surprising." She drew her headscarf through her fingers and pulled it back, drew and pulled, drew and pulled; Lindsay looked away. "He's left all the displays in Phillips' hands. He's breaking down, Lindsay. I've got to nurse him back. He'll survive, I know he will."

Survive! Lindsay thought with bitterness and horror. And suddenly he remembered that Harriet had been upstairs when he'd described his encounter on the bus; she would never realise, and his tongue would never allow him to tell her. Behind her compassion he sensed a terrible devotion to Jack which he could not break. She was as trapped as he was in this flat. Yet if he could not speak, he must act. The plan against him was clear: he'd been banished from the Rossiters' home, he was unable to protest, Harriet would be alone. There was only one false assumption in the plan, and it

concerned himself. It must be false. He could help. He gazed at Harriet; she would never understand, but perhaps she needn't suspect.

The beans sputtered and smouldered in the pan. "Oh, Lindsay, I'm awfully sorry," Harriet said. "You must have your tea. I've got to get back before he comes home. I only called to tell you not to come round for a while. Please don't, I'll be all right."

"I'll stay away until you tell me," Lindsay lied. As she reached the hall he called out; he felt bound to make what would happen as easy as he could for her. "If anything should happen"—he fumbled—"you know, while Jack's—disturbed—I can always help to look after the children."

Rice could hear the children screaming from the end of the street. He began to walk towards the cries. He hadn't meant to go near the house; if his plan was to succeed, Harriet must not see him. Harriet—why wasn't she protecting the children? It couldn't be the Rossiters' house, he argued desperately; sounds like that couldn't reach the length of the street. But the cries continued, piercing with terror and pain; they dragged his footsteps nearer. He reached the house and could no longer doubt. The bedrooms were curtained, the house was impossibly impassive, reflecting no part of the horror within; the fog clung greyly to the grass like scum on reeds. He could hear Elaine sobbing something and then screaming. Rice wanted to break in, to stop the sounds, to discover what was holding Harriet back; but if he went in his plan would be destroyed. His palms prickled; he wavered miserably, and the silver pavement slithered beneath him.

The front door of the next house opened and a man—portly, red-faced, bespectacled, grey hair, black overcoat, valise clenched in his hand like a weapon—strode down the path, grinning at the screams. He passed Rice and turned at his aghast expression: "What's the matter, friend," he asked with amusement in his voice, "never have your behind tanned when you were a kid?"

"But listen to them!" Rice said unevenly. "They're screaming!"

"And I should damn well think so, too," the other retorted. "You know Jack Rossiter? Decent chap. About as much of a sadist as I am, and his kids ran in just now when we were having breakfast with some nonsense about their father doing something dreadful to them. I grabbed them by the scruff of their necks and dragged them back. One thing wrong with Rossiter—he was too soft with those kids, and I'm glad he seems to have learned some sense.

Listen, you know who taught kids to tell tales on their parents? The bloody Nazis, that's who. There'll be no kids turning into bloody Nazis in this country if I can help it!"

He moved away, glancing back at Rice as if suspicious of him. The cries had faded; perhaps a door had closed. Stunned, Rice realised that he had been seen near the house; his plan was in danger. "Well, I mustn't waste any more time," he called, trying to sound casual, and hurried after the man. "I've got to catch my bus."

At the bus-stop, next to the man who was scanning the headlines and swearing, Rice watched the street for the figure he awaited, shivering with cold and indecision, his nostrils smarting with the faint stench of wet smoke. A bus arrived; his companion boarded. Rice stamped his feet and stared into the distance as if awaiting another; an inner critic told him he was overacting. When the bus had darkened and merged with fog, he retraced his steps. At the corner of the street he saw the fog solidify into a striding shape. The mist pulled back like web from the scarred face.

"Oh, Jack, can you spare a few minutes?" he said.

"Why, it's the prodigal brother-in-law!" came in a mist steaming from the mouth beside the scar. "I thought Harriet had warned you off? I'm in a hurry."

Again Rice was caught by a compulsion to rush into the house, to discover what had happened to Harriet. But there were the children to protect; he must make sure they would never scream again. "I thought I saw you—I mean, I did see you in Lower Brichester a few weeks ago," he said, feeling the fog obscuring security. "You were going into a ruined house."

"Who, me? It must have been my—" But the voice stopped; breath hung before his face.

Rice let his hatred drive out the words. "Your double? But then where did he go? Come on, I'll show you the house."

For a moment Rice doubted; perhaps the figure would laugh and stride into the mist. Ice sliced through his toes; he tottered and then plunged. "How did you make sure there was nobody about?" he forced through swollen lips. "When you got rid of him?"

The eyes flickered; the scar shifted. "Who, Phillips? God, man, I never did know what you meant half the time. He'll be wondering where I am—I'll

have to think up a story to satisfy him."

"I think you'll be able to do that." Cold with fear as he was, Rice was still warmed by fulfilment as he sensed that he had the upper hand, that he was able to taunt as had the man on the cliff-top before the plunge. He plunged into the fog, knowing that now he would be followed.

The grey fields were abruptly blocked by a more solid anonymity, the streets of Lower Brichester, suffocating individuality, erasing it through generations. Whenever he'd walked through these streets with Jack on the short route to the pub each glance of Jack's had reminded him that he was part of this anonymity, this inertia. But no longer, he told himself. Signs of life were sparse: a postman cycled creaking by; beyond a window a radio announcer laughed; a cat curled among milk-bottles. The door was rolled down on a pinball arcade, and a girl in a cheap fur coat was leaping about in the doorway of a boutique to keep herself warm until the keys arrived. Rice felt eyes finger the girl, then revert to him; they had watched him since the beginning of the journey, although the figure seemed to face always forward. Rice glanced at the other; he was gazing in the direction of his stride, and a block of ice grew in Rice's stomach while the glazing of the pavement cracked beneath his feet.

They passed a square foundation enshrining a rusty pram; here a bomb had blown a house asunder. The next street, Rice realised, and dug his nails into the rubber of the torch in his pocket. The blitz had almost bypassed Brichester; here and there one passed from curtained windows to a gaping house, eventually rebuilt if in the town, neglected in Lower Brichester. Was this the key? Had someone been driven underground by blitz conditions, or had something been released by bombing? In either case, what form of camouflage would they have had to adopt to live? Rice thought he knew, but he didn't want to think it through; he wanted to put an end to it. And round a corner the abandoned house focused into view.

A car purred somewhere; the pavement was faintly numbered for hopscotch. Rice gazed about covertly; there must be nobody in sight. And at his side the figure did the same. Terrified, Rice yet had to repress a nervous giggle. "There's the house," he said. "I suppose you'll want to go in."

"If you've got something to show me." The scar wrinkled again.

Bricks were heaped in what had been the garden; ice glistened in their pores. Rice could see nothing through the windows, which were shuttered

with tin. A grey corrugated sheet had been peeled back from the doorway; it scraped at Rice's ankle as he entered.

The light was dim; he gripped his torch. Above him a shattered skylight illuminated a staircase full of holes through which moist dust fell. To his right a door, one panel gouged out, still hung from a hinge. He hurried into the room, kicking a stray brick.

The fireplace gaped, half curtained by a hanging strip of wallpaper. Otherwise the room was bare, deserted probably for years. Of course the people of the neighbourhood didn't have to know exactly what was here to avoid it. In the hall tin rasped.

Rice ran into the kitchen, ahead on the left. Fog had penetrated a broken window; it filled his mouth as he panted. Opposite the cloven sink he saw a door. He wrenched it open, and in the other room the brick clattered.

Rice's hands were gloved in frozen iron; his nails were shards of ice thrust into the fingertips, melting into his blood. One hand clutched towards the back door. He tottered forward and heard the children scream, thought once of Harriet, saw the figures on the cliff. I'm not a hero! he mouthed. How in God's name did I get here? And the answer came: because he'd never really believed what he'd suspected. But the torch was shining, and he swung it down the steps beyond the open door.

They led into a cellar; bricks were scattered on the floor, bent knives and forks, soiled plates leading the torch-beam to tattered blankets huddled against the walls, hints of others in the shadows. And in one corner lay a man, surrounded by tins and a strip of corrugated metal.

The body glistened. Trembling, his mouth gaping at the stench which thickened the air, Rice descended, and the torch's circle shrank. The man in the corner was dressed in red. Rice moved nearer. With a shock he realised that the man was naked, shining with red paint which also marked the tins and strip of metal. Suddenly he wrenched away and retched.

For a moment he was engulfed by nausea; then he heard footsteps in the kitchen. His fingers burned like wax and blushed at their clumsiness, but he caught up a brick. "You've found what you expected, have you?" the voice called.

Rice reached the steps, and a figure loomed above him, blotting out the light. With studied calm it felt about in the kitchen and produced a strip of

corrugated tin. "Fancy," it said, "I thought I'd have to bring you here to see Harriet. Now it'll have to be the other way round." Rice had no time to think; focusing his horror, fear and disgust with his lifetime of inaction, he threw the brick.

Rice was shaking by the time he had finished. He picked up the torch from the bottom step and as if compelled turned its beam on the two corpses. Yes, they were of the same stature—they would have been identical, except that the face of the first was an abstract crimson oval. Rice shuddered away from his fascination. He must see Harriet—it didn't matter what excuse he gave, illness or anything, so long as he saw her. He shone the beam towards the steps to light his way, and the torch was wrested from his hand.

He didn't think; he threw himself up the steps and into the kitchen. The bolts and lock on the back door had been rusted shut for years. Footsteps padded up the steps. He fell into the other room. Outside an ambulance howled its way to hospital. Almost tripping on the brick, he reached the hall. The ambulance's blue light flashed in the doorway and passed, and a figure with a grey sock covering its face blocked the doorway.

Rice backed away. No, he thought in despair, he couldn't fail now; the fall from the cliff had ended the menace. But already he knew. He backed into something soft, and a hand closed over his mouth. The figure plodded towards him; the grey wool sucked in and out. The figure was his height, his build. He heard himself saying "I can always help to look after the children." And as the figure grasped a brick he knew what face waited beneath the wool.

Napier Court

"*Napier Court* was the last tale I wrote in 1967, in the midst of the *Demons By Daylight* bunch. Like several of those stories, it was a radical rewrite of a first draft. The 1965 version had a male protagonist laid up in bed, but Alma Napier is based on my solitary ex-fiancée, from whom I'd parted several months before writing this version."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

Written in: 1967
First published in *Dark Things*, 1971
Also published in: *Dark Companions*

Alma Napier sat up in bed. Five minutes ago she'd laid down *Victimes du Devoir* to cough, then stared round her bedroom heavy-eyed; the partly-open door reflected panels of cold October sunlight, which glanced from the flowered wallpaper, glared from the glass-fronted bookcase, but left the metronome on top in shadow and failed to reach the corner where her music-stand was standing. She'd thought she had heard footsteps on the stairs. Beyond the brilliant panel she could see the darker landing; she waited for someone to appear. Her clock, displayed within its glass tube, showed 11.03. It must be Maureen. Then she thought: could it be her parents? Had they decided to give up their holiday after all? She had looked forward to being left alone for a fortnight when her cold had confined her to the house; she wanted time to prove herself, to make her own way—she felt a stab of misery as she listened. Couldn't they leave her alone for two weeks? Didn't they trust her? The silence thickened; the darkness on the landing seemed to move. "Who's there? Is that you, Maureen?" she called and coughed. The darkness moved again. Of course it didn't, she said, willing her hands to unclench. She held up one; the little finger twitched. Don't be childish, she told herself, where's your strength? She slid out of the cocoon of warmth, slipped on her slippers and dressing-gown, and went downstairs.

The house was empty. "You see?" she said aloud. What else had she expected? She entered the kitchen. On the window-sill sat the medicine her mother had bought. "I don't like to leave you alone," she'd said two hours

ago. "Promise you'll take this and stay in bed until you're better. I've asked Maureen to buy anything you need while she's shopping."

"Mother," Alma had protested, "I could have asked her. After all, she is *my* friend."

"I know I'm being over-protective. I know I can't expect to be liked for it any more"—and oh God, Alma thought, all the strain of calming her down, of parting friends; there was no longer any question of love. As her mother was leaving the bedroom while her father bumped the last case down to the car, she'd said: "Alma, I don't want to talk about Peter as you well know, but you did promise."

"I told you." Alma had replied somewhat sharply, "I shan't be seeing him again." That was all over. She wished everything was over, all this possessiveness which threatened to erase her completely; she wished she could be left alone with her music. But that was not to be, not for two years. There was the medicine-bottle, implying her mother's continued influence in the house. Taking medicine for a cold was a sign of weakness, in Alma's opinion. But her chest hurt terribly when she coughed; after all, her mother wasn't imposing it on her, if she took it, that was her own decision. She measured a spoonful and gulped it down. Then she padded determinedly through the hall, past the living room (her father's desk reflected in one mirror), the dining room (her mother's flower arrangements preserved under glass in another), and upstairs, past her mother's Victorian valentines framed above the ornate banister. Now, she ordered herself, to bed, and another chapter of *Victimes du Devoir* before Maureen arrived. She'd never make the Brichester French Circle if she carried on like this.

But as soon as she climbed into bed, trying to preserve its bag of warmth, she was troubled by something she remembered having seen. In the hall—what had been wrong? She caught it: as she'd mounted the stairs she'd seen a shape in the hall mirror. Maureen's coat hanging on the coat-stand—but Maureen wasn't here. Certainly something pale had stood against the front-door panes. About to investigate, she addressed herself: the house was empty, there could be nothing there. All right, she'd asked Maureen to check the story of the house in the library's files of the *Brichester Herald*—but that didn't mean she believed the hints she'd heard in the corner shop that day before her mother had intervened with "Now, Alma, don't upset yourself" and to the shopkeeper: "Haunted, indeed! I'm afraid we grew out

of that sort of thing in Severnford!" If she had seemed to glimpse a figure in the hall it merely meant she was delirious. She'd asked Maureen to check purely because she wanted to face up to the house, to come to terms with it. She was determined to stop thinking of her room as her refuge, where she was protected by her music. Before she left the house she wanted to make it a step toward maturity.

The darkness shifted on the landing. Tired eyes, she explained—yet again her room enfolded her. She reached out and removed her flute from its case; she admired its length, its shine, the perfection of its measurements as they fitted to her fingers. She couldn't play it now—each time she tried she coughed—but it seemed charged with beauty. Her appreciation over, she laid the instrument to rest in its long black box.

"You retreat into your room and your music." Peter had said that, but he'd been speaking of a retreat from Hiroshima, from the conditions in Lower Brichester, from all the horrid things he'd insisted she confront. That was over, she said quickly, and the house was empty. Yet her eyes strayed from *Victimes du Devoir.*

Footsteps on the stairs again. This time she recognised Maureen's. The others—which she hadn't heard, of course—had been indeterminate, even sexless. She thought she'd ask Maureen whether she'd left her coat in the hall; she might have entered while Alma had slept, with the key she'd borrowed. The door opened and the panel of sunlight fled, darkening the room. No, thought Alma; to enquire into possible delusions would be an admission of weakness.

Maureen dropped her carrier and sneezed. "I think I've got your cold," she said indistinctly.

"Oh dear." Alma's mood had darkened with the room, with her decision not to speak. She searched for conversation in which to lose herself. "Have you heard yet when you're going to library school?" she asked.

"It's not settled yet. I don't know, the idea of a spinster career is beginning to depress me. I'm glad you're not faced with that."

"You shouldn't brood," Alma advised, restlessly stacking her books on the bedspread.

Maureen examined the titles. *"Victimes du Devoir, Thérèse Desqueyroux.* In the original French, good Lord. Why are you grappling with these?"

"So that I'll be an interesting young woman," Alma replied instantly. "I'm sure I've told you I feel guilty doing nothing. I can't practise, not with this cold. I only hope it's past before the Camside concert. Which reminds me, do you think I could borrow your transistor during the day? For the music programme. To give me peace."

"All right. I can't today, I start work at once. Though I think—no, it doesn't matter."

"Go on."

"Well, I agree with Peter, you know that. You can't have peace and beauty without closing your eyes to the world. Didn't he say that to seek peace in music was to seek complete absence of sensation, of awareness?"

"He said that and you know my answer." Alma unwillingly remembered; he had been here in her room, taking in the music in the bookcase, the polished gramophone—she'd sensed his disapproval and felt miserable; why couldn't he stay the strong forthright man she'd come to admire and love? "Really, darling, this is an immature attitude," he'd said. "I can't help feeling you want to abdicate from the human race and its suffering." Her eyes embraced the room. This was security, apart from the external chaos, the horrid part of life. "Even you appreciate the beauty of the museum exhibits," she told Maureen.

"I suppose that's why you work there. I admire them, yes, but in many cases by ignoring their history of cruelty."

"Why must you and Peter always look for the horrid things? What about this house? There are beautiful things here. That gramophone—you can look at it and imagine all the craftsmanship it took. Doesn't that seem to you fulfilling?"

"You know we leftists have a functional aesthetic. Anyway—" Maureen paused. "If that's your view of the house you'd best not know what I found out about it."

"Go on, I want to hear."

"If you insist. The *Brichester Herald* was useless—they reported the death of the owner and that was all—but I came across a chapter in Pamela Jones' book on local hauntings which gives the details. The last owner of the house lost a fortune on the stock market—I don't know how exactly, of course it's not my field—and he became a recluse in this house. There's worse to

come, are you sure you want—? Well, he went mad. Things started disappearing, so he said, and he accused something he thought was living in the house, something that used to stand behind him or mock him from the empty rooms. I can imagine how he started having hallucinations, looking at this view—"

Alma joined her at the window. "Why?" she disagreed. "I think it's beautiful." She admired the court before the house, the stone pillars framing the iron flourish of the gates; then a stooped woman passed across the picture, heaving a pram from which overflowed a huge cloth bag of washing. Alma felt depressed again; the scene was spoilt.

"Sorry, Alma," Maureen said; her cold hand touched Alma's fingers. Alma frowned slightly and insinuated herself between the sheets. "...Sorry," Maureen said again. "Do you want to hear the rest? It's conventional, really. He gassed himself. The Jones book has something about a note he wrote—insane, of course: he said he wanted to 'fade into the house, the one possession left to me', whatever that meant. Afterward the stories started; people used to see someone very tall and thin standing at the front door on moonlit nights, and one man saw a figure at an upstairs window with its head turning back and forth like clockwork. Yes, and one of the neighbours used to dream that the house was 'screaming for help'—the book explained that, but not to me I'm afraid. I shouldn't be telling you all this, you'll be alone until tonight."

"Don't worry, Maureen. It's just enjoyably creepy."

"A perceptive comment. It blinds you to what really happened. To think of him in this house, possessing the rooms, eating, sleeping—you forget he lived once, he was *real.* I wonder which room—?"

"You don't have to harp on it," Alma said. "You sound like Peter."

"Poor Peter, you *are* attacking him today. He'll be here to protect you tonight, after all."

"He won't because we've parted."

"You could have stopped me talking about him, then. But how for God's sake did it happen?"

"Oh, on Friday. I don't want to talk about it." Walking hand in hand to the front door and as always kissing as Peter turned the key; her father waiting in the hall: "Now listen, Peter, this can't go on"—prompted by her mother,

Alma knew, her father was too weak to act independently. She'd pulled Peter into the kitchen—"Go, darling, I'll try and calm them down," she'd said desperately—but her mother was waiting, immediately animated, like a fairground puppet in a penny arcade: "You know you've broken my heart, Alma, marrying beneath you." Alma had slumped into a chair, but Peter leaned against the dresser, facing them all, her mother's prepared speech: "Peter, I will not have you marrying Alma—you're uneducated, you'll get nowhere at the library, you're obsessed with politics and you don't care how much they distress Alma—" and on and on. If only he'd come to her instead of standing pugnaciously apart! She'd looked up at him finally, tearful, and he'd said: "Well, darling, I'll answer any point of your mother's you feel is not already answered"—and suddenly everything had been too much; she'd run sobbing to her room. Below the back door had closed. She'd wrenched open the window; Peter was crossing the garden beneath the rain. "Peter!" she'd cried out. "Whatever happens I still love you—" but her mother was before her, pushing her away from the window, shouting down: "Go back to your kennel!"... "What?" she asked Maureen, distracted back.

"I said I don't believe it was your decision. It must have been your mother."

"That's irrelevant. I broke it off finally." Her letter: "It would be impossible to continue when my parents refuse to receive you but anyway I don't want to any more, I want to study hard and become a musician"—she'd posted it on Saturday after a sleepless sobbing night, and immediately she'd felt released, at peace. Then the thought disturbed her: it must have reached Peter by now; surely he wouldn't try to see her? But he wouldn't be able to get in; she was safe.

"You can't tell me you love your mother more than Peter. You're simply taking refuge again."

"Surely you don't think I love her now. But I still feel I must be loyal. Is there a difference between love and loyalty?"

"Never having had either, I wouldn't know. Good God, Alma, stop barricading yourself with pseudo-philosophy!"

"If you must know, Maureen, I shall be leaving them as soon as I've paid for my flute. They gave it me for my twenty-first and now they're threatening to take it back. It'll take me two years, but I shall pay."

"And you'll be twenty-five. God Almighty, why? Bowing down to private ownership?"

"You wouldn't understand any more than Peter would."

"You've returned the ring, of course."

"No." Alma shifted *Victimes du Devoir*. "Once I asked Peter if I could keep it if we broke up." Two weeks before their separation; she'd felt the pressures—her parents' crush, his horrors—misshaping her, callous as thumbs on Plasticine. And he'd replied that there'd be no question of their breaking up, which she'd taken for assent.

"And Peter's feelings?" Maureen let the question resonate, but it was muffled by the music.

"Maureen, I just want to remember the happy times!"

"I don't understand that remark. At least, perhaps I do, but I don't like it."

"You don't approve."

"I do not." Maureen brandished her watch; from her motion she might have been about to slap Alma. "I can't discuss it with you. I'll be late." She buttoned herself into her coat on the landing. "I suppose I'll see Peter later," she said, and clumped downstairs.

With the slam Alma was alone. Her hot-water bottle chilled her toes; she thrust it to the foot of the bed. The room was darker; rain patted the pane. The metronome stood stolid in the shadow as if stilled forever. Maureen might well see Peter later; they both worked at Brichester Central Library. What if Maureen should attempt to heal the breach, to lend Peter her key? It was the sort of thing Maureen might well do, particularly as she liked Peter. Alma recalled suggesting once that they take Maureen out—"she does seem lonely, Peter"—only to find the two of them ideologically united against her; the most difficult two hours she'd spent with either of them, listening to their argument on Vietnam and the rest across the cocktail-bar table: horrid. Later she'd go down and bolt the door. But now—she turned restlessly and *Victimes du Devoir* toppled to the floor. She felt guilty not to be reading on—but she yearned to fill herself with music.

The shadows weighed on her eyes; she pulled the cord for light. Spray laced the window like cobwebs on a misty morning; outside the world was slate. The needle on her gramophone was dulled, but she selected the first

record, Britten's *Nocturne* ("Finnegan's Half-Awake" Peter had commented; she'd never understood what he meant). She placed the needle and let the music expand through her, flowing into troubled crevices. The beauty of Peter Pears' voice. Peter. Suddenly she was listening to the words: huge sponges, huge sea-worms—She picked off the needle; she didn't want it to wear away the beauty. Usually Britten could transmute all to beauty. Had Peter's pitiless vision thrown the horrid part into such relief? Once she'd taken him to a concert of *War Requiem* and in the interval he'd commented: "I agree with you—Britten succeeds completely in beautifying war, which is precisely my objection." And later he'd admitted that for the last half-hour he'd been pitying the poor cymbal-player, bobbing up and down on cue as if in church. That was his trouble: he couldn't achieve peace.

Suppose he came to the house? she thought again. Her gaze flew to the bedroom door, the massed dark on the landing. For a moment she was sure that Peter was out there; wasn't someone watching from the stairs? She coughed jaggedly; it recalled her. Deliberately she lifted her flute from its case and rippled a scale before the next cough came. Later she'd practise, no matter how she coughed; her breathing exercises might cure her lungs. "I find all these exercises a little terrifying," said Peter, "a little robotic." She frowned miserably; he seemed to wait wherever she sought peace. But thoughts of him carried her to the dressing-table drawer, to her ring; she didn't have to remember, the diamond itself crystallised beauty. She turned the jewel but it refused to sparkle beneath the heavy sky. Had he been uneducated? Well, he'd known nothing about music, he'd never known what a cadenza was—"what's the point of your academic analysis, where does it touch life?" Enough. She snapped the lid on the ring and restored it to its drawer. From now on she'd allow herself no time for disturbing memories: downstairs for soup—she must eat—then her flute exercises followed by *Victimes du Devoir* until she needed sleep.

The staircase merged into the hall, vaguely defined beneath her drowsiness; the Victorian valentines seemed dusty in the dusk, neglected in the depths of an antique shop. As Alma passed the living room a stray light was caught in the mirror and a memory was trapped: herself and Peter on the couch, separating instantly, tongues retreating guiltily into mouths, each time the opening door flashed in the mirror: toward the end Peter would clutch her rebelliously, but she couldn't let her parents come on them embracing, not after their own marriage had been drained of love. "We'll be

each other's peace," she'd once told Peter, secretly aware as she spoke that she was terrified of sex. Once they were engaged she'd felt a duty to give in —but she'd panted uncontrollably, her mouth gulping over his, shaming her. One dreadful night Peter had rested his head on her shoulder and she'd known that he was consulting his watch behind her back. And suddenly, weeks later, it had come right; she was at peace, soothed, her fears almost engulfed—which was precisely when her parents had shattered the calm, the door thrown open, jarring the mirror: "Peter, this is a respectable house, I won't have you keeping us all up like this until God knows what hour, even if you are used to that sort of thing—" and then that final confrontation —Quickly, Alma told herself, onward. She thrust the memories back into the darkness of the two dead rooms to be crushed by her father's desk, choked by her mother's flowers...

On the kitchen windowsill the medicine was black against the back garden, the grey grass plastered down by rain: it loomed like a poison bottle in a Hitchcock film. What was Peter doing at this moment? Where would he be tonight? She fumbled sleepily with the tin of tomato soup and watched it gush into the pan. Where would he be tonight? With someone else? If only he would try to contact her, to show her he still cared—Nonsense. She turned up the gas. No doubt he'd be at the cinema; he'd tried to force films on her, past her music. Such as the film they'd seen on the afternoon of their parting, the afternoon they'd taken off work together, *Hurry Sundown;* it hadn't been the theme of racism which had seemed so horrid, but those scenes with Michael Caine sublimating his sex-drive through his saxophone —she'd brushed her hair against Peter's cheek, hopefully, desperately, but he was intent on the screen, and she could only guess his thoughts, too accurately. Perhaps he and Maureen would find each other; Alma hoped so —then she could forget about them both. The soup bubbled and she poured it into a dish. Gas sweetened the air; she checked the control, but it seemed turned tight. The dresser—there he had stood, pugnaciously apart, watching her. She set the medicine before her on the table; she'd take it upstairs with her—she didn't want to come downstairs again. In her mind she overcame the suffocating shadow of the rooms, thick with years of tobacco-smoke in one, with lavender-water in another, by her shining flute, the sheets of music brightly turning.

A dim thin figure moved down the hall toward the kitchen; it hadn't entered by the front door—rather had it emerged from the twin vista in the hall

mirror. Alma sipped her soup, not tasting it but warmed. The figure fingered the twined flowers, sat at her father's desk. Alma bent her head over the plate. The figure stood outside the kitchen door, one hand on the doorknob. Alma stood; her chair screeched; she saw herself pulled erect by panic in the familiar kitchen like a child in darkness, and willed herself to sit. The figure climbed the stairs, entered her room, padded through the shadows, examining her music, breathing on her flute. Alma's spoon tipped and the soup drained back into its disc. Then, determinedly, she dipped again.

She had to fasten her thoughts on something as she mounted the stairs, medicine in hand; she thought of the Camside orchestral concert next week —thank God she wouldn't be faced with Peter chewing gum amid the ranks of placid tufted eggs. She felt for her bedroom light switch. Behind the bookcase shadows sprang back into hiding and were defined. She smiled at the room and at herself; then carefully she closed the door. After the soup she felt a little hot, light-headed. She moved to the window and admired the court set back from the bare street; above the roofs the sky was diluted lime-and-lemon beneath clouds like wads of stuffing. "'Napier Court'—I see the point, but don't you think that naming houses is a bit pretentious?" Alma slid her feet through the cold sheets, recoiling from the frigid bottle. She'd fill it later; now she needed rest. She set aside *Victimes du Devoir* and lay back on the pillow.

Alma awoke. Someone was outside on the landing. At once she knew: Peter had borrowed Maureen's key. He came into the room, and as he did so her mother appeared from behind the door and drove the music-stand into his face. Alma awoke. She was swaddled in blankets, breathing through them. For a moment she lay inert; one hand was limp between her legs, her ear pressed on the pillow; these two parts of her felt miles distant, and something vast throbbed silently against her eardrums. She catalogued herself: slight delirium, a yearning for the toilet. She drifted with the bed; she disliked to emerge, to be orientated by the cold.

Nonsense, don't indulge your weakness, she told herself, and poked her head out. Surely she'd left the light on?

Darkness blindfolded her, warm as the blankets. She reached for the cord, and the blue window blackened as the room appeared. The furniture felt padded by delirium. Alma burned. She struggled into her dressing-gown and saw the clock: 12.05. Past midnight and Maureen hadn't come? Then

she realised: the clock had stopped—it must have been around the time of Maureen's departure. Of course Maureen wouldn't return; she'd been repelled by disapproval. Which meant that Alma would have no transistor, no means of discovering the time. She felt as if she floated bodiless, disorientated, robbed of sensation, and went to the window for some indication; the street was deserted, as it might be at any hour soon after dark.

Turning from the pane she pivoted in the mirror; behind her the bed stood on her left. Something was wrong; it should have been on the right. Or did it reverse in the reflection? She turned to look but froze; if she faced round she'd meet a figure waiting, hands outstretched, one side of its face incomplete, like those photographs from Vietnam Peter had insisted she confront—The thought released her; she turned to an empty room. So much for her delirium. Deliberately she switched out the light and padded down the landing.

On her way back she passed her mother's room; she felt compelled to enter. Between the twin beds shelves displayed the Betjemans, the books on Greece, histories of the Severn Valley. On the beds the sheets were stretched taut as one finds them on first entering a hotel room. When Peter had stayed for weekends her father had moved back into this room. Her father—out every night to the pub with his friends; he hadn't been vindictive to her mother, just unfeeling and unable to adjust to her domestic rhythm. When her mother had accused Alma of "marrying beneath her" she'd spoken of herself. Deceptively freed by their absence, Alma began to understand her mother's hostility to Peter. "You're a handsome bugger," her mother had once told him; Alma had pinpointed that as the genesis of her hostility—it had preyed on her mother's mind, this lowering herself to say what she thought he'd like only to realise that the potential of this vulgarity lurked within herself. Now Alma saw the truth; once more sleeping in the same room as her husband, she'd had the failure of her marriage forced upon her; she'd projected it on Alma's love for Peter. Alma felt released; she had understood them, perhaps she could even come once more to love them, just as eventually she'd understood that buying Napier Court had fulfilled her father's ambition to own a house in Brichester—her father, trying to talk to Peter who never communicated to him (he might have been unable, but this was no longer important), finally walking away from Peter whistling "Release Me" which he'd reprised the day after the separation, somewhat

unfeelingly she thought. Even this she could understand. To seal her understanding, she turned out the light and closed the door.

Immediately a figure rose before her mother's mirror, combing long fingers through its hair. Alma managed not to shudder; she strode to her own door, opened it on blackness, and crossed to her bed. She reached out to it and fell on her knees; it was not there.

As she knelt trembling, the house rearranged itself round her; the dark corridors and rooms, perhaps not empty as she prayed, watched pitilessly, came to bear upon her. She staggered to her feet and clutched the cord, almost touching a gaping face, which was not there when the light came on. Her bed was inches from her knees, where it had been when she left it, she insisted. Yet this failed to calm her. There was more than darkness in the house; she was no longer comfortingly alone in her warm and welcoming home. Had Peter borrowed Maureen's key? All at once she hoped he had; then she'd be in his arms, admitting that her promise to her mother had been desperate; she yearned for his protection—strengthened by it she believed she might confront horrors if he demanded them.

She watched for Peter from the window. One night while he was staying Peter had come to her room—She focused on the court; it seemed cut off from the world, imprisoning. Eclipsed by the gatepost, a pedestrian crossing's beacons exchanged signals without meaning; she thought of others flashing far into the night on cold lonely country roads, and shivered. He had come into her room; they'd caressed furtively and whispered so as not to wake her parents, though now she suspected that her mother had lain awake, listening through her father's snores. "Take me," she'd pleaded—but in the end she couldn't; the wall was too attentive. Now she squirmed at her remembered endearments: "my nice Peter"—"my handsome Peter"—"my lovely Peter"—and at last her halting praise of his body, the painful search for new phrases. She no longer cared to recall; she sloughed off the memories with an epileptic shudder.

Suddenly a man appeared in the gateway of the court. Alma stiffened. The figure passed; she relaxed, but only for a moment; had there not been something strange about its long loping strides, its trailing shadow? This was childish, she rebuked herself; she'd no more need to become obsessed with someone hastening to a date than with Peter, who was no longer in a position to protect her. She turned from the window before the figure should

form behind her, and picked up her flute. Half-an-hour of exercises, then sleep. She opened the case. It was empty.

It was as if her mother had returned and taken back the flute; she felt the house again rise up round her. She grasped an explanation; last time she'd fingered her flute—when had that been? Time had slipped away—she hadn't replaced it in its case. She threw the sheets back from the bed; only the dead bottle was exposed. She knelt again and peered beneath the bed. Something bent above her, waiting, grinning. No, the flute hadn't rolled. She stood up and the figure moved behind her. "Don't!" she whimpered. At that moment she saw that the dressing-table drawer was open. She took one step toward it, to her ring, but could not look into it, knowing what was there—a face peering up at her from the drawer, its eyes opening, infinitely slowly, the lashes parting stickily—Delirium again? It didn't matter. Alma's lips trembled. She could still escape. She went to the wardrobe—but nothing could have made her open it; instead she caught up her clothes from the chair at the foot of the bed and dressed clumsily, dragging her skirt round to reach the zip. The room was silent; her music had fled, but any minute something else would take its place.

Since she had to face the darkened house, she did so. She trembled only once. The Victorian valentines hung immobile; the mirrors extended the darkness, strengthened its power. The house waited. Alma fell into the court; from the cobblestones, the erect gateposts, the street beyond, she drew courage. Two years and she'd be far from here, a complete person. Freed from fear, she left the front door open. But she shivered; the night air knifed through the dangerous warmth of her cold. She must go—where? To Maureen's, she decided; that was not too far, and she knew Maureen to be kind. She'd forget her disapproval if she saw Alma like this. Alma strode toward the orange fan which flared from the beacon behind the gatepost, and stopped.

Resting against the beacon was a white bag, half as high as Alma. She'd seen such bags before, full of laundry. Yet she could not force herself to pull back the gates and pass. Suddenly the gates were her protection against the shapeless mass, for deep within herself she suppressed a horror that the bag might move toward her, flapping. It couldn't be what it appeared; who would have left it there at this time of night? A car hissed past on the glittering tarmac. Alma choked a scream for help. Screaming in the middle

of the street—what would her mother have thought? Musicians didn't do that sort of thing. Besides, why shouldn't someone have left a bag of washing at the crossing while she went for help to heft it to the laundry? Alma touched the gates and withdrew, chilled; here she was, risking pneumonia in the night, and for what? The panic of delirium. As a child she'd screamed hoarsely through her cold that a man was bending over her; she was too old for that. Back to bed—no, to find her flute, and then to bed, to purge herself of these horrid visions. Ironically she thought: Peter would be proud of her if he knew. Her flute—need the two years any longer be meaningful? Still touched by understanding, she couldn't think that her parents would hold to their threat, made after all before she'd written to Peter. What must have been a night-breeze moved the bag. Forcing her footsteps not to drag, Alma left the orange radiance and closed the door behind her; her last test.

In the hall the thing she had thought was Maureen's coat shifted wakefully. Alma ignored it, but her flesh crept hot and cold. At the far end of the hall mirror, a figure approached, arms extended as if blindly. Alma smiled; it was too like a childish fear to frighten her: "enjoyably creepy"—she tried to recapture her mood of the morning, but every organ of her body felt hot and pounding. She broke and ran to her room; the light, oddly, was still on.

In the rooms below her father's desk creaked; the flower arrangements writhed. Did it matter? Alma argued desperately. There was no lock on her door, but she refused to barricade it; there was nothing solid abroad in the house, nothing to harm her but the lure of her own fears. Her flute—she wouldn't play it once she found it; she'd go to bed with its protection. She moved round the bed and saw the flute, overlaid by *Victimes du Devoir*. The flute was bent in half.

One tear pressed from Alma's eyes before she realised the full horror. As she whirled, completely disorientated, a mirror crashed below. Something shrieked toward her through the corridors. She sank onto the bed, defenceless, wishing all were over. Music blasted from the record player, the *Nocturne;* Alma leapt up and screamed. "In roaring he shall rise," the voice bawled, "and on the surface—" A music stand was hurled to the floor. "*die!*" The needle scraped across the record and clicked off. The walls seemed on the point of tearing, bulging inward. Alma no longer cared. She'd screamed once; she could do no more. Now she waited.

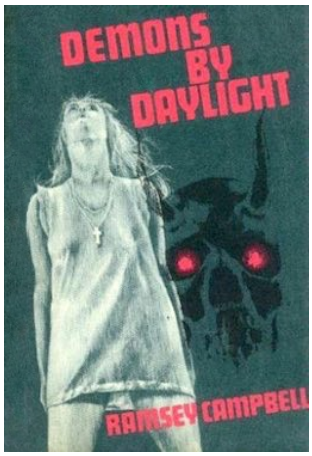
When the figure formed deep in the mirror she knew that all was over. She faced it, drained of feeling. It grew closer, arms stretched out, its face inflated grey by gas. Alma wept; it was horrid. She knew who it was; a shaft of truth had pierced the suffocating warmth of her delirium. The suicide had possessed the house, was the house; he had waited for someone like her. "Go on," she sobbed at him, "take me!" The bloated cheeks moved in a swollen grin; the arms stretched out for her and vanished.

The house was empty. Alma was surrounded by a vacuum into which something must rush. She stood up shaking and fell into the vacuum; her sight was torn away. She tried to move; there was no longer any muscle to respond. She felt nothing, but utter horror closed her in. Somewhere she sensed her body, moving happily on her bedroom carpet, picking up her ruined flute, breathing a hideous note into it. She tried to scream. Impossible.

Only in dreams can houses scream for help.

1968

The Second Staircase



Written In: 1968
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DELTAFILMS INTERVIEW MEET EUSTON 9.00—But never having met Mike Parry, Carol bobbed above the crowd and thrust through trajectories as the clock edged on to 9.15, finding Mike finally beneath the clock, hopefully holding aloft as identification a copy of *Castle of Frankenstein*. Mike smiled recognition, then his mouth drooped as the minute hand turned downward.

'I'm awfully sorry, Carol,' he said. 'Their front office phoned me last night; the interview's off. They'll be shooting exteriors all day. Schedules strike again.'

'But I brought my camera and everything,' Carol protested, 'and I paid for the train and took the day off as soon as I got your telegram!'

'I know, but it isn't my fault after all. When you're doing interviews for *Castle of Frankenstein* I suppose you have to expect this sort of thing. What do you want to do now? Will you catch the midnight train?'

'I don't have to go back till tomorrow, so I'm certainly not going to. But I haven't got a hotel.' Carol waited for Mike to offer a room.

'Then we'd better find you one. Listen, Richard Davis has set up a special showing of his horror film tomorrow night if you're interested. George Harrison and Ravi Shankar should be there, and John Campbell may be coming.'

'I've got to go back tomorrow!' Carol complained shrilly, thinking of the supervisor at the duplicating firm, shuddering.

'All right, then, we'll find you a hotel, and then I suggest a movie.'

At Lancaster Gate the grinding lift deposited them before a scanty bus-stop queue, its indifferent curiosity unwelcoming as the drained November light. Mike led Carol past towering girders which sketched some future hotel, into streets of hotels and boarding-houses staked out by bare black trees. In the

Underground, among commuters suspended from the ceiling, reading swaying newspapers, Carol had been surprised how easy it was to talk to Mike, to flatten the flickering screen into words; while their correspondence, initiated by Carol on seeing Mike's name signed to a magazine article, had been friendly, Carol had known too many conversations in which the other had soon withdrawn on some pretext. Mike must have been unable to offer a room. He liked Mike.

'Good Lord, where've you left your suitcase?' Mike halted by a lone parked Mini marbled by frost.

'I haven't brought one. I don't need it for one night.' Carol slept naked: a proof of virility, he told himself.

'Hmm, some hotels don't like that. That's if we can find one.' Glass doors, pillared porches: 'Hotel Full'. Hostile stations abruptly interrupted by a side street, its corner marked by one Fiat whose owner fought its engine behind the windows, steamy as a bathroom with his breath. 'Any port,' Mike suggested, indicating a protruding plastic sign halfway down the Victorian line: HOTEL DOCHERTY—*Bed and Breakfast*.

'I hope it isn't squalid,' Carol commented, following.

'Vacancies'! Mike rang the bell and peered into the pastel vista fragmented by the frosted glass. 'A horror film, of course,' said Carol, leafing through *What's On in London*.

'I thought the Bergman at the Academy—never mind, I can see that next week.'

'Here's a good one—behind the Charing Cross Road, it says. Oh, I'd love to see this—'

A blonde in a short blue dress and white apron let them into the dull-red carpeted hall. 'A single room for one night?' Mike enquired, turning to Carol for confirmation.

'One moment please, I will go for the manager,' she said, faintly Swedish.

'I'd love to see this—*House of Dr Jekyll*, sounds great.'

Mike turned from the visitors' book, which was overshadowed by a vase of dusty plastic flowers. 'Sounds vintage,' he agreed—or was it irony? Carol wasn't sure. About to argue, Carol heard voices descending the stairs at the end of the hall; two women beneath a stained-glass window robbed of

brilliance, arm in arm as they aided each other: a statement, an audible breath, a step down. 'In the river,' one wheezed, her voice faltering with her foot in space like a senile soundtrack. Mike glanced up, then returned to the vase; Carol watched and listened. 'She fell into bad company, I'll wager. That's the trouble with servants. And of course you don't need me to tell you what happened next.' A tinny hymn rose from a radio beyond the door through which the girl and manager were conferring hurriedly. The women wavered on the gulf's edge two steps up. 'What do they expect, letting foreigners in?' The women rested panting in the hall, then sidled suspiciously past Carol into and out of a passage at right angles to the hall, leading to what must be its twin. 'She couldn't even speak English. The manager's wife, if that's what she is and I have my doubts, had to tell her what to cook in French! Isn't that wasteful planning?' 'And that sort of girl, if a *man* got hold of her...' The women drew closer together and fumbled the front door closed behind them.

'If he doesn't mind, he can take 3,' the manager said and emerged to confront Carol. He was stout, ringed with fat; bloodshot eyes in a face red under sweat. The Swedish girl watched from the doorway. The manager glanced back at her, inflating his rings, and smirking, winked at Carol, the secret sign of the lechers' confraternity. Carol stared at him; he sympathised with the girl, felt she was degraded by the manager's allusion. Men always degraded women; Carol wouldn't if one ever came to him. Rebuffed, the manager told her: 'You'll not be moving into B until Mrs Docherty fits it out for you. She's here replacing our French maid,' he persisted to Carol, and boisterously continued: 'Nasty business, that!' Mike frowned at Carol; Carol waited.

'Can you wait a bit at all? I can give you 3, but it isn't ready yet. An hour or so?' In the unseen office, a clock chimed ten and an announcer declared that it was five to ten. 'No, that's fine,' said Carol. Thirty shillings—well, the room should be acceptable, judging from the hall, and the Swedish maid was sweet. He scribbled his signature at the foot of the column of dehumanised names and exchanged the notes for keys, keeping aloof from the moist red hand. 'I'll find the room tonight,' he said. 'Top of the stairs,' explained the manager. 'Top o' the mornin' to you gentlemen.'

'God, I hate men like that,' said Carol in the street.

'I don't hate anybody,' said Mike.

Mike couldn't place the cinema. After a meal at the Wimpy they crossed Leicester Square; the Odeon collapsed with a crash beneath cranes. 'Must be up here,' said Mike, indicating a street behind the hasty crowd, raindrops jewelling their shoulders. 'You sure you wouldn't like to see something more tasteful? What's on with it?'

'*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*,' Carol read phonetically.

'Now that is beautiful. I'm with you for that.'

Squeezing between piled barrows, books toppling from one, apples rolling from another, they ignored the beckoning figures beneath *Sex Films* signs, passed a Turkish restaurant and turned up an alley. 'Sex films,' Carol said. 'Isn't it degrading?' 'How much more so than *House of Dr Jekyll*?' Mike retorted, pointing at the half-naked girl in the monster's arms, the hunchback with the whip, the doctor fondling a skull.

The screen was grey and stained; at its side plaster cupids craned their necks to peer within the boxes of the converted theatre. The girl who had taken their tickets now donned an ice-cream tray and faced the auditorium. As Carol stared round at the seats—an old man snoring six rows behind, a scarved student reading *Cahiers du Cinema*—the faces dimmed and were extinguished. The ice-cream girl idled up the aisle. 'Go away and let us concentrate,' hissed Carol.

'There's no—*people*—left up at the castle,' the hero was told by a Transylvanian coachman from Brooklyn. Carol put his feet up; someone snored; someone splintered an ice cream carton. A hunchbacked retainer hobbled down the hall, avoiding the plywood walls. 'Who is the beautiful girl who stared from the window as I entered?' asked the hero. "Tis my daughter and you'd best not forget it,' croaked the hunchback. Carol hated him; he hoped the monster would give him what he deserved. Cripples offended him: like the supervisor at the duplicating firm—stamping up the office, pretending to help Carol with his work, putting one arm around his shoulders, ruffling his hair—the sissy swine; Carol thought of him in bed, and shuddered back to the screen. The hunchback was beating his daughter; thunder rolled like bowls. 'Leave the girl alone!' shouted the hero, snatching the whip, laying it across the hump; Carol rubbed his hands in glee. Someone felt his way along the shaking row of seats and plumped down in front of Carol. 'A whole empty cinema—' Carol complained and waited while Mike moved. He stood his camera between his feet and saw Dr Jekyll

stride forth from a secret panel. 'Fool!' he snarled to the hunchback. 'You and your daughter will ruin my experiment! Get the girl, Karl—' and the coachman carried her struggling against a sheet of lightning. 'As for you, sir, perhaps you may have the privilege of donating your brain for my experiment—' and the hunchback struck the hero from behind.

'So the sixties don't have a monopoly on gratuitous nastiness,' Mike commented. '*Sssh*,' snarled Carol. Lightning thrust a finger in the vault, prised it open; the monster shambled forth, bolts protruding from its neck like boils. 'The first adequate shot in an hour,' said Mike to himself. The coachman was eating sausages in the kitchen; a huge fat man—Carol saw the manager of the Hotel Docherty. The monster peeped in the window. Another sausage went down whole. The monster strode through the panes. The man in front of Carol bobbed up and down, chortling. The film shook; darts and rings of light were sprinkled on it, and a bright thread was stretched across the frame. The hunchback appeared and shouted to distract the monster; the film jerked and his rubber hump bounced about the screen as if by magic. Carol groaned and punched his thigh. The coachman squashed silently and spread across the plaster cupids, then reformed as the projectionist whipped off the Cinemascope lens. The monster advanced—to break the snivelling fat man's back, to tear off his head—but it merely strangled him; Carol deflated. 'By the Almighty, sir, what have you wrought?' the hero cried as the monster charged through a cardboard wall and the castle collapsed. Bricks fell on the hunchback and one bounced off his hump; bottles of acid smashed on the doctor; the hero carried the girl into the dawn and looked back once. 'He was a good man once, but he wanted power,' he intoned.

'I don't see how you enjoy that sort of thing,' Mike said in the interval.

'It doesn't hurt anyone,' said Carol. 'Nothing you can't touch can hurt you.'

The opera film about the umbrellas was stupid, Carol thought. A man drove into a garage and sang about his car. Carol thrust his knees up and tipped the ashtray into his lap; he galvanised upright. 'Look at my trousers!' he cried, brushing. 'Ah, merde!' sang someone on the screen. The student with the scarf laughed ostentatiously. 'Look at all this,' protested Carol.

'How about watching the movie?' suggested Mike.

'But it's stupid! Whoever heard of people singing everything? My trousers still aren't clean,' Carol said.

'I'll drop you a line sometime this week,' called Mike as the doors met. The tunnel drew the train into itself and Carol headed for the stairs, past panting late-comers. On the escalator heavy-eyed descending girls passed wide-eyed girls in bra and panties; Carol adjusted his camera, eyes averted. Fashion photographers must take a delight in degrading their models. Carol's subjects were landscapes and friends—he'd have liked to have photographed Mike as an aid to memory. His heels clanked on the metal treads of cracked white-tiled staircases; he strode down dusty circular corridors under naked bulbs, swinging the penumbra of a camera. They'd made their way from the plaster cupids to the Charing Cross Road, a drunk on a doorstep swinging a bottle, a blonde in a mini-skirt rhapsodising over Beckett, a cluster of umbrellas protruding from a crowd as from a flowerpot outside Better Books, within which Mike and Carol sheltered. 'Why, hi!' said Mike, buying a copy of *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*. 'These are the editors of *Gothique* and this is Mick Harris of *Twylight*, and this is Carol, my cameraman who wasn't, folks.' An old man picked up papers from the platform, studied, them, dropped them muttering; Carol stared into the tunnel, where trains thrust and vanished like huge mysterious worms. They'd all wandered round the bookshops, talking films, ending up in the Golden Egg beneath the Royal Dental Hospital as the Leicester Square fountain dulled from molten in the sunset. Carol leafed through Mike's horror-movie magazine, admiring the photographs but unable to understand a word of the French, and Mick Harris said: 'Don't tell me you side with our friends here on horror for its own sake!' Carol felt the focus of attention turn to him and argued—but he couldn't talk about the supervisor at the duplicating firm, about the hotel manager. Then the play was caught from him; the argument was bounding back and forth across the table, never falling. Carol turned back to the magazine; he felt uneasy in a crowd, threatened by negation. The magazine—Once, reading *Gothique* in the lunch-hour, he'd sensed the supervisor's chin almost on his shoulder, heard the soft voice: 'You could see all these films complete in Paris, if you ever feel like a holiday. If you're short of money...' Carol stamped his foot. The old man on the platform snarled something surrealistic and went off in search of unprotected scraps of paper. Mike and the others faded; from the horizonless desert of his life arose the familiar twisted figure, the hotel manager sharp and flat beside him. Carol hadn't lost the supervisor in *House of Dr Jekyll*.

With an approaching drum-roll, the train emerged blindly from the tunnel. Carol sat down, placed his camera beside him, brushed at his lap, still stained. At Lancaster Gate he left *What's On in London* on the seat; as the train continued, he glimpsed a man take his place and pick it up. The lift ground streetward and left him before the lone glittering bus-stop; behind it hung the moon like a stained light-bulb. He turned right toward the side-street and the Hotel Docherty. Five youths were dawdling toward him, elbowing each other, playing railings with umbrellas. He crossed the street and circled behind them to reach the hotel, swinging his camera. 'What's that you've got, darling, a handbag?' called one. Quickly bored with him, they jostled, punching, into the station.

Carol's face burned; his fists clenched. Who did they think he was, the supervisor? All these men exaggerating their virility—it made him sick. He glared at each frosted front-door panel. How many rooms tonight in which some poor girl would suffer untold humiliation? Like the little Swedish maid—Perhaps she'd sensed his sympathy that morning; she knew he'd be gentle, respectful. He might meet her on the stairs.

His fingers on the key were frozen; he could barely fumble it into the slot. The radio was dead; the hall was silent. Immobile, a pen hung on a chain from the visitors' book; one link was open, hooked. Carol tiptoed by and upward. The landing window was stained black. On the first floor a line of cold white hostile doors reflected their doubles; no sound suggested that the rooms were occupied. Halfway to the second floor Carol passed a toilet. The Swedish girl was forgotten; he wanted to find his room, his bed, to forget ambitions, failures. On the second landing hung a static chandelier like a giant spider encrusted with ice. Beneath it was a staircase, training a threadbare carpet into darkness. Carol touched the wall; no light switch. Top of the stairs. He padded into blindness; his elbow collided with a turn. Hot at the thought of awakenings below, he placed each foot with anguished care on the muffling carpet, wary of the fortified silence. His last step found no stair; his groping fingers chilled on a smooth door. They ranged and traced: 3. His fingernails scraped on the lock, the key slipped in and the door opened. A box of midnight luminosity stood before him. He closed the door and switched on the light.

Thirty shillings? Even in London—A rust-red carpet edged by a walnut wardrobe opposite the door, to its left a bed beneath an open window, a

straight chair beneath the bed's foot and a washbowl, nothing to relieve the wool waste pitilessly lit by an unshaded bulb reflecting from the pale grainy wallpaper. Maybe he'd complain—but in the morning; he was tired. He tiptoed downstairs to the toilet. The black enamel of the fittings was speckled with whitewash. The hotel was still disquietingly quiet, uninhabited; at least he wouldn't be required to strain for staircase conversation. As he closed out the foreshortened luminous parallelogram at the foot of his stairs, he found that the latch had been held back; he released it. It must have been unlocked when first he entered his room. He crossed to the washbowl. No towel lay across the dark-red scalloped counterpane. Carol unfolded his own, neatly packed into his coat pocket; he would never use towels which others might have touched. One corner yielded his toothbrush; he grinned mechanically at himself, freckled with someone's toothpaste on the mirror. No tumbler—now that was too much. He knelt and caught the jetting water in his mouth, the plumbing twittering like machine-guns, like the Martian deathrays in *The War of the Worlds*, the fat man backing away, streaming sweat, running, mown down; his lips momentarily closed over the tap. Then he stripped, doused himself with lukewarm water, towelled hurriedly, shivering, refolded his trousers on the chair, brushing at the stain. He thrust at the open window. It resisted. Well, he was man enough to stand it. He turned out the light, padded to the bed and pulled the blankets over his shoulders, enjoying the keen sheets. He drew his knees toward his stomach. His warmth lulled him.

Something soft and heavy moved across his face. He jerked upright into blackness, and his nails clawed at the curtain swaying in a frozen draught above him. The room formed before his eyes. A sheet of moonlight was hung up in the doorframe and stretched along the carpet to the window. Light glimmered in the mirror and painted Carol's jacket on the chair as a pale rectangle like a headstone; the wardrobe was a mass of shadow to his left. Carol became aware that he was trembling with cold; his shoulder-blades were aching. He must have slept for several hours. He heaved at the window; his fingers slithered up the frame; beneath he saw parked cars, huddled like animals for warmth. His hands were trembling independent of his stoicism. He'd never sleep like this; he had to compromise. He swung onto the arctic carpet and tottered numbly to the chair. Grabbing his vest, which he could hardly see or feel, he struggled into it. His bare arms thrust from it and it fell about his body. The mirror framed its last quiver. Carol

faced himself; he knew something was wrong. The length. Glancing down, he saw that he had not put on his vest at all. It was a girl's slip.

The door opened soundlessly, and the manager came in.

As the closing door flashed in the frame of moonlight, Carol saw that the figure on the wood was not 3 but B. Good Lord, I'm awfully sorry, what must you think, he was about to say. But his lips were working silently toward a scream. He was shaking, not with cold but with terror, somehow not his own. Then he knew. The manager came forward from the moonlight into the thick darkness, and as he left the beam he leered. Carol felt the silent shadows close in to hold him helpless. The crimson face moved nearer, shining in the darkness like a demon. A voice pleaded brokenly with the hot approaching mass, but it could not be Carol's; he did not speak French. His consciousness was flying off in fragments and something alien was rushing in to fill the vacuum. His body changed. He did not dare to look. He lunged desperately for the doorknob. A great shape threw its weight against the door. Carol's fingers clutched the light switch by the mirror. The bulb blazed on an empty room. The door was locked. Carol's clothes hung on the chair. He closed his eyes as he looked down, then forced them open; he was wearing only a vest. Of the manager, those hands Carol could feel, there was no sign.

The wall turned blinding white; the switch swam forward, glaring silver. It was dawn. The first car sped through an amber shaft between the houses. Carol felt that he had sat on the bed, trembling though fully dressed, for years. At last he leapt up, thrust towel and toothbrush into pockets, dragged the door open and stood waiting. Up the staircase filtered the sound of someone searching radio wavebands. Through Carol's mind flew thoughts: it hadn't happened to him, it wasn't real, it couldn't hurt him any more than could a film—none of them more convincing in the curtained dawn than they had been all night, as he'd sat vainly waiting for the next onslaught. He had to talk to someone. He flinched into the hall, eyes on the office door. No radio: the calm before the shock-effect. He backed into the branching corridor, into the parallel hall, up the second staircase to his room at the top —bright geometric wallpaper, towels across the bed, soap and tumbler over the wash-bowl—and down again to the telephone which had belatedly registered. But Mike wasn't in.

'How should I know when he'll be back? I'm not his mother!' Mike's landlady clicked and whirred.

Carol held the dead receiver. Women—he hated them, their soft helpless bodies, passively resisting, unattainable—even the little Swedish girl—No, he must think straight. He had to talk to her. She might be next. She could help him rid himself of the manager. He couldn't be along in the London crowds again, pressed in upon himself; not yet. He descended to the breakfast room.

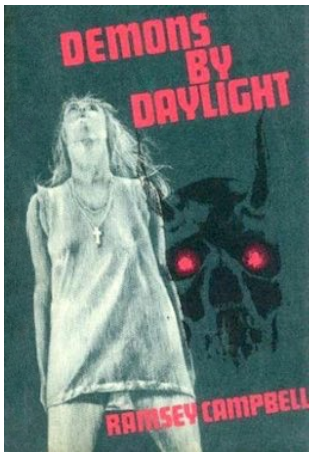
Faint tunes were strained from wall-speakers; yellow chairs and tables were spaced out across the floor and set with red plastic plates. Carol threw his coat on one chair and sat opposite. Toast was shelved in a plastic rack. Carol scraped butter on a slice, the sound resented by the silence. Then he left it on his plate. Why didn't she come? He could feel the manager filling his body, jerking his reflexes. Suddenly he realised that he faced a cupboard door; the kitchen was behind him. He pushed his chair back. The runners caught on the lino. He heard the kitchen door open, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw the crimson face.

'It's not every morning you'll find me serving.' The red hand placed a plate. 'It's the Irish they say are superstitious, is it? Not the Swedes, eh?' The face bent toward him. 'I'm telling you that girl wouldn't go near our last maid's room last night. Stayed with friends. You'd think nobody ever killed themselves in Sweden. I'm telling you, I'll have something for her when she gets here. Just because—' The manager caught him and threw him on the bed. 'There's my wife calling. Top o' the mornin' to you!'

The kitchen door closed. Silence. Finally the faint music returned, somewhere outside Carol. By the time the girl arrived, Carol would be gone. There would be only the manager.

And the voice: 'If you're short of money...'

The Interloper



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When Scott entered the classroom it was as if a vacuum-jar had been clamped over the class. Thirteen conversations were truncated; thirty boys stood, thirty folding seats slammed back; a geometry set crashed, scattered; John Norris coughed nervously, falsely, wondering if Scott had heard him saying seconds before to Dave Pierce "The Catacombs at lunchtime, then?" Scott's gaze froze about him. "All right, sit down," said Scott. "I don't want this period wasted." He sat. The congregation sat. Homework books were flurried open. John sensed Scott's haste, and pin-cushions grew in his palms; he thought of the solution on which everyone else agreed; he lived for the arrival of the Inspector in the afternoon, when Scott surely couldn't take it out of him.

"Answer to the first one. Robbins?" On the bus that morning, during breaks in the dawn game of musical window-seats, they'd compared solutions. ("What'd you get, Norris?" "34.5." "You sure? I had 17.31." "So did I." "Yes, I did too") The pins stung. "Correct, x = 2.03 or -3.7. Anybody not get that? Any questions?" But nobody dared stand unless so ordered. "Next. Thomas?" Thomas stood, adjusted his homework, gave vent to a spurious sigh of desperate concentration. Scott drummed a stick of chalk, swept down in dusty robes on Thomas. "Come on, lad, you can't dither in an exam. 27.5 is the answer, isn't it?" Thomas beamed. "That's right, sir, of course."

"No, it isn't, you blockhead!" Scott strode behind Thomas to peer at his homework, drove his knuckles into Thomas's kidney with an accuracy born of years of practice. "Wake your ideas up, lad! Fuller, can you show Thomas how to think?"

The exam in six months, possessing Scott with terrifying force. The Inspector's visit, driving Scott to fury at being subdued in the afternoon. Oh,

God, John prayed, don't let him ask me question five. "That's it, Fuller. Go on, sit down, Thomas, we don't need you as class figurehead. Hawks, what have you got for the next one?" The class next door roared with laughter, Foghorn Ford must be taking them, the English master, John's favourite, who let him write poetry in class sometimes when he'd turned in particularly good homework. Silence. Laughter. John was jealous. Scott was behind him somewhere, pacing closer: "Come on, come on, Hawks!" Further down the corridor cracked the flat sound of a strap. Some of the masters you could come to terms with, like the art master; you had only to emulate the skunk to get rid of him. But Strutt, the gym master—he'd have your gym-shoe off for that. And you couldn't do much about Collins's geography class—"Spit" they called him, because sitting on his front row was like standing on a stormy promenade. Yet no class was so suffocated by fear as Scott's. One lunch-hour when John had been writing poetry Thomas had snatched his notebook and Scott had come in and confiscated it; when John had protested Scott had slapped his face. Dave Pierce had told John to protest to Foghorn Ford, but he hadn't had the courage. Next door Ford's class laughed. Further off the strap came down: Whap! Silence. Laughter. Whap! Whap! WHAP! John felt Dave's eyes on him, deploring. He turned to nod and Scott said "Norris!"

He stood. More moist pins stabbed. On the still air hung chalk and Scott's aftershave. "Yes, sir," he stammered.

"Yes, sir. The first time I repeat myself it has to be to you. Question five, Norris, question five!"

The Inspector. The Catacombs at lunchtime. Foghorn Ford always called him "Mr Norris." None of these could comfort him; fear twinged up from his bowels like wind. "34.5, sir?" he pleaded.

"Norris—Thomas I can understand, because he's an idiot, but you—I showed you how to do this one on the board yesterday. Don't tell me you weren't here."

"I was here, sir. I didn't understand, sir."

"You didn't understand, sir. You didn't ask, sir, did you? You were writing poetry about it, were you? Come out here." Scott cast his robes back; chalk whirled into the air.

John wanted to shut his eyes, but that wasn't permitted; the class was watching, willing him to represent them in the ritual without shaming them. Scott pulled John's left hand straight, adjusted it to correct height with the strap. He aimed. John's thumb closed inadvertently. Scott flicked it aside with the strap. The crowd was hushed, tense. The strap came down. John's hand swelled with hectic blood.

"Now, Pierce," said Scott. "I'm sure you can enlighten your friend."

A bell shrilled. Ford's class pelted to the playground, flattening against the wall to file as Scott approached. "Time for a drink, Ford?" he called. John averted his face as he passed, swollen with fear and hatred. "Scott's not too bad really," Dave Pierce said. "Better than that swine Ford, anyway, keeping me in last week."

Disloyal to his throbbing puffed-up palm, thought John bitterly. "Glad you think so," he muttered.

"Never mind, John. Did you hear this one? Two men go to a doctor, see—"

John could guess the sort of thing: he didn't like to hear it, couldn't join in the secret snigger at "Edgar Allan Poe," "oui-oui," and so on. "We'd better hurry," he interrupted. "You get past the gate and I'll be under the wall."

He strolled past the playground; boys walking, talking, shivering in the pale February light which might have been shed by the gnawed slice of moon on the horizon; a group in one corner huddled round photographs, another conferring over homework for the afternoon; beyond, on the misty playing field, a few of Strutt's favourites running in gym-suits. On the bus that morning a man cradling a briefcase had offered to help John with his homework, but he was obscurely scared of strange men. He stood against the wall beyond the playground. When Dave's lunch pass flew over, he caught it and made for the gate.

A prefect leaned against the railings; he straightened himself, frowning, as befitted his position—one day a week for the school spirit, he'd rather be at the pub. Above his head words were scratched on the KING GEORGE V GRAMMAR sign through the caretaker's third coat of paint, in defiance of the headmaster's regular threats. John flashed the pass from his good hand and escaped.

Down the road Dave was waiting by fragments of a new school: a lone shining coffee-urn on a counter, pyramids of chairs, skulls drawn in

whitewash on the one plate-glass pane; a plane had left a fading slash of whitewash on the sky. "How do we get to The Catacombs?" Dave asked.

"I don't know," John answered, feeling comfort drain, emptying the hour. "I thought you did."

Heels clicked by in unison. "Let's follow these girls, then. They're a bit of all right," Dave said. "They may be going."

John drew into himself; if they turned they'd laugh at his school blazer. Their pink coats swung, luring Dave; their perfume trailed behind them—The Catacombs would be thick with that and smoke. He followed Dave. The girls leapt across the road, running as if to jettison their legs, and were lost in a pillared pub between a shuttered betting-shop and the Co-operative Social Club. Dave was set to follow, but John heard drumming somewhere beneath the side street to their left. "It's up here," he said. "Come on, we've lost ten minutes already." Cars on the main road swept past almost silently; in the side street they could hear beneath their feet a pounding drum, a blurred electric guitar. Somewhere down there were The Catacombs—but the walls betrayed no entrance to this converted cellar, reclaimed by the city in its blind subterranean search for space. Menace throbbed into the drum from the rhythm of John's hot hand. Spiders shifted somnolently in a white web wall within a crevice. A figure approached down the alley, a newspaper-seller with an armful of *Brichester Heralds*, his coat furred and patched as the walls. John drew back. The man passed in silence, one hand on the bricks. As he leaned on the wall opposite the boys it gave slightly; a door disguised as uneven stone swung inwards from its socket. The man levered himself onward.

"That must be it," Dave said, stepping forward.

"I'm not so sure." The man had reached the main road and was croaking "*Brichester Herald*!" John glanced back and saw the pub door open. Scott appeared and strode towards him.

"No," John said. He thrust Dave through the opening; his last glimpse was of Scott buying a *Brichester Herald*. "That was your friend Scott," he snarled at Dave.

"Well, it's not my fault." Dave pointed ahead, down a stone corridor leading to a faint blue light around a turn. "That must be The Catacombs."

"Are you sure?" John asked, walking. "The music's getting fainter. In fact, I can't hear it anymore."

"I couldn't really hear it anymore when we came in," Dave admitted. "Come on, it's got to be here." They rounded a turn.

A wan blue glow narrowed away into dimness. Slowly a perspective formed; a long stone passage, faintly glistening, too narrow to admit them abreast, perhaps turning in the distance—somehow lit by its own stones, luminously blue. It lured curiosity, yet John grasped Dave's arm. "This can't be it," he said. "We'd better not go on."

"I am, anyway. I want to see where it leads."

"Wait a minute," John said. "I just want to go back and see—" But he couldn't pronounce his inner turmoil. He was already frightened; they might get lost and not be back for Scott's class this afternoon. If Dave wanted to go on, let him. He was going back.

He turned the corner of the stagnant blue light and plunged into darkness. The moistness of the air hinted of lightless underground pools; the only sound was the sliding of his heels on slimy stone. He reached the wall ahead, the door. There was no door.

One fingernail, exploring, broke. He bit it off. His left hand, still sore, flinched from the wet unbroken stone. Suddenly alone and threatened, John fled back into the blue twilight, slipping in his own tracks. Dave was not waiting.

"Oh, God," John moaned. His eyes adjusted. Far down the perspective he made out a vague shape vanishing, its shadows suppressed by the unwavering light. He hurled himself into the corridor, arms scraping the stone, the archway hurling by above him, a turquoise spider plummeting on an azure thread, winding itself back. Globules beaded the brick; still plunging headlong, John brushed his forehead with his hand. Ahead the figure halted, waiting. "The door's shut. We can't get out," John panted, sobbing for breath.

"Then you'll have to come with me," Dave said. "There must be another way out of this place, whatever it is."

"But we're going downwards," John discovered.

"I know that. So we'll have to go up again somewhere. Maybe—Look!"

They were still walking; they had turned another bend. The passage twisted onward, glowing. John tried not to look at Dave; the light had drained his face of blood, and doubt glinted faintly in his eyes. On the stone floor wisps of cobweb, tinted blue, led to another turn. And in the left-hand wall Dave had seen an opening, foreshortened. He ran to it; John followed, robbed of The Catacombs, seeking a way back to Scott's next class, to the Inspector. Dave faced the opening, and the doubt in his eyes brightened.

It was an opening, but a dead end: an archway six feet high, a foot deep, empty except for filaments of cobweb which their breath sucked out to float and fall back. Dave peered in, and a spider as large as a thumb ran from a matted corner. He threw himself aside; but the spider was empty, rattling on the stone.

John had pressed past to the next bend. Another downward twist; another alcove. He waited for Dave to join him. The second alcove was thick with cobwebs; they filled it, shining dully, shifting as Dave again took the lead. The boys were running; the light congealed about them, the ceiling descended, threads of cobweb drifted down. A turn, an alcove, webs. Another. Glancing sideways, John was chilled by a formless horror; the cobwebs in the alcove suggested a shape which he should be able to distinguish. But another fear burned this away like acid: returning late for Scott's class. "Look, it's widening!" Dave shouted. Before John could see beyond him, they had toppled out into an open space.

It was a circular vaulted chamber; above their heads a dome shone blue through webs like clouds. In the walls gaped other archways, radiating from the circular pool in the centre of the chamber. The pool was still. Its surface was a beaded mat of cobwebs like a rotting jewelled veil. "I don't get it," Dave whispered; his voice settled through the air, disturbing shining airborne wisps. John said nothing. Then Dave touched his arm and pointed.

Beyond the pool, between two archways, stood a rack of clothes: hats, caps, a black overcoat, a tweed suit, a pinstripe with an incongruous orange handkerchief like a flag, a grey. They filled John with nightmare horror. "It must be a tramp," he said desperately.

"With all these things? I'm going to have a closer look." Dave moved round the pool.

"No, Dave, wait!" John skidded round the pool in pursuit; one foot slipped on the pool's rim. He looked down, and his reflection was caught by

cobwebs, jewelled with droplets, swallowed up. His voice vanished into corridors. "It's past one now! You try one passage and I'll try another. One of them must lead out." Immediately he realised that he would be alone in his corridor among the matted alcoves; but at least he'd diverted Dave from the suits.

"That's the best idea, yes. Just wait till I have a look at these. It won't take a minute."

"You do that if you want to!" cried John. "I'm getting back!" He fell into the passage next to that through which they had entered; the first alcove was less than a minute ahead. He looked back miserably. Dave was peering at the suits. John forced himself over the harsh blue stone. Then Dave screamed.

John knew he had to run—but to Dave or away? He was too old for blind heroism, too young for conscious selflessness. His legs trembled; he felt sick. He turned.

Dave hadn't moved, but one suit lay crumpled at his feet. He was staring at what it had hung upon, too far for John to see in the blue haze. John's hand pulsed and perspired. He stretched out his fingers towards Dave as if to draw him forward; Dave's hands were warding off whatever was before him. John tore his feet free of the urge to flee. As he began to trudge forward, a figure moved between him and Dave. Cobwebs held to its shape like an aura. John recognised the profile and the patched coat. It was the newspaper seller.

John struggled to shriek a warning to Dave—but of what? His lips were gummed shut as if by cobwebs. His legs were tied to the stone. The man moved round the pool, beyond John's vision. John's lips worked, and Dave turned. His mouth opened, but this time no scream came. He backed around the pool, past the suits. And something appeared, hopping towards him inside the patched overcoat: long arms with claws reaching far beyond the sleeves, a head protruding far above the collar, and from what must have been a mouth a pouring stream of white which drifted into the air and sank towards Dave's face as he fell, finally screaming. John clapped his hands over his ears as he ran towards the outside world, but Dave's screams had already been muffled.

As he fled past the first alcove, the web moaned feebly and opened a glazed eye. No more, he prayed, no more. Each turning was the last; each

stretch was cruelly telescoped by the unrelenting light. His lungs were burning; each sucked breath drew a wisp of cobweb into his throat. In one alcove a girl's eyes pleaded; her hand stretched a wedding-ring towards him. He screamed to blot out her stifled cries. In answer came a sound of something hopping round a bend behind him, of something wet slapping the walls. A web-wisp brushed his cheek. He blundered onward. Another bend. He heaved around it hoarsely, and saw daylight.

The door was propped with an empty milk-bottle; someone had found and blocked it, perhaps meaning to return. He staggered out onto a patch of waste ground: a broken bed, a disembowelled car, a baby's rattle encrusted with mud. Reaching behind him, he wrenched out the bottle. The door became one with the earth. Then he fell face downwards on the bed.

Dave! He was down there in an alcove! John jerked to his feet, shivering. Through the slight drizzle he saw people passing, eyeing him oddly. He couldn't tell them; they might be from the pool. Someone had to know. Dave was in The Catacombs—no, in the catacombs. Someone. Where was he? He sidled to the pavement, watching them all, ready to scream if one came near. Up the road from the school, in the opposite direction to that they'd taken so long ago. Even further from home than he'd thought. Ford. He'd tell Ford that Dave was in The Catacombs. He made for the school; the tangled lines of rain on the pavement looked like something he'd forgotten.

Scott was waiting at the gate. He folded his arms as John appeared. John's terror kicked him in the stomach. Scott's lips opened, waiting; then his gaze slipped from John to someone behind him, and his expression altered. "All right, Norris, you'd better get to class," he said.

It was the Inspector! John thought as he hurried up the stairs to the familiar faces. He didn't know where Ford was—perhaps he could tell the Inspector that Dave was in The Catacombs. If Scott would let him. He'd have to—he was scared of the Inspector. "He's scared of the Inspector," he said to Dave. "What?" said Hawks behind him.

Scott and the Inspector entered; Scott held the door politely. The class stood, raising chalk-dust and a cobweb from John's blazer, which was grey with wisps, he saw. But then so was the Inspector's pinstripe suit: even the orange handkerchief in his top pocket. "Dave, sir—Mr. Ford—" cried John, and vomited into his open desk. "My God!" shouted Scott. "Please, Mr. Scott," said the Inspector in a voice light yet clinging as cobwebs, "the boy's

ill. He looks frightened. I'll take him downstairs and arrange something for him."

"Shall I wait?" hissed Scott.

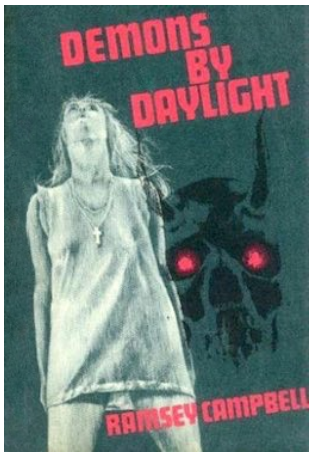
"Better start your class, Mr. Scott. I'll have time to find out all I want to know about them."

Bare corridors. Leaping tiles smelling of polish. A strap cracking. Somewhere, laughter. A headlong latecomer who gaped at John and the figure leading him by the wrist. The tuning of the school orchestra. The dining-room, bare tables, metal plates. The cloakroom, racks of coats stirring in a draught. "I don't think we can entrust you to anyone else's care," said the Inspector.

The gates, deserted. They turned towards the pillared pub, the side street. There was still time. The fingers on his wrist were no longer fingers. The eyes were veiled as the pool. Two women with wheel-baskets were approaching. But his mouth was already choked closed by fear. They passed on towards the side street. Yet his ears were clear, and he heard the comment one woman made.

"Did you see that? I'll wager another case of 'unwillingly to school'!"

The Enchanted Fruit



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When Derek returned with the pâté for Janice the flat was full of Stravinsky; she was marching about to *Jeu de Cartes*, familiarising herself with the rooms—the kitchen shining silver in the sunlight, the bathroom where a Picasso thrice eyed the taps, the living room with bookcase, record player and prints, the bedroom. She crossed to the bookcase as he entered, and from between *God is a New Language* and *Pop Art* withdrew a Carrier cookbook. 'Do you cook from this, honestly?' she asked.

'I'm my own wife. Was this the pâté you meant? We've a couple of hours before the people start arriving.'

'Thank God it won't be a necking party. Do you know I didn't get to bed till four this morning? The party last night, you wouldn't believe—Why is it these days you can't *be* with people you like?'

'You sit down and rest,' Derek said. 'I'll take over preparations.'

'No, I promised. After all, this is your flat-warming.'

'In that case I may be in the way. Shall I stay or drive around the aesthetic countryside?'

'You go out, darling. I've got this morning's crossword if I feel lonely.'

Through the windscreen Derek waved to Janice, tiny in the third window up the row like a strip of film. He steered out of the car-park beneath the apartments, toy cars lined up in their cardboard box, and was carried past his tiny picturesque church, between red-brick perspectives, drowsy trees, into a warm breeze sharp with dust. He was pleased to have this flat outside Brichester, among the lulling leaves, the open fields, somewhere to escape the daily press of Brichester, the false harsh rainbow of the packed cars, the hard bleached University smashing and swallowing ornate façades, churches robbed of dignity by plummeting iron balls, streets where some

lone house had struck him speechless with its silent pride, the noble bearing of its age and history. A cart creaked by; its driver nodded to Derek. The car purred onward, its note one with the dreaming fields, the red-brick cottages, the hills on the horizon. On such a day as this Derek worshipped God. Ahead the road rose to a bridge; a railway line was threaded through, stretched taut to Brichester, left slack among the first hills on the right. It was good of Janice to hostess his party. He'd met her three weeks ago at the Radio Brichester studio, fending off a randy disc-jockey; 'I don't think we can use a programme on the arts just yet, but we'll keep you in mind' was still ringing in Derek's ears, but on an impulse he'd approached her. 'Can you show me the way out?' he'd asked, the first question that came to mind. He'd sensed her gratitude. By the time they'd reached the door he'd learned that she appeared on record shows, several evenings a week when she was free from her work with disabled drivers. 'I'm for a drink to drown my sorrows,' he'd told her at the door. 'Can I tempt you?' And afterward—'Will you walk across town with me?' she'd asked. 'I don't like crowds when I'm alone.' The car poised on a crest and plunged. Janice was gone. The country opened round him.

Into the hills. Derek let the car bear him where it would, through the countryside across which the sun's shade was fleetingly drawn: fields sleekly ruffled as cats' fur, distant grassy slopes where wind-phantoms chased like hunting hounds. The road curved. A wood fell from its edge toward Goatswood. Where it grew thickest a lay-by encroached. Derek turned the car and stepped out.

Each corridor of trees seemed made to be explored, each green shadow promised mystery. He slid down the smooth grass to the first trunks. The sun's rays shaded into a submarine twilight. Above his head each leaf was brilliantly depicted, like an image of the piercingly precise birdsong which punctuated the afternoon. On his left a track led deeper. He avoided it: he sought mystery, the fulfilment of adventure. Dessicated leaves cracked underfoot like shells as he strayed to the right. The stout boles closed him in; looking back, he could no longer see his car. This was the only pure aesthetic, the true poetry, he thought. The bird-calls lured him onward. Crushed scents of trampled undergrowth moved with him; he thrust between trunks, cracking strips of bark, wading through tall grass, brushing aside dulled and somnolently nodding flowers. Overhead the branches interlocked and merged; translucent leaves glowed. The bird-song was

muffled, suffocating. Derek's toe plunged into fungoid trumpets. The air swarmed with midges. His feet sank into rotting leaves. It must be time to turn back. Janice would be waiting. He disengaged his sleeve from an outstretched branch, but in the underwater light he could not read his watch. He drove forward blindly, through a solid curtain of leaves, and fell into a clearing.

An insect struggled from the grass before his face, its diaphanous wings rainbowed like a trembling soap-bubble. He scrambled to his feet and saw the tree.

Its roots were clenched, crumbling the earth. From them it swelled, gigantic, to its first thrusting branches, pushing back the trees which encircled the clearing; through its meshed canopy of leaves others could be glimpsed, piled like cloud-banks. Its rich trunk, dark yet warm, stood alone on a mound of autumn built high from the edge of the glade. And from the overwhelming branches fruit depended like solid drops of sap, large as apples, soft and shaped as peaches.

After an age Derek stepped forward. His first gasp still trembled through the glade. Above him banked leaves rustled. A breeze sifted down. A branch shook. And as his hand shot out, a fruit fell on his palm.

It was a ball of pale velvet. He caressed it, searching for a flaw; there was none. It shone against the brown mound. Without thinking, he lifted his hand and bit into the fruit.

Juice coursed from it; he threw back his head and drained the liquid, spilling amber down his chin. In the shade his fingers were sticks of honey. He chewed and categorised. It was useless. He had tasted nothing to compare. Wine, fruit, meat—something of each, yet on another plane, something almost spiritual which was beyond eating, was the sunlight, shade, the open fields, the moment when one is truly alone and yet a part of all. For a moment he wished he could share the tree with someone. Janice. He gulped the fruit.

He rammed the trunk. It stood its ground. He ran to the lowest branch and leapt. The mound obstructed him. He smashed through the screening leaves and tore a limb from the nearest tree, broke back into the clearing and clubbed a branch. Caterpillars dropped on threads and drew themselves up to safety. He clubbed again. Fruit fell, softly swallowed by the mound. He

darted to them, caught them up and stuffed his pockets. Around him leaves fell and became the mound, shaping the silence.

A woman was whimpering, sobbing, straining for words. The flat, too twilit yet for light, was full of people, sitting on furniture, leaning, grouped about each other. Hands greeted Derek. 'It's simply that I can't get interested in a thriller printed in Monotype Bembo,' Graham Fisher said, closing a conversation, and 'I think Gilbert and Sullivan are the true pop art,' remarked John Williams, abandoning another. The sobbing woman was a record: Luciano Berio's *Visage*, before which Alan Price was rapt. Derek looked for Janice: she shone beyond the crowd, her black and blood-red military dress buckled with a medal like an engraved moon, the occasional hint of underskirt, bronze tights, crimson sunset shoes. Smiling, she waved.

'Oh, Jan, let me scribble some sketches,' Derek said. 'Cohering the group over there is Graham Fisher—of *Identity and Awareness* and *Ambiguity*, of course—restrained by Pat, and trying to get a word in are Norma, our consultant on table manners, and John Brighouse, who's following Steinbeck from job to job... Then John Williams is the singing solicitor, and backing away from Berio is Alan, poet, critic and transcendentalist—trying to convert Bob Grant to the new music. Bob, together with John and Beryl Stretch here, maintains a certain sanity in these proceedings—Oh, you know them?'

'I've had time to circulate, darling. Anyway, I know John and Beryl from the Playhouse Theatre bar.' Janice turned back to them. 'So it's all over with Frank,' she continued. 'He started to bore me. As soon as I get someone I want—'

'I'll set out the pâté,' Derek said.

'—I don't want them any more. He'd reached the stage of ringing up —"what are you doing to me?"—at two in the morning.'

Bodies passed across the engraved moon. The sobbing voice had found words, but was shouted down by a terrifying male chorus. Derek set plates around the low table like decorations and balanced in the triangles of pâté. 'A vote of thanks to Jan,' he called through the curlicues of smoke, the floating conversations. The record slowed and clicked silent. 'How about John Cage?' Alan called hopefully. 'Eat now, think later,' Derek replied and waited while they joined him at the table, trailing conversations.

Janice, John and Beryl sat at the other end from Derek. 'I think you'll like Spain,' Janice said. 'Except for the bullfighting. I was the only one in the hotel who wouldn't go. And of course there's all these marvellous churches on one side and the beggars on the other. You're awfully far away, Derek,' she protested.

'Sorry.' He took a bite of pâté to link himself with her. Then he stared at the bitten triangle. 'My God,' he muttered.

'What's wrong, isn't it any good?' asked Janice.

'It's beautiful, you don't need me to tell you. It's just—' There was no way to put it into words.

'Everyone coming to the Pinter at the Playhouse on Saturday?' John Stretch asked the others.

'I saw it in London,' Derek said, fighting free of some preoccupation. 'Magnificently menacing but lacking in cosmic perspective, as you'd say, Graham. I'm staying in on Saturday for Debussy on TV—call round later if you're free, folks. Listen, Jan, let's recap on Spain for a minute. Aside from your anti-Catholic point, which we'll overlook, how do you relate your horror of bullfighting to, say, this pâté which you bought? Have you any idea how pâté is produced?'

'Come on, Derek, there's a world of difference. Food is a necessity, but you can't tell me—'

'No specific food is necessary, Janice. If you're going to be true to your dislike of causing suffering then you should turn vegetarian.' He abstractedly bit into the triangle and was again distracted.

'I like that, attacking my pâté with your mouth full of it!'

'You know I'm not attacking you personally, darling. As for me—well, of course we Catholics don't accept that animals feel pain. It would make nonsense of the whole religious analysis of pain.'

'God! Derek, have you ever heard a dog after a car's had its back legs?' asked Janice furiously. 'I think you simply use religion as a shield. If you're confronted with something frightful you say it's the will of God. Can't you act instead of thinking? Substantiate or withdraw!' she cried—a pet phrase and Derek's favourite: it called to his love of argument.

He put down the gnawed pâté; he'd think about that later. 'There's so little one person can do,' he said.

Janice and John Brighouse were dancing to the Rolling Stones; her medal flashed its hieroglyph. The lights were on; Derek, sipping whisky, stared through his reflected face at the spires of Brichester silhouetted on the barred sky. He should have bought Janice a present for her help. Suddenly he thought of the fruit in a paper bag in his car. That first taste of pâté—'I'm working on a study of the Jehovah's Witness morality in Mickey Spillane,' Alan said to someone, and joined Derek. 'I'd like to take you up on pain,' he remarked.

'Go ahead.' Derek turned from Janice luminous above Brichester to Janice.

'You look as if you want to dance with her.'

'I can't.' Each tip of him was an extension of his mind, too sensitive to be forgotten in the gay trance of dancing. 'Forget it. What did you want to say?'

'To begin with, that pain is abstract. You can't feel someone else's pain, which is why you could eat that pâté.'

If he only knew—'I agree with you,' Derek said. 'Like the lover overwhelming his suffering beloved with solicitude. Too much sympathy is a reaction against not being able to experience the other's suffering; it can become irritating for both. For all he knows she'd rather be left alone.'

'Precisely. And conversely you can't communicate your own suffering; only you can handle it. I'm not at all religious as you know, but to take a mystical line—No, let's call it intellectual. You talk of experiences—aesthetics and art and so on—but in a sense pain is only another experience. We know we can switch off experiences—you can withdraw intellectually from an experience and it immediately becomes meaningless. Shouldn't you similarly be able to render pain meaningless?'

'It's an interesting point.' The record halted: 'Bah, pas encore plus de Pierres qui Roulent!' Bob Grant protested. 'And yet—' Derek continued —'let's not underestimate sympathy. There could be situations where someone else might be the only salvation.'

'Doesn't anyone want to stay for a slice of Penderecki's *St Luke Passion*?' Derek suggested. But coats were being held and donned; buses, trains were waiting; everyone was leaving.

A light rain pricked the hot air. Derek and Janice ran beneath a coat to his car. 'Only the bourgeois care about getting wet,' called Graham, answered by Pat: 'Graham, don't be pretentious!'

Ahead John Stretch's car pulled out, sluicing the rain from its roof. Alan climbed into the back of Derek's car. 'Hello, darling, I hope you enjoyed the party?' Janice asked. Derek followed John's blurred tail-light through the sprinkled mist to the Lower Brichester bus terminus. He was glad she'd liked the party; it had been hers as much as his. 'Jan, if you find a paper bag on the window-ledge,' he said, 'it's for you.'

'Aren't you sweet! What is it?' In the mirror he saw her hand, groping against headlights. Paper rustled. 'All that's in here,' she said, 'is a gooey mess I've just put my hand in.'

'Jan, I'm awfully sorry. It was something special, really. It must have gone bad.'

'That's a bit lowbrow for you, Derek, surely,' Alan said, 'practical joking?'

A whistle blew. Couples parted and ran to their buses. Two policemen watched a loud crowd stamp upstairs. Janice and Alan turned up their collars against the gusts of drizzle. 'There's a fantastic Hogarth-atmospheric pie-stall specially for you near here, Alan. I'll probably see you at the weekend,' Derek said. 'I've taken the week off from the library to enjoy my flat.'

'I don't think I'd like to live alone for ever,' Janice said.

Friday. The morning after. It was late; the curtains swayed in sunlight. Derek felt as muffled as the music from the radio in the flat above. He padded through his flat, gathering the scattered records—Berio, the Rolling Stones, the unplayed Penderecki—and shelved them; then he blotted out the brass band overhead with Dylan: 'All I really want to do—is baby be friends with you.' Undigested fragments of the party returned to him. The bag of fruit bruised as flesh. The pâté. He wasn't yet ready to think. He filled his bath, spied on by Picasso's eyes; through the ceiling came the calls of marriage. He balled his pyjamas; later to the laundry. Lying in the bath, waiting for his thoughts to form, he watched the water dull, turn grey. Poor wife upstairs, washing her husband's clothes. How displeasing the body was, how unaesthetic; that was why Derek didn't think he'd ever marry—the daily stains were something to be concealed in shame. He picked up the

soap. He hoped Janice hadn't thought the bag of rotting fruit had been a joke —

When he'd taken his first bite of pâté the taste had been that of the fruit, of the sunlight. Astonished, he might have mused for hours; but he'd set the miracle aside for conversation. Just a powerful aftertaste, he'd thought. But not so: subsequent tastes had been the pâté, transformed into the fruit. He couldn't question; he'd accepted. Something had entered and elevated him. Why hadn't he been able to communicate the experience? No matter; now it was part of him. And if Janice had been right about the suffering of animals —Of course she hadn't, but he could bypass moral doubts; there was now no argument against becoming vegetarian. No longer need he take hours over cooking. There was only so much time in this world, time to read the Dalí he'd bought months ago, to read *The Golden Bough*, of which he'd once said: 'Any rational Catholic should be capable of reading Frazer.' He rose wet from the bath, dried, dressed and went into the kitchen.

A boiled egg to begin with. The water churned and bubbled. Derek's tongue was thick with last night's whisky. He enthroned the egg within its cup. Folding a sandwich, he chewed.

The taste was there, but disappointing. Still, he thought, it must be the hangover. One would scarcely appreciate a sunset with a hangover. Unless the effect was wearing off. He'd collect more fruit later, more than he needed for himself. But first, the *Brichester Herald* and the *Times*.

The last few lines of sunlit rain lashed across the windscreen and were split into component drops. On an impulse he turned left toward Graham's and Pat's bungalow beyond Brichester, the children Mark and Baby Jane, to talk of his experience. But the bungalow was silent, shining; Graham must be at a librarian's conference, Pat and the children would be shopping. Baulked, he aimed for Goatswood, for the lay-by.

He stood before the forest. Transmuted by the rain, the twigs were strands of steel, melting brightly, dripping. Ahead a path plunged; the tree stood somewhere to the right. He'd collect fruit for Janice and make sure they were sound. He trod through the drenched grass; branches wept on him. Ahead the depths glittered like jewelled shadow. Trunks forced diversions. Somewhere birds fluttered and complained. Deep in the labyrinth he stopped, struck off to the left toward a looming bole, halted, retraced his tracks. He'd tied no thread to twigs. He threshed onward; his legs were

soaked. Another distant trunk betrayed its promise. He pressed toward a filtered fan of sunlight, which withdrew as he approached. A screen of leaves before him seemed secretive; parted, it revealed only vistas of dim branches. At last he turned, beat back twined foliage, emerged onto the road and walked back to his car. Perhaps another day. Next time he'd draw a map.

A storm massed overhead. Suffocated by the thick air and by the stench of damp leaves, Derek felt a little sick. He decided on a meal; not his own—he'd find a restaurant to calm his stomach. He drove toward Brichester. Above the dull hills streaks of light broke free and were suppressed. As he passed his flat two windows in the strip lit up; his own was dark. He thought of Janice.

In the rain the multicoloured signs of Brichester varied rhythmically, like kinetic art. Passing the pillars of the Art Gallery, Derek saw the poster of an exhibition; he'd take a look and then eat in the coffee bar.

On the walls colours pulsed like blood; blocks of red leapt forward and sprang back to give place to the blue; monochrome spirals spun and drew him in; perspectives changed, constructions flaunted their impossibility. His faint nausea whirled. Resonating footsteps led him down the corridor to the coffee bar. Colours marched by, meaningless. As he reached the bar he was attacked by a blast of heat and coffee. He bought a cup and sandwiches. Searching for a seat among the jagged sculptures, he came upon Alan Price, writing at a table.

'A new poem?' Derek asked. Then he saw that Alan was completing a crossword. 'Shades of Janice,' he remarked.

'This is hers. She left a few minutes ago for somewhere. She's attractive, isn't she?'

'Yes, very.' Derek couldn't concentrate; he felt faint. Around him the muted conversations were receding. He stared at his plate. His stomach was beyond control. He stood up carefully. 'If you can eat this for me, go ahead,' he said, steadying himself with a chair. 'The best thing I can do is to lie down.'

Next morning he couldn't face food. During the night he'd been troubled by gulps of some taste he hadn't been able to place. Perhaps he hadn't brushed his teeth. The weakness in his stomach trembled through his limbs. He

hadn't been to the doctor for years; he hadn't felt the need. Now he felt incapable of coping without help. He struggled to the car, wearily cleaned the speckled windscreen, and drove slowly to the surgery on the edge of Brichester.

He should have brought something to read; he had no urge to study *Woman's Own* or *Beano*, nor yet the *Daily Mirror*. Opposite him a toothless woman mouthed silently, stretching threads of saliva; usually he'd have felt sympathy, but suffering had dulled his responses. Children ran about the waiting-room, frequently brought to heel and screaming, soon released to chase once more, knocking against Derek's brain. Derek read the National Health posters, distracted by the choreography of raised heads each time the surgery bell shrilled. Two hours later, he reached Dr Love.

'Well, well, well, Derek, isn't it? What seems to be the trouble?' The doctor filled his swivel chair; in the mirror his grey cupola of hair betrayed its careful brushing.

'I seem to have acquired an upset stomach.' Once exposed to the air, Derek's prepared phrase disintegrated.

'Dear, dear, I see, yes. And have you eaten anything that's disagreed with you?'

'Not that I can think of. Well, I did eat some fruit.' Immediately Derek regretted saying so; it couldn't be the fruit, and he could scarcely describe his experience in the woods.

'Ah, is that right, now? And what kind of fruit was that?'

Derek searched; he might as well be pretentious. 'Lychees, actually.' Dr Love raised his eyebrows. 'It's a kind of Chinese dessert, like—well, I don't know—' Derek trailed off.

'I see, I see, yes. Well, we'd better give you something for your tummy.' The doctor scribbled. 'And how old are you now, Derek? Really, twenty-seven, is that right? Still working at the library?'

The door opened and the doctor's wife came in, hands swaddled in knitting. 'Tommy's feeling ill,' she said.

'Well, now, tut, tut. We can't have that, can we. You keep an eye on him and I'll be up to see him. This'll keep your tummy happy,' he told Derek. 'Come

and see me in a few days if it doesn't clear up. Well, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye...'

Waiting for the prescription to be filled, Derek wandered to a news-stand. His stomach seemed calmer, cowed by the threat of medicine. He bought a *Brichester Herald*; on the front page was a photograph of the Radio Brichester personnel, in the background Janice in a military mini-skirt, looking as if she'd rather not be photographed—he couldn't imagine why. He was sorry he'd missed her at the coffee bar, but he would have been poor company. He returned for the medicine.

Back at his flat he unwrapped the bottle, heavy with a thick white liquid. He poured a spoonful. Some escaped although he tried to tip it in, and crawled down the neck between his fingers, solidifying into a drip of tallow. He swallowed the spoonful. It was nauseating, reminiscent of something he'd forgotten. He left the bottle on the table and gazed from the window at the silver railway, leading the eye to emptiness. The swallowed liquid fought for freedom. He constricted his throat, moved unsteadily to the bed, stripped and lay back.

A knock at the door awakened him. When he opened his eyes, he realised that it had come before he was awake. He waited, but there was silence. Who could it have been? Janice, perhaps? He stood up and threw his dressing-gown around him. The room whirled through his brain. He reached the door and fumbled it open. A transparent sheet of sunlight made an angle with the empty hall. He padded to the stairwell and peered down, but only hot dust moved. His stomach sickly yawned. Angry with himself, he supported his legs to the kitchen and glanced about for food. Anything to fill him. He buttered bread; he watched the knife spread blobs of grease. Sickness rose, but determinedly he picked up a slice and chewed.

The night's taste was defined. It was the fruit—but as in the paper bag. The wine was bitter; the meat crawled; the juice drooled thickly. He dropped the bread and pinched his lips shut with his fingers. Frantically he read the clock: ten past four—time for the medicine. It must work. He filled the spoon and shut his eyes. Unbelieving, he stared at the spoon. The medicine was the fruit, but the decay had progressed. The spoon thudded on the carpet. Suddenly he clapped his hand over his mouth and rushed into the bathroom.

He lay down shaking. Heat clung like steam. The room veered, spun, swayed as in a storm. The taste seeped through him. At last it was intolerable; sweating, revolted by his body, he weaved to the sink and drew off a glass of water. At the first sip he knew. His hand drooped into the sink; the glass slid free and spilled.

There was nothing to do but accept. He lay inert. A bird's silhouette flashed across the ceiling and was gone. He closed his eyes, empty of intelligence. Gradually the sea stilled.

He couldn't hear what Janice was saying. His throat was clogged. The vortex of darkness on his eyes remained when he opened them; it was night. Janice was still speaking. Her voice came from above. She was in the married couple's radio. Derek's eyes closed. The coffee bar. Alan but no Janice. Alan's point—'to render pain meaningless.' A thought explored Derek's brain, touching, reviving. His body lay enervated, but his mind still functioned. His mind, his soul; suppose it had some supernatural power, inherent in its identity with God, to heal his body—

Nonsense. Nothing so mystical. His mind was in control; it knew that food tasted as it looked, for how else could it taste? His mind took control. It forced him upright, inserted his shaking limbs into clothes, urged him into the kitchen. The light found the slice of bread on the floor, collecting fluff. He almost broke, but his mind was ruthless; he gasped but that was all. It guided his hand to the door, set his feet on the stairs. To conquer the body: this was true self-sufficiency.

The icy front-door knob shuddered through him; he was outside. He went toward the car, but his mind forbade him; he might weaken and cause harm. He'd walk. His watch showed eleven. The nearest restaurant open at that hour was on the edge of Lower Brichester, less than half-an-hour away.

The road was bare, raked by the night-wind. The moon hung bruised like fruit. He dragged himself along by the wall; it crumbled beneath his nails. A car came up behind him; he extended a thumb and fell back as the car flashed past. But why? he cried. What have I done? His mind drew itself up sternly; he concentrated on the distance gained. Beyond his flat a train muttered beneath the bridge. A second car rushed by; a couple in the back pointed and laughed. 'Sober up!' they shouted. Grimly he followed their garish light to the crest of a hill. Below on hillsides headlights exchanged winks; beyond, the steady lights of Lower Brichester.

When he reached the restaurant, swaying down the street toward him as he fought an itch in his throat, it was closed. The pane beneath his forehead cooled his brain. There must be other restaurants. Inside, above the inverted chairs, a clock showed midnight. Desperately he looked to his watch for help, but found none. Three motor-cyclists roared by shouting; a cat scampered from their headlights. Derek wadded his handkerchief over his nose. In the next street the motor-cycles coughed their last. Then he remembered: round the corner was an all-night pie-stall. The wind cleared the grey fumes, and Derek tottered forward.

When he reached the stall there was a brief struggle; he wanted to flee the drunks chewing and spitting, the two smeared trestle tables, the girl behind the counter, surrounded by the motor-cyclists, the corners of her eyes blocked by sleep—but his mind was adamant. The food was edible, he'd eaten here one midnight, so that he already knew its taste. Gripping the counter, gripping his throat from within, he ordered two pork pies and a coffee. Discs of grease floated on the coffee as in a stagnant pool; he pushed the cup to one end of the counter and unwrapped the lukewarm cellophane from a cold pie. You know how this will taste, he told himself. The nature of the world can't change. He bit.

Around the corner of the stall came Alan Price, taking in the tables, the drunk asleep at one. 'Derek's right,' he said enthusiastically. 'It's like Hogarth 1968.'

Janice touched his arm. 'I don't like it,' she said. 'I find it frightening.'

The fruit had decayed completely. Derek staggered behind the stall and was violently sick. When he swayed out of the shadow, Janice and Alan had gone. The stall, the watching eyes, were unreal, part of some other world. He hadn't purged himself of the taste; it was stronger than before, filling his mouth, his nostrils. A hundred yards from the stall he saw a taxi-rank. A hundred yards—yes, levering himself along the walls, picking himself up when he crumpled, he would just make it. He knew that this time the taste would not fade.

Above him a voice sang 'Deo gratias'. He was awake at once; the fruit woke with him. But he had triumphed. As he'd rocked miserably in the taxi he'd seen salvation. When he'd reached his flat he'd found an envelope thrust beneath the door. He'd opened it and read: 'We all came round after the play but you weren't in. Lovely news! Radio Brichester say they'll be

able to use your programme on the arts! Love, Janice...' It no longer mattered. As the taxi had approached his flat he'd seen the church against the moon: no longer quaint, just solid. He wasn't alone with his suffering. Instantaneously the altar, the inextinguishable light, dimmed down the years from his childhood, sprang into dazzling focus. That night he slept.

The radio church service in the flat above moved singing down the aisle. Derek stood; his head throbbed; his gorge rose, intensifying the taste. Calmly he dressed, ignoring shudders. The taste grew sweeter, cloying. No matter: it was meant perhaps to reconfirm him from his dutiful Sunday church-going, to impose a fast, to bring him back to God, to strengthen him. He descended the stairs, only once falling against the banister, his perspiring hand sliding down the metal.

To the left of the path stood bright white headstones. Cars gathered at the gate; women gossipped as they donned their hats; children struggling on the grass separated at their father's call. A girl in a mini-skirt crossed herself and caught her toppling transistor radio, eager to be outside again and listening. Derek brushed by her, moved unsteadily to the front row, looked up at the flame dulled by the stained-glass sunlight, and knelt.

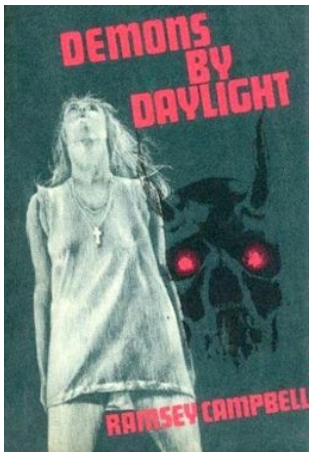
The organ blared. Everyone stood. The stained-glass image was a trifle naive, Derek thought. He brought his eyes back to the flame. At the next cue he deliberately stood abruptly, jolting his body, wrenching his stomach. I offer this as penance. The priest preached on the evils of the mini-skirt. Janice? Of course not. The true God was behind the priest, was the flame that would sear the taste from Derek's throat. He would take Communion. His acceptance of his suffering had purified him, he knew. A bell rang; the purest members of the congregation hurried to be first at the altar rail. Derek bowed his head. This is my body. He looked up and saw the priest raise the first wafer from the chalice.

He choked. The fruit transmuted everything. At once he knew how the wafer would taste. The bench collapsed. He clawed himself to his feet and blundered down the aisle, crashing into pews, knocking communicants aside. Incense suffocated him like poison-gas. He fell out of the church. The void surrounding him would not tolerate a God, and no God could tolerate the void. He ran blindly, fleeing the taste which moved with him. A tombstone tripped him. He fell to his knees, then forward.

For an age he lay there, mouth gaping against the soil, hands gripping stone. Then he heard voices. He raised his head. His hands recoiled from the headstone whose erased name could have been anyone's. In the babble on the path, he thought he heard a voice he knew. It seemed to call to him. Spitting soil, forgetting the taste, he strained his ears. At last he was sure. Slowly, painfully, he raised himself. The congregation was emerging onto the sunlit pebbled path, some meeting friends. He could see no face he recognised, but the voice, its words inaudible, continued. In a minute they would turn and see him.

He turned aside from the tombstone, and began to crawl toward Janice's voice.

The Guy



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You can't hide from Guy Fawkes Night. This year as usual I played Beethoven's Fifth to blot out sound and memory, turned it loud and tried to read, fought back faces from the past as they appeared. In September and October the echoes of lone fireworks, the protests of distant startled dogs, the flopping faceless figures propped at bus-stops or wheeled in prams by children, had jarred into focus scenes I'd thought I had erased. Finally, as always, I stood up and succumbed. Walking, I saw memories, fading like the exploding molten claws upon the sky. On waste ground at the edge of Lower Brichester a gutted bonfire smouldered. Children stood about it, shaking sparklers as a dog shakes a rat. Then wood spat fire and flared; a man dragged off his boy to bed. Defined by flame, the child's face fell in upon itself like a pumpkin wizening from last week's Hallowe'en. He sobbed and gasped, but no words came. And I remembered.

A papier-mâché hand, a burning fuse, a scream that never came—But the memory was framed by the day's events; the houses of the past, my own and Joe Turner's, were overlaid by the picture I'd built up from behind my desk that morning, the imagined home of the boy who'd stood before me accused of setting fireworks in a car's exhaust pipe: drunken father, weak wife, backgarden lavatory, all the trimmings—I could see it clearly without having seen it. My parents hadn't liked my change of ambition from banker to probation officer; faced with the choice, I'd left them. "Don't you know they all carry razors these days?" my father had protested round his pipe. "Get yourself a little security. Then you can help them if you must. Look at your mother—don't you think the clothes she gives away mean anything?" Referred to, my mother had joined in. "If you deal with such people all day, Denis, you'll become like them." The same prejudices at which I'd squirmed when I was at school: when the Turners moved into our road.

Joe Turner was in the class next door to me; he'd started there that term when the Turners had come up from Lower Brichester. Sometimes, walking past their house, I'd heard arguments, the crash of china, a man's voice shouting "Just because we've moved in with the toffs, don't go turning my house into Buckingham Palace!" That was Mr Turner. One night I'd seen him staggering home, leaning on our gate and swearing; my father had been ready to go out to him, but my mother had restrained him. "Stay in, don't lower yourself." She was disgusted because Mr Turner was drunk; I'd realised that but couldn't see how this was different from the parties at our house, the Martini bottles, the man who'd fallen into my bedroom one night and apologised, then been loudly sick on the landing. I was sorry for Mr Turner because my parents had instantly disliked him. "I don't object to them as people. I don't know them, not that I want to," my father had said. "It's simply that they'll bring down the property values for the entire street if they're not watched."

"Have you seen their back garden?" my mother responded. "Already they've dumped an old dresser out there."

"Perhaps they're getting ready for a bonfire," I suggested. "Well, remember you're to stay away," my mother warned. "You're not to mix with such people." I was fourteen, ready to resent such prohibitions. And of course I was to have no bonfire; it might dull the house's paint or raze the garden. Instead, a Beethoven symphony for the collection I didn't then appreciate. "Why not?" I complained. "I go to school with him."

"You may," my father agreed, "but just because the school sees fit to lower its standards doesn't mean we have to fall in with the crowd."

"I don't see what's wrong with Joe," I said. A look spoke between my parents. "Someday," said my mother, "when you're older—"

There was always something about Joe they wouldn't specify. I thought I knew what they found objectionable; the acts schoolboys admire are usually deplored by their parents. Joe Turner's exploits had taken on the stature of legend for us. For example, the day he'd sworn at a teacher who'd caned him, paying interest on his words. "Some night I'll get him," Joe told me walking home, spitting further than I ever could. Or the magazines he showed us, stolen from his father as he said: he told terrifying stories of his father's buckled belt. "I Kept the U.S. Army Going," by a Fraulein; my vocabulary grew enormously in two months, until the only time my father

ever hit me. I felt enriched by Joe; soon it was him and me against the teachers, running from the lavatories, hiding sticks of chalk. Joe knew things; the tales of Lower Brichester he told me as we walked home were real, not like the jokes the others told, sniggering in corners; Joe didn't have to creep into a corner to talk. In the two months since he'd run after me and parodied my suburban accent until we'd fought and become inseparable, he showed me sides of life I never knew existed. All of which helped me to understand the people who appear before my desk. Even the seat behind my desk belongs to Joe as much as to me; it was Joe who showed me injustice.

It was late October, two weeks before the bonfire, that fragments of the picture began to fit together. From my window, writing homework, I'd watched early rockets spit a last star and fall far off; once I'd found a cardboard cylinder trodden into the pavement. That was magic: not the Beethoven. So that when Joe said "I bet you won't be coming to my bonfire," I flared up readily. "Why shouldn't I?" I attacked him, throwing a stone into someone's garden.

"Because your parents don't like us." He threw a stone and cracked mine open.

"We're us," I said loyally. "I'll be coming. What's the matter, don't you like it up here in Brichester?"

"It's all right. My father didn't want to move. I couldn't care less, really. It was my mother. She was scared."

I imagined I knew what he meant: stones through the front windows, boys backing girls into alleys, knives and bottles outside the pubs; I'd probably have been as scared. But he continued "She didn't want to live where my brother was."

We ran from a stretched rain and stood beneath an inscribed bus-shelter; two housewives disapproved of us and brought umbrellas down like shields. "Where's your brother now? In the Army?" In those days that was my idea of heroism.

"He was younger than me. He's dead." The umbrellas lifted a little, then determinedly came down.

"Hell." I wasn't equipped to deal with such things. "What happened?" I asked, curiosity intermixed with sympathy.

"Of course only ill-brought-up boys try to impress with made-up stories," came from beneath the umbrellas.

Joe made a sign at them in which I hurriedly joined. We went out into the thinning lines of drizzle. I didn't like to ask again; I waited for Joe to take me into his trust. But he was silent until he reached our road, suburban villas pronged with TV aerials, curtains drawn back to display front-room riches. "You won't really come to my bonfire," he repeated suddenly: his eyes gleamed like the murderer's in the film we'd surreptitiously seen last Saturday, luring the girl towards his camera with its built-in spike.

"See if I don't."

"Well, I'd better say good-bye now. You won't want to be seen near your house with me."

"You watch this!" I shouted angrily, and strode with him arm in arm to his door. Joe beat on the knocker, which hung by a screw. "You're not coming in, are you?" he asked.

"If you've no objection." The door opened and Joe's mother appeared, patched jumper, encircled eyes and curlers: she saw me and frowned. "I'm Joe's friend," I tried to ingratiate myself.

"I didn't know he had any up this end." But she closed the door behind us. "Your father's not feeling well," she told Joe.

"Who's that?" a man's voice roared beyond the hall, the ancient coatstand where an overcoat hung by a ragged tag, the banister wrenched dangerously by some unsteady passage. "Is that Joe just come in? Have you been spilling paraffin round the house, you little bastard?"

Joe's mother glanced at him and winced, then hurried with Joe towards the voice. Left alone, I followed. Vests hung in the kitchen; Mr Turner sat in vest and braces at the table with his feet up, spitting into the sink, a Guinness at his side. "Of course he hasn't, Fred," she intervened unevenly.

"Then it's you," her husband shouted at her. "You've got that trunk hidden somewhere. I'll find it and fix it for good, my girl, don't you worry. I heard them moving round in there last night."

"Oh, my God," Mrs Turner muttered. "Shut up, will you, shut up, shut up..."

Her husband snarled at her, tried to stand up, raised a foot and thumped it on the table. "You watch out, my girl," he threatened. Then he noticed me in the doorway. "Who the bloody hell's that?" he yelled.

"A friend of Joe's. I'll make some tea," she told me, trying to ignore her husband's mumbling.

"I'll do it," Joe said; he seemed anxious to please.

"No, it's all right. You go and talk to your friend."

"I'll help you carry it in."

"Don't bother. I can manage." She looked at Joe strangely, I couldn't tell why: I know now she was scared.

"How much bloody tea do you think we've got in this house?" Mr Turner bawled. "Every little bastard Joe brings home gets a free meal, is that what you think?" I'd become the victim and I didn't like it; I looked at Joe and his mother in turn, attempting to convey my regret for having been a witness, for my incomprehension, for fleeing, for everything. Then I escaped from the misshapen house.

In the next week our walks home were jagged with silence, the unspoken. I said no more about Joe's brother; nor did he. The bonfire approached, and I waited to be invited again; I felt that my experience in Joe's house had rendered our friendship unstable. Meanwhile, each night as I worked in my bedroom, hissing trails of sparks explored the sky; distant shots resounded like warfare. One night, a week before Guy Fawkes, I abandoned my history homework in the middle of a sentence, stared round my room, at my father's inherited Children's Encyclopaedia beneath my Army posters, and stood up to gaze from the window. Three gardens from mine I could see the Turners'; during the day they had built their bonfire. The moon was up; it gleamed in a greenhouse like eyes. On top of the bonfire, above a toilet seat and piled planks like a gutted roof, stood the guy. Its arms were crucified across its wooden body; it swayed in a breeze. Its head turned back and forth beneath the moon; its paper face lifted to me. There was something horrible about that featureless grey expanse, as if eyes which should have been watching me were not. I drew back from the window and opened my door, for downstairs I'd heard my father say "—paraffin."

"To have a bonfire after that," my mother said; a glass clinked. "It's unfeeling. They're like animals."

"Hold on now, it wasn't ever proved," said my father. "You can't condemn someone without a fair trial."

"I know. You've only got to look at him. I know."

"Well, we'll agree to differ. Remind me tomorrow, I must buy that Beethoven."

Nothing about a trunk. In a far garden a ball of fire leapt up screaming. I picked up my history sentence, and next day, drop-kicking a can to Joe, I said "What was your brother called?"

"Frankie." Savagely he kicked the can against a bus-stop. I wanted to trust him. "You never did tell me what happened," I prompted.

His eyes fastened on the can; they glazed with fear, distrust, the look I've seen before my desk when I've enquired into family backgrounds. He strode exaggeratedly to the can and crumpled it beneath his heel. Suddenly he muttered "We had a bonfire. It was going out. My father got a can of paraffin and we threw it on the fire. It spilled on Frankie. We called an ambulance, but they didn't come in time."

I was silent; it hadn't helped my trust. "I bet they all think we're cruel round here, having a bonfire this year," Joe said.

"They don't know anything about it. Anyway, you're not," I told him. I couldn't repeat what my parents had said: I wasn't ready to oppose them.

"It was my mother's idea to have one this year. I think she wants to make me forget." Or somehow to prove to herself that she was wrong to suspect: not that I made this connection then. "I don't want to have a bonfire all by myself," Joe continued.

"You won't. I'll be there," I said. Some part of me trusted him.

At dinner on Guy Fawkes Night, after my usual taste of table wine, I told my parents "They've let us off homework tonight," which was true. "I'm going to see *The Bridge on the River Kwai* with some friends from school," which wasn't.

"I don't see why not," my mother said. "Joe Turner won't be there, will he?"

"No, he won't." He wouldn't.

"You won't have time to listen to this, then," my father said, reaching beneath *The Times* on the coffee table to produce Beethoven's Seventh. For

a moment I was ashamed: they trusted me, they bought me presents, and I betrayed them. But they condemned Joe without ever having met him. I knew Joe; I'd seen how withdrawn his parents were from him; tonight he'd be alone if I didn't keep my word. "Thanks very much," I said, and took the record to my room.

Night had fallen; curtains glowed and shadows moved. I glanced back, but my parents weren't watching. Again I felt a twinge of shame. In the sky around me it had started; green stars sparkled blue and fell; the twinkling blue star of an ambulance swept past. I stood before the Turners' door. Mr Turner swearing, drinking; I didn't want to face that. Once more I was ashamed; if Joe could stand him, it was up to me to do so for Joe's sake. I knocked.

Mr Turner pulled the door from my grasp. "Oh, it's you," he said, falling against the door-frame, hooking his braces over his shoulder. I half expected him to close me out, but he seemed triumphant about something. "I'm not the bloody butler," he said. "Come in or don't, it's all the same to me."

I heard voices in the front room; I entered. Joe was on the floor, counting out fireworks: volcanoes, worms, wheels, stiff-tailed rockets. Around him stood boys I'd never seen before; one had a headscarved girl on his arm and was fondling her. I knew they were from Lower Brichester. I looked at Joe, waiting to be greeted. "There you are," he said, glancing up. "These are some of my friends from where I used to live."

I felt out of place, no longer important, in a sense betrayed; I'd thought it would be Joe and me. But it was his home; it wasn't my place to judge—already I'd determined not to harden prejudice as my parents had. I tried to smile at the girl. She stared back; I suppressed my suburban accent. Ill at ease, I stood near the door, peering into the hall as Mrs Turner came downstairs. Her eyes were red; she'd been crying. She confronted her husband in the kitchen, out of sight. "Well, now you've built your bonfire, aren't you going out to watch?" she demanded.

"It was your idea, not mine, my girl. I'm not getting dressed to go out and play with all his little bastards. I've done my bit for the bonfire," he laughed.

"You're scared," she taunted. "Scared that you might see something."

"Not me, my girl. Not anymore. I'm not going to hear them moving about anymore."

"What are you saying?" she cried, suddenly audibly afraid—and Joe said "Wake up, everyone, time to start." We carried fireworks through the kitchen; Mr Turner's feet were on the table, he lay back with his eyes closed, smiling; his wife turned from him to us with a kind of desperation. A vest dripped on me.

The gravel path was strewn with twigs; what had been a flower-bed was now waste, heaped with wood. The girl tacked Catherine wheels to the fence; the boys staked out the soil with Guinness bottles, thrusting a rocket into each mouth. I glanced up at the bonfire against the arcs of fire among the stars, remembering the wooden figure like a witch's skeleton at the stake. "Where's the guy?" I asked Joe.

"Come on, you lot, who's got the guy?" Joe called. But everyone protested ignorance. We went back into the kitchen. "Has anyone seen our guy?" Joe asked.

"Someone must have stolen it," his mother said uneasily. "You'd think up this way they'd know better."

"After I dressed it up, too," his father mumbled, and turned quickly to his Guinness.

We searched upstairs, though I couldn't see why. Nothing beneath a rumpled double bed but curlers. Joe's room featured a battle of wooden model aeroplanes and a sharp smell of glue like paraffin. One room was an attic: dusty mirrors, footballs, boots, fractured chair-leg. Behind two mirrors I found a trunk whose lock had been forced. I opened it without thinking, but it was empty. "The hell with it," Joe said finally. "It's the fireworks they've all come for, anyway."

The girl had set one wheel whirling, spurting sparks. They lit up Mrs Turner's face staring from the kitchen window before she moved away; her husband's eyes were closed, his mouth open and wheezing. Joe took a match and bent to the bonfire; fire raced up a privet twig. Above us hands of fire dulled against the night. One of the boys sent a rocket whooping into space; its falling sparks left dents of darkness on my eyes. I had no matches; I approached the boy and asked for one. He passed me a handful. Beyond the fire, now angled with planes of flame, the girl was giggling with her

escort. I struck a match on my sole and counted: "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six—" when the rocket leapt. I'd forgotten to muffle my accent, but nobody cared. I was happy.

The girl came back with her escort from a region where chimneys were limned on fans of white electric fire. "The bonfire's going out," said Joe. I gave him some of my matches. Red-hot flecks spun through the smoke and vanished; the smoke clogged our nostrils—it would be catarrh in the morning.

Over the houses rose a red star. It hung steady, dazzling, eternal. Our gasps and cheers were silenced. The white house-walls turned red, like cardboard in a fire about to flame. As suddenly, the star sank and was extinguished; in another garden someone clapped. Everything was dimmed; Joe felt his way to the bonfire and struck matches.

Someone stood up from the corner of the house and moved behind me. I looked round, but the face was grey and formless after the star. A hand touched my arm; it seemed light as paper. The figure moved towards Joe. My sleeve was wet. I lifted it to my nose and sniffed; it was stained with paraffin. I might have called out if Joe's mother hadn't screamed.

Everyone but Joe turned startled to the kitchen. Mr Turner stirred and stared at her. "You must be bloody off your nut," he snarled, "waking me like that."

"Frankie's clothes!" she cried, trying to claw at his face. "What have you done with them?"

"I told you I'd find your trunk, my girl," he laughed, beating her off. "I thought I'd do something for the bonfire, like dressing up the guy."

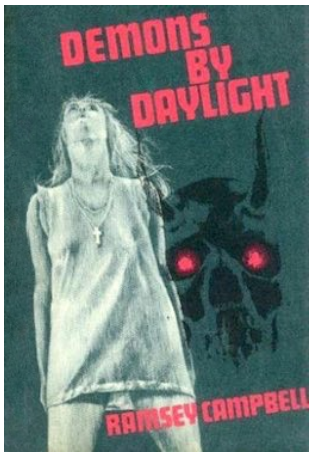
She sat down at the table and sobbed. Everyone was watching aghast, embarrassed. Our eyes were readjusting; we could see each other's red-hot faces. Suddenly, terrified, I looked towards Joe. He was kneeling by the bonfire, thrusting matches deep. My eyes searched the shadows. Near the hedge stood a Guinness bottle which should have held a rocket. Desperately, I searched beyond. A figure was creeping along the hedge towards Joe. As I discovered it, it leapt.

Joe twisted round, still kneeling, as it reached him. The fire caught; fear flared from Joe's face. His mouth gaped; so did mine as I struggled to call the others, still watching the kitchen. The figure wore trousers and a blazer,

but its hands—My tongue trembled in my mouth. I caught at one boy's arm, but he pulled away. Joe's head went back; he overbalanced, clawing at the earth. The rocket plunged into his mouth; the figure's other hand fell on the bonfire. Flames blazed through its arms, down to the rocket's fuse. The brick dug into my face; I'd clapped my hands over my ears and pressed my head against the wall. The girl ran screaming into the house. I couldn't leave the wall until I understood. Which is why each pebble is embedded in my forehead: I never left that wall. Perhaps subconsciously Joe had meant to spill the paraffin; who knows? But why had his father given it to him? Perhaps Joe had wanted it to happen, but what justice demanded that revenge? I reject it, still searching for the truth in each face before my desk while I work to release them from backgrounds like my own and Joe Turner's. The office tomorrow, thank God.

When the strongest of us went unwillingly towards what lay by the bonfire, away from the screams and shouting in the kitchen and the smoking Guinness bottles, we found a papier-mâché hand.

The End Of A Summer's Day



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"Don't sit there, missus," the guide shouted, "you'll get your knickers wet!"

Maria leapt from the stone at the entrance to the cave. She felt degraded; she saw the others laugh at her and follow the guide—the boisterous couple whose laughter she'd heard the length of the bus, the weak pale spinster led by the bearded woman who'd scoffed at the faltering Chinese in front, the others anonymous as the murmur bouncing from the bus roof like bees. She wouldn't follow; she'd preserve her dignity, hold herself apart from them. Then Tony gripped her hand, strengthening her. She glanced back once at the sunlight on the vast hillside tufted with trees, the birds cast down like leaves by the wind above the hamburger stall, and let him lead her.

Into blindness. The guide's torch was cut off around a corner. Below the railed walk they could sense the river rushing from the sunlight. Tony pulled her blouse aside and kissed her shoulder. Maria Thornton, she whispered as an invocation, Maria Thornton. Good-bye, Maria West, good-bye forever. The river thrust into blind tunnels.

They hurried towards the echoing laughter. In a dark niche between two ridged stalactites they saw a couple: the girl's head was back, gulping as at water, their heads rotated on the axis of their mouths like planets in the darkness. For a moment Maria was chilled; it took her back to the coach—the pane through which she'd sometimes stared had been bleared by haircream from some past kiss. She touched what for a long time she couldn't bring herself to name: they'd finally decided on Tony's "manhood." On the bus she'd caressed him for reassurance, as the bearded woman's taunts and the Chinese gropings grew in her ears; nobody had noticed. "Tony Thornton," she intoned as a charm.

A light fanned out from the tunnel ahead; the tallow stalactites gleamed. "Come on, missus," the guide called, "slap him down!"

The party had gathered in a vault; someone lit a cigarette and threw the match into the river, where it hissed and died among hamburger-papers. "I am come here to holiday," the Chinese told anyone who'd listen.

"Isn't it marvellous?" the bearded woman chortled, ignoring the spinster pulling at her hand. "Listen, Chinky, you've come here on holiday, right? On holiday. You'd think English wasn't good enough for him," she shouted.

"Oh, Tony, I hate this," Maria whispered, hanging back.

"No need to, darling. She's compensating for fear of ridicule and he's temporarily rootless. He'll be back home soon," he said, squeezing her hand, strong as stone but not hard or cold.

"Come on, you lot," the guide urged them on, holding his torch high. "I don't want to lose you all. I brought up last week's party only yesterday."

"Oh, God! Oh, hoo hoo hoo!" shrieked the boisterous couple, spilling mirth. "Hey, mate, don't leave me alone with him!" screamed the wife.

The party was drawn forward by a shifting ring of light, torn by stalactites like tusks. Behind her Maria heard the couple from the niche whisper and embrace. She kissed Tony hungrily. One night they'd eaten in a dingy café: dog-eared tablecloths, congealed ketchup, waitresses wiping plates on serviettes. At another table she'd watched a couple eat, legs touching. "She's probably his mistress," Tony had said in her ear; gently he showed her such things, which previously she'd wanted to ignore. "Do you want me to be your mistress, Tony?" she'd said, half-laughing, half-yearning, instantly ashamed—but his face had opened. "No, Maria, I want you to be my wife."

Deep in shade a blind face with drooping lips of tallow mouthed. Peering upwards, Maria saw them everywhere: the cave walls were like those childhood puzzle-pictures which once had frightened her, forests from whose trees faces formed like dryads. She clung to Tony's arm. When they were engaged she'd agreed to holiday with him; they'd settled for coach-trips, memories to which they had returned for their honeymoon. One day, nine months ago, they'd left the coach and found a tower above the sea; they'd run through the hot sand and climbed. At the top they'd gazed out on the sea on which gulls floated like leaves, and Tony had said "I like the perfume."

"It's lavender-water," she'd replied, and suddenly burst into tears. "Oh, Tony, lavender-water, like a spinster! I can't cook, I take ages to get ready, I'll be no good in bed—I'm meant to be a spinster!" But he'd raised her face and met her eyes; above them pigeons were shaken out from the tower like handkerchiefs. "Let me prove you're not a spinster," he said.

The guide carried his torch across a subterranean bridge; beneath in the black water, he strode like an inverted Christ. The faces of the party peered from the river and were swept glittering away. "Now, all of you just listen for a moment," the guide said, on the other side. "I don't advise anyone to come down here without me. If it rains this river rises as far as that roof." He pointed. But now, when he should be grave, his voice still grinned. "I don't like him," Maria whispered. "You couldn't rely on him if anything happened. I'm glad you're here, Tony." His hand closed on hers. "It can't last forever," he told her. She knew he was thinking of the hotel, and laid her head against his shoulder.

"So long as the roof doesn't cave in!" yelled the boisterous man.

"Cave in!" the guide shouted, resonating from the walls; the faces above gave no sign that they'd heard. "Ha, ha, very good! Must remember that one." He poured his torch-beam into a low tunnel and ushered them onward. Behind her on the bridge Maria heard the couple from the niche. She lifted her head from Tony's shoulder. Thinking of the hotel—the first pain had faded, but in the darkness of their bedroom Tony seemed to leave her; the weight on her body, the thrust inside her, the hands exploring blindly, were no longer Tony. Yet she wasn't ready to leave the light on. Even afterwards, as they lay quiet, bodies touching trustingly, she never felt that peace which releases the tongue, enabling her to tell him what she felt. Often she dreamed of the tower above the sea; one day they'd return there and she'd be wholly his at last.

The vault was vast. The walls curved up like ribs, fanged with dislocated teeth about to salivate and close. Behind her, emerging from the tunnel, the other couple gasped. Stalactites thrust from the roof like inverted Oriental turrets or hung like giant candles ready to drip. The walls held back from the torch-beam; Maria sensed the faces. In the depths dripped laughter. The party clustered like moths around the exploring torch. "Come on, lovebirds, come closer," the guide echoed. "I've brought thirty of you down and I don't

want to have to fiddle my inventory." Maria thrust her fingers between Tony's and moved forward, staying at the edge of light.

"Now before we go on I want to warn you all," the guide said sinisterly. "Was anybody here in the blackout? Not you, missus, I don't believe it! That's your father you're with, isn't it, not your husband!" The boisterous woman spluttered. "Even if you were," the guide continued, "you've never seen complete darkness. There's no such thing on God's earth. Of course that doesn't apply down here. You see?" He switched off the torch.

Darkness caved in on them. Maria lost Tony's hand and, groping found it. "Oh, God! Where was Moses!" yelled the boisterous couple. The young girl from the niche giggled. Somewhere, it seemed across a universe, a cigarette glowed. Whispers settled through the blackness. Maria's hand clenched on Tony's; she was back in the bedroom, blind, yearning for the tower above the sea.

"I hope we haven't lost anyone," the guide's face said, lit from below like a waxwork. "That's it for today. I hope someone knows the way out, that's all." He waved the torch to draw the procession. Laughing silhouettes made for the tunnel. Maria still felt afraid of the figure in the dark; she pulled Tony towards the torch. Suddenly she was ashamed, and turned to kiss him. The man whose hand she was holding was not Tony.

Maria fell back. As the light's edge drew away, the face went out. "Tony!" she cried, and ran towards the tunnel.

"Wait," the man called. "Don't leave me. I can't see."

The guide returned; figures crawled from the tunnel like insects, drawn by the light. "Don't be too long, lovebirds," he complained. "I've got another party in an hour."

"My husband," Maria said unevenly. "I've lost him. Please find him for me."

"Don't tell me he's run out on you!" Behind the guide the party had reformed within the vault; Maria searched the faces shaken by the roving torch-beam, but none of them was Tony's. "There he is, missus!" the guide said, pointing. "Were you going to leave him behind?"

Maria turned joyfully; he was pointing at the man behind her. The man was moving back and forth in shadow, arms outstretched. The torch-beam touched his face, and she saw why. He was blind.

"That's not my husband," Maria said, holding her voice in check.

"Looks like him to me, love. That your wife, mate?" Then he saw the man's eyes. His voice hardened. "Come on," he told Maria, "you'd better look after him."

"Is husband?" the Chinese said. "Is not husband? No."

"What's that, mate?" asked the guide—but the bearded woman shouted "Don't listen to the Chink, he can't even speak our language! You saw them together, didn't you?" she prompted, gripping her companion's arm.

"I can't say I did," the spinster said.

"Of course you did! They were sitting right behind us!"

"Well, maybe I did," the spinster admitted.

"Just fancy," the boisterous woman said, "bringing a blind man on a trip like this! Cruel, I call it."

Maria was surrounded by stone faces, mouthing words which her blood swept from her ears. She turned desperately to the vault, the man stumbling in a circle, the darkness beyond which anything might lie. "Please," she pleaded, "someone must have seen my husband? My Tony?" Faces gaped from the walls and ceiling, lines leading off into the depths. "You were behind us," she cried to the girl from the niche. "Didn't you see?"

"I don't know," the girl mused. "He doesn't look the right build to me."

"You know he isn't!" Maria cried, her hands grasping darkness. "His clothes are wrong! Please help me look for Tony!"

"Don't get involved," the girl's escort hissed. "You can see how she is."

"I think we've all had enough," the guide said. "Are you going to take care of him or not?"

"Just let me have your torch for a minute," Maria sobbed.

"Now I couldn't do that, could I? Suppose you dropped it?"

Maria stretched her hand towards the torch, still torn by hope, and a hand fumbled into hers. It was the blind man. "I don't like all this noise," he said. "Whoever you are, please help me."

"There you are," the guide rebuked, "now you've upset him. Show's over. Everybody out." And he lit up the gaping tunnel.

"Wonder what she'd have done with the torch?"

"The blind leading the blind, if you ask me," voices chattered in the passage. The guide helped the blind man through the mouth. Maria, left inside the vault, began to walk into the darkness, arms outstretched to Tony, but immediately the dark was rent and the guide had caught her arm. "Now then, none of that," he threatened. "Listen, I brought thirty down and thirty's what I've got. Be a good girl and think about that."

He shoved her out of the tunnel. The blind man was surrounded. "Here she is," said someone. "Now you'll be all right." Maria shuddered. "I'll take him if you don't feel well," the guide said, suddenly solicitous. But they'd led the blind man forward and closed his hand on hers. The guide moved to the head of the party; the tunnel mouth darkened, was swallowed. "Tony!" Maria screamed, hearing only her own echo. "Don't," the blind man pleaded piteously.

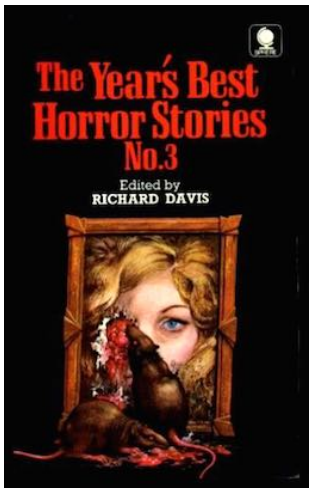
She heard the river sweep beneath the bridge, choked with darkness, erasing Tony Thornton. For a moment she could have thrust the blind man into the gulf and run back to the vault. But his hand gripped hers with the ruthlessness of need. Around her faces laughed and melted as the torch passed. They'd conspired, she told herself, to make away with Tony and to bring this other forth. She must fall in with them; they could leave her dead in some side tunnel. She looked down into the river and saw the sightless eyes beside her, unaware of her.

The guide's torch failed. Daylight flooded down the hillside just beyond. Anonymous figures chewed and waited at the hamburger-stall. "All right, let's make sure everybody's here," the guide said. "I don't like the look of that sky." He counted; faces turned to her; the guide's gaze passed over her and hurried onward. At her back the cave opened inviting, protective. "Where are we?" the blind man asked feebly. "It feels like summer."

Maria thought of the coach-trip ahead; the Chinese and the girl unsure but unwilling to speak, the bearded woman looking back to disapprove of her, the boisterous couple discussing her audibly—and deep in the caves Tony, perhaps unconscious, perhaps crawling over stone, calling out to her in darkness. She thought she heard him cry her name; it might have been a bird on the hill. The guide was waiting; the party shuffled, impatient. Suddenly she pushed the blind man forward; he stumbled out into the summer day. The others muttered protests; the guide called out—but she was running headlong into darkness, the last glint of sunlight broken by her

tears like the sea beneath the tower, the river rushing by beneath. As the light vanished, she heard the first faint patter of the rain.

The Old Horns



Written in: 1968
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'Look at that wood,' George said, standing above Eve as she lay on the hillock. 'Can't you just imagine satyrs chasing nymphs through the undergrowth, catching them in the shadows.'

I looked toward the trees: dappled shifting sunlight, soft hollows and rises resilient with pine-needles.

Eve laughed and looked in the other direction. 'But why The Old Horns?' she persisted.

'It sounds like a legend,' George suggested. 'Horns played by satyrs, a pagan orgy, revellers lying sated on the sand—a bit like us in fact—virgins dancing toward the man of their choice—'

I sat up; my poem was disintegrating. 'Paganism wasn't like that,' I interrupted, raising my voice. 'It degraded the body. It didn't release you, it dragged you down into itself. It rotted you.'

'Who asked you?' George said.

I lay back, clutching a bottle of home-made wine. The sun swelled behind my eyelids, fermenting my brain. George and Eve whispered on the hillock to my left. Away on the right, where the grassy mounds became dunes, I could hear the others; friends of mine but blurred by alcohol—several girls and women carefully avoiding George, two children chasing, men who frowned at George but, like myself, never intervened. I gave myself up to the sunlight, the rustling grasses.

I thought:

To walk on needles sharp as scattered combs.

No, that was inappropriate.

Pines like arrows to the sky, the sea's reflection.
Dunes.

But beyond the dunes lay The Old Horns, disguised as soft sand. Last week when we'd discussed the picnic, someone had mentioned the name. We'd decided at once; it sounded authentically mysterious. It was part of the beach, but we'd convinced ourselves that sand was half the fun, sand sprinkled on the garlicwurst like salt, sand crunching between the Camembert and crackers. We hadn't known about The Old Horns. At noon we'd come upon it; one of the children, scampering ahead toward the beach, had screamed and sunk into what had seemed a dune. We'd pulled her free; her legs were clothed in socks of brown mud. Surveying warily, our eyes sharpened by the sunlight, we'd noticed that the dunes ahead were no longer the rich brown of wet sand, but the festering richness of rotting wood. 'Keep close to me, you two,' Thora called to her children. We turned back; when we wanted the beach we'd go round. I examined the place as we hurried back to where the grey fungi, suddenly apparent everywhere, gave way to grass. The deceptive stain had leaked toward the beach, toward the dunes, toward the pines which curved round but hung back, their roots thick with the mud as if advanced tentatively and caught. Just inside the curve of the pines I saw the dull glint of a pool. We came to firmer ground. 'Tobacco waste,' suggested someone, thinking of the factory we'd passed a mile away that morning, brown and rough and moist as chewed tobacco. 'Donkey-dung,' George had laughed. Lying on my hillock, I felt my poem choked by The Old Horns; it was as though something had suffocated or was stirring feebly in its own filth, clogged, encrusted. When I'd looked back I couldn't see the child's footprints; all trace of her had been engulfed.

Water left to catch the leaves, to photograph the trees.

Eve screamed. I jerked erect to see her pulling away from George, who fell flat on the grass. 'Protect me,' she pleaded, running to me.

'Of course. Have some wine.' I wiped the mouth of the bottle and passed it to her; she drank, then lay back. 'It's not so comfortable here,' she complained.

'Use this as a pillow,' I suggested, extending my arm.

'It might be hard,' she said, getting up and standing between the hillocks.

'Come on, baby,' George called, straightening his open-necked shirt, 'we're all friends here.'

Baulked of Eve, I felt rising to my lips the insult I'd conceived last time George had grabbed a girl. I tried to hold it in. Last time, when I hadn't spoken, I'd seen that George's way with women merely shielded a kind of emotional impotence, a lack of real relationships: an emotional void which might be filled by lust or by the civil servant's blind devotion to duty, or in George's case both. 'Must you walk round with your emotional fly unbuttoned?' I blurted.

Eve laughed; George's grin withdrew into its shell. My poem was ruined; I stood up unsteadily, emptied my bottle and joined the others.

One of Thora's and Ken's children was goading a doll to climb a dune. The doll was clockwork; it clumped up the inclined sand, tilted and fell back. I was chilled by it: motion without soul. Ken was measuring his home-made wine into paper cups. 'Where are George and Eve? Oh, well,' he said, and filled a cup for me. We stood talking above the prostrate bodies in the sunlight.

Thora's other child ran down to her. 'Mummy, mummy, on the beach!'

'What, dear?'

'Someone playing with a big red balloon with a face on it! I saw it over the june!'

'Dune, dear, dune.'

The mist inflated the sun as it set.

'The minibus is breathing its last,' Ken told the sun-bathers. 'Hope it lives until we reach the country club.'

George appeared, combing sand from his hair. 'Bet I know what's wrong with it,' he said, and explained.

'You know, you may be right,' Ken agreed. 'Have some wine and we'll take a look.'

They strode off toward the road which led to The Old Horns. I stood among the eyes closed against the sun, the faces streaked with sweat and sand. Off to my right the sea whispered glittering; over the dunes to the left rose the pines; ahead, invisible behind a rise, spread The Old Horns. I sipped the wine, making it last.

George and Ken returned. 'Well done, George,' Ken called out. 'We've operated on the minibus.'

'I may leave early,' George said. 'I want to watch Julie Christie on TV.'

'What's wrong, George, anti-social?' I shouted. 'Isn't anyone being friendly today?' But nobody laughed.

'That's the last of the wine,' Ken intoned.

Bodies stirred to protest. Someone sat up and pulled out a pack of cards.

'Oh, not cards,' Eve said, coming round a dune. She glanced at George, then at me; a stray wind thrilled trembling through her sleeves. 'Let's have a game of hide and seek.'

Voices mumbled assent; the others stood, brushing sand from their clothes. 'Who's going to chase who?' George asked.

'The girls will chase the boys,' decided Eve.

'One guess where I'll be,' George said, winking.

'You two can play,' Thora silenced cries, 'but only if you promise to stay away from the quicksand.'

'We'll give you a hundred!' Eve called.

'Don't you go after Ken,' laughed Thora. 'He's mine.'

'One, two, three—' the women chanted.

With the rest, I ran. I rounded a dune and doubled back. I crouched low over two more and could no longer hear the chant. The sun hung close to the sea. I dropped into a hollow at the edge of the beach. The hundred must be up. I lay on my side. A long-legged spider straggled before my face; it scrabbled frantically over the sand, conquered the dune and vanished. Faint cries of triumph came from somewhere. Ahead along the beach The Old Horns suffocated my thoughts. I thought of George, waiting in the shade beneath the pines for Eve. Keep away, I willed him, don't disturb me. I cupped sand, let it trickle, become one with the dune.

I caught up the grains with indistinguishable others. They were warm, lulling. It seemed they'd never end.

The others had gone. In the evening the sea whisked foam high and retreated. It was cold in the hollow. I stretched and rose. Then I heard the music: on the beach, low wet dissonances with a jagged jerking rhythm. I climbed toward it; from the top of the dune I'd be able to see. The sand sank

beneath me; my feet flung wildly. I reached the rise and stared toward the beach.

Once I'd seen a film of a festival in, I think, Mexico: gay crowds had filled the streets, and above them had lumbered great heads, painted grinning mouths, blind eyes, monsters shaken with slow mechanical mirth. I felt now the horror I'd felt then. On the beach, at the edge of The Old Horns, figures were prancing, leaping in a puppet's parody of joy. Their heads—no, they couldn't be heads: on their shoulders were set huge paper masks like balloons, nodding horribly, their grinning mouths stretched wide as if bloated from within. The masks were the colour of The Old Horns: heads inflated by mud, glimmering red now in the sunset. The music came from swaying pipes thrust in the stretched mouths; thick notes drooled. Whatever the pipes were made of, it must have been rotten; one disintegrated as I watched, fell softly and merged with The Old Horns. There might have been a dozen of the stamping figures; I was terrified, but something drew me closer. Some wore robes as in a pagan ritual; some were dressed in Victorian suits; one wore trousers and an open-necked shirt. As I came near the stain which was The Old Horns, this figure turned its glistening unsteady head to me.

My choked scream woke me. I struggled to my feet and ran toward the pines, slithering down avalanches of sand, not looking back toward the beach. I had to reach the woods; they were too close to The Old Horns; Eve might be on the edge. I plunged into the forest, falling down slopes sharp with pine-needles, toward the pool I'd seen glinting. At the far end of an avenue I saw its dull reflection. On my right, toward The Old Horns, the needles had decayed; great slabs of fungus crawled up the trees. I came panting to the pool. The avenue was blocked by a rotted tree; a precarious path formed a rim about the water and led up to a rise beyond. 'Eve!' I called; my cry was muffled by the fungus. Something in the pool caught my eye. I peered through the needles surrounded by scum. Deep in the water was something I had taken to be the floor of the pool. But it couldn't be: it was a huge face drawn in curling mud, gigantic wet pits for eyes, a grinning mouth whose lips crumbled and smoked in the water. I felt its power; it was The Old Horns, creeping from its temple of mud on the beach, sleeping wakefully in the pool, oozing into the trees through their roots. I flinched back from the water, and in the reflection I saw a dark balloon bob into sight over my shoulder. My head plunged underwater. The face swirled and

poured into my mouth and nostrils. Agony ate through my brain, burning it like acid, swelling my cheeks until I grinned.

I was clutching at the hollow near the beach. Sand pierced beneath my nails like needles. My face was in the sand, suffocating. I don't know why, but as I swept the grains from my cheeks I thought of those honey-coloured eggs one finds on old wood. I leapt up. The sun bulged red on the horizon; against it dunes charred like cardboard. My thoughts retreated from the nightmare. I didn't go to look at the beach. I glanced uneasily around the hollow, and heard a cry of joy from the direction of the pines. Eventually I found them; they'd discovered a last bottle.

Eve handed me a paper cup and I gulped down the wine. 'Where did you go that we couldn't find you?' she asked.

'Never thought we'd see you playing hide and seek!' Thora told me.

'Has anyone seen George?' Ken called.

'I couldn't find him either,' pouted Eve.

'Mummy, the big balloon went into the pond!'

'I told you to stay away from there,' Thora said, slapping her.

Ken kicked sand and ran up a dune. 'George!' he shouted above the child's cries. Everyone was standing sated in the blue evening, finishing the wine, eager for the country club: suddenly we all were shouting 'George!' from dunes, 'George!' into the woods, 'George!' toward the beach, 'George!' from the edge of The Old Horns until I shivered and hurried back.

'He said he was going home to watch TV,' said Thora.

'That's right, he did,' remembered Ken, relieved. 'Onward to the minibus, then.'

We piled in and drove through the stone gateposts, down the rutted road. The pines followed us, swaying in the wind.

The waiters at the country club frowned as we entered, treading sand like holy footprints on the carpet. Ken invoked his membership. The lights were muted, the music more so. The waiters set places at the table, and we congregated at the bar.

'There must be a legend of pagan orgies at The Old Horns,' I said to the barman. Everyone looked at me.

'Wouldn't know about that, sir,' he said. 'The kids round here dare each other to go up there at night. Don't know what they get up to once they're there.'

We sat down. 'I won't be a minute,' Eve called, talking at the bar to a man playing with his old school tie. The wine waiter placed lists before the ladies. Never thought they'd see me playing hide and seek, indeed; I knew they liked my introversion as little as they liked George. 'You can't be going?' Thora protested: she seemed genuine. 'I thought I said,' I told them. 'I want to watch Julie Christie on TV.'

It took me an hour to walk back to The Old Horns. Sometimes I dawdled, gnawed by fear; sometimes I drove myself onward, determined to prove myself wrong. Ahead of me cars lit up naves of branches. Once I heard a cry among the omnipresent pines, perhaps an owl; once a star was hidden by a branch. I watched for it, but it never reappeared.

I plodded up the road toward The Old Horns. For a moment the moon ornamented the gatepost like a globe; glistening green rays ran down the stone like luminous paint.

I wasn't impressed by the poetry. Through the posts I turned into the forest; the moon was caught by reaching twigs and dragged down.

The scent of pine sharpened the cold air. The first shadow fell across my path; my feet ventured into darkness and snapped needles, shattering the silence. The pines supported the dark sky, but night welled richly in my wake. Glancing between the too-quiet trunks, I made my way down the avenue toward the pool.

Among the trees a pale globe grinned as it moved with me. I glanced up, my heart pounding—but it was the moon, tangled in the branches like a spider's cocoon. As I looked away, I caught a movement beneath the moon.

Nothing could have moved. There was little wind: too little to trouble what seemed to be a decayed trunk, fat and brown in the shadows. I had to know. I thrust between the trees, grasping cold fungus and shuddering, and reached what I'd seen. There was nothing: merely a space between the trunks. 'George!' I called.

Branches snapped ahead of me. Far down the dim perspective of trees a figure was prancing toward the pool. It's George, I thought, trying to forget: he was drunk and now he's awakened, he's ashamed. I plunged in pursuit.

Low branches ripped my face; I put up my hands to protect myself and found them smeared with blobs of clay or mud. At every step a branch tried to tear my face. Ahead the figure leapt like a doll jerked by a cripple; it was further away than before. I couldn't see its head in the shadows. It seemed to be singing thickly—or was it screaming? I couldn't tell; the voice was choked. Suddenly a moonbeam found the head. It was in proportion, but it glistened; it was coated with mud. Suppressing my thoughts, I ran faster, beating off the branches, my hands wet with mud scraped from something.

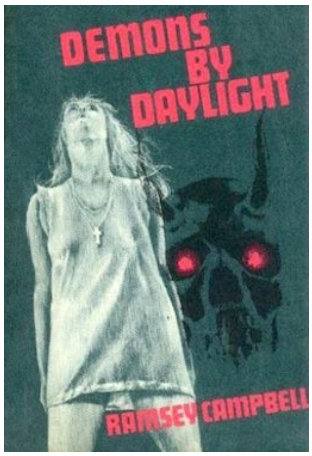
Just as I was close the figure pranced free of the forest. It had reached the pool. The moon-white water darkened for a moment, then shone unobstructed. I came out into the clearing. Swarms of black flies scintillated above the pool. I peered about. The path was deserted; nothing moved except the glittering flies, unless there was a figure creeping through the trees on the edge of the path. I began to pick my way around the pool toward the rise beyond. Terror took me. I couldn't balance above the water. I threw myself back, unable to complete the circuit either way, and looked down into the pool.

The moon was there, floating on the scum like a stone from beneath which something might crawl. It dazzled whatever lay beneath. A bubble of mud rose to the surface and burst.

Even when I heard movement I couldn't look away. I didn't need to. Inverted in the pool, a figure burst forth from the trees at the far edge of the path. I heard something collide dully with a heavy branch. The figure, silent now, danced jerkily up the rise like a chicken in its death-spasm. At the top it met the moon. It stood struggling still to dance; it threw up the arms of its open-necked shirt in a final gesture of joy. Its inversion gave me a chance not to believe what I saw; the moon balanced on the space between the shoulders. Then it fell back into the pool. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, only needles whirled in the water. Already the flies were gathering. I backed away from the pool. A trunk thrust against my shoulders. All at once I turned and smashed my way out of the forest, accepting the blows of branches, trying to abort the embryo of guilt. I fell out between two pines, and the moon sailed up, equivocally free at last.

Poetry had won.

Potential



"Charles leaves a disappointing 'Be-In' in the company of Cook, who promises him a more fulfilling experience at a party where people are trying 'to realise potential'. [...] The suggestion of Cook's homoerotic interest in Charles at the beginning of the tale gives the tale considerable tension and is unprecedented in Campbell's work. Campbell describes a story with a plot similar to this one (*The Steeple On The Hill*) as the work of Errol Undercliffe in *The Franklyn Paragraphs*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1968
First published in *Demons By Daylight*, 1973

On the poster outside the Cooperative Hall, forming from the stars twined in the foliage, Charles had read: 'BRICHESTER'S FIRST BE-IN—FREE FLOWERS AND BELLS!' But in the entrance hall, beyond the desk where a suspicious muscle-man accepted his ten shillings, two girls were squabbling over the last plastic bell. Searching in the second cardboard carton, Charles found a paper flower whose petals were not too dog-eared, whose wire hooked into his button hole without snapping. "Bloody typical," a boy said next to him. "I'm going to write to the *International Times* about this."

He meant it wasn't a true love-in, Charles supposed, fumbling with terminology. He'd once bought the *International Times*, the underground newspaper, but the little he had understood he hadn't liked. Uneasily he watched the crowds entering the ballroom. Cloaks, shawls, boys with hair like dark lather, like tangled wire: Charles adjusted his "Make Love Not War" badge, conscious of its incongruity against his grey office suit. He glanced up at the names of groups above the ballroom door: the Titus Groans, the Faveolate Colossi. "OK, guys and gals, we've got a fabulously faveolate evening ahead for you," he muttered in faint parody. "Come on," said the boy at his side, "let's go in."

Through the entrance Charles could see swaying figures merged by chameleon lights and hear drums like subterranean engines; as they entered the guitars screamed, a spotlight plunged through his eyes to expand inside

his skull. "Let me adjust," he said to his companion: anything to gain time. Threads of joss-smoke curled into his nostrils, sinuous as the hands of a squatting girl, Indian-dancing for an encircling intent audience. A middle-aged man left the circle, which closed, and wandered ill at ease: a reporter, Charles thought. He searched the vast ballroom; groups of thirteen-year-old girls dancing, multicoloured spotlights painting faces, projectors spitting images of turbulent liquid on the walls, on the stage the Faveolate Colossi lifting guitars high in a faintly obscene gesture. "Ready?" asked the boy at his side.

They danced toward two girls: sixteen, perhaps, or younger. A crimson light found Charles; when it moved away his face stayed red. Each time he moved his foot it was dragged down by a sense of triviality; he thought of the file left on his desk last night, to be dealt with on Monday morning. He sensed the reporter watching him from the shadows. The music throbbed to silence. The two girls glared at Charles and walked away. "Not much cop, anyway," said his companion—but then he seemed to see someone he knew: he vanished in the murk.

On the balcony above the ballroom a girl wearily blew bubbles through the shafts of coloured light. They settled, bursting when they touched floor or flesh: Charles saw his life. "Are you a flower person?" a voice asked: it was the reporter, twirling a paper flower.

"No less so than you, I should think." Charles felt cheated: the boys with flowers behind their ears, the girls dancing together like uneasy extras in a musical, the jagged lances of sound, the lights excruciating as the dazzle of scraped tin, gave him nothing: less than the fragments he'd retained from books on philosophy.

"I'm not one—Good Lord, no. I'm just searching." Charles sensed sympathy.

"You're not a reporter?"

"Never have been. Is that what I look like? No wonder they've all been watching me."

"Then why are you here?"

"For the same reason as you," the other said. "Searching."

Charles supposed that was true. He stared about: at the far end from the stage a bar had been given over to lemonade. "Let me stand you a drink,"

the other said.

At the bar Charles saw that the man's hands were trembling; he'd torn the paper petals from the wire. Charles couldn't walk away; he searched for distraction. On stage the leader of the Titus Groans was staggering about, hands covering his eyes, crying "Oswald, Kennedy, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe—" The speakers round the ballroom squealed and snorted. "Kill, kill!" screamed the Titus Groan, setting fire to a cardboard amplifier. Charles glanced away, at caped figures in a corner. "Sons of Dracula," he muttered in a weak Karloff parody. The other laughed. "You're a good mimic," he said. Charles thought of the office: moments when he'd felt the conversation move away from him and improvised an imitation to hold attention. He stared at the figures smoking gravely in the corner, until he saw the flash of a packet of Woodbines.

"If someone had given you LSD or hashish, would you have accepted?" the other asked, sipping a Coke and belching.

"I don't know. Perhaps." Something to set him apart from the people at the office, though they'd never know: he hadn't even dared to wear his badge among them.

"You feel empty. You're looking for something to fill you, to expand your mind as they'd say." The man's hands were shaking again: the glass jangled on the bar.

"Ja, iss right, Herr Koktor," but it didn't work. "I suppose you're right," Charles said.

The Titus Groan was casting flowers into the crowd. Suddenly Charles wanted one—then immediately he didn't: it was trivial. Girls scrambled for the flowers; as they converged they changed from red to green. "Gerroff!" yelled one. "I think—" Charles said. "I know," the other agreed. "Let's leave."

In the entrance hall the pugilist behind the desk peered at them suspiciously. "By the way, my name's Cook," the man mentioned. "Charles," Charles said.

They emerged into the main street; behind the blue lamps the moon was choked by clouds. A passing couple eyed Charles' flower and "Make Love Not War" and shook their heads, tut-tut. "I know you bought that badge for the occasion," Cook remarked. "You might as well take it off."

"I do believe in it, you know," Charles said.

"Of course," Cook said. "We all do."

Tomorrow Charles might say: "Last night I met a philosopher"—but once he'd claimed as his own a description of a robbery told him by a friend, only to be taunted by his neighbour at the office: "Yes, I saw that too. Last week on TV, wasn't it?" Two boys passed, tinkling with beads and bells. Charles was about to offer Cook a drink: he'd formed vague friendships at the office thus. But Cook was struggling to speak.

"I wonder—" he mumbled. The moon fought back the clouds, like an awakening face. "I don't know you very well, but still—you seem sympathetic... Look, I'll tell you. I'm meeting some friends of mine who are experimenting with the mind, let's say. Trying to realise potential. It sounds dramatic, but maybe they can help you find yourself." His head shook; he looked away.

He was nervous, Charles could see: it was as if he'd drained Charles' unease into himself, leaving Charles the power to calm him. "I'll try anything once," Charles said. Blinded by the lamps like photofloods, the moon shrank back into the clouds.

They walked toward a side street where Cook's car was parked. In the unreal light the shops rose to Victorian façades, annihilating time. Charles wondered what they'd give him: LSD, lights, hypnosis? In the Be-In the pounding sound and leaping lights had reminded him somehow of brainwashing. He didn't like the idea of hypnosis: he wanted to be aware of his actions, to preserve his identity. Perhaps he'd simply watch the others.

Down a side street, on a stage of light from a pub door, two men fought. Charles couldn't look away. "I thought so," Cook said. "You're one of us."

In the next street Cook's car waited, its headlights dull like great blind eyes. "I hope you're not too perfect," Cook mumbled, unlocking the door. "They can't abandon me, not now. No, I'm just suspicious by nature, I know that." Savagely he twisted the ignition key, and shuddered. "They're in Severnford," he said.

Darkness spread again over the last house like decay, and the road dipped. As they swept over a rise Charles saw the distant Severn: a boat drifted quietly and vanished. Hills were lit like sleeping colossi; over them the moon bounced absurdly before the clouds closed. Suddenly Cook stopped

the car. The darkness hid his face, but Charles could make out his hands working on the wheel. Cook rolled the window down. "Look up there," he said, pointing an unsteady finger at a gap in the clouds exposing the universe, a lone far frosty star. "Infinity. There must be something in all that to fill us."

In Severnford they pulled up near the wharf. The streets were lit by gaslamps, reflected flickering in windows set in dark moist stone. "We'll walk from here," Cook said.

They crossed an empty street of shops. On the corner of an alley Cook stopped before a window: socks, shirts, skirts, bags of sweets, tins of Vim, along the front of the pane a line of books like a frieze. "Do you read science fiction?" Cook asked.

"Not much," Charles said. "I don't read much." Not fiction, anyway, and retained little.

"You should read Lovecraft." Next to the tentacled cover a man fought off a razor, hands flailing, eyes pleading with the camera: Cook almost gripped Charles' arm, then flinched away. They entered the alley. Two dogs scrabbling at dustbins snarled and ran ahead. In a lighted window, above the broken glass which grew from the alley wall, someone played a violin.

Beyond the houses at the end of the alley ran the Severn. The boat had gone; tranquil lights floated against the current. Gas-lamps left the windows of the houses dark and gaping, shifted shadows behind the broken leaning doors. "Over here," Cook said, clearing his throat.

"Here?" Cook had headed for a disused pub, its dim window autographed in dust. Charles wavered: was Cook perhaps alone? Why had he lured him here? Then Charles looked up; behind the sign—THE RIVERSIDE—nailed across the second storey, he glimpsed the bright edge of a window and heard a hint of voices, mixed with some sound he couldn't place. Cook was swallowed by the lightless doorway; the two dogs ran out whimpering. Charles followed his guide.

Beer-bottles were piled in pyramids on the bar, held together by Sellotape; in the topmost candles flared, their flames flattened and leapt, briefly revealing broken pump-handles on the bar-top like ancient truncheons, black mirrors from which Charles' face sprang surprised, two crates behind the bar cloaked in sacking. POLICE ARE PEOPLE TOO was painted on a

glass partition; for a moment it appeared like the answer of an oracle. "Oh, the police know about this," Cook said, catching Charles' eye. "They're used to it by now, they don't interfere. Upstairs.'

Beyond the bar a dark staircase climbed; as they mounted past a large unseen room, through whose empty window glimmered the Severn, the voices hushed, giving way to the sound which worried Charles. Cook knocked twice on a panelled door. A secret society, thought Charles, wondering. The door opened.

Sound rushed out. Charles' first thought was of the Be-In: a united shriek of violins, terrifying. Inside the long room faces turned to him. "Take off your shoes," Cook said, leaving his own in the row at the door, padding onto the fur which carpeted the flat.

Charles complied uneasily, postponing the moment when he must look up. When he did they were still watching: but not curious, clearly eager to know him. He felt accepted; for the first time he was wanted for himself, not a desperately mimicked image. The young man in black who had opened the door circled him, shoulder-length ringlets swaying, and took his hand. "I'm Smith," he said. "You're in my flat."

Cook hurried forward. "This is Charles," he stuttered.

"Yes, yes, Cook, he'll tell us his name when he's ready."

Cook retreated, almost tripping over someone prone on the fur. Charles surveyed; boys with hair they shook back from their faces, girls already sketched on by experience, in a corner an old couple whose eyes glittered as if galvanised—writers, perhaps. They weren't like the people at the office; he felt they could give him something he sought. Against the walls two speakers shrieked; several of the listeners lay close, crawling closer. "What's that?" Charles asked.

"Penderecki. *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*."

Charles watched the listeners: in the violins the imaginative might hear the screams of the victims, in the pizzicati the popping of scorched flesh. Near one speaker *Beyond Belief* protected a veneer from a pub ashtray; next to it lay *New Worlds Speculative Fiction*, *We Pass From View*, *Le Sadisme au Cinema*, an *International Times* and a pile of *Ultimate Press* pornography, above which, mute, stared Mervyn Peake's Auschwitz sketches. "Smoke?" Smith asked, producing a gold cigarette-case.

"No thanks," Charles said; when he knew them better he'd try the marijuana, if that was what it was.

"I will," Cook interrupted, taking a black cigarette.

The violins died. "Time?" someone suggested.

"I'll make sure," Smith turned to Charles apologetically: "We don't use words unless they're meaningful." He padded to a corner and opened a door which Charles hadn't noticed; beyond it light blazed as at the Be-in. Charles thought he heard voices whispering, and a metal sound. He glanced about, avoiding the faces; outside the window loomed the back of the pub sign. A wall hid the river from him, but he could still see the quiet boat in the moonlight. He wished they'd speak instead of watching him; but perhaps they were waiting for him to declare himself. He wished Cook wouldn't stand at the bookcase, his shivering back aware of Charles.

Smith appeared, closing the door. The faces turned from Charles to him. "Charles has come to find himself," he said. "In there, Charles."

They stood up and surrounded the door, leaving a path for Charles. They were eager—too eager; Charles hesitated. He'd wanted to be part of something, not alone and acted upon. But Smith smiled deprecatingly; the fur lulled Charles' nerves like a childhood blanket. He started forward. "Wait," Smith said. He stared at Cook, still trembling before the bookcase. "Cook," he called, "you want to participate. You be guide."

"I feel sick," said Cook's back.

"You don't want to leave us after so long."

Cook shuddered and whirled to face them. He looked at Charles, then away. "All right," he whispered, "I'll help him." Beckoned by Smith, he preceded Charles into the other room.

Charles almost turned and ran, he couldn't have said why; but he was inhibited against rejecting people he'd just met. He strode past the eyes into the blazing light.

At first he didn't see the girl. There was so much in the way: cameras on splayed tripods, blind blinding spotlights climbed by cords like Lovecraft tentacles, in the centre of the floor a rack of knives and razors and sharp instruments, carefully arranged. He heard what must be the whimper of a dog on the wharf. Suddenly he peered through the twined cords and thrust

Cook aside. A girl was tied to the wall. Her arms were crucified high. She was naked.

The jigsaw fitted—*International Times*, pornography, the cameras, pornographic films—but Charles felt no revulsion, simply anger: he'd come so far for this. Then a glimpse of crimson drew his eye to the gap where the girl's left little finger should have been. Unbelieving, he stared at the floor, at the pattern of crimson tracing the agonised flurry of her hand.

"Make your choice," Cook said.

Slowly Charles turned, sick with hatred. Cook had retreated to the door; over his shoulder the others craned for a better view. "Make your choice," Cook repeated, indicating the rack of knives: his voice trembled, and the girl looked back and whimpered. "Let what is in you be you. Release your potential, your power."

Charles couldn't look at the girl; if he did he'd be sick. He could feel her pleading with him. He approached the rack; his stockinged feet clung to the floor as in a nightmare. He touched a knife; its blade mutilated his reflection, its edge was razor-sharp. He clutched the handle and glanced with prickling eyes toward the door. It wouldn't work: too far to run. He struggled to remove the knife from the rack.

"Go on, Cook, help him," Smith said. The girl sobbed. Cook turned about, trembling. "Cook," Smith said.

Cook sidled toward Charles, his eyes appealing like a dog's as they linked the girl and Charles: Charles was his nightmare. Almost at the rack, Cook stood shaking and glared toward the girl. "My God!" he cried. "You haven't —"

"My wife?" Smith called. "Not even I."

The knife slid from the rack and was at once in Cook's stomach. Yet Charles saw the blade flash on Cook's face, flayed not so much by terror as by knowledge. Cook fell on the knife. Charles closed his eyes. Blindly he wiped his hands on his jacket. At last he faced them, and almost knew what Cook had known. They were watching him with a new expression: worship.

Behind him he heard movement. He had to turn. The girl was pulling her hands free of the cords, flexing her little finger which had been hidden in her palm, wiping off the crimson paint on a cloth from the floor. As she passed Charles she stretched out her hand to touch him, but at the last

moment lowered her eyes and knelt before Cook's body. Smith joined her and they linked hands. The others followed and knelt, the old couple sinking slowly as their charge was drained. They turned up their faces to Charles, waiting.

You made this happen! he might have shouted to defeat them. You staged this, you invented it! It means nothing.

And all he'd done had been to perform their script—but his hand had held the knife, his hand still felt it plunge, his hand displayed the blade beneath which they cowered. Within him something woke and swelled, tearing him open, drawing him into itself. They saw; they knew. The girl stretched out her hands toward him, and they chorused a name.

At once it was outside his body, no longer part of him. For a moment he was filled by the innocence of oblivion. Then, finally, he knew. He felt what they had called forth sucking him out like an oyster, converting him into itself, the pain as his molecules ripped asunder as if his fingers were being wrenched loose. He cried out once. Then blood fountained from his mouth.

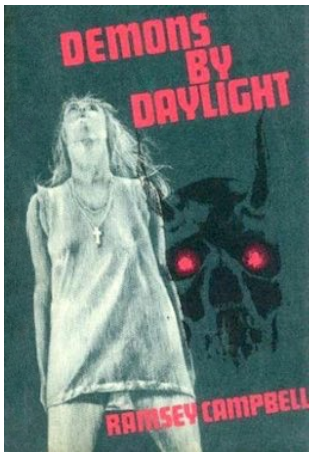
They moved whispering through the flat, eyes averted. Two of them supported Cook's body to his car. "In the hills, remember," Smith whispered.

He returned to the studio, head bowed. "The river?" someone asked, pointing to the dry grey shape on the floor.

"It's nothing now," Smith said. "It won't be recognised. The front door."

They gathered up the husk and piled it into a paper carrier, where it rasped, hollow. Someone took the bag down through the pub. The candles had guttered. He threw the contents of the bag into the street beneath the gas-lamps, and the dogs converged snarling to fight. Then he rejoined the others, as reverently they raised their eyes to what filled the flat, and waited for it to speak.

At First Sight



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'To you,' someone said.

Valerie squirmed. Across the pub table they were swapping jokes, dirtier and funner. At her side Len looked embarrassed. When they'd all met from the office to celebrate Tony's twenty-first they'd paired off outside the pub; seeing Valerie unescorted, Tony had called Len, who'd been trying to merge with the mist of this last night of October. He'd sat with her for two hours, but the third time he'd rammed his finger through a beer-mat her smile of encouragement had drooped. Val was a mirror; if someone stood before her mute then her tongue would fail her too. She looked away from the dulled diamond facets of the tankards multiplied into the froth, beneath the second ceiling of smoke, to the clock above the bar: only five minutes to go, thank God. Someone knocked a table; glass shattered. She regarded the mist which breathed on the panes, and from the corner of her eye saw something rising, falling back.

'To you,' he said.

At last her eye caught his; he was seated at a table near the bar, and as she looked he rose and lifted his glass to her. Dark sleek hair straight as his comb's teeth, dark intense eyes, swarthy face ten years older than her own, black belted raincoat; the brass-buttoned leather teenagers at his table stared and laughed. Val saw the black glove which raised the glass toward her, and stood up. 'To you,' she responded.

Around her smoke puffed out and curled, mixed with laughter; she sensed Len looking up at her, looking away.

The man reached behind him, gripping the table with his other black-gloved hand. 'To us,' he called.

Val hesitated. Behind her Len said: 'Look, can anyone do this?' flipping a beer-mat high with his fingers, catching it in mid-air. 'To us,' she called, and

behind the man saw the teenager lean forward, catch his glove and start to pull it free, shouting 'What's this then, mate, Marks and Spencer's?' Her heart throbbed; her skin iced. The man turned, put down his glass and gripped the boy's wrist. The boy looked up, and his face drained. The black raincoat swallowed him like fog; the barman doused the lights to move the drinkers; three men staggered to the bar for a last order. The lights blazed. The man and the boy were gone. The two remaining teenagers exchanged glances, then made for the door, which was swinging itself into place. Outside the disturbed mist swirled and closed again.

When Val returned to the flat she ripped October from the calendar. Each month was an overlapping pictured strip; from January fragments of cardboard flesh had matured into a girl, and in June fingers had begun to take shape around her. Val knew that in December great male hands would clutch her, carrying her into an unknown New Year. For a week in February she'd meant to tear up the calendar; now, still remembering whose present it had been, she treasured it to show that she'd survived. She leaned on a creaking cane chair and said goodnight to Mick Jagger on the wall, to the tambourine hanging above the TV set.

Jane was asleep. Val drew the curtains softly to admit intimations of light. As she undressed she remembered meeting Jane. A party somewhere, each room with its function, drinking in the kitchen, dancing in the lounge which led to the bedroom; she'd glanced in at the dancing silhouettes and recoiled, terrified because she would never know them. She'd retreated to the kitchen, looking for a glass, and Jane had found her one, saying: 'You must be like me—a friend of a friend of a friend.' On the pillow Jane's face lay, smoothed out like Val's sheets. Two boys had hurried into the kitchen, glasses at the ready. 'My God, she was randy,' one was saying. 'She really was. Bloody randy.' 'I think I'd better go,' Val had said. 'My parents will be wondering.'

'Mine too,' Jane had replied. 'And I'm at the University, for heaven's sake. If only I could find someone to share a flat—' Val had thought of her parents; they'd retreated behind solidified homilies, she no longer knew them—at least something between them reflected back her determination to preserve her identity, whatever that might be. 'I might,' she'd told Jane.

As Val stood at the window for a last taste of the night she looked up at the next house: one floor above, a man's silhouette moved in a bright frame. He

might be reflected from the flat upstairs—but no, impossible, that flat was empty; he was beyond a door in the building opposite. Val intended to explore upstairs some day in daylight. She crept into bed, thinking momentarily of Len in the pub: a suburban home, early to bed except when he was reading books on office management and economics. He'd no doubt go far, she thought. And the dark man, where was he? Kicked by the teenagers, he might have crawled home to his flat, a whisky from the cabinet to steady him, standing perhaps on a Persian carpet. But something told her he wasn't the one who'd been hurt. He'd beckoned her to worlds of night, cars sweeping down still lanes to a golden country club, and onward to a city glimpsed from a hill at midnight, swarming with far neon fireflies. She was envious, but she slept.

Next day at the office Len caught her eye and smiled tentatively. She smiled back and looking away, hurried between the desks like territories to the Ladies'. Before the mirror she raised one eyebrow; she'd perfected that control and thought it effective. That night at the flat she repeated the performance, and Jane replied: 'Someone called for you while you were out.'

'What was he like?'

'Italian type.' Jane was turning a record cover in her hands; its overlapping three-dimensional photograph shifted slowly but never quite met the eye. 'I said I didn't know when you'd be back.'

'Bitch. Anyway I don't know who he was, I don't care.' One of these days, Val thought, they'd fight over a man.

They were behind with the rent; next night Val worked late. The top deck of the bus home was empty. She sat in front, watching Lower Brichester as it passed. A sports car swept by, its driver's hair combed by the wind, and at once had left her behind. On the edge of the pavement trees moist with mist rushed toward her; overhanging branches beat the roof like whips toward which flew the bus. At the approach of the bus the packed leaves crawled like insects; as they came close they were tiered by the reflected interior of the bus. Suddenly Val sat forward. The last reflection was printed on her eyes; a dark face, blurred into a coconut by memory, above a seat behind her.

Sheets of sodium light turned through the bus like pages; the conductor was swept forward, playing castanets of change. Val spilled her coins. She

groped beneath the seat, ashamed and yet not; she willed him not to go downstairs. She paid. For a moment she struggled to engage him in conversation, but too late; he retreated. Shivering, she dared to turn. She was alone on the top deck; its poles gleamed clinically, a single curl of cigarette smoke floated in the cold air. She was still afraid. If she followed the conductor downstairs now he'd wonder what was wrong. She stood and ran toward the stairs. As she passed the seat where she'd seemed to see the face she stretched out her hand and touched the leather. It was cold as the stones of a well.

A glass was held toward her, half-full of some dark liquid. Her eye refused to look beyond the hand which held the glass. Then she saw that it was not a glass; it was a girl, struggling among the fingers, one bare arm thrust out beneath the thumb. Nor was it a hand which held her.

Val sat up in bed. The mist which had walled up the window seemed to have seeped into the room; the furniture was grey and formless. She peered toward Jane's bed. What she could make out was not reassuring; Jane was lying oddly, twisted, shrunken. Val called to her. She didn't answer. The blankets warmed Val's legs, suggesting that she snuggle and forget. She pulled the light-cord. Jane's bed was empty.

The room withdrew from her; she felt isolated with something unknown, hostile. Beyond the tangle of Jane's bed a hairbrush with translucent insect legs. Where was Jane? How little Val knew of her—out of a sight all day at the University, brittle as crystal at parties, only displaying occasional facets at breakfast or tea, calling 'Goodnight then' before they slept; for all Val knew she might betray her to what Val sensed pursuing. It was the night and silence which mused, Val told herself, not her. She found her slippers and got up to look for Jane; they'd make coffee and talk for a while.

The hall was empty. Val tiptoed downstairs; the bathroom was on the ground floor back. As she reached the hall a passing car dragged rectangles of light across her breasts; the shadow of the hall-stand rose up and capered. She'd wait in the flat instead, she decided. Something gave a raw cry; one of the cats which the old lady in the ground floor flat collected, Val told herself, stumbling upstairs.

As she reached their floor she thought she heard movement above her. Could Jane be in the top room? If so, what was she doing? Unwillingly Val climbed and stood before the door; it was inlaid with panels of darkness.

She reached for the doorknob. As she did so she thought: suppose when she grasped the knob it was turned from inside? Beneath the door lay a wedge of blackness, like negative light. It wouldn't show if someone was moving toward her. She recoiled and felt the stairwell at her back. Whirling, she ran downstairs.

Beneath their flat door showed the same wedge of darkness. She stood between the hostile room above and the wails below, afraid of what she might find. Then she plunged into the flat and turned on the light.

In bed Jane blinked. 'Where were you?' Val asked harshly.

'The bathroom,' Jane said, and turned over.

In the morning Val was jealous. Of course Jane hadn't met a man last night, but it was as if she had: she was capable of giving that impression. 'Damn,' Jane said, entering the kitchen in her housecoat. 'I've lost a stocking.'

Val poured the milk for coffee. She was determined to outdo Jane. 'I was nearly engaged last year, did I ever tell you?' she remarked. 'He was a student. He gave me that calendar.'

'What happened?'

Val wished she hadn't started. 'My parents said we couldn't afford to marry. After a while I saw they were right.'

'So? You could have gone to live with him.'

'I couldn't. I wasn't ready.'

'At the University they all sleep together now and then. It doesn't mean anything,'

'I've left a cup in the front room,' Val said, and went to stand before the calendar: two months and there'd be nothing of him left.

When she returned to the kitchen Jane was leafing through a fashion magazine. 'I couldn't wear gloves,' Jane said. 'I'd feel suffocated.'

'Nobody's asking you to,' Val told her.

Val didn't go to the pub that lunchtime; she didn't feel able to support a conversation. As the others donned their coats Tony called to her and Len, who was sitting at a desk nearby with a book propped by his sandwiches: 'I've got an open invite to a party tonight if you're free.'

'All right,' Val said. 'I'll try and get my flat-mate to come.'

'Thanks anyway,' Len answered. 'I'm behind with my correspondence course.'

The door closed and laughter faded. Val watched Len as she turned the pages of her fashion magazine. Planes of air stood between them, flat as the desks. He glanced up at her. 'Good Lord, you must be hungry,' he said. 'Have a sandwich.'

"That's sweet,' Val said.

He remained on the edge of his book. 'I see you're going out with that man you met at Tony's twenty-first,' he muttered.

Val stared at him. 'No, Len, why?'

'Didn't I see him waiting for you outside here? The day after Tony's party?'

'I don't know,' Val said. 'I think he's been following me. I'm frightened, Len.'

'Good God.' Len came over to her. 'If you want me to I'll phone the police.'

'I don't know who he is. I may be completely wrong.'

'I drive near your place on my way to work, I think. If you like—what I'm trying to say, I could give you a lift.'

Val's eyebrows lifted. 'I'd like you to,' she said.

'Tony's invited us to a party tonight,' Val told Jane at tea.

Jane raked the scraps into a newspaper. 'I'm going out tonight,' she said.

'I wish you'd tell me where you're going sometimes.'

'Look, Val,' Jane remonstrated, 'We share a flat, we don't share each other. Why don't you find yourself a man?'

Furious, Val drank more heavily that night than she'd intended. Eventually, sharper than the other fragments of the party—a girl trying to support herself with a shining set of fire-irons which clattered wide and spread a silence, a group gazing up at a painted cavalier, throats taut and gulping Pimm's between slow comments—she discovered that one man had been replenishing her glass: mauve shirt, veteran-car tiepin, horn-rimmed glasses. He was leading her toward the door; several couples were lying on the carpet.

'It's becoming disgusting,' the man said—but his hands were already cupped toward her. 'I know a country club not far from here.'

'Thanks, but it's getting late,' Val said. 'I must be leaving in a minute.'

'Never mind. I'll run you home.'

'It's kind of you to offer.' But Len wouldn't clutch her, she thought suddenly; he'd be gentle, shy enough to woo her—she'd read his expression when he'd driven her home earlier. 'My fiancé is calling for me,' she said.

'You might have told me sooner.'

But she hadn't known sooner. As she waited for the last bus she could see, above a football ground on the horizon, blue interlocked bars of light, harsh as the razor-edged November night. The night, however, only met the alcohol which weaved within her; it didn't purge her. The bus arrived; she was amused when its poles slid from her hands. She sat upstairs. On the sharp glittering pavements lights peered through leaves which rippled, sometimes forming into what might have been a face. Val was warm; imagining the flat ahead, she had an idea.

Her warmth decided for her. It would be her mystery, something to withhold from Jane. Tomorrow she'd tell Len; he might admire her for it, or he might be angry, upset that she'd risked herself; that would be pleasant too. When she reached the flat, climbing past a purring shadow on the ground floor, she raced to the top door.

Before it she quietened for a moment, listening. Their flat had been dark; the building held its breath with her. The door was indistinguishable from the gap of darkness within. She caught hold of the cold doorknob; it seemed to move beneath her fingers. She laughed and opened the door.

It merged with the darkness. Ahead she saw a grey rectangle; between the houses opposite she could see cranes, their distant heads dipping like dinosaur skeletons. The sky flared pink. On the floor something caught the colour and faded; next to it she made out a huddled shape. Reaching behind the door, she found the light switch.

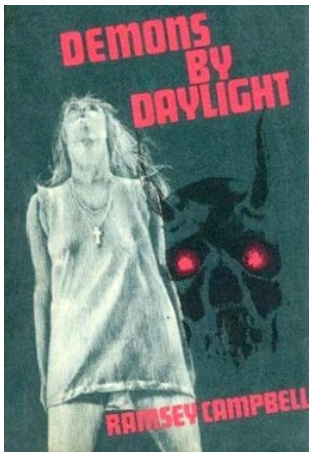
The room leapt like the closing walls of a toy house. The walls were bare; in the corners of the ceiling a few triangles of flowered wallpaper had resisted stripping; the bare boards stretched to the plaster. She entered, and a figure moved towards her. It was herself, projected on the window opposite.

From there her eyes found the boards beneath the window. Dust hung about her feet like ground-mist, but where she looked a rectangle of board was defined. It must have been a trunk; whoever had lived here last had taken it with him. He'd left only a crumpled grey blanket spread on newspapers, and two wine-glasses. Val felt disappointed; the room had been drained of danger. Then she saw that the glasses held dregs. She stooped to examine the crimson globule in each, and on the floor between them and the blanket saw the imprint of hand. No, it couldn't be; to lie like that it must have been boneless. Someone had dropped a glove.

For no reason that she could discover, this did for her what the night could not: the alcohol evaporated, and she chilled. She turned to leave. Then, among the folds of the blanket, she noticed something tangled as if suffocated. She didn't want to touch the blanket. But there was no need. From what she could see between the folds she had guessed what it was. It was Jane's lost stocking.

When she'd locked the door of their flat she sat upright on a chair in the front room. She moved the clock away from the window. Glancing about for something, anything, to distract her, she caught sight of the fingers closing around the girl. She leapt up and tore the calendar to shreds. Then she watched for the hands of the clock to crawl. Behind her the upstairs window was reflected, if the light was on. She thought of Len asleep; she thought of Jane's face when she'd said she had been to the bathroom, and what her face had masked. She knew she'd never see Jane again. By dawn she'd have made her choice; but now, while the night surrounded her and the alcohol swam back, she didn't know what she might do if she heard footsteps descending the stairs: barricade the door, or simply sit and wait.

The Sentinels



Written in: 1968
First published in *Demons By Daylight*, 1973

They were the last people Douglas expected to see in the village pub, but their appearance could hardly have been better timed.

'Good Lord,' he called, 'Ken! Maureen! Come and help persuade Barb to drive up to Sentinel Hill.'

'Doug,' Barbara said uneasily, looking to the newcomers for help but finding none: they'd hurried to the table through the sawdust, eager as children kicking sand. She searched the pub: farmers' faces propped on elbows like florid gargoyles, puffing clouds of pipe-smoke which buoyed up a last moth circling the oil-lamp on invisible elastic: ten miles from home and not a face to which she could look for aid.

'Barb, don't be anti-social,' Doug reproved. 'This is Ken and Maureen—I met them at the science-fiction convention. You two want to go up on the hill, don't you?'

'If the young lady's driving I don't see why not,' Ken said, 'but first I must buy you a drink.'

He took their orders and Maureen sat opposite Barbara, setting a transistor radio between them. 'Why don't you want to go?' she asked Barbara. 'You won't be scared with Doug, surely. The hill's got a terrific atmosphere, more so than this pub.'

Barbara thought of Sentinel Hill. They'd driven past at dusk on their way to the pub: the sloughed stone faces mobile with shadow; a few cars, uniformly grey, from which their passengers had climbed to count the stones and count again and descend baffled; a child at the centre of the circle prancing awkwardly and, as she'd slowed to let Doug watch, turning to her a cardboard demon's face. 'I can't see any sense in going,' she told Maureen. 'It's warm in here, but it'll be icy cold up there this time of year.'

'I'm sure Doug will keep you warm,' Maureen said.

Barbara watched Ken returning from the bar, his arm beneath the tray supple as a waiter's. 'Ken moves beautifully,' she said to Douglas.

'You can judge better than I.' That morning he'd awoken to rhythmic thuds in the next room; he'd strode across her bedroom, past the framed embroidery, the flowers in a cut-glass vase fragile as the chime of the bell her mother used to denote dinner, and found her leaping, graceful as a fountain, before a propped ballet manual. She hadn't noticed him; he'd tiptoed back to his side of the bed and *The Eighth Pan Book of Horror Stories*. 'Barb says you move beautifully,' he told Ken.

'I shall find a way to repay the compliment.'

'How did you two meet?' asked Maureen.

'Quite by accident,' Douglas said. 'Someone invited me to what I thought was an all-night party, only it turned out to be a musical evening. Six weeks ago, that was. I suppose the Brichester SF Group was up in arms about that diatribe in the *Herald*, Ken?'

'These days we ignore the critics. Let's face it, only fans appreciate SF. Mundanes never will. At least, it'll never be appreciated as literature while the critics insist on setting it apart from the mainstream.'

'I'm a fantasy man myself.'

'I wish he'd read something else,' Barbara said, looking away as the moth toppled inside the oil-lamp: a flare, a wisp of smoke. 'Not that science fiction's any better.'

'Don't start that again,' Douglas warned.

'Fantasy's indistinguishable from SF? At the Convention you'd be shot at dawn!' Ken said. 'I don't mind fantasy, but I do wish people wouldn't call it SF. Still, it explains why you're drawn to the hill, Doug.'

'Not drawn,' Douglas said, glancing sharply at Barbara, 'just interested.'

'It's like Rollright,' Maureen interrupted. 'Do you remember that girl at the Convention talking about the Druid circle at Rollright?' Douglas thought he did: they had found her asleep on a bed in Dave Kyle's room, her hands full of change for one of the card-playing writers. It had been Douglas' first Convention: the first night he'd staggered sickly from the Liverpool Group's party, and the next day he'd had to sidle out from lectures as the stage began to slip below his vision. On the Saturday he'd met Ken and Maureen in the

Brichester Group's room, and then had gone early to bed, hearing someone putting his fist through a pane, the thud of a bottle, what sounded like a mob breaking down a bedroom door. It must have been the strangeness of it all. Even in the horror fans he'd never recognised his visions, the thrill of slipping into its niche the last of a set of magazines, the membranous wings against the moon, the face which peered back from the pool, the pale stone steps descending into darkness. He'd thought when he'd met Barbara that he could reflect his images in her. He was still trying.

'If you're a science-fiction reader,' Barbara was saying to Ken, 'you won't be interested in Sentinel Hill.'

'Fan, dear, not reader.' He was lifting the last of his beer to Maureen's lips. 'I don't want to seem hidebound,' he said.

Maureen caught his hand and wiped her mouth. 'Come on, you two, drink up,' she called. 'I want to play my radio.'

Ken pulled her to her feet and led her toward the door. Their shadows drew across the farmers and refreshed them: gargoyles, yes, but protective as a church. 'Don't let's go tonight,' Barbara whispered. 'Let's go home instead.'

'We will, of course, afterwards. Your parents are away all weekend, after all.' Douglas stood; above his head a flake of ash fluttered in the oil-lamp. 'We don't want to seem unfriendly,' he said.

Beyond the houses in the square outside the pub stretched a field, iced by the moon, sharp as the surface of December air which instantly moulded to her. If they invited Ken and Maureen to her home for Christmas Eve next week perhaps the others wouldn't mind their driving back to Exham now—but no doubt Ken and Maureen would be otherwise occupied. She'd tried her best; she didn't want to make a scene. 'Would you really rather not go to the hill?' Douglas asked.

'I don't want to spoil the evening for everyone. I'm the only one who can drive.'

In the back seat Maureen switched on the radio. Singing, the car swung about and rushed headlong from the village, its lights touching small high empty windows, projecting a tilted ploughshare on a barn. Ahead Barbara saw avenues of bleached trees sweep to meet them, immediately engulfed by shadow, threshing as they passed. On the road stones gleamed like toads;

one hopped. She wasn't sure how far ahead the hill would rise. 'I don't like the name,' she said.

'What name?' Douglas enquired abstractedly, moving his arm along the back of the seat.

'Oh, Doug. Sentinel Hill.'

'I shouldn't think you would,' Maureen said. 'They're supposed to guard the hill against anyone who doesn't make a sacrifice to them.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Barbara declared; the bloodless trees waved wildly, a sinister greeting. 'I suppose I've been brought up apart from such things. Who guard? A sacrifice to whom?'

'The Sentinels. You remember, Doug, that girl was saying they make pilgrimages to Rollright from Birmingham on Walpurgisnacht. I gather something like that happens here. Have you been to a Convention, Barbara?'

'She hasn't yet but I hope she will next year,' Douglas said.

'I thought next Easter you might come up to Exham,' said Barbara, 'to stay with us.'

The highest twigs pulled free of the moon like strands of cobweb, and the hill swelled up before her. Above the depression into which her car slowed as if summoned, the ring of shapes stood white and waiting. She could no longer play for time. She turned the car so that it was poised for the road; the headlamps spotlighted a gate into a field opposite, one bar comfortingly askew, pale uncombed grass beyond, barbed wire atop the gate silver as tips of lightning. 'I'll leave the engine running,' she said. 'We won't be long.'

'Think of the petrol,' Douglas expostulated.

'I don't want the engine to catch cold.'

'I shall bring my radio as protection,' decided Maureen, and dragged Ken toward the figures. Over the tinny jangle and the announcer's voice Barbara heard Ken: 'I hope we're not going to stay all night, this seems a bit futile to me.' The radio faded; soon it would be inside the circle. Barbara felt obscurely disturbed; it seemed like an insult, a blasphemy. Nonsense. The Sentinels were relics, no more.

Douglas took her hand and began to climb. He caught her glancing back; but all he could see was the car, thumping like his heart, and a gate. He felt

deliciously unnerved. The moon stood above the circle like the beginnings of a face; ominously still against the tethered trees, the Sentinels surveyed the countryside. On one side of the circle, silhouettes of branches rippled like unquiet muscles; opposite, a figure held its stumps before it like a dog beneath the moon, begging or about to pounce. He hoped Barbara felt frightened too. He wanted her to grip his hand until it hurt.

They met the others in the centre of the ring. Their coats were shaken by the wind, the girls' headscarves blew out like flats. 'It's senseless to call them the Sentinels,' Barbara said, 'when some of them are facing inward.'

Maureen surveyed the circle, the rough ambiguous hump each back presented. 'I don't know where you get that,' she called above the radio. 'They're all facing outward.'

'But as we came up I thought—Oh, well. Doug must be affecting me.'

'There is a story, though, that you can't count them,' Maureen continued, craning on tiptoe, clutching Ken's shoulder for support. 'Eighteen, I make it.'

'Seventeen, surely,' Ken argued. 'You must have counted twice.'

'I have eighteen too,' Douglas said. 'Barb?'

'Oh, I don't know. You're all pretty close, I'm sure. Yes, yes, eighteen. No, nineteen.'

'We must split up and go round,' Maureen said. 'Me and Ken, you and Barbara. Here's where we start.' She ran and crowned one figure with the radio. At once a voice sang from its erased mouth.

They followed her, bruising the moon-painted turf. 'We'll go anti-clockwise,' Douglas said. 'One. Two.' The radio's song streamed away on the wind. The Sentinels waited to be discovered. From the road they hadn't looked like this to Barbara: each face set back in a cracked cowl, fragments of the cheeks emerging from shadow like petrified sponge; beneath the cowl, the folds and ridges of what once might have been a cloak, from which protruded hands or wrists held high like the parodied paws of an animal. The heads came up to Barbara's shoulder. 'What were they supposed to be?' she asked, instantly regretting.

'Six. Seven. I don't know. Not human, anyway. Look at those pores. As though they'd suck your soul out. Or something might crawl from one of

them.' He thought he remembered a story like that. 'Now, Barb, I didn't mean it. I was only joking.' He embraced her.

She closed her eyes. Not here, she thought, but she opened her mouth. Behind her eyelids floated fear; the moon was steady, waiting patiently, old as the Sentinels. They swayed. Something supported her. Two hands clutched her waist. She struggled and looked down. They were stone stumps. She choked; for a timeless second she was wedged, caught. She slipped on the turf and was free.

'I'm sorry I brought you,' Douglas said. Ken and Maureen passed them, counting: 'Now then, we're winning!' Maureen laughed.

The next face was blank as the moon, except for the eyes. They must have been deep indeed; in one a hollow spider rattled in a cobweb, like a loose eye. 'Do we count this?' Douglas wondered, pointing.

Inside the circle, behind the figure, a bud of stone grew from the earth. She couldn't see what it was meant to be.

Douglas drew her to stand by the Sentinel while he tried to connect the protrusion with the figure. Unwillingly she glanced at what stood by her shoulder. From this angle she thought she saw the hint of a mouth; it was grinning. The head was about to turn; the eye would come first, the cob-webbed eye rolling in glee. 'Come on, Doug,' she said unevenly. 'The others want to go.'

'Seventeen, eighteen,' Douglas finished, touching the stone on which the radio was balanced. Beneath the moon the radio's light had dimmed.

'Same as me,' Maureen told Ken triumphantly. 'What did you have, Barbara?'

But Barbara was listening for some sound which should have underlaid the radio's. She stared down the hill toward the road. The gate was gone. 'The car!' she cried, and ran.

She climbed out of the driving seat as they pelted down. 'It's dead,' she said: she seemed on the edge of weeping. She gripped Douglas' hand; he thrust his fingers through hers, happy.

'I trust you're suitably frightened,' Ken said to Maureen. 'One hysterical female will do, I should think.'

'I'm not given to melodramatics.' Barbara gripped Douglas' fingers between her own. 'There's nothing more frustrating than a dead car, that's all. Can you fix engines, Ken?'

'Haven't the faintest, I'm sorry to say. We don't feel the need for a car. We only met you tonight because we took the first bus we saw.'

'I hope it won't be too cold in the car.' Barbara pulled at Douglas' hand.

'You're joking! We must spend the night on the hill.'

'Well, my God,' Ken muttered.

'Poor Ken,' said Maureen. 'I know we could be safe in bed. Never mind, we must take advantage of the atmosphere, at least for a while.'

As they climbed Barbara looked for a ring on Maureen's finger; there was none. She realised Maureen didn't care about appearances, even flaunted them; it seemed cheap, somehow. She'd changed her own ring over for the weekend. If she saw a car approaching she'd run to it for help. With the engine, she meant. It couldn't be long before they'd be back in Exham. Her thoughts returned there; she'd thought her embroidery was sewn upon her mind, but the threads had pulled free; she couldn't blot out the approaching silent figures, nor Maureen's voice: 'What's happened to my radio?'

Although they were close now, the music was no louder. They reached the crest of the hill, and the music vanished with the light from within. For a moment the radio stood mute, an absurd crown. Then something moved; it must have been the wind. The radio toppled to the turf.

'Well, that is annoying. It really is. I'm sure I haven't used up all that battery,' Maureen said.

The car and radio were dead; the gate was swallowed. The moon poured vitality into the Sentinels; they seemed closer now, threateningly still against the surrounding restless woods. Barbara urged Douglas away from the figures. 'I'm cold,' she told him. 'Please, Doug. Let's stay in the car.'

But Douglas was otherwise alert, to something like the soughing of the trees, yet not. Voices whispering. A chorused hiss: consonants which spat hostility, forming words which he could almost understand. He whirled. It was the radio. Before the others could turn, he had smashed the radio with his heel.

'Doug!' Barbara cried. He saw her hand flash. His cheek blazed, hot as crimson. His fist clenched, then slackened. While she'd thought she was preserving sanity she had lashed out at her own fears. She met his eyes. 'I'm sorry,' she said. She clutched his hand; he didn't respond.

'It's all right.' But it wasn't: once his mother had slapped his face when he'd shrieked at an autumn leaf which had leapt on his coverlet like a spider. In those days she'd made him sell his magazines as soon as he'd filled a shelf —just as Barbara might, he thought. He didn't want a mother or a nurse.

'It's damn well not all right,' Ken said. 'Eleven quid that cost. There wasn't eleven quid's worth of bloody static in that radio.'

'I'll pay, don't worry.'

'Never mind, Ken, it was a lovely present,' Maureen interrupted. 'We can always get another. Don't let's quarrel.' She crossed to Douglas. 'Where was that stone you didn't know whether to count?'

'Over here.' Barbara stood near the edge of the circle, biting her lip, staring at the turf. Ken followed them.

'Oh, yes. There's another one opposite, I think.' Maureen turned back to Ken. 'Talk to Barb,' she called. 'Doug and I are telling ghost stories.'

'Well, if that's the way it goes, I'll look after Barb,' Ken said, kicking the radio, which had drawn electricity from the moon.

'I don't need looking after!' But Barbara didn't move away. Behind her a shape held up its hands.

'I didn't really want to show you anything,' Maureen whispered. The head at her elbow seemed intent. 'I didn't want your friend to overhear. I know why you smashed the radio. I felt it too.'

'We'll be all right,' Douglas whispered back. 'There's four of us. Listen, if you feel this way, maybe we really should stay in the car.'

'You were waiting for me?' A smile fluttered across Maureen's mouth. She moved to place him against the wind, which had begun to flap more strongly about them. 'Don't you realise I'm terrified to death? I couldn't show it either. Doug—I keep seeing something running round the edge of the circle.'

'What?' He'd raised his voice; he stared at each figure.

'Not now,' she hissed. 'It's never there when I look at it directly.'

'Listen,' he said intensely, 'I've read about this sort of thing. It might be safer to stay within the circle.'

'Oh, God, I don't know. I don't know.' Her eyes roamed. 'Look!' she cried.

Something pale had moved; he had thought it was a tree.

The branches had now almost grasped the sinking moon. He peered about the circle. It was still; only the trees between swayed as if possessed. 'There is something,' he whispered, wanting not to tell Maureen, to protect her. 'I'm sure one of the figures has gone. It's the one I had trouble with counting.'

Before he could stop her, she was shouting against the hectic wind: 'You two, quick! Is the circle complete?' She twisted on her axis. The countryside tossed as if in the throes of a nightmare. Ken was yelling: '*One*, damn it, *two*, damn it—' Then Barbara shrieked: 'No!'

Maureen hid her face on Douglas' chest. 'I know what she's seen,' she mumbled. 'I don't know which it was. One of the figures isn't stone.' She was trembling. Douglas put his arm about her shoulders.

Ken saw them; his face darkened. He pulled Barbara to him. She thrust him away and backed to the edge of the circle, her fists high. Behind her she was mimicked. Then she saw Maureen and Douglas. She cried out wordlessly and turned. Before they realised, she was stumbling down the hill toward the car.

'She's made it,' Douglas said in Maureen's ear, stroking her hair, trying to caress courage into her. 'If we can follow—' But she was still shaking. He knew what was wrong; they had to pass between the Sentinels, and he didn't dare to search for what she had seen. The trees were leaping for the moon; the wind was thrusting him toward the Sentinels. He glanced about wildly for Ken. Ken was stooping by the radio, standing up with what he'd found: a razor-sharp fragment of metal.

Then the car started.

Maureen's head turned. Together they ran to the edge of the circle. 'We must make, it,' he told her. 'Close your eyes and cling to me.' But she hadn't closed them when she screamed.

In the road below, the car had conjured forth the gate like an image of escape. They could see Barbara, tiny in the window from which light

streamed forth like mist, intent on the dashboard, too intent to notice through the other window the figure squatting like a watchdog.

'The face,' Maureen sobbed, clutching Douglas.

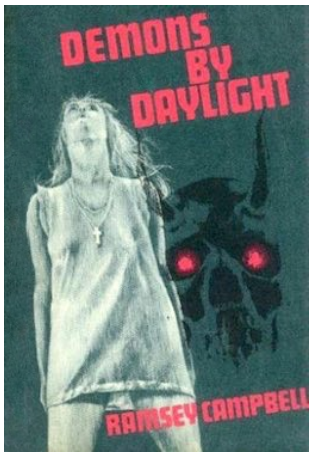
Douglas hurled her away, to Ken, who'd dropped the shard of metal. 'What face?' Ken muttered. 'I can't see.'

'Oh God,' Douglas shouted. 'Barbara!' The car whipped about, losing the gate, and skidded into the road. A tunnel of trees sprang forth, into which it plunged. The figure ran alongside, skipping high.

Douglas slithered down the grass, ran panting up the road, falling on stones, running onward. Ahead the tunnel of light dwindled; Barbara had gone. Only the last light of the car and, as it turned a corner, the shape which leapt easily onto the roof.

The others found Douglas kneeling in the road. When they spoke he met their eyes, and they were silent. Together they stared ahead into the night, waiting for the sound.

Made In Goatswood



"A first draft was written in 1965 as *A Garden at Night*, and a second draft in 1966 under the current title. This third and final draft was the last story written for inclusion in *Demons by Daylight*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1968
First published in *Demons By Daylight*, 1973

The man behind the counter of the curiosity shop wore a cloth cap; when he bent his head Terry Aldrich felt he was being served by a toad. The man's hands were brown and crinkled as the paper in which he wrapped the parcels. The paper flapped: dust billowed round the shop, passing like incense across the window through which the summer sun was dulled as by sunglasses, changing form and leaving particles on clasped leather-bound books, carved vases, ornamental knives, a naked wooden boy frozen in the act of crying praises to the sun or possibly of beating off an attack from above. The hands set the parcel before Terry; he thought that the dim eyes gleamed in derision. Briefly his hand was clasped by fingers drier than the notes he paid.

His car was parked at the end of the street, beyond a canvas stall like a shrine; a girl's eyelids lowered wickedly as she held out fruit which reminded him of peaches. He shook his head. Across the street, beyond the crowd, the shirts revealing arms muscled as with roots, the dresses flaunting thick legs and breasts, a man stripped to the waist stood against a hot wall gnawed by weeds and stared at Terry's parcels. He grinned, and Terry grinned back: he was overwhelmed by Goatswood. He admired them all; they were rooted in the earth, in nature.

Ted Pyke turned in the front seat as Terry dumped the parcels in the back. A girl squeezed by Terry, warm with sweat imperfectly overlaid with perfume; her bare leg brushed his. 'Presents for the girlfriend?' Ted commented. 'I should be sure she wants them before you spend your money.'

Terry climbed in beside him and started the engine. 'I told you, Kim's a gardener,' he said. 'These ought to bring her garden closer to nature.'

They drove toward Brichester. The curtained windows of Goatswood's offices blazed in the sun like stamps on display. Even here, Terry thought, beneath the office buildings, one could sense the moist earth, rich as a ripe field; he imagined the workers returning not to the red-brick houses beneath hillsides held in thrall by the bright still air, but to canted cottages, moist at dawn, resounding with the snorts of muddy pigs. If only he could persuade Kim to live on a farm! He was sure that they could learn to make it work—but he knew she'd never agree; he'd accepted this. As he turned the driving mirror, wincing at a brief blade of sunlight, he saw the parcels jostling on the back seat. 'Symbols of the earth,' he said to himself.

'I don't know what you said,' Ted muttered, 'but I'm sure you weren't talking to me.'

'Sorry, Ted. I've even got Kim talking to herself. She says it's the sign of an enquiring spirit.'

'I'm sure,' Ted said.

On their left the progress of the houses had already been barred by trees. Opposite, before the woods closed in, a last street of dingy houses lay exhausted between gardens high with grass, uneven with rocks, and on the corner a newspaper shop, its cramped windows full of yellowed cards; baked mud preserved the tracks of cars. 'Stop here,' Ted ordered.

'I thought you wanted a lift all the way to Brichester.'

'I've changed my mind. This is Fitzroy Street. You've heard me talk about it in the pub. You find the card you fancy in the window of the shop, and they direct you.'

'At this time of day?' Terry had heard Ted's tales in his local pub, but he hadn't thought about them; he didn't know Ted well enough to care. 'I hope you get your money's worth. Good God, man, what can you gain from this?'

'A woman who won't keep you awake wondering when she's going to leave you, that's what. Maybe one day you'll know what I mean.'

'I hope not,' Terry said. He drove on, flinging Ted's hand from the door. He felt cheapened, stopping for that on his way to Kim. 'I may love nature,' he

said aloud. 'That doesn't place me with the animals.' Behind him Goatswood was swallowed by the forest. On the back seat paper rustled.

On the frosted front-door pane Kim shimmered, flesh and flowered cotton. The pane flashed and they embraced; her hair was warm and scented as her flowers. Behind her in the the hall an angel hung, eternally elevated. 'There's something for you on the back seat,' Terry said. 'It's not much, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, what?' She sped between the ranked flowers and opened the car door. On the seat the paper had split; rough grey faces grinned at her. They were ornamental gnomes.

'They're like devils,' Kim said. Terry came up to her. 'They're—different, aren't they?' she commented.

'I thought you needed something for the garden,' he said.

Drawn by the open doors, Kim's mother approached. 'Heavens, what are those?' she cried.

'Look what Terry's brought me.'

'You must be famished, Terry. We should really wait till Kim's father comes home, but—'

'That's fine,' Terry said. 'We can decorate the garden while we're waiting.'

'The front's a bit crowded. They might go better in the back,' Kim suggested. Terry lifted them carefully, like a father cradling babies, and carried them through the house; beyond the painted angel radiating her own sunlight, they heard the clatter of plates. In the back garden two flowerbeds blazed about the lawn; near the hedge, over which rose the first trees of Brichester Central Park, a rockery shone dull red, tending to molten in a tinge of sunset. On the clothesline pegs nodded like birds. 'I think they'd only make the garden seem more artificial,' Terry said. 'Would you rather they weren't seen?'

'Of course I wouldn't, darling.' But she was glad that the street was almost deserted. On the pavement opposite a small girl in a muslin curtain and a tablecloth led a quiet procession; Kim hoped they weren't blaspheming. Two legs drew their body from beneath a Mini: Mr Logan from across the way, who waved to her and watched Terry, setting the gnomes in a triangle, the apex staring over the low white stone wall.

Finished, he leapt the wall and considered the garden. Kim took his hand. They weren't amiable suburban gnomes at all. The eyes were grey globes set deep in pits; the noses were hooked like those of childhood witches she'd leafed over; the mouths grinned, revealing pointed teeth. Terry indicated the park behind the houses, the trees awakened by an evening breeze, like an outpost of Goatswood beyond; he pointed to Mercy Hill, his home, where a spire fingered the sun above the hills. 'Now there's something of that here,' he said.

A car drew up to Terry's. 'I'm glad you're here,' said Kim's father. 'You can help me argue my case for salad.'

'Splendid,' Terry agreed. 'Plants torn from the soil. Nature in the home.'

'I've made salad already,' said Kim's mother from the doorway.

'Well done.' Kim's father started up the path, then saw the gnomes. 'What on earth are these?' he asked the evening. 'It looks like a Druids' meeting-place.'

'Probably,' Terry told Kim. 'There'll be a hot time in Goatswood on Monday.'

June 24th, thought Kim. 'Why?' she asked.

But at that moment a spoon clanged within a pan; her mother was announcing tea.

Terry sat back, full. Outside the front-room window the backs of the gnomes seemed to emanate dusk, drawing colour from the flowers. Kim's father was reading the Brichester Herald; her mother was pouring the tea. He saw the crowd outside the curiosity shop in Goatswood, accepting the sunlight, vital, primitive. 'I can't get over that film we saw on Thursday,' he said to Kim. 'The sheep running into the church as soon as revolution breaks out. The flight from primitivism.'

'Whoever made that film,' declared the Brichester Herald, 'must be a very unhappy man.'

'All this godlessness that's going round can cause nothing but unhappiness,' Kim's mother said. He saw her glance above the mantelpiece and return Christ's look of sorrow.

'Why should the director be unhappy?' Terry argued. 'He has a vision.'

The Brichester Herald came down like a veil. 'But not a belief. Anyone who destroys more than he creates must be miserable beyond expression. Question what you see by all means, but believe in something first.'

'What do you believe in?'

'What's around me,' said Kim's father instantly. 'Not politics disguised as panaceas, not poets trying to be philosophers. This house. My job. Reality.'

'There's only one right and one wrong,' Kim's mother told her. 'Those who don't take the right road know they're doing wrong.'

'That's my exit line,' Kim's father said, taking out his pipe and striding to the sitting-room.

Her mother carried out the first plates; Kim stared after her, toward the angel. Terry touched Kim's fingers. 'You didn't say anything,' he rebuked.

'Why should I, Terry? I'm happy.' She pressed his hand and followed her mother with plates. In the garden he could see the gnomes; faceless now, they were grey lumps of stone like memorials. Behind him the light was switched on; a luminous female reflection engulfed a gnome. 'Terry,' Kim's mother whispered, 'it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you understand Kim enough to make her happy.'

Her mother was ironing a cardigan; she folded its arms on its chest. The scent of warm wool streamed out the open window. Kim took a cup from the kitchen table and carried it brimming to her father. As he set aside the Herald he said: 'You don't like those objects in the garden, do you?'

'I suppose they're pagan. But that's not the point. The point is, they're Terry's.'

'That's certainly not the point. If you object you must tell him. If you suppress it you'll kill your beliefs. I've seen this happen. I know.'

'I'll have my coffee in a minute,' Kim called into the kitchen. She'd packed the picnic basket for tomorrow; now, as always before she went to bed, she communed with her garden. The air was soft as fur. Soothing, the flowers weaved gently in the breeze. But the night was jagged, torn by the harsh stones on the lawn. Perhaps she might persuade Terry against them after all, but not on her father's advice; she knew where that led. She looked toward Mercy Hill; lights moved across intersections—perhaps one was Terry. She tried to isolate his window from the display, and was distracted. A grey cat

was slinking somewhere on the lawn, about to brush against her leg. She glanced down, but there was nothing; colourless grass, the back of a stone head. Turning, she closed the front door and saw the angel.

As Terry drove to collect Kim, a clock struck midday. His hand rose from the wheel; he'd made half the sign of the cross before he knew. For those who'd died during the hour, as he'd been taught. His hand dropped. He didn't believe. 'Pray to believe,' he'd been told—but he saw this as more delusion that paradox: praying to something he didn't believe in for help to believe it existed. Yet he feared to think too deeply on his unbelief; he'd accepted a hostile universe, he couldn't be expected to do more. 'Believe in something first,' he addressed the windscreen ironically. 'In Nazism? In the unholiness of blood transfusion?' He passed the church, its stained glass exalted by the sun, and stopped before the Sunday school where Kim taught; beyond, cars glinted on the hills.

In the red house children sang. Terry went round to the back seat and settled the hamper which Kim's mother had given him when he called. 'If it rains don't forget you can come back here,' she'd said. A troupe of Girl Guides marched past, their blouses blue as the blinding sky. The door of the red house opened; Kim's class surged out. As Kim appeared, the pleats of her mini-dress pink as a flower, a boy and a girl ran past Terry hand in hand. Kim kissed him. 'In front of my class, too. I hope we don't corrupt them,' she laughed. 'I've got you a little present. Don't hate it, Terry.' She opened her hand; a St Christopher medal gleamed gold.

'All fight, my darling,' he said. 'If you think I need protection.' He fixed it between them on the windscreen.

He let Kim choose the hill. A dry bare path led up through undergrowth; she ran upward to the smooth grass, her pink pleats flying. Terry dragged the hamper to the top, stopping to survey the countryside: distant tufts of trees, hills still against the piercing blue horizon where skimmed a lone white bird, darting butterflies like windblown scraps of paintings. From the top he could see the toy roofs of Brichester, like red plastic; the trees of Central Park located Kim's house; but his eye was drawn beyond, to the great forest in which Goatswood was set as in a ring of green velvet. 'Look at it,' he said.

'Don't look at it,' said Kim. 'Look at me.' And as he did so, the countryside blurred.

The grass on which they sat before the empty hamper was warm as the sunset, but the air was cooling. Some of the cars beneath the hills had gone home. 'Shall we go down?' Kim asked.

'I think we might.' Terry stood up and cast stray papers into the hamper. Suddenly he moved it to stand against the shadowed amphitheatre of Goatswood. 'Can I have the lunch-box?' he asked.

Kim couldn't see what he was doing; she passed him the lunch-box, which he set atop the hamper. 'A tribute to the forces of the earth,' he said.

A stray breeze caught the lunch-box tabernacle and rolled it rattling toward Goatswood.

They were close to her house when Kim said: 'Let's go into the park for a while.' The gates were open; Terry drove onto the gravel. Near the gates a man was prowling with THE WAGES OF SIN on his chest and the rest behind his back; a bearded prophet clung to an unsteady stand and exhorted evening lovers to take note of the imminent end of the world. Kim caught Terry's eye and smiled up at him. 'That's not me,' she said.

The trees had trapped the twilight. The branches which the sun had dappled were brown stains on the shadows; leaves moved like hives of darkness. They followed a walk they'd found one day. At its end glimmered a Chinese pavilion. As they emerged from the trees onto shifting pebbles, Kim's hand brushed a twig from which a ball hung, tiger-striped, and startled it into myriad tiny spiders, spun away on threads by a breeze.

In the pavilion Kim lay against Terry. His mouth moved round her neck, and she pressed into him. Through the pavilion's pillars she could see the trees, leaning forward like spectators. She felt him touch her breast. 'Not too much at once,' she whispered.

'I promise.' His hands caressed her. Her eyes closed. As her lashes met, she glimpsed movement between the pillars. A small pale figure darted back among the trees; the crushed grass staggered erect. Children, she thought, spying before they understood. 'I think we're being watched,' she said in his ear.

'I think we'd better go back to your place.' Her parents were at a whist drive. They left the pavilion, arms about each other, and entered the wood. Looking back, Kim saw the pavilion, gleaming like a skeleton; she shivered. As they passed a tree a face peered out behind them. Of course

not, she thought: the children wouldn't follow. She pressed her face into the warm cloth of Terry's jacket.

She felt safer in the car, her hand on his knee. But as the car swung about to return to her house, she chilled for a moment. Then she relaxed; what she'd seen photographed between the trees by the headlamps must have been bushes of pale blossom, swaying in a breeze.

Terry bore the cups of coffee high into the front room, as if for ritual. Sitting on the couch, they sipped. Then Kim traced the back of Terry's neck with her fingertips and let him draw her closer. In a minute she'd switch out the light. She thought of Terry coming home each night, of a sitting-room whose details were vague except for the two of them on a rug before the fire. Then the back of her neck prickled. It wasn't the heat. She sensed eyes.

She caught his hand. 'Terry, someone's watching,' she said.

'What, here too?' He sat up and stared about. His eyes passed over a gap in the curtain and fixed on Christ in accusation. 'God,' he muttered. 'Don't tell me this is a subtle Catholic objection.'

'Oh, Terry,' she said miserably.

'Well, whoever it is can't be out here, can he?' He ripped back the curtains; light flooded out on the gnomes, drawing immense shadows. 'He must be in the room.' He indicated, and floating truncated above the garden, his reflection waved its arms. 'I mean, God—if you believe in him—created nature, sex is the word. Why feel ashamed?'

'It wasn't that at all, Terry. I love you.' Kim sat on the couch; her head sank.

'I know you do.' But he felt religion in the air between them, invisible as her perfume. 'Look, it's just that I wasn't expecting this. I think I'd like to be alone to work it out.'

If she'd said 'Please don't go'—But she could say it only to herself.

As Terry climbed into his car the front door opened. Kim didn't speak. His last glimpse was of her framed in the bright doorway beyond the stone figures; it was like a temple or a sacrifice.

'He hasn't phoned,' Kim wrote. It was the next day; the diary had been Terry's present—she'd admired it once in a shop. Her eyes closed. She tried to control herself, but already her face was pressed into the bed, the white sheets cold as an isolation ward. She'd had to leave the table earlier to come

upstairs and weep. Her mother had been about to follow her, but Kim had heard her father say: 'Let her come to terms with it. Her beliefs will see her through.' Her beliefs! She looked up at the crucifix above her bed with something like hatred. Would she give that up for Terry? But why should she have to choose? She remembered a scene when she was twelve: her father coming home, shaken by a car crash, shaken more to find he'd been under-insured and they might have to sell furniture. 'So long as you're alive,' her mother had said. 'I've prayed every night that if this happened you wouldn't be harmed.' And he'd exploded. 'God didn't buy this house! God won't have to go short to pay for the damage!' Kim had sat trembling on the couch; at twelve it had been as if the house shook. 'We won't have to sell my pictures?' her mother had pleaded: the angels which had guarded her family for generations. Kim had stuffed her fist in her mouth and buried her head in the couch; but she'd heard the angel shatter. 'If they were worth anything—' For a week after that they'd sat silent as wax dummies in an exhibition room, except when her mother broke and rushed upstairs. It was over now, but not for Kim: that had been when she'd determined to be tolerant, for that was all that preserved love. 'Oh, Terry,' she sobbed, 'I tried to please you, not to argue with you! If only you'd do the same for me!'

When it was over she lay exhausted on the bed. Her head throbbed. Deliberately she turned over the blurred pages of the diary. Terry told me today he loved me. I think Terry is looking for a house, but he hasn't said so yet. June 24th. Midsummer Eve, of course. She threw the diary on the dressing-table and went downstairs.

Her parents were visiting friends. The house was empty; only the ten o'clock dusk moved through the rooms. She poured herself a glass of orange juice and gulped it down, feeling slightly sick. Drawing the front-room curtains, she switched on the television.

As the room's bulging reflection was ousted by an announcer's face, a car drew up outside. Kim ran out. For a moment she thought it was Terry; she had opened the gate before she realised. Downcast, she returned to the house, kicking the door behind her. The grey heads stared toward the road, except one. A child must have dislodged it with a ball; it faced toward the house.

'I just don't know how our relationship may stand,' Terry said. He didn't know whether they could hear him at the bar; he didn't care. But he wouldn't admit even to himself that he was ashamed of last night.

'Still talking to yourself?' Ted Pyke asked. His face swam forward through the yellow light like a shark closing for the kill. 'You look a bit off. Trouble with the girlfriend?'

'Something like that,' Terry said. 'Go to hell,' he hissed.

'I wouldn't mind a lift to Goatswood. If you want a free introduction—'

Terry remembered the girl whose bare leg had brushed his in the sunlight. 'Don't be so eager,' he told Pyke. As they'd watched the sheep flee into the church Kim had touched his hand; she hadn't agreed, but she'd tried to understand what he felt. 'I'm going to see her,' he said abruptly.

'I may be walking that way later,' Pyke said, turning back to the TV above the bar, two flickering lovers in bed, encouraged by the drinkers.

The lovers threw back the covers; the girl stared and trembled. Footsteps plodded up the stairs toward them. It was her father. Kim watched, unwillingly fascinated. The father took shape from the shadows, looming above them. The footsteps continued. Kim leapt forward and turned off the father's voice. Silence, heavy as stone; yet she was sure she had heard the footsteps plodding upward, here in the house. Again she prickled, not with heat. She tiptoed into the hall and was confronted by the angel, radiant, calm, detached.

Beneath the angel the telephone rang.

She caught up the receiver. 'Who's there?' she cried.

'I'm sorry about last night,' said Terry's voice. 'Truly I am.'

'So long as you're still here,' she said. But he wasn't really there; he was attenuated as the wire; hardly anything of him reached her. She listened for the footsteps.

'I'm coming round to see you. The phone is in our way.'

The footsteps must have been an echo in the television. 'My parents will be back soon,' she told him. 'We must work this out together, just the two of us.' The wire whispered, voiceless. She'd said the wrong thing, she thought. She didn't dare to call to him, to make sure he was there; he might have left

the phone box. Finally she dropped the receiver back on the hook, like a stone whose weight was too much for her.

When she turned she saw that the front door was open. She hadn't kicked it shut. The gnomes had merged with the dusk which filled the street. She closed the door.

Perhaps Terry was on his way. Reflected on the angel, she saw her face still traced by tears. She wanted to welcome Terry; he mustn't see her like this, she didn't want to be pitied. She ran upstairs.

As she collected her makeup bag from the bedroom she smiled at her crucifix. Hurrying to the bathroom, she switched on the light. The neutral tiles reflected back Terry, the rug before the fire. She washed and analysed her face before the full-length mirror. Her compact clicked. Imperfectly closed, the door at her back crept open. A blade of light opened along the landing floor. It cleaved the mirror and found a face.

Kim whirled. The landing carpet was bright as grass. Of course there was nothing; she had seen merely lumps of shadow, a curve which she couldn't now locate had seemed a grin—perhaps the corner of the landing beyond her parents' open door. 'My nerves are on edge,' she said, 'but Terry's coming.'

She powdered her nose. Close by she heard a smash of glass. 'A bottle in a dustbin,' she said before she could ponder. Deliberately she switched out the bathroom light, braving the darkness. She crossed the landing to her room, and heard slow footsteps in the hall.

Not Terry, surely? Could the front door, have opened again? Were her parents home too soon? 'Hello,' she called. The grey stone silence inched toward her. Footsteps clumped up the staircase in the television—but she'd turned off the sound. She ran to the light switch by her parents' door, and tripped.

Her makeup bag spilled; her compact clattered down the stairs. She heard it clang against something she couldn't picture halfway up the staircase. One hand comforting her bruises, she felt for what she'd tripped over. Before her fingers touched the wall they recoiled from something like a stone saw, a thick hook, deep cold pits in which something rolled: a face.

When Terry drew up before Kim's house he realised first that the gnomes were gone. The pebbles had exploded wide, discolouring the lawn. So Kim

had moved them. In a way he was glad; she'd asserted herself. They could talk and maybe move toward a deeper understanding. He strode up the path between the obscure flowers. The front door stood open; the frosted-glass pane had been smashed.

'Kim!' He rushed into the house, dashing into rooms, switching on lights. On the stairs lay Kim's powder-compact; it had been trampled, clumsy footprints faded toward the hall, a large burden had been dragged through the mess, streaking the wall. The bathroom mirror met him; in the other rooms Christ stared down, sorrowing. Terry charged downstairs again, into the kitchen. The back door was open.

Beyond the hedge the trees in Central Park had begun to dance. A new moon hung above them, like a lopsided luminous grin. Terry ranged about the garden. The flowers had closed, unseeing. The clothesline was drawn across the sky like the line at the end of a story. In the hedge he found a gap, where something large might have been dragged along the ground and through into the park. Terry tried to squeeze through, but the hedge grasped his shoulders. He dashed past the rockery, then froze. On the rock liquid glistened. Sick, he bent and caught a drop. It was black on his finger beneath the moon; it might be water. He ran into the light from the kitchen and held out his finger. It was blood.

As he climbed the railings of the park, tearing himself free of the spears, he snarled: 'If you take Kim, whoever you are—' He remembered the angel he'd passed. The phone: he could have called the police—but to go back now might be to lose Kim. He forced himself to stand still and listen. Branches battled and broke loose, but only in the wind. He plunged into the wood. The trunks were still as pillars; the branches held the luminous grin. Ahead something rushed through the undergrowth, perhaps the midsummer wind.

Deep in the woods he heard a cry. An owl? He couldn't know. Deafened by the ecstatic leaves, he strained his ears. Then he heard ponderous footsteps on wood. He drove himself through the trees toward the sound. At last he saw a distant clearing, trees like a Druid circle, a building which might have been a temple within. His feet flung pebbles wide, and he saw where he was. Before him, ossified by moonlight, stood the Chinese pavilion.

And precariously balanced at the top of the steps, shrunken and pale, a gnome grinned. As he watched it fell forward and toppled down the steps.

Blinded by rage at himself, Terry stumbled forward and smashed the gnome to pieces on the pebbles. The stones gnashed, blotting out any final distant sounds among the trees.

When Terry panted back to Kim's house, still confronted by a thousand dim threshing figures which were branches, Kim's father met him in the shattered doorway. He stood like a sentry, blotting out the radiance from within. 'Not now, Terry,' he said. 'Kim's ill.'

'You mean she's here?' Then Terry heard the sobbing, and her mother's voice, the words inaudible but soothing.

'We went for a walk in the park to leave her alone for a while. You know what I mean, Terry. We found her there. She was as you can hear. I saw someone running into the bushes, but I haven't got them yet. They must have heard me coming. Her mother held her hand and I carried her back here. If she wants to she'll tell us what happened.'

'Thank God,' Terry said. Then: 'How is she?'

'She'd been knocked unconscious. Her cheek was bleeding, but she's safe. I'm sure of that. The doctor's coming.'

'I must see her,' Terry cried. But her father blocked his way. 'She's been ill all day because of you,' he said. 'You've brought nothing but chaos into this house. Let's be adult about this, Terry. She's unlikely ever to want to see you again.'

'I love her,' Terry said.

'So do I. And I've been here longer than you, Terry.'

The door closed. Through the shattered pane Terry saw the angel. He stood numb. Then Kim's father reappeared and blocked the view with a piece of cardboard. Terry turned and walked past the empty lawn.

As he drove down the street, a figure waved him to halt. It was Ted Pyke.

'Alone?' Pyke said. 'How about my proposition?'

Terry sat silent. 'Why not,' he muttered finally. 'Get in.'

Pyke opened the passenger door. The light blazed and caught something on the windscreen. It was the St Christopher medal. Kim's hand touched Terry's. He heard her sobbing. 'No,' he told Pyke. 'I've changed my mind. Find someone else.'

'What's wrong with you?'

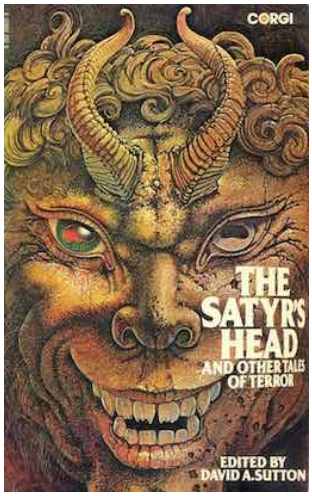
'I'll tell you,' Terry said. 'I'm not going to be dragged down to your level.'

'Thanks,' said Pyke. 'You bastard.'

Terry watched him walk into the night, picking his way from streetlamp to streetlamp. He hadn't liked to say it, but it had had to be said. He turned the car and drove back. He thought of Kim limp on the pillow, purged by tears, her mother at her side. The three of them against her father. So long as she survived.

As he left the car his hands trembled. He controlled one, and looked up to Kim's bright window. Silently he made the sign of the cross. Then he walked toward the house.

The Previous Tenant



"The Previous Tenant dates from 1968, the year before I met my wife. [...] I later saw that the story recalled *The Beckoning Fair One*, which I'd read when I was too young to appreciate its subtleties. On the other hand, I've no idea where the central relationship came from except the depths of my head."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The Dead*

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He closed the cupboard door and crossed to the window. The pane exhibited ghostly strokes of soap, like the paint sketched on the sheet of paper he'd crumpled up last week. In the next room his wife moved a table, which screamed. He stared out. The roofs were a jagged frieze against the colours spilled to mix on the horizon; below, the red streetlamps tasted of raspberry, tinting the trees like attenuated pinecones separated by the ruler of the pavement. A car passed, hushed as the evening, casting ahead on the road what seemed already a splash of yellow paint. It wasn't enough for him to express on canvas. He turned back to the flat room, the wallpaper's pastel leaves whose meaning had been lost through countless prints, the bed he must never touch without having bathed. He had remembered what he'd seen as the cupboard door had closed.

The imprisoned books rebuked him; already, on the Renoir, a coil of dust curled and fidgeted like a centipede. What he'd seen was crushed beneath Matisse and Toulouse-Lautrec; he hoisted them and slid it out. It was a photograph of the girl who had owned the flat: one leg high on a wall, her skirt taut, her hand arched on her knee, her eyes beneath an arch of lustrous hair smiling at whoever held the camera; how could she have become a scream above the city, a broken figurine beneath the window? His wife coughed. At once he thrust the photograph into his pocket. At the door he turned to check the cupboard. It was closed.

His wife was cross-legged on the carpet, surrounded by the glasses from the cabinet, considering the space available. "I've done the best I can," he said.

She dabbed a bead of lacquer from her forehead. "It's not your books I object to, you know that," she told him. "It's just that there's not enough space, that's all."

"I don't remember you complaining when we looked it over."

"Who'd complain at a flatful of furniture?" Above her stood the antique chairs, the glass-topped tables, the mirrors with which the girl had surrounded herself. "But there's such a thing as being over-generous, you know."

He was silent; he didn't want to say "We should be grateful."

"If we get rid of a few of these things you could have your painting on the wall."

"There's no point." Not in one painting and a hundred crumpled scraps of drawing-paper.

"It might brighten the place up a little."

"That's a profound analysis." He watched her stretch her legs, hemmed in by the glasses; it seemed a perfect symbol—he would have transferred it to canvas if he had been able to paint her.

"I know I don't have your intellect." She picked up a glass; in a club she wouldn't long have held it empty.

"I've never said so, have I? What you don't have is a sensitivity to this flat. It's the girl's life. There's the chair where she must have sat when she composed the note. Or is that what's bothering you?"

"It doesn't bother me at all, you know that. I'm not the one who lies awake." She spread a cloth on the table and filled two glasses. "Just a few things of my own, that's all I ask. I don't like charity."

And the men at the ballroom? What did she call the drinks they bought her at their clubs? "You're not in all that much," he said.

"It's not my fault if you won't come with me."

"Can't afford to come with you, you mean." His words thrust like a tongue toward an aching tooth. His fingers traced his inside pocket, the photograph symmetrical with his heart.

"Don't, don't. You're hurting yourself." She carried a glass to him. As he took it, she laid her hand on his within the concealed rectangle.

"You can't be both a civil servant and a painter. Don't try for so much or you'll lose everything," she said. "Let's leave the flat to look after itself for tonight. Our room is ours."

"Do hurry," she said, "I'm so tired." Deflated, he lay back. In a minute the moonlit sheet over her breasts was rising and falling like surf. He inched to sit up. His side of the bed was a scribble of shadow like paint scrawled in fury. Perhaps this might be meaningful on canvas. *Bedroom Scene, The Marriage Bed*—but he couldn't express their marriage. She had been a civil service typist; as she'd passed him, glanced and smiled, his pen had become erect between his fingers; the next time she passed he had sketched the memory. When she came to look he'd said "I'd like to paint you."

"That would be nice," she'd replied, "but not nude." Baulked, for she had destroyed his dream, he'd postponed the offer through months of clumsy dancing in ballrooms where smoke billowed to meet clouds of false stars, of hands across club tables at one in the morning; seeking to possess her, he'd foregone the rushing skies, the stretched clouds, the combed and recombed grass, which met at his easel and poured into his brush, and he'd suffocated. When they emerged from the cramped registrar's he'd found he couldn't paint. On the wedding night she'd cried out; briefly he'd possessed her. Yet before the honeymoon was over he'd yearned for something more; he'd gazed from the hotel at rumpled trees, humped hillside walls where the girl from the photograph might have stood and smiled. "Don't forget to give in your notice," he reminded his wife. "I'll keep you." Perhaps thus he could possess her. But his walks possessed the breasts of the kills, the splayed thighs of the valleys. Then one night he'd been whipped home by a storm and had found her gone. An hour later she'd slammed the front door, gasping happily, thrilled by the leaping rain, and had halted at the sight of him sunk deep in a dark chair. She'd stroked his hair; rain coursed down their merged faces like tears. They'd gone upstairs to find the house was cracked; rain dripped somewhere. They couldn't afford the repairs, and at last they'd agreed before a landlord's card bulged and distorted by the first drops of a new rain: this flat, close to the country as she'd said, closer to the raw red sign of the ballroom round the corner as he'd thought. He slid down the bed to mould himself to her, but she was still asleep. He turned over. The moonlight fell short of the wardrobe, where his suit hid the photograph.

The cupboard of books was held within skins of sleep, which weighed on his eyes; next to it, his easel was a dusty blackboard. As he drowsed into sleep, he thought the cupboard opened.

"Wear your nice suit today," he said. "I like to see you in it."

"All right, for you." The sunlight slid from cars and coated leaves with light; it might become a painting. He collected pens and wallet from the table by the bed and followed her into the living room. As he entered she drew the tablecloth across a brilliant sheet of pressed sunlight and pinned it down with bowls of cereal; through the sheet he'd seen its carved legs, shaped as by caresses. "If you think we can't afford furniture," she mused, "I could always go back to work."

"I don't think that's called for." Shaped as by caresses. His hand stole beneath the cloth and touched the wood. Slowly, exquisitely, his fingers traced the curves. He saw the leg braced on the wall, the taut skirt. His wife picked up her spoon; it blazed at the edge of his eye. Unlacquered, her hair glowed. Suddenly ashamed, he reached out and stroked her knee.

"Not when you're eating, please," she said. "Your hands are greasy."

At the door he realised that he couldn't go back for the photograph; if he did his wife would know. Instead, he looked up at the window through the leaves piled like her hair. The pane was white as an empty canvas; within, a figure shielded her eyes and waved.

When he came home that night his mind was covered with sketches, erased lines, sheets half-torn and reassembled with conjecture. He'd imagined the tree-lined street washed by headlamps as the girl had seen it, staring down, perhaps for a last glimpse of whoever had abandoned her—the unknown hand on the camera shutter no longer holding hers. In the lunch hour he'd sketched on the back of a form, but the sketch had lacked a sight of the reality. "Don't lay the table yet," he told his wife as he veered into the kitchen, "I have an idea I want to get down." The people in the flat below were across the city when the girl had screamed and fallen, but they were sure that she had been abandoned; a drained husk, perhaps she'd thought that she might float toward the empty landscape. He set up his easel before the window. The room seemed more cramped than he remembered; he would have to sit on the bed. He projected the girl on the pane, but she

refused to pose; her foot poised on the sill, the weighted falling sun shone through her skirt. That wasn't what he wanted. Already the streetlamps were raw wounds on the night; a tree shed a leaf like a flake of skin. If he could see her perhaps he would be able to persuade her to pose. He crossed to the wardrobe and felt in the pocket for the photograph. There was no pocket. The suit was gone. You did that on purpose, said his nails biting into the wood. The sun sank and touched the black horizon. He tramped into the kitchen. "So you got rid of my suit," he said.

"You don't think I wouldn't ask you first?" Behind her head a curtain swayed like a skirt. "It's only at the cleaner's. You're an artist—I'd have thought you'd care how you looked."

"So that I'll get on, I know. I didn't think you'd go behind my back."

"If there was anything in it you wanted I'm sorry, honestly I am. I couldn't find anything."

"Nothing I haven't already got."

"This table really is too small, you know," she said. The cruet came down hard on the clothed glass. She knows! it exclaimed. Or had she fumbled it rather than thumped it down as a protest? No, he was sure she had the photograph. She withdrew herself from him by sleeping, then she stole his souvenir. The carved leg pressed his. "I like the flat as it stands," he told her. "It welcomes me."

As he stood before the cupboard plates chattered in the kitchen. No doubt the girl had washed up for her lover; perhaps they'd eaten at two in the morning, their hours based on their shared rhythm, not imposed from outside—the sort of life he meant when he yearned to be bohemian. Arms about each other, they'd tire together when at all. He opened the cupboard door; he would find a book that might suggest a detail to extend across his empty canvas. In the shadows the titles were dim. He knew each by its place. He touched the tip of a spine, and a finger flattened beneath his own.

He wasn't menaced; he didn't recoil. Instead he reached up and brought the glove to his face. It glimmered white on his palm. The fingers were stiff, perhaps starched. He held it by the knuckles and let the fingers rest arched on his hand.

In the kitchen a knife scraped. His wife had finished. Carefully he laid the glove over the books, where it posed lightly, coquettishly. He closed the

door softly, as if apologetic, and returned to the easel. In a moment the girl in the photograph might move as desired and stare from the window. But the sun's last shards were blunted; at a crossroads in the centre of the landscape, traffic-lights tripped up and down their scale. Two glasses chimed. He cursed his wife; jealous, she'd driven away his model. He strode out of the bedroom. "Are you going out?" he demanded.

She arranged the first ring of glasses, encircling the table leg. "I want to do as much as I can tonight," she said. "Anyway, I thought you might like me to stay in."

"When I'm painting?" She turned to him: surely he could have left that unsaid. "Watch what you're doing!" he shouted, but too late; kneeling, she overbalanced and her hand, flinching away from the glasses, caught the table leg. The table reared. The glass top came down on the arm of a chair, and a star flew out between them.

"Oh, I am sorry," she cried, on the edge of tears. "I didn't mean to." But he'd rushed to the table and grasped a carved leg. The ruined top ground and splintered. He whirled, brandishing the leg, topped with a head of jagged glass like an axe.

"I didn't do it on purpose. I wouldn't have done that." She tried to catch hold of his hand as it drooped. "We'd better get rid of it before someone gets hurt," she said.

"Throw away the glass but leave the legs. I may be able to use them sometime. In a carving," he added bitterly.

In the night he sat up. His wife's face lay upward on the pillow, helpless. The black sun was hot beneath the horizon, like a coal about to set fire to the air. He plodded through the flat and turned on the kitchen light. The carved legs were piled in a corner; above them an edge of the curtain swayed. He thought he heard his wife call out. He would fight her; he would complete a painting to express the flat. If only he could see the girl, find the photograph. Behind him the door banged and sprang back. Someone moved silently to stand behind him, her hands almost touching his shoulders. She didn't tint the white tiles of the kitchen. He swung about. Only the restless door moved. "I wouldn't have left you," he said almost to himself.

His wife was propped up by the pillows, waiting. "What were you doing?" she asked.

"There was something I wanted from the kitchen. I didn't expect to find you awake,"

"There's a rat in your cupboard," she said.

"Nonsense. What would a rat want in there?"

"I heard something scratching at the door. If you're not going to look, I will."

She slid out and was round the bed before he could move. Aghast, he slapped the light switch. Electric light thrust out the moonbeams. She pulled open the door and craning on tiptoe, leaned her head inside. At last she decided "It must be in the wall."

As she returned to bed he extinguished the light. "You haven't closed the cupboard properly," he said. He opened the door as if to shut it with a slam. A moonbeam partitioned him off from the bed. He laid his hand on the rim of the cupboard, waiting, and the glove fell on his fingers like a caress.

Dear Sir, I am in receipt of your letter—On the back he sketched the glove. At once his pencil traced her poised arm and ranged over her curves, the lead point sensitive as his fingertips. It smoothed her hair and formed the framed oval. But her face eluded him. The shutter of his mind had jammed. Was she facing him or smiling secretly in profile? He drove the point into the paper close to her hair, and the pencil snapped.

"We'll have to eat in here tonight," said his wife from the kitchen. "I know it's crowded."

He threw his overcoat on the bed; he should have an overall to welcome him, a vortex of colour like petrol after rain.

She was wearing a grey sweater; she looked young as a rediscovered photograph. Opened, the oven door exhaled the heavy heat of steak. She encircled the meat with potatoes and smiled. "When I was dusting your books—"

His knife froze in the meat. "You were dusting my books?"

"I thought it was the least I could do. I found a glove. I thought at first it was the rat."

And he'd torn up the sketched hand. "What have you done with it?" The knife gouged; the meat tore.

"I threw it away, of course. It would have ruined your books. It was covered with—I don't know, it was all wet."

"With tears, perhaps. No, no, it doesn't matter."

The pillow gasped as his fist drove in. The bedroom was void. He left his easel in the corner. Already the girl's presence had attenuated; she'd begun to fray, to be absorbed into the flat like mist. Or to drift out of the window; his wife was systematically driving her out, destroying the expressions of her personality, his tokens of her. Clouds bulged from the lacklustre sky like wet wallpaper. He stared at the unlined sheets, willing even the curve of her leg to form. One sight of her face and he would possess her. But he felt sure the photograph was ashes. Suddenly he caught up his easel and bore it toward the window. There would be a suspended silent moment before the easel smashed and scattered on the concrete. He thrust the window high. A breeze breathed into his eyes, and for a second a cloud smiled beneath hair. At once he knew. With gestures sure as sketched lines he set up the easel. Then patiently he lay back on the bed to wait.

He leapt up. His wife was sorting plates and cutlery on the kitchen table. "I won't be in your way," she said. "I won't be, will I?"

Without a word he clutched the carved legs and returned to the bedroom. Each leg was wood. Unprepared for the end of a curve, his fingers constantly fell into space. He laid one leg against his; when he moved the edge cut into his flesh. The wood was lifeless. The cupboard was empty. One side of the canvas had slipped low; a corner encroached on the wide dull landscape. The girl was elsewhere. Even the touch of the glove had been too light to suggest so much as the ghost of a hand. Abandoned once, she would never return again if rebuffed. And yet, he thought—and yet his painting might provide her with a hold. She might become the painting.

Light resonated in the glasses like a soundless chime. He stood before the kitchen door; his throat was dry. The kitchen was her last refuge. Surely it contained nothing that his wife might shatter. The girl knew this as surely as

he did. Yet he was afraid to enter; it would be their first meeting. And his wife would be alert.

The door swung in his wake. She came to meet him. Yet not quite; her presence was lent a harsh immediacy by the white tiles, compressed by the pendulous sky, but not formed. She was still preparing for him. He must wait. As he whirled, impatient, he glimpsed his wife's face, flat as a painting against the wall.

He paced the bedroom. The sky was close as the walls, encasing his eyes. He found that he could hear himself breathing, almost suffocated. He wrenched open the cupboard door and dragged out a sketch-pad. A title for his painting. Anything. But the edges of the pencil were insufferable as the angles of a rusty threepence. A book to calm him. The art-paper scraped beneath his nails, agonising as tin. He dropped the book and rushed into the kitchen.

"Oh, what is it?" his wife cried. "Don't keep going away from me!"

At the sound of her voice the girl fled. The kitchen rejected her. He stared slowly at his wife, the neat ranks of cutlery, the handkerchief bulging the arm of her sweater like a muscle. "God. God. God," he said.

And then he fell silent.

Behind her head, like an embryo born of the breeze, the curtain swelled. A thrust of air created cheekbones from its folds. Above them hollows might harbour whatever expression he called forth. The line that linked the hollows fell away into an arch. As the curtain swayed a wrinkle smiled, but shyly.

His wife followed the line of his gaze. "Oh, the curtain," she said. "Why didn't you say it was crumpled?"

She shook it straight. For a moment it was sucked against the window-frame, as if clutched in panic and relinquished. The tips of a tree were veiled, then sprang bright.

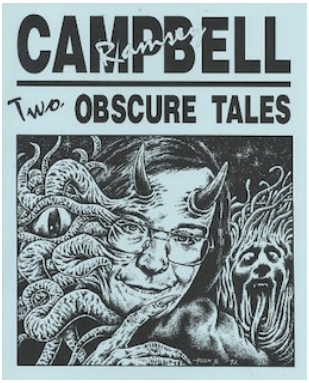
The table shook at his clutch. "Won't come back," he muttered.

"Sorry?" But his face was frozen as a portrait. "You look so lost tonight," his wife said. "Can I give you something?"

The planes of the kitchen were flat as the untinted tiles. He would never know what colour of dress the girl had worn: nor that only skulls lack a

nose. He peered through a wavering mist at the table. His hand closed on a carving knife. "This'll do," he said.

The Void



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I stared at my right hand as it gripped the arm of the chair: the whorls of the knuckles, the wrinkles of the veneer. Nothing else in the room or outside seemed solid. A second ago I was born, my mind wiped clean, instantaneously inheriting however many years had cultivated hair on my arms, whatever actions had led to this room, the silver leaves of the wallpaper, the wind trapped in the chimney like a weak ghost behind the frame with its chemist's qualifications. I knew that in that second I'd been staring at my hand. When my wife entered I remembered everything, and my mind turned red and raw as litmus. Gradually I neutralised the colour. I thought of Edna.

But my wife was waiting. "Yes, Jo," I said. Such a tone I might have used to one of my girls at the chemist's, I knew, but I wanted to be alone, to sink into memory.

"You called out." She was about to sit on the arm of the chair, though oddly uneasy; already her fingers were stroking my hair—if they probed too deeply they might find Edna.

"Did I? I don't remember." It must have been before I'd been born. But I could see she wasn't satisfied. "What did I say?" I asked wearily.

"It sounded like 'chemically possible'. 'It must be chemically possible', you said."

"How strange." Independent of anything I knew, my right hand was tight on the arm of the chair. I felt it as frail; in a moment the whorls might burst.

"Tim, what did you mean?" Her face came round to mine and gazed in. "Tell me." I knew she could see, not Edna, but my memories. As at the bottom of a microscope she saw magnified a tiny frantic scene: the wet blinding road, the wheel that whipped through my hands like rope, my hand clutching air, the star which leapt from the windscreen jagged as pain—

And she stroked my hair. "I wish I could stop," she said. "You want to be quiet, I know." As she determined what was trapped in my mind I wondered what was passing through hers: frustration that she hadn't been in the car that night to share my suffering as the first cold drops of rain fell in my wound? Whenever she probed too deeply she was miserable, then bravely oblivious. I wished she wouldn't see so clearly into the depths of the gulf between us. If only once she'd forge ahead as if it were not there and leap across. If only there were something to bridge it, to fill it: children.

But now I must convey to her that I was ignoring it. "Jo," I said. "You're helping me, you know that." I appreciated her efforts, even while I wondered at the terror that I sensed she was trying to conceal.

"If only I could be sure."

"Why don't you make the tea, and I'll help." I was sure now that I'd achieved the right prosaic intonation, the correct suggestion that this was the answer, that nothing else mattered, that I didn't feel her terror growing.

"You sit quietly. I've only to set the table." Yes, she was responding. "And afterwards, I'll leave you alone if that's what you want," she said.

"You know I don't." Gently I traced the curve of her cheek. Her face didn't change. Only her legs trembled. And when she rose I knew she wouldn't shudder until she was out of the room, when she could blame herself for her terror. If only I could ask her what was wrong. I knew only that I'd known five minutes ago. I'd known what must be chemically possible.

As soon as I'd switched on the television I leapt up and turned it off. I must not avoid thinking; that was fatal. Briefly, as I sat down, a square of light dwindled within my reflection and expired. Somehow, I felt, Edna could help. Yet though at the thought of her the walls turned to cardboard, she wouldn't form. She seemed tenuous as a memory that might have been a dream. Where had we met? Chilled, I realised that I didn't know. Perhaps because of this frustration, I sweated with the certainty that our meeting was the key; if I could remember where then I'd understand. As my mind strained to clutch beyond its boundaries, my hand regained its grip on the chair-arm and trembled till I thought the wood might snap.

When Jo appeared in the doorway, striding down the hall, impelled by her determination, I was moved. She'd commanded herself not to falter, not to betray her terror. If I hadn't sensed it then perhaps she might have reclaimed

me; but with this new unasked perception, this sense of viewing us both through a spyhole or projected on a screen, I could feel only how absurd all this was, the terrors which eroded us both yet might be destroyed by discussion which neither of us had the courage to force upon the other. "Come on, Tim, nourishment," she said.

The table was laid in a pattern I hardly liked to disturb: almost a symbol protecting the permanence of the house, the room, the walls, our life. Such thoughts led nowhere; I'd never been a mystic, I couldn't imagine who had infected me with such deathbed musings. Jo picked up her knife and fork and gave mine a hopeful glance. "How was the chemist today?" she asked as, with a clumsiness that shocked me, I gathered the first mouthful.

"Fine. Much as usual." Her words were a code of references which I had to translate back into a shared past. Startled, I realised that I'd forgotten nine hours of customers, admittedly alike as the ranked bottles, barrel bodies, smaller barrel heads, all outside whatever had been swelling inside my brain until tonight it had burst and blinded—except for one, somehow a key among my lost set, who'd been so grateful for a quick prescription that he shook my hand. Enraged, I knew that the chemist's too was charged with hidden meaning. Chemically possible. "How was the chemist today?" Suddenly I was jarred by what might be Jo's terror. But immediately I dismissed the idea as melodramatic; Jo hadn't spoken out of suppressed fear that I might clear the way for Edna. She'd never heard of Edna. She had merely been observing the teatime ritual.

"And how were the girls?"

Was one of them Edna? No, I knew that much and could compose a likely answer. "Still too much makeup. At least, Miss Latimer has seen my point, but Miss Trent, the unhelpful blonde you met, she still seems determined to paint herself a new face." Out of control, I'd overrun; robbed of memory again, I had absolutely no idea whether I'd invented everything I'd said. But Jo was clearly satisfied. The figure on the screen was sure of his lines even when my attention wandered. Cold, I wondered what shared implications I had touched of which I know nothing—as I looked down and found that while I'd been away, my independent hands had fed me, cleaned my plate.

"Shall we have coffee in the lounge? More—" I saw the words pass through her mind: cosy, intimate—but finally she said: "It'll be warmer in there." She couldn't approach what she feared. When she gave me the cup

her fingers withdrew before my hand had time to find hers. We'd passed the point of touching to tap the sexual current; our touches communicated an awareness of security. Yet now I yearned in an agony of desire to touch her. Which was why Edna had to be.

If she had to be. I wanted to come home to Jo and sit and exchange thoughts through smiles and make love, even the cautious economic love we'd made somewhere on the other side of the splintered windscreen. I could regret all this without remembering its loss. I refused to be thrown together with Edna, whoever she was, whatever she signified. I made room on the couch for Jo. "Sit by me," I said.

She sat, uneasy as a virgin. I kissed her and she replied, but I could feel her braced for something yet to come. My first caress was strangely tentative, as if I'd never touched her, and with it the walls thinned, our eyelids darkened the room, we seemed surrounded by a void quietly chaotic as the wind in the chimney, a space at whose centre we floated fixed to the points where our bodies met. Then, as Jo sprang upright as from cramp, the void rushed out, to give place to the other which filled my mind, the void whose edge I'd been approaching. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Tim," said Jo on the brink of tears. "I do try. I can't help it."

"What's wrong?" I asked, feeling hysteria close. "What's wrong with me?"

"There's nothing wrong with you. Oh, Tim, please don't start thinking that. But—I don't know how to say this so you'll understand—please give me a little time."

And of course I didn't understand. As I looked back I saw her shoulders shaking and knew I couldn't touch them. I passed the front door pane, solid with night, and went upstairs. Instinctively I entered the room furthest from the landing. A single bed, first for the child we might one day afford, then for guests, now for me. My removal to this room had been my decision, not Jo's. Why could I remember only ironies, as if I were my own disinterested observer? Such as my chemist's shop coming soon after the accident, allowing us the child we would now never have, not when the child might be in the car next time I crashed. No, that was rationalisation. We had sold the car. The reason lay elsewhere, close to Jo's plea for "a little time" as if I'd known her only weeks. Another key, and it came to me instantly that Edna knew. Edna knew and I'd forgotten.

I sat down on the bed, among the furniture with which we'd tried to hide the emptiness. Jo was silent: only the wind moved formlessly. I lay back and sought Edna's answer. My eyes sprang open. My husband filled my eye, bearing down toward me, and I twisted out of reach. I thought I'd fall, but it was a double bed, doubled again by a mirror over a dressing-table on which lay a separated loop of wire. If I could pull free of the pillow I'd scream. But my voice said only "I can't, I can't. Please, Eric."

"You know it makes no difference," he said. "I don't even notice it now. You're still you, Edna." But he must have seen my mouth gaping outraged, my eyes wide as the void expanded. He picked up the wire. "I'll see to the light," he said.

Like electricity, I thought. My mind had fled the horror, leaving me imprisoned.

When I heard Jo's footsteps I blinked away the nightmare and leapt back from the single bed. My hand, clenched on the sheet, tore it free with the fury of a husband discovering adultery. I had to scream, but as myself: I shrieked every obscenity I knew into the void, to destroy that hidden threat of femininity. But when I turned I saw Jo in the doorway, her face clenched by misery. As I took a step toward her, she whirled and ran to her room.

I stood trembling, my nerves scraped bare, my mind clutching space and slipping free. I didn't dare to lie down. Chemically possible. Like electricity. I battered the walls of my mind. Where were *my* memories? Who was I?

When I awoke nothing proved that I was not still asleep. Outlines were treacherous. I'd twisted and turned all night; now, as I tried to find form in my carefully defined movements about the room—a hand through a shirt-sleeve, a knowing grope, the other hand—my mind refused to be still. Beyond the window it was dark: that dark which creeps and crowds across the eye, a vision of the transient chaos which was my blood. I disowned my mind; let it probe and suffer, I wouldn't listen. I emerged onto the landing. Half-seven and still dark; everything seemed directed against me. Jo's door was closed; I imagined her huddled beneath the blankets, shutting out the world and me for a few short hours. In the kitchen I found the sandwiches and thermos which she'd left, a mute reproach.

Drops of dew hung at the cracked tips of leaves; against a thin dark mist the spokes of cobwebs glittered, intricate yet communicating only horror. Last night I'd been tired; I must have dreamed Edna. But I knew that she'd

confirm the mirrored bed, the length of wire that seemed the seed of revelation. A boy with a sackful of newspapers cycled by, his cough muffled by a scarf. Shivering, I strode faster to the bus stop, between the houses that were blocks of darkness seeping into random yellow rectangles of light. All was veiled, beyond my comprehension. I had to be helped. Yet Jo had hidden. Suddenly I thrust the sandwiches into a clammy hedge and emptied the thermos down a drain. I'd call Edna. Whatever she could tell me, it must help.

On the bus everyone was coughing out his own mist. A good day for tonics, I thought—but somehow it wasn't my thought. Above the street a few neon signs flickered feebly against the murk; three silent men shouldering dustbins emerged from behind the shops and vanished. As I reached the door I glanced up at the plastic lower-case lettering: *damsons chemists*. So that was my name.

Grey as planes of mist, the windowpanes hung before the bottles and cosmetics and smiling cardboard girls. My hand gripped the key as it might have a lifeline, and at my heels gaped the void. I folded back the gate and unlocked the door, to be greeted by a scent of antiseptic cold as the gleam of a scalpel. For a second I was on the edge of memory. I hung up my coat and pulled on my white overall. In the shop I switched on the heater; the careful displays, encased in glass as if in ice, rejected me. I opened the cash-drawer. The last time I'd met Edna—I shook bags of change into the drawer. When had I last met Edna? When and where had I met her at all? What did she look like? I must have glimpsed her, me, last night reflected shocked in the unexpected mirror, but there lurked madness, the void. I slammed the cash-drawer and strode into the dispensary, my right hand reaching out toward the telephone.

When I heard the shop door open my hand sagged and I hurried back to the counter. The sharp discoloured air had rushed into the shop, edged by Miss Trent's perfume. She and Miss Latimer had arrived; they glanced at the clock and relaxed. Behind them the door closed itself wearily, fitting my name into its niche, as it had done with increasing reluctance for weeks. I waited while they said "Good morning, Mr Dawson."

"Good morning. Close the door, please, Miss Trent," I said and examined the prescriptions that the night-letter box had collected. On the edge of my

concentration I noted an exchanged glance. "Before you came, Liz," Miss Latimer laughed, "that door used to behave itself."

"I should think that's true of more than doors," I muttered. I shouldn't have; I wanted to ignore them and find myself. To shut out the world, which seemed determined to lure me into situations that I couldn't handle, and search within. I'd just thought of Jo, pulling the blankets back on the cold morning alone, perhaps relieved.

As Miss Trent approached, my right hand trembled. I couldn't look up; I saw something monstrous on her face, her false eyelashes starting from her eyes like insect legs from dark holes of mascara. This falseness, those alien objects like parasites on her face, were somehow the source of the terror that surrounded me. "We read the newspaper on the train, if you'd like to read it," she said. "I'll make a cup of tea if there's time. You must be as cold as we are."

"I scarcely think there'll be time for that," I told her, turning over the last prescription. "We open in seven minutes. Tea break is at ten, Miss Trent."

Before I could come to terms with Jo, Edna, the nightmare of last night, they'd returned. They couldn't have had time to say much behind my back, I reflected. "Gosh, isn't it horrible out. The sort of day when you like to be working," Miss Latimer said.

"I had hoped I was not alone in finding all days much like that," I replied. I was facing them; they couldn't glance their comment. I had some power over them, then; it gave me courage for the phone and whatever lay beyond. "Miss Latimer, I'll need you in the dispensary. Miss Trent, I trust you're capable of handling the counter without help?"

"I'll give you a hand if it gets too much for you, Liz," Miss Latimer said.

My power was weakening. "If you have time to spare, Miss Trent," I called over my shoulder, "the floor could stand cleaning."

The bottles were cylinders of fluorescence; on the dispensary wall the black telephone gleamed. When she'd applied for the job Miss Trent had seemed efficient, but in the weeks she'd worked in my shop the eyelashes had crept onto her face; at first merely absurd in their independence, they seemed lately to have changed her subtly into a coquette. Or was she gradually revealing herself? I neither knew nor cared; these were not the memories I sought. The white walls, the antiseptic; there was a memory, but

I chilled. I idled back to the shop for the prescriptions, waiting for the weight of memory to press through into my consciousness. At the door I halted and listened.

"Was he like this before it happened, Jackie?" Miss Trent whispered.

"No, he used to be awfully sweet. Keen on his job but because of how it helped people, you know. I may be wrong, but perhaps now the job is all he's got. Maybe his wife—"

"I feel sorry for her. She was so on edge when she came in. I couldn't understand what she wanted."

"I feel sorry for him too, though. Never mind, love. You've got Kenny and I've got Dick, and we won't have to put up with all this for much longer."

What could I say? Miss Trent, I'm sorry but you're the sort of girl who reminds me that I'm betraying my wife? I strode into the shop and caught up the prescriptions. Next to them lay the newspaper. "When you're ready, Miss Latimer," I said coldly, "I should like to deal with these." Then I saw the headline: *New Hope for Heart Transplants*. Before I knew, my right hand had ripped out the words as a dog tears cloth. I glared up as if to see the truth at last, but I was confronted by Miss Trent before she looked away. "Miss Trent," I called, and my voice rose to a shout. "For God's sake, will you wash your face!"

When they both stared wordlessly I weakened. I needed my strength for the phone. "I'm sorry," I said wearily. "I've had a bad night. I'm not myself."

Handing me the bottles from the dispensary shelves, Miss Latimer was silent. So you've seen what I'm capable of, I thought. If your disapproval is so painful, how much more so would Jo's be if she knew about Edna! But the phone hung at the edge of my gaze. I needed Edna to reveal what was surfacing in my mind. I scribbled on the label of the last bottle and emerged into the shop. A motorcyclist slowed outside the window, exchanged distant kisses with Miss Trent, and roared away. "If you and Miss Latimer would like to go for break I'll hold the fort," I said, avoiding her eyes. "No need to hurry. There are biscuits."

I'd had to wait until I was sure that Edna's husband Eric would be out, mending fuses, tending wires. Now, every time I was ready to face the phone, the shop door opened; the world held me back from the truth. I was pulled back and forth behind the counter, from display to drawer to window.

When the girls returned I was weak again. I wavered toward the tearoom. Then, desperately, I turned and caught up the phone.

The line mused sibilantly; the space of which it spoke was chaos. Only the throb of the bell and the click and the waiting breath were fixed. It was a woman's breath, which elsewhere I'd heard quick and harsh. "Edna," I said.

"Tim. Oh, thank God. I thought it might be Eric. He was hopelessly upset when he went out. Last night—"

"Edna, I haven't much time." Not last night, I yelled.

"Please, Tim, let me talk. I must tell someone, and if I can't talk to you—" Tim was silent; perhaps he wasn't listening. I gripped the phone as if to force my way through to him, my lover, to whom I was inextricably bound. "I thought I was going mad. Last night Eric was so miserable I felt I had to. I tried, Tim. Oh, God, I tried! He says I haven't changed for him but I can't forget." My eye ranged about the hall, as if in fear of Eric eavesdropping; it found the fuse-box up to which he'd once hoisted me while he explained how it worked. "But—oh, how can I make you feel it—as soon as he began it was as if I were someone else. Someone was watching us, and it was me. If he'd made love to me then it would have been rape," she said harshly, and fell silent. She was waiting for me to comfort her, but I was gasping, drowning in terror of madness. If she spoke again I'd be lost somewhere in the void which united us. It was like turning to stare into a camera and at the same time seeing oneself on a screen turn and stare. I clutched the receiver so hard it might have melted. "Tim, you're still there?" she cried.

To see her would be to preserve my identity with an assurance of her own. "We must meet," I stammered. "Today. For lunch."

"Oh, Tim, I can't," she said unhappily. "Eric may be home."

"You must," I forced out, beating my knuckles against the white wall. "Leave him a note. You know you're closer to me than anyone else could ever be, and you know why," he said. But I didn't know; I knew nothing, not even the varnish on my nails like surfaces of blood, not even the screwdriver lying on the hall table as if amputated. "Meet me at the station. I'll be there at one," he said. "Someone's in the shop. I have to get back to the counter," I said, and slammed the phone down.

My right hand hung trembling against the white wall. Suddenly the horror burst from me; I roared inarticulately. In the shop a murmur was instantly

truncated, and glass smashed. I rushed out of the dispensary. Miss Trent was wide-eyed above a pool of medicine jagged with corners of glass. She saw me and ran forward. "Mr Dawson, are you all right?" she cried.

"All right!" I shouted. "You're trying to destroy me then, are you? Are you?"

I knew I was right in a sense. Something was trying to destroy me.

When I left the shop the sky had cleared from grey to glass. I'd spent the rest of the morning arranging displays in intricate patterns, chilling my fingers on linoleum, resolving the reality of my hands against sharp glass, even once, alone in the dispensary, dropping a bottle when I felt threatened. I hurried down the street. Figures emerged from ringing doorways and battled the wind for their coat collars. I wondered whether Edna had left; then at once I tied my thoughts to my stride.

As I crossed a shopping street, above which hung the first few plastic Santa Clauses, a car skidded on a lost patch of ice. Its grille reared toward me like a toothed mouth. Within three feet of me, it regained control. Gripped by a fear that was not that of death, I ran and plunged into an arcade. The lights were warm yellow, but I was striding forward into terror, cold as the insinuating wind. I pushed through the crowd, hoping to be trapped by bodies, held down by flesh. For a moment, as the faces pressed past, I invoked Jo. Perhaps she was smiling desperately in a supermarket, buying food for tonight; perhaps tonight we could sit down face to face and each confess to what obsessed us. But I couldn't look to her for help in her betrayal. For even as I shrivelled, emerging from the arcade to realise that the station was two streets away, my body strode ahead of me, inexorably drawn.

Below the bridge the lines spread out to align with their platforms, the signals seemed to point to the station like signposts. I dragged my fingers along the parapet as if to erase their prints, but already I was turning from the pegged magazines above the bookstall to search for Tim, starting as a platform gate clashed back and passengers welled out. I mustn't think of Edna. I ground the grime of the parapet into my fingers and fastened my mind on whatever presented itself; the train lines sketched into the faint distant mist to suggest an invisible union; a crushed shoe abandoned in the gutter; the Station Hotel, too close to book into with Edna; a tortured metal gate; long white echoing corridors where drifted terrifying anonymous

smells; a bright blank light, a close blurred face and suffocation; a tilted lawn, white cane chairs and watchful figures on the gravel walks; Edna passing on someone's arm, turning her head, her guide delighted by the coincidence as she introduced us—I knew I was on the edge; I accepted. Receptive at last, I hurried across the bridge. Whatever happened now, my feet were set in their course.

The departures indicator shuffled like a pack of cards. I looked away from figures disconsolately turning from an empty platform, and saw Tim striding through the crowd, halting as a chain of trailers clattered ponderously before him like a noisy funeral. I thrust away the last and ran forward. My right hand clutched Edna's. "The waiting-room," I hissed.

Below the pale green of the dusty wall lay a fringe of darker green, like a precipitate in a test-tube. The bare bulb hung above a single street gypsy, asleep beneath newspapers against a cold heater. I saw a headline I knew and clutched Edna. We kissed as if to bind ourselves together through our mouths. And at once I was flung out to hover, impotent, bodiless, watching. Their mouths separated. "I want to say I love you," she whispered. "And yet I feel as if I'm being driven. Or drawn. Like magnets. Electricity."

"Even if it were chemically possible," he said, "you know that's not all that's brought us together. His hand—"

"And his eye," she finished.

And at last I knew who I was. I remembered the bent point of the front gate that one of my children had swung out of shape.

"I must have you. Tonight," he said.

"Yes. Whatever happens," she responded. Her eyes lifted to him, one a fraction slower than the other. "But somewhere else. We can take a train to the sea."

"It will give us three hours," he said.

I struggled without moving, clawed without substance at their skulls. Take me back to my home! I shrieked. Back to my twisted gate! And then, How can I be both of you? I was as helpless as the dust that swarmed above them from the ancient leather of the benches. I forced myself feebly between them, to destroy this shocking schizophrenia, and was caught. "Somehow I want to turn and run," she told me. "And yet I know I'll stay."

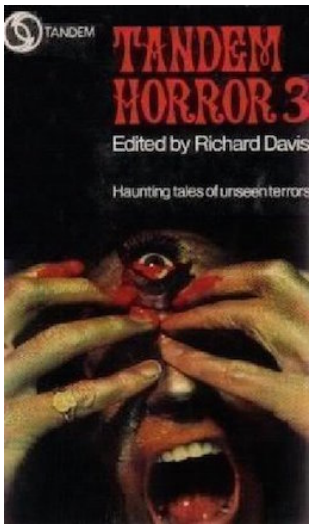
"Your magnets are turning," I said, and raised my hand toward her face.

From the corner of my eye I thought for a second that his hand was clawed to tear my cheek like paper. But he lifted my hair back, and we kissed. "We can't risk more. Tonight at six," I told her. "I'll tell Jo something or other. You leave first. I'll give you a minute."

As she hurried from the station I seemed to be stretched, wrenched apart in an agony without pain. It must be love, I thought. I had a brief image of a twisted gate; we must have met there once. Then I pushed open the glass door, signed in grime, and began to walk back to the chemist's. There was something I wanted to scribble down before I forgot, about a gate. Perhaps it was the gate across my shop doorway: it might need oiling. Tonight I could ask Edna; she might know. Otherwise, tonight would perhaps bury in the depths of my mind whatever had begun obscurely to trouble me again.

Or perhaps, as I rather hoped, it would simply cease to exist.

Cyril



Written in: 1968
First published in *Tandem Horror 3*, 1969
Also published in: *The Height Of The Scream*

A tentative flame felt its way along the edges of the pages, seeking to open the book. It leapt up the corners; a brown crisp of cellophane lifted from the cover; Flora bent closer, and the doorbell rang. She swore and stood up. She'd told Lance to let himself into the flat, hoping that he might—it would have augured well. She threw the window high and looked down; at her back the flames buzzed and muttered over the book. Beneath the streetlamp borrowing fire from the chaotic sky, Lance stood before the basement railings, adjusting and readjusting the parcels beneath his arm. She'd sworn at him; she felt ashamed, and swore. "Here, Lance!" she cried. "Something for you," and cast the keys down. He gaped and smiled; he wavered between her voice and her keys. One of the parcels slid free, only to be caught by his thigh. She hoped to God it wasn't the bottle. Off balance, he juggled the parcels, somehow swept up the key and scurried out of sight beneath her balcony.

Minutes later she heard him hurrying upstairs. On the landing there was a pause while perhaps he regained his hold on the parcels. She should have gone down to help. She glanced about the flat. She hadn't time to hide the *Lysistrata* prints; they were bound to terrify him, too soon. He was hastening down the long linoleum hall. She ran to the door and found him contorted round the parcels, which refused to be set gently down.

"Let me," she said, catching what must, beneath its crumpled wrapping, be the bottle. "Could you find the wine I wanted?"

"I think it must be," he said. "I don't know much about wines." Not that it mattered; any alcohol would do—indeed, anything she could ask him to buy for her without arousing his suspicions and so lure him to her flat. But

when she'd watched him yesterday sipping shyly at his half of beer in the office lunch-hour, she'd realised that wine might prove useful indeed.

"Well, come in," she cried. "Oh, you must for a few minutes," she pleaded. "You're cold." She took his elbow to usher him inside, but at last she had to let go. "Here's the fire," she said, thrusting a cup aside with her heel. "Try not to notice all this crap. I'm bloody lazy, I should warn you now." He clutched the other parcel to himself and edged forward, almost into the flames; she could smell his trousers warming. As the ash split into flakes and flew up the chimney, the title stood out black: *Bringing Up Baby*. "Oho," Lance mumbled. Or it might have been simply "Oh"; she could never be sure.

"Know a man by the books he leaves," she said. "A friend of mine, a late friend, let that book slip last night. Christ, men are so unsubtle!"

As Lance huddled closer to the fire she could smell his coat, faintly smoked by November fog. "I didn't mean you," she apologised. You're about the only sensitive man I know—but she knew that would drive him further inward. "Oh for a sensitive relationship, you know? Perhaps I should try a lesbian or two. There are few things I wouldn't try once." He laughed and tried to hide behind his shoulders. Christ, she thought, it's almost love. If I could fell in love with anyone I'm sure it would be Lance.

"You'll catch fire in a minute," she said. "Do take your coat off. I know you'd like a coffee." She would have loved to unbutton him, but waited for a chance to draw the sleeves free. "And what have you been buying?" she asked as he fumbled with the parcel over the fire.

"Oh, this." Her fingernails on his coat collar ran down his palm as it withdrew. "It's a, I mean it's just a doll. I saw it, you know, shopping. I thought you might like it. You said you collected things."

"You are a darling," she said, thinking: I shouldn't have said that yet. She unwound the woollen scarf from his neck and, as he wasn't looking, brushed it across her cheek. It was tangled with lumps of fluff. Then she laid his clothes on the camp bed and tore the wrappings from the parcel. As she lifted it to look closely the doll's eyes turned down in a chubby face, perhaps proud of its neat Tyrolean shorts and T-shirt. I wonder why he felt this was appropriate—or maybe he was desperate, she thought. "It's very sweet. You're very sweet," she said. If he had been anyone else she could have pulled the clothes from the doll and slid her tongue into each crevice,

although it terrified her to know that the doll was sexless. "I should explain," she told his shoulders, "that I wasn't burning that book for symbolic reasons. There are things you must burn to enjoy them, and things you must eat." Almost she offered him her piece of basalt, cold as catatonia on the tongue. "Speaking of which," she said, "you must eat before you return to the cold."

"Oh, I mean," he said, half-turning. "Thanks," he said.

She'd succeeded. "And what can I tempt you with?"

"Well, it's all right," he said. "I'll eat anything," still turning tentatively like an injured man afraid to test a limb.

"We'll have omelettes," she decided. "But first let's put Cyril to bed. I shall call him Cyril," she explained, "because that's the name I'd call a child I wanted to dominate. You know, Lance, if I had a child—which thank God science has helped me to prevent—I think it would only be so I could beat him. One must channel one's aggression." I don't mean this, she thought, do I? All I'm trying to do is to force Lance to talk, if only to shut me up. I'd like to feel present for five minutes. She kicked a coffee bean toward the fire. "God, what a craphouse," she said.

Cyril wouldn't stand gazing from the window; she sat him on the sill, facing toward her bed, and tucked the curtains behind him. Lance watched from the bedroom doorway, hands behind his back. "How do you like my room? Come on, let's eat," she said, and captured one of his hands. As she scraped the omelette from the pan she reached vainly for conversation. They would have to talk first, she thought, if only to soothe him. The news? She never read newspapers. His silence was crushing her skull. She peered round the curtain which veiled the kitchen from him like the entrance to a dressing-room. Lance was glancing up again at the *Lysistrata* prints and quickly recoiling. If I can't release him from himself then nobody can, because nobody cares.

She poured wine into the glasses and carried the tray to him. "I'm sure it's not what you're used to at home," she said, "but I trust it's less than emetic."

He waited for her to sit, then took a mouthful. "It's good," he said. "Honestly, I mean. I like it."

If he weren't so anxious she might have believed him. "If you drink your wine it might be better," she suggested.

"I haven't drunk much wine."

"I don't like to drink alone."

Success again, she thought, but how slowly! "You'll sleep tight tonight," she said. "Do you ever dream?"

"Well, I suppose so."

"About people you know? I'm sure you must dream things you couldn't tell most people." But he'd looked down to realign his knife and fork. "The things you can do when you dream. I enjoy delirium for the dreams, you know, because then I'm at the mercy of myself. If there's a real me then Christ, that's where she is."

A flame throbbed like a muffled drum. Flora was silent. From somewhere Lance asked: "Don't you ever get frightened, living alone?"

"Good Lord, my flat is open house. It's like a station sometimes." She took his glass. 'You live at home?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," of course he said.

"And what will you do eventually?" She picked up the bottle, burning from the hearth.

"No more for me, really," he said, glancing at the clock and leaping up; crumbs of omelette tumbled down his trousers, "No, honestly, I mustn't."

"Lance, I should have warned you," she said, tensing herself for the lie. "I thought you'd have realised the clock's an hour slow. The last bus has gone."

His eyes turned up and retreated above his round mouth. Christ, she thought, I love him. I'll protect him. "You can't walk, it's too cold," she told him. "You must sleep here. Give me your number and I'll phone your parents."

The telephone stood grey upon the wedge of silver light along the wall; above it numbers were entangled, some in handwriting she couldn't place. She glanced up the wooden staircase to the dark mouth of her floor. Even if Lance were still sitting with his hands tight in his lap, he wouldn't be able to hear. When the receiver squeaked urgently, panic-stricken, she pressed in the coin like a knife.

"Is that Lance's mother?" she quavered hoarsely. She hadn't realised the voice would be so difficult to sustain.

"Who is that?" a woman demanded. Flora knew her face was sour and wrinkled as an orange. "If that's Eunice, I'm surprised you haven't rung before."

"I'm nobody you'd know," Flora said, crabbing her hand on the wall to help her voice. "Just an old lady your son helped to get into her house when she was locked out."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," the voice conceded.

"I'm sure you've been worried about Lance. I know I would be if I had a son. I'm sorry I didn't ring sooner, but it's difficult for me to get up and down stairs. I just wanted you to know that he'll be staying here with me tonight. He'll be quite safe, but I'm a bit upset,' she said. But the phone was noncommittal. Suddenly Flora continued: "And he bought me a little doll. I thought that was a nice thing to do for an old lonely lady like me."

"That's the way I brought him up," the voice said through an electric hiss like the rush of a wave. "Always take a present when you're visiting."

Flora prolonged a cough into the mouthpiece, wishing germs travelled, and replaced the receiver. God, she thought, how could anyone release him. God!

Beside Lance's leg the wine had spilled from the bottle and mixed with the ashes. She could see he hoped that she wouldn't notice; she looked away. "I usually go to bed about now," he told his hanging hands.

"I've been known to go to bed early." But even weaving his conversation into hers wasn't enough. She must fail while he was so conscious of what and what not to do. She couldn't break through his fidelity. "You'd better sleep in here," she said. "Just leave everything. I'll clean up in the morning."

As she undressed each movement was so heavy she wondered, why bother? Her body was lithe beneath the nightdress which twice had been torn from her, and yet she was incapable of holding what she really wanted. She peered into her somnolent bedroom fire as it shifted, then returned to the other room.

Lance was covered by the blankets; somewhere beneath was his body. Behind his head his clothes hung on the chair as on a line. He gave a smile, generally appreciative rather than for Flora. "I won't be asleep for a while. We insomniacs, you know," she said. "If the fire goes out come in and see me. Or if you need anything." She would ask point-blank, but she knew

how dreadful that would be—and besides, that was one thing she would never do. Instead, she tucked the blankets about him. But she couldn't find his body. For a moment she was poised to spring; but she held back, seeing him helpless, on the edge of dream. She had almost kissed him when she turned and quietly closed the door behind her.

A distant train rushed muffled through a tunnel; a dog yelped. Flora thrust her arm beneath her head, the better to hear the night. It was a decade since she'd lain and listened to the sounds of midnight; she'd lived at home then. These days she would be buried somewhere with shrieking guitars or tramping the night with friends, peering upward for a lighted window and a party. And Lance would be lying quiet, his hands stilled, his mind released —She turned toward the wall. Through the thin plane she could hear him breathing. As she accepted the night she extended. She embraced the streets she'd walked wet and echoing at four in the morning. Peaceful, she sensed that she could merge with whatever she wished. Instantly she merged with her love; she was sharing Lance's peace, and somehow this erased the agonies of the evening; at rest, he was himself. A red coal crinkled and fell. His breathing was so clear that she could imagine him next to her in bed. This at least was hers alone, she thought.

Her eyes heaved against their weight to open. His breath was suffocating her. Good God, she thought, is he ill? The harsh exhalations seemed on top of her, preying on her lungs; he might be in the room. Then inadvertently she shuddered; perhaps he was. For a moment she imagined him inching the door open, crawling in on hands and knees so as not to disturb her, raising his head and peering at her, shy as before her prints. She trembled upright. The room was black; the introverted fire smouldered; through a chink between the curtains she glimpsed a bright fragment of streetlamp. The blackness breathed. She sank back, drawn down by sleep, and heard something strike the floor at the foot of the bed.

It was small. A baby. But surely a baby's fall would never be so hard and menacing. She wrenched herself awake; half her mind was in darkness. It must be Cyril. Only her eyes were free above the sheet, waiting, anxiously alert; her body was hemmed in, she couldn't lift the sheet from herself. Around her the breathing quickened, panting. The transparent curtain drew back from the ostrich neck of the street-lamp, revealing the room beyond her vision. Then, close to nightmare, she saw that the neck of the lamp was

swaying, questing back and forth outside the window. No, it was not the lamp. The curtain was appearing and withdrawing as what had fallen fought its way free.

The breathing had slowed; its pace was deliberate, like an approaching tread. Flora knew her first wild notion had been right. Lance was in the room. What she had declared impossible had happened. She closed her eyes. She must not move; Lance must approach in his own way. But the cold silver light flooded her, penetrated her, exposed her helpless. If only she could see him! She'd never known fear—well, perhaps once, but even then less than most women. Now she tingled at the edges. She knew she was safe with Lance, of course. This was every kind of experience at once; it was delicious. She felt the bed shake. Lance, on all fours, afraid to awaken her, had bumped against the foot. His breathing choked, then recommenced more softly, faster. In a moment she would know what he meant to do. She embraced fear.

At her feet the bedclothes tugged. She pressed her eyes shut and lay still. A weight crawled over the coverlet and crept toward her toes. When it touched her a charge coursed through her body; the light within her eyelids blazed. Lance's hand moved over the arch of her foot, gradual as his breathing. The blanket rested on her face, soft wool yet a prison. The hand traced her leg. Flora's fingers splayed out like antennae to determine what was wrong. Then she knew why she was troubled; the hand was approaching up her leg in rapid breathless stages, as if climbing. Suddenly her mouth opened, but the wool caved in upon her cry. The hand scaled her body; the room held its breath. Incapable of waiting longer, she opened her eyes. The icy light poured down; from the corner of her eye she saw the fire collapse and show forth a red heart. Otherwise, nothing. Still the hand crept upward. It reached her shoulder and lay inert. In a moment she must see his face. She would know. The hand moved from her shoulder to the coverlet over her neck. Then, hard and black against the precise light, a head rose into view.

Love or fear thrilled through Flora; she surged upright to embrace him and saw that Lance's head was shrunken, pale as a dead baby's. She recoiled, gasping. The head fell back and the plastic eyes rolled up to gleam in the steely light.

Oh God, Flora thought, revolted. Is this a game? What's wrong with him? She twisted free of the bedclothes, vaulted over the pillow and stumbled to the light switch. In control again, she turned, already prepared to pity. But on the floor next to the tossed bedclothes was only the doll. One leg was bent beneath it; it rocked as if struggling to rise and walk.

And Flora, furious, strode forward. As she gripped it, digging her fingers into its side, its eyes turned blindly upward. She raised her hand to strike it, and then threw it into the heart of the fire. As it began to buzz like an agonised insect in the silence, she knelt down to watch.

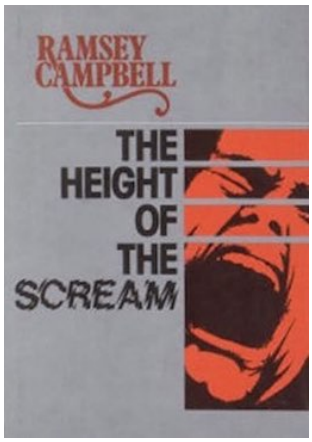
Its clothes burst into flame. Naked, its arms warped upward as if pleading. A pink liquid bubbled from the elbows, and the arms fell broken into crevices of flame. Exuding, its legs drooped and lay bent outward on the orange coals. At last its head sank back. One eye-socket writhed, and the eye hurtled out to roll by Flora's knees.

She had to be rid of the eye; otherwise her release would be incomplete. She bent forward to pick it up between thumb and forefinger, and froze.

For an eternity she was petrified. Then she pressed her hands to her ears. The fire boiled close to her cheek; the eye had rolled beneath her knee. But Flora only dragged her head down and wished, cursed, prayed that the screams from the next room would stop.

1969

Ash



Written in: 1969
First published in *The Height Of The Scream*, 1976

"You go on ahead and see to things," Anthea had said. "I'll see you at the weekend." Remembering, Lloyd gnashed the gears as the house came into view, its bricks blushing in the sunset. Yes, he could see to things: one mistake in signing a hotel register and she doubted him. The removal men had left at last; the house was tranquil, subdued as the faded orange of the bricks, the grass of the garden disturbed only by a dent where a table had leaned its weight on its leg. The few notes he'd taken on the Cotswold dialect struggled to rise from the seat beside him. He was satisfied with them, but it was Anthea's project on folk tales, Anthea whom Brichester University had commissioned to compile the book, Anthea's money which had claimed the larger part of the house, while he was just a temporarily redundant journalist. And Anthea who had insisted that they live together outside Brichester, of course. All right, he knew that the morality of sex was personal and therefore private: that was why she had run out past the hotel porter and his huge umbrella like a bedewed mushroom; but it wasn't sufficient reason. He kicked the car forward, toward the corner shop.

The shopkeeper's spring was rusty; he uncoiled laboriously upward behind the counter with a box of Kleenex. Dust lay on his crown of hair like ash on a fire in the morning. He and his customer turned to Lloyd like images mirrored on the plane of dust between them. "You'll be new," said the image behind the counter.

Perhaps he'd shown his ignorance of a local custom, Lloyd thought. He surveyed the bottles of disinfectant, crinkled packets of stockings, pegged protractors and set-squares, newspapers. "Have you cigarettes?"

"I don't know if we'd have your brand." But they had, Lloyd found, irritated then triumphant: he disliked affectation.

"And what's bringing you up here?"

"Well, cigarettes. Oh, down here, you mean?" The silent image had extracted a Kleenex and coughed red-eyed; the shop-bell rattled, muffled with dust, and the newcomers stood listening. Dear God, Lloyd thought, in a minute they'll all be crowding round like peasants from one of those Transylvanian villages at Shepperton. 'I'm doing research into local customs," he said.

"That'll be nice," said the shopkeeper.

"Should be interesting, that," remarked one of the latecomers. Look, Lloyd thought, I'm as bored as you are. There wasn't one accent he recognised from the tape.

"You're at number 37 then, are you?" someone asked.

A Kleenex hung lolling out of the box. "You won't be living there alone?"

"Not for long." Even Anthea couldn't expect him to lie about that.

"It's a tragic house, is that." You're never Cotswold, Lloyd thought accusingly.

"I can remember the day she left him as clear as yesterday," the shopkeeper said.

"Aye, but he wouldn't lose his sleep over that, I reckon. If that woman thought she was badly done to she'd turn on you in the street. Anyone, mind you, and you didn't know her from Adam."

"He was as bad after she left, though, remember. We had to complain in the end. He left the next day."

"Well," Lloyd said, "I'll see you sometime." Muddy boots vacated their prints for him. The bell's tongue trembled, thick. He parked the car in the

alley behind the street and walked back; as he glanced up the road which joined the street opposite his house the streetlamps opened unblinking eyes and led his gaze to a gap of darkness. He'd already forgotten the shop; he scarcely thought he needed to make notes.

He set the recorder on the hall table by the telephone and hung up his coat. "Anthea?" he called, hurrying upstairs. How odd! he thought, halting. I must miss her more than I thought. For a second he'd been sure that she was hiding, ready to leap on him—but she would have considered that undignified. His fingers traced a splinter recessed in the banister.

Somewhere something was burning; the air was faintly acrid. He ran downstairs and threw open the door beneath the staircase. But beyond the rakes, the lawnmower brown with rust and brittle strands of grass, the beach of scattered coal, the furnace door hung loose and disclosed a cold hole. No smoke betrayed the kitchen; the cooker and refrigerator stood sharp on the red stone flags. He looked into the sitting room. The furniture sat stolidly in the dim light from the street; the keyholes on the face of the Victorian clock were nostrils, unbreathing; on the mantelpiece a black marble hand rough and wrinkled with dust had been moved toward the door by a removal man. Lloyd thought it ugly, but left it where it was; Anthea might find it interesting.

He wandered upstairs. At the bedroom door he knocked and entered. Now listen, he told himself furiously, twice is too much. It's Tuesday, only four days to the weekend. Against the brown wallpaper which soaked up the light the bed stood, almost puritanically white. He returned to the kitchen and began to beat an omelette. Later he would ring Anthea.

But her telephone purred complacently. Eventually he shrugged into the mirror and set down the receiver. He cleaned out the mouthpiece, which was clogged with dust or ash, and took notes and recorder to bed with him, distributing them on Anthea's side. When he found that he'd somehow erased the tape he swore bitterly; all he could hear was the faint muttering of a woman's voice, one that he didn't even recognise.

Anthea said: "I trust you're eating well? The University seems quite excited by the sample notes I gave them. Lonely without you, but only for three

days by the time you read this. Ring me tonight to let me know you're surviving."

As he read the bacon charred. However, he hid it in bread and ate it while he reread Anthea's letter. The morning newspaper had arrived with the compliments of the corner shop. He supposed he would have to thank them, but it would be an effort: "Mrs. Jenner and Mrs. Wolsey gave a talk on Spain and showed slides at the Free Trade Hall; Mrs. Cooper won first prize in the Swiss roll competition." Thank heaven he was only an observer, and transient. Where they drew their folk tales from he couldn't fathom. Certainly not from their imaginations, which must have starved to death decades ago.

In the hall a moth fluttered across from the sitting-room and came to rest on the mirror above the telephone. Grass was springing erect to conceal the dent in the lawn. The lampposts perspired. A moth, or something grey.

"Nice day," said the man at the first cottage. "Not so nice for the farmers," said his wife, and discussion ensued. Even if they could reach back to folk tales, they weren't prepared to yield them up to Lloyd. He left the notebook and recorder in the car, near a Tudor church sheltering gargoyles with eroded faces, and began to climb a shattered path past wire-netting cages of clockwork hens. But in the askew hillside cottage, beneath a light bulb which seemed sensitive to a personal gravity, all he could call forth was a ten-year-old pitchfork murder which he could have found in a dozen newspaper files. Perhaps his research had been discussed in a pub and rejected, or perhaps there was no more material to retrieve. So long as Anthea realised that he'd done his best.

Dabbing milk from his lips, he picked up the receiver and stared blankly at the blank wall. Moth and mirror had vanished. Surely he'd locked the front door. Yes, of course he had. He pushed open the sitting-room door and the furniture lit up with what light wasn't lost to the walls; over the mantelpiece hung only a rectangle of unreflecting wallpaper. If this is village pilfering it's another yardstick of their intelligence, Lloyd thought angrily. He crossed to the window to examine the fastenings; within the pane the furniture hung isolated in the darkness. He turned uneasily; he'd been brushed by the thought that now he couldn't see behind him. Not that it mattered. He

peered into the bathroom; the mirror was still peeling with steam from his bath. The wings of the dressing table mirror were closed across its face, and refused to give way. He shook at them and wrenched. Suddenly they sprang open, crashed back against the wall, and his helpless reflection exploded and collapsed into an avalanche of glass.

Anthea answered the phone on the third pulse. "How's the field trip?" she asked.

"Reasonably successful. But of course the recorder's broken down. I've taken it for repair."

"That's a pity. Can't be helped, I suppose. How are you managing generally?"

"Perfectly well. The house is in shape."

"I managed to get out of the Head of Philology's dinner date this time."

"Well, that's encouraging. Anthea? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here. Is someone there with you?"

"Not that I know of."

"It must be the operator. Anyway, we'd better not accumulate a phone bill just yet. Oh, Lloyd, if you're not having much success with the natives, I'll take over the difficult ones at the weekend. I'm missing you." She sounded a little surprised. "Ring me tomorrow," she said.

He unhooked the microphone from his ear and carried the tape-recorder upstairs. But his voice was louder than Anthea's, and the second time he played back their conversation he could hear only what he might have said. Besides, he must have omitted to erase; in the background the anonymous woman's voice of last night muttered obsessively, sometimes coming close, almost shouting Anthea down, but still incomprehensible. He switched off the recorder and fell asleep.

Next morning he checked the doors and windows before breakfast. They hadn't betrayed him, and the only hint of activity in the house was a flight of scraps of ash which fluttered toward him as he opened the sitting-room door. On an impulse he descended into the cellar, but the only door other than that through which he'd entered was the door of the furnace. In any case, if anyone had entered through the cellar they would have been wary of the clatter of the scattered coal yet might well have tripped over one especially large piece just beneath the furnace door.

As he pried eggs loose from the pan he heard the click of the letterbox. A letter from Anthea, perhaps. He slid the eggs onto a plate and hurried into the hall. Before he reached the hall, however, an odd thought troubled him: he couldn't remember having heard the letter strike the mat. He peered at the sliver of light which was trying to slip beneath the door. But except for a few flurried flakes of ash which had drifted from the sitting-room, the hall was empty. Lloyd returned to the kitchen, catching at thoughts. Perhaps, on the point of delivering the morning paper, someone had realised that he'd shown no interest. Wait a minute, though; wasn't the paper a weekly? It might have been, but he couldn't find his copy in the house.

The day proved unsuccessful. Few cottages were roused by his knock, and those few offered only tales of someone else who'd seen a headless horseman. Late in the afternoon the recorder choked to death on a fragment of ash. Lloyd parked the car and walked back to the house. In the hall a light was extinguished—drew back, rather, as he overtook the reflection of the streetlamp. He wondered whether Anthea would drive down on Friday night or on Saturday morning. Well, he could ask; he didn't have to seem too eager.

He twisted the key in the lock and turned the doorknob. Halfway, it tried to turn back beneath his fingers, as if on the other side a weak child were playing a feeble joke. Irritated, he wrenched the door open. He must remember to oil the mechanism.

Though the telephone was stubborn, he finally reached Anthea. "First of all, when are you coming down?" he asked.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hello. When are you coming down?"

"Who is this?" Anthea demanded.

Lloyd sneezed, and the ash retreated. 'Well, it's not the Head of Philology," he said.

"Listen," Anthea said, her voice cold as the receiver. "I don't know who you are or what you want, but I don't believe a word of it. I obviously know Lloyd a great deal better than you do, which I suspect is not at all."

"Anthea?" Lloyd pleaded, beating off the ash which swarmed about his face like flies.

"Go to hell!" Anthea shouted, and was gone.

When he set the receiver down at last, cursing village telephone exchanges and village bigots, Lloyd realised that he had to know where the ash was coming from. He had never lit a fire; he'd thought that the removal-men had produced the ash in the sitting-room grate. But when he examined the grate he found no sign of a new fire; only the trail of restless ash toward the door and, lying palm down and crawling with ash near the grate, the ancient marble hand from the mantelpiece. He was sorry that it hadn't broken when it fell. After he'd searched the house twice for smoke, he persuaded himself to go to bed. At least the bedroom was free of ash, except for one shred which must have clung to his cheek and now had settled on the pillow. In the last muffled minute before sleep he thought he heard the dull clang of a metal door, distant enough to be outside the house.

He couldn't remember what the dream had been. Twice he had awakened, coughing away a glimpse of something dark that rolled toward him. When he returned from the bathroom, his hand came away black from the bedroom doorknob. He ate breakfast slowly, dovetailing thoughts. Then he made his way to the corner shop.

"Yes, once she left him he turned out to be as bad," the shopkeeper said, blotting an incontinent cup of tea with a newspaper. "No thought for others at all, he hadn't. Two days after she went he was burning things in the

furnace. Her stuff, I suppose. We couldn't stand the smell, do you remember?"

"You're right there," said the newcomer, unannounced by the mute bell. "You and me and Tom went round and told him about it. He was sorry enough, I'll say that for him. Even if he did keep it burning half the night. And the next day, he'd gone."

"Yes," Lloyd said. "He would have."

"Sad," the newcomer said, stamping cracked mud from his colourless boots. "A sad house. You'll be all right, anyway. I see your friend's arrived."

Lloyd surged with relief, then with anxiety. 'You mean she's up there waiting?"

"Waiting? No, I mean she's inside."

"Inside the house," Lloyd said dully, touching the only key to the house. "What did you see?"

"Nothing I shouldn't ought to have. The postman put a letter through the box, see, but she must have pushed it out by mistake, because she waited a bit and opened the door and took the letter in. Don't worry, I didn't see anything I shouldn't. Only her hand, and anyway she was wearing black gloves."

"I'm glad of that," Lloyd said, backing toward the door. But he had to be sure. "Thank you for the newspaper," he told the shopkeeper.

"No, no, don't think of it. I'll put you down for next week's if you like."

"I don't know if I'll be here that long," Lloyd said and emerged, breathing unevenly. Perhaps they'd delivered the copy he already had and at the last moment had realised—but he couldn't go in again to ask. He sat in the car, staring at the sun knifed by a Tudor gable, and finally drove around the village. No hotel, no rooms to let. In any case, he had to tell Anthea what he intended. But the only intact public telephone failed to reach her; the bell at

her number was measured and relentless, and nobody else knew where she was. He could still drive back to Brichester and catch her before she left. It wouldn't take more than an hour. Then he imagined himself trying to explain. That was not the way to keep Anthea. He would wait for her outside the house.

In the afternoon he coaxed forth a folk tale over the paralysed tape recorder. When he emerged from the cottage the sun was melting orange on the forested hills over which it was balanced. Anthea might be on her way. He drove fast; the tufted sun leapt, peered and fell back. Clouds of fire moved sluggishly in the windows of the house. Lloyd sat in the car at the end of the street opposite, and waited.

And when Anthea arrived, he would run across and tell her—what? Two stolen mirrors? No, he couldn't pretend he was playing detective. He took out the key and stared at it. The hand, the letter and the front door must have belonged to the next door neighbour. He locked the car and entered the house.

In the kitchen he made coffee and set out another cup. He looked at his watch. Anthea must arrive soon. If she hadn't arrived by eleven he would sleep in the car. He stood up to make sure that all the lights were lit. The hall light blazed; the square of wall above the telephone was dull yet threatening; the dark scrap which hung from its corner must be torn wallpaper. The sitting room furniture seemed darkened by the room, perhaps by dust. Or by ash; the floor was clean. Suddenly cold, Lloyd turned to leave, then whirled again. The marble hand was nowhere to be seen.

He began to hurry about the room, peering under chairs and into ill-defined corners. Then, in the cellar, the furnace door clanged.

Gripping the back of a chair, he strained his ears. At once he heard the soft dull exhalation of something thrown on a fire. Or perhaps it had been something charred and hollow cast out of the furnace. He moved through the cold intense light into the hall, and a car drew up outside.

It was Anthea, he knew. Almost he scampered to her. Almost, but he wasn't going to; he would deal with this himself. He inched open the cellar door and descended the first steps.

The light was on, but dim; ash clung to the bulb like insects on a rotting pear. The furnace door was shut; wings of shadow hung from the furnace, hiding the walls. At the bottom of the steps the floor and the coal were merged by darkness, but he could see fragments of coal coming alert with ash as the breeze of his descent brushed them. The garden implements were blurred in the comers. He hesitated on the last step; he should have left the cellar door open to draw in the light from the hall.

The cellar door opened.

He twisted about, teetering on the step. The door was opening stealthily; a bent strip of light probed into the cellar, throwing his stretched shadow across the coal, as far as the furnace door and one particularly large piece of coal. No, it wasn't a piece of coal; it was more like a charred football, rolling back and forth in a draft from the door, rolling at him as the ash rose swarming from the floor and the hall light went out.

Lloyd scrambled frantically up the steps, his nails catching at the stone. Something like brittle sand collected and piled on the back of his neck, on his arms. The dim choked light dragged him down, away from the black gap of the doorway. He reached the last three steps. The grey flakes were stinging his eyes, but he could make out that someone was hiding beyond the doorway, sneaking the shrivelled marble hand around the door-frame and groping for the cellar switch.

At that moment the doorbell rang.

Purged of thought, Lloyd threw himself at whatever waited in the frame of darkness. There was nobody; he collided with the wall. Something fell to the floor by his feet. He kicked out and stumbled toward the front door. A soft mass gathered and hung in his path. He covered his face with one hand, choking, and clawed his way through; light fragments flew into his face like blind moths and settled on his cheeks. He threw open the front door and dragged it to behind him as Anthea began to speak.

When she saw his face, she ran to the car and helped him in. He gestured, coughing uncontrollably, and she drove through the flashing lines of streetlamps into the hills. She stopped the car far out in the massed dark. But Lloyd was brushing at his sleeves, his face, his hands, until blood began to trickle through the clinging flakes, and it was some time before he could speak. "One day, I'll tell you what happened," he said at last, "but just now I want to be quiet."

"Where are we going?" she asked, subdued.

"Not back there. You're safe from that," he said. "To my flat. That's what I said. To my flat."

After The Queen

"As for *After the Queen*, the setting is based on a real cinema, the *Woolton*, one of the few suburban Liverpool cinemas not to close in the sixties or seventies."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The Dead*

Note: The Woolton may be discovered as the *Woolton Picture House* at L25 5JH.

Written in: 1969
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When Robert arrived in the suburban village he was twenty minutes early for the film. He stumbled down the hill from the cinema, fitting his heels into the cracks between the cobbles, and surveyed the main road. Cars sped past, threshing pools of rain; bedraggled tattered newspapers drooped from branches in the nearby park behind railings scaly with soaked rust. Across the road, beneath the thick night sky stained darker with its burden of rain, the flat blackened Victorian façades were broken by a blue screen, a launderette window displaying bored children; three doors away shone the moist yellow lights of a pub. He crossed the road and entered.

He had braced himself for the burst of sound from turning heads, but the bar was almost empty. One man sat hunched on a stool, staring into the trademarked mirror between the headstanding bottles of Scotch and gin above the shelves of beer; as Robert entered, the man's gaze snapped at his reflection like tongues between wet red trembling lips. A man in his sixties sat at a table, calmly sipping a glass of beer. "Good evening, how are you?" he called to Robert.

"I'm fine, thanks. Pint of bitter," Robert told the mostly blonde barmaid. "And you?" he called as an afterthought.

"Oh, well enough, you know, well enough. Yes."

"That's good," Robert said. He'd better stand at the bar, or before he knew it he would be involved. But the man huddled before the mirror had produced, struggling from his cuffs, a pair of hands like emaciated crabs,

scuttling over his coat collar and pulling it down; his eyes probed deep into the further inch of reflection he had gained.

Chilled by a drop of rain that had threaded itself through his spine, Robert sat down at a table.

"Could you undo these, please? I'm sorry." Robert glanced up; the man at the other table was holding a packet of Woodbines from whose cellophane his fragile flaking nails had slipped. Robert took the packet carefully, but their fingers touched.

"It's extremely good of you. Have one—go on, please." Their fingers touched again; Robert managed not to flinch. "I seem to have mislaid my matches," the man said.

Robert drew his gun; a flame sprang from the barrel. "Is that Austrian? I was in Austria once, a long time ago," the man said, cupping his hand about Roberts, "One day I should like to see Austria again. Do you live round here?"

"I've come to see a film," Robert told him, gulping beer.

"Oh, yes. There are some good films. At the cinema across the way?"

"That's right," Robert said, taking a breath before the last mouthful.

"I was thinking of going over there myself."

"I didn't mean the cinema just across the road," Robert said hurriedly, staring fascinated at the eyes in the mirror, restless and frantic as if caged. "I meant the one a few streets away."

"I can't say I know that one. Which one is that?" But Robert's throat was open, mute and working beneath the upturned tankard. "Have another on me," the man said.

"I'd like to, but I must rush."

The man touched Robert's elbow. "Don't let him trouble you," he whispered, glancing at the man before the mirror. "He's nervous, that's all. Always was."

"I guessed as much," Robert said. "Well, thank you for the cigarette. I'll see you again."

A breeze wrinkled the puddles. Deep in the park, a portable radio wavered with song and a grey sodden newspaper tore free of a branch. Robert

crossed the bare polished road and followed a loud fragmented group of teenagers up the hill.

The cinema slanted with the slope; one poster for *The Dummies of Horror* had been pasted at a tangent with the horizon, but in another the silently shrieking girl and the closing circle of gleeful waxworks seemed in danger of toppling in a heap into the corner of the frame. The pay-box had held its own against the slope, but Robert had to pace uphill, ticket in hand, to reach the entrance of the auditorium—no balcony, only a long stretch of stalls. One girl slipped back giggling against Robert as her soles betrayed her; he grasped her shoulders briefly, steadying, and entered the cinema.

He wasn't sure whether he was levering his way uphill along the row of seats; when he sat down the screen was level with the plane of his vision. The lights were dimming; shadows thickened on the faces around him, ageing them like paper. Or perhaps his eyes were merely bewildered by the subdued light. He accumulated details of the cinema: on either side of the screen, pillars winding their way to the ceiling like overfed pale vines; a dark tear in the curtain across the screen; a gaping hole in a row here and there where a seat had been extracted; couples scraping ice-cream from plastic cartons, many more clustering about the bright light of the ice-cream tray; new arrivals bumping vociferously into unfolded seats.

All at once the lights flickered out; the first advertisement danced blurred on the masked screen and struggled clear within the hole in the curtain; the curtains creaked open and a red firefly leapt from the front stalls—no, a cigarette butt thrown to smoulder before the screen. Robert watched the second-hand transient colours. An anonymous middle-aged man was digging a garden, his wife was carrying him a cup of tea, followed by their children wary of the camera—"For the best gardening tools in town, come to Worthington and Brown!" Robert's gaze wandered to the minute heads bobbing along the foot of the screen, to the red electric Gents. Ah, yes. He stood up, patted his coat and left it to guard his seat. As he walked down the aisle to the edge of the screen, the image closed into itself, flattened into two dimensions; yet, he mused, the figures within moved untroubled.

He washed his hands and tried to coax a clean inch from the roller towel. The cubicle of cracked tiles was hidden directly behind the screen; the walls resounded with the opening music of the feature, surrounding Robert as closely as if he were in the film. He hurried into the auditorium to regain his

seat. As he strode through the audience he felt oddly troubled: the cinema was canted slightly, he was sure, and the askew intent faces were like waxworks, immobile, on which the screen sprayed colours for effect. He toiled to his seat and sat down.

The man had wagered that he could spend a night alone in the waxwork museum. At midnight he sat among the aisles of postured figures, reading the newspaper for which he wrote. The figures were too still; nobody could hold such poses without shifting occasionally: such an effort required a daunting singleness of purpose. He turned a page and started at the crackle of sound. Then he dropped the newspaper. He was sure that he'd heard something else—a faint breath of linen from the Victorian aisle.

He tiptoed in that direction, followed relentlessly by the camera. Jack the Ripper's victim lay, one arm flung almost into the aisle, eyes closed. The linen fluttered again. The journalist climbed over the rope around the scene and bent closer to the girl. Behind him, a finger trembled and flexed. He peered at the girl's face. Her eyes sprang open, and she grinned. As he leapt away from her, Jack the Ripper loomed at his back.

Robert had once read a similar story which perhaps had suggested the film. But this was only the pre-credit sequence. After the ride the Journalist's unmarked body was discovered; his girlfriend wept and mourned for the first five minutes but then was comforted by the journalist's friend, who suspected the proprietor of the museum—some species of foul play to gain publicity, perhaps. The police wouldn't listen, of course, so they would have to resort to other methods. Near the screen something hollow rattled; a skeleton was running back and forth along a row of seats. Eventually Robert realised what it was: the arms of the seats were hollow and eight teenagers were fending off boredom with their xylophone. Robert swore; they'd intruded on the reality of the film, were trying to render it unreal because they could offer it no reality. At the waxworks the couple insinuated themselves into the crowd. He began to pin the proprietor down with questions, but the pins kept falling out; she leaned over the rope and examined Jack the Ripper as the crowd drifted away. She reached out to touch him, and the knife fell from his hand to quiver in the floor. She fainted.

And a man hurried into a cinema and paid, urged on by the camera at his shoulder. Robert sat up, frowning. The audience was bored but silent; they

hadn't noticed the projectionist's blunder. They were empty, Robert thought: less real than the film. The man entered the empty auditorium, and the film was snuffed out; the image persisted for a moment, framed in a sudden rectangle of blackness. The invisible audience stamped and whistled. An ice-cream carton trundled down the sloping row and halted baffled at Robert's feet; he kicked it away. The soundtrack reared up and the film recommenced. The couple had hidden among the waxworks; the museum was locked for the night. They padded down the aisles, seeking evidence that the dummies had been moved, propelled perhaps towards their dead friend to terrify him. Robert stared down on them from above. They were surrounded by a labyrinth of hands arrested as they gestured or stretched out, of eyes which glinted alertly but seemed still.

He knew the couple was trapped, but he was helpless. Then he found himself between them as they talked, decided to separate and explore again; he was yet more frightened, and struggled to be free. But when he looked down on them once more as they parted and paced away like duellists, he almost cried out. From above he could see that the waxworks had closed in unnoticed; every aisle was a cul-de-sac.

He realised at once what had happened. The dead journalist had infected the dummies with his own introverted terror; they were puppets of his death, and moved now as they sensed fear. The girl turned. The end of the aisle at which she had entered was blocked by a guillotined corpse. She gasped and began to run in the other direction; but Crippen stood there, a little abashed. Her friend was yards away; she could scarcely be further from him; but she froze at the thought of running the gauntlet of those treacherous pale wax hands, ready to move as soon as she turned her back. She screamed. And staring down, pulse thumping, Robert saw that the man was also boxed in.

Of course there was a happy ending. The museum's manager had heard sounds and had phoned the police. Shuddering, the couple explained that they'd had themselves locked in to win a bet. One policeman lit a cigarette, whirled around at a noise he might have heard, and the light from the flung match fled up Marie Antoinette's skirt. As the altercation continued outside the blazing museum, the couple slipped away and kissed—but the Queen leapt through their approaching lips to smile between the closing curtains as

from a vignette. The audience avoided her eyes and hurried out; Robert strode down the aisle to the tiled cubicle.

When he emerged the cinema was empty, long and regimented as a barrack-hall. Many seats were still down, waiting, as if the audience might at any moment return. The smoking light was yellow and stained as a wash-leather. Robert began to plod up the tilted aisle. Through the dim windows of the projection booth he glimpsed movement. The projectionist was crouching. Robert couldn't see his head, nor indeed anything recognisable as a framed limb. Robert had passed only the first few rows when the lights began to flicker out.

Don't worry, I'm leaving, he was ready to shout. Then his shadow was trailed before him, pulled out of shape by the cant of the screen. He turned to determine the source of the light. The curtains had crept back, and a film was moving blurred about the screen.

Robert groped his way to a seat. The film was the one he'd seen briefly adumbrated half an hour ago. Gradually the blur cleared. This could hardly be the opening of the film; it must be an amputated reel included by mistake, which the projectionist, curious, was running through. The man on the screen had found a seat in the cinema; Robert squinted at his face but was unable to make it out. Then he was gazing at the back of the man's head from far behind him in the cinema, perhaps from the projection box. Oddly, the screen that confronted the man was blank and shadowed.

After a minute or so, still gazing, he wondered what the man's head was meant to communicate. If this were an experimental film, it failed to reach him. Robert rested his hands on the arms of the seat, patted them twice and made to stand up. At that instant he discovered that the camera was stealthily moving towards the seated man.

He strained his eyes again at the man's face, but it remained dark and featureless as the screen within the screen. Suddenly he knew it was not the man's face that should concern him. He glanced about the cinema within the screen. It looked remarkably like the one in which he was sitting, and he wondered briefly whether the film had been shot there—by the projectionist, perhaps.

The ranks of darkness within the screen seemed empty. Before Robert could reassure himself, however, he was once more behind the man and creeping unwillingly closer. The closing empty frame menaced him, like the

walls of a murderous room. Empty, yet not quite; at the foot of the stealthy screen clung a hirsute blot of fluff, an intruder on the projector's lens.

Robert had been dragged to within a few feet of the man. In a minute he would leave: as soon as his prickling hands relinquished their grip on the arms of the seat. Again he found himself staring into the oval of darkness that was the man's face. Still the rows at the man's back were empty, though his head and shoulders blocked that part of the cinema directly behind him. The screen's frame was clean; the projectionist had blown the fluff from the lens. No, there it was, creeping with Robert towards the back of the man's head. They were barely a foot away now. At any moment he must turn. The blot of fluff rose up behind him, swaying and quivering.

Robert had grabbed his coat and had run to the front of the cinema, to the exit beneath the screen, before he saw that the double doors were padlocked shut. He whirled. The tiered rows flickered faintly with the film. They were empty. All of them. Though he couldn't see them clearly, he was sure they were empty. He couldn't count them, but there were a great many to run past. His back was to the screen; the film must be reaching its climax unseen. For some reason he felt chilled, and ran back to his seat. He threw his coat over the back of the next row; but losing its hold, it slipped heavily to the floor. Distracted, Robert stooped to catch it up. As he rose he glanced overhead and froze, crouching. Above him the cinema was dark. No beam of light linked the projector and the screen.

Gasping, Robert turned directly to the screen. The man's head had twisted back over his shoulder. His expression was invisible; there was no sound. A second later the screen blanked out, leaving Robert in total darkness.

He fell into the aisle and trembled between the rows, alert, straining the darkness for sounds. His feet inched forward, towards the unseen exit. Then he remembered his coat. He snatched it from the row, and a seat slammed back. Robert started and almost yelled aloud. The silence held for a moment; then there came a sound of seats closing one by one, a rattle of hollow armrests, rapidly approaching him.

If he hadn't reasoned frantically that the first seat had disturbed the others like ninepins, Robert would have been convinced that something was pursuing him along the arms of the seats. He bundled his coat together and began to walk up the aisle, faster, faster. His thudding feet were vibrating the seats, for the armrests rattled as soon as he had passed.

He panted upward, through the darkness. Each rattle was closer. All at once he knew why: his feet on the tilted floor were being guided blindly towards the seats with each step. He corrected his path as best he could and laboured onward. The next armrest to rattle was closer than ever.

Closing his eyes, he ran. He had not run three steps when the corner of a row struck him, punching the breath from him. He fell.

His fingers crept forward over the rough fabric carpeting the aisle. He knew they must touch something. A spent match, a fragment of crackling cellophane, the cold iron supporting a seat. Above him an armrest creaked and rattled faintly, as if someone perched or leaning on it had shifted restlessly, waiting.

He recoiled, stuttering. He splayed out his fingers to thrust himself to his feet. He was staggering sightlessly when the auditorium doors exploded open and a carpet of light unrolled swiftly towards him. "Come on! I can't find the light switch!" a man shouted. "Not much further! Come on!"

Robert ran wildly, focusing himself on the centre of the track of light, never glancing into the darkness beyond. In the bright foyer he dragged the exit doors shut and turned shaking to the man who had befriended him in the pub. "Thank you," Robert said, gripping his hand. "Thank you."

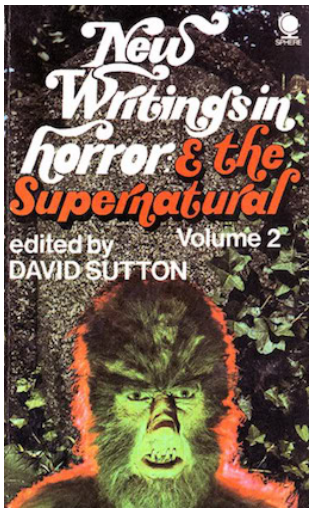
"You'll be all right," the man said. "It's happened before."

"But does the manager know?" Robert demanded. "Why doesn't someone tell him?"

"Oh, the manager," the man said, pointing to an open pale-green door next to the pay-box. "Don't you see? He was the first. He knows if anyone does."

Robert stumbled forward and peered in. The manager had his back to him; but his frantic eyes met Robert's again for a second in the mirror above his desk before they withdrew and began once more to brood.

The Other House



Written In: 1969
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Also published in: *Inconsequential Tales*

One morning, after a weekend in Birmingham, I stood for an hour at the motorway entrance and thumbed. Dawn hung suspended, diluting the night, on which a distant line of telegraph poles asserted its blackness; rain weighted the beams of headlights and was flung out like sparks by whirling wheels. Across the roundabout a girl shielding herself with what remained of an umbrella caught my eye. "I may have a scrap of shelter left," she called. "Come and join me." Her name was Joan. Her eyes were black and bright; her face drew in to concentrate upon her mouth, and she smiled at least as often as her long legs shifted. She was hitching back to Brichester after a performance of *Othello*. "I should have had a lift back to St John's Wood," I said, "but they broke down." We talked until four nurses in a Mini skidded up to us and made room for her. "You have this," she insisted, moulding my fingers to the handle of the skeletal umbrella. "I can get another from the buses' Lost and Found." A few minutes later I attracted a car and, after crumpling the umbrella into its ring, sat knees drying before the heater and dozed. Only the edge of a thought was needed to recall Joan.

Two months later, since I still glimpsed her face between realities, I wrote to her. "I have an empty week to fill," I lied. "I've heard a good deal about Brichester." Well, I'd once encountered the name in a library book, whose title eluded me. "Do you think I might take up your invitation?" Five minutes more and she might have invited me; I felt that her invitations were frequent and sincere. "Love"—no, "luv"—yes—no, "thanks in advance!" The next day she replied. "Of course you must come and stay! Tell me when and I'll meet you." I told her of likely trains and she confirmed. When I'd carried my suitcase out of my flat, I returned to assure myself that the gas was locked up, the windows tight, the library books unable to overstay

their welcome. Beyond the window, a concentrated sun eased itself above the roofs.

By the time I reached Brichester the back of every seat was spread with hot discarded jackets, hung with ties like nooses. In Brichester Central Station commuters waddled moistly or, panting, weaved their way like disturbed insects within the ribs of the dome. I felt that my hand could rust the handle of my suitcase. I'd decided to greet Joan: "Come to think, I don't believe you actually invited me but since you mentioned where you live—" She was waiting beyond the grille; she shook her hair down her shoulders where it rippled, black, on orange flowers and paler orange cotton. "Are you hungry?" she said. "We can eat at the Union."

"I had lunch on the train, thanks."

"How about a beer before they close?"

"I think I'd prefer coffee. Good for the pores, you know."

"Could you survive long enough for us just to pass through the Union Bar? It's only round the corner from my place. Someone I want to get hold of should be there."

We caught a bus into Lower Brichester; Joan pointed out artists and poets entering pubs. More pubs and Bingo halls, tufts of triumphant grass glimpsed down alleys, tall houses with iron balconies, a cramped park laden with factory girls, a formless stretch of waste ground bristling with the tubular tent poles of a market. We walked along Milton Street. As we passed a Victorian corner house like four grey monoliths set together to form a stone pillar, Joan glanced up. At the end of her gaze a window framed a sample of staircase. She pointed down Keats Street opposite. "There's your bed for the week," she said.

At the far end of Milton Street squatted the Students' Union, a long low concrete box with dazzling glass doors. We passed the notice board, Judo and horse-riding clubs, "Kill a Commie for Freedom Debate", "Challenge the Toothbrushing Champion for Oxfam", and stepped over a wizened balloon and two tankards into the bar.

"I'm not a student," I hissed.

"Nor am I," Joan said.

The bar was full of froth-specked beards and tall thin girls like spring onions in tiny skirts. The barman was poising his towel; Joan ran forward and bought two beers before I could forestall her. She half-emptied her tankard and surveyed the bunched faces. "Amos! Come and meet Amos," she told me.

Amos had a high shoulder over which his hair trailed as he peered round eagerly at me. "Is he here?" Joan asked.

"Sorry, love, no. I can't produce him."

"Did you hear him in the studio today?"

"No again. But then I never do. You have a nameless friend, I see."

"Sorry, I'm not usually so low on manners. Amos, this is John and vice versa."

My hand was caught and engulfed. "This is my first half-hour in Brichester," I said.

"Then there's a great many people for you to meet, and the best way to get to know them is at a party," Amos said, pouring down the last of his beer and collecting his strewn limbs. "Which is an oblique invitation for tonight."

"A party?" Joan demanded eagerly.

"Not one of mine, love. There's one tonight somewhere, though. You're sure to find it, and you can let me know where it is."

The barman began to shout and collect glasses. "Listen, Joan, why don't you come over and see if he's in the studio," Amos said. "I owe you a meal, anyway. You can eat when you come down. Then you can meet Natasha."

Joan looked at me as if to communicate something. "Your girlfriend?" I asked.

"Good God no. Only my lover."

We emerged from the Union into close immobile almost tangible walls of sunlight. I felt cut off from the others; there were too many movements beneath the largely opaque surface of the conversation. "I've already eaten, so I won't watch," I said. "If I could just drop this case at your flat, Joan, I'll explore a little Brichester."

"I've got a key for you," Joan said, producing it from a flowered handbag.

"I'll see you about five, then."

"Say six," Joan said.

As I turned up Keats Street, I looked back and saw them entering the monolithic house on Milton Street. The sun was high; the house was one with its shadow. Joan's house was false Regency, part of an undivided line whose perspective was truncated by a pale clay waste. Her flat was on the second floor, a large room and an afterthought crowded with bed, wardrobes, cups of coffee, the nipple of a cucumber. I made my way into the main room, trying not to tread on scattered sleeveless records. Propped against the open record-player was a note in Joan's writing: "TRY THE STUDIO!!"

I splashed cold water on my face. Finding no towel, I stood on the woven ironwork of the balcony and gazed across the baked brown chimneys to the green foreheads of the fields beyond. On Milton Street the grey porous house still absorbed the sunlight. If Amos was closer to Joan conversationally, at least I was here in her flat with my own key. I slid the records into the few sleeves I could find, locked the door and began to walk back through Lower Brichester.

The infrequent bookshops seemed to stock mainly *Private Eye* and *Rubber News*. Children threw tyres on a pale orange fire on a bombsite. Two girls carried piles of records into a second-hand shop. An old man swayed beneath a bottle on a doorstep. A couple embraced in a cemetery, watched by a movie camera and a bored clapper-boy with a Coca-Cola. Halfway down a street of disembowelled houses, I read a pencilled sign in a curtained window: "We still live here."

When I returned to Joan's flat she was lying on the couch in a dress whorled with lime and lemon; *Also Sprach Zarathustra* exploded and gathered again. At least it was the complete work, I thought, not the soundtrack record. "I'll make coffee," she said. "Christ, if I can find a clean cup."

I sat in the single armchair. "Brichester's varied, I'll say that," I said. "Did you meet whatever her name was, Natasha?"

"Oh, God, John," Joan said. "I don't know how old she was. I don't want to know. Amos set out to see how I'd react, that's all. He likes to create situations. She's only the latest of a series."

"Then why did you go?"

"I was looking for someone in the studio above," she said forlornly.

She was silent as she hunted for the elements of a salad. We ate standing up on the balcony before the heavy sun. Somewhere a clock struck eight with bells that sounded waterlogged. Joan caught my hand. "Come on, John, I'll buy you a drink," she said.

We turned left on Milton Street, away from the Union. I was sure that Joan waited until my attention was elsewhere before she glanced up at the grey house. Sensing her strategy, I waited and looked back. Within its outline the shadowed side of the house was formless, but the window which framed the staircase was lit. For a moment I thought I saw the colourless form of a figure standing on the staircase, staring back at me.

All I could see of the pub was the stained-glass windows; inside was a press of flesh, faces, smoke, from which struggled glinting tankards and fragments of conversation: "She's stopping people in the street for the newspaper now and asking them whether they think Guy Fawkes should be abolished"—"To preserve his self-sufficiency he relies on other people." This time I beat Joan to the bar. We forced our way into an inner room and found a mantelpiece. "Remind me in the morning, I'm modelling at the art class," Joan said. "Hello," she said at intervals, and watched the doorway.

"Is that your source of income?"

"Well, I'm not completely a kept woman," she told me.

A Negro thrust between us and threw a butt into the fireplace. He stood up, his denim jacket tightening on his arms. "Do you smoke?" he asked me.

Feeling vaguely menaced, I took out a packet of cigarettes. "No, man, do you *smoke?*" he said.

"Oh. No, I'm afraid not."

When he'd elbowed his way out a Negro at a table touched my arm. "I shouldn't tangle with him," he warned me. "Last one who did, he set his Alsatians on him one night."

"I don't wonder you were put off," Joan whispered. "But if you're thinking of buying, I can introduce you to someone."

At twenty-five past ten the faces were closer; there might have been a blazing fire behind me. "Look!" Joan cried. My responses were muffled, but

my eyes darted in pursuit. Two couples were bearing cans of beer toward the door. "They augur a party," Joan said. "Let's arm ourselves with a bottle and follow."

We finally managed to obtain a bottle of Californian Chablis with a paper collar, offering a decanter in exchange for a slogan. "God, what a bodega," Joan complained. The couples we had glimpsed were out of sight; we tramped up side streets, listening beneath lighted windows, demanding of passing groups "Are you going to the party?" "No, where?" they said. At last Joan despondently regarded a red and furtively active Morris Minor which we'd passed ten minutes earlier. "I would have liked a party," she said. "Still, we can take the bottle out on the balcony and feel superior to people."

As we came in sight of Keats Street I found myself glancing up at the massed black house. From nowhere came a shiver. I blinked and peered closer. I felt too mellow for it to matter: yet on the square of staircase a silhouette leaned on its hands and stared down. I looked at Joan. She too was staring at the house, but at a group brandishing bottles on the doorstep. The first-floor window was alight and crossed by sipping shadows. "There's the party," Joan said. "It's at Amos's. Do we really want to go? Oh yes, let's."

We showed the bottle and were admitted. The staircase was unlit, which seemed somehow wrong. I groped my way upstairs. My fingers, exploring rough wallpaper, encountered a cold perhaps wet patch of bare wall and recoiled. I tried to deduce whether we should by now have passed the window that overlooked the corner of the street. I stumbled and fell forward. There was no stair, only darkness through which I was falling, watched by an unseen figure that had snatched away the stair. Joan clutched my arm tightly. Of course there was no stair; we had reached the landing. The beer was thinking for me.

Amos opened the door; he wore a Japanese silk jacket, his eyes were bright and fascinated by something inside me. "I thought you'd found the party," he said.

"We thought we had too."

"No, these are just the people who couldn't find it."

Joan pushed past him and searched the faces. Behind them Popes screamed, a miniature lighthouse on the mantelpiece displayed combinations of colour. "I'm afraid the glasses have all been assigned," Amos said. "I'll decant this decadence into bottles for you."

Between the conversations trains shunted. "Listen to that closely," Amos said, returning with our Chablis in beer bottles. "It's a sound effects record. Rhythmically very subtle once you become attuned to it."

"Where's Natasha?" Joan asked.

"Over there." He pointed to a girl in one corner; her young body was mostly bare, her face might have been thumbed into shape from a lined pink tablet of soap. She was gulping wine and sucking at an amateur cigarette.

"She's fine. I promised I wouldn't give her a child on acid," Amos said to Joan. "I can't offer you food, I fear. However, I can offer you a sugar-cube if you wish."

"I don't think so," I told him. Joan gripped my hand.

"Well, just as you like. But do let me point out that once when I had a wholesale stock of sugar-cubes I had some people try to bring the house alive. That's the sort of thing you can do, you see. Once you know that everything lives and life is one, you're equipped to reach out to individual lives. It's the only way. I tell you what, let me build you a cigarette."

Joan's grip relaxed. "Just one, then," I said. "I'll share it with Joan."

Amos disappeared into the kitchen. "He's a pretentious bastard," Joan said.

I waited and tried to learn from the faces. I felt it would be difficult to reach out to them; there was a sense in which Lower Brichester was secretively massed, defensive, perhaps menacing. Several were crowded about the lighthouse, eagerly awaiting its next beam like the answer of an oracle. Another group endeavoured to compose with the notes of their stroked glasses. Some danced and stared away over the thrusting bodies of their partners; there was no music. I glanced at Joan. She was intent on the ceiling; her mouth was open, perhaps hopeful, perhaps fearful. "Do you hear anything?" she whispered.

"No, Joan," I said. "I don't."

Amos lit the cigarette for us. "Tell me what you feel," he said. "I always like to know."

At the first inhalation the room seemed to snap alert; my body abruptly sat down. I held the cigarette to Joan's mouth; her lips moved on my fingers; she closed her eyes. I inhaled again, feeling for and holding down the faint taste of spice. "Very little," I told Amos. "A slight gain in clarity, that's all."

Amos nodded indifferently and moved away. Joan took the cigarette and fitted it to my lips. I closed my eyes.

Around me the conversations were linked by a complex rhythm beyond my power to analyse. They massed and rose above me, and my head tilted back. Beyond my lids lay the ceiling, on which a huge form was dormant. No, not dormant; it was insubstantial as smoke yet lethargic and heavy as sinking mud; it was the essence of the house, of the gabble about me, of Lower Brichester. Its passively accumulated weight was pressing down toward me; it was trickling down the walls, merging with them, surrounding me, its nerves within the walls alert for Joan. My eyes sprang open. "What are you looking at?" Joan demanded.

"Nothing," I said. "What makes you ask?"

Joan took a last puff and ground out the cigarette. "John, if you don't mind, I have to get up early," she said. "You stay if you want to, of course."

On the stairs as we descended, Joan took my arm. If I could have found her in the dark I'm sure I would have kissed her, but I was afraid we might fall into the darkness. We crossed the road into Keats Street. Neither of us looked back.

In her flat I made coffee, while she laid blankets on the couch for me. "Would you think me terribly unsociable if I drank this in bed?" she asked.

I held my hand beneath the tap and perceived the transparent ragged leaves of water that sprang from my fingers. Prickling on the couch as the heat gathered, I closed my eyes. A car flickered by. Almost asleep, I became aware of a man with an undefined face. I knew his kind from delirium; he was composed of innumerable infinitely thin layers; but at some point that I failed to locate, his layers became those of a tall house. I turned over to dismiss him, but he lay on my eyeballs, waiting. In the next room Joan moved uneasily in bed and was quiet.

When I awoke it was past noon. Behind my head the long windows were high; lunchtime footsteps and petrol fumes drifted up through the mesh of the balcony. There was something I had to remember. I struggled free of the

clinging blankets and saw on the boards of the floor a pair of gym shoes, the left one sprayed red. Yes, of course: I had to wake Joan; she was modelling. I knocked and entered her empty bedroom. Next to a ring of coffee on the floor lay a note in her handwriting: "TEA, EGGS, OCTOPUS TENTACLES." In the other room I fried myself an egg and spread bread. I wondered whether she had watched me as she painted her shoe.

Half an hour later I emerged. On the burning pavement opposite a couple walked barefoot, mystical stoics. The bedraggled bells tolled; the last note sounded like a glass dropped inadvertently: two o'clock, perhaps. Beyond the tower the grass on the hills had been quiffed up by a now suffocated breeze, but I turned toward Lower Brichester; I might encounter Joan.

I couldn't see her in the windows of the house on Milton Street. I strolled on, perceiving the textures of expanded brick, the spotlighted shiny tin of red sports cars. When I touched my cheek it felt like hot moist rubber. The sun had focused on the back of my neck; there was a sensation on my spine like the tactile equivalent of a dark shape on the edge of vision.

I came to a grocer's shop and entered. Perhaps Joan had intended her note for me. In the cool vegetable twilight between the lettuce leaves the shopkeeper was watching someone through the doorway, but I could see nothing.

I left my carrier bag of tea and eggs at the flat. As soon as I returned to the street the back of my neck was threatened again, but as if the dark sensed shape were moving closer—I might be able to lure it forward and then spring the trap. The heat was rising; my shirt would have to be flayed from me. I hurried away from Milton Street, up Wordsworth Lane and past a fish and chip shop to a pub. Among the locals a harassed girl scratched her ear with her circular spectacles and scribbled notes. The barman glanced frowning behind me; I caught myself, triumphantly crafty, searching the faces behind mine in the mirror. For a second I wondered if I was being pursued by last night's marijuana—but no, that was equally naive.

At the end of Wordsworth Lane I stepped onto waste ground. A road of sorts led uphill across the wrinkled soil, its boundaries chipped and erased by chunks of rubble. On my left a lone house hung suspended in its last seconds of form as it burned; smoke and tatters of ash rose shrivelling into the sky. Two workmen kept watch, leaning on an iron bedstead; beyond the heat their faces fluttered like paper masks. The house coughed darkly, and

one workman pointed behind me, his arm rippling, uncontrolled as a papier-mâché snake. I turned sharply, and the back of my neck carried its attendant menace with it. The road was empty of all but its own leavings.

At the top of the hill I found a road bordered with trees and a railway line. I paced along the road, trying to massage the threat from the back of my neck, to a bench with its back to the city. Brichester spread out beneath the hill, instantaneous blocks and intricate vertical designs of colour, denied shadow; the silver line of the Severn formed the top of the frame, but the grey repressed bulk of Milton Street refused to participate in the metaphor. I sat on the bench, which smelled of stripped paint. Sunlight was fitted like glass between two trees on the edge of the tracks. Through this I could see the hills, unreal as a reflection. Not so the landscape behind me: Milton Street had gathered itself together like a stone battalion and surged silently forward. I could feel its heat on the back of my neck. One more leap and its rough burning mass would crush me.

I twisted about. The landscape was too still, too innocent. But I thought I could feel the shadow behind me pale and move away. When I turned back to the road, Joan was approaching. Her eager eyes acquainted her with a passing train, then caught sight of me. "Well, that's the unpleasant part of the day lived through," she said. "Hello, John."

"Did you model."

"Euphemistically, yes. It was Amos's art class."

"Why, was Natasha there?"

"Hardly. She works in a cake shop downtown. No, it was just Amos. The bastard. He thinks everyone's a puppet. I was supposed to be meditating. He kept coming up and pushing my legs apart."

I wasn't sure that given the situation I wouldn't have done the same, but I said "He probably didn't mean it that way."

"No," Joan said bitterly, "you're probably right."

We stared at the dust struggling in the air above the railway lines sharpened by light. "I got your note," I said.

"I didn't leave one," Joan said, then reconsidered. "Oh, John, you shouldn't have!"

"Well, I have."

"Thank you ever so much."

I felt safe in taking her hand. "There's no need to be so grateful."

"Sometimes I think it's gratitude that keeps me going." She watched the last weary particles of dust sinking to rest until the next train. "Did you get octopus tentacles?" she asked.

"Not even squid."

"Neither did I. A negative coincidence!" Briefly she squeezed my hand. "The only kind I know," she said, and stood up. "Let's go and eat some of our food," she said.

As we started down the broken road I said "I had the feeling earlier that I was being followed."

"I wish I was." She stared down the hill, past a lamppost balanced on the stump of its standard like a limbless dwarf. "Why, there's— Oh no, it isn't. I must have been mistaken."

"You must have been," I said. "There's nobody in sight."

After we'd eaten omelettes at an uncertain six o'clock Joan said "Would you be suffocated if I played my Debussy?" She lay back on the couch. I glanced at her often, but her face was calm and closed as the shifting disloyal ruses of *Jeux* passed beneath it. Among the records shovelled into a corner I found a Stockhausen, and played that. The dabs and points of music fell together into an intricate pattern, like a kaleidoscope. For some reason, however, I thought of the desperate accumulation of detail that supports unrequited love.

Abruptly Joan sat up. "I must run round the corner for a minute," she said. "I won't be long."

At eight o'clock I left the flat. Habituated, my feet made for the Wordsworth Lane pub. Then I thought of the Union, and turned back. I was determined not to look up at the house on Milton Street, and I restrained myself until the last second. Then I hurried onward. I had seen a light extinguished on the staircase. That was all, I told myself. The light had gone out, and this had caused the effect I'd seen: a silhouetted figure that had suddenly expanded and blotted out the entire window.

The Union still retained a semblance of end-of-term life: in the film society students were tittering, catcalling and stamping at an Ingmar Bergman film.

In the bar one group was playing cards with frequent cries of "Harrison!", a concrete poet was intoning "Norman's nose", a middle-aged man in a leather jacket was selling copies of *Black Dwarf*. I forced my way to the bar and gasped halfway through a pint of beer. "Alone?" Amos asked.

"Briefly."

"I'd like to wish you luck," he said, "but I honestly don't know whether I can."

"I'll try to do without your luck, then," I said. I finished the beer and made my way out, past the first overturned stool of the evening.

On Milton Street I felt hungry again. As I passed the grey Victorian house the door opened. I refused to look. Footsteps hurried down to the street as I reached Wordsworth Lane. I joined the queue inside the fish and chip shop. A minute later the door juddered open and Joan entered, throwing a Kleenex into the gutter as she did so. "I'm sorry you're hungry," she said.

"I always have supper at this time."

"Twenty to nine?"

"My God," I said, "I thought it was eleven. My watch must have stopped last night." I tried not to betray how disturbed I was. "Will you have something?" I asked.

"Not for me. Not now."

I ordered chips from the Cypriot owner. Folk music played on a tape recorder: notes harsh as plucked tin, a tenor voice flapping in trapped anguish. Over the mirror behind the bar of the potato-slicer hung a calendar portrait of a soulful girl. Joan stared at her; squares of light lay flat on her eyes. "I wish I had her face," she said.

"Why? You're singularly attractive as you are."

But her eyes were still mirrors of the mirror. I couldn't project my sincerity; I had the voice of a television interviewer, I knew. Once when I'd heard myself on tape I'd been depressed for weeks. "I'm not trying to be tactful, however it may sound," I said. "You appeal to me, I know that."

She disengaged another Kleenex from the sleeve of her lime dress. "I'm going back to the flat," she blurted. "I think I've got a cold."

When I returned to the flat she'd made coffee. Her eyes were red. I emptied the chips on to a plate and passed it to her, but she shook her head. She

poured coffee and sugared it for me. I ate the chips and washed the plate, recoiling from the thick heat which bulged in through the open window. I sat down opposite Joan and she looked at me for a long time. "I won't ask what happened," I said.

"Gil." She waited. "He has the studio above Amos," she said.

"You'd better tell me everything," I said, "or nothing at all."

"When did you last feel there wasn't any point in going on?"

"Recently."

"If only I had a choice," she said. She stared out of the window at a footstep, stared as if its owner might pad up the wall and balance on the windowsill. "There isn't much that isn't cliché," she said. "I met Gil two years ago. That was when he was depressed. More than usual. He told me I might be able to help with his paintings. He paints as if he's operating on himself. Without anaesthetic. He wanted to do an exhibition to sum up Lower Brichester. He said I could help him sum it up. I still don't know how, but he did paint me. Not that it looked like me. It was so beautiful. I remember, that first night I was posing he came up to me and hit me because I moved."

"But tonight you got tired of it," I suggested.

"No, you're utterly wrong. That first night I realised he was dedicated. He knew where he was going. I fell in love with him."

My expression of disquiet must have struck her as one of interest. She went on: "About six months ago he left. It was Amos. Gil said he couldn't live so close to what he was trying to express. It confused him, he said, and something else—he said that Amos was spying into regions he wasn't equipped to come to terms with, Amos was surrounding him with chaos. We had a great scene in the middle of Milton Street. I said he couldn't—oh, couldn't leave me, you know. But he just hailed a taxi that was passing and never gave me his address."

She fumbled for a Kleenex. "They say this is good for you, don't they? Like going to the bog." She screwed the Kleenex into a ball. "Then just after Amos had this let's-all-make-the-house-come-alive acid party, Gil came back. About a month ago. I was walking past the house thinking about him and there he was, in the window on the stairs. He must be keeping out of Amos's way—that's why Amos never hears him in the studio. Although

even to me he hardly seems tangible, he hardly seems there since he's come back. Yet everything around him suddenly comes so sharp, so immediate—oh, I can't explain. I think at the moment he's terribly depressed. But I know something must come of it."

"And tonight?"

"I saw him for two minutes."

"I'd have said two hours."

She stared at me. "I only said: 'I have someone staying at the flat, would you like to meet him?' "

"And he replied?"

" 'No,' " she said, and sobbed.

I leaned forward and took her hand; she couldn't have seen my hesitation. "What do you get from all this?" What are your feelings on the present political situation?

"It sounds so simple to answer." Her hand was limp but pulsing.

"Can you say that you're helping him?"

"Not any more." Her hand moved in mine, then gripped.

"Don't you realise—for God's sake, surely you realise that you deserve a better relationship that this?"

"Sometimes." Her head drooped; she bowed forward; one more inch and we would touch. I stood and, lifting her to her feet, put an arm about her shoulders. "He never said I was beautiful," she said. I stroked her shoulders. Very slowly, we were walking.

But when her thighs gripped me like the rollers of a mangle I no longer felt desire; I hoped compassion would be enough.

It must have been past one o'clock when I awoke. Across the roofs wailed the crescendo of a siren. My legs were tangled in blankets on the edge of the couch; Joan hadn't wanted me to sleep with her. I raised my head at a scrape of metal. She was slicing lettuce over the sink. I dragged myself free of the blankets and she said "Just a second and I'll leave you alone."

She bit mouthfuls from a lettuce leaf and picked up the percolator through her handkerchief. Balancing my plate on the edge of the sink, I watched her.

Head bent, she filled the cups. At last I took her wrist and laid my arm along hers.

"No, John," she said, not looking up. "I'm torn enough as it is."

We stood separated, poised; outside the window footsteps chopped the padded air like sharp dropped rocks. Joan thrust one leg onto the balcony and peered down. "Amos!" she called to a silence.

"Perhaps he doesn't want to hear," she said, returning. "I'm going across to speak to him."

"Shall I come with you?"

"I suppose so."

Amos was arranging shirts to hide a matchbox at the bottom of a drawer; behind his head the lighthouse stroked the wall with pale pink gleams. "I thought you might be over," he told Joan. "I heard you calling but I couldn't see you."

"Is Natasha here?"

"She's out hunting for food."

"Listen, Amos," Joan said. "Let her go. She's young yet, she isn't in deep enough to be caught. She doesn't have to stay."

"But she wants to stay," Amos said.

Joan glanced at me, appealing. I was mute; I wondered what I would have done if Joan had been ten years younger and I'd lived here.

"Perhaps I'll see her later," Joan said. "Amos, would you let me know if Gil comes in, please? Though I suppose you still won't hear him."

"You're wrong," Amos told her. "He kept us awake half the night. It felt like a storm overhead. As if the house was closing in."

"Is he here now?" Joan cried.

"No," Amos said. "Listen, when he left I understood he wasn't coming back."

"Well, now he has."

"Apparently."

Back at Joan's flat we discovered that neither of us had a key. "Oh, break it down," Joan said.

I butted the door with my shoulder to weaken the lock. About to attack it in earnest, I discovered that I'd already torn the entire lock free. Dismay at its weakness left me open to depression: Joan had relied on me but smashing the lock had made me feel an intruder. "I can't repair it," I said.

"Why should you? Lower Brichester is one big room."

I watched her roll up the blankets and sit on the couch. Two minutes later she said "I'm just going out." Before I had time to sort through the records she'd returned. "If you wouldn't mind, John," she said, "I have the beginnings of a headache." I took Keats from the bookshelf and opened *Lamia*. Joan stood up and leaned over the balcony, surveying the view from Milton Street to the churned clay hill. She turned, one hand on the balcony rail. "I'm sorry, I'm not going to be very good company," she said. "Why don't you go out? You haven't seen Brichester properly."

"I take your point," I said.

In central Brichester women stood and stared at clothed dummies, boys posted wads of Inland Revenue correspondence, men sold minute deflated versions of gigantic inflated balloons in clusters like pawnbroker's signs, polished glistening husbands carried their wives' shopping to long polished cars watched by traffic wardens. At six o'clock I dodged into a restaurant and ate steak in the shadow of plastic flowers. "Very good, thank you," I said four times, the last time choking. This was the sort of place where you dined on the first date.

The evening heat settled like steam on a bathroom wall. The cinema was cooler. At the end of *River of No Return* I was moved when Marilyn Monroe clung to Mitchum and escaped the river, time or life or whatever it symbolised. Yet could one escape? In reality she'd taken her place in the river now, a gentle rock, a small statue. She could never have trudged about with the crowd outside the cinema. And if she had created something, so did Lower Brichester. It might be as transient as the falling woven colours of a kaleidoscope, but central Brichester was no more than a loop of film. Joan wasn't, could never be, part of central Brichester. At least she had shown her willingness to escape.

It was midnight when I reached Keats Street, having walked in the wake of the last bus. Outside the house on Milton Street the streetlamp had failed. The window on the stairs was as black as the rest of the house. The moon urged the shadow of the building toward Keats Street.

Joan's flat was dark. I thought I would have to knock, but instead of a chair under the knob only a wad of Kleenex locked the door. The hall was full of Joan's faint breathing. I tiptoed into the main room. Moonlight slanted past the window. The blankets were spread neatly on the couch, but somehow I was reminded of a dustsheet. I caught up cold water to displace the stale air like breath that oppressed my face, undressed and lay down on the couch.

I couldn't sleep; all I could manage was a restless doze beneath the weight of air. My thoughts turned restlessly with me. If Joan could free herself of Amos's art class, of Amos—but that would mean climbing free of the whole of Lower Brichester. Gil? He was too shadowy for me to consider. I couldn't think. The heat was warping my brain. In delirium I'd often felt as if I were at the wrong end of a telescope with something vast peering down at me, its ponderous movements reverberating silently against my ear. Now it was beside me. It had awakened. The whole room seemed to spring alert. I struggled to heave off my thoughts as the night pressed down on me like a body.

When a breeze creaked at the window I started. My own heat prickled. The breeze should lighten the thick air. I lay waiting. The creak was insistent, and a cat moaned in the street. Suddenly I struggled upright, and the entire weighted crowded room tilted with me. What had creaked? Not the balcony, not the window. Had it been a cat that moaned? Around me hung the lightless oppression that awaits the first burst of thunder. I stared at the walls that separated me from Joan, from the sounds. I had a tense constricting premonition that the oppression might be split, that Joan would cry out. But around me delirium hung inert, stagnant and satisfied. There was nothing I could do. Five minutes later I went blank and fell asleep.

Again I awoke at lunchtime. Joan was washing her face at the sink. For a moment I decided that I'd been dreaming. Then she gripped the sink to support herself as she splashed her face.

"Give me five minutes," I said, "and I'll buy you lunch."

Two streets away we found a Chinese restaurant. By the door a businessman was sawing at a curried chicken leg amid an expanding pool of sauce. The menu offered six different preparations of pig's offal. Joan finished her sweet and sour and smiled weakly. I took a last gulp of sake. "Joan," I said, "about one o'clock this morning—"

She turned crimson and told her plate "I wish you hadn't mentioned that."

"All three minutes of it," I said harshly.

"It seemed longer," she said. I thought she was going to weep. I was mutely infuriated. None of this was our fault.

I knew she wanted to be alone. I took her back to the flat and left her. At half past five I drank among tired faces at the Union. Afterwards I walked, returning at intervals to Milton Street. There was no sign of life in the grey house. I remembered Joan confronting Amos.

At ten o'clock I strode toward Keats Street. If nothing else, I could buy Joan a drink. What could she be musing over, alone among the strewn records? I passed the house on Milton Street, and as I did so the streetlamp lit. I glanced up at the house, flat and bright as a cutout against the darkened sky. Then the front door opened and Amos emerged.

As I ran forward I knew what I would say. "Hold on, Amos. I'm going in."

He blocked the door feebly with his arm. "Don't go in. Even I can't stand it any more. Natasha's gone home because she can't stand the feel of the place. For shit's sake, come on and I'll buy you a drink."

"I can't, Amos. There's something I must do," I said. "Sorry about Natasha," and I was inside.

The door slammed. Amos's head bobbed mournfully out of sight beyond the frosted pane. I made for the stairs.

When I couldn't find the switch I climbed the stairs in darkness. Halfway up the stairs, still vainly watching for the window on the street, I felt menaced. The house was too empty; it seemed hollow; the stairs felt like paper that would tear beneath my feet at the next step. I slammed my foot down, hearing the echo in a hollow room, and strode to the top. At the studio door I knocked. It swung inward.

I groped for the rusty insecure switch. The light blazed through dust. Dust on the floor, where footprints crossed like the marks of a bar fight in sawdust; dust on the single piece of furniture, a scrolled couch; dust on a confusion of easels, on a stack of paintings laid against the wall beside perhaps more wrapped in brown paper. From the uppermost painting Joan smiled radiantly at me.

I strode forward, kicking dust from my toes. I lifted the first painting and was about to turn its face to the wall when my fingers traced a piece of

cardboard taped to the back. It was a photograph of a young morose bearded man; he'd signed across himself—"Gil". I laid down the painting and turned to the next. Joan looked puzzled. In the next she was uneasy, then downcast. In the last she was weeping. I gazed into her wet eyes, then glanced at the parcel in brown paper.

When it came to the confrontation for which I was determined to wait, I would have shown my strength. I picked the tape loose and unfolded the brown paper. As the corners parted like a curtain Joan peered out nervously. I stared at her and hurriedly turned to her next phase. Her eyes looked scared. There was one more painting. I pried into its hiding place and fell back. Joan gazed at me in naked terror.

I couldn't begin to think about the artist. Thunder was gathering; stifling air seemed to pour into the room. I squatted and examined the painting, but its age was uncertain. I was trying to analyse Joan's eyes out of my mind. When I glanced up they were wide, almost as if staring hysterically beyond my shoulder. Heat was pressing on the back of my neck. I grabbed for the next to last painting to cover up Joan's terror. As I did so I caught sight of a puff of dust creeping along the floor. Someone was behind me.

I whirled, off balance, and saw Joan.

As I teetered my hand came down on a corner of Joan's fear, which snapped. I looked down at it, then at her. There was nothing I could say.

"John," Joan said, moving forward: the heat and the suspended thunder crept forward with her. "It doesn't matter! Not to me!"

I half rose, confused. She ran forward and caught my hands, pulling me up and against her.

"Wait," I said. The boiling pendulous air lapped me; my thoughts were melting. "Let me take you back," I said. But she was pulling me toward the couch; our tracks cut deep into the dust, her shadow spread across the floor like a stain, absorbing my own. "Not here, Joan," I said.

"Yes, here! That's precisely it! Don't you see?" I disengaged myself; by God, all of a sudden she had the strength of a man. "*Don't* you see? Won't you give me this?" she pleaded.

I shook my head and tried to lead her to the door, but she sat down stubbornly on the couch. The thunder in the room was pounding my skull. I

didn't intend to be used as a symbol. "At your place, Joan," I told her and hurried downstairs.

I stood on the corner of Keats Street and waited. The moon was cooling the night. Minutes later the door of the grey house opened and Joan emerged. No, it wasn't Joan; there was something wrong with her face. I started forward and realised that this must be another girl. But surely she was wearing Joan's flowered dress? Joan with a man's bearded face? I had reached the middle of the street when a crushed pain exploded like a storm in my brain and clamped my hands to my skull. When I opened my eyes I saw Gil in a sweater and jeans hurrying into Joan's house.

Joan's flat was unlit when I staggered upstairs. Their voices murmured briefly, then were silent. I battered at the door, but it held against my trembling shoulder. In the flat above I heard someone padding to the stairwell to discover the reason for the disturbance. What reason could I give? Suddenly afraid of the whole of Lower Brichester, I ran out into the street and stood in the pale night, staring up at Joan's window, black as a storm cloud.

At last I returned to Gil's studio, rammed the couch against the door and slept on it. It was the only victory left to me.

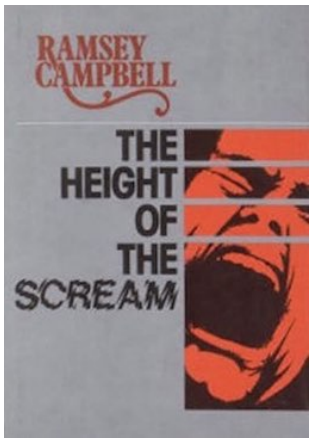
At nine o'clock next morning I brushed dust from my turn-ups and returned to Joan's flat. On the clay waste at the end of Keats Street a mechanical shovel opened its claw and dribbled clay. Her door swung open at a touch; the lock still hung dislocated. The flat was empty. The bed was shapeless; her painted shoes lay crushed in a corner; on the scattered records blobs of strawberry jam bulged like pimples. On the windowsill lay two rent books, Joan's and that for the studio. I packed my case, jammed the door shut with a Kleenex and left.

But in central Brichester, swept away by the suffocating crowds, I felt that I'd allowed myself to be carried away from Joan. I stood and pondered; the crowd eddied muttering around my suitcase. I caught up the case and made for the address on the rent books.

When I emerged I stood for a blinded minute, my case dragging at my hand like a restless child. My mind was burned bare as the sky. Then I began to walk very fast toward the railway station. The studio on Milton Street was rented to Joan. God knows where she found the money. Perhaps her acid-summoned incubus could make money appear. I was ready to

believe anything, for the landlord had convinced me that although the studio might still be in use, nobody had lived in it for six months.

The Telephones



Written in: 1969
First published in *The Height Of The Scream*, 1976
Also published in: *Demons By Daylight*

As Tim entered the pub the coin telephone rang once, an immediately realised wrong number. Briefly he thought of an assignation. He would have liked to have been telephoned among the businessmen behind their lunchtime tankards by a girl. He patted beads of sweat from his forehead and laid his hand for a moment on the bar, where its pattern of whorled ovals faded instantly from the pine. "I'm sorry, sir," the barmaid said. "I'm afraid I can't serve you."

"May I ask why not?"

"We're not allowed to serve anyone with long hair."

"I hardly think that's legal."

"Would you like to speak to the landlord?"

"I would, yes."

The landlord turned smiling, pulling hurriedly at his bow tie as if caught with an imperfectly wrapped gift. "I'm sorry, sir, I'm afraid it's a matter of policy."

"I don't think your license gives you that much leeway."

"There's a sign on the wall over there which entitles us to refuse admission."

Tim looked toward the sign and realised furiously that he need not have. Beneath it a businessman with an attaché case and a plate of ham rolls

watched and grinned. "Yes, on reasonable grounds," Tim said.

"I'm sure you realise we have nothing against you personally. But if we served you we'd have all sorts of long-haired people coming in, causing a nuisance and taking drugs."

"I'm not one of your local trendies," Tim said. "I'm not likely to bring in hordes of ravening hash-heads."

"I'm sure you're not, sir. I'm very sorry."

"Suppose I go out and phone the police?"

"I'm afraid they'd laugh at you. They suggested that we instigate this ban."

"I see. Very well, I shall get in touch with my solicitor."

"As you wish, sir."

Tim turned to leave and halted. The businessman's grin was wider; it clamped on his tankard as beer poured down like foam from a factory outlet, it chewed a ham roll and an overlap of ham protruded from it like a ragged pressed tongue. Tim realised that his boots had also been slaughtered. He bent and pulling them off, kicked the boots toward the man. "Eat those as well," he said.

"You'd put anyone off their food with that hair of yours, wondering which you were."

Tim strode out. He reached the door and the telephone shrilled again, like a warning.

Emerging, he gasped. The businessman's complacent hatred had suffocated him like clinging fog. Tim's occasional telepathy was improving, whether thanks to or in spite of his efforts, although it functioned only for broad and often unpleasant concepts. In the pub invisible wet towels had seemed to drape his head. He glared at the front of the pub and tried to project an image of the businessman posturing in a ballerina's costume, but he could

tell it wasn't taking; his telepathy seemed to be entirely one way. At least it increased his sensitivity. He felt that was crucial, particularly nowadays.

He pulled off his socks and stuffed them into a waste bin. A traffic warden frowned and looked away. Tim padded through the one o'clock crowds; on the pavement, hot and rough as sandpaper, toecaps nudged him; the crowd's thoughts drifted over him—happiness; an appointment, hurry, heart thumping and stomach sore; a hanged and mutilated murderer; depression; a bar full of perfumed men. If they were the crowd's, of course; he couldn't distinguish his own subconscious muttering. Suddenly he wanted to be somewhere he could allow his mind to reach out to beauty. Later he could phone Frank, who was a solicitor. He ran across a pedestrian crossing, black and white, burning and lukewarm, and caught a bus to the edge of Brichester. If society can't find a way to make you conform, he might have thought, it will crush your image of yourself. In fact, he thought, just because I'm sensitive doesn't mean there's any doubt that I'm a man, I'll show you.

Beyond Brichester he began to walk up the Severnford road. There was a hospitable hotel several miles up, at the Berkeley intersection. For the first mile a pavement followed the road. Soil spilled from the grassy bank which bordered it, blackening Tim's soles and gritting warmly between his toes.

The hard blue sky was focused to display a sharp golden sun. Beneath, its light poured off the curves of cars, whose outlines wavered as they laboured uphill over the bubbling tarmac. Dogs lolled from their windows, looking hopeless and hysterical as victims of a kidnapper; children were heaped in the back seats, scrambling over each other like a nest of spiders, staring at Tim. Exhaust fumes trickled through the grass and stained the sky. Nor do I need you, Tim thought, hopping to pull free a dry brown sliver of grass which had pierced his sole.

Ahead of him a girl in slacks trudged humped beneath a rucksack, buttocks and thumb protruding. Tim began to hurry, hobbling over gravel spilled from the driveway of a cottage. Perhaps he could offer to carry her rucksack. She was in danger. As he began to run, a fawn Mini drew close to her and stopped. The rear window was blocked by suitcases, perhaps of samples, but Tim saw a hand take her elbow as she climbed in beside the

driver. Poor girl, Tim thought, and then: Frank would have taken her arm and her rucksack and escorted her. He hurried on, trying to skim the pavement, which was hot as the stones of a fireplace.

Where the pavement disintegrated into brown earth and pebbles stood a telephone box. Tim called Frank's office, holding the call box door open with one sole pressed against the glass, smooth and soothing as ice. But Frank was still at lunch. Tim consulted his watch; it was almost two o'clock. He stared along the pebbled vista, barbed with parched grass. Perhaps he should try to thumb a lift—the pub was more than an hour's walk ahead. Thumb a lift, poor girl. He stepped onto the baked cracked path, and the telephone rang.

When it had rung three times he picked up the receiver. "BRI-chester 3109," he said.

"Who's that?" demanded a man's voice.

"This is a public call box."

"I was expecting to find a boy there," the voice said despondently. "We were going to get together."

Tim leaned his head out of the box. Cars chased by; there was no house nor pedestrian in sight, nor anything against the sky except fields of taut bright grass. "There's nobody about, I'm afraid," he said.

"They never are when it comes to the point," the voice complained.

"He may be waiting where I can't see him. Maybe he's waiting for me to go. I tell you what, try again in five minutes."

"Wait," the voice said. "What are you doing at the moment?"

Tim's foot slipped from the pane; the door was closing lazily, inexorably. He kicked out and thrust it wide. "Just walking," he stammered.

"All on your own? You don't sound like a lonely boy. Do you drink alone?"

"Sometimes," Tim said.

"How awful. I know, you wait there and I'll come to you. You don't mind waiting for something worthwhile?"

"I must go. I'm sorry," Tim stammered. Explain, he thought. No need to be offensive. "I'm tired. I'm trying to thumb a lift," he said.

"You can give your thumb to the drivers," the voice said, 'But keep the rest for me."

Tim slammed the receiver into place and fled. The pebbles struggled harshly underfoot like frightened insects; the grass whipped his ankles. Eventually he slowed, panting, his hair flopping wetly over his forehead. This can't have happened to me, he told himself. I'm a man.

He strode on, thumbing wildly. A jeep almost halted, until the driver glanced back at Tim's face and frowned in disappointment. A white Morris Minor paced him for a few seconds, then sped on. A breeze flowed between his fingers like water and ceased. He pressed forward, into the endless cushion of still air.

A few trees thrust from the border ahead, like cylinders of chocolate about to melt in the trembling distance. For a second Tim clenched; a tree could hide a man. Rubbish, he thought. You don't wait in ambush on a busy road like this. Someone would stop if they saw something wrong. Of course they would. If they saw a struggle. He glanced back over his ponderous outstretched arm at the headlong moist faces, intent on the bumper ahead. Besides, he thought, he wouldn't come after me when I reacted as I did. They're sensitive, everyone knows that. But his mind was shrinking away from a thought like a white-hot knife: if Tim were trapped he'd never know himself again. Vaguely he felt more afraid of the fear; to fear is to believe, to believe is to succumb. He stepped from the wrinkled earth to a grass path where insects dropped from grass-blades and squirmed underfoot.

He glanced at his watch. Half-past two, half a mile beyond the last time he'd looked. Perhaps if he stood in the path of a car, swore it was urgent—A white Morris Minor cruised by. That's the second, he thought. Suddenly he

strained his eyes and made out the number. He hadn't noted the number of the first.

Then, around a tree ahead, he glimpsed the crimson corner of a telephone box. He stood still for a moment, then began to run. His feet slashed through the grass; emerging stones crushed his toes like hammers. He reached the box and wrenched open the door. There was no directory on the shelf. He slumped. The air from the box hung inert about him like the stale smoke in a train compartment. All at once he stared at the wall above the telephone. One glass frame displayed the number of a taxi-rank. He caught up the receiver. He opened his mouth and heard the voice.

"Teaser," it said. "You wouldn't admit to it, would you? You can't run fast. You can't tease and then run away."

The receiver fell like a noose and hung dangling in the suffocated box. Before it had stopped swinging Tim was five trees distant, sweating a liquid skin, heaving out gusts of harsh air. He felt something wrong with his mind, as if deep within a piece had jarred loose and were refusing to engage; as if, since he had tried to project his thoughts at the businessman, some function had been arrested. The world felt unreal.

Still fleeing, he twisted his head back over his shoulder. A sports car bright as a fairground carriage swung around a curve behind him. He leapt into the road, hands outstretched to push the car to a halt. The car drove at him, swerved across the road and a woman's voice screamed over the screaming wheels: "Get out of the way, you bloody pansy! Opt out if you want to but don't kill everyone else in the process!"

An image of a striking hand flew into his eyes. He stood watching the sports car shrink. He can't be in a car, Tim thought. He must be in a phone box. Perhaps the last one down the road. Or the next ahead, came the answer. Or he's phoning from wherever he lives. He could have found out the number of this box from the exchange, he could have deduced I'd decide to phone. A white Morris Minor passed on the other side of the road. Tim whirled. He didn't recognise the numberplate. But he could have changed it, he thought wildly. He hadn't thought to look at the driver.

For a moment Tim glanced back at the telephone box. He could phone the police. And tell them what? No, he thought, both he and I must hate the police. We're both persecuted. Momentarily he felt sympathetic. It was the man's right not to conform, after all. So long as he stayed away from Tim. He could have nothing to do with Tim.

A quarter of a mile further on Tim saw a figure striding toward him. The figure was precisely detailed as a manikin, yet the face eluded him. Instantly Tim realised how far he was from Brichester. His feet were raw as a racked throat. Between him and the figure stood a telephone box, blazing against banks of flowers, blossoms clustered like puns of hot white smoke. Scents curled about Tim like pourings of stirred colour; it occurred to him that this rich mixture would blot out any other perfume. He and the figure in the checked shirt had almost reached the telephone box. Tim stopped. The figure passed the box and strode toward him. The telephone rang.

Overwhelmingly relieved, Tim paced around the figure with no more than a glance. The threat had located itself. The insistent ringing faded behind him.

He thought: once I reach the Berkeley intersection I can get into the hotel. I can buy a meal if I have to; they're bound to provide that. Then I can ring for a taxi. If I can't get through on the public phone I'll say it's out of order; they must have a private phone somewhere. Phones do go out of order sometimes.

He froze. And phones do sometimes ring for a wrong number.

He looked back. The flowers hung exhausted into the sky; the figure had vanished. He had hardly glimpsed the face, but now he remembered that it had smiled. A casual greeting, perhaps, but now it crinkled into a significance which clung to the edge of Tim's mind. If the phone had rung innocently, if that was why the man had smiled—Once again he had the sense that the components of his mind were failing to engage. He plodded back toward the box, wading through the grass, staring blindly at the hectic cars. I didn't answer the ring. If it was him he'll try again. He knows I must be near. Shall I answer? My God, yes! he thought. Then I'll cut him off and ring the operator! She can tell me where he is, she can call a taxi!

He strode into the phone box, inhaling a sediment of scent. Flowers intruded on the panes like Victorian borders. Behind him in the grimy mirror, scribbled with relationships, the door closed. Immediately the phone rang;

Tim's fingers slipped from the receiver. As he captured it, he felt an indefinable movement in the depths of his mind, a meshing. "So you've decided to come round," the voice said.

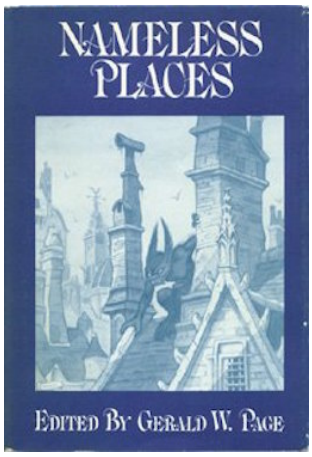
"Come round where?" Almost Tim laughed, although his limbs trembled. "Where are you?" he said.

"You're still determined not to realise," the voice said. "I'm here. Here in the phone box."

Tim's eyes struggled. His gaze caught at the massed flowers, the empty fields, the long hot hard road. Then he met his own eyes in the mirror. His sly reflected mouth grinned.

He put out his hand to obscure his treacherous reflection, and touched not glass but flesh.

The Last Hand



"On trains to science fiction conventions the assembled gamblers of LiG [the Liverpool science fiction group] fell to cards. Without this I'm sure *The Last Hand* would never have occurred to me."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

Written in: 1969
First published in *Nameless Places*, 1975
Also published in: *Told By The Dead*.

When Martin saw the blotches moving down the compartment window, against the thick twilit streams of smoke, he thought at first that it was raining. Then he realised the blotches were flies nuzzling the pane, hurling toward him like curdled drops of the smoke. Already one fat fly like a lump of soot was crawling toward the gap at the top of the window, through which a breeze had flapped at Martin's face all the way from Liverpool. He sat for a moment waiting until the fly entered, so that he could kill it; then he threw his book of crosswords into his case and made for the bar.

"If you give up your job, Martin, I shall leave you."

Many of the compartments on the rocking corridor were curtained; Martin thought of a spy film. But there was nothing mysterious about this train: a dog's nose impressing its seal on a window, the open mouths of sleepers, children laughing or looking sick at the sway of the carriage, a suitcase inching its way to the edge of the rack. Through one window, limned against the Stanlow oil flare across the Mersey sandflats, Martin saw the scuttling skeletal legs of a fly as it fluttered with him.

"We have to talk about it. You can't write your book if you keep your job, and you'll never write it without me. I wish I didn't have to tell you this."

He strode through the restaurant car, past the gathered white curtains and the lamb chops. He was hungry, but if he could restrain himself as far as London it would be less expensive.

"You haven't got the will or the capital, and you need me to tell you that you've got the talent. But I can't and I won't. I've got to make my own way,

and I shall in London. I know you'll want to live with me, but that's just second best. It should be me living with you."

Peals of Birmingham laughter came from the bar. He bought a can and poured the metallic beer into a paper cup. Beneath the Runcorn bridge the Mersey drained from sandbanks like moist indolent flesh in a clogged bath; as the train rushed through the bridge the pattern of the lattices flew silently whirring across his eyes. A fly clung trembling to the window, as if thrown out by the hectic pattern.

"I know you'll keep thinking of me and that won't help your writing. I want you to, because I love you. But I don't love insecurity."

The train flew past a hotel which seemed to have been torn in half, leaving a raw jagged wall and a space for the building's twin, and came to rest in Runcorn station. On the road across the line rain hung like a web from silver lights; shadows on the drizzle ran along the platform, slamming doors. Somewhere Martin heard a buzzing.

"If you've got a job—*if* you've got a job—"

When the train moved out Martin ground his cup into a ball and made his way up the corridor. The diluted smoke billowed ahead of him. He reached the compartment and halted. Three men were sitting beneath his case, playing cards.

The dealer was huge, wet with rain or perspiration. His tall thin companions seized their cards and scrutinised them. As if they were messages, Martin thought—as in a spy film: messages coded through cards. There was the seed of a short story. He stood musing, but the idea slipped away. He dragged back the compartment door and entered.

The dealer looked up; his great eyes glittered like rain on mud. "How are you, friend?" he shouted. "Didn't I say someone must be joining us?" he added, protruding his hands from his bulging black sleeves at his friends.

"Why, a fourth," said one, his sleeves fluttering on his rapid arms like wings.

"A gift from God," the other said thickly, his head turning rustily to Martin.

"Are you going far?" the dealer demanded. "If you want to sleep, old boy, we won't disturb you. I'm sure we can find someone else who'll join us in a good profitable game. You see, I'm being honest with you."

"You can deal me in for a round if you like," Martin said, sitting next to him but not too close. "I'm bound for London."

"Have you high hopes, old boy?"

"No," Martin said.

"It'd hardly be sporting to ask you to join us if you're not too well off. No offence, old boy. No need to be ashamed."

"I can manage," Martin said.

"Well then, let's see what poker does for us!" The dealer snatched the cards from the thin men and shuffled them; he engulfed the pack in his hands and pulled them apart, pouring the cards between them. Colours and numbers flashed at Martin, sketched faces peered. For a moment he thought the figures on the court cards were full-length and, which was odder, full-face and grinning; but in the next shuffle he saw only the familiar twinned profiles.

"One thing, though," Martin said as the dealer thrust the first card into his hand. "The deal passes in rotation, and dealer's choice."

"The Shorrock method, eh?" the dealer laughed. "All right, old boy, dealer's choice it is. I don't think that'll upset us, do you?" he shouted, not waiting for his companions' huge eyes to glance at him and their heads to shake hastily and lethargically.

Martin fanned his cards and sorted them: two kings, two tens, an ace. "Your bet," the dealer said.

Martin rummaged in his pocket and threw sixpence on the windowsill. Outside the pane, numerous flies were crawling silently like delirium.

"My dear chap, sixpence? We can't be so timid now, can we?"

"You'll never be one of us that way," said the slow thin man, bending to the sill with half-a-crown.

"That's more like it! Two half-crowns and one for me as well! Is this your game, old boy?"

"It has to be," Martin said.

"No, no, not at all. Just as you like. We mustn't force ourselves upon you."

"Of course it's as I like," Martin said. "You're not taking me for a loser, surely? Half-a-crown and one card, please."

In exchange for the ace he received a seven. Reaching back, he turned on the reading light. The others were not using theirs. His eye caught that of the thin man nearest the window. "You get used to this kind of light," the man blurted.

"Presumably," Martin said. "Half-a-crown."

"That's better, that's more confident. But we don't frighten, do we? See, he's twice as confident."

"And another half-crown."

"Ten shillings, old boy."

Martin examined his cards. "No," he said.

"You disappoint me, old boy. It's only confidence that sees you through this life, you know. All right, I'll see ten shillings. Seeing? Well, it looks as if my pair of queens has it. Control your face, old boy, there's no need to be so open to us."

"My deal," Martin said. "Same again."

The hands of the man by the window seemed not to belong to him; they dragged at the knees of his trousers like the hands of a hysterical child. "I could do with something to eat," he muttered.

"Just be patient," the fat man advised. "It'll be all the better for waiting."

Martin dealt himself two aces and three meaningless cards. He answered half-a-crown and re-dealt himself two threes and a six. The twitching thin man raised the stakes to five shillings. His companion pushed a slow hand into his pocket, reached across the restless legs and inserted ten shillings beneath the pile. The fat man followed. Martin thought for a moment. "A pound," he said.

"That's right, that's good! You'll be one of us in no time! Are we scared?"

The leaden man folded his cards together, leaned over for the pack and pushed them into place. "I'm trembling," he said.

The man by the window almost dropped his cards; they flapped and crackled like dry wings. He thrust two pounds beneath the silver and caught the pile wildly as it fell.

"You're doing well, old boy! Rid of one of us already! I think you're on your way now. Two quid."

I mustn't raise again, Martin thought. I must save some money for the next hand in case. And for London. As if the little that he had could make a difference. But he might win. "I'll see you," he said.

"You shouldn't have, old boy. Three nines, that's all I can show you. Only two pair? Bad luck, old boy. Brave try."

"I think you can deal me out now," Martin said. "I'll just adjourn for a few minutes."

"All right, old boy." As Martin reached the door the fat man called "But you will be back, won't you? Don't make us come looking to give you your money back."

In the bar Martin leafed through his wallet and counted ten pounds. He felt he should have more, but he'd underestimated the cost of the train ticket. He could still win, though, perhaps by changing the game on his deal. Assuming the game wasn't rigged, of course. Absurd, he thought. How could the game be rigged—his brief idea of messages in the cards? Hardly; that was what came of allowing his imagination to use him rather than the reverse. The men were simply grotesques and as such fascinating, perhaps even stimulating when you knew them better. He crumpled the paper cup and left the bar. A large wet fly bounced from the window.

About to open the compartment door, he halted. The three men had laid aside their cards and were passing something between them. It must be a sort of gambler's charm—a small pale object in which points gleamed like eyes. He watched fascinated, for as they tossed it from hand to hand, the motion and the dim light made it seem to struggle. The door jammed momentarily, and when he glanced at the men again, they were returning their cards to the pack.

"Another game, old boy?"

"If you like."

"No, no, if you like. We mustn't stay where we're not wanted."

"Well, stay," Martin said. "We've a long way to go yet."

The man opposite stirred his legs like sticks in mud; water was trickling down his painted black hair. "That's true," he said. "And we must give you a chance."

Martin arranged his cards and automatically followed half-a-crown. He had four clubs; he threw away a diamond and took the first joker he'd seen. He gazed at his hand. "Well, don't read them," stuttered the thin man at the window, staring out at the swarming wet flies. "Play them."

"Five shillings," Martin said, thinking wistfully of his crosswords and their anagrams, and read the cards. Ace, Ten, Nine, Eight, the joker would be King of Clubs—ATNEK—CANT KE—but if the joker represented any letter, CANT BE—

"What's the last bid?"

"A quid. Come on, old boy, you can't leave us now!"

"Two pounds, then."

"No, I tremble again."

"Four!"

"Six!"

"Eight!" Martin cried with all the conviction he could summon.

They were seeing him. He switched on his reading light, which someone had turned off. "Ace King flush," he said.

"Two pair," the trembling man muttered in despair, drawing his knees up close to him.

"Dear, dear, that sets us back, I think. Although I'm sure there's something I could do with this joker. Why yes, old boy, I'm afraid there is. Nines over fives. Full house."

Martin dropped his cards in the thin man's shivering lap. "Sorry about that, old boy," the fat man said.

The thin man shuffled, pulled at his hands as if to wrench his arms from their sockets, and held out a card to Martin. "All right," Martin said. The money was meaningless, anyway, and so was his trip to London. The man opposite was gazing at him and running his fingers down his cheekbones, drawing the flesh back from his glittering eyes.

Martin followed half-a-crown. He peered at his cards; the light behind him was dimming. Ace, Eight, Three, Two of Hearts and a joker. AT THE (K). CANT BEAT THEM.

"Let's see what you've got, old boy," the fat man shouted. "Why, you've won!"

The silver jingled into Martin's lap; cards were thrust at him. He glanced up; all their eyes glittered; the flies crawled against the grey boiling night, and the pattern on the upholstery seemed to squirm grubbily at the corner of his eye. Ten and Eight of Hearts, Ace and Nine of Diamonds, and a joker—he threw half-a-crown blindly—if he read Ace as One, THE DON—THEY DON—

"Bad luck, old boy. Never mind, the cards are yours." Suddenly he didn't want to read the message, even though he realised vaguely it was the aspect of the game that gave him a sort of chance. "I'll pass the deal," he said, standing. "I'm going to drown my losses." He piled the cards on the seat and slid back the compartment door.

Perhaps all the corridor lights had fused. Perhaps the train had halted in a tunnel. Perhaps smoke had massed somehow in the corridor, for no light from the compartment penetrated the blinding darkness beyond the door. Martin's foot flinched back. He glimpsed himself snatched away and dwindling, like a fly whirled away on the wind. All at once his despair reversed itself, and he wanted desperately to live. He turned. Like a framed illuminated painting, the three men held out the cards to him. Behind him in the impossible darkness a dry horde swarmed rustling. He reached for the handle and, panting, slammed the door.

"I thought we'd come too far for you to leave us just yet. One more game won't hurt, old boy. Will it?"

"Hurt?" said the slow man, sucking the syllable. "That's not the word."

"I have no money," Martin said.

The fat man laughed open-mouthed; his tongue flapped like a stranded fish. "Old boy, surely we know each other well enough by now not to think in terms of money."

Martin crushed the cards between his sticky hands, thrusting them into place like the teeth of a machine. He could feel the eyes on him. How could they glitter when the light was so dim, and how could there be so many? He glanced up, scattering the cards, and saw only the six wide eager eyes. No light filtered through the window now; the pane was alive, like a black honeycomb: THEY DONT what? His mind struggled to complete the

message before the cards were dealt. Suddenly he said "Ace counts low. Low hand wins."

"I don't know about that, old boy," the fat man said, gesturing back his companions.

"Dealers choice, remember. You agreed."

"So we did," the fat man said slowly. "And we can't break our word."

"But we always play ace high," the thin man cried, ploughing his fingernail along the base of the window.

"Be sporting, old boy."

Martin said nothing. He shook his head ambiguously and threw each of his cards into sight as if it were lethal. Eight and Ten of Spades. Seven of Diamonds. Ace of Clubs. Joker. ETSSDAC.

"No use prolonging the agony, old boy. We might as well show."

"Wait a minute," Martin gasped. "What do jokers count?"

"In your game they're not worth anything."

T USE CADS. THEY DONT USE CARDS.

"You two show," the fat man shouted. "Come on, we're nearly there!"

"Flush," stammered the man by the window. The cards sprang from his hands.

"Pair of eights," said the man opposite Martin, showing them with the lethargic movement of a melting plastic skeleton.

"Pair of twos," the fat man said and grinned. "Not doing too well that round, are we, old boy? Don't you wish you were playing straight poker?"

"Not really," Martin said. "Whether it's low or high, I have an ace."

The three heads turned. The great eyes glittered, and the mouths worked moistly. Behind them Martin saw that the gap at the top of the window was black and blocked by a mass which crawled. The fat man gripped Martin's knee hotly and levered himself to his feet. The three of them stood over Martin. At once the lights went out, and shapes bumbled softly against him.

They've cheated, he thought in bitter desperation. So does everyone. Wind whipped rain from the windows; the train rushed on, and a buzzing form buffeted him hugely. Struggling, he was twisted about and came face to face with the dark intensely fearful oval of his head in the compartment mirror.

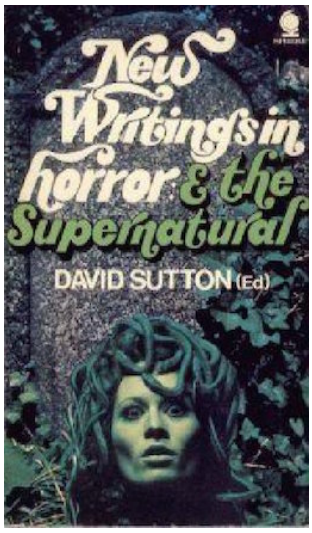
Then he saw more, and began to struggle frantically as his unseen captors enclosed him.

Someone had opened the window wide; black rain sneaked in, and the train curved and gathered speed toward a tunnel. The tunnel's lips worked. Their outlines crawled minutely and changed, and black spittle flew from them only to return and crawl. Somehow, as the train shouted as it plunged into the tunnel, what lay ahead was displayed in the mirror for him. At the end of the tunnel as if far down a telescope he saw a station like a black ship, sinking beneath swarming clouds of blackness.

A shock thrilled through him, and he managed to throw off his captors for a moment. It was as if the train were moving in two directions simultaneously: the forward rush he felt and the impossible opposite direction in the mirror. It challenged all sanity. And yet they must give him a chance, they couldn't break their word; his mind was still alive and determined to live. "I'm not letting you win!" he shouted and threw himself toward the door, through darkness that buzzed furiously. He had grasped the handle when the first lights of Crewe station blazed into the empty compartment.

Or almost empty, for his feet weren't free. He glared down and saw that they were buried in a mound of silver and notes. He kicked. Then he stooped and began to gather the money. From beneath it crawled three weak flies, which he crushed. He pulled down his case and threw the money in, crumpling it, throwing in the silver from the other side of the compartment, laughing. Suddenly he flung in the rest and, closing the case, strode out onto the platform. He ran through the dim brown light, past waiting figures like forgotten waxworks, toward the platform for Liverpool. Somewhere he heard a buzzing.

Broadcast



Written In: 1969
First published in *New Writings In Horror And The Supernatural #1*, 1971
Also published in: *Inconsequential Tales*

We were only fourteen years old, for God's sake. Only intermittently did we remember to try to think and act as adults. It was six years ago. I'd gone that evening to the Radio Brichester studio with Ste—with whom I lost contact two years later, when our attitudes to life began to sketch themselves in and clash. With a mixture of flattery and genuine enthusiasm we'd persuaded Mr Rolands, our art master, to allow us to watch him record one of his occasional broadcasts.

It was seven o'clock in the evening. In the street beneath the wide Cinemascope office windows above which the studio was hidden, the streetlamps were daubed with gold, and beneath our feet crunched like scattered breakfast cereal those clenched leaves that creep mysteriously into treeless urban streets. We took a silver-grey muffled lift to the fifth floor and the world was walled out.

There had been a fire at Radio Brichester the previous night; we were eager to see the damage. But the Reception foyer was empty of damage and of receptionist, although on the switchboard red paper crosses were pasted over some of the sockets. We disarranged the BBC leaflets on the low tables and Ste said "Shall we wait?"

"Nobody's here," I said. "Let's find Mr Rolands."

Ahead of us led a long white corridor reticently menacing as a hospital, inhuman as a dream of a papered maze where you shrink to an anonymous helpless point. However, we were growing up, and over the exit from Reception a speaker sang a pop song that we knew. We strode forward.

In some of the rooms we glimpsed effects of the fire. One office was stacked with grey dripping scripts and pamphlets, and tapes spilled onto desks from cardboard boxes. In one deserted studio the window over the

tape decks had burst and framed an empty star, surrounded by tips of charred wood; we inhaled the stale stench of blackened plastic. The second studio was closed and full of gesticulating shirt-sleeved men. Before we reached the last studio we felt secure again, for we could hear Mr Rolands' voice. But two paces closer we made out his words.

"Come on, Mai," he was exhorting, "get that booze cupboard open."

"There's a good few local pundits available to us, not to mention eager," a light male voice reminded him.

"If you can open that cupboard to every nineteen-year-old who's able to smear paint on canvas within ten miles of Brichester—"

"I'll see whether I can find the key. After you've recorded the programme."

We peered through the pane in the door. Mr Rolands was standing by a tape deck with his tie thrown round the back of his neck like a rope, his hands hanging defeated. A young man in a pink open-necked shirt and fawn trousers was regarding him and turning knobs on a control panel. We knocked and entered.

"Why hello, boys," Mr Rolands cried in what we could see was manufactured welcome. "These are Adrian and Steven. This is Malcolm."

"Malcolm Hughes," the young man at the tape deck said, implying Mr Hughes.

"They'll be quiet, won't you, boys?"

We nodded. "Do you really want to use them in the programme?" Malcolm, as we'd determined to think of him, said.

"We'll see how the introduction goes," Mr Roland said quickly.

"Mike thought he might interview you on what art means to you," Malcolm told us. "He throws out all sorts of ideas on the spur of the moment."

Of course we hadn't known; we were excited and terrified, punched unexpectedly in the plexus of our adolescence. "You can start as soon as you're ready," Malcolm said.

"Where do I start?"

"At the beginning."

"Yes, but I mean I've done the piece on sculpture."

"Unfortunately," Malcolm said, switching on a tape recorder: a smoked hoarse bass voice thundered, choked, burst out again.

Mr Rolands paled. "That can't be me," he said.

"It was until the fire," Malcolm told him. "You two stay out here. I'll I turn on the overhead speaker."

We tried to look nonchalant on swivel chairs. Mr Rolands, still pale, gave us a forced grin and hurried through two doors like an airlock into the recording studio. Through a window over the control panel at which Malcolm sat we could see into the studio as into a private ward: Mr Rolands sitting alone at a circular table through which a microphone protruded. He took out a pad and leafed through it. "All right, Rolo," Malcolm said into his own microphone. "If you just run through your opening lines I'll check your level."

Rolo! We dragged our chairs back where Mr Rolands couldn't see us and spluttered, spinning wildly. Malcolm glanced at us wryly as he donned headphones like earmuffs. "Come in closer to the mike, Mike. That's fine," he said and Mr Rolands fell silent. "Sorry, by the way. I seem to have exposed one of your dark secrets."

"Well, that's journalism," Mr Rolands said harshly.

"There's enough room left on Janice's tape for you. Talk straight through if you can."

"I can," Mr Rolands said. "Let's get going."

"I'll give you a green in ten seconds," Malcolm told him. We watched the red second hand of the studio clock picking off the seconds; we couldn't see whether Mr Rolands was as tense as he sounded. In the foreshortened corner of the inner studio we saw a green light flare. Malcolm pointed his finger and pulled the trigger.

"Art in Brichester?" Mr Rolands said, falsely offhand. "Some of you may wonder where it is—" but somehow his voice exploded, scraping the microphone and jarring the studio. Malcolm grimaced and switched off the tape. "Don't overload, darling," he pleaded tightly. "I've told you I've just enough space on the tape."

"I'm not overloading. You took my level."

"Wait a minute and I'll check. Say something," Malcolm told him and exchanged wires.

"Such as what? There was a young lady of Bali, who took such a fancy to Dali—"

"That ought to be foolproof," Malcolm said, adjusting his headphones.

"It's a good job you stopped me there." We could imagine Mr Rolands composing his face, his thoughts and his voice. The green light flared. Mr Rolands cleared his throat. "Art in Brichester? Some of you may wonder where it is—" but now his voice rattled faintly like tin. Malcolm slashed his hands at the window in a cross, an exorcism. "It's the bloody mike," he said. "Hang on and I'll come in there. Mike trouble," he threw at us as he rushed through the airlock.

"Do you want to be interviewed?" Ste hissed at me.

"If Mr Rolands interviews us it'll be all right," I said.

"Rolo," Ste said and snorted uncontrollably. No doubt he would spread it all round the school, I thought.

We stared at the record covers in a cabinet until Malcolm returned; the studio lacked windows, the only light was blue as ice. "Mike trouble all the time," he complained and replaced his headphones. "Try it once again. I can't see anything wrong with the equipment."

"All these re-runs are liable to destroy whatever coherence I have," Mr Rolands said.

"It's hardly my fault. Green in twenty seconds."

When the light flashed Mr Rolands enquired wearily: "Art in Brichester? Some of you may wonder where it is—" and his voice was huge again; the speaker buzzed and snarled. "Dear God," Malcolm cried. "Keep talking. I'll bring Brian in to find out what it is."

He ran out. "Keep talking, indeed," said Mr Rolands' gigantic voice. "Don't worry about all this, boys. The perils of presenting yourself to an audience, you know, of making yourself presentable."

"I don't think that interview will transpire," I said awkwardly to Ste.

"He doesn't sound as if he'd be up to it, anyway."

Malcolm flung the door open. "Talk, will you, darling, for God's sake," he shouted at his microphone. "They think it may have something to do with the fire. I'm going out to find Brian. He's in the pub, they tell me. Keep talking, and these two can stop you if it rights itself. Did you understand all that?" he panted at us.

"Some of it," I said sharply, but he'd gone.

"All right, I'll talk," Mr Rolands boomed. "Are you listening? There was a young lady of Bali—no, I decided against that, didn't I. What would you like me to say? Well, I'll think of something, you'd better not touch that microphone. You can come out where I can see you if you like. No, on second thoughts don't, you'll only put me off. Let me see. If I can find my notes I'll give you a preview of tomorrow's lesson. Don't worry, I'm joshing you. What is there to talk about, in heaven's name?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I wouldn't like to have to do that," Ste said.

"He'll manage."

Mr Rolands returned, louder than before and very fast. "The studio in which I find myself is a pale green box. Around me are five deserted chairs encircling a table with a green felt top. I could play Patience. One hundred, no, one hundred and about ten degrees away on my left is a glass ashtray with rests for cigarettes, black as nicotine-tipped teeth. Ahead of me is a dead green light bulb on the edge of an only slightly less than square window through which I can see another pale green wall, an edge of the control panel and a rack of records. It's a painter's purgatory. Am I doing all right? Can I stop now?"

"Go on, tell him to go on," Ste hissed.

"He will. We don't have to tell him," I said, for I wouldn't have known what to say.

"Am I boring you? I'm boring myself. What can you talk about in this anonymous box? If I had a mirror I'd describe myself. Here I am, thirty-four years old and balding fast. Shall I lecture? I would if I gave lectures these days. I can't remember any. It's much easier to teach, you know, they can't contradict you. Don't repeat my jokes, will you, boys? It's my masochism talking. Ah, masochism. The only honest relationship. My God, it's impossible to cohere in front of this tin cobra!" A magnified thud fell from the speaker; Ste and I started. Mr Rolands must have thumped the table.

"All right, let's take the microphone. I'll get my own back, I'll describe it. It's like a disposal unit. It's draining me away. I don't know how much of me remains. The tape is carrying my voice away. It isn't my voice any more, it's a series of electronic impulses or something. I'm sure you know more about that sort of thing than I do. Myself, I can't fix a fuse without blowing a dozen more. Though of course one could think of circumstances where that might be exactly what was needed. Do you know what a girl said to me once? It wasn't once, it was last week... It's the tape, you see, carrying me away. You do realise out there that I'm joshing, do you? Only joshing. Come on, Malcolm, for Christ's sake where are you?"

"He can't be long," I said desperately.

"Malcolm darling, are you out there, you bastard? Come on, show yourself, you wouldn't want me to review you and the leggy telephonist. Ah, so you're not there. In that case I can talk. Are you a little shocked, boys? This doesn't sound at all like what the housewives thrill to, does it? You see, you never really know anyone. Least of all yourself. The things you do to get onto the air. Masochism again. Don't put your daughter on the studio floor, Mrs Worthington—"

He was singing. I glanced aghast at Ste, who was shaking and snorting.

"Enough of that. I'll close my eyes, perhaps I can keep hold of myself that way. And count to a hundred, if you like. Ah, it's warmer in here. Now, what was I saying that was worth hearing? Eh? Well, tell me, for God's sake! Do you see, we all need an audience to define ourselves. No, I don't need an audience, just one person. Perhaps she'll be listening. No, I'm rambling, this isn't even being recorded, it's just draining me away. I used to talk to her like this—no wonder she left. She'll hear the programme, though. What good would that do?"

There was silence except for his colossal breathing. "Where's that fellow Malcolm?" I demanded of Ste. "It's his fault."

"He'll be back," Ste whispered. "Shh."

"Where did he say Brian was?" Mr Rolands mused hugely. "In the pub, of course. I should be there now. By God I should."

Silence again. I wouldn't look at Ste. I stared at the blank wall and yearned for a window. Or anything to distract me from the silence.

Mr Rolands coughed; I leapt back before I'd had a chance to peer through at him. "You see, talking's meaningless unless you talk to someone. You need someone to catch what you've said and throw it back at you. Then you know what you've said. Otherwise what you say fades instantly and that part of you is gone. Until at last you've nothing more to say and you no longer exist."

The clock ticked like the drip of water the Chinese used. Say something, I pleaded silently. You must say something.

"If I die before the tapes, will they be me or not?"

Tick. Drip. Tip. Drick. I leapt up and pushed the door into the inner studio. I heaved at it. Perhaps it locked from the inside to prevent interruptions. "I'm going to find someone who can use the microphone," I told Ste. "Stay here."

I ran down the shadowless corridor. Through the door of the next studio I saw men gathered around a control panel; none of them was Malcolm. I wrenched open the door beneath the red light. Bent under headphones, one man twisted knobs desperately as a pilot diving for disaster, snatching forth music and voices and crackling static. I didn't know it then, but it was like those moments at a party when the people and their speech are no longer significant and only the mass of sound exists. One man half-strangled by the sleeves of a sports coat swung round to me. "Get out, you bloody child!" he cried. "Can't you see we're recording?"

I didn't realise that he'd given me the chance to talk; I bolted back to the other studio. "Has he said anything?" I panted at Ste.

"Not since you went. He's going round the twist!" Ste giggled.

"Listen, go and find Malcolm. He's in one of the pubs. You look older than me." Ste gaped. "Go on, go on! Tell him it's an emergency!" I shouted.

Ste still gaped. I shoved him out into the corridor. "Mad," he tittered.

The studio walls seemed to suck invisibly inward with Mr Rolands' breathing. I stood and swallowed my terror. Then I hurried to the control panel, to the microphone. The microphone was switched off; otherwise he would have heard me cry out. All six chairs around the table were empty.

I shut my eyes and shrivelled. Then, furiously, I opened them again and frantically searched for the knob Malcolm had turned. A switch looked

familiar. I pressed it and shouted "Mr Rolands!"

My shout must have deafened him. He boomed weakly "I suppose so."

"Mr Rolands," I stammered. I didn't know him as a man, only as a teacher; I tried to forget what I'd heard. "Where are you? I can't see you."

"I don't know where I am. Am I at all?"

I couldn't answer; the knobs were slippery as onions beneath my palm. If only I could keep talking until Malcolm returned.

"What do you mean, you can't see me? My eyes are shut but yours aren't. Oh God." The entire speaker shuddered. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know. I don't want to talk any more."

He must have sunk onto the floor, I thought desperately. That's why I can't see him. Perhaps he's ill. "I mean I can't see you from where I'm standing," I said.

The speaker shook with coughs of laughter. "You'll grow up well, I can tell that. I was always fond of you, you know. When you were in my class. At least I can say that."

"I'm in your class!" I cried. "Hang on, I'll come round where I can see you. Yes, there you are, of course!"

"I wish there were more like you," the speaker said, and sighed. "All right, give me proof. God, how I need proof. There's my hand. What am I doing with it?"

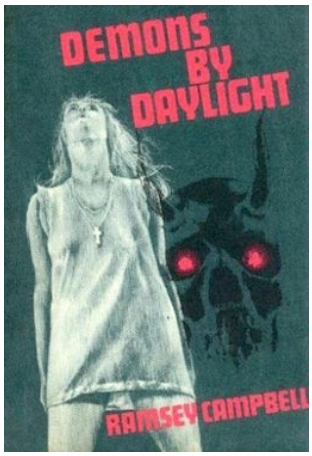
I stared into the deserted studio; I realised I was weeping. My hands clenched on the knobs; I almost fled. I coughed. I tried to cough until Malcolm came.

"Come on, now," the speaker said. "A simple question. What am I doing with my hand?"

I swallowed and blinked. "Waving," I said.

And then there was only silence.

The Lost



"The story was a last-minute substitution for *Reply Guaranteed* in *Demons by Daylight* when Alan David Price's criticism convinced Campbell to remove the other story from the book."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1969
First published in *Demons By Daylight*, 1973

It was in Rudesheim that I had my first important insight into Bill's character. The previous night, outside Koblenz, we had caught a bus in an unsuccessful attempt to find the town centre and when our three marks fare ran out had been abandoned in the country, by a filling station railed off by leaping brilliant rain. I'd been sure there had been hefty figures following us as we walked into the stinging darkness—but Bill had seen a bus heading back to our hotel: he hadn't wanted a fight. So we'd joined the rest of our coach party that morning. Chairlifts were strung down a hillside of vineyards to Rudesheim; I stood up until Bill protested, although I had already seen that there could be no danger at all unless you fell on one of the vine-poles. Our courier led us down into Rudesheim, through the contorted cobbled streets of aproned women selling souvenirs, between tables full of tankards and huge packed laughing Germans, and into an inn. Here Bill revealed himself.

They hadn't reserved a table for our party; they scattered us among a group of tables, leaving a seat free at mine and Bill's. They gave us a menu in Gothic script and a leaflet of drinking songs. Our courier was trying to persuade us to sing along with a tenor shouting out the words to a trap drum and organ, but Bill said: 'We've been organised away from everything I wanted to see. This is my first tour and my last.'

'Sorry, Bill,' I said.

'I didn't mean it was your fault. I wanted to come.' I supposed he had, although I suspected Dilys had persuaded him. I hadn't seen either of them for ten years; they had moved so much around London that I hadn't been able to track them down. In fact, I hadn't seen them since soon after my parents died. But at last I'd found them in the telephone directory, hiding in

Hampstead. I'm sure they were pleased to see me, and when I mentioned that there was an extra seat on the tour I was taking Dilys had said: 'Why don't you go, Bill? You need a holiday.' She would be teaching; I'd gathered that early in the evening. Later I'd heard her whisper: 'Go on, Bill. He obviously wants you to, and you haven't seen him in years. You'll have a lot to talk about.'

Well, we did; I talked about changes in the Civil Service and how difficult it was to gain promotion if I'd wanted to, he told me about advertising. But just when I was ready to explain how the other people in the office had conspired to weigh me down with the dullest work, an American GI heard our English and took the other seat at our table.

I don't recall much of what he said; I was annoyed by the interruption and was surveying the inn, the clocks like intricate pastry, the little drinkers carved in niches on the walls, a group on the other side of the raftered room rising obsessively to their feet and raising tankards. But after we'd all had a few glasses of wine the American—who was a GI from the base outside Frankfurt—said: 'Nights in Saigon we used to go in the rooftop restaurant and watch the tracers. It was like the Fourth of July.'

I could sympathise with him; I feel outside most things that aren't happening to me, an observer, rather as I imagine a writer must feel. I sometimes wish I were a writer; it must be overwhelming to build up characters who will do what you want them to do, instead of having to wait for the right moment with people. As I say, I could sympathise, but Bill cracked the stem of his glass on the table and spluttered: 'I suppose you also view every Vietnamese you get in your sights as some sort of television show!'

'Goddamn it, did you ever go to Vietnam? Hah?' the GI shouted. 'Well, you wanna go out there before you tell us what we should do! How'd you like it if we told you how to run your country? Hah?'

'Somebody ought to,' Bill said conversationally. 'London's a madhouse.'

'Jesus! You wanna sell out your own country! You want the Germans to run your country, right?'

'All I'm saying,' Bill told him, 'is that my experience of London tells me that anything can fester there unnoticed. There are too many niches and hidey-holes.'

'Listen, let's get rid of all this crap! What do you want, you wanna take the Germans back with you when you go?'

'Not at all. I was persuaded to come on this trip,' Bill said. He glanced at me. 'I didn't mean by you, Don,' he apologised. 'Dilys insisted that I take a holiday. I wanted to come. It's just that I wish she were here.'

He'd successfully shaken off the GI. Perhaps he had meant me; I didn't know, I didn't mind—if he were against me so much the better. We finished the meal in silence and made our way back to the coach. At three o'clock the sun was high and men were vomiting beside the Rhine.

As we boarded the coach Bill said: 'I've been thinking. What you bought at Nürnberg—'

I clenched my face and nodded at the courier's back. When we'd sat down he continued: 'I was only going to say that you could hide it in the bottom of my case. I don't think the Customs would find it there.'

'If it comes to that,' I amended. 'I may leave it somewhere.'

The coach ploughed forward into the sunlight toward Frankfurt. People began to pack their jackets onto the luggage-rack. Far back down the bus a cup and saucer clinked; for an uneasy second I was on a lawn. Our courier switched on her microphone and concealing most of her German accent, demanded: 'Now, how long is the length of the Rhine? Who can tell me that?'

'She's a nice kid,' Bill muttered, 'but I wish she wouldn't do that.'

She was pleasant enough but I was worried that she never removed her headscarf; it was like the raised visor of an orange suit of armour. When she spoke to us away from the coach her voice seemed tinny, as if she had a microphone wired into her throat, a grille in place of teeth. I watched her often and her movements seemed jerky, isolated; they lacked flow, like a robot's. In so many people I knew I could sense nothing; their movements were robotic too—all you had to do was to wait for the right movement and you could direct them. Not at all like Dilys. 'How's Dilys?' I asked Bill.

'As I've said, she's fine.'

'Happy?'

'Of course. What do you mean?'

I'd been half-joking; I regretted having asked, 'It's just that I haven't seen either of you for so long. I'm interested,' I said.

I'd known Bill at school in Chelsea and for some years afterward. I was living with my parents off the King's Road; the night the car crashed and the police were waiting awkwardly when I came home from the pub I didn't know what to do except phone Bill. He visited me most nights for a month or so; the last few times he brought Dilys, and all at once there was perfume and cooking and a great deal more laughter in the house. One night he was working and she came alone. I took her out to dinner but afterwards, back at the house, I suffered a night of misunderstandings. Three months later she was engaged to Bill; six months later they were married. I couldn't believe Bill's ease with her. After that they rarely visited me, at least not after I came out of hospital.

The courier's voice nibbled at castles on stroked and ruffled hillsides as we coasted by beneath them. We cruised past women in bright bunched peasant dresses like painted sheaves of corn, hitch-hikers with bulging canvas rucksacks and their socks rolled over their trousers or their knees red beneath shining leather shorts, hot bright cottages with their roofs striving ever upward, typically Germanic. I can't describe architecture, but everyone's been to see *The Sound of Music*, even if they only go for a cuddle on the back row. I say a cuddle, but you know what I mean. Behind me I could hear fragments of conversation like thumbed radio wavebands. 'All you have to do is hit them on the nose. Roll up a newspaper and tap them on the nose. They don't like being tapped on the nose.'

Bill was asleep with his mouth hanging open. I almost photographed him. Instead I watched the scenery, although now we'd reached miles of featureless green, where I couldn't think. When I say I feel outside most things I don't mean I don't take notice. I just wait for things to fit together.

When we reached Frankfurt night was falling. I wasn't sure that I saw a great bottle of beer floating above the city. I had; it was a huge balloon. Moments later, as the lights began to blaze in our wake along a main street as if we'd touched them off, I saw a totem-pole striding toward me down a side street. It was a child stacked on his father's shoulders. The bus stalled at a traffic light, and a woman in a doorway swung a key and smiled at me; next to her shoulder hung a 3D nude photograph on a postcard stand, like a window in the air, like a thought which she was trying to force on me. From

a pram at the kerb I heard an incessant wailing like the cry of a siren. I imagined no face above the humped blanket, just a gaping metal mouth with lockjaw. I mustn't have had enough sleep; things weren't fitting together.

I was glad when we drew up before the hotel and Bill awoke. The hotel was high and modern. Behind dark wooden counters like polished packing cases, waiters in dinner suits passed out keys and called in porters. They had my name and address wrong again—my writing had deteriorated since my parents died—but I didn't correct them. We made our way behind a porter, hurrying to the lift to keep his balance with our cases. We must have paid most of our money for this hotel; I even saw a foyer bookshop where I caught sight of *Fanny Hill* and several de Sades. As we waited for the lift a man in shorts leaned over a girl on a circular seat and said: 'How long have you been here? You could have come upstairs if you were at a loose end.'

Our room had two deep beds and strip lighting, pure mirrors and its own blinding white bathroom. Bill unwrapped his free soap and emerged from the bathroom masked by the towel as he rubbed. 'My God, Don, don't drum your fingers like that, you'll wear your nails off,' he said.

He switched on the radio and found the Beatles singing in German. I remembered Beatles songs through portable radios across Hampstead Heath as I'd walked back from their flat, catching the rain in my outstretched hands. I went out on the balcony and stared at the sunset, curling over the edge of the city like burning sheets of paper. As I gripped the balustrade my fingers found a niche in the concrete. 'What shall we do then, Bill?' I called.

'I'd like another Weiner Schnitzel.'

I came back into the room and swung up my camera from the bed. 'That's all right, but I mean, since it's Frankfurt we could find a couple of women afterwards. You don't have to search here.'

'Not for me, thanks. You can put that camera down too, mate,' he said. 'You needn't think you'd be taking pictures.'

I threw the camera back on the pillow. 'What makes you think I've sunk to that level?' I said plaintively.

'Don't take everything so seriously, mate. I know you're all right.'

'Then what shall we do?' I asked again.

'You won't have any fingernails left in a minute. I tell you what I'd like to do—find that beer we had in Munich.'

As I washed my face I kept catching sight of Bill in the mirror, sitting on the bed. I rubbed soap into my eyes to stimulate my brain; I couldn't think what he reminded me of. At last I had it. I came out grinning. 'Let's find a Weiner Schnitzel for you, Bill!' I shouted. Of course: he looked like a man in the condemned cell.

In the foyer we browsed in the bookshop. The girl smiled at us from the top of a ladder; I noticed that her thighs were mottled with bruises. We emerged into the street. Panels of light were propped against the tops of store windows. As we passed a side street two women came alert and followed us for several blocks until they were replaced by others. On the next main street trams clanked by; where they connected with the overhead wire a spark spat like a burning hair, greatly amplified. For me certain things are intensified to the exclusion of many others. And quite rightly: one must concentrate or founder.

We followed the tram-lines into the heart of the city, past the station, grim faces peering into themselves, heads withdrawing into the ground on an escalator, boys buying what looked like black sealing-wax, a Wimpy Bar opposite. 'I don't think we should eat round here,' I said to Bill. In open bars on corners gross figures munched immense hamburgers, girls so young I couldn't believe it sat on high stools with their tight skirts pulled up. In a square a fountain flickered like a close-packed chatter of luminous ghosts. The tram-wires gave out, but we strode on. 'We'll find that beer for you to have with your Schnitzel,' I promised Bill as he panted and grumbled.

At last I saw a menu in a scrolled bright window on the corner of a dark alley. 'There,' I said.

Beneath the lamps like dim inverted amber blossoms, more high stools stood close to a dark bar. On the walls, haloes of leaves surrounded the lamps and boisterous engravings. A few circular tables, their surfaces encircled by whorls of the tree-trunk like frozen ripples, were scattered in the darker reaches of the hot room choked by smoke and by a heavy mass of shouted conversation; Bill and I sat at one. I pressed my back against the hard ornate chair to stop the Germans from rising to the roof like balloons. A man in a bulging stained apron said 'Nacht' expansively and handed us menus. But I nodded to Bill to say 'Zwei Weiner Schnitzels, bitte.' I knew

virtually no German, although I once had a friend at school who could swear in six languages; I spent nights remembering the words.

I ate my Weiner Schnitzel and watched the bar; Bill was protestingly silent because they hadn't had the beer he wanted. Ahead of me a girl sat with her skirt spread around the stool and hanging down. She must have known when eyes were watching her wherever they were, just as I do, for she turned and stared at me. I tried to smile, but my mouth felt like that of a tragic mask. She said something to the man on her right, and he swung round trailing smoke, his cigar like a blackened gun-barrel, to train his gaze on me.

I knew he was hostile; I always do. I stared at him, pressing my lips together with my fingers to stop them trembling, willing my eyes to burn out his. Bill's head was bent on his food. I couldn't speak. Then the man's two companions glanced at him, turned and supported his gaze. It wasn't fair. I could feel myself dwindling. Suddenly I remembered words. I began to shout at them. 'Verfluchte mal! Blutziniger. Affe! Scheisskerl!'

Bill stared at me, astonished. I felt his gaze, but I was hypnotised by the three men. Slowly they got down from their stools, like hippopotami sliding down a river-bank. There was about three yards between us, but they were closing in slowly, inexorably. They would crush me.

I tried and failed to look at Bill. I rubbed my hands down the insides of my thighs as I had before I was caned at school; helplessly furious, I knew it was wrong that he should have the cane as if he were superior, that my mother should have to go to the headmaster because my father wouldn't, that they should crush me. It was like being herded in by hippopotami, but one had a duelling scar, another had a red ear pressed out to twice its size. And that ear was flapping toward me. If it touched me I would scream.

Then Bill pushed back his chair and strode between us. What he did then I thought brilliant in its way; he faced them and let his right hand rest negligently bulging his trousers pocket.

'Round behind me, Don. I'll move with you,' he hissed. A part of me was furious; he of all people shouldn't be in control now, he shouldn't be enjoying the situation.

I circled his axis to the door. He backed away toward me—but I hadn't opened the door, and he pulled his empty right hand into view too soon. The

three men started. Words poured from them like beer. I shouldered open the door. 'Run!' I yelled.

We ran: the wrong way down the alley, past women dropping from doorways, as a plane throbbed overhead and drowned any sounds of pursuit. I ducked left into another alley, running headlong into a night wind like an icy pillow. Bill was treading on my heels. I flung myself across into another alley; I was sure we were heading back toward the hotel. Shirts flapped repetitively from a balcony, and behind me I could hear the forced padding and panting of the three men and Bill. Then light tore the labyrinthine blackness. I threw myself out of the alley into a main street before a slowing tram.

'Is that our tram?' I demanded, pointing, as Bill lurched out beside me.

'Quick!' he yelled and sprinted.

'No,' I said, 'that's not our tram.' Unless I was mistaken it plunged out beyond the edge of the city. But Bill continued running. I moulded myself into a nearby doorway. After a moment I saw the three men pop forth from the alley into the light like balloons and bounce after him. If I'd called out they would have seen me, of course. They bounded aboard and the tram moved off. As I raced to stand between the lines where it had been I saw Bill thrown back and forth in the globular mirror of the tram, jostled by the three men like fish in a bowl. I'm sure they have those mirrors on German trams.

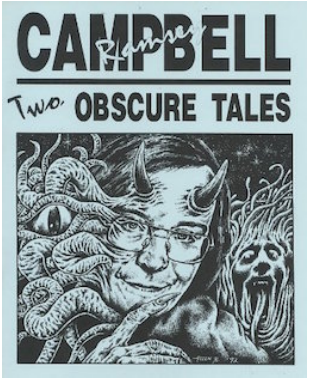
On my way back to the hotel I was pursued by a woman. I waved her off; sometimes on the darkest nights I would look for them in Hampstead when they weren't there, but now I wanted to keep myself pure. I debated whether to stay in the hotel for a while. I decided not; I needed sleep, and there was a telephone in my room. As I washed my face I glimpsed the empty bed in the mirror. There seemed to be some extra significance in this, but it eluded me. I undressed, and my Nürnberg souvenir fell to the carpet. I thought and hid it in the niche on the balcony. Then I went to bed. I think I wondered what I would say if the telephone rang, if they would understand me. Mind you, Bill could speak only half-a-dozen words of German.

The next morning I told the courier that Bill hadn't returned. Obviously I couldn't describe what had happened; I said he'd gone off with a woman around eleven o'clock. She shook her head sadly. I gave her a pound and said that I felt bound to leave the tour and stay in Frankfurt. Sadly she

departed. Some hours later I took a taxi to the airport for the next plane to London.

Though it was a rush for the plane; almost at the airport I remembered that I'd left my Nürnberg souvenir in the balcony niche. They might presume that it was mine, and wrong address or not, it might reach me. So I had the taxi return, screeching and manoeuvring along the autobahn, and said I'd left my suitcase keys. At first they wouldn't let me in the room, but the porter closed his eyes and his fist on a pound. I ran into the room and found the niche. I would hardly need my souvenir now. I was glad; had it proved necessary then explanations to Dilys would have been much more difficult. Which they may still turn out to be, of course. But I can wait. That's something I'm good at. I threw the knife as far as I could. It fell with a dull clunk on a roof below, and I thought of Jack the Ripper. Not because I wanted to be another, I'm sure. It was another idea trying to make itself felt, for I remembered how a thought had hung about the house for weeks after my misunderstanding with Dilys: how all women must be alike and yet it had to be Dilys. I'd missed my chance of finding out then; but not this time.

The Urge



"Campbell notes that the meeting in the bar is based on a true experience involving himself, the poet Alan David Price, and an anonymous young man."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written In: 1969
First published in *Two Obscure Tales*, January 1993
Also published in: *Inconsequential Tales*

I hardly know why I went into the coffee bar, except that it was close to the theatre where I'd just interviewed the cast, half in and half out of their togas and personalities, in a long low plaster dressing-room barred with spears and hung with masks. Just a jungle hut, I'd thought when an actor had screamed "Get out, puppet-master!" at the director. I'd strolled across to the coffee bar to translate my shorthand hooks into some sort of draft for the newspaper. Beneath the hasty murals of neon vistas and the hanging baskets of plastic flowers, the flattened mushroom tables were all occupied by couples and groups driving questions into one another. Trying not to appear patronising, I grinned at the owner as he served me. The coffee machine gurgled as he'd gurgled six months before when I'd interviewed him on the opening of the coffee bar, his answers as parched as the machine. I sat down at a table opposite a young man with long hair bedraggled as by rain, although it was a sharp dry February night. I sipped my coffee and reached for my notes, and he said "As soon as you sat down I knew I was going to dislike you."

I gazed at him: jeans and a black sweater with a pink glimpse of flesh at the elbow. Years of meeting disapproval and hostility had prepared me for this. "I thought you were supposed to love everyone," I said.

"Oh, you're one of those," he said wearily.

"Surely I don't look like one."

"My God, can't I ever miss out a step? You're one of the label-mongers. Don't you know any people?"

"People are my job."

He grimaced as he might have at a child's foolishness and stared out of the window on my left, at the sky. Perhaps it would have been simpler for me to find another table. But I detest retreating, and he seemed a challenge. "What exactly do you dislike about me?" I asked.

"That question, to begin with."

"Significant," I said. "It must be something within yourself. I'd advise you to analyse your reaction for your own good." I didn't realise that I was merely fighting back; I thought I was enjoying myself because for once I could probe deeper than the *Brichester Herald* allowed. But he was peering again through his hair at the sky. After a moment he glanced angrily at me. "All right," he said. "Look at the way you're holding your cup. Effeminate."

"Effeminate? I could introduce you to so many girls—" My hand had closed on the cup with a determinedly masculine grip before I grasped that his insult had almost succeeded in making me leave. I'd been shown the door and sat waiting with my next question too often to be tricked. "Of course we all betray ourselves at times," I admitted. "You, for instance. What are you so unsure of? Yourself?"

"Ha ha. No, wrong line," he said and completely bored, leaned back on his stool and let his eyes encounter the stars outside the window.

"I thought you hippies were supposed to have found a solution."

"I'm not a hippie," he replied abstractedly. "I'm me."

"In that case why are you chasing a fashion?"

"I was here first," he said. "I couldn't care less if it's long or I'm bald. I don't like to be touched, that's all. People touching me drag me down. Like they were hanging weights on me."

"You like to look at the sky," I perceived.

"Yes."

"And the stars. Like holes in the sky."

"No, not like holes in the sky," he mimicked. "Like stars."

"You don't respect style?"

"I don't respect anything people have invented. I use the words I'm stuck with. As few as possible."

"You don't believe in communication?" I began to see a way to break him down. Briefly I hesitated: perhaps he needed his defences. But no, nobody needs dishonesty. Losing one's defences is the first step to maturity, I've always told myself when those I've interviewed have cried or shouted. "You must have something to communicate," I said. "Surely you feel you're worth communicating."

His head jerked up. "To whom? Show me someone who's worth it. Look at them! You still holding your cup like that, him over there pulling his beard out and sucking it, that girl with him, look, propping her mouth shut and trying to look like a psychoanalyst in love—Puppets, all of you, acting out your idiosyncrasies as if they make you individuals. You interrupt the universe. Like that window." Like the sky, his dark eyes glittered yet were tranquil, I noted uneasily. "Out there is reality. No more acting."

"Then you should go out there," I suggested. I was sure I'd brought him down to earth.

"I shall," he said. "I climb."

"Climb," I repeated.

"Trees and roofs. I use cough syrup for fuel."

"I see."

"To get back out there."

"Back?"

"It's where I came from. It created me. Everything man creates is propaganda for himself. What's your defence?"

"Against what?"

"Everything. Must I use clichés? What do you do, as your aunt would say."

"I work for the *Brichester Herald."*

"You mean you reduce people to columns of instant print. How many editors does what you write go through? If people can be brought lower, which I'd have thought was impossible, then people like you do it."

"I thought you were too contemptuous of people to care."

"I was one myself once."

"Aren't you now?"

"I'm determined not to be. Not what you think of as a person, anyway. Come on, show me what you claim in that paper."

I disarrayed the *Herald* on the table and found a headline: *Fire Kills Three*.

"Three what? Okapis? Kangaroos? Why do you expect me to assume they were human beings, why should they have exclusive priority? As if it mattered anyway. But God, it annoys me. Listen, that headline's evidence enough of how desperate you are to interest people in people! Show me one way man can prove he's not an animal!"

"He thinks."

"Thinks? What does that mean? Sets up defences?"

The owner of the coffee bar gripped the table and leaned between us. "Sorry to interrupt your discussion, but last orders, gentlemen."

"Coke, please," I ordered sharply and watched his quick inadvertent nod. My companion, if that was what he was, caught my eye and grinned faintly. "You may make it sometime," he told me, "if you ever use your contempt for people as a beginning. Surely I can't be the only one to see."

The waitress brought my Coke. Had it not been for the effervescence on my tongue, the strings of rain which had begun to melt on the window, the hypnotic jerking miniskirt of the waitress, perhaps I might have made that blind leap which leads to revelation. But what revelation could cough syrup offer?

"What would you do," I asked, "to make people see?"

"I'd persuade them to stop eating, drinking, depending on others. That would be the first thing, to evolve beyond this biological and psychological machinery which we all think's so wonderful. Then I'd have everyone sit alone and think for the rest of their lives. No, not think. Absorb."

"And then?"

"And then they wouldn't be able to. Why? Because they'd be weighed down by one thing: knowing someday they would die. That's the whole point. Not to notice you've died, because it's not important."

"But your perceptions would change."

"Balls, if you think that's an objection," he said. "From perceiving the universe you become the universe. Your body and brain cease to be obstacles. That's true perception."

The owner began to scurry between the tables, coughing and pointing out the time. "Listen," I said hastily. "If I could prove I was serious, would you agree to an interview? Not for the *Herald,* of course. For an intelligent magazine."

"I couldn't care less. No, I won't have the time. Anyway, show me an intelligent magazine. Anyone intelligent would have found out everything I've told you by himself, and he wouldn't bother reading magazines. My God, you don't imagine I'd let you reduce me!" Abruptly he stood up and, before I had a chance to speak, had left.

I folded the *Herald*. I couldn't write about what had happened and yet I felt it was imperative. All at once I let the *Herald* slip to the floor and hurried out.

Beneath the streetlamps sheets of rain ballooned and deflated. I halfway down the street, between the irregular patterns of light from high Victorian windows, I saw him. Head down, he strode into the angled silver rain. Once he halted, threw back his head and drained a small bottle. I hastened in pursuit.

Where the rain rushed bodily across a block of waste ground, he turned left. Surrounded by sucking pools of mud and dark rain indistinguishable from flat stones, a deserted tower stood protected by a circle of iron spears. Yards ahead of me he plodded, squelched, dripped, but never faltered or looked back. A path of slippery planks conducted me past the tower, so that I was almost at his heels when he reached the gate in the railings.

As I stepped into the hissing mud one plank resounded against another. He vaulted the gate and, as I reached it, glanced back. I raised my streaming eyebrows for approval.

"You don't think I'm waiting for you," he said in disbelief, and started up the path of swimming pebbles towards the tower.

Furious, I leapt over the gate. I would watch his failure. My hand caught in the black grinding chain wound through the padlock. I wrenched it free and confronted the tower. A streetlamp splayed out beams around its silhouette; dark scales of ivy overlapped on the stone. For a second I couldn't see him. Then my waterlogged eyes made out a ladder climbing the silhouette, and a figure humping upwards like a caterpillar. I almost laughed. Instead I moved closer.

He was thrusting his shoulders upwards through the rain, as if surfacing for air. Curving away from him, the tower was a cylinder of rain. I approached until I was beneath him. A pebble rattled, and his head turned a fraction.

At once the rung on which he was standing snapped like a bone, then the one beneath, and the next, leaving his legs suspended between the sweating uprights, his toes trembling towards the earth. I couldn't look up. I dreaded to see his neck snapped, his chin askew on an upper rung. Then I realised his absurdity and that of my idea. His absurdity—but he lifted one hand and dragged his body upwards as if it were someone else he was pulling to safety. Perhaps what had happened didn't matter.

But how could he descend? That didn't matter either, I told myself, and turned towards the gate. I took six parallel steps. My hands weighed in my soaked pockets. Before me I saw my shadow on the pebbles, my arms like the handles of a cup. I pulled out my hands and let them go limp as my hair. Something he'd said I should have realised was a revelation, some point at which I could have communicated with him. I turned back towards the tower. It and the ladder were deserted.

He couldn't have come down the ladder. If he had fallen inside the tower I would have heard. I stared about for a sign. Perhaps there was one that I couldn't interpret. But the sky was closed off from me, the stars blotted out by a churning mass and replaced by plummets of rain. For a moment I thought: imagine all that must be beyond this.

I dragged at my ear. Five minutes later I managed to control my hand and hold it restrained against the sky. At least I can write, I thought. That may help.

The Sunshine Club

Written in: 1969
First published in *Dark Horizons #26*, 1983
Also published in: *Waking Nightmares*

"Will this be the last session?" Bent asked.

I closed his file on my desk and glanced at him to detect impatience or a plea, but his eyes had filled with the sunset as with blood. He was intent on the cat outside the window, waiting huddled on the balcony as the spider's cocoon like a soft white marble in one corner of the pane boiled with minute hectic birth. Bent gripped my desk and glared at the cat, which had edged along the balcony from the next office. "It'll kill them, won't it?" Bent demanded. "How can it be so calm?"

"You have an affinity for spiders," I suggested. Of course, I already knew.

"I suppose that ties in with the raw meat."

"As a matter of fact, it does. Yes, to pick up your question, this may well be the last session. I want to take you through what you gave me under hypnosis."

"About the garlic?"

"The garlic, yes, and the crosses."

He winced and managed to catch hold of a smile. "You tell me, then," he said.

"Please sit down for a moment," I said, moving around my desk and intervening between him and the cat. "How was your day?"

"I couldn't work," he muttered. "I stayed awake but I kept thinking of how it'd be in the canteen. All those swines of women laughing and pointing. That's what you've got to get rid of."

"Be assured, I will." I'll have you back at the conveyor belt before you know, I thought: but there are more important fulfilments.

"But they all saw me!" he cried. "Now they'll all look!"

"My dear Mr Bent—no, Clive, may I?—you must remember, Clive, that odder dishes than raw meat are ordered every day in canteens. You could always tell them it was a hangover cure."

"When I don't know why myself? I don't want that meat," he said intensely. "I didn't want it."

"Well, at least you came to see me. Perhaps we can find you an alternative to raw meat."

"Yes, yes," he said hopelessly. I waited, staring for a pause at the walls of my office, planed flat by pale green paint. Briefly I felt enclosed with his obsession, and forced myself to remember why. When I looked down I found that the pen in my hand was hurrying lines of crosses across the blotter, and I flipped the blotter onto its face. For a moment I feared a relapse. "Lie down," I suggested, "if it'll put you at your ease."

"I'll try not to fall asleep," he said, and more hopefully, "It's nearly dark." When he'd aligned himself on the couch he glanced down at his hands on his chest. Discovered, they flew apart.

"Relax as completely as you can," I said, "don't worry about how," and watched as his hands crept comfortingly together on his chest. His sleeves dragged at his elbows, and he got up to unbutton his jacket.

He'd removed his hat when he entered my office, though with its wide black brim and his gloves and high collar he warded off the sting of sunshine from his shrinking flesh. I'd coaxed his body out of its blackness and his mind was following, probing timidly forth from the defences which had closed around it. "Ready," he called as if we were playing hide and seek.

I placed myself between the couch and the window in order to read his face. "All right, Clive," I said." Last time you told me about a restaurant where your parents had an argument. Do you remember?"

His face shifted like troubled water. Behind his eyelids he was silent. "Tell me about your parents," I said eventually.

"But you know," said his compressed face. "My father was good to me. Until he couldn't stand the arguments."

"And your mother?"

"She wouldn't let him be!" his face cried blindly. "All those Bibles she knew he didn't want, making out he should be going to church with her when she knew he was afraid—"

"But there was nothing to be afraid of, was there?"

"Nothing. You know that."

"So you see, he was weak. Remember that. Now, why did they fight in the restaurant?"

"I don't know, I can't remember. Tell me! Why won't you tell me?"

"Because it's important that you tell me. At least you can remember the restaurant. Go on, Clive, what was above your head?"

"Chandeliers," he said wearily. A bar of sunset was rising past his eyes.

"What else can you see?"

"Those buckets of ice with bottles in."

"You can't see very much?"

"No, it's too dim. Candles—" His voice hung transfixed.

"Now you can see, Clive! Why?"

"Flames! F—The flames of hell!"

"You don't believe in hell, Clive. You told me that when you didn't know yourself. Let's try again. Flames?"

"They were—inside them—a man's face on fire, melting! I could see it coming but nobody was looking—Why didn't they look?"

His shuddering head pressed back into the couch. "Because it was meant for me!"

"No, Clive, not at all. Because they knew what it was."

But he wouldn't ask. I waited, glancing at the window so that he would call me back; the minute spiders stirred like uneasy caviar.

"Well, tell me," he said coyly, dismally.

"If you were to go into any of a dozen restaurants you'd see your man on fire. Now do you begin to see why you've turned your back on everything your parents took for granted? How old were you then?"

"Nine."

"Is it coming clear?"

"You know I don't understand these things. Help me! I'm paying you!"

"I am, and we're almost there. You haven't even started eating yet."

"I don't want to."

"Of course you do."

"Don't! Not—Not—"

Outside the window, against the tiger-striped blurred sky, the cat tensed to leap. "Not when my father can't," Bent whispered harshly.

"Go on, go on, Clive! Why can't he?"

"Because they won't serve the meat the way he likes."

"And your mother? What is she doing?"

"She's laughing. She says she'll eat anyway. She's watching him as they bring her, oh—" His head jerked.

"Yes?"

"Meat—"

"Yes?"

It might have been a choke or a sob. "Guh! Guh! Garlic!" he cried, and shook.

"Your father? What does he do?"

"He's standing up. Sit down! Don't! She says it all again, how it's sacrilegious to eat blood—He's, oh, he's pulling the cloth off the table, everything falls on me, everybody's looking, she comes at him, he's got her hair, she bites him then she screams, he smiles, he's smiling, I hate him!" Bent shook and collapsed in the shadows.

"Open your eyes," I said.

They opened wide, trustful, protected by the twilight. "Let me tell you what I see," I said.

"I think I understand some things," he whispered.

"Just listen. Why do you fear garlic and crosses? Because your mother destroyed your father with them. Why do you want and yet not want raw meat? To be like your father who you really knew was weak, to make yourself stronger than the man who was destroyed. But now you know he was weak, you know you are stronger. Stronger than the women who taunt

you because they know you're strong. And if you still have a taste for bloody meat, there are places that will serve it to you. The sunlight which you fear? That's the man on fire, who terrified you because you thought your father was destined for hell."

"I know," Bent said. "He was just a waiter cooking."

I switched on the desk-lamp. "Exactly. Do you feel better?"

Perhaps he was feeling his mind to discover whether anything was broken. "Yes, I think so," he said at last.

"You will. Won't you?"

"Yes."

"No hesitation. That's right. But Clive, I don't want you hesitating when you leave this office. Wait a minute." I took out my wallet.

"Here's a card for a club downtown, the Sunshine Club. Say I sent you. You'll find that many of the members have been through something similar to what you've been through. It will help."

"All right," he said, frowning at the card.

"Promise me you'll go."

"I will," he promised. "You know best."

He buttoned his coat. "Will you keep the hat? No, don't keep it. Throw it away," he said with some bravado. At the door he turned and peered past me. "You never explained the spiders."

"Oh, those? Just blood."

I watched his head bob down the nine flights of stairs. Perhaps eventually he would sleep at night and go forth in the daytime, but the important adjustments had been made: he was on the way to accepting what he was. Once again I gave thanks for night shifts. I went back to my desk and tidied Bent's file. Later I might look in at the Sunshine Club, reacquaint myself with Bent and a few faces.

Then, for a moment, I felt sour fear. Bent might encounter Mullen at the club. Mullen was another who had approached me to be cured, not knowing that the only cure was death. As I recalled that Mullen had gone to Greece months before, I relaxed—for I had relieved Mullen of his fears with the same story, the raw meat and the garlic, the parents battling over the Bible.

In fact it hadn't happened that way at all—my mother had caused the scene at the dining-room table and there had been a cross—but by now I was more familiar with the working version.

The cat scraped at the window. As I moved toward it, the cat's eyes slitted darkly and it tensed. I waited and then threw the window open.

The cat howled and fell. Nine storeys: even a cat would scarcely survive. I stood above the lights of the city, lights clustering toward the survive. dark horizon, and the tiny struggling red spiders streamed out from the window on threads, only to drift back and settle softly, like a rain of blood, on my face.

The Christmas Present

"A slightly different version of this story was broadcast on BBC Radio Merseyside on December 24, 1969; it was produced by Tony Wolfe, read by Gavin Richards, with a specially composed electronic score by Donald Henshilwood, and for these reasons the story is dedicated to them."—introduction to story in the anthology *Ghosts For Christmas*.

Written in: 1969
First published in *Nameless Places*, 1975

You scarcely notice Christmas in Liverpool, except that there are more parties. On Christmas Eve I made my way early to the pub; as I hurried along Gambier Terrace I glanced up in search of party-goers, but most of the rooms of students and writers of ephemeral verse were unlit, blackly rattling in the wind which swept up from the river around the horned tower of the Anglican cathedral and across the sloughed graveyard, recently scraped clean of graves. Still, by ten o'clock in The Grapes bottles of California Chablis were gathering on the tables; my table had collected three and a half of anonymous Riesling. Not that I knew all the people behind the names: only Bill and Les and Desmond and Jill, just back from London for Christmas, whose hand I was holding. I couldn't place the mute student on the other side of Jill; I'd caught his name and let it drift away among the stained glasses. He was one of those people you always seem to meet in the neurotics ward of O'Connor's Tavern or arguing with the Marxists at the Phil, a face everyone knows and nobody can name, and I didn't know what to do with him.

We hadn't objected when he joined us, thrust smiling hopefully against our table by the deafening scarved crowd, a drooping streamer supporting his head like a red chin strap—but he'd shown no inclination to provide a bottle. I couldn't bring myself to say 'Look, there are enough of us already'; it was Christmas. Perhaps if we waited he might go away. But at other tables groups were clutching bottles like truncheons and rising, and outside the first police cars were howling their way to Upper Parliament and Lime Streets. 'We might as well go,' I said and stood with Jill, followed by the others.

At last the student spoke. Jarred, I realised that I hadn't heard his voice, aggressive beneath the deprecating Southern whine. 'I've got a present here for someone,' he told his hands lurking under the table. 'I wanted to be sure it'd be appreciated. Shall I give it to you, then?' he asked me.

'Do I take it you've been watching me to make sure?'

'It was a nice thought,' Jill said, squeezing my hand and watching my face. 'Wasn't it?'

I knew she needed to believe in the Christmas spirit. 'Well, thank you very much,' I told the student. 'We're going back to my place for a party if you're free.'

'Great,' he said. His hands ventured forth and passed me a small box wrapped in black paper, tightly sealed and Sellotaped. 'I'd like to be there when you open it,' he said.

We forced out way through brimming tables and discussions of the art of cinema and emerged into Catherine Street. Fragmented by shadows of branches hard and sharp as black ice, we made our way through to Gambier Terrace, but Diana and Beatrice were out, for their cacti clawed at an unlit window. For a second I thought I heard the tin choirboys singing carols in the tree outside the Jacey Cinema, but as they faded, buffeted out of shape by the wind, I decided that they were trapped in a radio. Jill was peering through the hedge opposite the cathedral; beyond, the Mersey glittered, and at Birkenhead the dinosaur skeletons of cranes had come down to the water to drink in darkness. My hand was frozen around the cardboard box. I hid Jill's in my pocket and we turned into Canning Street,

As we did so I heard the student say 'Look at the face on that cathedral.'

We looked. An edge of the night-wind slipped into me as I took in the image; the tower's horns had pricked up triumphant and mocking, the long windows were eyes, drawn down and slitted into static evil. 'I wish it had a mouth. Then at least we could guess its thoughts,' I said.

'It looks as if it's shouldering its way up from the graveyards,' Jill said, and then immediately: 'Don't make me say things like that.'

'Don't worry,' I said. 'There no longer is a graveyard.'

'Thanks for trying,' said Jill. 'I've just been staring into that graveyard. If you hadn't pulled me away I might still be there. Why is it so crowded? And

why in heaven's name do they have to light it up at night?'

'Come on, Jill, this is no party mood,' I protested and hurried her back to the corner of Hope Street, the others curving back in formation and following us like a tail. 'They've cleared the graveyard out completely. I'll show you.'

'No, John, please don't!' Jill cried.

'Look, don't force her,' the student intervened. 'He's quite right, you know. No graveyard at all.'

Jill steered us back toward my flat. I nodded thanks to the student. 'What is your name, by the way?' I asked.

'I'll tell you later,' he promised.

'When you've decided in our favour?'

'If you like.'

'My God!' I shouted beerily, but Jill gripped my arm.

'Look!' she said. 'We're being followed.'

'By what?'

'Darkness.'

I persuaded myself to relax. Turning, I saw that the light at the end of Canning Street was unlit. Behind us our procession plodded; a dark figure, probably Bill, waved a bottle at me. Briefly I thought: surely there were only eight more of us in the pub? How many are there now? But as they stepped one by one over the edge of light, I saw that there were no more than eight—certainly not the few dozen dark shapes that for a moment I thought I'd seen.

When the second light went out I said quickly to Jill: 'Someone in the power station is stoned.'

'Surely they can't turn off individual lamps,' she whispered.

'Of course they can,' I said, letting her cling to me as she strode on. The third light vanished almost before we reached it, transformed into a dwindling image of brightness which receded like hope. Behind us the others shouted comments. There wasn't a car to be seen in Canning Street except the shells at the kerb, and there were two more lights ahead to be passed. Jill was almost running, snatching at the light before it was

extinguished. I gripped my present and hurried with her. Beside her the student moved with us. His face suggested an expression which I couldn't read; as it seemed about to identify itself a fist of darkness clamped over his face. We were running. His face reappeared, expressionless, and we'd reached my flat. I glanced back; the others, however many there were, arrived panting. On the steps I hesitated, staring back along the fake Regency façades; surely some of the houses had been lit when we passed? But, an incoherent singing bus weaved past on Catherine Street, my key slipped into the lock, and we piled inside.

Jill and I plunged straight into the party, filling glasses where I'd placed them ready on the mantelpiece, sweeping up my abandoned afternoon's manuscript and burying it in the bedroom beneath coats, drawing back the curtains to attract those who might still be wandering with bottles, lighting the fire and throwing up the window. A record smacked the turntable and caught the needle. A bottle drained; conversations intertwined; laughter sprang up. Someone was dancing; a corner of my Beatles poster tore from the wall, but I'd meant to throw it out a month ago. Jill and I leaned against the chiming mantelpiece and sipped. Jill saw the student before I did, standing at the open window, staring down the lightless street toward the cathedral. As the next record hung alert for the needle, Jill cried: 'Listen, everyone! John's had a present!'

'Well, open it,' Bill called.

I took the sealed box from among the glasses on the mantelpiece, but the student turned. 'No, not yet,' he said. 'Wait until midnight.'

'Why midnight?' Bill demanded.

'Christmas Day.'

'Well, that's right,' Bill agreed. 'That's tradition.'

'Tradition,' Jill hissed. I could feel her tensing.

'Come on, Jill, sit down, love,' I said.

But Bill called: 'What's wrong with tradition?'

'Oh, not tradition,' Jill said from the couch. 'Myths. How can we all stop for a couple of days and get stoned on the myth of human fellowship when people are being murdered in Vietnam?'

'Oh, come on,' Bill said, offering a bottle. 'Never mind that for now. It's Christmas.'

'In Vietnam too?'

'You can't ignore myths,' the student interrupted. 'A war is a clash between a myth and its antithesis.'

'Don't be pretentious,' Jill said.

'All right, you stay on your debating-society level, but you wait. I'll show you that myths are dangerous.'

Jill recoiled. The arrested dancers looked uneasy. 'That's a hell of a generalisation,' I intervened. 'How dangerous?'

'All belief needs is a mob to give it form,' he said. 'Listen, mate, there's nothing more frightening than people gathering round a belief. And I'll tell you why. Because if a belief exists it must have an opposite. That exists too but they try to ignore it. That's why people in a group are dangerous.'

He'd given me a present but I couldn't resist saying: 'In that case I'm surprised you came here.'

'Ah, well,' he said, 'I'm safe now.'

I think all this was above most of our heads. The second record had fallen unheard, but the touch of the needle on the third galvanised us all; we danced frenetically. Someone tried to draw the student into the dance, but he shook her off and returned to the window. As I whirled with Jill I saw him push the window up and climb into the balcony, his hair springing up against the darkness. The record spun to a climax and lost the needle, and in the suspended silence we all heard the bell.

At least, we couldn't imagine what else it might be. 'It's the cathedral. What's wrong?' Bill demanded. For the bell sounded drowned, its note boomed and then choked, muffled, swept away screaming and was engulfed. It dragged itself back, clanged unbearably loud and then dulled, thudded tonelessly in mud. We all stared at the student's intent back, but he never turned.

'It must be the electricity, like the lights,' Bill said, and was about to go when the voices began. 'Carol singers,' he said happily.

Yes, we thought, carol singers, they can't be anything else. But there seemed to be so many coming up from the cathedral, an entire choir. I didn't

recognise the tune, and I could tell that everyone was baffled, for the tune led toward recognition and then fled squealing and growling into impossible extremes, notes leaping like frogs and falling dead. The voices squirmed between the suffocated tones of the bell, voices thin and cold as the wind, thick and black as wet earth, and paced toward us up Canning Street.

'What are they singing?' Bill said desperately.

'Does it matter?' Jill muttered.

I pushed past the student and gripped the chill iron of the balcony. But Canning Street was an abyss of blackness, leading to the powerful horned form of the cathedral. I could see nothing, only hear their voices fling a contorted mass of sound toward the sky and into the earth, and wonder whether they were moving to the music. I could only imagine their faces turned up to me as they chanted and knocked at the door beneath my feet.

When I thrust my head back through the window it was too late. 'I'll go and give them something,' Bill said. 'After all, it's Christmas,' and he'd gone.

Nobody else moved. Perhaps they were right; perhaps Bill was right. The bell swung reverberating through the sky. I peered down through the mesh of the balcony. Before I could strain sight from the darkness, I heard the street door open. I listened for minutes, waiting to hear more than the clangour of the bell and the packed insistent voices. But there was nothing, except determined conversation in the room behind me, until Jill gripped my arm through the window and whispered urgently: 'John, they're in the house. They're coming upstairs.'

I dragged myself over the sill and fell into the room. I could hear the voices turn at the first landing, mount the stairs lethargically like a gigantic worm. 'Where's Bill?' I demanded.

'I don't know.'

'Quickly,' I shouted. The voices were bursting forth at the top of the stairs. 'Everyone. We'll take a collection. Give them money, Jill, you collect half.'

But she was staring aghast out of the window. I whirled. On the balcony the student bent ecstatic against the gale of sound. Jill stood, a cry blocking her mouth; her face drained of colour and wrinkled like an apple. The voices massed toward the door of the flat. 'Don't offer them money,' Jill choked. 'Give them that present.'

I lunged for the mantelpiece, thrusting bodies aside. Everyone seemed determined to ignore what was happening, to leave the decision to me; I waded through entangled conversations and clusters of faces like blank bubbles. I threw out my hand and caught up the cardboard box, and the student pinioned my arm. 'Don't touch it, you fool!' he cried. 'Not now!'

The voices were at the door, roaring a single note or a million, a sound which could never have emerged from throats but might have burst forth from a tunnel. I struggled with him. 'One moment more,' he pleaded. 'Just to see.'

And Jill shrieked and snatched the cardboard box from me and threw it into the fire.

For a moment the trembling flames were crushed, struggling, helpless. The bell crashed like tons of drowned iron; the voices squealed in triumph. Then the flames sprang up, swarmed up the corners of the box, and a minute later it puffed like rotten wood and collapsed into shapeless ash. The bell swung up into an aching silence; a draught muttered where the voices had been.

We waited until Bill knocked on the flat door. 'Why on earth did I go downstairs?' he wondered.

'So much for your myths,' Jill said to the student. 'Damn you.'

I controlled myself. 'There's one thing I want to know,' I said. 'What did you put in that box?'

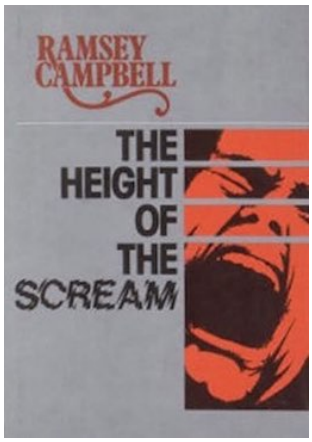
'Surely you can see that that doesn't matter,' the student said. 'Just something to give form to a belief, that's all. It was a sort of anti-Christmas present, actually. The antithesis of a Christmas present. An experiment, mate, you know. Or do you mean the actual contents of the box?'

'We don't need to know that,' I told him. 'In fact, I think Jill would rather not.' I hit him only once, but he fell.

'Here, hang on,' Bill protested. The others looked away. That I expected; but Jill clutched my shoulders and cried: 'Bring him round! Bring him round, for God's sake! How do we know where he was before he met us? How do we know he didn't give someone else a present?'

And now we can't bring him round.

Beside The Seaside



Written in: 1969
First published in *The Height Of The Scream*, 1976

Milne left the garage and began to descend the hill to the town at the edge of the sea. Above the water the sun sank like an orange windblown seed, furred by a faint mist. He'd stopped to read *Playboy* in a layby, but when he'd closed the magazine the car had coughed weakly and had barely staggered to the lip of the hill down to the sea. It would be repaired in the morning, they'd told him, and he could stay in the town. He strode past white Victorian houses wedged into the hill, balancing his case full of samples of the new perfume; below, along the beach which was a leg stretched in a *Playboy* posture, a few figures hurried through April, and a lone green car vanished up the coast road.

The town's few streets were drawn to the promenade, and in the first hotel —one of a line whose intricate verandas had been chafed into sameness by sand—he found a room. "Oh, are you a salesman, Mr. Milne?" But it wasn't an echo of the inevitable joke, for she ushered him into his room with a smile, not a grin.

Well, the room would be gone in the morning, and he might find a club for the night. But his mind shouted: good God, what a holiday! Who could leap up eager for the day between these walls like slabs of yellow sand? Who could meet his face reflected between those patterns of wood tangled as brown seaweed? Who could live beneath the pencilled misspelt sign "No drinking in bedrooms" strung between two corners of the room like "Thou God Seest Me"? Beyond the balcony the thin line of the sea was russet, but the sun was sinking fast. Yet as Milne hurried from the room he glanced speculatively at the double bed.

At the end of the hall a net curtain unfurled across the window like a wing drifting forth from a cocoon. Milne locked his door and glanced up. A woman crouched on the ray of light along the floor, where the curtain's shadow bunched and spread. No, he hadn't seen her; he'd remembered

seeing her, or remembered an insomniac notion, for the shadow whipped away and the floor was bare. A strange idea, given even his previous sleepless night in a disembowelled bed: it wasn't as if she had been crouching, more as if she had been a sketch glimpsed as she folded in half. He passed through the ray of light, his shoes crunching on sand.

In the dining-room, among the marine prints and the teapots in their knitted coats, sat groups Milne might have predicted: a family holidaying and laughing out of season, two pensioners and a stained wheelchair, a typist who couldn't afford Majorca. The last, a timid eager teenager who smiled with the family, sat alone. "I'll put you two together," the landlady said, taking Milne across to her. "You look right as rain now," she told the girl.

"Have you been ill?" Milne asked as he waited for his chop.

"A bit. I'm all right now, though. My friend went on a coach trip and she won't be back till late. I didn't want to spoil her week."

"How do you intend to pass the time?" Milne felt that was unequivocally conversational. Her nose was shiny, and fifteen years ago—at her age, in fact—he'd rejected women with shiny noses.

"There's not much to do down here," she said. "You can always walk along the prom, I suppose."

"No doubt you could."

"There always seem to be a lot of people on the beach at night. And other people watching."

"You've more or less sold me on an early night," Milne said, intending no ambiguity.

"Did you have to have a double bed? We got one even though we didn't want it."

"Oh, I'm surprised," Milne said.

But the room couldn't sustain an early night. Perhaps clubs were beyond her experience, Milne thought as he emerged to search, strolling along a quarter-mile of promenade to the first turn, past flurries of sand and shifting embryonic humps of the beach. In the inky light half the freaks of breeze and sand might have been embracing.

He made his way up the first hill. Already crumpled newspapers and trodden chips gathered outside the fish-and-chip shops; further on, buckets

and spades clanked against a tube of fitful pink light in a shop doorway, and in an amusement arcade glowing plastic men leapt up and howled as they were shot. An alcoholic twitched away from a cracked Woolworth's window as Milne approached, snarling "Now gerraway, boy! Gerraway, won't you?" and poking forth fingers coated with wet sand which Milne saw had smeared lines on the window.

Milne cut through an alley, past a lone string of garish cardboard fat women, and found himself in what might have been the same street. No, there was a cinema; the posters peeled like wallpaper in an abandoned house to advertise *Bullitt* or perhaps a tattered *Sound of Music*. Bored by the colourless night, Milne quickened his pace. Beyond the grey shop windows, the glowing gibbet of a neon sign, "The Submarine Club". But when he came closer he saw the groups of shaved heads jostling down the steps, boys whose hair was minute tips like grains of sand, and the pursued groups of factory girls, vanguards of a new and equally disturbing race of close-cropped blondes. As he turned away, however, a Jaguar drew up and its driver coaxed forth a girl. Milne watched engrossed, as he might have pored over a *Playboy* centrefold. Even beneath the goosenecked sodium lamps she glittered, turning a cold facet to dazzle the defensive skinheads, whose laughter shattered. She was intricately perfect as a brooch, and Milne wavered in the shadows. Then she moulded back into the car and was gone.

Milne walked down toward the sea. Above a shop in whose doorway lay a broken plastic windmill, a room flickered around a television. He thought about the girl: during the night he knew her surfaces would melt from her, dangerous as ice over quicksand. He didn't envy the driver of the Jaguar. Neither, he realised with an insight he could usually avoid, did he envy himself.

He reached the promenade. A half-mile to his left it merged with the coast road which he would take tomorrow for the next large town, Liverpool. He turned in the opposite direction, toward the hotel. A chill breeze crept across the beach, which glimmered beneath a moon that bulged out briefly like white flesh from between strips of cloud. The sea was seeping darkly over the horizon. Yes, of course the old jokes were accurate; he had his transient women as he drove around the country, but hurriedly before he sped on to outdistance ennui or worse, reflection. It frightened him how fluid housewives were beneath their sleepy "Good morning," how their lives

could slacken with their muscles. Sometimes he envied them their chameleon natures, although he suspected what that revealed of him. Sometimes he saw himself as a lone traveller—but he was no cowboy, for what did he leave except often a sample of perfume, and what did he take with him except some shreds of memory sticking to him like burrs, all anonymously smelling like his suitcase of the latest perfume?

"What do you want?" he demanded as he leaned on the railing and peered out at the sea. On the drowned sand, patches of mud glistened like dead bruised jellyfish. Perhaps ideally he needed a woman whose aspects he could fit together at leisure, like a jigsaw, fascinated then triumphant—not the eager typist, not the determinedly brittle girl in the Jaguar, for they would draw him down into themselves. "Go on then, where is she?" he demanded and pressed his lips together, for he was talking to the sea, whose refusal to be defined and violent ecstasy he detested. Not that this was violent; rather was it an oily sea which slumped sluggishly across the beach. That must be why so many couples lay down there, darkly huddled along the mile of beach. My God, they must be damp and daft, he thought. The grains of sand which settled on his own feet were clammy enough. Or perhaps they weren't couples. In the feeble bursts of moonlight it was difficult to see. Certainly one embrace on a glistening stain of mud was of coils of rope and limbs of sand.

He moved back from the railing and halted, disturbed. Along the railing, as far as he could see up the promenade, figures were leaning, peering out across the beach. He couldn't count them. The nearest man must have felt Milne's gaze, for he jerked out of his inertia and hurried away, almost running. The others still gazed down. What could they see? Milne wondered. Momentarily, before he erased it in fury, he had an autoerotic image of sand: once, gazing at a handful of sand slipping between his cupped palms, he'd thought how like a vagina it looked. Balls, he told himself, that's not the explanation. From what he'd seen of the town he could imagine that watchers had nothing else to do; why, even the sand which surged up the slope of stone below the promenade and trickled about his feet was more alive than they. He shook his toes free of the amoeba of sand, but already it glittered on his legs. His trousers were covered with the drifting grains; he might as well take the chance to slip beneath the railings and stride toward the sea. But he turned instead and strode toward the hotel,

past the sign of a deserted taxi rank through waves of sand which washed across the pavement.

It was close to midnight. The hotel was silent and paler than the moon. Over the table full of women's magazines and *Reader's Digests,* Milne stared blankly back at himself through the lounge door; his hair had yellowed. He hurried past the scatter of redirected letters on the hall table, past the vase of plastic ferns, and upstairs.

Before the entangled mirror in his room he combed sand from his hair; grains sprinkled whispering on the glass top of the dressing-table. The hotel was still quiet; the jovial family had taken a tour, the old couple and the typist were doubtless asleep. He lifted the window a little. A roll of moon squeezed out between two tight clouds, and Milne glimpsed the line of figures propped intent at the railing, above the beach where sand lifted, palely whirling in the breeze. Slashed by a blade of the wind which pierced between window and frame, Milne undressed hurriedly and burrowed into bed.

A shout awoke him. Perhaps it echoed down a dream; perhaps it was the last laugh of the jovial family. Disorientated by sleep, Milne felt without believing that he was walled into a sandpit. The sheets weighed on him heavily as sand and rustled like grains. He shifted restlessly, his eyes closing. Then he blinked. Half-awake or not, he was sure he'd caught sight of something which had reared up on the balcony like a semi-opaque wave and vanished.

But the white sky streamed past and nothing else moved. He hung alert for a few minutes, then sank into sleep again.

Ants massed on his face, crawling. They pressed into his mouth, gritting between his teeth. He threw off the sheets and awoke—at least, he was sure that was the order of his actions. His face prickled and chafed against the pillow; his tongue grated against his teeth. He jerked upright and clutched the light cord. As he pulled it and light blazed his fingers recoiled. They were excruciatingly gritty with sand.

He swung to sit on the edge of the bed, and grains rained on the carpet. The sand must have crept through the window on the breeze. He heaved the window shut, half-noticing that the air no longer moved but was an invisible block of ice. As he peered out at the faint dilution of night on the horizon, a shadow swept across the room behind him.

He stared at the lightbulb. Had the shadow been cast by an insect on the bulb? Somehow he associated the shadow with insects, a whole swarm of them crawling across the wall. He didn't intend to return to bed until he'd found the intruder.

Dressed, he began to search. In one corner of the room he killed a torpid earwig; in another he found a tiny blackened cog from a child's toy. Beneath the bed he found what seemed to be a plastic mouse's tail, and either a cat or the child had scraped the bed's legs to the bone. He peered beneath the dressing-table. The bottom drawer had sprinkled splinters on the carpet, but otherwise there was nothing. His face lifted in the mirror, and behind him the "No drinking" sign moved.

It couldn't have been an insect. One side of the string had risen and fallen back. It couldn't have been a swarm—yet unless his eyes were failing, one corner of the room had slipped out of focus because its entire surface was alive with minute specks. He caught up a shoe and rushed at the wall.

Nothing. But the corner of his eye caught movement, a swirl of shadow across the window. He stood in front of the bed, instinctively protective. A diagonal of movement streamed back to the first wall. In a second the wall scintillated like an anthill. Milne snarled incoherently and threw the shoe, then struggled to remove its twin. As he did so he saw in the mirror the reflected shoe strike the reflected wall, beneath a swarming yellow oval which might have been the unstable impression of a girl's face.

The wall screamed.

It might have been only the image of a scream that tore his mind. It was an echo, or a memory, before he could tell. Already it had disintegrated into a hiss like rain and pattered on the carpet. He was on his feet before he could think and clutching for the door. But his feet skidded on shifting sand and his nerves tore, for the doorknob was acrawl with grains unbearable as powdered glass.

He stared at his fingers, shocked not to see blood, and lunged for the window. The floor rolled apart beneath his feet. He fell. The floor and the walls were whispering voicelessly. He scrabbled to his feet, his fingers scraping together like rusty iron, and thrust at the window.

On the pane, against the dawn, stood the bed; and the sheets moved.

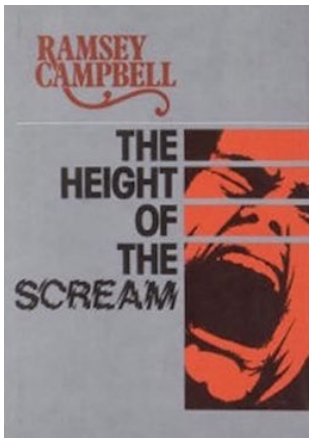
Milne turned as though in treacle and saw the girl's face on the pillow. No, it was too shapeless for a tanned girl's face; it must be a stain. But it moved, although it had fallen in half. The lower half of the face, from the upper lip downwards, swarmed into shape and crept up the pillow to meet the cheekbones. And the sheets rose convulsively, furiously, as if limbs were drawing themselves up only to disintegrate and collapse again. As Milne watched mutely, the crawling particles of the face massed into a new pattern, and the mouth smiled.

He was across the room in one leap. The doorknob was clean. He fumbled and wrenched the door open. Behind him, a weight struck the floor with a spread flat thud which at once became a pursuing hiss. He stumbled limping down the stairs, his shoeless foot flayed by sand, and fell out into the dawn.

He peered about weakly. A quarter of a mile away one taxi slept at the taxi rank. If Milne could reach the garage he could drive back later to collect his suitcase. He began to hobble along the promenade, shivering in a breeze which scooped up the sand from the pavement into his face. A few minutes and the dawn would splay forth. But now he could see little in the flecked crawling light; only the indistinct vista of the promenade dropping one edge to the beach, and at some distance still the taxi, guarded by a dim figure. Milne limped forward, brushing at his face, somehow unable to bring himself to call out or wave. There was so much sand in his eyes, like desiccated tears. Heedless of his chafed foot, he began to run.

1970

Second Chance



Written in: 1970
First published in *The Height Of The Scream*, 1976

No, take it away! Take it away!

I'm all right now. You won't have to give me the needle, just so long as you don't try to show me—you know. I'll be calm. No, really, I'll tell you everything that happened. I'm a writer, you know—well, when I have the time. Oh, if you're sure it'll make things easier—Yes, you're right, I do feel better. Don't worry, I'll tell you everything in order. Just as if I were writing a story.

Well, it was yesterday morning and I'd had just a few hours' sleep. About four o'clock, I'd say. I'd been waiting up for this friend of mine, Terry McEnery from Liverpool. He was supposed to be staying with me in Birmingham overnight before he hitched his way to Brichester to see this girl Lorraine. Listen, before I go on, I wonder if you could draw the curtains because it's getting dark and I think I can see—That's right. Thanks.

So it's four o'clock in the morning and my arm and my eyes feel as if there's a ton of water on them and around them, and this voice on the phone asks for me and says "Were you expecting a Mr. Terry McEnery to visit you tonight, sir?"

I thought it was a joke. Wouldn't you? Anyway, I said yes, who's that.

"This is the motorway police, sir," the voice says, and it could still have been Terry choking his throat and doing a pale Harry Secombe. "We're sorry to trouble you. I'm afraid your friend has been in an accident."

Four o'clock in the morning, remember, and everything's heavy, even the light, and all I want to do is cut my way through this weight that's leaning on me, so I say: "Is he dead?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

Well, my mind seemed to go taut, and I blurted out: "Do you want me to come down now?"

"We'd be very grateful, sir." I'm sure they weren't expecting me to, and I didn't know Terry all that well. He wasn't what you'd call a friend, actually. Too irresponsible. Drank and drove, came asking you for money; both things I don't respect. But it was too late to do anything except take down the directions and get dressed and drive up the motorway.

It was dawn before I found them, because I'd assumed he would be coming up from Liverpool, when he was on the other side of the motorway in a stolen car. So I had to find the next loop under the motorway and drive back a mile, waiting to see that blue light flicking on top of the ambulance like a nervous tic. And all the cars edging past and rushing away to merge their lights with the dawn. And a flag drooping against a sky the color of rain above a restaurant like a hospital ward. Terry's car was slewed round across the motorway and crushed against the concrete support of the bridge like a tin kicked against a wall. It was a Ford Anglia. There was half a whisky bottle under the driver's seat and they were picking the rest out of Terry. I don't know where his face had gone.

They'd found my name and address on the letter in his pocket; I don't know how they made out my name through the blood. They gave me a cup of coffee out of a flask and asked me a few questions, and they said they'd traced the car to Brichester and lost it again, until one of the motorway patrol had seen him driving and drinking from that bottle and tried to flag him down. No, I said, I'd no idea what had taken him to Brichester. Of course I knew it was Lorraine.

Well, I felt it would be best if I told her about Terry. But the odd thing was, as soon as I made that decision I wanted very much to see her again, although I'd almost forgotten her. I'd seen her only once, when I ran Terry down to Brichester six months ago. He was hitching then, but three hours after he left he came back and said nobody would give him a lift. So when I met Lorraine that time I felt somehow that as he'd imposed on me I had some rights with her. Not quite like that, no—just to take her out or something. But I only met her briefly, in a pub, with Terry, and I don't remember much, but what I do recall is very vivid. She had this little triangular face you wanted to cup in your hand, and lips so pink you felt you'd have to part them gently, so they wouldn't wither. And she was always resting her fingertips on the tendons of Terry's hand when she wanted him to speak to her—you could see his eyes come alive. Yet I wasn't at all sure

of their relationship. I remember I wondered about that all the way back to Birmingham. So I felt that if I drove down to tell her about Terry, I might have more of a chance than I dared think possible.

On the way to Brichester I fell asleep in a layby, and when I woke up with the sun on someone's windscreen shattering my eyes I felt as if I were falling. I'd slumped halfway into the passenger seat, you see, and when I sat up the world seemed to tilt onto its side. I remembered I was on my way to see Lorraine, but that only lengthened my fall. I hadn't had much to eat—only one of those dry triangles of sandwich in cellophane you can buy in the dawn on the motorway, that look as if they've been created by computer—and I felt I should get my strength and my bearings back. So I drove to a pub a few miles outside Brichester, through this sparkling green landscape with still a few feathers of mist caught between the trees on the hills, a landscape which somehow looked incomprehensible. I was driving automatically, safely enough, yet it was as if there were something sleeping on the surface of my mind, between me and the world.

I had a ploughman's lunch and a beer at the pub. The bar was full of Toby jugs and equestrian prints and bright brass warming-pans, and I was feeling surer of myself by the time I noticed there was a phone. So I looked up the number of the College of Education hostel where Lorraine lived.

Her room was next to the phone, though I didn't know that then. I recognised her voice at once: it had a faint Gloucestershire burr, just enough to soften her speech. Though her voice wasn't so soft as she said "Yes, who's that?"

But I'd only given my name when she said "Well, well. Are you coming here?"

"In a while," I said. "I'm just eating." I felt that I should tell her about Terry when I met her, not over the phone.

"Take your time," she said. I waited for her to go on, but when at last I opened my mouth to think of something to say she'd gone.

I knew I'd mishandled the exchange. I returned to the bar and had another beer. Well, a few more. It occurred to me that I might have to pursue her through crowds of girls I'd never met before I could talk to her alone.

When I eventually found the hostel at the edge of Lower Brichester it was mid-afternoon and the hills were beginning to moulder with mist. There

were several hostels, each resembling a stack of three long bungalows, but Victoria Hostel was the one I wanted. I parked by a sign saying NO VISITORS AFTER 11 P.M., and went in.

There was a pay phone on the wall and leading off at right angles two corridors of dull green doors. There was a table with a visitor's book and another headed LATE PASSES, and on one of the doors hung a painted sign: PAM IS IN—BEWARE! I turned it over, but it read only PAM IS WATCHING—BEWARE! Down the stairs drifted the smell of fish and chips in newspaper, echoing voices and ironic cheers and someone's battle with a guitar and a Dylan song, but I couldn't hear Lorraine.

So I made my way up the left-hand corridor, past a portrait of the principal with her face turned to the wall, until I encountered two girls pinning a Luther King Memorial Debate poster to a noticeboard, a tall Jenny and a tiny Anita. They pointed me back the way I'd come, and Anita said: "Lorraine mentioned you were coming."

"No she didn't, Neat!" her friend said, but I was already on my way, not bothering to think what she might have meant, nor yet reflecting how much they appealed to me. I came to a door and knocked on the sign DID YOU KNOCK?

"Yes?" Lorraine called. "Me," I shouted back. But there was silence until the door opened and Lorraine demanded: "Yes, what?"

"It's rather a long story," I said warily.

Her eyes came alive for a second. "Of course I know you," she said. "You're Gerard." All of a sudden her eyes were dimmer than ever. She looked years older than twenty-one. "You phoned, didn't you," she said.

"A few hours ago."

"It wasn't a good line," she said. 'I thought you said Terry."

So that was that. I stood on the threshold, waiting for an exit line.

"Well, how do you do, anyway," she said, and shook my hand as she might have held up a laddered stocking. When she stared at me as she would have looked at the stocking I said: "Sorry to have troubled you. Nice to see you again," and turned to go.

I took one step and my foot wasn't there. I lay stunned on the floor while the wall drummed against my head. It was as if someone had caught my

foot and twisted it behind me, yet the someone had been me. Do you think you could get rid of that crack between the curtains? It must be pitch-black out there. Thanks.

Anyway, I heard Lorraine gasp, then she was kneeling by me. "Are you ill?" she cried.

"I hadn't thought so," I said, fighting to slow down the pulse of my head.

"You'd better come and lie down," she said. Her hand beneath my elbow was as delicate as I could have imagined, and the blue flares of her skirt rippled about her thighs, but her lips were fretted with toothmarks. "Have you been drinking?" she demanded.

"Not enough to matter," I said, but I was no longer sure.

She led me through her living room, full of bookcases of Sartre and Beckett and Malcolm Lowry, into a small bedroom with a sink and watched while I lay down beneath a window the width of the back wall. "Maybe we should talk," I suggested as she betrayed her intention to leave.

"If you like." She sat on a chair by the sink. "I thought Terry was coming up to see you before he went back to Liverpool," she said.

"No, I don't think so." I could go no further; my head wouldn't let me.

"Well, perhaps he only said it as a parting shot, God knows why," she mused. "But really, Gerry, I couldn't have put up with him. Nobody could have expected me to."

"What went wrong?" I asked.

"The car he used to get here, for a start. He'd stolen it."

I suppose that was my cue. I suppose I should have realised that if she hadn't still cared about him she would occasionally have spoken of something else. But I preferred to wait and be sure of what I suspected: that she'd left him for good.

"That was just a detail, mind you," she said. "The car was to convince me that he had a job and that I could join him in Liverpool at the end of term. Not that he didn't try to wriggle out of saying he had a job. He'd keep anything back from you if he thought he could gain by it. Right, I told him, I'm not going to be your mother. That happens, you know. It wasn't so much being his mother, it was that I didn't have any rights. Oh, he brought me things every so often, but how was I to know they weren't stolen?"

I stood up. I would feel stronger even if my head felt worse. "I don't think you'll see him again," I told her.

You see, I hadn't realised that she knew so little about life, about herself. "Do you know where he is?" she demanded. And before I could reply my skull clenched and I sank back on the bed. "No," I said, but it was more a general repudiation.

"You'd better try and sleep," she said. "I've got to go out for food. I'll get you some aspirins."

I must have slept for several hours. When I awoke I stared out of the window and the field I remembered spread out to the hills wasn't there. All I could see was a high white wall pressed up against the light from the window. I didn't feel much closer to myself when I realised it was fog. I didn't feel at all like meeting whoever had knocked at the outer door. But Lorraine was in the other room, and a moment later I hear her talking to Jenny and Anita. It was odd: momentarily I knew them but couldn't recognise her, then I knew it was Lorraine's voice and theirs were unfamiliar. Just hold on, let me think about that. No, it's gone.

I heard Jenny asking to borrow some coffee and saying "We thought you'd have come to the debate."

"I wasn't all that interested," Lorraine said. 'If I'd had the energy I might have gone downtown. My God, no, I couldn't have. Wait a minute." She hurried in to look at me. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

I thought I might have a second chance. "Rough," I said.

"I suppose you'll have to sleep here." She hissed through the door: "Any rooms vacant tonight?"

Jenny came in. "Hello again," she said. "We heard you'd fallen. I know Liz is away tonight, Lorraine. But listen, it's getting late. You'd better hide him before the chains go on."

'It's the system, you see," Anita told me as I stood up. "If we want to be out after eleven we have to list in the book where we're going to be, make and number of car and all this crap. And all visitors, for which read men, have to be kicked out before eleven."

"Assuming, you see, that there are things one doesn't do before eleven," Lorraine said.

"All rules enforced by the warden of the hostel," Jenny said. "Not that she's repressed or a hypocrite. It's rather worse than that. She simply does what she's paid to do."

They ushered me upstairs. Two girls ran by in pursuit of a third squealing student teacher who had apparently wrecked their beds. Adult third-formers, you might say. You see, I blame that hostel for much of what happened. Treat people as a herd and one day you'll be stampeded. Treat people like children and some will be happy to play, others will decide they'd rather choose less Victorian parents or simply that they can't stand whoever has forcibly adopted them. And then you wonder why they smash the system with all the immaturity you've wished upon them. Oh, Jenny and Anita seemed to have preserved themselves, but Lorraine—I felt Lorraine was a theorist with ambitions to live but no experience. When they said goodnight to me outside my room for the night, Lorraine said: "You could stay in my room but it wouldn't be worth it." I don't know whether that was for the benefit of the others. But I remembered Terry outlined by blood and wondered whether she could cause suicide by inexperience.

Well, it was a square room with portraits of Che Guevara and Tariq Ali on the wall, Dylan records piled in the corner by a record-player fingerprinted in white paint, a scrapbook of cuttings on John Wayne, an electric torch and some candles, GOOD MORNING COMRADE stencilled across the mirror over the sink. There were straw chairs and a red settee like a worn-out machine with a rusty spring hanging down one leg, but I didn't feel like sitting and I knew I shouldn't go out of the room. I would have locked the door but there wasn't a lock—it was the same in all the rooms. I peered out of the window at the road past the hostel, but it had been erased and the great grey page hanging outside the pane was blank. So I went to bed.

It's all right, I'm going on. Don't worry, I feel fine. I woke up at heaven knows what hour. Someone had dragged a sheet of light away from my face. It took me a while to realise it would have been a car's headlights reflected on the ceiling. All this falling asleep, you see—half my time was spent trying to get back into situations. Then I leapt up in bed. I'd left my car parked in front of the hostel, where it was bound to be noticed. I just sat there and gaped, and that car headlight came sweeping back and probed out of the fog like a searchlight. Instinctively I shrank back, and as I did so I

saw the light stretch to touch and run up the far wall of the room. And on it there stood a man's shadow.

Well, the first thing I thought of was the unlocked door. I wrenched at the light-cord and of course the room was empty. After a few minutes I figured out that the shadow must have been my own, not standing at all but just with its torso stretched. But I couldn't help thinking about it as I dressed, because it had been trembling like I reflection in a pool or—well, more like a bubble about to burst. Maybe I'd been trembling in bed. No, I'm not trembling now.

I couldn't see my car from the window. The fog had sliced off everything except a strip of grass like a drowned grey carpet. All I could see was my shadow, faceless yet intent against the wall of fog. Intent—well, intense then. It felt intense, and it seemed separate from me, because it was too big. I felt as if my own shadow were hidden within this other. Well, I turned away deliberately, and I was sure I saw the shadow drop to the ground. It was trying to copy my movement, of course. Then I became convinced that it had shrunk, as if what had surrounded it had withdrawn. I started edging back and forth in front of the window to recapture that first shadow, until I realised they might see me. No, I don't know what relevance this has. It's just that I can't forget it.

Yes, perhaps I do need that now. Thanks. Much better, thanks.

Well, I took the torch with me and tiptoed downstairs. The back of the principal's portrait looked threatening, and all the green doors looked tense, about to burst open. But I reached the entrance and let myself out.

The car was still standing forlornly where I'd left it; I didn't even need the torch to track it down. Perhaps the warden hadn't seen it in the fog. The road outside the hostel sloped, and I managed to coax the car down the hill without using the engine. But by now the fog was almost pressing its face against the windscreen. I couldn't drive, as I'd half-proposed after coming so far, and I certainly didn't intend to sleep in the car under such conditions. So I eased the car into a side turning, past a black tree which materialised like a detail in a painting under renovation, and hurried back to the hostel.

And the door wouldn't open. I wasn't going back to the car; I made for Lorraine's window. At the last moment I remembered not to tap on the pane; my car murmuring downhill might have disturbed the warden and my tapping would alert her. Instead, I flashed the torch-beam into Lorraine's

bedroom. I couldn't see her, but I saw the torchlight patting and fumbling at the wall at the foot of her bed, like the vague pleas of a feeble ghost. It occurred to me without any basis that I might be imitating Terry. Eventually I did tap, but Lorraine never moved. So I stood back from the window, and a face peered out at me.

Must you nod like that? I know you're listening. No, it wasn't Lorraine's face. It must have been my own, though for a moment I didn't recognise it, because it gleamed like a white plastic mask, and it looked half-melted—but as I moved closer it approached, until we met at the pane, and when I retreated again it was pasted pallidly on top of my reflected body. I know it should have been. I know that.

The entrance door was open when I reached it. I suppose it had been opened surreptitiously to let someone in. I scurried upstairs on tiptoe and huddled back into bed. That's all I remember. Except that it felt as if what had been sleeping on my brain before had slipped down onto my face. I mean, it was a cold night.

Yes, I woke up next morning. Are you trying to be funny? I—what the hell, I left the hostel before anyone was up, and felt safe at last.

Take it away! No, I didn't really think you were going to pick it up, but stay away from it, please. Why? Well, for God's sake—No, all right. All right, I haven't explained. Just stay away from the desk.

I woke up and it felt as if there were an entire body asleep within the confines of mine. Perhaps it was me. I don't know what I mean. I had one sharp thought: the sun was beginning to thrust through the mist, Lorraine would be awake by now, she had some money I could borrow. I don't think I wondered why.

When Lorraine opened her door she didn't speak. She simply threw her arms around my shoulders and dragged me into her. At last she whispered: "I'm so glad you're here."

I disentangled my mouth from her hair. You see, exactly as if I were writing a story. I could have stood there not knowing but I asked: "What's happened?"

"Nothing, now," she said. Nothing. Nothing. "It's so coincidental, you wouldn't believe," she said. "That friend of yours is asleep upstairs—you know, the one from Birmingham. Gerard."

I think I just stood there, waiting for everything to fall back into place. "What's coincidental," she was saying, "is that you're wearing exactly the same clothes. Ah, your face gives you away. You've already seen Gerard, you've borrowed his clothes and you're not letting on. Look, you must try not to borrow so much."

I know I was backing away by then. "Terry?" she said miserably. "You're not being jealous, are you? Terry, there's no reason for you to be jealous of Gerard."

I just walked out of the hostel and up the road and I thought of nothing at all. I suppose the car is still back there. Yes, I went into that snack bar and threw an ashtray into the mirror behind the counter, but I don't know why. I didn't see anything. Yes, of course I know my name.

No doubt you want to play word games now. I knew there'd be something like that. As you like, but one thing—I'd be grateful if you'd take that mirror off your desk and put it away somewhere. Take it away, please. Take it away!

Writer's Curse

Written In: 1970
First published in *Myrddin*, 1981
Also published in: *Inconsequential Tales*

I looked up from the last line of handwriting, which was tight and nervous as a tongue between teeth. Dunn was conscientiously bubbling ink into and out of his pen beneath the theatrical gesture of the pink desk-lamp, but I saw that he was impatient for my comments.

"You have an undoubted ability," I said, "for involving your reader in the situation."

"Thank you very much," he said to the bookcase in front of him, but his eyes expected more.

"But," I interrupted. I'm never too kind to apprentice writers: the illusion of achieved ambition stunts them. "But. You pile so much into your stories that the tension breaks. And vivid as it is, it's derivative."

"Oh?" His head snapped up with his voice. "From whom?"

"Well, your white figure hopping along the beach has hopped out of M. R. James. Your faces in the sea you've fished out of Hope Hodgson. And your faces on the wind are someone else's story."

"Whose?" he demanded, turning his back on the cartons of magazines crowded against the pipes that bulged beneath the paper roses of the wallpaper.

"Mine, as a matter of fact."

At that he withdrew into the shadows beyond the downcast circle of light. I knew he had no answer now, but saw no reason to lend him one. A warm breeze which smelled of the cooling grass of the bowling-green fingered the curtains and let them droop. Dunn slumped mute, faceless, his shadowed hands struggling in his pockets, and a butterfly which should have been asleep flickered on the lampshade, blushing translucently. I listened to its frail questing patter on the shade, and without warning Dunn flung out a disembodied brilliant arm and crushed the butterfly in his fist.

"Nor have you much feeling for beauty," I said sharply, shocked.

"I'm not a moth at anyone's flame," he shouted. "You don't need to tell me I can write!"

"I've told you so several times, and it wasn't a moth," I said. "Look, you want an editor's opinion, not mine. I've given you enough addresses."

"And I'll try them, don't you worry," he said harshly.

"Good." The hairs on his arm on the lamplit desk were blurred bright wires; I felt bound to try to stop his trembling. "Look, I've told you that your stuff is vivid," I said. "Sell a few and then you'll have time to concentrate on discipline."

"Discipline," I heard him mutter as I left. When I'd picked my way over the tangled carpet in the hall, past the shattered patch of soiled plaster next to the disembowelled pay phone, I was glad of the summer night. I doubled back beneath Dunn's window, along the privet hedge painstakingly whitewashed by the moon, and made my way across the bowling-green to the pavilion. Its windows were boarded, but a few boards had been prised away and replaced by long strips of darkness. The railing of the veranda gave beneath my elbows as if jointed, and I gazed into the trees of the park, brushed together by warm shadow. Then Dunn leaned from his sill. "I shouldn't stand there," he called. "You never know what might be in that pavilion. Faces in the dark." I supposed he had to shape his material from something, but it was as I'd said: he had no feeling for beauty, no ability for form, no sense of peace.

A fortnight later, since I hadn't heard from him, I returned to his flat. The front door was open. The hall was a battle of sound; the landlady's kettle shrieked, dogs struggled over my feet and into the sunlight as the landlady scooped them out of her rooms with a frying-pan. "Out with you, the lot of you. And you make sure your friend goes out too," she bellowed at me. "Sitting inside on a day like this! The idea!"

Dunn was hunched over his table, constricted among the cartons and bookshelves, much as he'd gathered himself protectively around his notebook, patched elbows thrust out as a warning when first I'd met him in the pub. It had taken time and beer to convince him that my interest was genuine. Now there was no reply in his eyes to my greeting. But I didn't intend the day to be dimmed; I threw up the freckled window and watched

for a moment the bowls rolling about the green, trying to dislodge indelible dabs of sunlight from their backs. When I turned to Dunn, two frowning slits were watching me beneath the black rim of his spectacles.

He slapped a letter down on my side of the desk. "I've had that story back," he said.

I might have written the editor's letter myself; I'd said it all two weeks ago. "Well, I did advise you," I pointed out. "Never mind. Most people start out with more rejection slips than manuscripts. I'm sure you can still make this story work."

But he was staring at his finger, on which he was balancing an ink-bottle drained pale. "You don't know that editor, by any chance?"

"He's had a couple of my things."

"You wouldn't have written to him about my story?"

"Good Lord, no." I laid my hand on the desk, a gesture of honesty. "Why on earth should I have done that?"

He clutched the bottle like a grenade. "Because you said I'd stolen your ideas! To get your own back! I know my story's good!" Before I could retreat he hurled the bottle. It shattered close to my fingers, and one fragment flew like a tiny jagged hatchet-blade to bury itself in my wrist. Furious, I pulled it out, and it rocked back and forth in triumph on the desk, a thin thread of blood settling like a ruby in its curve.

"I'm sorry," Dunn said. "I apologise. That didn't do any good."

"Your talent for observation is developing," I said sourly.

"She's got Elastoplast downstairs." As he hurried away, he seemed preoccupied.

In the hush, bowls clicked distantly; a cloud fluttered at the sun and fled. When Dunn returned, disappointed that I wouldn't let him place the sticking-plaster, he said "I've just had an idea for a story."

"Really."

"Well, you know," he explained apologetically, "ideas don't choose their time to introduce themselves. Would you like to read it? I think this one might get through to you. And after that I won't need to trouble you again."

I had myself had fits of uncreative fury in the face of obstacles; I edged toward forgiving him for the ink-bottle. Besides, he'd become overwhelmingly eager, and I hoped for an impressive story. "So long as you keep your hands off ink-bottles this time," I said.

"Don't worry," Dunn said. "I won't even let you see the ink."

The following week I had a card from him, rather like an invitation to a private view. Beneath a moon nibbled by fat clouds the pavilion half exhibited and snatched back its shadow, and I wondered in passing whether Dunn had shrugged off his obsession with the place. His window was a square of dim pink light, pasted like a square on the house. He let me in, smiling broadly—"She's at her Bingo"—and ushered me upstairs.

A chair stood ready for me at the desk; the desk-lamp bent its head over the first page. Dunn led me by the elbow to his story. "I think you'll lose yourself in this one," he said, grinning. As he took his place in an emaciated armchair facing me across the desk I glanced about, perhaps irrationally, for pens, ashtrays, bottles, any objects which might forswear their domestic calm and prove their loyalty to Dunn. His head ducked puppet-like beneath the rim of light; his gaze fastened brightly, eagerly on me. I closed the pink cone of light about me and sat down to read.

"—He sat down to read. Around him the room gave a mute cry of warning; the cartons of magazines seemed on the point of mounting to barricade the window, the frame of the window itself tensed as if to contract and wall out what he ignored beyond the pane. Moonlight sucked back like a misted breath behind a cloud—the edge of inexorable darkness. Now the park would be a single massed suffocating blot, he thought, and then the nerves of his ear strained toward the window, for outside he could hear the footsteps of a crowd. Running. A crowd running on boards. No, they weren't running; rather they were milling about, confined, like horses terrified now they had been plunged into darkness. But the terror was not theirs; it was soon to be his—"

"You've certainly improved," I said. "Why, I can almost hear—" and my mouth let the words drift away, for Dunn had vanished.

I twisted the desk-lamp toward the room. Shadows lifted and stretched from cartons; shadows drew out the arms of the armchair like rubber, pulled them to snapping before they slumped back. But the room was empty. Outside, across the bowling-green, I could hear quick overlapping

footsteps. While I had been engrossed, Dunn must have slipped out, grinning. It was a good joke; it proved the power of his writing. I crossed to the window to call him back, and threw the sash high.

The bowling-green was an abstract expanse of grey, squared off at the pavilion. The green was bare—yet out there, close to me, the footsteps continued.

The joke was more sustained, then; perhaps a shade obsessive. Dunn was hidden somewhere nearby, tramping rapidly on the spot. Well, I would turn the joke. I picked up the desk-lamp and led its flex to the window.

The circle of light fell into the garden, which was deserted, and moved outward. On the black privet hedge, favoured leaves sprang up green. From there a stain of darker green spread across the grass, dimming and unfocussing as it approached the pavilion. Surely there wasn't just one set of footsteps; had Dunn brought his friends with him? The faint blurred oval of light drifted off the bowling-green and, when I strained my eyes, lent the pavilion a faint brown tinge. I steadied the lamp to coax back the light, and at the pavilion something pale moved.

Ah, Dunn. Even when the light lay inert on the bowling-green I could see the white egg of a face framed between two boards across a window. I lifted the light toward the building. I had barely time to think: if he's inside the pavilion how did he get through the boards over the door?—when the light framed the building again and as if on cue half a dozen pale featureless eggs clustered into the space between the boards.

While I watched, unbelieving, more of the eggs crowded into the space. I thought distractedly of those myriad eggs one finds in dead trees. But I knew these were faces. Paralysed, I imagined the unseen bodies piling over one another in the dark.

I was still staring when the first pale shape squeezed forth like a drop of poison from between the boards and dropped struggling to the ground.

Four more had burst forth before I realised what drew them. I clapped my hand over the lamp and threw it on the desk. Around me the room swayed drunkenly with shadow, but I knew what was solid; I leapt for the door. It was locked.

I wasted three blows on it before I felt that something higher and heavier than I had been pushed against it from outside. I didn't shout; the landlady

was out, and there was little point in wondering where Dunn was. Perhaps I could jump from the window.

My shadow was flung helpless across the green to the pavilion, and the shadow teemed with life like a carcass. Within it white shapes massed; some still boiled forth from the pavilion, innumerable others scuttled across the green, throwing out their arms and dragging their legs forward, humping along like grubs, all their featureless heads turned up to me. They were too close. Even as I glared down into the garden the privet hedge creaked and gave way in a shower of black leaves.

I heaved the window shut. Then desperately I switched off the lamp, but it was too late; they already knew where to find the light.

I stood numb in the middle of the room, staring out at the piled sky. A minute later a white object bobbed into view, groping over the outer sill. One corner of the desk dug into my back like a weapon. Another blurred shape groped, and a head rose into view. I couldn't see the face, but what might have been hair straggled high, like cobweb drifting from a moon. A second head edged into sight, and their hands thudded against the pane, softly as children patting mud.

So softly that I thought I knew what to do. I threw myself forward and wrenched up the window. The pale heads recoiled; then the mass of them cascaded plumply down the wall, like a dislodged pile of rotten fruit. Blocking my breath with one hand, I peered down into the garden. Before I could see more than a struggling chaos of soft moonlit bodies, two arms reached damply down from above the window and softly, stickily, pulled at my neck.

I clawed at the fat hands, but my fingers slipped. In the garden bodies slapped clammily together and a mass of faces like weighted white balloons climbed towards me. The arms at my neck were strong as rubber. I clutched at the sill as I was lifted. All meaning had been betrayed; I was at the mercy of nightmare. How could the thing have climbed above me?

I cried out. It couldn't have. "Rubbish!" I cried. "A lousy loose end!"

And Dunn leapt out of the armchair as my hands on the window-sill clenched on the manuscript and tore it into shreds.

He rushed to the desk, snarling in fury and fear. I saw his hand clutch toward a drawer. I threw him aside, and caught up the bottle of ink within. I

squinted into the bottle. On top of the ink floated a curl of crimson. I strode past him as he clawed at my arm, and poured the ink out of the window.

"Next time you want to write in blood," I shouted, "use your own!"

Yet on the stairs I almost went back. For halfway down I was halted, one foot in mid-air, by the fear that somewhere, sometime, talent will succeed.

Property Of The Ring

"A young man finds his personality becoming petrified by a stone set in a finger ring."—Ramsey Campbell, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written In: 1970
First published in *Arkham's Masters of Horror: A 60th Anniversary Anthology Retrospective of the First 30 Years of Arkham House*, 2000
Also published in: *Inconsequential Tales*

When Alan Swift awoke he felt cold and attenuated as a sheet of tin. One finger of his right hand was constricted; he coaxed his hand from beneath the sheets and found a ring he'd never seen before. His head aroused, startled, but the room didn't roll; the party had left no trace. Ah, the party—that must contain an explanation. Around him he saw the walls of the flat were flayed and grey. In a second or so he remembered why. Sunlight poured effortlessly from a blue glass sky, and he lay back in the light and tried to account for the ring.

The events of last night toppled over one another, merging and obscuring, like spadefuls of earth collapsing back into a pit. Chris had been working; Alan had finished the children's novel at last, though he wasn't satisfied, and she'd taken the manuscript to begin work on the illustrations. Then? A pub, several students he knew and envied for their apparently untroubled vitality and instant casual humour, a party, a girl and an hour of that hasty snatching conversation with which one attempts to store up a friendship or more against the morning after. No, a friendship, nothing more—Chris was more. In fact, he was sure that it had been the girl who'd approached him. At one point she'd seemed pretty yet hollow as china; at another she'd brightened and throbbed—perhaps after they had exchanged rings, to touch as one tries at parties. His initials had been etched on his ring; with no trace of himself in his wallet either, he had felt anonymous. And now he couldn't remember her name or her face or her voice; straining, he managed to disinter just four words, voiceless and impersonal as though in quotes: "property of the ring."

He lay. He wasn't hungry. The June day streamed down on him, requiring no participation. He saw no reason to break the spell. But he glanced again at the ring, at the obscure shape of the band, like a snake or perhaps like

convoluted vines, at the unclear emotionless face of a girl, less eroded than embryonic, in the setting of the ring. Surely she hadn't said "I took it off my boyfriend, I didn't want him to have it"? That must surely have been an overheard fragment. But he was troubled, dissatisfied, awake. Wearily he stood up and padded to the sink. Automatically he pulled off the ring before washing. It hadn't, after all, been so successful a party. Besides, he should have known he didn't need parties now that he had Chris.

As though sunlight had exploded within him, the swirling faces of the party paled and billowed back. He thrust his finger into the ring and hurried out.

Chris never said "hello": rather it shone from her. Above the square where she waited, lithe in a white blouse and slacks, cars sped downhill like gleaming coloured beads slipping free of a thread, and crushed together smoking beneath a fresh white statue. "Hello!" Alan shouted.

"Are the walls waiting?"

"They're bared to us."

Her blonde hair streamed behind her in no wind as she caught his hand and led him beneath glittering frantic leaves to the shops beyond the corner of the square. "Holidays," she said. Her voice was unselfconscious as a stream. "I thought of Ibiza. Sun in the wine and rainbows on the hippies."

"It's later than you think, you know. Two months."

"But we aren't going to be packaged. No tinfoil buses, no brown-paper hotels."

"True, yes."

His words echoed dully in Alan's mind. Usually, lit up by Chris, he sparkled, even crystallised; now his responses seemed dredged up like shards from mud. "I'm not awake," he apologised as they came in sight of the shop owned by—what were their names, Tom and Adrienne? And at once a memory awoke, from the first disorientated hour of the party. It hardly seemed worth mentioning now—they were almost at the shop—but rather than talk about the ring, he said "I had a glimpse of another novel last night."

"Well, once the flat is bright and I move in, we can work on the next novel together."

Dutifully Alan said "It won't be bright until you're there."

In the shop angular cardboard birds fluttered mutely in flocks; glass deers vital with light reared beside red white and blue mugs; a sitar leaned against a Peanuts poster and a snuffbox picked out bars of a Mozart concerto. "You know Ted and Arlene," Chris said, "and you two couldn't forget my fiancé Alan."

Ted shook back his hair and unrolled a strip of wallpaper on the counter; eagles swooped across the mysterious glow of an evening sky. "Oh, Ted," Chris cried. "How long did it take you?"

"About a week. Slightly longer than usual, but we wanted it to be special. I did the sky and the eagles are Arlene's."

"Oh, Alan, look at it," Chris gasped.

"Yes, it's fine," Alan said. "It certainly is."

"We're going to put it up today," Chris told the others. "Could we have some almond paste to improve that awful glue?"

"Here's something I kept to show you," Arlene remembered. She steered her wheelchair through the maze of shelves to the window. As Arlene pointed, Chris gazed into a blue glass egg in which a treasure of light was trapped. Tiny inverted passers-by climbed up its curves and vanished.

"It's so beautiful," Chris said. "It's the most intense image I've ever seen."

"It's more than that," Ted interrupted, wrapping the wallpaper. "It's perfect because it is its own single thought."

"It's a creature," Chris said.

"There's a difference," said Alan, "between a creature and a creation."

"Well, it's more than an image," she insisted.

"What does it think with?"

"Why, us, of course," Arlene said.

As Alan opened the door of the flat Chris asked "Where's your signet ring?"

His hand twitched and, twisting the key, fled behind his back. "I gave it away at the party," he said.

"Well, it doesn't matter. You're you, not a ring. But what's that?"

"Just something I got." The rolls of wallpaper swung before him like stretcher supports, and he hurried through the living room, past drooping posters of Dick Bruna bunnies and scraped plates of scraps on a low table, into the bedroom. There he threw the wallpaper among the ridges of the bedclothes. Chris was unpacking the glue and washing out a plastic bucket. "We'll make coffee in a while," she said, "but first let's stir."

In the bedroom she hung an odd square of wallpaper off the centre of the wall, like a window or a block of amber within which the eagles hovered. "We'll build from that," she said.

Alan stood up from the bed with an effort, trying to draw on the vitality of last night, the leaps and surges of speech. "I'd concentrate on what we'd see from the bed," he suggested.

"Of course you would. Of course we shall."

Eagles rose across the wall in an irregular stepped design. "That paste makes me ravenous," Chris said.

The paste was cold yet the room was almond-scented as a bakery. "Look, that wall will be full of sunlight in an hour," she said. "Let's eat now."

"At this time?"

"I'm hungry."

"I suppose that's a good enough reason."

Sunlight sprang from a corner of the low table. Chris had cooked a mild curry; her piled fork sped from the plate on her lap to her mouth. Alan ate with his left hand; his right hung open at his side, having recoiled prickling from the texture of the couch. He felt the rice in his mouth like a handful of swollen pills; the meat passed through his throat like a slow roll of boulders clogging a stream. However slowly he ate, he knew that eventually he must join Chris in the bedroom. To stick paper on a wall, for God's sake! But no, Alan thought heavily, there was nothing else he would prefer to do.

As Chris had predicted, the bedroom wall was brimming with sunlight. At the foot of the bared plaster lay overlapping brown shards of old wallpaper. Alan felt an intuitive almost undefinable sympathy for the plaster, as if the glue and paper would stifle the wall. "Remind me to look for some cufflinks

for you," Chris said. "There's all sorts of marvellously strange things in the antique shops these days."

She glanced frowning at him as he lay back on the bed. "Are you ill?" she asked. "You're not usually as quiet as this."

Alan shook his head on the pillow like a boulder rolling in treacle, "just a bit tired," he said.

"Come on, have a bit of paper. It'll wake you up."

Alan watched as she picked up a rectangle of colour that curled into the air, turning a slimy snail-like underbelly, flapping once like a broken bat-wing. As she smoothed the glued surface across the wall, he shivered. "Come on, Alan," she said without turning. "Please."

Alan propped himself on his right hand and stood, although the hand was reluctant to leave the bed. He swayed above the bucket, but his hand flinched back; he imagined being coated with the glue from head to foot, drowning in a marsh. "That corner isn't clean," he said. "I'll do that."

At the first scrape of metal on plaster he dropped the tool, trembling. His bones seemed to shrink in anguish. "My head," he groaned.

"Are you hurt?" Chris cried, leaping up from a strip of paper.

"I'll do it," he said indistinctly, and staggered into the living room.

After ten minutes he levered himself away from the couch; in the sunlight he burned like a black statue. He leaned against a shady corner of the room. The walls stood solid in mutual support. In the other room Chris patted paper onto the wall; her pats were like soft unbearable slaps on his forehead. She shouldn't. The wall was white and hot. She should leave it alone.

In a while she came to him. "Alan," she accused. Her sounds visibly rippled the air. Her face moved frowning across his eyes, then its strata shifted. She was puzzled, anxious. He closed his eyes as his fingers worked uncontrollably at the sight of the frantic changes of her face. "Are you all right?" she demanded.

He nodded; the boulder toppled into the treacle.

"Would you like me to make some coffee?"

Now his lips had to move, to rid him of the need to think. "Up to you," he said.

Shrugging her whole body, she filled the percolator. Glass flashed warm and vanished. He detached himself from the wall and tramped leadenly into the bedroom. At the foot of the bed he leaned back and fell inert on the sheets.

"Alan, whatever's wrong," Chris called, "don't be melodramatic."

His feet and knees pressed together; his hands moulded to his sides, and his eyes closed.

"I don't mind if this is just a mood," Chris said. "I'm not the one to talk about moods. But you hardly spoke to Ted and Arlene, you didn't want to discuss our holiday. It doesn't matter about Ted and Arlene. It doesn't matter, but you do. It doesn't matter if you're quiet. Only if you worry about it, and I'm beginning to. Are we going to be able to talk? If not, why go on?"

She came into the bedroom and looked on the bed. "Oh, Alan," she said. "Don't I matter?"

Its lips moved but it didn't speak; where its brain had been there was a stone.

"I didn't hear you," Chris said. She knelt on the bed and gazed down.

It felt a thin material brush its upper section, material similar to that in which it was needlessly encased. Then a warm soft appendage moved across its top, rhythmically returning. Above it an orifice opened and closed, within which a piece of the soft substance moved, striking vibrations.

"Alan, I know it's not me that's wrong."

The vibrations troubled it. They must stop. It poised to move for the last time before achieving peace, timelessness in which it could meditate again, and the soft appendage closed around one of the extensions moulded to its sides, still unmerged.

"Alan, look at the ring! Oh, Alan, look at the face!"

It struggled to move, but its peace had trapped it. Nothing mattered.

She wrenched at the ring, at the hand. It was immovable. Furious, frantic, she prised the finger free and tore at the ring. It shifted a fraction, and blood trickled down the finger. She gripped her wrist with her other hand and heaved. Skin tore and the ring threw her backwards onto the floor. As she

struggled upright she brought the ring to her eyes, and almost could not recognise the face.

"Alan?" she called desperately, sunlight coating her eyes. "Alan?"

Blood streamed down the finger. The blood was moving, hot in the sunlight. His blood was moving. He was moving.

The Worst Fog Of The Year

"*The Worst Fog Of The Year* was written in 1970 and accepted soon after by Gerald W. Page for *Coven 13*, alias *Witchcraft & Sorcery*. However, before it could be used the magazine folded. Ramsey subsequently mislaid the manuscript, and the title became listed as 'lost'. That is until now; with the first publication of a story written twenty years earlier."—Phil Williams, Afterword to the story in *Dark Horizons #31*

"The story first appeared in the British Fantasy Society's journal *Dark Horizons*. Karl Edward Wagner let me know that he would use it in *Year's Best Horror Stories* if the ending were less jokey, and I made it so. Both endings appear in this book, in case you didn't notice."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in *Told By The Dead*

Written in: 1970
First published in *Dark Horizons #31*, 1990

Thick fog had been drawn over the fields. Since the encircling horizon was invisible, the boundaries of the pale landscape were defined only by a dull silence. The moon was a dab of grey paint on the sky. Ahead, above the surface of the fog, Gaunt saw parallel lines of hedge marking the road which led to the house. With its gables piled askew against the sky the house resembled a waterlogged box soaking out of shape.

Almost before he was ready Gaunt was inside the house and passing along the dark hall, glimpsing a stretched grin on the face which adorned the the post at the foot of the banister, a heavy curtain weighted with dust and gradually sagging across a mirror, oak panels displaying framed portraits which appeared to have grown beards of dust. At the end of the hall a fan of electric light lay half closed on the carpet. Gaunt inched past the heavy oak door and its brass meringue of a doorknob, into the room.

Two women sat on couches with rolled arms of thick black leather. Around them the room was piled with silence. The tea in the porcelain cups abandoned on a black table was clouding over like two miniature ponds, and beside the cups and their silver tray an orchid was crushed within a paperweight. Heavy velvet curtains twice Gaunt's height almost curtained a long window.

The older woman reached beside her for a poker, which she thrust into the fire beyond the marble proscenium of the fireplace. Her gaze never left her

companion's face, and the pistol in her hand never wavered. "What time is it now?" she demanded.

The young woman shook back her black hair from its band and threw out her wrist to consult her watch. "One o'clock."

The gun rose a fraction. "Don't lie to me."

"Twenty to twelve," the young woman said, shivering. "For God's sake, won't you see what you're doing? We can still leave. There's time."

"Almost midnight," the other said happily, and then her voice sharpened. "Don't bring God into it. It's God's will that we're here. Whatever happens will be meant to happen."

"Rubbish," Gaunt snorted.

The woman patted her greying hair into place with her free hand while the girl shrank back into the crook of the couch. "Even if you can't cover your knees, pull your skirt down. Your father won't want to see you looking like that, whatever your boyfriends like."

"You," the girl said wearily, "are mad."

"If you knew that," Gaunt demanded, "why did you let her lure you here?"

The woman raised the gun until the eye of the barrel was level with the right eye of her victim, then she threw the weapon on the hearth. "Go on, and take your atheism with you. God couldn't be so cruel to your father. God will let him come to me."

The young woman made to reach for her, but drew back. "He's dead, mother. He's been dead for months."

"Don't you know I still love him, whoever he married? Do you think I could be frightened of him?" All at once the mother's eyes looked as dangerous as the barrel of the gun. "You're afraid of how he may punish your sins, when you should be weeping for the pain you caused him."

The girl sprang up and kicked the gun, which skidded away beneath the table while the cups chattered like teeth. "That's right, you run," her mother jeered. "He's out there waiting for you. You know you're meant to stay until he comes. Why else do you think tonight is the worst fog of the year?" And behind her the music crept up—for that, of course, was the title of the film.

Outside, over the fields which surrounded the house, patches of fog were wearing thin. A threadbare strip like the ghost of a path, perforated by brittle

grass-blades, led towards the house. At the end farthest from the house, blades bent suddenly and sprang up; then others stirred closer to the building. Although the fog hung close to the ground, what troubled the grass was crawling beneath the fog.

For the second time Gaunt wanted to leave. The first had been in London, in a cinema off Tottenham Court Road. Surrounded by snoring men, he'd realised that the young woman was trapped. Her own stupidity and inconsistency had trapped her, or those qualities of the script had, and his feeling compelled to will her to escape had infuriated him. Now, having seen it once, he knew her fate, yet more than ever he was urging the film to let her go. He would have left the cinema, except that he was the entire audience for the press show. At least nobody would know he wasn't watching, and so he closed his eyes. With luck he might nod off, just like one of the Londoners who had nowhere but the cinema to sleep; he'd been lying awake for nights trying to think what to make of his life.

In front of him was dimness not unlike midnight fog, and the sounds of stealthy crawling in the grass. Why was he here? Be mightn't even be allowed to review the film. His editor had hinted that his reviews were too analytical for a small-town newspaper and in particular for the cinema manager, a friend of the editor's. If the editor gave way to persuasion then Gaunt would have to, like a minor character required to behave as the script demanded. He heard movement dragging through the grass, and thought he could hear the squeak of soil clenched in a groping fist, though last time he hadn't. He felt as if he was dreaming the film, in which case he had to accept some blame for its absurdity, for that of his own situation, for the absurdity of talking to the film in the dark as though it was as real as himself and as though his feelings could make any difference. "Pointless," he muttered. "Meaningless, you and me both." He drew a breath to groan as though the film could hear his impatience with it. For a moment he was enclosed in a humming silence; his head swam unpleasantly, and the fog in his eyes seemed to surge at him. Then he heard grass rustling around him.

Had the projectionist turned on the stereophonic sound? He needn't have bothered; it wouldn't improve Gaunt's view of the film. Perhaps the speakers had momentarily gone wrong, because the sound had ceased. Gaunt's eyes lay shut, and his mind lay inert, until behind him he heard the young woman run to draw the curtains.

"He won't come through the window. He'll use the front door as he has every right to," her mother said, and Gaunt opened his eyes. He wasn't in the cinema, he was in the room.

For a moment he thought he was experiencing some new visual gimmick. The room seemed unreal; it seemed somehow to have crammed itself into his eyes. He was nearest the table, and he made himself dip one shaky finger into a cup of tea. The skin of the stagnant brew gave way, and the chill of the liquid shivered up his arm.

He couldn't cry out. The chill had seized his throat, and he couldn't even swallow. His mind was struggling to deny what he was experiencing, but was this really more absurd than his everyday life? As soon as he had the thought, it seized him, and the room opened out around him. "Did he come through the front door for my sister?" the girl cried behind him.

Gaunt lurched aside and stared at her. She was gazing at her mother, who lay in an attitude of regal indifference on the couch. Gaunt shoved one hand almost into the daughter's face, but she didn't flinch. Neither woman could see him. It was he who was unreal.

"No doubt," the mother said.

"And for my brother? Did you lure them both here?"

"They came when they were called," the mother said, and with a hint of bitterness, "He let them see him, but he didn't show himself to me."

"But you saw what he did to them. You saw how they were stuffed with earth."

"Don't you say that! Don't you dare suggest he could do that to anyone!"

We're all mad, Gaunt thought wildly. Everything is. He almost touched the girl to convince himself that she was real, but what would that or its opposite prove? He stood in the room, unable to stir, and then he heard a scratching at the front door.

"He's your father!" the woman shouted as her daughter flinched towards Gaunt. "Don't you let him see that you're frightened of him!" She flung herself at the young woman and grabbing her wrist, dragged her along the hall to the front door. Gaunt felt as if the wake of her violence was carrying him along, past a mirror in which he might or might not be glimpsing himself. There was silence except for the panting of the women; even the

front door appeared to be holding itself still. Then something scratched at the foot of the door.

The daughter fought. Gaunt wanted to help her, but the idea felt like a pit into which he would never stop falling. Suddenly several objects like blackened splintered knife-blades were thrust under the door. They were fingernails.

The daughter screamed and, wrenching herself free, fled along the hall. Gaunt thought her flight had released him until he felt himself being rushed after her. As he ended up in the middle of the room, the mother came in and locked the door. "He won't mind if I open the window for him," she said. "It'll be like an assignation."

The daughter caught up the silver tea-tray as if it was the only weapon she could bring to mind, sending the cups trundling across the carpet. "After I cleaned up for him," her mother shouted, "and you didn't even wash up!" She captured her daughter's wrists, and the women wrestled for possession of the tea-tray. Flashes of light from it blinded Gaunt, who closed his eyes as if that might help him escape. Then they sprang open. At the window, muffled by the curtains, he'd heard a feeble thud of stone on glass.

The woman released her daughter and ran to the curtains. She dragged them open, and the fog bellied forwards to soak up the light from the room. At the bottom of the right-hand pane Gaunt saw a stone rear up slowly, strike the pane and spatter it with mud, fall back to hang suspended for a moment and then thump the grass. Around the stone were five discoloured things like blades.

The blows were growing stronger. From outside the window came a choking cough, and a shower of mud obscured the glass. The mother pulled the upper bolt free of its socket and stooped to the bolt at the foot of the window. Her daughter ran at her, lifting the tray to batter her down. Then the pane gave way, and the stone thudded on the carpet.

Gaunt staggered back, closing his eyes. The gun! He fell to his knees and groped under the table. Nothing. The women screamed, and what sounded like a mound of earth fell through the window into the room.

As Gaunt scrabbled under the table he heard sounds of padding and scraping, like the progress of an injured dog that was causing the floor to quiver. He forced his eyes open, and saw the gun ahead of him, just out of

reach. He hitched himself forwards, and the mother bent to pick up the gun as the young woman stumbled to the door. A shadow fell across Gaunt's path. He peered wildly along it and confronted something like a face.

It was crushed and discoloured. It might almost have been a mask shaped of mud and insufficiently baked. Parts of it were moist, other parts were crumbling. The sight of it paralysed him while a frayed hand wavered up from the carpet and reached towards him with its askew nails.

When Gaunt didn't move, the hand faltered to the ragged lips. Deliberately, and with some effort, the mouth produced a handful of glistening mud, and then the hand came swaying towards Gaunt's face. He felt his lips twitching uncontrollably. It was waiting for him to open his mouth.

He couldn't keep it shut now that an outraged scream was building up inside him. The prospect of his fate made not just his mouth but his whole body squirm. The convulsion released him, and he squirmed aside, seizing the wrist, which was mostly bones, and twisting it. Its flimsiness took him unawares. The arm tore loose from the shoulder, and Gaunt went sprawling. Instead of bones and tendons, the arm ended in a bunch of wires and metal rods.

Gaunt staggered to his feet and gave the mutilated dummy a kick to convince himself it had stopped moving. The mother stood frozen, gun in hand, in the act of turning to shoot her daughter in the leg. The daughter was almost at the door, her hand outstretched to grasp the key. How long before the shot revived the action of the scene? Gaunt sprinted to the door and turned the key, then clutched at the young woman's hand.

He didn't know where he meant to lead her, but in any case the knowledge would clearly not have helped. As soon as he tugged at her cold hand, her arm came away at the shoulder.

He felt the walls and floor and his sense of himself begin to give way to the dark. Absurdity was everything. Everything he touched betrayed it. He lurched away from the standing remains of the young woman, towards the husk of her father. Which of them might come lopsidedly for him?

Neither, by the look of it, and the gun would never go off. None of them would ever move again, and there was no point in his moving when there was nowhere for him to go. They were nothing. In destroying them, he'd

destroyed nothing. But if he were capable of destroying no more than a symbol of the threat of nothingness then surely he, if nothing else—

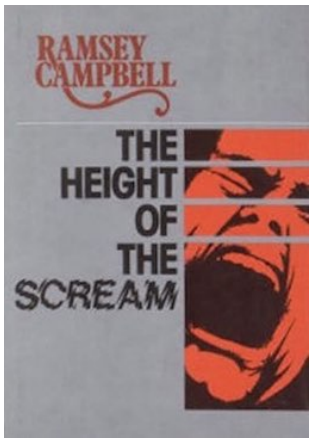
He cried out wordlessly, shocked by the pain: the cinema seat had sprung up at last and smacked his arse.

[Alternate ending replaces the final paragraph with: Before he could finish the thought it went out like a light, and he felt himself come apart in the suddenly total darkness.]

Illustration by Dave Carson, taken from Dark Horizons #31, 1990.

1971

The Dark Show



Written in: 1971
First published in *The Height Of The Scream*, 1976

As they came out of the house his wife said: "Who did Peter tell me you were going to interview?"

"Night," Plowman said.

"They're a good band. Some of my class will be there," Peter said. "I know, I know we've got to meet my teachers. But I'd have liked to go."

"Say there, Peter, not thur. You're proud of what your teachers say, you know that," she said. "Though I don't mind admitting I would quite have liked to see Night myself."

Plowman frowned. You should mind, he thought. He glanced at his tape-recorder, suddenly anxious in case he'd forgotten to remove the tape of his fourth form reading Shakespeare. No, it was a blank tape. His mind relaxed a little but began to intone "I'm from Radio Merseyside" until he halted it: too much rehearsal and he wouldn't sound convincing. He looked up, trying to tap the surrounding suburban peace of Mossley Hill, but couldn't: too many trembling television aerials, too many glazed gnomes on the lawns and plastic spiders in the cars. "Can I hear the tape when you've done it?" Peter asked.

"Indeed you can. I'm going to play it to you and to my pupils. I want you to hear Night as they really are."

"It's only a phase," his wife said. "You take these things too seriously. You shouldn't try to teach outside the classroom."

"Culture isn't a nine-to-four job," Plowman said.

They emerged onto the main road and ran for a bus. "Anyway, you used to like the Beatles," she said.

Plowman was panting furiously; she hoped he would forget his retort before he regained his breath, he thought. He fell into a seat upstairs. "Some of their melodies will last," he panted. "But they made Liverpool fashionable. You think about it, the louder and more vulgar and less

musically trained you were, the bigger your audience seemed to be. Music reached a point where anything was good so long as it was new, and that's where Night came from."

"What's wrong with Liverpool?" Peter said. At the front of the bus boys were singing football songs and throwing plastic cups out of the windows. One of Plowman's pupils, who lived near Anfield football ground, had told him that on Saturdays they would close all their windows but still would have to shout to be heard over the chanting. Peter was joining in. Plowman struggled not to rebuke him—these days he was more strict with Peter than with his pupils—and his wife said "But what's your objection to Night?"

"What's your objection tonight?" shouted one of the boys at the front.

"My objection?" Plowman said. "That young girls have had hysterics after their concerts and won't tell anyone why. That theatres have found traces of pentacles chalked on the stage when they've left. That they walk around the audience backwards—or widdershins, if you know what that means. That any adults who go along to keep an eye on things come out disturbed and unable to explain what's wrong. If that isn't dangerous I don't know what is."

"Don't shout. We can hear you," his wife said. "You sound like a censor. I thought you believed criticism was the intelligent alternative."

"Those things you said, they're only gimmicks," Peter said. "Like wrestlers have."

"I don't know who's been encouraging you to watch wrestling," Plowman said. "Here's my stop. Let's leave it at that for now. My answer will be on the tape."

When he arrived before the shell of the Hippodrome Cinema, beneath a film poster torn by wind and rain, he was almost calm. In the window of a nearby empty store bat-winged musicians flapped above a proclamation "NIGHT—MAGIC, MUSIC AND LOVE." He imagined Night as they must be: veined emaciated figures fighting their instruments, jerking puppet-like before a stroboscope, their hair flung up like twigs in a storm. Though the concert wouldn't begin for almost an hour, the audience was already gathering under the marquee, their long hair beaded by the first drops of March rain. They glanced at Plowman; one or two smiled.

He rattled at the entrance doors. "The gig doesn't start for an hour," someone called beneath the marquee. But he should have press privileges; he banged on the glass of the doors. Eventually a man in a dress suit, white shirt and bow tie clattered down the steps from the foyer. His clipped moustache twitched. "We're not open yet," he called through the glass.

"I'm from Radio Merseyside," Plowman shouted and then, abandoning caution, "My name is John Plowman."

The bar clanked back. "Are you here to interview the group?" the manager asked.

"I am. Can you take me to them?"

"You'll have to speak to their manager about that," the other said, peering at the queue as he closed the doors and looking bemused.

"Can't you take me to them?"

"I'm only responsible for the building. You know it's closed as a cinema," the manager said. "Tonight is an experiment. Don't worry, their manager seems a nice fellow in his way." But Plowman's confidence began to ebb as he was led past a closed refreshment counter and a sign "No Illegal Drugs Please" to the entrance to the stalls. This manager he could handle; the other was part of Night. Guarding the door to the stalls was a bony young man in a blue denim suit, one eyelid drooping toward its shadow beneath. "This is Mr. Plowman of Radio Merseyside," the Hippodrome manager said. "He's here to do an interview."

The eyelid lifted slowly as a snake's head; behind the man Plowman heard a huge hollow metallic shriek. "Isn't one of your people here already?" said the manager of Night.

"I'm from another programme," Plowman said.

"I don't know how they'll feel about another interview. I'll see when they've finished setting up. Can he go up?" the man said to the Hippodrome manager. "The gallery's open so you can see the whole scene. Go up all the way to the top."

Though perhaps he should have stayed Plowman wanted to escape; he felt the man suspected him. He hurried up the stairs to the second foyer. Standing on a mosaic circle which somehow reminded him of magic, he glanced about; steps led down to an arch curtained by red velvet, and above

the public stairs an empty poster frame gleamed dully like a window bricked up from outside. He pushed through the doors into the circle. Empty seats blurred by dim amber lights descended in ranks to hang above the stage; the shadow of the higher gallery weighed on him. Below, unseen, something emitted a bass snarl and then, as if castrated, squealed. Searching quickly, Plowman saw through a doorway leading off the circle a wooden staircase leading up.

His feet were dim brown shapes which hammered and echoed on the stairs. At the top he emerged onto the gallery. There was even less light here, but above him he could see the dark hovering wings of the roof and a chandelier which hung like a claw. Before him rows of benches plunged. Only dust sat here now, yet for decades in place of the anonymous specks there had been audiences cheering the music hall. Perhaps the tradition had contained nothing valid; Plowman thought so, but he felt uneasy that it should have been so completely erased. He turned to go down and tackle the group's manager. Then, on the lip of the gallery, lights blazed into color and figures moved.

Curious despite his disquiet, Plowman climbed down the steep aisle in the edge. On the last bench, two men in denim sat amid the dust. They glanced at Plowman and his tape-recorder without interest, but he sensed a barrier rising from them which was not the dust. One of them placed a slide in a projector, and for a moment the colours of a crushed butterfly flashed on the screen beneath. Plowman leaned forward. Far below, as in a pit, figures stood in front of a collection of amplifiers like boxes in an attic. One of the figures raised a saxophone, and from the mouth of the instrument flapped a red tongue.

It was not until he reached the brighter lights of the entrance foyer that Plowman calmed. He had expected long hair and rainbow clothes, they hardly worried him; what could the tongue have been but another aspect of flamboyance? Nevertheless he was beginning to feel sick, perhaps because of the dust. But the tape-recorder tugged at his hand, reminding him, and the Hippodrome manager came forward and whispered: "You'd better talk to him again. He says they'll be starting the, er, gig soon."

Heaven forbid, Plowman thought, a would-be hip Hippodrome manager! And the cheapness of the pun combined with his nausea, with the crash of the doors and the rush of cold air as the audience poured in, to produce an

almost physical revulsion. He wouldn't falter again. He strode over to the man in the denim suit, who turned from peering through the stalls entrance and stared at Plowman. "What did you say your name was?" demanded the manager of Night.

"My name is Plowman."

"The other guy hasn't heard of you."

"I'm freelance," Plowman said. "Music critic."

"Well, all right," the manager said. "They'll talk to you. Only fifteen minutes, though. They're backstage."

Plowman almost ran, trying to outdistance a creeping unease, through the stalls beneath gilded boxes on which carved faces smiled, onto an improvised stage and past the dark clutter of the attic, around behind the screen and into what seemed a barn. Rusty iron ladders clung to the walls, rolled dusty posters lay against them; in the planks of the floor he could see the square outlines of a trap. To his left, along a corridor at the top of a flight of rough stone steps, he heard voices, slipping into laughter as he hastened over the black flags of the corridor. His first glimpse was of a dulled plain paint, walls of no particular color beneath naked dusty bulbs like disinterred pears. Then Night turned to look at him.

Yes, their hair was long; and they were dressed entirely in black. One of them, who held an acoustic guitar and who Plowman presumed was the leader, had a large black somehow friendly beard. But Plowman felt that this was part of a perhaps deliberate deception; for the man's shadow flapped blackly above him, and from within the sound-hole of the guitar a pale face grinned. He glanced away, past the drummer pensively tapping the seat of a chair, and with a mixture of relief and renewed horror caught sight of a fat red rubber tongue rolling from the saxophone. "It's the other man from the BBC," said the saxophonist, a tall man with the white thin limbs and tiny careful movements of a living skeleton.

Plowman started. "Yes, that's right. Could I have you all around the microphone?" he said, and realised with a chill desperation that he knew none of their names.

"You want us all to come in?" the drummer asked.

"You'd better take it, Stein," the saxophonist said to the leader. "He talks," he explained to Plowman.

"Perhaps that's best," Plowman agreed, pulling two wooden chairs rough with dust to face each other. All his questions had deserted him. "Let's check the level. Will you say something? That's fine. Are you comfortable? Well, I'll switch on now. I talked to the leader of Night before their concert. Now, Stein, how would you explain your music?"

"Most people call me Frank. Stein is the band's joke," the leader said. "As for your question—well, if it could be explained, as you call it, it would hardly be music. It might as well be prose."

"Don't you believe in criticism?" Plowman saw the saxophonist glance up; the red tongue swelled and pointed at him.

"I was trained at the Royal College of Music. I think I can answer you yes," the leader said. "But it's precisely because contemporary music has largely become an analysis of itself, an introverted form, that I chose so-called pop music as a medium to bring music back to us audience."

Far away, muffled, Plowman could hear the audience; the walls seemed to advance, dulling him. "If you take your music seriously then you surely can't take your audience seriously," he said loudly to the walls; on the recorder the indicator leapt. "I mean, you couldn't really call them musically—musically literate."

"More than you might admit, but in any case that's too traditional a view," the leader said. "Our aim is to break down the distinction between band and audience. Our whole purpose is to get rid of the hang-ups of contemporary self-consciousness. There should be no sense of identity in a shared experience."

"But art communicates identity. So do relationships," Plowman shouted. "You can't just thrust everyone together." He remembered Peter years ago with his mouth surrounded by raspberry juice like lipstick, his own shame at being unable to kiss him, and felt sick. Couldn't they see that there were people you would never want to come close to, that you could turn sick if one of your pupils had a pimple, if your wife's eyes were full of sleep, even if she gave you a sleepy trusting smile—He controlled himself: he had them. He pointed to the red tongue, which wrinkled and sank. "What about this witchcraft paraphernalia?" he demanded.

"That there is a joke, of course," the leader said. "A little grotesque for the boppers. We're reaching what you might call a family audience; don't ask

me why, but it's encouraging. Our ritual, though, is another matter and quite serious. After all, we don't go around waving headless poultry, there's no point in being gratuitously offensive." Plowman wished he hadn't asked; he switched off the recorder, but the leader continued. "Myths are still necessary in order to recover folk or popular culture, so we decided to return to the most elemental. The old religion, as it's quite validly known. Are you still recording? I hope you haven't lost my point."

"Forget the tape for a minute," Plowman shouted. "You may be sure of your purpose, but don't you see that the effects could be terrifying? Do you realise how young some of the children in your audience are?"

"Really, please," the leader groaned, and the saxophonist said: "You'll have to tell them out there that."

He was the evil in the group, thought Plowman. That clattering hardly human sentence had been stylised enough to be a curse, and as if to seal the curse the red tongue filled and pointed at Plowman. He stood up trembling; the walls rose with him like a lifted box. "All right, thank you," he said. "You must give your concert," and he hurried out of the room and ran toward the hubbub of the audience.

As he emerged onto the stage, beside a clump of black drums, several members of the audience glanced up at him. One girl was eager; then, disappointed, she looked away. But he had seen that eagerness before—in his wife's eyes when he had first known her, at his only series of night-school lectures. She and Peter were entitled to expect him not to let himself be beaten. He sank into a place in the first row. He could never make himself heard articulately above the music; no, but perhaps he could interrupt the performance.

Around him the conversations were as blurred as the auditorium. A few lights flickered on the walls like candles in a cave. Forms passed close to him, laughing. They knew what form the concert would take; he did not—indeed, he'd heard only one song by Night. And it was he who would have to battle.

Without warning the speakers at the back of the stalls shouted wordlessly. Everyone turned. While they peered toward the exits, the lights swooped into darkness. Then projectors slashed a pentagram of light across the auditorium. It seared Plowman's eyes and hung on the darkness that flooded back. The pentagram blazed out again, pulsing faster, brightening. As he

tightened his eyes against the light Plowman saw three figures flickering in the side aisle, slowly gliding toward the back of the theatre, walking backwards.

Someone giggled; Plowman coughed loudly. But the eyes of the audience were fixed on the gliding shadows, and when they reached the stage the theatre was completely silent. The audience held its breath, and Plowman felt his heart throbbing. Then the stroboscope flared; the instruments shrieked briefly; on the screen the shadows of Night blazed, and Plowman felt the tension rush out of the audience in a wave.

Night began to chant. Behind their voices the instruments pursued a complex fugue. For a moment Plowman faltered: wasn't this music? Should he have heard more of their work before venturing an evaluation? But as they played they leapt; the stroboscope pulsed wildly, and as Night bounded and fell, glittering blackly, the light displayed them in mid-air and blotted out their fall. They were flying; they were witches. No, Plowman thought, examining the untrained voices: he wasn't so gullible.

"Grow from the earth!" they chanted, and the cinema trembled as rocks ground together, while landslides hurtled from the screen toward the audience. "Breathe in our breath!" and gales howled through the auditorium, tearing up trees and earth in gigantic handfuls to throw down on the stage. The audience swayed back and forth, higher and higher leapt Night, the strands of the fugue coursed faster; Plowman shivered in the gale, for he felt that a force he couldn't define was determined to hypnotise him. They chanted of water and fire; seas were hurled high by the gale, flames rose from trees and embraced the forest. The fugue moved to a higher key; the voices pursued it; the audience swayed like a forest, and flames lifted hissing from the water, whipped up by the gale, as rocks sank melting. As the music fused into a long C major chord, the image silently imploded.

Yes, Plowman admitted reluctantly, they have talent, however hollow—and the thought vanished as he saw that from the implosion, amid total silence, a face was emerging. Slowly threads of lava and water gave it substance; calm bubbles rose and smoothed out on its surface. It was huge and expressionless. Quiet colours splashed the walls and ran down into shadow. Then Plowman saw that the face was scintillating faintly—that it was not a face at all, but a mass composed of a multitude of faces.

Suddenly afraid, he stood up. "What is that?" he cried. "What are you trying to do?"

At once the face went out and the stroboscope burned into his eyes. As the iris of blindness dilated and faded he saw, gazing down from the stage directly above him, the saxophonist. The stroboscope began to pulse, hollowing out the saxophonist's face with shadows. His eyes were filled with blackness that throbbed, like the sockets of a possessed skull. That blackness was gazing at Plowman. The red tongue stirred in the mouth of the saxophone, and Plowman knew that a curse had been directed at him.

He fell back in his seat, willing his fear to allow him to flee, and was deafened by the cheers of the audience. They knew what to expect, but Plowman could only shrink back when the snarling guitar and falsetto saxophone began to throb with the alternate notes of a melody. Before he could collect himself, the audience commenced swaying against him and the leader of Night shouted the first line of the song. The drummer followed in a higher key, harmonising astringently; the music began to rise in a vertiginous harmonic spiral. And Plowman felt darkness beating down on him.

Eventually he realised why: the stroboscope was slowing. Instead of the light, the darkness now flashed out, more and more thickly, weighing down on the auditorium. Briefly a reminiscence of the pentagram burned on the darkness, trapping fingers, hair and wide eyes in its path. Plowman shook his head violently but the pentagram continued to reappear, sinking slowly like a web. The audience's swaying was heavier, more lethargic. Plowman tried not to hear what the audience was singing, gasping as the music rose in pitch; but the sound slid into his ears between his fingers.

"*You know you're there! Don't worry! We're all here and there! Surround yourselves—compound yourselves—around yourselves! There's darkness all around us but no fear—There's no you, there's no we—Because we're here and there!*
Because / Plowman threw his head back; away
we're / from the swaying mass. Yet a cry
here / of fear escaped him; for he
and / thought that the roof was
there..." / jerking down, inches
at a time, pressing him together with the audience, a suction cup poised to

lift them all struggling, crushed together inextricably, into blackness. He remembered the multitude of faces. He gasped in horror, and his eyes sought the agitated shadow which was the saxophonist. The stroboscope blazed; a face formed around the blackness of the eyes, and on it for an instant a black smile was carved.

Then the stroboscope blinked out entirely.

In the total darkness the music stopped, but the singing continued—whirling Plowman higher, drawing him toward its centre. Warm bodies swayed against him. The singing shrieked. Plowman felt himself pinioned against the ceiling, struggling against flesh which buffeted him softly and fell back only to brush once more against him.

He strained blindly for some defence: it wasn't music, it was mob hysteria, he was more mature than they, less vulnerable. But as he did so, all his senses were shaken by the assault. And then they gave way.

It was like the deceptive peace of delirium, when the world weighs intangibly on the brain. As the mass of sensation rushed into him he vanished: the music seemed simultaneously to recede to a point where it was tolerable and to become synonymous with him and his surroundings. He floated, totally numb and naked. Then he became aware of the audience.

Around him, or behind him or in front of him, formed an invisible somehow perceived Chinese box of rooms. The boxes merged, their contents fluctuated: impressions of beds on floors, sleeping-bags, posters, stolen street-signs. There was one constant: Night, who continued to sing from record-players, from speakers; the rooms themselves sang. In the dimness of the rooms figures sat or lay, smiling, reaching out to Plowman. They touched him without moving. Androgynous hands caressed his body, hefting and compassionately judging each part of him.

A shadow gathered through the rooms, and from it a red tongue uncurled and bloated. At once a multitude of hands covered Plowman, a pulsing armour. The tongue deflated and the shadow faded. Before Plowman could gain strength the hands slipped into him. They teemed through his brain, handling his thoughts. Wry smiles, sad shrugs, astonished laughter, and then an unspoken agreement: they had nevertheless accepted the concept of him.

Plowman cried out in revulsion. Somewhere, nerves awoke and his body squirmed. He leapt into an open space; he clawed at his body, he kicked and

punched at the now intangible invaders. Yet the intolerable innocence and mutual tolerance of the audience poured into him, bursting his brain. Get away! he seemed to scream. Don't analyse me! Let me be what I am! Leave me beauty!

When the stroboscope flashed again, he saw that he was leaping, kicking and clawing between the stage and the first row of seats. He was dancing.

As the instruments retrieved the melody and Night repeated the song, others stood up around Plowman and began to dance. "That was beautiful," a girl told him. And when he fell to his knees and sobbed, she smiled and wept a little with him.

Night Beat

Written in: 1971
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Almost exactly three weeks ago. Constable Sloane had visited the exhibition. Now, as he stood outside the museum at midnight, his thoughts were elsewhere. Streetlamps marched up the hill on which he stood, their lights padded by mist; cars laboured up the carriageway, reached the summit and sped away—but he hardly noticed their speed or their numbers, for his thoughts had returned to the murder.

It had been the night of the day on which he had visited the exhibition. What mattered, though, was that it had been his first month on a beat: and it mattered more that when his radio had called him to view the corpse thrown broken among the bricks of a disintegrating alley leading from one of his main roads, the older policemen who had discovered the body had had to drive him back to the station, where he had sat white and shaking, gulping cups of tea. Of course his superiors had been sympathetic: he was young, he had never seen death before—they had even excluded him from the investigation which would be concentrated on his beat, and insisted that he confine himself to the calmer city centre for a while. He had barely been able to persuade them not to give him a companion, for he knew that it had not been the corpse which had left him shaking, not the mutilations or the blood. When he looked back on that night, he felt that he had been shaking with shame and fury: for he could have led them to the murderer.

And he had been furious because he knew that they would never have countenanced his method. Intuition was no part of police procedure. Yet ever since his childhood he had been able intuitively to sense sources of violence. He felt profoundly what his superiors wearily accepted: that violence surrounds us all. His first beat had led him through both suburbia and slums; and if each broken bottle outside a pub hinted terror to him, equally he felt the presence of violence in quiet suburban roads behind the ranks of sleeping cars, knew instinctively which set of patterned curtains concealed shouts of rage, the smash of china, screams. Sometimes he was

honest with himself, and admitted that it was the violence buried in him that recognised these sources, reached out to them. But now this was forgotten, for never had he felt the imminence of violence so powerfully as here. When they'd moved him to the city centre neither he nor they had realised what they had done. Last night he had passed the museum and had come alert; tonight he knew. Within the museum lay the source of that murder.

His radio hissed and spat. For a second he thought of calling Central for help, but then he half-smiled bitterly: he had no evidence, they would only think that the murder had unbalanced him completely. Yet he was determined to act; once he had conquered his fear of the surrounding violence he had become obsessed with the suppression of violence—and as well, this murder had stained his beat. He thrust the radio into his pocket and started up the steps to the museum.

When he knocked on the doors the glass panes shuddered. They were a meagre protection against the violence within. After a minute Sloane saw a light bobbing closer through the wide dark foyer. As the light found Sloane and held him, a figure formed darkly about it; a face swelled from the shadows like a wrinkled half-inflated balloon. At a childhood party Sloane had dulled and grown more taciturn as the evening wore on; tired of trying to rouse him to play, the other children had buffeted him with balloons. "What's all this about, son?" the caretaker demanded.

Now that the doors of the museum were open the sense of violence seemed stronger; Sloane could scarcely remember his lies. "A routine check, sir," he said.

"What routine's that, son? What's up?"

"We've had a few robberies around here recently. I'd like to look around, if you don't mind. Just to check."

The watchman hawked and gave Sloane room to pass. The foyer was high, reaching above the light; Sloane felt the cold arch of the ceiling. The walls were walled by darkness; painted faces glimmered dimly in the void. "Can we have the lights on, please?" Sloane asked.

"You'd have to ask the curator for that, son. But he'll be home in bed." He was obviously triumphant. Sloane frowned and the man came closer, nipping Sloane's arm with his fingers and apologising with a lopsided

alcoholic smile. "You can have my torch for a few minutes if you ask nicely."

"I'm sure you don't want to obstruct the law. You seem a bit unsteady—perhaps you ought to sit down."

"You can't have it unless I've got a spare battery." The caretaker sidled into his office behind the marble staircase and rummaged in the drawers of a dark table. Above the table a white lampshade was bearded with a single strand of cobweb; on the table, next to a sagging moist rectangle outlined in rum, lay an open copy of *True Detective Confessions*. "You're lucky," the caretaker said, passing Sloane the torch.

Sloane felt violence massing in the room. "I won't be long," he said.

"Don't you worry your head about that, son. I'll come round with you."

As Sloane emerged from the office the torch's beam touched a globe of the world standing at the entrance to the Planetarium. Above the globe a moon was balanced on a wire; a dim crescent coated its edge. Sloane crossed to the staircase and the crescent expanded. At the same time the caretaker moved behind him. Sloane flexed his shoulders as if to shake off the violence which he felt looming.

The staircase climbed through a void across which their footsteps rang. The marble was slippery and sharp; Sloane glanced back at the caretaker and hurried to the top. A finger on a marble pillar pointed to THE HISTORY OF MAN. The torch-beam led him through an archway and fastened on a crumpled yellow paper mask inexpertly smoothed: a mummy's face.

"These are their specimens, here," the caretaker said behind him. "This is where thieves would be hiding, son, among the bodies, eh?"

He can move faster than I thought, Sloane realised. He peered at the man behind him, redolent of alcohol, one hand on a case containing the dark handle of a Cro-Magnon jaw. The air was thick with inertia; even the violence hung inert, and the caretaker seemed embalmed as the mummy. "Not here," Sloane said.

As he crossed the marble landing, his heels clanking like boots of armour, Sloane felt the violence swell to meet him. He halted, afraid. "I'll show you this room, son," the caretaker said. "It's where I take my pride."

The torch-beam splayed out beyond the figure of the caretaker, a star of darkness shone from his limbs; Sloane moved aside to see at once what was beyond the second archway. As the light plunged in, moons sprang up in glass cases, slid from the blades of swords and axes. "Tell me those aren't good as new," the caretaker said. "They can't say I don't keep these clean, son, that's a fact. I'd be in here like a shot if I heard a thief. Take his head off quick as that, I would."

Aggression stirred. "You wouldn't need me, then," Sloane said.

"When you've seen as much as I have, son, then I'll need you."

Although he could feel the violence mounting Sloane half-laughed: here they were quarrelling among the ready naked blades, yet no word was ever worth a blow. And as the violence ebbed from him, he located its source at last. It lay beneath his feet. "I haven't time to argue," he said, and ran.

The void beyond the staircase clanged about him; the caretaker shouted; Sloane's radio crackled and called out; in the shaft of light paintings, pillars, stairs leapt and swayed. Sloane's ankles trembled as he landed on the marble of the foyer. Then he ran past the moon on the globe, which vibrated and began to swing as he rushed by, into the Planetarium.

The arc of the torch-beam streaked across the false sky like a comet; on the ceiling stars sparkled and were gone. Beyond the ranks of benches leading down to the stage, Sloane saw a glass case. At once the air snapped taut. Within the case violence was trapped. Outside, in the foyer, the caretaker swore and clattered closer. Sloane switched off the torch and felt his way forward down the aisle.

He had never been afraid of darkness; it had been the moon that he had feared in childhood, never more so than on the night of the party. But now the darkness seemed a mass of weapons, any one of which might mutilate him. His entire body prickled; each nerve felt the imminence of some poised threat. He could hear faint footsteps, but the room was full of echoes; his pursuer might be at any distance on either side of him. Sloane had failed to count the benches. His hand groped forward from what he had assumed to be the last bench. His fingers touched another, rose and felt the darkness. Moist breath clung to them, and they recoiled from a face.

As Sloane fell back, struggling with the torch, the beam sprang between his fingers. He was close to the glass case, and the caretaker was inches from him. "I thought you'd be here, son," the caretaker said. "What's the game? Trying to twist an old man?"

The caretaker moved in front of the glass case. His face came at Sloane, nodding like a balloon. Instinct leapt and Sloane struck out, punching blindly as he had the children at the party. Gasping, the caretaker fell beside the case. And Sloane saw the sign which the man's body had concealed.

He had seen the sign before, on the day of the murder. Before his mind was overwhelmed he had time to remember and realise. Last time had been in daylight; the sun had helped him for a few hours, but they hadn't won. Already the sign was meaningless; all meaning was contained in the grey stone within the case, beneath the sign LUNAR ROCK.

Sloane felt his mouth forced open from within. His skin ached as if a million needles were being forced through. But they were hairs; and his shoulders slumped as his hands weighed down his arms, formed into claws, and dragged him at last to stare down at the unconscious caretaker.

The Shadows In The Barn

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That's decent of you, son. I'll have a pint of bitter, if I may. Just one thing, though—could you ask them not to give me a tankard? I have my reasons. A pint glass will be fine.

I hope you didn't mind me sitting here listening to you. Some people think if you sit with your hands in your pockets you're a layabout. Well, I didn't think you would. I used to work, you know. Believe me, I wish I still could.

You can't guess? Didn't you see me watching that trick you did with the coins on the tankard? That was a good trick, and I know what I'm talking about. Yes, you're right. I was a magician. I could show you some tricks. But I'd rather not, if you don't mind. These days I don't like to use my hands.

I suppose you think I'm being mysterious, not wanting a tankard and so on. It's not something I care to talk about generally. But I don't think you'd laugh. It might upset your girlfriend, though. God knows it upset me.

All right, I'll tell you. You notice how I'm drinking, putting my hand back in my pocket as soon as it leaves the glass? It's not my hand I don't want to see, it's—well, listen.

It all happened many years ago. You'd think I'd have forgotten, wouldn't you? I was on holiday, or as much of a holiday as I ever used to take. My father was a magician before me, you see, and he taught me most of what I had to know. He always used to wear a black top hat covered with symbols, and I can remember him sitting with his feet on the stove in our caravan, telling me that the most important thing was to get the measure of your audience. And that you should never leave your work entirely, even when you were on holiday, in case someone else should learn new tricks and force you out. He was always there to help me when I was rehearsing in the caravan, even after he died.

So I say, I wasn't entirely on holiday. I'd promised myself a couple of weeks to drive through the Cotswolds. Yes, I had a van then. Now I walk, or slouch as they say. But I'd advertised ahead in some of the local papers of the Cotswolds, in case anyone could use me. I only had one answer, asking me to perform for a Sunday school party somewhere outside Berkeley. It was to be on the second day of my holiday, but of course I accepted. I didn't know that it would be the end of my holiday, and of everything else as well.

I started out early in the morning from Birmingham, where I'd had to spend the night. Birmingham wasn't as bad then as it is now, but those dead buildings were already beginning to rob the place of all its colour. I can still remember driving into the Cotswolds. As I left Birmingham I seemed to see nothing but grey and gouged earth, lopped trees—and then as I got nearer the Cotswolds grass began to spring up, the stumps grew into trees, hills rose: it was a kind of resurrection. Yet now I think about it there was something primitive as well, as if time were turning back: all the deserted barns, the stubbled ploughshares, the stone walls that seemed to follow the hills forever, had been abandoned by man because they didn't need him, only the earth and its forces.

Anyway, I reached the village by mid-afternoon; Camside, I think it was called. I know there was a river, because people were leaning on the parapets and watching the sunlight. The first thing I did was to find a little hotel. The vicar had said I could stay at his house, but I decided not. I'm not much for religion; there's something more than us, I know that, but I don't think it's friendly. It's up to us to make what we can of life. The woman who ran the hotel—a huge woman with an apron like a postage stamp stuck on her belly and a great melon smile—wanted to see some magic, of course, so I showed her some tricks with cards. If I'd known, I'd have left it at that.

Well, I had a meal and went across to the Tithe Barn about half an hour before the show was due to start. I hadn't been able to get in touch with the vicar in the meantime. I felt happy, I remember: passing all the red stone houses which didn't jangle as cars went past, strolling along the main street where stall-holders were unpacking their stalls, looking up at a village clock whose hands were clasped together at noon or maybe at midnight, walking through the churchyard where sparrows were singing among the headstones. I felt I'd have an easy night.

The Tithe Barn had one of the steepest roofs I'd ever seen. There wasn't much else to notice, just an entrance with a few church posters pasted on it. So I went straight in, and I was nearly blinded. God knows where they'd got their spotlights from. They'd built a stage at one end of the barn—for plays and so on, I suppose, because there were a couple of makeshift dressing-rooms behind it—but all I could see at first was a blaze of light with two shadows fluttering above it under the roof, and I told you how steep the roof was. Eventually I made out the vicar and his wife fussing about on stage, and realised that theirs were the shadows that looked like a pair of hands grappling under the roof.

Of course I told them I wouldn't need all that light. But apparently the local rep put up with it, and the vicar's wife was quite upset. "We had an appeal to buy them," she said. She had pale skin and a pale dress that was supposed to be pretty; she was one of those fragile women whose weaknesses you mustn't notice, the same way people would be afraid to say anything about a cup of tea at the vicarage. "All the villagers contributed," she said. "My husband bought them." Well, he was a long black pole with a head like a shelled egg stuck in a cup, and I could understand the spotlights, but I wasn't going to put up with them. Eventually I persuaded them that I could make do with one. That must have been when I lost my chance to stop what happened.

Then the vicar said to me "Thank you very much for offering your services." He had some knack of suggesting more than he said; I felt that he was telling his wife off for being unchristian and trying to remind me of my place. So when he said "I hope the children will enjoy it," it sounded as if he was saying that they might be difficult and that he didn't know whether I had the talent to win them over. I didn't quite tell him that I'd show him, but that was what I felt.

I had a look around the barn. They'd brought in rows of hard wooden chairs, which weren't going to help. Then I went into one of the dressing-rooms, which was more like a packing case. I took my time setting out my props, because I was determined not to go out again until the show was due to start. Well, I knew when that was easily enough, because all of a sudden I heard a chorus from Handel's *Messiah* coming from out front, which they'd put on a gramophone for the children. Follow that, as you'd say these days. So I gathered everything up, went out and told the vicar's wife to take it off

—for which she glared at me as if I'd dared to hurt her—and strode straight onto the stage.

For a moment I thought I'd come out early, because even when the music stopped there wasn't a sound from the audience. And with the spotlight in my eyes I couldn't see whether anyone was there. So I arranged my props on the table they'd given me, to let my eyes adjust a little. Then I turned round and had another look.

At first all I could see were eyes glinting at me. After a while I made out that there were four rows or so of them, but it took me longer to work out what was wrong: they weren't talking, they weren't scuffling, they were simply watching me.

You know, this unnerved me so much that I almost muffed my first trick, a simple thing with coloured streamers. While I performed, half of me was trying to get the feel of those children. I gave them half a dozen tricks and there still wasn't a sound, not a laugh, not a mutter. Not a head turned. There's a bad audience that every magician knows, where half of them shout out how it's done and you have to find a trick that'll bring them up on stage and dazzle them. This wasn't that kind of audience. They were soaking me up and giving nothing back. Do you know, I found myself changing style halfway and turning it into a comedy act in the hope they'd respond. But they didn't twitch.

Well, my eyes were getting used to the light by now, and I was just about ready to give up when I saw two boys whispering on the back row. Now, they weren't like the rest: they were from some country house outside the village—their clothes were crisp as a fiver. And beyond them I could see the vicar and his wife just slipping out. When I think about it I suppose they were just going out for a word with some of the parents, but at the time all I could see was that they and those two brats on the back row weren't interested. So I thought, I'll show you. The wall behind the stage was painted white and perfect for a shadow show. But it wasn't going to be like any shadow show they'd seen before.

Of course I've thought about the whole thing since. You would too. I've hardly thought about anything else. And over the years I've worked out what was going on. I think those children were scared; I think those two boys had told them I was a real magician, in league with the devil or something like that. Remember, they wouldn't applaud me when I came on

stage—looking angry I suppose—in the middle of the record, because it was church music. They may have thought I was the devil, in my father's hat and cloak; you see, they would have been more terrified not to believe if they'd been told it was so. Not that I knew this then. I was simply out to get through to them somehow. But all I'm saying is that what happened wasn't entirely my fault. God knows I wouldn't have wanted it to happen.

So I turned to the children and said something like "Watch very carefully now. I'm going to show you some ghosts."

Well, the silence somehow grew sharper. I told you, I didn't know they were scared. But I must have destroyed my last hope when I said "If they frighten you, scream and I'll make them go away."

The first thing I showed them was a kind of skull with a big silly Mickey Mouse grin. There were some little girls, you see, so I thought I'd better ease into it. I could move my fingers a little and make the eyes peer round the audience. I was standing side on to them and watching for any reaction, but there wasn't one that I could see. I broadened the grin on the skull and crossed its eyes, but they didn't make a sound except for the two whispering at the back. All right, I thought, you've had your chance. Now we'll break the rules.

I glanced at the entrance to make sure the vicar hadn't come back, and then I sent a spider with unequal legs hobbling up the wall and into the roof. You don't know how pleased I was when I saw all their eyes turn up to watch it. Some of them even moved in their seats. So when I'd got the spider over their heads I clapped my hands. And they all jumped and stared at me. I was nearly clapping for excitement; I was completely carried away. I produced another spider, an even bigger one, and it crawled up painfully, falling back every now and then, to where I'd left the other one. I don't know how many I sent up to the roof—a dozen or so. It was only when I paused for a moment that I stopped. Because the two boys on the back row hadn't made a sound since I'd started the spiders.

I was just congratulating myself when I thought of how the children might feel. Well, I'm not completely stupid. After all, think of them, sitting there waiting for all those spiders to fall, not daring to move. So I said "Well, did you like that?" Let's remember, now, that I hadn't reason to think they'd all been won over, since I didn't know they'd been scared all along. "Tell me what you'd like to see now and I'll see what I can do," I said to them. And

then I noticed that the boys at the back were staring—not at the place where I'd left the spiders, not at me, but at the wall behind me.

I looked round and saw a face on the wall. I'll be honest with you; my heart jumped. It wasn't a pleasant face. There was grass sticking out of it, more like grass than hair, at any rate; one eye looked as if it had slipped down the cheek, and there was grass growing between its open lips. In fact, it looked like my father must have looked after he was dead. Well, I saw in a second that it was the shadow of the streamers that I'd crumpled on the table after my first trick. So I said something like "Well, that's an extra one," and knocked the streamers off the table.

And the face stayed there on the wall.

Now you can't think in a situation like that; you act. I threw myself in front of it and, even though it cost me a year or two, turned my back on it. I looked at the children, and I could see they knew. I could see something else, above my head, but even though inside I was one long deafening scream I stood sideways again and let them see my hands in front of the face. "There," I said. "That's how it's done," and before they could see my hands had nothing to do with the face I stood over and blocked it for good.

But then I had to watch them and feel their fear coming up in a silent wave, and see what was above my head and out there in the barn.

I didn't dare to look up in case they might look up too. It didn't seem as if that would matter, though, because I knew that any minute someone was going to see the humped shapes that were hobbling down the walls and clawing themselves across the floor towards the children. They'd be lost then. But I could see that my own shadow, which had been up under the roof all the time like a three-fingered claw, was moving and spreading like a stain until it reached above the rows of seats and began to close. I knew what was drawing it; it was their fear.

So I said "Well, that's all for now. You'd better go out to your parents, they'll be waiting," and I was shaking so much they must have noticed. But the claw didn't quiver, and the children didn't move. I looked straight at them, willing them to look straight at me, and I saw that the claw was almost closing, the other things had almost reached the seats.

And then the vicar appeared in the doorway. I shouted to him "We've finished now. Will you turn the lights on?" and my breath came out almost

in a cry as they all turned to him, away from the shadows.

I couldn't believe it when he called back "If you could give them a few more minutes while their parents arrive I should be grateful."

Well, what would you have done? I screamed at him "God blast you, turn on the lights!"

There isn't much more to tell. Just too much. The vicar gave me my fee in the entrance as if it were a Christian gesture to help me redeem myself. I left my props in the barn; I intended to go back for them in daylight. Then I followed the children and their parents, who kept trying to lose me, back to the village street and the hotel. I wasn't much of a drinker; I asked the woman at the hotel for the strongest cup of tea she could make.

She brought it and when she saw I wanted to be quiet, she went away. But she must have heard me scream, for she came running back. I think she took me for a drunkard; I know she wasn't pleased when I kept the light on in my room all night. But she didn't see what I saw when I picked up the cup of tea. She didn't see a huge black insect with an odd number of legs scuttle from beneath my hand and into a corner of the room.

Well, I lived with them. I had to. After a long time, when I hadn't used my hands, I saw them less often. But once in a while, when I least expected it, something would move at the corner of my eye, and it wouldn't be something I'd want to see. I could show you what I mean, but it mightn't end there. The claw might come back. I know I wouldn't see what would happen if it ever closed. And do you know, I don't think I should want to.

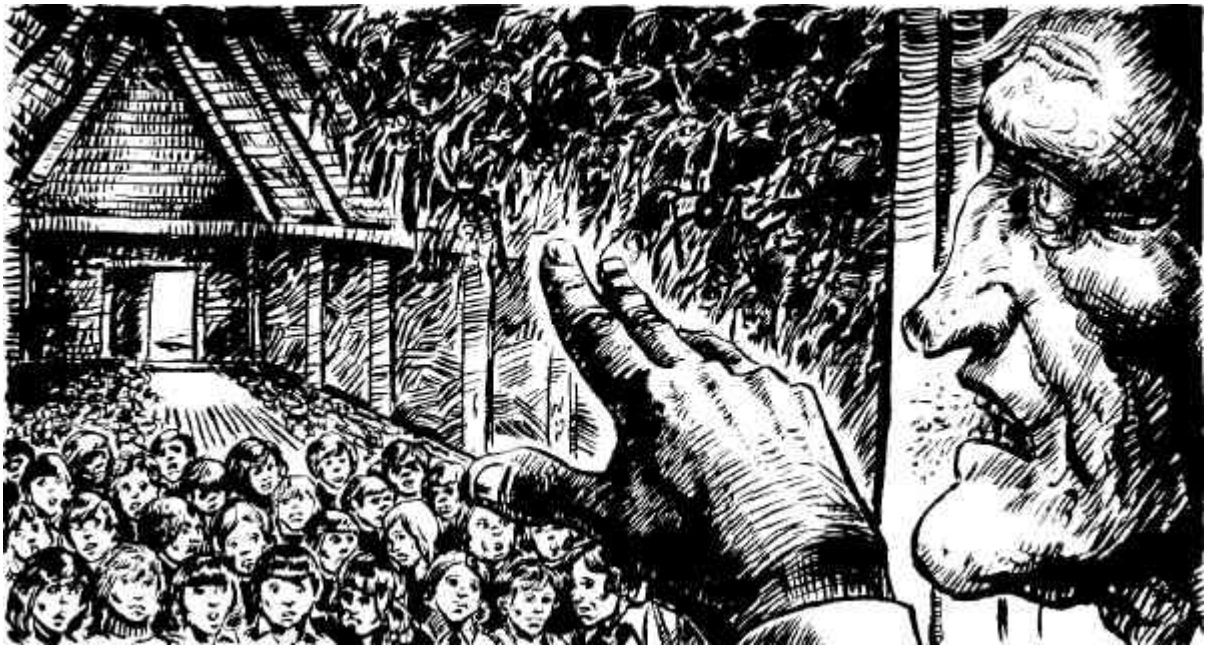

Illustration by Russell Nicholson, taken from Dark Horizons #12.

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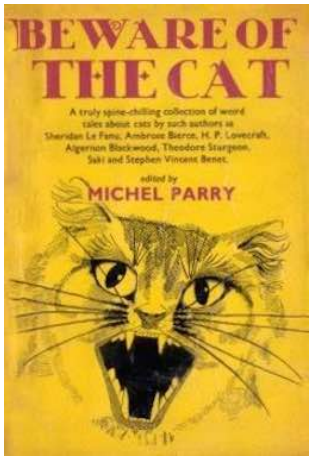
Cat And Mouse


BEWARE OF
THE CAT
A truly spine-chilling collection of weird tales about cats by such authors as Sheridan Le Fanu, Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, Theodore Sturgeon, Saki and Stephen Vincent Benet.
edited by
MICHEL PARRY

"*Cat And Mouse* was the earliest tale I ever wrote to order, for [...] Michel Parry. The book was, I need hardly say, a collection of supernatural tales about cats. Reviewing it in *Fantastic*, Fritz Leiber criticised my story for coming on too feline too early. As usual in his criticisms, he was right, [...] but I don't think it's malicious of me to point out that the feline images in the opening sentences of *Cat and Mouse* were added at Michel's request. I hope they and my comments won't seem too intrusive."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

Written in: 1971
First published in *Beware Of The Cat*, 1972
Also published in: *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

You couldn't say that the house crouched. Yet as we came off the roundabout on whose edge the house stood, and stooped beneath the trees which hung glistening over the garden, I had an impression of stealth. It couldn't be related to anything; not the summer glare nor the white house within the garden. But silence settled on us, and the circling cars hushed. And although the sunlight glittered on the last raindrops dripping from the leaves, a waiting shadow touched us and the quiet in the garden seemed poised to leap.

I had to struggle with the key in the unfamiliar lock; my wife Hazel laughed, annoying me a little. I'd wanted to throw the door wide and carry her in, enjoying my triumph; God knows I'd gone through enough to buy the house. But at least I enjoyed her delight once I managed to open the door.

We'd seen the house before, of course, when we were furnishing the rooms, but now we both felt a shock of unfamiliarity. The white telephone amazed us; so did the stairs, a construction of treads like the tail of a kite which was the major addition we owed to the previous tenants. Hazel's was the reaction I could have predicted; she rushed through the downstairs rooms and then clattered upstairs, eager to own the rest of the house. As I watched her run up the open stairs I felt a dull surge of desire. But when I made my own tour of the pale green living room, the white kitchen cold as a hospital, the bathroom with its abstract blocks of colour and its pink pedestal, I felt

imprisoned. The air smelled slightly dank, like fur. Of course Hazel had been wearing her sheepskin coat, but it seemed odd that the entire ground floor should smell of wet fur, a smell that trailed with me like a cloak. I began to open windows. Perhaps, since we'd lived on a third floor for years, I simply needed time to adjust to entering a house whose windows weren't open.

I found Hazel within a maze of double-jointed lights and drawing-board and cartons of books, in the room we'd decided to use as an attic. The smell was stronger here. "Come down and I'll make some tea," she said.

"Just let me tidy up a little."

"You've done enough for a while, love."

"You mean selling myself?" I said, thinking of my ideas and my art which I'd battered against the advertising agency where I worked until they had been battered half out of shape.

"No, I mean selling your talent," Hazel said, then with an edge of doubt: "You do like our house, don't you?"

"Of course I do. That's why I worked to buy it," I said and stopped, peering down at the windowsill. We had liked the rough wood of that sill, and had left it unpainted. But now, trying to peer closer without appearing to do so, I saw that the sill looked chewed. Or clawed. The former owners must have had a cat or a dog. That was the explanation, yet I was disturbed to think that they had locked it in here, for nothing else could have driven it to such a frenzy that it would have left its claw-marks on the sill and even in the putty round the window-pane.

"I'm sure you'll sleep now that we're here," Hazel said, and I started. "What are you looking so worried about?" she said.

I was thinking how, when I'd stripped the attic to paint it, I had noticed claw-marks tearing through the wallpaper without realising until now what they were, but I didn't want to upset her; besides, I wished she wouldn't probe me so often, even though it was out of love she did so. "I'm wondering where the stereo is," I said.

"It must be on its way," she said. "They'll take care of it. They can see how expensive it is."

"Yes, well," I told her, faintly annoyed that I should feel bound to explain this point again, "it's the most sensitive. You have to pay for sensitivity."

"I know you do," she said smiling, and I realised she'd found another meaning, a personal meaning which she wanted to share with me. Sometimes her insistence on puns infuriated me; often it made me love her more. I coaxed my gaze away from the patch on the wall where the paper had been clawed. "I wouldn't mind dinner," I said.

The stereo arrived after dinner, halfway through my third cup of coffee. The workmen were clearly annoyed that I should supervise them, as if I were showing them how to do their job. But it was only a job to them; to me it was perfection in jeopardy. When they'd left I played *Ein Heldenleben* at full volume, caring nothing for the neighbours, since they were beyond the garden. Hazel listened quietly, more in order not to disturb me than out of a genuine response to the music. Somehow I felt trapped; the Strauss surged against Hazel's tranquil uncommunicative face, against the padded silence of the room, and never broke. I crossed to the windows and flung them high, and the feeling streamed out into the dark garden, where its remnants clung to the trees.

That night I could neither make love nor sleep. Outside the bedroom window cars whirred lingeringly by, like a sound by Stockhausen passing across speakers. My wife slept buried in the pillow, frowning, her thumb in her mouth. The tip of my cigarette glowed and reddened the landing; it opened in the gloss of the doors like a crimson eye, watching from the attic and from the other bedroom whose purpose was beginning to seem increasingly futile. I had meant to go downstairs, but down there or in my ears lay a faint ominous hiss, quite unlike the threshing of the leaves above the garden. I listened for a few minutes, then I scraped my cigarette on the ashtray by the bed and pulled the covers up.

Hazel woke me at noon. I gathered she'd awoken only recently herself. I unstuck myself from sleep and followed her downstairs. I must have looked disgruntled, judging by Hazel's glances at me. I felt she'd woken me up merely for company. When we reached the living room she said: "Darling, listen."

I heard only the words, which were the formula she used when she wasn't sure that I would agree. Of course her tone implied another meaning, but I wasn't awake enough to notice. "What is it?" I demanded.

"No, *listen*."

That was the second half of the formula. I often spent an hour before sleep juggling ideas and an hour after breakfast waking up; nothing angers me more than to be called upon to make a decision before I'm awake. "Look," I said, "for Christ's sake, now that you've dragged me out of bed—"

Then I saw that she had been gazing at the stereo. From its speakers came a sound like the hiss of a hostile audience.

"You see, it moves back and forth," Hazel said. "The stereo must have been on all night. Will it have gone wrong?"

"I take it you've left it on to make sure it will?" I couldn't tell her that I wasn't shouting at her but at something else, because I didn't care to admit it to myself. But as I pulled out *Ein Heldenleben* and almost ripped it with the stylus I felt the movement of the hiss, felt it loom like a lurking predator, an actual dark physical presence, as it crept from one speaker to another. Then the Strauss rushed richly out. It sounded perfect, but aside from that it meant nothing. I took it off, scowled at Hazel and stumped back to bed.

I was running upstairs, and the stairs tilted steeply like a ladder. Suddenly sliding gates clanged shut at both ends of the staircase, and something groped hugely through the wall and felt around the trap for me. I awoke struggling. The blanket lay heavy and fluid on my body like a cat, and my skin prickled with what felt like the memory of claws. I threw off the blanket and sat up.

For a moment I was lost; I stared at the blue walls, the grey wall, the impossible silence. I struggled to my feet and listened. It was five o'clock, and there should have been more sound; Hazel should have been audible; the silence seemed charged, alert, on tiptoe. I made my way downstairs, padding carefully. I didn't know what I might find.

Hazel was sitting in the living room, a book in her hand. I couldn't tell whether she'd been crying; her face looked scrubbed as it would have if she had wept, but I was confused by the thought that this might be the impression she had contrived for me. More disturbingly I felt that something had happened to change the silence while I had been asleep.

She came to the end of a chapter and inserted a bookmark. "I like to sleep too, you know," she said.

"No doubt," I said, and that was that. Through dinner we didn't speak, we hardly looked at each other. It was less that each of us was waiting for the other to speak than as if the silence itself was poised to pounce on the first to succumb. Several times I was almost frightened enough to speak, so that at least my fears might be defined; but each time I determined that it was up to Hazel to begin.

I don't know what music I played after dinner; I recall only visualising fists of sound crudely battling the blankets of silence. I looked at Hazel, who was trying to read against the barrage of noise which for the moment had lost all meaning. I felt grief for what I might be beginning to destroy. "I'm sorry," I said. "Maybe I'm starting to crack up."

Sometimes Hazel would dodge around the bedroom and I, having pinned her to the bed, would rape her; we seemed to need this more and more often. But tonight we waltzed gently over each other, exploring delicately, until I was too deep in her to need ornamentations. "You're a deep one," I said.

"What, love?" she gasped, laughing.

But I could never offer her puns more than once, and now less than ever, for my body had stiffened and chilled. Perhaps, despite her reassurances, I was cracking up. I knew that at that moment I was being watched. I peered down into Hazel's eyes and tried to gaze through them, and as I felt her nails move on my back I remembered the sensations of claws at the end of my dream.

The next day, Monday, I came home tired by a lunch which one of our clients had bought me; my constant smile had felt more like a death-grin, and certainly had expressed as little emotion. Returning to the agency I'd walked through shafts of envy which had penetrated even my six whiskies. Our house should have offered peace, but all I felt as I opened the front door was the taut snap of tension. I felt awaited, and not only by Hazel.

In the early evening cars passed with a muffled undulating hum, but soon faded. I remembered that back at our flat we could always hear the plop of a tap like a dropper or the echoing cries of children in the baths across the road. Here in the house the silence seemed worse than ever, threatening to drown us, and our speech was waterlogged. Yet it wasn't the silence I found most disturbing. Over dinner and afterwards, as we sat reading, I glimpsed an odd expression several times on Hazel's face. It wasn't fear, exactly; I

should have described it as closer to doubt. What upset me most was that each time she caught me watching her, she quickly smiled.

I couldn't stop thinking that something had happened while I had been at work. "How was our house today?" I asked.

"It was fine," she said. "Oh, while I was out shopping—"

But I wouldn't let her escape. "Do you like our house, then?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

I was certain now that she was hiding something from me, but I didn't know how to find it. She could elude my questions by any number of wiles, by weeping if necessary. Frowning, I desisted and put Britten's *Curlew River* on the stereo. Of all Britten's work I love the church parables more than any; their sureness and astringency can make me forget my crumpled colleagues at the agency and their clumsy machinations. I thought *Curlew River* might help me define my thoughts. But I didn't get as far as the second side, with its angelic resolution. Peter Fears' eerie vocal glissandi in the part of the madwoman chilled me like the howls of a sad cat; the church which the stereo recreated seemed longer and more hollow, like a tunnel gaping invisibly before me in the air. And the calm silences with which Britten punctuates his parables seemed no longer calm. They seemed to pounce closer and to grow as they approached. Determined to respond to the music, I closed my eyes. At once I felt a dark stealthy shape leap at me between the music. My eyes started open, and I glanced to Hazel for some kind of support. The room was empty.

And it was dark. On the wall opposite me the wallpaper hung clawed into strips. It was not the living room. Perhaps I cried out, for I heard Hazel call "Don't worry, you're all right," and something else inaudible. I saw that the wallpaper was after all not clawed, that it was merely shadows that had made it seem so. Then Hazel came in with a tray,

"What did you say?" I demanded.

"Nothing," she said. "I crept out to make some coffee."

"Just now, I mean. When you called out."

"I haven't said a word for ten minutes," she said.

After Hazel had gone to bed I stayed downstairs for an hour of last cigarettes and fragments of slogans. The month looked slack at the agency,

but I couldn't stop thinking, and I preferred not to think about the house. Eventually, of course, the house overtook my thoughts. All right, I argued in mute fury, if I were moved by Britten's melodious angels then I might as well admit to a lurking belief in the supernatural. So the house was haunted by the presence of a dog or, as I sensed intuitively, a cat: so what? It didn't worry me, and Hazel hadn't even noticed. But if my grudging belief was the latest fashion in enlightenment, the retreat from scepticism, it didn't seem to be helping me. Spectral cats could have nothing to do with my hearing Hazel's voice when she hadn't spoken. I felt that my mind was beginning to fray.

A paroxysm of dry coughs persuaded me to stub out my cigarette. I threw the scribbled scraps of paper into the fireplace and came out into the hall. As I turned out the light in the living room, a shadow leapt from the hall to the landing with a single bound.

Of course I wasn't sure, and I tried to be less so. I crept upstairs, feeling my heels hang over the open treads of the staircase. For a moment my nightmare returned, and I was heaving myself up a tilted ladder which grew steeper as the gaps between the treads widened. Halfway up I could hear myself panting with exhaustion, perhaps from lack of sleep. At the top the shadows crowded indistinguishably. On tiptoe, I opened the bedroom door. I had drawn it back only inches when a fluid shadow rippled through the crack into the room.

I threw the door open, and Hazel jumped. I was certain she had, although it might have been the bedroom light jarring her blanketed shape into focus. As I undressed I watched her, and after a minute or two she shifted a little. Now I was convinced that she hadn't been asleep when I entered, and was still only pretending. I didn't try to make sure, but it took me some time to turn out the light and slip into bed. For minutes I stood staring at Hazel's obscured body, wondering where the shadow had gone.

I awoke feeling lightened. The room gave out its colours brilliantly; beyond the window waves of leaves sprang up glowing in the sun. It was only as sleep began to peel back a little that I wondered whether Hazel's absence had lightened me.

Once downstairs I didn't go to her. Instead I walked dully into the dark living room and slumped on the settee. I began to wonder whether I was afraid of Hazel. Certainly I couldn't talk to her about last night. My eyes

began to close, and the living room darkened further. Shadows striped the wall again; in a moment the wallpaper might peel. Or a claw might tear through—

The door gushed light and Hazel came in, carrying plates of breakfast. She smiled when I leapt to my feet, but I wasn't greeting her. The living room was bright, as it had been since I'd entered. I had realised whom I might see. After all, the house was his responsibility.

"How do you feel?" I said, staring into my coffee then glancing up at her.

"All right, love. Don't start worrying about me. I should try and have a rest today if I were you."

I didn't know whether the shadow was speaking; in any case, I resented the implication that I looked incapable. "I'm going to take a couple of hours off this morning," I said. "If you want to come—I mean, if you want to get away from the house for a while—"

"Silly," she said. "You'd be upset if dinner wasn't ready."

My suspicions were confirmed. I couldn't believe that she wouldn't take the chance to escape the house unless it had infected her somehow. I was glad that I hadn't told her where I was going. I managed to kiss her, forgetting to notice whether the feel of her had changed, and hurried round the corner to the car. Muffled thunder hung in the air. For a moment I regretted leaving Hazel alone, but I was afraid to return to the victim? But I couldn't altogether believe that one's personality could be ousted; I could imagine a framework within which this might be logical, but I wasn't sure that I felt it to be real. Yet I noticed that here, caged in by ropes of rain, I still felt more free than recently: free of the house's influence.

Suddenly I wanted to be with Hazel. If I had to I would drag her out, whatever was within her, however dangerous she might be. I could telephone my agency when I arrived at the house. I turned my car and it coursed through the pools of the city.

Along the carriageways out of the city the trees looked bedraggled and broken. Occasionally I passed torn cars, steaming where they'd skidded in mud. I was hardly surprised, when I reached the house, to see that the telephone wire had snapped and was sagging between the roof and the trees in the garden. As I drove past the roundabout it occurred to me that if Hazel were a victim she was trapped now. She would have to admit that she was

as vulnerable as me. No longer would I have to suffer the entire burden of disquiet.

I think it was not until I got out of the car that I perceived what I had been thinking. I felt a chill of horror at myself. I loved her hands on my back, yet for a while I had turned them into claws. All along Hazel had been frightened but had tried to hide her fear from me. That was the doubt that I'd seen in her eyes. At once I knew what had blinded me, what had sought to destroy her. The rain dwindled and the sun blazed out; a rainbow lifted above the carriageway. I rushed through the garden, lashed by wet leaves, and dragged open the door to the house..

The house was dark—darker than it should have been now that the sun had returned. It was dim with stealth and silence. There was no sound of Hazel. I hurried through the ground floor, stumbled upstairs and searched the bedrooms, but the house seemed empty. I gazed down from the landing and saw that the front door was still open. I was ready to run out and wait for Hazel outside, yet I couldn't rid myself of the impression that the staircase was far longer and steeper than I remembered. Trying to control my fears I started down. I was halfway down when a shadow crept across the carpet in the living room.

For a moment I thought it was Hazel's. But not only did its shape relate to something else entirely—it was far too large. I stood on the edge of the stairs. If I ran now, whatever was moving in the dim room might misjudge its leap. I wavered, fell down two stairs and jumped clumsily to the hall. At that moment the telephone rang.

In my terror I could see it only as an ally. I backed up the stairs, reached down and caught up the receiver. I muttered incoherently, then I heard Hazel's voice.

"I've got out," she said. "I hoped I might catch you before you came home. Is the door open?"

"Yes," I said. "Listen, love—don't come back in. I'm sorry. I didn't understand what was going on. I blamed you."

"If the door's open you can make it," she said. "Just run as fast as you can"—and then I remembered that the telephone wire was down, remembered the voice that had called to me from the other room.

As I dropped the receiver the air came alive with hissing. It was the sound that the stereo had trapped, but worse now, overpowering. I launched myself from the stairs and came down in the middle of the hall. One more leap and I would be outside. But before I regained my balance I had seen that the front door was closed.

I might have wasted my strength in trying to wrench it open. But although I didn't understand the rules of what was happening, I felt that if the house had tried to convince me that Hazel was safe that meant she was still inside somewhere. Behind me the hall spat. I clutched at the front door. I told myself that I was only using it for support, and turned.

It took me some time to determine where I was. In the dimness the hall seemed green, and a good deal smaller. I might have been in the living room. But I wasn't, for I could see the stairs; the walls weren't closing like a trap; the shadows hadn't massed into a poised shape, ready to sink its claws into my back. My mind began to scream and scrabble at itself, and I concentrated on the stairs. Eventually, after some hours, the hall imperceptibly altered and seemed stretched to dim infinity. The stairs were miles away. It wasn't worth making for them. There was an acre of open space to be crossed, and I knew I had no chance.

I cried out for Hazel, and from somewhere above she answered my cry.

That cry I knew wasn't faked. It was scarcely coherent, pulled out of shape by terror; it was scarcely Hazel, and in some way I knew that guaranteed its truth. I ran to the stairs, counting my footsteps. Two, and I was on the stairs. I had control of the situation for a moment. I should have kept going blindly; I shouldn't have looked round. But I couldn't help glancing into the living room.

The doorway was dark, and in the darkness a face appeared, flashed and was gone, like the momentary luminous spectres in a ghost train. I glimpsed an enormous black head, glowing green eyes, a red mouth barred with white teeth. Then I tore my gaze away and looked up to the landing, and I saw that the stairs had become a towering ladder, a succession of great treads separated by yawning gaps which I could never cross. The air hissed behind me, and I could go neither up nor down.

Then Hazel cried out again. There was only one way to conquer myself, and my mind was so numbed that I managed it. I shut my eyes tight and crawled upwards, grasping each higher stair and dragging myself painfully

over space. Beneath me I felt the stairs tremble. I wondered whether they would throw me off, until I realised that something was climbing up behind me. I tightened every muscle of my face to keep my brain from bursting out, and heaved myself upward. I felt a purring breath on my neck, and then I was on the landing.

I stumbled to my feet and opened my eyes. Unless the house was able to blot Hazel from my gaze, she could only be in the one room I hadn't searched, the attic. As I ran across the landing, a huge face flashed at the top of the stairs. Its eyes gleamed with bottomless hatred, and for a second it seemed to fill with teeth. Then I had reached the attic and slammed the door.

I slumped. The attic was so crowded with lamps and cartons that nobody could have hidden there. The objects massed, suffocated and strung together by cords of dust; I didn't see how I could even make my way between them. I might be trapped in the maze and cut off from Hazel, if indeed she were in the room. I knocked one of the looming cartons to the floor in an attempt to clear the view, and on the thud of the carton I heard breath hiss in muffled terror.

At once the room rearranged itself, and I saw Hazel. She was crouched in a corner, her knees drawn up to her chin, her arms pressed tight over her face. She was sobbing. I moved gently towards her, loving her, bullying the fear from my mind. My feet tangled in wire. I looked down and saw the cord for the lamps. I knew where the socket was; I plugged in the lamps and let them blind the door. Then I went to Hazel.

"Come on, love," I said. "Come on. Hazel. We're going now. Come on, love."

Her arms drew back from her face. She looked up at me; then she shrank into the corner and her eyes gaped in horror. I fell back. But her lips moved. She was trying to speak to me. She wasn't frightened of me. I looked behind me, towards the door.

The door had opened, and the doorway was half-filled by an enormous face. Its mouth yawned wide and a tongue sprang dripping across its teeth. I grabbed the lamps and shone them into its eyes, but they didn't blink. Its face began to bulge in through the doorway, and behind it others leapt across the landing to hover grinning above the first. With a surge of pure energy and terror I hurled the lamps at the faces.

What happened I don't know. I never heard the lamps strike the floor. But the surge of energy carried me across the room to heave the window open. I ran to Hazel and pulled her to her feet, although she shrank sobbing into the corner. I threw her across my shoulder and staggered with her to the window. I glanced back into the room, where faces with gleaming eyes capered in the air and flew at us in a single toothed mass. Then I jumped.

I think the house must have overlooked that. Mice might fall from a window, but they aren't supposed to jump. So I spent time in hospital with a broken leg, while Hazel was furious enough by the end of the week to visit the estate agent's. Once she had made him admit that he wouldn't spend a night in the house, the rest was easy. "I have no time for horror," he told her. My leg soon improved. Not so Hazel's insomnia; and yet when we lie awake together talking through the uneasy hours, I think there are times when we're grateful. Somehow we could never talk that way before.

A Madness From The Vaults [Final Version]

"The story is revised considerably from its earlier draft, as Campbell has excised the prefatory 'Author's Note' that explains how the story came to be translated and indulged less in descriptions of Opojollac's despotic reign."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Completed in: 1971
First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #43*, November 1986.

Beneath the city of Derd on the planet of Tond lies a labyrinth of vaults, whose origins remain obscure. The yarkdao who built the city could intuit no explanation for their presence, nor were they encouraged to explore by the fragmentary legends of well-nigh endless passages, linked in a manner that defied mapping. The yarkdao assumed that the vaults had served some hermetic function in the lives of the unknown citizens of that ruined pyramid-city on whose foundations Derd was to be built and neglected further thought. In the heyday of Derd, some yarkdao elected to be entombed in the vaults rather than suffer abandonment on the peak of Liota above the city, but such rebels were uncommon. The openings from the vaults which occasionally gaped on the streets of Derd were avoided by the multitude, deterred by the legend that on certain nights the corpses preserved below would stalk forth from their alcoves and emerging, their faces turned to the dead and ashen sun of Baalblo, would parade through the streets.

At the end of its life, Derd lay beneath the tyranny of its last governor, Opojollac, whose law for any crime required the culprit to be cast into the vaults. The poorer quarters of the city were laden with the corpses of those whose taxes had enriched his robes with glimmering black charms, while the richer yarkdao could only weep as their mansions crumbled beneath the ever-rising crystal serpents with which Opojollac's palace was spired. In Derd the names of the new-born were no longer the outcome of a day-long christening ritual but were subject to the whim of Opojollac, who thus ensured that none could boast a name so sonorous as his and by that token

hold sway over his city. Certain words, phrases, and syntactical modes were the property of Opojollac alone, for on Tond language is power. There were rumours that he might order a temple built to himself, and none dared meditate on the eventual fate of those virgins who were summoned to his palace; although some said that at such times the crystal serpents would rise redly gorged against the green sun, and some, indeed, that they would preen their scales lethargically.

So Opojollac ruled through myth, and decadence simpered in Derd with lips painted with the blood of torture; and with decadence came apathy. Nonetheless, at the rising of a day, as Opojollac dined beneath the translucent roof formed of a shell found in the desert, a servitor fought free of the curtains of mauve skin which veiled the entrance to the dining-hall and presented himself, bowing backward towards Opojollac through his legs.

"O omnisapient and benevolent Opojollac," he moaned. "O omnipotent—"

"Your praises, however fulsome and gratifying," pronounced Opojollac, "represent an interruption of my meal. Cease, and justify your presence. But first show me your tongue—yes, it appears tender, and if it cannot provide a satisfactory explanation I may well transfer it to my plate."

"Amen, O gracious Opojollac," responded the servitor, shuddering. "A yarkdao waits outside, saying that he must speak to you immediately of some danger to your glorious self."

"I imagined I heard a participle," mused Opojollac in a voice hoarse with mirthless laughter. "Guard your syntax. Let the yarkdao enter, reminding him the while that he may not behold me otherwise than inverted. As to your tongue—perhaps I may benefit from allowing it to mature a little."

Almost immediately, a yarkdao in tattered robes appeared, bowing once without grace. "O governor," he said, "there is a yarkdao dead in the Streets of Pleasure—"

But Opojollac laughed without humour. "I am alive," he cried, "and it follows that such deaths cannot affect me. Since the pleasure-givers do not trouble me, their methods of extracting payment are no concern of mine. Servitor, have this intruder shorn of all but the last syllable of his name and cast him to the vaults."

The servitor, skilled in the ways of Opojollac's palace, managed while yet bowing to capture the miscreant, and Opojollac returned to his meal. But coincidence dictated that Beav Lanpbeav, Opojollac's chief administrator, should that day be collecting taxes in the Streets of Pleasure; and presently, while Opojollac was trifling with his collection of musical instruments, Beav Lanpbeav craved audience. "Play to me," Opojollac commanded, "and tell me your tale."

The administrator took up a lute tuned in quarter-tones, shuddering at the stains which marked its frame and remembering how Opojollac had acquired the instrument. But it was the governor's favourite toy, and Beav Lanpbeav had so ingratiated himself with Opojollac by his art that he was not required to bow, so, while the dissonances of the lute touched the petrified trees which were the pillars of the hall, he spoke.

"O beneficence, I had made my way through the Streets of Pleasure and was about to quit them by the northward egress, when in my path I encountered a crowd of the tenants of the street. I called upon them in your name to move aside, which, of course, was done with dispatch; yet I observed that they huddled into the hives on that side of the thoroughfare farthest from an entrance to the vaults. Beneath the green rays of Yifne that entrance seemed instinct with movement of a kind I could not distinguish. When I approached, I saw tracks of a nature unknown to me, as if something that possessed an ill-matched number of limbs had emerged from, and returned to, the vault. I turned then to that which lay in the street, but for a space could make little of it. It appeared to be a black and pitted mass trampled into the earth, more than the height of a yarkdao in span, and acrawl with insects. 'What droppings is this?' I shouted in your name. 'Who has befouled the street?' But from beyond one of the barred doors, a voice cried that the mass in the street had but recently been the husband of one of them."

"Doubtless a sorcerer's revenge," Opojollac mused, but he frowned. "Nevertheless, I and no other hold power in Derd. Go now, send forth spies and be quick to bring me any further such tales."

Days passed, and Opojollac kept to the hall of music, where he tried to coax from his instruments the tunes which the embalmed songsters suspended among the trees had sung in life. But always he failed, and each day brought new tales of the unknown peril that stalked the city. At last

Beav Lanpbeav took up the lute once more and told Opojollac of his findings.

"O kindly tyrant, it seems clear that a forgotten monster has come forth from the vault. Many have spoken of a shape which rears forth from the entrances and leaps on its prey from the shadows. You must know that those entrances from which it preys draw ever nearer to your palace and that there is an entrance situated near your portal. There is but one course to take: to ask counsel of the protectors of our world, the Globes of Hakkthu."

"For once your wisdom is equal to my own," Opojollac said. "Go then and seek counsel."

"Not I, for pity," Beav Lanpbeav cried, paling, "for they would scarcely grant indulgence to my poor tales. Me they would crush; you have the language to converse with them."

It troubled Opojollac that his dealings with the city of Derd might find little favour with the implacable Globes, yet he admitted grudgingly that his administrator might prove less equal to the task. So he made ready, donning a robe like a skin of mirrors for the desert, and took his leave. Glancing back, he saw Beav Lanpbeav musing among the black branches and pale silent songsters within the hall.

Slowly Opojollac passed among the low mansions which were dazzled by his palace, and between the brown hives of the poorer quarter. Few yarkdao were to be seen nor were caravans of traders to be heard, and everywhere, it seemed, gaped the entrances to the vaults. At last, close to the rim of the city, Opojollac approached one of the entrances. Within, the dark rough walls stretched away beyond his sight and beads of moisture gleamed from the shadows. At the edge of total darkness Opojollac saw an image set in an alcove; he distinguished a limbless torso surmounted by a pitted, malformed head, flat like a serpent's whose wide mouth and deep-set eyes were frozen in a vapid smile. Vague memories stirred of tales told at the birth of Derd, but Opojollac shrugged quickly and hurried out into the desert.

Already, against the dazzling white sand, he could see the broken totem-pillars which marked the tip of the path to Hakkthu. He gained this path, which was formed of cracked and treacherous fused sand, and, as he hurried on, the blinding desert coated his eyes. Soon he found it difficult to distinguish his surroundings or to reassure himself of the reality of what he saw. Once he imagined that from a shattered amber dome on the horizon,

thin tattered figures pranced forth and beckoned hungrily to him, and, some immeasurable time later, that he glimpsed a huge, toothed head struggling to raise its body from the sand.

At last the path began to dip and he knew that he was approaching Hakkthu. He paused to brush the paste of dust and sweat from his face, and the mirrors flashed intolerably on his arms. After a while he made out, in the omnipresent whiteness, a gigantic cloud of dust which puffed up incessantly from a hollow of the desert. Opojollac drew all the power of his language to him and hastened down the unsteady track to stand at the lip of the hollow.

Within the restless cloud of sand, which loomed more mightily than his palace, he thought that he perceived the rolling of great rusted surfaces and heard a low unceasing rumble, like the musings of a metal colossus. He threw himself down and, crying out the ritual invocation, began to address the Globes.

"O ageless Globes, who have moved since the beginning of Tond and who, before the birth of my poor world, were pleased to roll through the unimaginable depths of space, the greatest and wisest of planets, hear my supplication! Know that a monster has risen from the vaults beneath Derd and craves power on this world, which is thine alone!"

Minutes of silence passed so that Opojollac dared glance toward Hakkthu. Then he threw himself supine again, for he had glimpsed a gigantic rusted mouth yawning above him through the dust. For a moment only the dust whispered, then a voice like the grinding of ponderous gears boomed out above Opojollac.

"It was well done to bring this intelligence to Hakkthu. Listen well to our command. We, the Globes, had the labyrinth beneath the pyramids constructed to pen the avatar of Azathoth who lurks below. Yet we knew that he who festers there must one day learn the labyrinth, though it were the work of aeons, and emerge to bring chaos to Tond. Thus we caused a further protection to be constructed. Go now to the vaults, touching the walls at the span of your arm, and a light will guard you and protect you. Above the pit in the deepest vault, a lever stands from the wall which touched, contains once more the avatar of Azathoth. Go now, and fear not."

When Opojollac raised his head again, only the dust rolled; and so he made his way back across the dimming waste to Derd. The silence of the desert

lay upon the city, and Opojollac encountered no citizen in the streets. The entrances of the hives and mansions stood unguarded, and Opojollac saw that his city had been abandoned.

As a wind from the desert sang thinly in the shells which roofed his palace, Opojollac cursed the traitorous citizens and thought to flee. Then a vision mocked him of his palace ruined and inhabited by the creatures of the surrounding waste. An entrance to the vaults gaped close by. Opojollac strode to it and, stretching forth an unsteady hand, touched the wall within the entrance. As he did so, a line of light sprang forth beneath his fingers and sped along the wall into darkness. It was a warm light, like the glow of fires at midnight in the desert, and so Opojollac gave himself into its protection and passed into the vaults.

For hours, it seemed, he walked. The walls were pocked like ancient flesh, down which black sweat rolled. At times the floor descended sharply, and he slid beyond the path of the light beneath the low looming roof of black stone. Often the passage broadened into a junction whose limits the light could not distinguish, where the shadows crowded and nodded toward him as the luminous path rushed on. Once, far down a transverse passage, he saw a great flat stain amid which seemed to glimmer the face of a criminal he had consigned to the vaults. Sometimes the light threaded the eyes of cadavers standing like grim servitors in niches; sometimes it startled clusters of round pale shapes which withdrew hastily into the walls; sometimes it leapt across the mouths of other passages, faintly illuminating dank choked depths and Opojollac, panicking, fled in its wake.

Long after Opojollac had ceased to count the branching passages, he halted at a junction. But for the stumbling of his feet, there was silence in the vaults; yet for a moment he was sure that he had heard, filtering distorted down the corridors at whose rendezvous he stood, a long stertorous hollow inhalation. His whole body pumped like a stranded fish in fear. The sound was not repeated, however, and after a while he hurried in pursuit of the guiding tip of light.

Minutes later he heard the sound again, breathing down an unlighted corridor on his left. Now it was louder and Opojollac stared in terror into the indistinguishable depths, where condensation dripped unseen from the ceiling. Once again he hastened in the path of the light, which curved ever beyond his vision. Vertigo spun within him; he felt that he was running into

a spiral of claustrophobic stone, like the interior of a gigantic subterranean shell. He ran, his head swimming, and all at once light burst, intensified, upon his eyes. He had reached the centre of the labyrinth.

Beyond the termination of the corridor, the light had encircled a domed chamber. A mixture of dust and moisture coursed down the walls and drops hung trembling beneath the dome. Within the loop of light lay a circular well, its rim cracked and encrusted with mud, and beyond the well, opposite the entrance in which stood Opojollac, a rusty lever protruded from the wall.

After hesitating, Opojollac entered the chamber. The path around the rim was more than wide enough to permit him to gain the lever, yet he could not bring himself to look down into the well. Indeed, his eyes half-closed protectively as he came within reach of the lever and dragged it down.

For a moment there came no sound, nor any indication that the lever had done its work. Then, from far down the well, rose a vast bubbling breath.

Opojollac looked down. Deep in the grey encrusted well a figure stood. In the dim light he took it to be a colossal version of the image which guarded the entrance to the vaults, a limbless trunk on which was set a flat head like a reptile's whose stretched mouth smiled senselessly. Beads of mud trickled over its face, and cobwebs hung from its lips. Opojollac peered closer, distinguishing that globes of dull moisture had fallen on the eyelids of the image. Then he saw that this was not so: that the eyes had opened and were glaring up at him.

He cried out in horror and, pressing his hands against the wall behind him, began to edge back toward the entrance. As he did so he saw grey buds form at the shoulders of the shape in the well. While he was yet some paces from the entrance, the buds bloated and long knobbed fingers sprang from them. As Opojollac reached the passage, huge unequal hands broke free of the shoulders and rose toward him through the well on boneless arms.

Shrieking, stumbling, falling against the walls, Opojollac fled the vaults. He emerged from the central spiral and blundered onward, drawn outward by the unwavering light. No sounds pursued him but in parallel corridors he glimpsed dim grey forms which seemed to match his pace.

Eventually he halted, choking. From the junction at which he stood, several passages plunged into subterranean blackness; but the thread of light was

there to guide him. He leaned against a wall to allow himself to cohere and his mirrors rattled dully about him. Then, in the dim corridor opposite him, he saw a movement like the swift unfurling of a pale fungus. He turned to flee and in the passage from which he had recently emerged he saw the light extinguished and a grey scrabbling hand reach forth for him. As he backed away, the hand traced the line of light into the junction and doused it like slime. Opojollac's being was turned inside out, for he glimpsed the two hands groping through the junction with no body intervening, and their arms stretched back into darkness, but he cried out and fled.

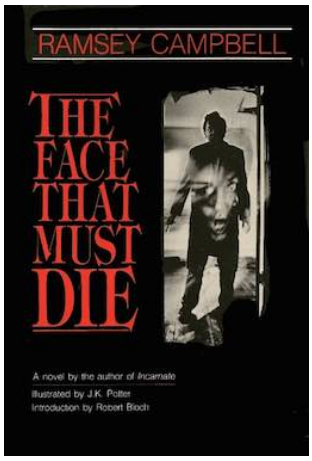
At last he fell out into the city of Derd. For a moment he turned to his palace; then he began to run toward the desert through the twilit green-tinged streets. But he perceived that some odd quality was shared by the light and by the silence; and, gazing upward, he saw the cause. The Globes of Hakkthu had not betrayed their trust. The action of the lever had indeed contained the avatar of Azathoth; for a great translucent dome covered the entire city of Derd.

Opojollac beat on the dome with his fists, crying out curses against his people, against the Globes of Hakkthu, against the abomination from the vaults. But the dome did not respond to his pleas; and while he yet threw his body against the translucent surface, two vast unequal shadows of hands rose up against the dome and descended toward him.

Such is the tale which the Globes of Hakkthu, to whom the protection of the planet Tond was entrusted, are wont to intone at the nadir of the night.

1972

I Am It And It Is I


RAMSEY CAMPBELL
THE FACE THAT MUST DIE
A novel by the author of Incarnate
Illustrated by J.K. Potter
Introduction by Robert Bloch

"*I Am It And It Is I* (a title which Lovecraftians may recognise) [...] was to be one of a collection of tales called *Marihuana Marvels*, a project which, thank heaven, got no further. All the same, I find I quite like the story, one of my funnier pieces, and I'm glad to see it into print at last as a complement to the novel."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to the 1983 reprint of *The Face That Must Die*

Written in: 1972
First published in *The Face That Must Die*, October 1983

There can't have been much stuff in that cake. Or else it must have been all seeds. I must have had the best of it last night.

I don't want to think about last night. Maybe I should listen to some sounds.

So why shouldn't I think about last night? I'm not going to be stoned on this stuff. There were some nice sounds going, and I was listening to them, and that must have been when everyone went out for a walk. Sylvia went to crash with Den and Heather. She'll be back. It was just a temporary thing. I wish I could remember exactly what happened. She wanted to turn the sounds down, that's right, because the gays upstairs were banging on the floor, and we had an argument. I forget what I said. I know I told her to fuck off, and she went out crying with Den and Heather. They're not on the phone, or I could tell her I'm sorry. I mean, I am, but it was weird because at the time I felt bad about it yet something told me I had to be on my own for a while. Weird.

I can't suss why I'm not stoned now. It's nearly two hours since I ate that cake. It was the last piece, right enough, and I know it was full of seeds because we didn't spread them out properly. But last night, I mean, wow, that was cake. Den had brought along some Debussy. I said shit when I saw it, but they were really some sounds when he put it on. That's right, I had my eyes shut, and I was sailing down out of space through the clouds into this ruined temple, and just as the sounds were really freaking out there was light, brighter and brighter. Had Sylvia gone by then? No, she couldn't have, because Den didn't leave the sounds. I can't remember.

But that was good dope. A friend of Den's was growing it in Sefton Park, right in the middle of all those streets. I mean, all those straights in the streets never knew, that was the incredible part. Just beautiful. And he was making it to Amsterdam, so he sold his plot. Plot of pot. Wow, must remember that. He sold it, half to Den and half to me. Last night was the first crop. Said he scored the seeds in some little village with a ruined temple in the background. It sounds like William Burroughs, I know, he said.

It sounds like William Burroughs, I know he said.

My God, I'm slowing down. It's coming on.

Right. I'm going to listen to some sounds. See if it's as fantastic as last night.

This room's too purple. Look at those velvet curtains. It's like your spit thickens when you're sick, they're thickening the sunlight. So are those cars in Lodge Lane. Grinding away and throbbing and rattling—they're interfering with the sunlight. No, they can't be. Who said that? Come on, come out wherever you are.

I'm going to hear some sounds.

Look where the records are. I'll never get over there. It'll be a miracle if I can stand up. Jesus, look at that! My purple shadow! It's turning to look at me! You're turning to look at yourself, you mean. Who's saying these things?

Oh Christ, there's Sylvia. I just flashed her. In the doorway with tears running down her face. Trembling like she wants to shake herself to pieces and never be put together again. Oh I'm sorry, love. I didn't want you to go. It was the shit talking. I never wanted you to go.

- Why do they call it shit?

- Who's there? Oh Jesus, it's not Sylvia who came apart, it's me. My mind's splitting down the middle like a cleaver's gone through it.

- Of course. There's a calm side and a paranoid side. You're on the paranoid side now, man.

- I've had this before. Like my mind's a battleground between the strong and the weak. Vietnam in the head. Like that book by someone, Aldiss,

Barry was reading us last week. All right, I can play it. What did you say back there?

- What? What did I say? Oh, I was wondering why they call dope shit.

- Weird question. The colour, maybe, I don't know. Listen, however many of me there are, we're famished. Let's make it to the kitchen. You take this leg and I'll get the other.

- Go on! You can do it! Listen, you aren't turned on to this scene at all. You've got to become me, man, you've got to become the strong calm side of this mind we've got, then there'll be no more paranoia, no more weakness. Merge, man, merge.

- Maybe, but how long have we been walking towards that door? The purple's pulling us back. We aren't going to make it. Anyway, listen, we don't even know what's on the other side of the door. Let's just lie down and maybe hear some sounds.

- You crawling cowardly bastard. I could show you things that'd make your experiences look like shit, if you had the courage.

- All right. All right! We're out. Don't ask me how I got through that shadow. Felt like cobwebs. My God, is that the bedroom over there? All that way? Oh wow, that orange door is my scene, though. This whole hall, it's like those comics Barry had last night, what were they, Marvel Comics.

- We aren't going over there. Just in the kitchen. There, you made it. Fantastic.

- Look at those pans hanging up. What are they, mouths? Mouths on sticks! Sylvia used to feed those mouths. She loved having her own kitchen.

- Forget that. Forage, man. What's this? Duck pâté. A duck made into paste. Don't know how you could think of eating that, even if you weren't stoned. Sylvia bought it, don't forget. She bought it and you were supposed to eat it.

- Don't you say that. I used to walk around the block sometimes when I was stoned and think of coming home to Sylvia when we were old and we could just sit together.

- She stuffed a crushed duck down your throat. She didn't care.

- Don't you put her down, you fucker! I want to see her! I want to tell her I'm sorry!

- All right. There's nothing good here, anyway. Let's take a walk.

- See Sylvia?

- If you want.

- Just so you know who's running things here. Clump. That door sounded satisfied. It wanted me to come out for a walk. There you are, Croxteth Grove. That means all these trees and look, on that wall, that cat sitting like a gargoyle. All its fur with the sun running off like water. Summer is to sit with Sylvia, like that kids' book I was reading.

- Maybe so, but look: Lodge Lane. Main roads aren't good for the summer.

- For once I think you're right. There's something bad about those cars. It's like the cars are using people for parts, you know, cogs or valves. My God, look at all those cars sitting at the side of the road waiting to catch someone! That's right, they draw off energy somehow and drive about on it.

- But what about all these people walking around?

- Well, what about them? Look, look at them jerking about! There's that guy tapping his umbrella, there's a woman brushing her hair back from her face, look, she's doing it again, there's some kids kicking a can. "Yes, that's right, they've been thrown out by the cars because they've got too much excess energy. But the cars will get them again. Am I walking along Lodge Lane talking to myself?"

- "Yes, I think you probably are. We are."

- "I thought that guy with the umbrella was looking at us weird. Fuck off, cog! Listen"—listen, the cars won't get us on the way to Sylvia, will they?

- Those cars waiting at the lights look pretty bad. If we run we can make it across the lights and into Sefton Park.

- "But we're going away from Sylvia."

- "That's true. Well, it's your scene, but I can tell you I don't like those cars. Half an hour in the park and I'll take anything, but not right now. And remember this, man: you need me."

- "Fair enough, I suppose. Run!"

- We're across. Don't slow down. Did you see that car straining to get at us past the lights, those eyes? Blind but they could see us.

- Right, but I like these trees. The leaves are talking about summer. Listen, we won't get too far away from Sylvia, will we? I can feel my mind

stretching. I don't want it to snap. Christ, that would be painful, all my thoughts snapping back together.

- Don't hassle. We want to get away from those tenements on Lodge Lane. You can feel everyone weighing on everyone else. Think of having twenty floors on top of you. All that sweat and flesh.

- Bad scene. But this going in the park to get it together seems like a kind of a return to the womb thing.

- Feel all the life growing around us, the grass and the flowers and the trees. Taking their own time.

- Beautiful. But let's not forget Sylvia. She's beautiful too, and we hurt her.

- Nobody's forgetting. Now just feel your foot crossing over from the pavement into the park. Feel the grass accept you.

- Fantastic. It kind of breathes in so I don't hurt it.

- It's more than that. It's welcoming you.

- This is incredible. There's nobody about except the grass and the trees. Where are we going, down to the lake to see the ducks?

- I shouldn't think you'd feel too good about ducks right now. Let's go and see where your dope is planted.

- That's a great idea. Maybe it'll talk to us. Like those trees aren't moving but they're talking about the sun.

- They're talking about life. You aren't there yet, though—the dope has been talking to you since you came on.

- I'm with you. Look how the shadows of the trees are lying down on the path to be in the shade. But they are the shade.

- Identity is a weird thing.

- Right. Those shrubberies, I mean, the sunlight just lies there like honey. I could eat it. But what I meant to say was, the dope is just behind them.

- That's where I have to go.

- We don't have to anything, man. We're free. We can just let the sunlight splash over us.

- We have to go there. Don't you want to visit it? Aren't you grateful for what it's giving you?

- Shit, you're right, I am ungrateful. Come on, I'm going to thank it. The shrubberies are caressing us. Like—

- There are shoots there if you look. They're quiet now, but when they grow someone's going to eat them or smoke them. Then they'll tell him everything.

- Right. Shoots, thank you, you're beautiful. But I was going to say, those shrubberies were caressing us like Sylvia. I was just wondering if she's still at Den and Heather's. She might have come back to ours. I mean, if someone told me to fuck off while I was stoned I mightn't be able to get it together either. But I do love her. She knows that.

- I can feel the shoots growing. Birth, that's what life is for.

- Right. You know, Sylvia wants a baby, I can tell. Maybe we weren't into getting married before, you know, the whole straight scene. But if she wants it, it's my scene. "If this is you telling me this, shoots of dope, we'll both come and thank you."

- I could be reborn.

- That's fantastic, man. How?

- Just think how a seed must feel.

- Don't stop! I mean, too much!

- Thrusting down through the earth, feeling the soil hug you, the trees meditating.

- Digging in the earth?

- That's right.

- Like this?

- Right, but stay cool. Not so fast. No need to break your nails. Time's stopped.

- Look at all these stones, been down there nobody knows how long without anything to hassle them. That worm's going to fuck the earth. Think of all the straights living round this scene and never knowing. Sylvia would love this. We ought to show her.

- We will, but don't worry about time. She'll come to see you. You can talk to her then.

- Man, this hole is deep. I'd never have thought I could do it.

- Don't stop now. Don't think about it.

- If we're going any deeper I'll have to stand in it.

- Stand in it. I mean, straights wouldn't even think about it, never mind do it.

- I ought to get a job in the country if I can dig like this. Jesus, I can't even see over the top of the hole. I never realised earth was so warm. Protective, kind of. Feels familiar.

- This is where I was born.

- Come on, man.

- This is only the beginning. Wait till you feel yourself pouring through someone, touching their being and speaking to it. It might be Sylvia.

- That's amazing. Just imagine. I'd like her to feel—Christ! I can feel something growing up from my stomach like a shoot!

- You know who that is.

- Shit, man, it isn't you!

- Yes, but now I'm you as well.

- What's that? Rain? Look, the soil's raining on us.

- It's giving itself to us. Stand still. Let me feel it for you. It'll be easier.

- Clods of earth! Christ, it's hailing!

- Pull your hands in now. Think of what you'll have to tell Sylvia.

Litter

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Also published in: *The Height Of The Scream*

I used to walk through the market at night.

I mean the new construction of plastic and tiles and glass, where the old street market used to be. I work at Radio Brichester—producing the folk-song programme, among other shows—and it's handy, late at night when the last bus has gone, to cut through the market and take a taxi from Central Station. I used to do so often, even though I grew to dislike the route.

Why? There were several reasons, some of them banal. Perhaps I should describe the market. It's two storeys high, cloven by a cross of avenues. Avenues—they're corridors, to be less pretentious, but that's the name the city council has given them. Each corridor is walled by two levels of shop fronts, largely plate glass and plastic signs, and at the crossroads in the centre escalators carry you up to the balcony level.

If my description sounds dull and featureless then I've succeeded. Even in the afternoon, during its crowded hours, the place is leaden with anonymity. Some people visit the shops, of course, but the mass use the market as a thoroughfare: hurrying through, their minds dulled by muzak, occasionally halting to gaze at televisions gagged by windows. Unlike the street market, a bewildering, deafening and dazzling maze which might infuriate you but could never leave you unmoved, this new development offers the mind no purchase. It most resembles a colossal supermarket, but that hardly explains why I began to find it disturbing.

The market was deadening: that was the first thing I noticed. Since I'd always been working late when I used the shortcut, it seemed unremarkable that I could traverse the market without a single thought occurring in my brain. Obviously, I was exhausted. But one night I knew I wasn't exhausted: I'd compared in passing the melody of an English ballad with that of an Indian folk-song, and at once a whole programme had begun to take shape in my mind. I came out of Radio Brichester juggling with ideas. Enjoying

myself, I entered the market—and it was as if an old grey dishcloth had been pulled over my head: I couldn't think or perceive, only struggle. Not until I emerged could I function properly, and by then half my ideas had suffocated.

Well, I blamed the market. I wasn't sure what was wrong, but I was convinced it wasn't wrong with me. So, making an effort (and it was fairly strenuous) I set out to notice things. After a while I discovered that there was a feeling—or less a feeling than an aching lack of any personality at all—about the centre of the place, near the escalators, which were surrounded by several hefty pillars, as much for decoration as for support. They were carved with cogs and levers and more abstract symbols, the work of one of our local artists. At night the metal and rubber of the escalators chafed, and the machinery trumpeted and groaned. With its jungle sounds and its deliberately primitive carvings, the centre might have seemed reminiscent of an abandoned temple, no doubt; but between the off-white walls, among the echoes of traffic and footsteps, it felt simply empty, unnervingly so, and sounded rather like a ghost train someone had forgotten to switch off; I felt as if its planners had attempted to fake atmosphere with inappropriate juxtapositions.

The noises, though, puzzled me. While walking through I'd often heard swishing sounds, rustles up on balconies, a sort of limping patter and scuttle out of sight in the other corridors. Nothing remarkable, but they served to draw my attention to something stranger: that even when I crossed the market earlier than usual, I never met anyone. Window-shopping couples seemed to keep to the main streets, even the homeless never sheltered in the market. And yet it was a shortcut.

Which brings me, I suppose, to Jamie Macdonald.

Not that he has any bearing on what happened, only the aftermath. His real name was James, and he'd never been to Scotland in his life, but when the Radio Brichester staff was invited to a mayoral dinner Macdonald turned up in a kilt. His fat hairy legs improved nobody's appetite. I can't say I ever liked him. He was a disc jockey, and his program consisted of two hours of anonymous vintage rock and intermittently Scottish logorrhoea, although it was professional of its kind. Off the air, with his ten-year-old Beatle cut and his three thirty-year-old chins, he was less impressive. However, around the time I began to feel there was something wrong with the market he issued a

warning against fashionable witchcraft to his listeners, and this made me feel we might have attitudes in common. That's how he enters the story, or this is:

One night in mid-November I finished a folk programme of which I was quite proud. I made my way across town feeling peaceful and acutely perceptive. The market looked pale and squat beneath the concrete hooks and gleaming eggs of streetlamps. I strolled along the flagged path to the market, and my mood soured. The city council had planted a few scrawny trees in wire tubes among the paths to add colour, but I could see that long before they grew into trees one could be proud for they would be swamped by old newspapers. As it approached its first anniversary the market seemed more and more determined to fertilise the surrounding streets with trash. I thought of the cleaners I'd glimpsed early one morning, silently scrubbing a waste of tiles. Our cleaners at Radio Brichester were anything but silent. I pondered this, and then I saw a man hurrying along one of the paths toward the market. It was Macdonald.

"This isn't your usual route," I called.

He halted and frowned. He was wearing mauve trousers and carrying a transparent umbrella. "I don't always come this way," he said.

"I'll accompany you, if I may." We entered the market; an alarm was ringing somewhere, and televisions flickered.

"I hope you don't mind my asking," I said, "but if this is your shortest route home, how is it you avoid it?" We'd often met in the lift and parted at the street.

"It's a bloody peculiar question, if you don't mind my saying," he said.

"It's not mere curiosity."

"You surprise me." Among the pillars the escalators creaked like tethered boats. "You tell me why you want to know," he said, "and perhaps I'll tell you."

I should have been furious, but I felt he might have something to reveal; besides, the conversation and the market were beginning to stifle my emotions. "There's an atmosphere to this place I've come to dislike," I said. "No, it's more a lack of atmosphere, that's precisely the trouble. You know how most places have a personality. This place is about the least haunted I've ever encountered, and it makes me uneasy. I mean, if you dig into most

cultures you'll find the notion of the genius loci. What sort of spirit could this place have?"

Macdonald was gazing at me. "That's all, is it?" he said.

"Well, nothing's actually happened."

"You know, you're all right," he said. "I thought you were having me on, but I can see you're not. You ought to come outside your folk music sometime and take a look at what's going on. Sorry to spoil your story, but I don't come this way because I don't live this way. Only my wife's away for the weekend and one of my fans wants to know what I look like without ma keelt."

I should have known, I thought sourly: as banal as that. Somehow it was the sort of thing I should have expected to learn in the market. Hostile clichés jostled in my brain, how pleasant for you, I wish you luck, but instead I pointed and said "What's that?"

Along the corridor ahead a small white shape was scurrying. Occasionally it gave an ungainly leap and fell awkwardly; once it somersaulted, once it came to a halt and seemed to dwindle before puffing up and hopping closer. "It's a plastic bag," Macdonald said.

And of course it was. I was still expecting too much of the market. The bag bumbled along, skipping and falling playfully like a puppy. It exhaled, then wrapped itself around my ankles. "It's after you," Macdonald said.

It seemed to be. As soon as I freed myself it filled again and pressed against me. I turned and let it drift away, but it rolled back and moulded itself to my leg. Suddenly I felt disgusted, as if I were trying to shake off a limbless mindless embryo. "You can have it," I said to Macdonald, and kicked it toward him. He tried to knock it away with his umbrella, and I hurried off down the corridor. I heard him trampling the bag and tearing it with his umbrella. Looking back, I saw tatters of plastic grasping at his legs.

In the morning I awoke still thinking of the incident. It seemed indefinably squalid, and my mind was smeared with it. At Radio Brichester I encountered Macdonald. He winked and grinned secretively, and my mind produced an image of his struggle with a pale shapeless night-creature. I hurried on to see the station manager, who told me that he'd like a Christmas folk show, lots of carols and the better known the better, and no more talk than absolutely necessary if I wouldn't mind. Of course I minded,

but there was little I could do except sulk and eventually begin to construct the programme.

But at least it kept me away from the market. For a couple of weeks after the scene with Macdonald I consciously avoided the place, for less conscious reasons; and by the time the memory began to lose form I was sorting out the Christmas show and leaving the station early. In fact, if I hadn't stayed for the station's Christmas party nothing more might have happened.

It was an enjoyable, if incoherent, party. Someone wandered in from one of the pantomimes, wearing a stuffed parrot on his shoulder; the type of a news bulletin was unfocused, and its reading slurred, by Guinness; a theatre pianist made progressively vainer attempts at the Hammerklavier. Macdonald left early, having been harangued by his wife over the telephone. I left late, taking half an hour to bid good-nights.

The ice of the night didn't reach me, warm as I was. I bumbled along, slapping bus stops amicably on their waste bins, patting traffic meters on their heads. A few cars skated on the dull mirrors of the roads. Down on the Severn a tiny line of lighted windows slid by. I'd thought it might be the season for taxis, but none was about, and so I headed for the market.

Before I reached it I determined not to let it affect me, to preserve the mood of the party. Let the place be as stiflingly anonymous as it wished: my personality could pass through intact. I rounded a corner and there it was, squatting glumly, wreathed by my breath like a tomb amid studio mist in a film. I laughed. I balanced along the line between the flags of the path, and the thin caged trees hissed and rattled softly, snake-like, in the wind.

The ceiling of the corridor drifted above my head like a white shadow. My footsteps hammered on the tiles. I passed the fish shops, their slabs sluiced clean, a boutique from whose windows bald nude androgynes stared expressionlessly. In a shop near the escalators identical silver heads danced, grew and shrank, but before I could make out the face the television screens went blank for the night. Somewhere ahead came a fluttering, as of birds' wings.

My footsteps continued to knock, measured, regular, like the sounds of workmen. The featureless muzak of the escalators hummed, faltered, hummed again. They must have been overhauled, I thought. I passed the last shop before the pillars, and the white of the tiles closed on my eyes like

fog. Or more like the beginnings of snow-blindness. Among the pillars something fluttered again. My mind groped for a song. At the top of my voice I began to roar *Matty Groves*.

As I did so the fluttering intensified. I could locate it now; it came from behind the pillar nearest which I had to pass. It sounded as if the bird, which might be nesting there, had trapped itself among the carvings of the pillar and were struggling to pull free. But somehow I didn't want to go round the pillar and free it. Surely the carvings were too widely spaced to trap a bird. Instead, I made to hurry past.

Then the escalator caught my eye. The escalators rise straight from the centre of the floor to the balcony level, and they're enclosed by glass. Where the sides of the treads back the glass as they climb, they form mirrors. These mirrors are dim and unstable, of course, but nonetheless I could glimpse fragments of the pillar in them. And the reflected pillar seemed to be covered with a multicoloured mass that shifted and crawled.

I hesitated, then I began somewhat unsteadily to run. I came level with the pillar and with the transverse corridors. A gust of wind struck me, and the mass that had been pressed to the pillar detached itself and hurled itself in my direction.

It consisted largely of paper: old grey newspapers, paper bags puffed up like lungs, tendrils of receipts, scraps like leaden moths. As the wind tore it from the pillar and threw it at me, the mass resembled a hulking attacker swooping from concealment; it was almost my height, and for a moment gave the impression of a similar build, and of a sort of faceless impersonal aggression. Then it flew apart, scattering on the floor, pasting itself to the walls and to me.

I brushed it off furiously, my heart pounding, and hurried away. Or began to, for I hadn't taken three paces when I heard a fluttering behind me. I turned and saw the litter falling from the walls into a heap and reforming.

I was still drunk, and so I stood and watched. The heap was dwarfish now the support of the wind was weakening; two feet high at most, it shuffled about a little as if questing before it collapsed into a quarter of the size. Eventually I wandered away, glancing back frequently. The heap tried to rise, failed and began to drift away in fragments.

Next morning I had a headache which jabbed out of shape any notions I tried to ponder. At lunchtime I went out on the roof above Radio Brichester to clear my head. A wind plucked at me, and six floors below the city muttered monotonously. I gazed toward the Severn, where light fluttered silently on the water about a few boats. I glanced toward the market, left like a plastic lunchbox among the peaked Victorian façades, and all at once I remembered last night's incident and realised how unlikely it was. How drunk had I been? As I mused, the door onto the roof opened. I turned and saw Macdonald, chewing a thick-lipped ham sandwich.

"Trying to catch a cold?" he called.

"No, just trying to clear my mind a little."

"Been chased in the market lately?" he shouted.

"Well, as a matter of fact," I said, and stopped. I could hardly expect a sympathetic hearing. But I was damned if I were going to let his opinion matter. So I told him.

Telling him seemed to free me of the obligation to investigate the market. He smiled and shook his head when I'd finished, and walked away munching. He left me convinced that if there were something odd about the market I had no wish to encounter it again, and if there weren't then I didn't propose to depress myself with the place after a day's work. In either case, I shrugged it off.

Until a stormy night a fortnight later.

All evening layers of black cloud had been racing each other past the studio windows. When I left they had slowed, and were unfurling overhead. The hail began just as I was passing the market on the way to the station. I didn't intend to walk through, but I saw no reason not to take advantage of the shelter of its overhanging roof.

I stood and watched. Hail slashed across the mercury-vapour lamps like the teeth of luminous combs. Above, a blurred moon was threshed by tattered clouds. A man rushed stumbling across the mud between the paths, past a large battered plastic Santa Claus left over from the street's Christmas display, trampling the adolescent wisps and stubble of grass. He was a vandal in an unthinking way, but I couldn't altogether blame him; the place commanded no respect. The surface of the paths crawled beneath the onslaught of the hail, and paper bags winced in the mud like dying fish. A

young couple arrived panting beneath the shelter, bearing a radio full of tinny pop music. I gazed at the moon, enjoying it, thinking how few people in cities ever look up. When I glanced down, I saw Macdonald running toward the market.

He didn't see me, and I looked away. Almost at once I heard his voice.

"—chart-topper if ever I heard one, really great sound, and confidentially I'll tell you what their lead guitarist told me, they got the tune from Johann Sebastian Bach and he wrote some really good ones, so they tell me, but he's finished with them. Anyway, we've got some awfy braw wee records on the turntable for you now but listen, here's a warning for you next time you're in Brichester Market, don't go dropping litter or it might drop you, that's what someone was telling me who got jumped on the other night by a crate of beer-bottles, and who said he emptied them all first?"

The music recommenced and the couple with the radio stared at me, alarmed, because involuntarily I'd punched the wall of the market. But I whirled and ran toward the entrance beyond which Macdonald had vanished. He wasn't getting away with that. I was going to catch him and keep him in the market until something happened. The episode after the party overwhelmed my memory, and I knew I hadn't just been drunk. Tonight I felt it would happen again. I would make it happen.

I couldn't see Macdonald ahead, but I could hear his footsteps. "Macdonald!" I shouted. "There's something in here I want you to see!" The echoes of his footsteps multiplied, as if hurrying. I slipped and almost fell; the tiles were wet as the edge of a swimming-pool.

Balls of newspaper and cartons huddled against the shops, unmoving. I ran faster, one hand ready to catch the wall. Pink cardboard girls in a travel agent's flashed by, but there was still no sign of Macdonald. His footsteps were hemmed in by echoes, and sounded unreal. In a moment I would have passed the pillars and he would be in sight.

I reached the centre of the market and halted, surrounded by the echoes. The sound of footsteps clattered from all four sides. The market's acoustic was odd, I knew, but not so spectacular. At once I realised that I had not been following Macdonald at all, but the sound of restless cardboard.

I was still looking both for Macdonald and for the source of the sound when that source emerged from behind the pillars and advanced on me.

It sounds absurd, and it looked so as well. A few empty milk cartons clattered into sight, pale water dripping from their torn mouths. Some sodden newspapers flapped dismally at the corners of the pillars, detaching themselves at last and falling to the tiles to flutter feebly like dying birds. A couple of magazines lay face down in dirty pools, trying to raise themselves. A ragged sheet of polythene rippled along the floor like a grey flattened caterpillar. Then cardboard boxes began to lumber into view, tumbling and rolling on their distorted edges, and a wind buffeted me from all four sides; an odd wind. All of a sudden I found myself cut off on three fronts, and the litter waiting, flapping and clattering nervously.

It was absurd, I repeated to myself: grotesque and unpleasant, but absurd. I turned back the way I'd come, slowly as if the litter mightn't notice. I took a step, and ahead the cartons I had passed shifted slightly away from the wall. I moved again. One of the cartons shook itself, tipped forward with a wet slap and skidded toward me.

I watched it come, ready to side-step. But I manoeuvred too soon, and I hadn't realised the weight of the thing. It teetered and brought one comer smashing into my shin.

I cried out, as much in surprise as in pain. As I did so I remembered the couple with the radio. They'd seen my reaction to Macdonald, and I could hardly look other than foolish. Nevertheless I shouted for help. I shouted twice before a beer-bottle rolled beneath my feet and sent me forward, almost burying my face in a pile of squelching newspapers, its corners shivering with what could have been anticipation.

I thrust myself to my feet and controlled my fury. If kicked the paper I should never be rid of it. I forced myself to think calmly, or began to—until several bottles rolled against the wall and smashed.

It was then that I realised that I might be in danger, when the paper and cartons began to grope toward me, shards of glass glinting in their midst and on their surfaces. I backed away, searching for a means of escape, and saw what might be one: the escalator. The toothed paper rose up quivering, and I ran. I wasn't sure, but I thought I remembered an exit from the balcony level.

I gained the escalator and began to stumble upward as it moved. I gripped the moving banister, feeling the rubber bump and swell beneath, my hand like the muscles of an arm. At the foot of the escalator the litter was

massing and toppling forward to be carried upwards. Then above me I heard a crash of metal.

I glanced upwards and stood on the step I'd reached, overcome by despair. On both sides of the point where balcony and escalators met were dustbins. Two had fallen over, spilling their contents onto the balcony. Some of the rubbish, including trampled flowers from a florist's, had already trailed as far as the down escalator and was being carried to meet a waiting huddle of cartons below.

I felt myself being lifted inexorably, and tried not to cry out again. I knew nobody was within earshot, and crying out wouldn't help. On the contrary, if anything.

I gasped, not immediately knowing why. "On the contrary"—but why? I knew—I knew I knew. "Been chased through the market lately?" Below me on the escalator I heard the tinkle and scrape of glass. I remembered the night of the party, when I hadn't let myself be chased. A mindless threat has no motives of its own. And at last I realised how I'd escaped.

I reached the balcony and stood for a moment, taking deep breaths with my hands protecting my nose. Then I walked calmly, only my face twitching, to the down escalator and stood on it. I tried closing my eyes, but this proved worse than watching the impatiently trembling cartons rise toward me.

At the bottom of the escalator I stood for some minutes. Behind me I could hear small objects scuttling down the stairs. When the cartons made no move I edged past them. I had just inched myself free when the cartons, and such contents of the bins as had made their way down, hobbled toward me.

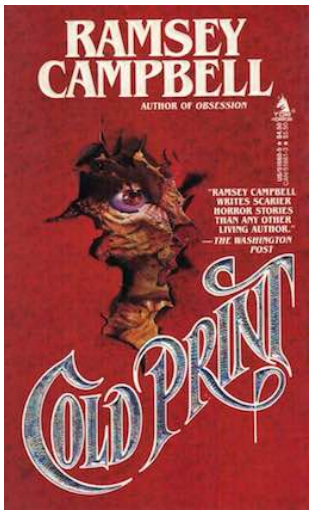
I had hoped that they would subside before reaching me, as in the previous episode, but clearly this time they had gained more energy from the chase. They kept coming for some considerable time, and were hideous, particularly the trodden flowers smelling of fish that managed to reach my face. I sustained only a couple of scratches, but I had to walk slowly out of the market before brushing off all that had clung to me. Afterwards I felt ashamed to approach another human being, but I managed after some argument to hire a taxi. I spent hours in the bath, knowing I would never sleep.

I haven't spoken to Macdonald since, for he made it impossible for me to broadcast a warning. I haven't even attempted to guess the city council's

reaction. But I continue to fear, no, to know that the market isn't unique; and perhaps other victims of its species may be more capable than I.

1973

Among The Pictures Are These: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—THE WASHINGTON POST
COLD PRINT

"A collage of descriptions of a variety of bizarre drawings. In a brief note Campbell writes that the pictures described are found in a notebook he drew in 1961, when he was fifteen, and that he 'has tried to describe what's there as objectively as possible'. Proof, perhaps, that the child is father to the man."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1973
First published in *Cold Print*, 1985

A void. Against it stand several cut-out figures, representing men. One feels they give a glimpse of an infinite series. They are completely featureless except for a small slit in the region of the heart. Below them, half obscuring the undivided legs of one, is a small figure, formed of dust; it is impossible to discern its slit. Above, a hand protrudes from a cylinder and manipulates a puppet, which wears a crude crown and brandishes a stick tipped with a pointed stone or jewel. Near the hobbling unequal feet of the puppet, a mouth hangs in the void. Within it a record-player balances on the lower lip.

An undistinguished stone landscape. A single tuft of grass sprouts from a rock, a river rushes by. Against a lone cloud stretched to a point, a landed spaceship smokes. A rubber simulacrum of a tree bears a single apple, and a naked man with abnormally short legs, perhaps the pilot of the spaceship, reaches for the fruit.

A cave. Several creatures—a one-eyed chinless humanoid with one arm considerably longer than the other, a figure with a long thin head and eyes on stalks, a small snarling pot-bellied dinosaur, a disquieted lizard—regard a fragment tied to the wall of the cave. The fragment depicts a spaceship which has crashed among rocks. A man wearing a jacket and shrunken checked trousers, and with rudimentary hands and gun, steps forward from it. One foot rests on the floor of the cave.

A title page: *Ye Anciente Marinere*. Web envelops the capital letters. A one-eyed grinning snake with bared fangs curls about the margin. Above a bow and arrow floats a contented skull. A bird with horns, bat-wings and a small penis stands on a rock in the sea. A zephyr who has lost one eye rests his head on the skull of an animal and blows in unison with a furious dog-headed creature with webbed feet. The sea's crest of foam contains three skulls.

A crossroads at midnight, deserted except for a faceless witch kneeling in a pentagram. From the flames in the pot before her rises the head of a demon, its face rather like that of a sleepy cat. One word is visible on the signpost: EXHAM.

A plain. In the middle stands a thumb-shaped rock, seen through (or contained in) a drinking-glass. A head like a malformed potato grips the top joint of the thumb with eleven spidery legs. The head glares skyward with its one eye and bares a single fang. Below, tiny figures kneel and worship, and one stands with a fuming cup in its hand. Outside the glass, more distant, another head unattended by worshippers clings to its rock and gazes sadly at the sky.

A landscape of high thin peaks and spears of rock. A comet with the face of a skull rushes over the horizon. Nearer and higher, a second comet drifts. Its neck and shoulders solidify into the head, whose face is that of a blind horse with long eyelashes, while from the shoulders hang claws on arms like fragile pipes. In the foreground a grimoire is held open by two long-fingered hands, clearly not those of one person. From the pages fumes a flattened cloud, containing a plain broken by mountains and, above the plain, a snarling bat-winged demon with fangs, horns, and moustache. Behind the cloud hovers a figure with a single webbed wing and the stump of another. It has the face of a grasshopper, and its proboscis reaches down to the tips of its pendulous breasts. From its waist curls a thin trail of dust.

Night under a full moon, outside the mouth of a cave. On the ground two figures copulate. The female lies in an attitude of submission, her arms splayed limply. Her face and pointed ears are huge, and her upper lip is extremely prominent. Her mouth gapes, showing pointed teeth, and her glazed eyes gaze upwards; she may be hypnotised or dead. The male's head is smaller, but his ears cover most of the side of his head. His jaw opens wide enough to touch his throat, and he bites into the female's armpit,

drawing streams of blood. His arms appear to be boneless; one curls around his mate's body, while his other hand is poised above his head, its pointed fingers aimed at her face. Within the cave, a shadow with a conical head frowns down.

A void. Nearest, a lugubrious face whose mouth has grown down into the chin on the left side. The backs of two hands with pointed nails beat a tuned drum. Beneath a bed a naked man lies smirking; against the bed rests a large wheel with a cutting edge. A living bust with a terrified face floats above the footboard, staring at a vibrating stick thrust into a plank. Outside an askew window, a disembodied face stares in from the night. The cross-pieces of the window obscure both the eyes and the mouth of the face completely.

An avenue of wild bare trees on a plain. Several display raw stumps. Some way down the avenue, six figures join hands and dance around a corpse. From their midst rises a wraith, passing across the moon with pointed arms outstretched. At the near end of the avenue stands a figure; one breast, the chin, an ear and the other side of the face have melted. A hand reaches towards it, its nails liquefying.

A title page: *Alethia Phrikodes*. Webbed capitals. A cross formed of tentacles stands gesturing at the foot of a hill. From the tower of a melted church a tree waves, and above it a glove is veined by black lightning.

A finger beckons, pointing to a figure with malformed fragile arms, almost nude except for a loincloth. The face is covered by a hood of sacking, and only the pointed chin is visible. Pan-pipes shriek a discord, and behind them appears an eye and a mouth overhung by a blood-tipped fang. A hand, within whose insubstantial wrist can be seen the silhouette of a hanging, points to a gibbet. From the gibbet swings a skeleton. The skull is oval; the teeth protrude, and the lower jaw is missing.

A naked man with abnormally short legs climbs a rock face. Legless birds with flattened heads and long beaks torment him. There is a large open wound beneath his left shoulderblade. At the top of the rock face lies a corpse wearing a jacket or sweater. Its limp fingers hang over the edge, and from near them falls a rock. Further along the edge stands a tree like a flash of lightning stylised in wood.

An explosion in an abyss. Portions of wall fly out of the smoke, some framing shattered windows. An arm is hurled out, and more distant, a

tattered torso still bearing its head and one arm. Highest against the fish-shaped clouds rise a leg and, still calmly smoking, a chimney.

Caption: 'Once I beheld... a thing I saw not clearly, yet from glimpsing, fled.' A man wearing a short jacket and trousers stares horrified at a slab before a cave. Behind him a hand with four digits gropes from a pool. On the slab a chinless head, tufted like a pineapple, grips the stone with eleven short legs and stares at the sky with a look of dismayed resignation. Beside it hover three faceless bats. A shadow kneels before the slab.

A mountainous landscape. Against the moon hangs the askew silhouette of a horned man with bat-wings. Nearer, on a rock, another stands. He has long hair and a pugnacious Neanderthal face. His wings rise from his shoulders; he has no arms, and instead of buttocks a wistful face with a snub nose surmounts his thighs. His toes grip the rock. Ropes and claws of dust drift past him, across the sky.

An operating theatre. From beneath a sheet protrudes the head and arm of an unconscious man. The sheet is drawn so tight that it appears there is no body beneath it; in any case, the table is by no means long enough to accommodate a body in proportion to the head. Within a stain on the sheet can be seen disembodied eyes and a sneering face with a cowl pulled down over its eyes. A surgeon, his eyes masked, stares away from the table. His eyes and mouth are rudimentary, and he holds a knife perhaps a foot long. About him drift clouds containing affrighted faces, one with a knife in its throat; a huge shadowy skull; a howling fanged mouth with flaring nostrils, thrusting out a hand which holds a glass globe; the head of a man on the table, pouring blood, with a disembodied arm flourishing a dagger above it, and beside it a sorrowful naked figure with a chinless phallic head, kneeling and declaiming.

A plain. A few gravestones stand or lean. Against one sits a skeleton, one hand caressing its pelvis. From its mouth drifts the legless body of a vampire, her mouth and shroud daubed with blood. Nearby a figure holds a bone to its fanged mouth, its stance reminiscent both of gnawing and of playing a flute. Its pointed head rises straight from its chest through the V of its jacket, emerging only from the ears upwards. Above a single sketchy tree on the horizon, a dismayed face floats. Its hair is plastered blackly to its long head, and its eyes are drawn vertically into thin rectangles. Its arms and shoulders withdraw to huddle behind the head, and together with the

rest of it are stretched to a ragged ectoplasmic point above the tree. As it gazes down, its whole attitude recalls that of a distressed priest.

A plateau broken by erect clubs of rock. A figure wearing a loincloth stands with one hand on a cracked skull. Its hair is long and its nose hooked; its breasts are rudimentary, but although the loincloth has slipped it is impossible to determine the figure's sex. One foot presses on a small snake with an eye missing. The figure's right hand holds a book, one finger marking a place. From that page streams a sparkling mist, forming into a head and arms with long hands. The conical reptilian face frowns, and one hand displays a globe containing a silhouette of a gibbet. Near the skull a shattered hourglass drifts, while in the sky oval bat-winged heads flutter.

A mountainous area. Narrow veils of a distorting mist rise from the ground. On a short length of railway line stands an engine. Its boiler is tilted far to the left, and from the tilted funnel flies an animal's skull. A face with fangs, lacking ears and one eye, grimaces from within the circle of the front of the boiler. A figure dressed in sacking, malformed by decay and the mist, stretches out an undecayed hand towards the engine. Skulls hover or streak skyward. Near one, a broken crystal ball contains a bedstead. A huge gun shoots liquid at the engine. Above the gun, a crescent moon lies on its back, sliced by the mist and imperfectly reassembled, and beside the moon appears a great eye set in dust.

Caption: 'All this he bade—but my soul... fled without aim or knowledge, shrieking in silence through the gibbering deeps.' An inverted mountain landscape hangs over a void. A head with upswept hair clings to the mountains with eight thick tufted legs. The head has one eye, two fangs and a cleft chin. A watery hand points away across the void, while beneath it two hands whose wrists trail off into dust cover a terrified face.

An extinguished candle smoulders. Behind it, a slightly taller figure is completely hooded, and the hood rises to a high point at the back of the head. Closer, a woman fingers one of her breasts, which press together on the left side of her body. Beneath her hair, her face is a shadow containing one eye, the socket of another, and a painted mouth. A figure, whose head may be hooded or faceless, stands with hands on hips; its arms appear to be sewn to the body. A man wearing a hat and cape leaps from a pinnacle into the sea. A door opens, revealing a shadow. Near the top half of a corpse lying in a pool of blood hangs a dripping knife, while above the corpse

hovers a cluster of terrified masks. Several of the masks, however, are smiling.

> *In 1973 I came across some notebooks full of drawings I'd made twelve years previously. Their technique was minimal, but their effect on me was too disconcerting not to share. Influences on them include Lovecraft as well as surrealism and Weird Tales covers. I've tried to describe what's here as objectively as possible*.

The Whining

Written in: 1973
First published in *The Hounds Of Hell*, 1974
Also published in: *The Height Of The Scream*, *Dark Feasts*

When Bentinck first saw the dog he thought it was a patch of mud. He was staring from his window into Princes Park, watching the snow heap itself against folds of earth and slip softly from branches. Against the black trees on the far side of the park, flakes shimmered like light within the eyelids. Bentinck gazed, trying to calm himself, and his eye was caught by a brown heap on the gradual slope of the whitened green.

It lanced his mood. He sighed and began to gather his coffee cup, smashed in a momentary rage. At least he hadn't allowed his fury to touch the Radio Merseyside tape recorder, which contained its source. He opened the French windows and hurried around the corner of the house to his bin, almost tripping over the half-buried handle of an axe. As he returned he saw that the brown heap was shaking snow from its plastered fur and staring at him. It freed its legs from the snow and struggled toward him, half-engulfed at each weak leap.

Bentinck hesitated, then he shrugged flakes from his shoulders and closed the windows. After mopping the carpet he played back the tape. He'd worked at Radio Merseyside only a month, and already here he was, allowing a councillor to feed him answers which begged specific questions, the ones the councillor was prepared to answer. And off the tape Bentinck was absolutely and articulately opposed to capital punishment, in fact to any violence: that was what infuriated him. Well, he might as well be calm; the incident was beyond resolution. He might as well enjoy his free afternoon. He bundled his coat about him and emerged into the park.

Small cold flakes licked his cheeks. He crossed to the lake, his footsteps squeaking. Ducks creaked throatily across the silver sky, and a flurry of gulls detached themselves from the white with rusty squawks. Behind him Bentinck heard a wet slithering. He turned and saw the dog.

As soon as he met its eyes the dog changed direction. It began to sidle around him, a few feet away, curving its body into a shape like a ballerina's expression of shame. It circled him crabwise, pointing its nose toward him. It was several shades of mud, with trailing ears like scraps of floorcloth, and large eyes. Its legs were short and bent like roots, and its tail wavered vaguely. "All right, boy," Bentinck said. "Whose are you?"

He stepped toward it. At once it leapt clumsily backwards, rather as an insect might, he thought. "All right," he said, slapping his shin. It skidded to its feet and shook off a dandruff of snow. As it did so he saw that its skin was corrugated with ribs. "Food," he said, remembering a bone he'd intended to use for soup. But the dog stayed where it was, tail quivering. "Food, boy," he said, and began to tramp back to his flat.

Then the dog commenced whining like a gate in a high wind, a reiterated glissando rising across a third. "Food! Food!" shouted Bentinck, almost at the windows, and the couple in the first floor flat peered out warily. I've been a fool once today, Bentinck thought, and then glared up at them; their hi-fi seemed to need a good deal less sleep than he, and while he wouldn't complain unless it became intolerable he was damned if he would whisper for them. 'Here, boy!" he shouted, and hurried to the refrigerator. Over the slight squeal of its door he heard the incessant cry from the park.

He tore a piece of meat from the bone and hurled it toward the dog. The animal made a gulping leap and began to claw up an explosion of snow where the meat had landed. Leaving the bone inside the window, Bentinck found a towel in his laundry bag. In the living room he halted, surprised. The dog was sitting in front of the gas fire, gnawing the bone. It snarled.

"Do sit down," Bentinck said. "You don't mind if I close the windows?" Out of the corner of one eye the dog watched him do so. "I don't suppose you'd consider lying on this towel. No, I thought not," he said. "Just so long as we can both have the fire." The dog grumbled as he sat down, but continued chewing. Bentinck gazed at it. Its back legs curled around and its tail followed them, as if to form a pleasing contrast to the sharp straight bone. Somehow, Bentinck thought, the contrast expressed the dog.

Gradually its jaws wound down. Bentinck had been lulled by the sight of its satiety; only the appearance of a pool seeping from beneath the animal startled him alert. Bending closer, he realised that it wasn't the thawing of the dog. "Now wait a minute," he said, springing up. The dog winced back

from him, leaving the bone; it began to cringe, and its tongue and tail quivered. "All right, you poor sod, it's not your fault," he said. 'I hope you don't object to the *Echo*."

But when he returned with the newspaper, the dog was scraping at the carpet and worrying the tape recorder's lead. "I'm tempted to offer you the tape, but on balance I think you've been enough of a good deed for one day," he said. Wrapping his hand in the towel, he fished the bone out of the pool and threw it into the park. With a bark that combined a whoop with its whine, the dog followed.

Later, at Radio Merseyside, he edited the tape and had an unpleasant slow-motion conversation with his producer. As he returned to his flat he thought he saw the dog lapping at the lake, at its encroaching margin of mud and waste paper. "I'm afraid I didn't quite manage to pin him down." "Well, you can't be expected to learn everything at once." "That's true." "But you'll have to work on mastering interviews." "Yes, I will." "Won't you." "Yes, of course." God, thought Bentinck savagely. He filled a soup bowl with water and set it outside the windows. Under the sill the snow was flecked with blood, and there were claw marks on the frame.

He was awakened by dull thumps overhead, which his heart imitated and continued. He dragged the alarm clock into view and saw it was four o'clock. Then he became aware of the whining, the cause of the protests resounding through the floor above. Wearily he groped his way to the French windows. As he opened them snowballs hailed down from the first floor, and the dog yelped. Indignant, Bentinck spread newspapers on the carpet and coaxed the dog inside. It slithered through the windows like a timid snake and lay down panting. "That's it, boy," Bentinck said. "Bedtime, what's left of it."

Three hours later the whining prodded him awake. "No, no, boy, shut up," he mumbled—but almost at once the dog clawed open his bedroom door and crawled toward him as if under fire, leaving a snail's trail of melted snow. He stroked its back as it came within reach, and the dog attempted to writhe itself through the carpet. Leaning over to follow his hand, Bentinck saw that the animal had an erection. It peered at him from the corner of its eye, slyly. "You go back to your own bed," Bentinck said and retreated under the blankets.

But the whining prised him forth. He opened the French windows and the dog galloped toward them, halting at his side. "I know, you're scared to go out alone," he said. "I take it I've had my sleep." He shaved, washed and dressed, trying to hush the dog. "A walk will do me the world of good," he said, opening the windows. "Jesus wept."

His feet crunched through the glazed snow and plunged into the mire of the paths. Ducks swam through a grey coating of snow. The dog ran ahead, casting itself in a curve, struggling to its feet and running back toward him. He found a dripping stick and threw it, but it only sank into banked snow with a thud. By the time they'd circled the lake his feet were soaking. He hurried inside, closing out the dog, picked up the telephone and dialled. "Didn't you use that tape? Good," he said, "I'd like to try him again." He changed his boots and left by the front door.

But the councillor had gone to Majorca for a week. When Bentinck neared home that evening, still composing questions, he hesitated at the park gates. He could go round to the front door and avoid the dog. However, he intended to take advantage of the park while its litter and mud were draped. Nothing moved on the dimming slopes. He reached his windows and unlocked them. As he did so the dog scrambled around the corner of the house and shot into his flat.

"Well, I know what *I'm* having for dinner," Bentinck said, cutting cellophane open. The dog lay on the kitchen tiles and watched him; its tail strained to rise and fell back. "You see what that says?" Bentinck said, flourishing the packet. "Dinner for one." But as he ate, his left hand secretively passed scraps of meat beneath the table, where wet teeth snapped them away.

"It's usual for guests to leave when the host shows signs of collapse," Bentinck said, tying his pyjama cord. He changed the newspapers by the windows and shivering, unlocked the halves. 'The Gents' is outside," he said. But the dog lay down, tearing the top layer of paper. Bentinck closed the windows and his bedroom door. He set the alarm, and the whining started.

"No," he said, opening the door. "No," when the dog refused the invitation of the windows. "*No*," as it began to gaze sidelong at him. Upstairs he could hear the first rumbles of displeasure. He picked up a newspaper. He'd read that a rolled-up newspaper was the kindest instrument with which to

chastise a pup. He rolled the *Echo* and struck the dog's rump with the face of the year's Miss Unilever.

The dog yelped and rolled over. Then it began to fawn, curling itself about the carpet as if all its bones were broken. It stood up in a dislocated way, its hindquarters belatedly regaining an even keel, and came toward him, licking its lips and whining. "Be quiet," he said and struck it again, harder. It spun over, almost somersaulting, and sidled back to him. Its tongue flopped out, dripping; it rubbed against his legs, swinging its tail in a great arc, and whined. "Oh, get out," he said, disgusted. "Come on. Out now." It climbed up his leg, pressing its crotch against him. "Out!" he shouted and opening the windows, picked up the struggling dog and hurled it into the snow. Then he buried himself in bed. Above him the hi-fi began to howl and thump.

For the next week he kept the windows closed. He avoided the couple on the first floor but was ready with an argument should he meet them. Each night he heard the whining and the scrape of claws on wood. On the Sunday afternoon he saw the dog ploughing through the lake in pursuit of a stick thrown by three children, which had lodged beneath a bench overturned into the lake. He watched the animal as it tried to lift the bench on its shoulders, to force itself beneath the seat, and for a moment admired the dog and envied the children. Then his mind shifted, and he wondered whether they would be able to resist the creature's temptation to sadism. He rolled up a newspaper and struck himself on the arm. He was surprised by how much it hurt.

That night the dog attacked the window while he was still reading. Bentinck rolled the paper and flourished it. The dog redoubled its efforts. One of the lower panes was scribbled with crimson, and the animal's left front paw was darker tonight. Bentinck frowned and went to bed, and in the morning called the RSPCA.

When they arrived, two men in a snarling van, the dog had vanished. Bentinck had gone to the edge of the park to entice the dog into the flat, and almost didn't hear their knocking. "Clever dog you've got there," one said, stamping the snow of the search from his boots. "Better not tell him we're coming next time." "It isn't mine," Bentinck said, but it wasn't important, and besides they were already driving away. He collected together his

equipment to interview the councillor. He opened the windows, and the dog hurtled out from beneath his bed into the park.

That evening the dog wasn't waiting when he returned. He inched his way through the windows and locked them. Then, controlling himself, he made coffee. At last his hand crept forward and switched on the tape. "I'm not concerned with punishing specific criminals. I'm concerned that violence is becoming an everyday fact of life." "Now this is complete nonsense, isn't it?" he heard himself saying angrily, and switched off before his fury surfaced completely. Then the French windows began to shudder.

He stared at them. The dog was hurling itself against them, clawing at the frame. Bentinck leapt to his feet and gestured it away, but it swung its tail and began to dig at the sill. He wrenched open the windows to chase the dog away, but it had already squeezed into the room. "Come on," he said. "I don't want you." He was still trying to drive it out when someone knocked at the door of the flat: a man with a thin frowning face and long grey hair tucked inside a car coat. Of course, the landlord.

"I'll get my cheque book," Bentinck said, wondering why the man was frowning.

"The people upstairs have been complaining about your dog."

"It's not my dog," Bentinck said, dropping his cheque book. "And in any case I'm surprised they can hear it at all over their hi-fi, which they play till all hours."

"Really? It's odd you haven't complained before. Whose dog is it if it isn't yours?"

"God knows. All I know is I'd like to see the last of it."

"Do you know, I've gone through life convinced that the man's the master of the dog. What is this dog, a hypnotist?"

"No," Bentinck snarled, "a bloody pest."

"Well, I'll tell you what to do with pests, just between us. You get some meat and cook it up with poison. Simple as that. I'll even let you dig in the garden if you do it quietly. There's your rent book. I'll see myself out."

The landlord left, leaving the door ajar. I've tried the RSPCA, Bentinck said furiously, you try them if you're so bothered. I might give them a ring

about you. The dog was fawning at his feet. "Stop that," he shouted, stamping, and stood up to close the door.

Behind him there came a thud. The dog was chewing the tape recorder lead and had pulled the machine to the floor. "Haven't I made myself clear?" Bentinck shouted. He opened the windows and stamped at the dog, urging it toward them. It crawled around the room, cringing back from furniture, trying to climb his leg, and he grasped it by the scruff of its neck and dragged it yelping toward the windows. Still holding the dog, he closed the windows behind him.

"Now go. Just go," he said, kicking slush at it. It ran splashing toward the bins, its tail wagging limply, but when he turned to the windows it began to sidle back. "Go, will you!" he shouted, running at the dog and tripping. He pushed himself to his feet, his hands gloved in ice, as the dog leapt at him and smeared his mouth with its tongue. "Go!" he shouted and fumbling behind him for what he'd tripped over, threw it.

He heard the axe strike. The dog screamed and then began to whine, its cry rising and rising. "Oh Christ," Bentinck said. There was no light from the first floor, and he couldn't see what he'd done, only make out the dog dragging itself by its front paws through the crackling slush toward the park. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't bear to touch the dog. He stumbled toward it and saw the axe cleaving the snow. Closing his eyes, he picked up the axe and killed the dog.

Afterwards he found a spade standing against the house. He had to hold the dog together while he wrapped it in polythene. Shovelling and kicking, he disguised the discoloured snow. Then he dug a hole at the edge of the park, filled it in and tried to scatter snow over the disturbed earth. For hours he lay in bed shaking.

Next morning a corner of polythene was protruding from the ground. Bentinck trod it out of sight, shuddering, feeling the ground squelch beneath his heel. When he came home, having successfully edited the tape, he found a whole edge of polythene billowing from a scraped hollow. Several dogs were chasing in the park. He dug the ground over, watching for a face at the first floor window, as the first flakes of new snow drifted down.

He awoke to the memory of a whining. He sat up, hurling the blanket to the floor. For minutes he listened, then he padded to the French windows. The garden was calm and softened by unbroken snow. A full moon floated

in the clear sky, coaxing illumination from the landscape. He returned to his bedroom. Thick darkness lay beneath the bed.

The councillor blustered. Bentinck shrugged him off and turned his back. Before him, dawning from the shadows, lay a dog or a young girl. Bentinck held scissors, a red hot poker, an axe, a saw. He awoke writhing, soaked in sweat, an eager whining in his ears. His whole body was pounding. He let his breathing ease, and groped for the clock. Before he could reach it, a tongue licked his hand.

The couple on the first floor were awakened by shouts. Groaning, they turned over and sought sleep. At eight o'clock they were eating breakfast when they saw Bentinck staggering about the park. "He's drunk. That explains a lot," the woman said. But something in his manner made them go to his assistance. When they drew near they saw that his trouser legs were covered with dried blood. Around him in the snow the prints of dogs' paws formed wildly fragmented patterns. "Listen," he said desperately. "You realise it's impossible to exorcise an animal? They don't understand English, never mind Latin." They took his arms and began to guide him back to his flat. But they hadn't reached the house when he looked down and started to brush at his shins, and kick, and scream.

The Stages Of The God

"When *Whispers* began in 1973, Ramsey had just become a full-time freelance writer who was looking for new markets and new genres, including S&S. He had been introduced to the genre at age sixteen by the Arkham House/Howard collection, *Skull-Face*. The stories about Ryre for the *Swords Against Darkness* anthologies were distinctive but within the then-accepted parameters of S&S. *The Stages Of The God* from *Whispers* is unique and I think uniquely good. It shows the influence of Howard's friend and *Weird Tales* contemporary Clark Ashton Smith as well as of Howard himself. It was my pleasure to recommend *The Stages Of The God* to Stu, and it has been an even greater pleasure to bring the story to the attention of the present editors. That issue of *Whispers* already contained a horror story by Ramsey, so *Stages* was published under a pseudonym. Ramsey created Montgomery Comfort from the names of two (hack) British filmmakers, Montgomery Tully and Lance Comfort."—David Drake, Foreword to *The Sword And Sorcery Anthology*, 2012

Written in: 1973
First published in *Whispers*, Volume 2 Number 1, 1974
Also published in: *Far Away And Never*

Topops abandoned his city at dawn. As he descended the translucent stairs from his palace the green sun of Yifne sank beneath the peaks before him, and the leaves streaming from the trees on the surrounding mountains seemed to dull again. He strode across the square and reached the polished cones which housed his court. Their tips glimmered green, but looking back he saw that the pearly cones were dimmed by the spire of the palace, already a glory of emerald.

He strode on, through the hives like foothills behind the houses of his court. His adversaries had promised that a steed would be prepared for him at the gate of the city. They had insisted that he walk through the streets of the city, lest the sound of hooves awaken support for him; and he agreed, upon the stipulation that he leave at dawn, rather than in the darkness like a thief whose city had been filched. As he strode towards the gate he thought:

"Had I not bowed to democracy, Lomboan and his cronies could not have worn the clothes and the words of the court. Had I not been bowed by their words and the plots they concealed, I should not have given them tracts in the city to govern in my name. Had they not learned new words in secret with which to bind their tracts, their supporters could never have outnumbered those still loyal to me. But my body has aged before my mind, and the army that I might command could not sustain me. It appears that my

time is past, but nonetheless my thoughts are formed with grace, using words of power, as befits a king."

Now he was in sight of the gate. It was open, in accordance with the promise that he had exacted, and beyond the stout walls waves rippled and faded in the white grass. Against the planed road to the mountains stood a swordsman holding the king's steed. Topops strode forward and thrust his foot into the stirrup, acknowledging the swordsman neither by word nor glance.

Topops was stroking the fur of his steed and whispering words of praise into its great veined ear when he heard the slither of discovered metal. The swordsman had swept his blade free of its green-woven sheath and was poised to cut at the legs of Topops's steed. The leaves which protected the man's skull and body were well-nigh impenetrable—but Topops's foot had already lashed out, crushing the man's windpipe, and in the same movement he half-swung from the saddle and caught the flung sword by its hilt. His lungs heaving, he rode his steed over the choking man in sorrowful fury, for years ago they had ridden together, leaved for battle.

Then from beyond both halves of the gate came the snorting and spittle of restrained steeds, and Topops knew that the swordsman had been sacrificed to weaken him. He shouted: "Fall, droppings of the world! Conceal yourselves, lest you be shovelled into the pit and thus subjected!" and casting his sword in an arc that almost splintered the edges of the gate, rode forth.

Two of Lomboan's men edged from ambush and flinched back from the whooping blade. One tried to arrest its flight with his own sword, but screamed as it sprang from his hands to slash through the grass and stand quivering. "No power!" the other, a squat man with a dull pulped face, shouted in encouragement. "Empty words, empty head, empty crown! We ghostise him!" and by his speech Topops knew him for a mercenary from one of the decadent lands. He brought his sword down like a whip on the mercenary's skull, not cleaving the leaf but stunning him, and heeled his steed towards the mountains.

Miles onward he halted, brushing sweat from his face and clutching at his breath. He opened the baskets which hung beside his heels and smiled bitterly to find provisions; they would have formed part of the mercenary's payment, and the man would have feasted at once, using Topops's body as

table. He gazed back to the city of Topome, which shone now like green buds growing from the rippling tinted plain. Far down the road two insects scuttled in the dust. Topops stroked his steed, which was the swiftest in the land and which would carry him to Yemene, three days' ride away on the coast, and to a ship.

At dusk he reached the mountains. Avoiding the route used by traders from Yemene, he rode until he reached a second and untravelled pass. Its mouth was little wider than an alley between hives, and Topops knew enough of the superstitions of mercenaries to suspect that his pursuers might baulk at its entrance. "Nevertheless," he thought, "most forms of life may be subdued by the words of a king." And he rode between the towering dim walls.

Hours later he heard a dry tinkling far back down the pass, like the sound of the settling of ash, and knew that his pursuers had not been deterred. He rode on, often holding back cold rough darkness with both hands. Eventually he slept, laying himself along the back of his steed so that the brushing of his chin might sustain the coaxing of his hands.

When he awoke, in darkness close as the lid of a coffin, the sounds of his pursuers had ceased. He allowed his steed to continue until the darkness parted jaggedly high above him and displayed a sprinkling of stars. His eyes, alert now to any light, made out a cave ahead. It was dry, and Topops led his steed within, and both slept. But near dawn they were thrust forth by something soft which emerged from deep within the cave, filling the bore entirely and carrying before it a clattering debris of loose rock. Dazed, dismayed and uncertain of his words' power against its bulk, Topops mounted his steed. He gazed back, but was unable to determine whether what protruded from the cave was a limb or a worm.

By full daylight he had almost reached the far side of the mountains. The grey chiselled walls loomed above him, and on the ledges lay great balls of bone through which the wind moaned softly. Behind him came distant rustles of pursuit. He urged on his steed, out of the mountains. As he emerged slow waves of wind and cloud-shadow passed across the forest which stretched beneath him to the horizon.

He rode obliquely into the forest, which was almost a day's width. The heads of the trees shook violently above him, buffeted by the wind, but already green heat was settling between the trunks like a still warm sea.

Soon he encountered the cleared route of the traders. Ashes of old fires stirred among the green gripping roots. He quickened the pace of his steed, plunging between the tremendous unshaken trunks in flight from the stifling heat of noon.

Long before dusk he was forced to halt, for his steed's fur was lank with sweat and his own head pumped like a heart. He led the beast into a glade and, as it had not been provided for, shared his food and water with it. Then he lay back in the soft green hollow of a trunk. The branches glittered and chattered with birds. One, grasping a horizontal branch with long translucent legs as pink as its plumage, fluttered its wings and spun wildly head over heels. Topops rested, heavy with thought, for beneath the agony of the swordsman he had trampled his memory revealed sorrow and acceptance. "Let Lomboan know that his words cannot cast out humility and courage," he thought.

At last he rose. The hissing and creaking of the forest concealed any sounds of pursuit. He coaxed speed from his mount, thinking to reach the plain beyond the forest before dusk. The baskets drummed against his heels, his steed's muscles flowed between his thighs, wind swept back the branches of his hair. Then his steed fell, netted by the long twining grasses.

Topops struggled to his feet. The beast was kicking weakly, its round black eyes rolling. He slashed the vines, but the beast lay snorting, and blood and foam began to pulse from his mouth. Then Topops knew that the food they last shared had been poisoned. He had eaten little, disliking the taste. Cursing, he stroked the beast's head and, closing its eyes with one hand, plunged the sword deep.

He cut the straps between the baskets and, emptying one, tied it about his shoulders. He collected fruit and filled his flasks with water from a nearby stream. Then he strode down the path between dimming trees, until exhaustion dragged relentlessly at him and he sheltered in a glade.

When he awoke it was daylight. The bright coiled and thrusting green of the glade pained him like the plucking of torture. He staggered to his feet, embracing a trunk, and the forest sprang closer to oppress his eyes. His limbs were numb and felt immense. He tied the basket to him with battling fingers and began to trudge towards the edge of the forest, his mind floating dully outside him.

When he reached the white plain, on which the sand shifted whispering like an echo of the sea on the horizon, he saw that he had emerged a mile west of the road to Yemene. The poison burdened his mind, but he realised that his pursuers might have gained, and that he must not keep to the edge of the forest. Instead, he staggered forward obliquely onto the plain.

The green sun throbbed in his eyes like a silent gong; it glittered on grains of sand, stabbing with points of light. The sand slid beneath him; it threw him face downwards into hollows, it crawled beneath his nails as he tried to rise, it rustled in his ears like insects. As he groped to his feet in the midst of the plain, he glimpsed a building ahead, sinking with the rest of the landscape as his mind slipped down again.

He shuffled forward, grasping the straps of his basket. Remembering his pursuers, he turned, and the plain whirled with him. Against the green of the forest he saw a clump of pale pulpy blossoms. Then, as he chafed his fingers with the straps to gain a hold on his mind, he made out that the blossoms were the faces of his pursuers, idly awaiting his death.

He began to run, supporting himself with his sheathed blade, plunging his feet into sand. The building ahead was clearer now: a low round hut, white as the plain, like a globe half-buried in the sand. Topops knew that it was a shrine, abandoned before the building of Yemene and for that reason shunned by the people of the coast. He could run no more; his chest was wheezing like a bellows clogged with sand, and the horizon swayed as if storm-wracked. "It is fitting that a king should defend a shrine," he thought, gathering his mind. "Let the mercenary defy the superstitions of his fathers and find death."

He groped his way around the shrine and found the door, which was framed like a blank canvas in a crust of sand. He thrust at the door. The sand scraped and sifted down, but the door refused to move. Around the curve of the shrine he saw the mercenary, a blur of dull green and flesh, preparing to mount his steed. Topops plunged his sword into the plain and, thrusting against it, ground his shoulders into the door. With a thud of released sand, it swung inwards.

Topops unsheathed his sword and entered, steadying himself with one hand. The interior of the shrine was gibbous: against the flattened side of the half-globe stood a throne of white rock. Otherwise, apart from a scattering of sand, the shrine was empty.

Topops glanced about, choosing the area he might best defend. "An ousted king should fight before a throne," he thought, and gripped the arms of the throne, closing his eyes and preparing his mind for combat. When he opened them he noticed a carving on the wall to his left. It was crude but powerful, and he fastened his mind upon it for strength.

It depicted a child gazing up at a man, who was in turn gazing up at a form whose outlines were vague. The child's face turned to the man, and the man's to the form, bore identical expressions of awe. Topops found that the sketched but unclear lines of the form affected him somehow with the same emotion. Seeking power, and moved by the passion which had gouged the figures from the stone, he stepped forward and traced the lines of the carving with his fingers. As he completed the strokes a shiver of inexpressible recognition passed through him; and the carving retreated from his hand as a door slid open in the wall.

The space which the gibbous wall had concealed was cramped; it contained only a stone bench draped with hide cracked by age. Nevertheless Topops entered. One part of his mind recognised that the mercenary would be outlined against the light, while he would be less visible in the dim space but would have little room to manoeuvre. Another deeper part of him was furiously impatient, and insisted that he feel a presence latent somewhere in the shrine. And so he did: a dormant light about to blaze forth. A peace which was also weakness descended on him, and he sank on the bench, his sword ready by his side. Now the shrine seemed thin as a shell, about to shatter and reveal its contents, as did the landscape outside and the approach of the mercenary. It stretched; it attenuated; it quivered, and a vision rushed forth.

A plain of grey sand. Dry waves of dust fly up hissing and scatter. Layers of black cloud are piled on the horizon like sediment, seeping into the plain so that sky and earth are indistinguishable. Dust and shadows drift across the plain. Sometimes the crust cracks like an egg, and from the sliding mound malformed vegetable limbs edge forth. In one place an eye the colour of decaying trees stares up from the sand, sprinkled and bordered by dry tears of dust. A plain of grey sand. Wooden figures climb forth from the sand, crippled and tottering, and bludgeon one another clumsily. Where a limb is splintered or one of the blind green eyes is gouged, white rot flows.

Beyond the sand, a beach of purple mud, almost black. A grey sea laps at it, and where the waves collide the mud trembles and sucks like gelatine. Conical cores of rock emerge from the sea, glinting dully, and the tips of others are sucked by the mud. From the beach arise flopping pillars of mud and tottering insect-like constructions of shells. When they clash, the pillars spatter and are cloven like worms; the white skeletal insects are smashed into fragments, and each recombines. A beach of purple mud, almost black.

Deep in Topops's mind the dormant light was forming. A point of pitiless radiance began to grow, sweeping shadows back into the landscape, spreading through his mind. "No," he thought, "not a plain of grey sand, not a beach of purple mud, but a green kingdom!" His mind was stretched above the landscape, cupped like the shrine, its edge drawn keen. He clamped it down like a crown thrust deeply into sand and mud. Then, as his mind made a globe and tightened upon its contents, he began to command the landscape.

"Sea, scoop the mud! Unblemished sea, pour on the beach! Laden sea, sink to rest deep in the ocean! Winds, cast the grey dust upon the mountains! White suffocated sand, rush to meet the sea! Soil and rocks, rise now from the plain! Flying sand, sunder the wooden cripples! Growing wood, become trees and come forth! Spring up, grasses! Rocks, do not conceal the cripples in your hollows! Rocks, close and crush them!"

Then the cup about him became the shrine, and in the doorway behind the throne stood the mercenary. Topops gazed at him calmly and rose; his mind still seemed cupped about him. He saw that the man had come alone to take his sword and garments, as knowledge comes instantly in a dream. The mercenary fell back into the throne-room, raising his sword. Without thought of his own blade—indeed, without thought—Topops caught up all the sand from the floor of the shrine and flung it in the man's eyes, searing through them. The man fell twitching, already dead.

Topops gazed down at the corpse. The shrine had given him the power to inhabit his own vision. Behind him he heard the door slide into place and, turning, saw that the third form in the carving had become clear. It was a man surrounded by light, gazing up in awe at a sketched form. Topops stretched his hand towards it. Then he heard the beat of hooves on the sand.

He strode to the door of the shrine. Outside, the third of Lomboan's men was dismounting. "Go back to Topome," said Topops, emerging from the

shrine. "I have killed the mercenary but have no wish to show other than forgiveness to my subjects. Return to Lomboan and tell him that you speak the king's words. Tell him that I have the power to make Topome the greatest city on Tond, and that he and his like must flee."

The man unsheathed his sword, casting the sheath into the sand. Topops urged the sand to throw the man to the ground, so that he could subdue him, but his mind had shrunk. The man flew at him, sword moaning. "Do not tempt your king!" shouted Topops. "I will kill no more slaves to Lomboan's words! A king does not punish slavery!" But as he retreated into the shrine, his adversary sheathed his sword in the sand and poised a knife to throw. He refused Topops even the honour of a sword; instead, a knife, as one impaled a criminal. Topops clamped his mind about the shrine and the doorway contracted, cleaving the man's hands and arms as he sought to hold back the walls. Then Topops, out of pity, brought the walls together.

The shrine cast out the corpse of the mercenary. Topops closed the door, sweeping the remains of the third man onto the plain, and gave himself up to sorrow. As he grieved he glimpsed the landscape beneath the layers of black cloud. Wooden figures were scrambling forth from the rocks, and beneath the white sand on the beach pillars of mud were struggling up, coated with crumbling sand.

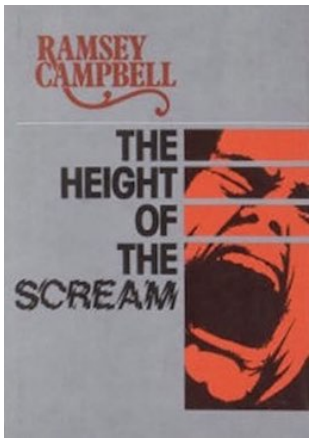
He thought: "A king's mind should be worthy of him. My mind has allowed evil to lie its way into Topome, and has been guilty of the deaths of two subjects whose only crime was slavery. Nor does it have faith outside this shrine. Therefore I shall do battle with it, and shall subdue the evil which threatens my vision, for then my mind shall have full use of its power and may use it to benefit Topome and indeed Tond itself. My mind shall be purified and whole, as befits a king."

Then Topops found his way through the darkness to the throne and began to cup his mind.

All this happened centuries ago, or so say the legends of Yemene. The city of Topome was rent by riots and looting long since. The shrine now stands between a rocky plain and a beach patched with mud. Travellers who skirt the land of the shrine say the trees fight there, levering themselves from caves which sometimes close in on them, splintering. Sailors say that skeletal figures and dark worms battle at twilight on the beach. When the

people of Yemene shelter from the tides that storm upon the beach, this is the tale they tell. None goes near the shrine.

The Height Of The Scream



"An attempt to capture the atmosphere of the drug culture and art scene of the times. [...] Similar in theme to *The Depths*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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"Hurry up with the joint or it won't seem worth going," Martin said.

But I was watching the skin of the joint roll back from the glowing glans as I inhaled; my head sailed back; I heard the glittering flutter of a bird outside the window. "I'd really like to go now," Martin said. "I'm an hour slow."

"If you look at the clock across the road you'll see you aren't." He shook his head and I had to look myself. It was an hour later than I'd thought. I'd been sure that my time wasn't so personal. Martin was standing at the window with the joint, exposing himself as it were. "Sorry. They must just have remembered summer time," I said. 'I'll get my coat."

The soft whoosh of cars on Princes Avenue met us halfway down the stairs. We ran out to find a taxi, and a raucous argument rose from the basement through a hole in the lawn. "Listen, I'm starting to feel bad about this," Martin said. "That joint won't help this party. I mean, it's the sort of party you watch, not enjoy."

"You knew that when you had it."

"I knew I wouldn't enjoy the party. The joint will show me why."

"You'll forgive me if I reject your preconceptions."

The taxi swung into Granby Street. A shamefaced man hurried out of a shop doorway from which urine trickled. "We could have brought a joint if you'd thought," Martin said. "They're trendy enough where we're going." I stared from the window until we reached Childwall: placid ranks of cars and Siamese-twin houses, a synagogue, a few people walking, a few gnomes squatting, the occasional garden crowded with wooden arches and

ivy. The taxi left us at the Slaters' house and an enormous quiet descended, interrupted by a distant hoarse dog.

Betty opened the door to us. A low-necked ankle-length black dress streamlined her thin body, and a silver-coated marijuana leaf dangled between her freckled breasts. "Hello, Martin. No doubt we invited you," she said. "And I think I know your friend as well. Yes, I've seen you behind the counter in the music library." She handed us glasses and wrote our names on them with a marker pen. "So that we don't have arguments about who pays for breakages," she said. "Well, wander in. Our protégé is going to make an announcement soon."

The party was located in the main room, which most resembled a long hall scattered with beanbags and pieces from the gallery two streets away, which Betty ran. Around the walls were plaques which mixed colours slowly or hooted when you breathed on them; on the windowsill stood Jack-in-the-boxes from which members of the city council popped up grimacing. The room was roaring with conversation, for Betty's gallery was fashionable, particularly in Childwall. The adagio from Mahler's 10th, of all things, was trying to make itself heard. I knew some of the people from similar functions I'd visited with Martin: young morose painters and bemused academics; reporters from Radio Merseyside and the *Daily Post*; Betty's sister Mildred, an executive officer in the Civil Service who was given to saying "I want to talk to you, which means I'm going to be horribly truthful again" and who had a corner to herself at the far end of the party. Almost everyone seemed either to be surrounding Peter Hale, tonight's painter, or to be waiting for a chance to speak with him. "Don't let the crowd put you off," Martin said, pouring himself sherry. "He'll talk to us."

I hoped so; I was beginning to dislike the indeterminate blur of hermetic conversations. I'd attempted to join two, but they hadn't opened. Martin edged his way into the circle around Hale, and I followed.

"Hello, Peter, it's really nice to see you again. I must come to your exhibition, specially if your friends get in free. I saw one of your science-fiction things the other day. Very typical, I thought. Here's someone you ought to meet, I can't remember why just now. He works in the music library, I suppose that's a reason. Hey, aren't you playing the meeting game? Peter, you can't have dried up already. Look, I've known you as Peter for twelve years. Oh come on, Peter, Fatman, talk to us."

Hale insisted on being called Fatman in memory of Sydney Greenstreet and his father's hoarded wartime National Comics. "If I'm going to make myself what I want to be I might as well start with my name," I'd heard him say on Radio Merseyside, in a booming voice which he often covered with his fingertips, as if it were too loud for what it had to say. Seen striding through town, he seemed to be carrying his girth to an exhibition. "You've come a long way, it's really nice," Martin said.

"But look where I have to go."

"Don't deprecate yourself because it's fashionable," I said. I'd seen some of his paintings and thought them fairly evocative—his series of Musical Thoughts, which had balked at Henze and halted at Gerhard: an attempt to show an infinity of crystalline figures descending transparent staircases under a stormy sky. He didn't strike me as the type you could ask what he had against Handel and Haydn.

"Who's fashionable, him? Listen, he started the fashion," Martin said. "Don't you remember that painting the headmaster liked, Peter? He said it was brilliant, if I remember. He wanted you to give it to him but you really felt it wasn't that good, and he never spoke to you after that."

"I don't need reminding," Hale said, touching his mouth. "I know I'm not much good at giving."

"Fatman, here's someone from the *Daily Post*," Betty said. "He's anxious to talk to you," and she ushered them away. I frowned. There was something grotesque about a roomful of people patronising Hale for the fee of having to call him Fatman, all the more so when I felt that it was almost a nickname a child might adopt in order to reject his childhood. And the clock on the wall showed the time we'd assumed when we left the flat. Martin caught my eye. "Don't let it get through to you," he said quickly. "It'll get worse."

Mildred returned to the room, wearing sparkling trousers beneath which her large buttocks churned. "Dressed for battle, I see," Betty said; "I'm sure you'll win." Laughter was suppressed around the room, more out of politeness than compassion. Once, after a concert at the Philharmonic, I'd passed the Slaters standing near a crushed and bloodstained car. "You see what happens when you lean on things," I'd heard Betty say, and Mildred had been pursued by nervous slavish laughter all the way to the car park.

The Mahler reached its orchestral outburst. "Could we have that thing turned down, do you think?" someone said. The theme disintegrated and the orchestra shrieked in inarticulate despair, and Betty kissed a painter a passionate thirty seconds' adieu and turned off Mahler's reconciliation. Several drinks passed. People slid off beanbags, laughing or turning pale. An art master panted aggressively at a hooting plaque for five minutes. Betty and a young dishevelled sculptor returned to the room and Mildred frowned at her and shrugged. "What did you mean about not letting it get through to me?" I asked Martin.

"You're not watching," he said.

"And at the centre of all these films, no matter how bad, there's a truth called Bette Davis," Betty said to a rush of silence. Hale was standing up and bellowing "I'm sorry but I wonder if I could have everyone's attention for a moment," and massaging his lips wildly as he realised that he had it. "Go on, Peter, let's hear some honesty," Martin shouted.

"Well, all I wanted to say really was thank you to Betty and Mildred." He paused and there was a drizzle of applause. "I said say it, but I meant I wanted to give them something as a sign of gratitude."

"That's enormously good of you, Fatman," Betty said, falling into a beanbag.

"It was the first sketch for my ABC of SF." I'd seen a few of this series: a towering flowerbed for Aldiss, a sinking New Brighton for Ballard. 'I've framed it for you," Hale said to Mildred.

"She can't find words to thank you," Betty said.

"As a matter of fact I can," Mildred said. "It's one of my best presents ever, Peter."

"Well no, it's me thanking you," Hale said. "I mean, if it weren't for you the gallery would never have made it at all and a lot of us would still be having to listen to our friends telling us how talented we are.

"We are all very grateful for your money, Mildred," Betty said.

"I think Peter's a little embarrassed by your wit."

"Now watch," Martin said.

And as if a slide had clicked into place in my brain I found myself sharing part of his consciousness. It was the joint, of course; it had happened

before, although not with him. I had a flash of Mildred in a short black pleated skirt and navy-blue knickers and white knee-socks, up at the far end where nobody would play with her. "Come on," I said. "It's not as simple as that."

"No? Watch."

"At least I'm not boring him," Betty said, lying back in the bean-bag with her knickers displayed and her immature breasts weighing down her grey sweater, Betty and her gang laughing at Mildred. 'I'm not boring Fatman. He doesn't like you to call him Peter."

"It doesn't matter, really," Hale said.

"Nor anyone else in the room am I boring," Betty said, swaying to her feet. "Or if I am I'm sorry. This sort of squabble is usually kept private. In normal homes."

"And what isn't normal here?" Mildred said.

"This is hardly the time to discuss that. Look, you see, everyone agrees. They'll be leaving if we don't talk about something else."

"They're your friends. Tell your friends what isn't normal here."

"Well, it's normal for someone to be the breadwinner. But," Betty said in a whisper I could hear even as I edged toward the door, "it isn't normal for the breadwinner to sit around the house all weekend pawing at herself."

"At least that way I know who's touching me."

"Well, you know what I'm always looking for in bed. My father's balls."

"You exhibitionistic little Judas!" Mildred cried. "You wouldn't have dared say that to him, you fucking—oh now look what you've made me say, you bitch!" and she began to snatch books from a shelf and hurl them at Betty: L. P. Hartley, Elizabeth Bowen, dialogues with Stravinsky. "There's some bruises that won't turn you on!" she cried as Betty advanced on her, rubbing her thigh where the spine of a book had struck it. Mildred grabbed a Picasso collection and Betty swung in front of her the first defence that came to hand, Hale's sketch. The book tore through. For a moment they grappled, clawing and pulling hair, then Mildred pushed Betty away and ran upstairs sobbing.

People collected around Betty to apologise before leaving. "I'll be all right so long as you come to Fatman's exhibition," she said. Martin mopped his

forehead, gulping air. "That's all," he said.

Hale joined us as we put on our coats. "And these are the people I'm reaching," he said.

"You've got to realise sometime," Martin said. "Everyone's like that when you break the shell."

"No," I said. "I'll see you," and before Hale could find his coat I was out of the house and taking deep breaths of a cold prickling rain. And now he's gone off to sulk, I heard Martin say. Never mind. I wasn't staying to gloat.

And two days later Peter Hale was dead.

I wasn't working until one o'clock, but I intended to meet Martin at the public opening of Hale's exhibition. Smoke billowed from fires in the back yards as I brushed my teeth. The phone rang and I answered it, foaming and swallowing toothpaste harsh as bile. It was a police inspector at Hale's exhibition. Hale had shot himself. "Mr. Hodges says you knew him quite well," the inspector said.

"Martin Hodges? I don't know where he got that idea."

"You're saying he isn't telling the truth?"

"I don't mean that. I suppose I knew quite a lot about, er, Hale." Though I was angry I didn't want to revenge myself on Martin by placing him in an awkward position, and I was half-amused by the way he seemed to have undertaken to educate me. "I'll come down there if you want," I said.

My shock at Hale's death began to accumulate on the bus. Children with sketch-pads were sitting in Princes Park. There had been too much of him, most of it unexpressed, to have vanished in an instant. I restrained myself from trying to imagine what had happened.

At the gallery I could only stand uncomprehending. People stood talking and letting their heads edge round the shop doorways on either side, and the manageress of a bakery ordered her girls away from a reporter. Martin was leaning on his umbrella and frowning uneasily out of the gallery window. Inside, Hale's paintings lay smashed in a heap in the middle of the floor, among the derivative record-sleeve psychedelia: idealised men with flaming green hair, ornate birds the colour of orange juice. "Here he is now," Martin said.

The inspector and a small moustached man, Hale's father, came to meet me. Mr. Hale's lips and the skin around his eyes were trembling, like a bubble about to burst. 'It wasn't a girl, was it?" he appealed to me. "Was it someone who'd got a hold over him?"

"I'm just shocked. I don't know."

"Please, Mr. Hale," the inspector said. "They'll take you in the car.

"I told him he'd be a success one day. He was on his way already, wasn't he? This was his chance. But he used to say I didn't know anything about it." Mr. Hale was groping for the door. "It was my gun. I didn't know he had it, I hid it years ago. I killed in the war with it, you see, and I knew he wouldn't have wanted to know that. God knows I tried to understand."

When Mr. Hale had left the inspector said "Was he taking drugs? Was it as simple as that?"

"No, he never tried them."

"And how is it you're so sure of that?"

His tone had sharpened. "He was quite forthright about it. It was well known," I said, sharing Martin's memory of Hale's refusing a joint and lecturing him.

"So you've no idea of how it might have happened?"

"I still can't believe that it did. If you'd asked me where he'd be in ten years I'd have said he would have been at least a very able minor artist, and very possibly he'd have surprised us all by then. Of course he had doubts, but never to this extent. Destroying all his work as well, I find that almost harder to believe."

"Perhaps not quite all. There's something I'd like you to see. Please be warned it isn't pleasant." He opened the office door and pointed. "As far as we can tell he stood with his back to that canvas when he shot himself. It was blank then."

"Christ almighty. I just can't take that in," I said, and Martin sat down and stood again. 'It's just the sort of romantic crap he wouldn't have gone near."

"I'll be outside if you want me," Martin said. 'I'm feeling rather bad."

"I should say you're all right," the inspector said to me, "but him—I'd stay away from him. The things they do to themselves with these drugs.

Sometimes I wonder how many of your generation will be with us in ten years' time. Was Hale like him, would you say? Is that why it happened?"

"I can only think it was a terrible fit of depression," I said. "And I'm sure Martin can't have been involved."

"Oh, we've no suspicions of him on that score. He was outside and the door was locked. He saw there was something wrong and called us, but you could tell it was an effort to do so. I sound resentful. I have a son, you see, and I hope he'll never prefer not to ask me for help. Still, I'm wasting your time. Tell me about Hale."

I ran across the road to a bus. "I feel like seeing people. I'll come with you," Martin said.

I sat facing the engine at the rear, watching the road stream away. "He warned you against me," Martin said.

"What makes you say that?"

"I could feel it coming. That was why I went out."

"He was talking about Hale. What do you think—"

"Don't make me think about anything like that," Martin said. "I've done enough."

A child sat opposite me, blocking my view. His face bore an unchanging reproachful grimace. Two stops later a middle-aged couple in frayed clothes sat a reproof apart at the other end of the back seat. "Don't touch me," said the woman. "Don't speak to me," said the man. All I could see now through the side window were cramped flashes of the bottoms of shop fronts and the antics of litter in side streets. I wished I'd used my bicycle. I gazed at the emergency door and Martin followed my gaze. "I see what you mean but I don't think the driver would agree," he said.

A man with a grey wax face and waxwork's black hair and a nose like a trampled candle lowered himself onto the seat opposite our touching knees. The bus jolted on the patched road, and he steadied himself with a hand that lacked two fingers. I drew back into myself. I blinked my gaze away from the space like a toothless gum between his fingers. The roar and sweet stench of the engine and the prolonged deafening howl of the brakes seeped through to me; I felt as though I were trapped in a box three feet wide. Once when I was ten a purple boil had appeared at the base of my jaw like a plum

trying to grow through my cheek. Whoever it had appeared on I shouldn't have been able to touch it, and my compassion still sometimes regresses to sensitivity. Which is true of everyone, I told myself, staring at a hill that swept up the back window between the frieze of shoulders.

"You've been kneeling," the mutilated man said.

My toes clutched at the soles of my shoes as he brushed at my knees. "You'll get years out of those trousers if you keep them clean," he said. "Kneeling like that. I hope it was to pray. I knew a boy once, about your age, who wouldn't pray before a battle. Said his god was in a flask. His flask got his head shot off and I only lost these." I smiled and nodded and clenched my toes.

"You've been kneeling too," he said to Martin. "You've both been at it."

"Right, okay, but not right now," Martin said, lifting the man's hand away by the cuff.

'It won't bite, you know," the man said. "It's only a hand. Don't you want it near you? There, look, it was shot for you. No? Where shall I put it? Out of the window? Do you want to put me out of the window? Eh, and kick me when I'm down?"

"Please piss off," Martin said.

"My stop," I said, grabbing the pole. As I half-tripped into the swaying aisle I realised that everyone on the bus was staring back at Martin. One man in blue overalls was gripping the back of the seat, and the woman next to him was pulling at his arm. "It's all right, no," she said, her eyes fixed on his face. As Martin passed the man stuck out his foot and drove his toe into Martin's shin. "That's right, leave him now," the woman said.

Martin's eyes and mouth widened and he hobbled to the doors, supporting himself on his umbrella. The tip of the umbrella slipped from the edge of the platform, and he almost fell. Gasping, he caught the pole. The umbrella rolled under the bus.

"Get it if you're going to," the driver said.

Martin stared at him, and the skin around his eyes puckered. "I don't want to go under there," he said.

"You don't have to go under," I said. "Just reach."

I could see the people on the bus craning to watch; some were laughing loudly enough to be heard. Martin knelt down, staring at the driver, and groped under the bus. He leaned further and his armpit scraped the curb. "You won't find it unless you look," I said, and the bus began to roll forward.

I almost spoke but didn't know what to say, I almost dragged Martin to safety, but he was already on his feet and leaning against the bus stop. "Brakes. Brakes went," the driver said, but his eyes weren't so sure of themselves. "I'll move the bus and you can get your umbrella," and as the bus groaned away toward the Pier Head I snatched the umbrella.

"It's all right now. It was an accident," I said. "Do you want a quick pint before I go to work?"

"You're really fantastic. Incredible faith you've got," Martin said. "You'd really like to go in there?" and he pointed at a faded brick-and-plastic pub outside which several youths in leather were laughing. As he pointed they stopped and took a step toward us. "Wha sup, umbrella man? Didz we upset syer? Yerve ruinedz our fun now," one said. I felt as if someone had plunged a hand into my stomach and were trying to drag his fist free. "Come into work with me," I said.

"Christ, just go and I'll be fine!" Martin shouted, halting a taxi and slamming himself in. I stared after him, then I hurried toward the music library with laughter rising in my wake. A Beethoven quartet was playing, but all I registered was the name.

I didn't think about the morning, but it lay like a block of lead in my mind. I still hadn't thought about it three hours later, when Martin came in. "I'm sorry I went off like that. I've got my head together a bit more now," he said.

"All right. I know you must have been pretty disturbed."

"It was bad. Do you like these people you work with?"

I couldn't tell whether he meant to relieve my tensions or his. "Yes, I think so."

"That's really nice. I mean, I'm glad. You want to hold onto that. Specially if you can get them to buy some good sounds instead of all this decadent classical stuff. Listen, you told me once you had some friends with a cottage in Wales. Do you think they'd notice me if I slept in a corner?"

"I'm afraid so. They'll be practising natural childbirth about now."

"That's a drag. There aren't many places I like to go any more. Are you going home when you finish work? I suppose you'll have just about enough to eat for yourself?"

"No, come round if you like."

A man entered the library. "You've a thief among your members," he said. "Someone's put some pop rubbish inside this *Sound of Music* cover."

I frowned in order to control my face. "I really want to visit you. On your own you're one of the nicest people I know, I really mean that," Martin said. "I'll buy you a meal sometime. If they don't take me back at the University I'll get a job soon. But I really want to talk to you tonight. There's things I have to tell you."

When I returned home Martin was turning round and round in the alcove of the doorway. "Christ, I'm glad you came," he said. "Some spades were doing something horrible across the road. They were making one of them run and catching her. You could hear her screaming."

"It's over now," I said, patting his arm.

"Not in my head it isn't. I don't know how—Christ, I was going to say I don't know how you can live round here. As if that mattered."

I opened the door of my flat. "Dinner won't be long once I open the packet," I said.

I heard Martin slump on the bed. "I've just come from the Slaters," he called. "They've made it up."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"You wouldn't be to see it. I was there for an hour and it feels like walking in melted sugar. It's sickening."

"At least the strength to forgive is something."

"I'm sorry to have to disillusion you. They need each other to tell them it wasn't their fault about Peter Hale, and they know they've still got to live together. That's all. You saw the real Slaters at the party."

"Come on, Martin. You know, after the party I honestly felt that you wanted these things to happen. It's almost as if you were making them happen."

There was a silence. I could hear a slight creak from the bed-springs as if Martin had sat up. I could hear a saxophone two rooms and a main street away. I became very still. Martin said: "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

I could feel him waiting for me to go to him. I went into the main room, thinking. "I didn't mean it literally," I said. "It's just coincidence. Or at most, perhaps you're one of those people who attract the bizarre."

"Please let me try to tell you about it," he said. "Maybe I can get it together that way." Shouts and laughter rose from Princes Avenue, and he shut the window. "The less I suspect the less I can make happen," he said. He lay down and closed his eyes. "The first time I knew what I was doing was three weeks ago. I'd gone to see my parents. My mother was trying to make my father tell me to get a job. He's been impotent for years. When he wouldn't say what she wanted she started saying he wasn't a man and that was why I was like I was. Well, I'm not much good that way myself. I was quite stoned, and I got this idea that she was going to get it out to show me he wasn't a man. And by Christ, all of a sudden she tried."

"Well, perhaps after years of frustration—" but I didn't believe whatever I'd intended to say.

"She couldn't have done that by herself. It just wasn't her scene. Anyway, he pushed her off and slapped her, and I went into the kitchen to wash up. I couldn't have stayed with them. When I came back they weren't speaking. Have you ever been in a completely silent house? Nothing except one of them turning on the box and the other one immediately getting up to turn it off. I haven't dared go back since."

"You should go back," I said. "Not to make something happen in the way you mean. Just to try to talk them out of it."

"You don't see it yet," he said. "For the first time in my life I can see them as they are, and if I go back it'll only make sure that they stay that way. If I keep away perhaps they can pretend. I can't pretend, you see. That's what's so bad."

"But you could try to change your view."

'Wow? Don't you think it's enough to try not to think it? It's like having a floodlight up against your eyes and not being able to blink. For three weeks. You just try to imagine it. I don't know what opened me up this way. Acid

or THC, I don't know. And it can happen at a distance. Like with Peter Hale. I told him he'd destroy himself if he didn't reach people he could respect, he was that sort of person. Then I started thinking how he'd do it. I didn't tell him, but I remembered his father had been in the war, and he was just the type who'd bring his gun home to brood over. I was outside the gallery when Peter shot himself, you know. I saw him do it. It was weird, because I'd already imagined it and so it wasn't any worse actually seeing it happen."

"And whose idea was that canvas?" I said, clenching my fists.

"Mine, of course. I'm not proud of it," he said, tightening his eyelids. "I've been seeing too much Ken Russell."

"All right," I said. "Suppose all this is true as you interpret it. Obviously you mustn't think too deeply about what's happened, that would only make it worse. But you have to try to change your outlook, for everyone's sake."

"Christ!" he shouted. "Change how? I've been fighting it for three weeks, you tell me when I've had the chance to take time off and change. Listen, have you ever had premonitions? You try to imagine what it would be like if you knew that having the premonition would make it happen!"

"But they aren't premonitions. They're preconceptions."

"Jesus, I like you a lot but you do piss me off sometimes. You think you know it all. Let me tell you something that'll bring you down a bit. Until today nothing's ever happened to me, until that thing on the bus. That wasn't just me. That took two."

I almost spoke, then thought. "I suppose you could be right," I said.

"And you're so smug about it."

"Me smug!" I shouted. "Me smug!"

"Look, let's stop there. You think about it and we'll talk again in a while. I don't want to screw you up, of all people."

"Sit down!" I shouted. "You're so perceptive about everyone except yourself, you tell me what's wrong with me!"

"You asked, remember. All right, I'll tell you. Like today in the library, you and the rest of them laughing at that poor guy just because he liked *The Sound of Music*. I managed to keep my head together until I got away,

otherwise you might be out of a job, so you can thank me. Now please, I want to go."

"Not yet you aren't," I said. "Now we've got that crap out of the way we can talk about you," and I shoved him back on the bed. His head thumped the wall. "Let me go!" he screamed.

"Shut up!" Something like a short circuit occurred in my brain, bypassing all the restraints of compassion. My fist was back and looming over his face when, with a shock that drained me completely, I realised what had happened. I sank on the corner of the bed, trying to analyse swiftly. I'd felt an uncontrollable flash of self which, so it had seemed, I had to express or burn myself out. Martin pushed past me. "Martin, please don't go," I said, "I can tell you how it felt, what you're doing. It must have been the same for Betty and Mildred and the rest. If we talk it may be a step toward a solution."

"You of all people," he said. "I set you apart from the rest. It's just people, that's what I have to get away from." The shouts on Princes Avenue were closer. "There's a mob out there but it's only the same as staying here," he said.

I heard the door slam, and punched the bed in undirected rage. From the street came renewed shouts and the thud of wood on metal. I threw the window up and saw five youths bludgeoning a car with sticks. "Stop that!" I roared. They looked up and laughed, and I grabbed the phone and called the police. I had just replaced the receiver when I heard someone shouting "Jesus, that's a stupid way to behave." It was Martin.

I reached the window in time to see one of the youths shoving Martin's head back against the stone gatepost. I leapt downstairs, but by the time I reached the gate it was all over. A police van had arrived, and another was blocking the side street. Thumping with their clubs, the police herded the youths into the van.

"Listen, don't say no, please," Martin said. "Can I borrow your bike? I want to get away from people somewhere. Then I'll come back and talk to you, I promise."

"I'll get it," I said.

When I came back Martin was staring wide-eyed at one of the policemen. "Say that again," he said.

"I was just saying these have bought themselves a holiday," the policeman told me, grinning. "They duffed up two Negroes half an hour ago, just like that, for something to do. We'll be in touch with you, Mr. Hodges."

"It wasn't me," Martin said. "It doesn't need me to make it happen. It's there already."

"Yes, and that means you can stop worrying," I said, and then I heard all his barriers go down. It was like the shriek of the Mahler, beginning as a low almost inaudible rumble, then speeding up: a scream which rose and grew until it reached a pitch thin as wire, slicing through my mind, and still rose, until it was only a point, tugging in agony at me. I think the policeman heard it too, for he frowned and rubbed his forehead before getting into the van. "Martin, don't go yet," I said, but he was already cycling away between the cars and the trees, and the thread of his scream was stretched to the moment where, indistinguishable from my aching memory of it, it vanished.

My name and address was scratched on the frame of the bicycle, and next morning the police called me almost as soon as they found Martin's body.

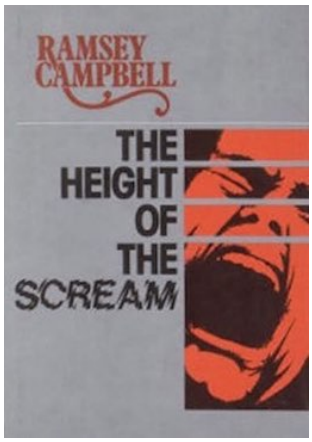
He was lying on Freshfield Beach, surrounded by the bricks with which he'd been battered to death. Tears and terror disfigured his face. "Bricks, of all things," the inspector said to me. "Why bricks?" I could understand his perplexity; the beach was scattered with bottles and tins, and pollution lay in the hollows of the sand like dirt beneath nails, but the bricks had come from a housing development a quarter of a mile up the road. "These bricks were piled up by the houses," the inspector said. "Some hooligans knocked them into the road and your friend may have ridden into them. Look, you can see where the wheel's bent. I'm sorry." I didn't know whether his sorrow was for Martin or the bicycle, which they'd tied onto their car as evidence; I nodded and shrugged sadly, and promised to help when called upon, and walked away from the beach, beginning to suspect I understood.

Perhaps I did, for as I walked along the gravel road between the green strata of the pines and the banks of trodden sand flashes of Martin met me: cycling wildly along the road in the dark, hearing thuds among the trees and the splintering of wood, and a pursuing rumble like the stumbling gallop of horses. A bird hovered overhead, flutter-tonguing, and as I reached the houses I felt the wheels wobble uncontrollably beneath me, obstacles thumping the ground around me as I fell, and an engulfing stillness as I realised that something in the darkness was hostile.

Perhaps I was inventing evidence of my suspicions. It would have taken considerable power to conjure attackers from the inanimate, and indeed to leave the traces that I thought I'd glimpsed. But equally power would be required—and this was what struggled to be resolved in my brain as the police car sped by—to perceive the last traces of Martin. When he'd snared my fears on the bus, had he propped my mind open too?

The train was about to leave Freshfield Station when three children of about ten, two boys and a girl, piled into my compartment. Clouds began to roll across the sky. "The sun's gone out," said the girl. One of the boys was showing her how a pointed piece of wood resembled a knife. "Give us a kiss," said the other. "No, gerroff," she said. I talked to them all the way to Seaforth. "Listen, the way the train's jolting us around you might stab yourself or me with that, and I wouldn't like that," I said. When the train moved out of Seaforth I sat staring at the piece of wood he'd left under the seat, thinking: But this is only the beginning.

The Words That Count



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Amen to that, because it did seem to be the words that counted. That's a bit short storyish as a beginning. But after all, I know this morning would make a good short story, and this is going to be it. So I'll buck my ideas up, as my father would say.

Evil is something you read about, but what you read is only very approximate, if that. (That's better!) Even the Bible can read like a story sometimes, if you permit your mind to slacken. I'm lucky to have had my father to read the Bible to me, rather than one of those teachers who try to indoctrinate their charges in the lie that it isn't meant to be taken literally. But evil is clever today. It takes forms that aren't in the Bible. It comes through the letterbox in a plain brown envelope with a threepenny stamp.

From Mike, I thought as I heard the letterbox click. I was in the kitchen, making my father's breakfast. Mike's my boy friend, my first and only real one. He's only a bus ride away but we often exchange letters, because it makes me feel secure to read them during the day. And my father doesn't insist any more on opening them, which makes Mike all the more my boy friend (I won't call him Mike if I send this off, of course; in fact, he doesn't really come into the story at all unless I make him.) Anyway, I turned the stove down and went to get the letters.

"Us, is it?" I heard my father call. "Yes, but it's nothing," I called back, because it didn't seem to be. It was just a flat brown envelope addressed to me, without a return address. "Just a circular," I said.

"Deliver us from circulars," my father said, which is the one thing in surprisingly bad taste he sometimes says. I suppose all men suffer from the temptation to shock, even Mike, although he has great self-control. I threw

the envelope on the kitchen table and took my father's scrambled eggs up to him. That's his weekend treat; on days when I'm working I only have to slice him a grapefruit.

But I didn't take the envelope to him. I don't know why, because of course I felt guilty, and kept telling myself that I didn't want to bother him. "I'm sorry," I said. "Shall I throw it away?" "Yes, unless it's anything worthwhile," he said. He wasn't wearing his dressing-gown, so I left the tray outside his room, but he put his head around the door and smiled at me. He often does that, and his hair is usually standing up like a silver halo; it's as though someone were leaning out of a stained-glass portrait to smile. I don't think that's blasphemous. I went downstairs and had my own breakfast, and there was the envelope waiting in front of me.

Temptation is a dreadful thing, because it insinuates itself among your thoughts and mixes them up. I kept reaching for the envelope and drawing back. You see, I was beginning to be convinced that someone had sent me one of those things they're trying to stop, a catalogue of aids to love. As if the sacrament of marriage weren't enough of an aid! I know it will be for Mike and me. But what scared me was that I didn't know how much I'd have to see before tearing it up—or taking it to my father, who would know what to do. I almost threw it away unopened, except that I felt I'd have to grow up sometime; but my head was throbbing as I thought about it.

'Into the jaws of hell, then," I said to myself, and snatched the envelope and ripped it open, holding my breath. I shook out the contents, then I breathed so hard that I had to hold it again in case my father had heard.

Not that I was completely reassured by what I'd found. It was a pamphlet bound in a soft black material on which light rippled slowly. It felt like fur. I shivered, because it seemed too enticing for its pages to be innocent. But I closed my eyes and let the pamphlet fall open, and looked.

"Us." That was all: just one word on the page, in delicate mauve letters on a darker purple. It was strange—I mean it was even stranger, because that was a word I'd been thinking about a good deal. I don't think I have space in my diary to explain, if I'm to finish my story. I remember wondering

whether all the pages were like that, and whether any of the words were ones I shouldn't read. But I steeled myself and turned over.

"Lead" was the next, in a pearly pink against mauve. I stared at this, because the colours seemed beautiful in a quiet way, like the Oriental paintings on our tea service. Then I let the pages run through my fingers. I had to stop, not because any of the words I'd glimpsed were foul, but because the colours were throbbing against my eyes like a kaleidoscope gone out of control.

And I'd almost forgotten to run my father's bath. Perhaps that should have shown me how the pamphlet was, if I may permit myself the word, seducing me. But I couldn't have known then what it was. I ran upstairs and turned on the taps. 'I'm sorry, father. I've been reading," I called. "I'm sure you needn't blame yourself," he said. "The day was meant to be used." I heard him put the tray on the landing as I turned off the taps. I took it downstairs and washed up, thinking.

"Us," I was thinking. That was how the pamphlet worked: by putting claws into your brain, and that was the first. And to stop myself being confused I thought about the pamphlet. What I'd seen reminded me of a book of poetry Mike had shown me once. Some of the poems weren't the sort of thing I should have read, and he'd apologised. But some seemed to be just words arranged attractively on the page, and I thought the pamphlet might be similar. It depends on the kind of attraction, of course. I was even beginning to think Mike might have had the pamphlet sent to me as a present!

Against yourself there's sometimes no defence. It comes of not making yourself be straightforward. I should have waited for my father to come down and shown the pamphlet to him, but I saw no harm in reading it. A bird was sitting on my childhood swing and puffing up its feathers, and the garden sparkled like the night with dew. It seemed pleasant to listen to the bird's trills and read. So I sat at the table and began to read the pamphlet slowly from the beginning.

"Trespass" was the word that made me frown. "Thou shalt not trespass," I found myself thinking, and yet the pamphlet seemed to be urging the

opposite. But the word wasn't important, I told myself; the artist had simply wanted a pattern of dark blue stretched across lilac.

Who could have produced such a thing? That's the thought that shocks me most, although perhaps the idea fed them lies to justify itself, as it was doing to me. I can only shrink from myself as I was then, my head bent close to the table, my eyes and my brain separated. My eyes were drinking in the colours while thoughts scrambled in my brain, my own thoughts being silently suppressed while others moved into their places. My head was twingeing, and I sought peace in the slow turning of the colours. I had forgotten where to seek true peace. "Who" was the next word, then "those."

"Those as can, does; those as can't, teaches." I'd once heard my mother shouting that at my father. Of course she didn't really talk like that, she was only affecting vulgarity. She died of cancer when I was ten, and my father and I prayed for her soul before every meal. I missed her, although my father told me that was presumption: everything belonged to God. Something of her was still in our house, even after my father gave away her clothes to Father Murphy. Her letters were in a drawer in my father's room, and he'd honoured her photograph by putting it next to the Sacred Heart in the lounge. This was what I thought as I looked at the word. All that from one word! And I remembered their argument.

"Forgive her," I'd cried. I'd felt guilty because in a way it was all my fault; my mother had been proud because a teacher had liked a story I'd written, but my father had said nobody needed fiction when there was the Bible. Looking back, I think he wanted me to write something he could sell in his Catholic bookshop, not a fairy tale. But then I didn't know; I'd squeezed myself into the couch, crying and screaming, feeling that it was wrong for my mother to take my part against my father. "Those as can—" I heard her shout, and I ran to my father to intercede for her. I felt he would listen to me, and after a while, holding up his hand for silence, he did. I felt guilty again when my mother died—in fact it was worse, and I've never understood why.

We were closer after that, though; there wasn't so much tension in the house and in me, I suppose because I knew my mother was with God. There was a different sort of tension when I brought Mike home, after having met him in

the library where we work; an odd sort of tension, because although I knew I shouldn't I half-enjoyed it. Not that this is helping my story, but I like to be able to write it down for myself.

As I turned the pages I was thinking all this (so perhaps it does fit into my story). My mind felt strange then, though, like a slippery surface across which my thoughts were scurrying, sliding out of reach as I tried to catch hold of them. The room felt oppressive, and so did the sound of my father getting out of his bath. I must have been overpowered by then, because I began to turn the pages faster in case I shouldn't have finished by the time my father came down.

"Trespasses" stopped me again. I knew it should remind me of something but God help me, I didn't know what. All I could think was that when I'd brought Mike home the first time my father had treated him like a trespasser. My father had wanted me to work in his shop but there wasn't enough money, so he managed to persuade the city librarian to let me work in the Religion Library, making me promise solemnly to choose my friends. I found that there were books on spiritualism and black magic on the shelves but I didn't tell him, although I should have; I simply told people when they asked that all the books were out. I believe you can lie in the service of God.

Our house felt brighter when Mike continued to visit. My father rebuked me after his first visit, but I told him that Mike had been to the best Catholic school in town. I didn't tell him that he'd lapsed, because I know I can bring him back to the Church. After all, I'm twenty-three and I want to help people. That was why I left the convent, that and the way all the silence and rustling terrified me; they were kind but I couldn't make sense of the gap between life in the convent and the people we tried to save from alcohol and drugs. I wanted to see ordinary people so much that I couldn't sleep for weeks. Perhaps I wasn't ready. I think I did the right thing, because once I met Mike I knew I was ready for him. I felt God was watching over us.

"Us"—there it is again, but let me get on. That word was troubling me then too, and I began to walk around the house, still reading. It was as if the kaleidoscope had got into my head, and my thoughts were about to fall together. I found myself staring at the television set. My father is a member

of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, and recently he watched part of a wrestling match before writing his weekly letters (one to Mrs. Whitehouse, one to each of the broadcasting companies). I'd been both repelled and fascinated by the wrestlers. They were pink as the inside of a shell, and their muscles kept wobbling and then growing taut. I'd once seen Mike fight, to take a broken bottle away from a man who was threatening his wife, and I'd been terrified and proud. Terrified most in case my father heard we'd been in a pub, for he would have forbidden me to see Mike again. I stared at the television, thinking all this, and then my thoughts fell together.

Forgive me, father, for writing this down, but I think it's better out of me. I began to think of all the subjects Mike had to avoid discussing, his lapse, drinking and the rest. Suppose he betrayed himself one day? I imagined them fighting over me, like knights over a lady, or wrestlers. I would belong to whoever won. Of course my father would win, I thought, because if I were honest I had to admit that right was on his side. And having won, what would he do with me then?

And I can't remember what I thought after that, because I backed into the sideboard and knocked over a cup. It wasn't broken, and I began to giggle nervously, listening to the china chattering against the saucer like a tiny monkey running into the distance. I wondered what it would have sounded like if it had broken. I felt I'd never listened to things like that before, I'd always rolled into a ball inside when anything was damaged. I found myself staring at my mother's photograph and then, I'm still trying to remember why, I ran upstairs.

"Bread." I've had to stop here to think, because that was one of the words in the pamphlet. Bread is what they call money to buy drugs. I wonder if the pamphlet were drugged somehow, because when I think about it that was the effect it had. The evil of people!

"Daily prayer and lots of it," Sister Clare used to say to the people we were helping, and I've always remembered that advice. I don't think I feel drugged now, though. Perhaps I was when I went to the bathroom, although no doubt the words in the pamphlet were enough.

Our timetable was established a long time ago; I would run my father's bath after breakfast and when he'd finished, I would wash properly and brush my teeth. The bathroom would be full of steam and a warm smell I liked because it was my father's. I took off my clothes and then I began to squirm inside, remembering how my father had found me once standing on the toilet with no clothes on and trying to look in the shaving mirror, and he'd sat on the bath and beaten me. Then I regained control of myself, but while undressing I'd knocked the pamphlet into the bath. I had to grope for it through the steam, and then I saw that there were a few of my father's hairs around the inside of the bath, and I caught myself wondering where they'd come from. I want to cross that out, but at the same time I want to leave it to remind me what I'm capable of. Before God I don't usually have such thoughts. My father and I have always been just us.

Us again. All right, I'll explain and then I can get on. I feel guilty thinking of Mike and me as us, it seems disloyal. I don't know if I'm right, because I can hardly think of Mike and my father in the same way. But I keep thinking about it until my head hurts. I think my father feels something similar, and that's why he's begun hitting me again. I try to stop him, but he has a bad heart. That's all, and now I haven't much room in my diary. I washed and brushed my teeth, and when I came downstairs my father was waiting.

"Give that to me, please," he said.

Heaven help me, for a moment I didn't know what he meant and when I did I realised I was trying to hide the pamphlet behind my back. I blushed and apologised, and gave it to him.

"In heaven's name, what nonsense is this?" he said.

"Is it a poem? I think that's what it's meant to be." I hurried into the kitchen for no reason except so as not to have to look at him, because my face was burning and I was confused. I realised that I'd read the pamphlet through but couldn't remember having finished it, and a part of my mind knew what I'd read and was trying to tell me. My face is burning now.

It was worse to wait in the kitchen when the only sound in the house was the pages turning, and it was as bad to watch him frowning. I felt he was going to discover what I'd been reading before I did, and that terrified me as much as being caught that day in the bathroom. I tried to think of something to distract him.

As I did so he spoke, and when he saw me start his frown deepened. "Look at these colours," he said. "They're false. I ask you, are these the colours of God's earth?"

"Earth isn't a colour," I said. I don't know why, because I knew it was a stupid thing to say. "Sorry," I said, and the pamphlet was making me crafty, because I said "Let me have it and I'll show you, some of the colours are beautiful."

"On no account," he said, and I began to draw into myself, because I knew that at any minute he would make the discovery I dreaded, and I still didn't know what it was. I realise now I said out loud "Oh, God, what have I done?"

"Done? What do you mean?" he said, and I'd reached such a pitch I almost cursed inside myself. "I mean I don't think we have enough vegetables for dinner for three," I said weakly.

"Be quiet now and let me look at this. There's no call for you to bring God into your housework."

"Will you excuse me then, while I go and see?" But I was equally terrified to leave him with the pamphlet or to stay; my head was pounding.

"Thy," he read. I remembered I'd read that word two or three times. "Is this supposed to be religious? If so it's a poor job," he said. He turned two pages, then he went rigid and raised his eyes to me.

"Come here," he said. That's what he said in the bathroom when I was little, and that's how I went to him, with my ribs hurting because I was breathing so fast. He gripped my shoulder and held up the page.

"Kingdom," he read and turned back. "Come, kingdom, thy. Thy kingdom come! Do you know what this filth is?" he shouted and a purple vein grew from beneath his hair. I couldn't speak, only shake my head. But of course I did know, because the first word in the pamphlet had been "Amen."

"Thy kingdom come! That's what they want today, isn't it? The devil's kingdom!" He swung me round to face him, hurting my shoulder. "And this is how they go about it! Was this your friend's idea? Did he send you this?" he shouted, his face still darkening, and I could only shake my head until my ears screamed.

"Name me one person who would send you this!" he shouted, and I managed to say "I don't know anyone. They could have got my name from anywhere." Then I gulped back a cry, because he'd pulled the covers back and was ripping out the pages.

"Thy" sailed by me, and I picked it up seeing only the colours, soft shades of yellow and lime. My father's face seemed to swell and loom over me, and I crumpled the page into his hand and closed my eyes. I heard his breath snarling and the rip of the paper, and I was thinking of the time he forbade me to see the boy next door again, because he wasn't a Catholic. I know it was for my own good, but then I lay sobbing in the garden, and when a butterfly settled near me I tore it like a wet scrap of paper. My father's destruction of the pamphlet seemed like that, and I sobbed before I could stop myself.

"Be quiet!" I felt him grab my shoulder. "Tell me before God, did you read this?" I opened my eyes and there on the floor I saw the word "hallowed," like pieces of jigsaw when you know they fit together by their colour. I looked at him and couldn't speak, seeing the vein trembling on his skull.

"Hallowed is as hallowed does," I was thinking, anything to cover the slippery surface of my mind, because now I could see through it and there was my father on the floor, his heart burst. I was thinking that then there'd be just me and Mike to save me from despair, the worst sin, just us.

"Heaven help you, child!" my father shouted. "Don't think up lies! Did you read this filth?"

"In a way," I stammered. "I mean, I didn't read it, just looked at the colours. The art."

"Art! You call this art?" he shouted. I must have become crafty again, as I sometimes was when I was little, thinking I could tell when he'd softened. That, and the fact that the pamphlet had gone; the thoughts it was feeding me had gone; my muteness had gone, and although I was shaking I felt a tremendous relief. Everything seemed all right again. "Yes. Well, it is. In a way," I said.

"Who taught you that? Your friend?" he shouted, and knocked me across the room. I ran to my bedroom sobbing, and the sheet beneath the blanket was wet when I'd finished. I sat on my bed for an hour after that, thinking all that I've written down. It was then that I thought of writing it, because Sister Clare used to make the people write down their lives; she said it helped. I knew I could write it, if my father would speak to me.

"Father, please forgive me," I said when I went down. He was staring out into the garden. After a while he turned and nodded. "I forgive you," he said. "I know you didn't understand. But never do anything like that again unless you want to kill me." And I ran up to my room again, but this time I was smiling.

Our house feels peaceful now, and I feel somehow cleaner for having written all this down. I shall read it through now to see what effect it has, and perhaps Mike can read it when he's brought us back from Mass. No, on second thoughts, there are things in it he shouldn't know until after we're married. He can see it when it's properly finished. I'll have to rewrite it before I send it anywhere, if I do, because I know the effort of writing isn't meant to be visible. And it certainly is at the moment; every time I've hesitated at the beginning of a paragraph the ink's collected in my nib; and the words stand out from the rest. They look almost as if someone else had written them in.

Point Of View

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I'd just entered the staff area, whose open plan was laid out in the sunlight, when I felt that it was going to be turned inside out. But I had no time to look at that notion, because beyond the half-partition I could see Roy and Ken fighting in the Domestic Science area. Roy had managed to grasp Ken's hair and was banging his forehead against a shelf, like a tough egg. "Now come on," I said. "What's the problem?"

They raced each other to me. Their faces looked rumpled. "He said I had nits," Roy said, whining.

"Well, you did six months ago," I said. Since then puberty had made him fastidious; he washed his hair every second night and was anxious to tell me so. "He hasn't now, you know," I told Ken.

"He hit me first."

"I seem to remember you used to hit someone who called you a nigger," I said. "But you've both got over that. Do you see this is the same sort of thing? Now then, I take it you were in the Domestic Science area meaning to make us some coffee. So how about getting on with it and trying not to break anything. Particularly not each other."

They went behind the counter between Domestic Science and the staff area, their elbows recoiling in an exaggerated don't-you-dare-touch-me. I feared I'd only talked the situation into hiding for a while. I suspected I'd seen merely the surface. Gazing from the window at the warren of grey siamesed houses that surrounded the school, strung on their narrow corridors, I could imagine that the situation was rooted deep and far. But I found myself gazing at the bright still blue sky, which seemed fixed and on the verge of growing brighter; fixed as if to give me a chance to find the point from which everything would be turned inside out. I couldn't, because I felt fixed myself, like an object being scrutinised. I turned and saw Cox watching me.

He was standing at the far end of the counter. When I turned his eyes widened quizzically, and I frowned slightly to tell him that if he wanted me to understand his comment he would have to speak it, and he moved his eyebrows negligently to indicate that if I didn't follow it wasn't worth continuing, and I saw the lines around his eyes which were scratches his wife's sarcasm had made. We stood at either end of the counter with our faces shouting at each other, and when someone had to speak Cox jerked his head at Roy and Ken. "Coddling them again," he said in a tone that meant I was a fool if I thought it was a question.

"No," I said partly to make him shrug and go away, partly because I felt arguing might give me a hold on my mind and on the odd things it seemed to be doing. Of course he didn't shrug, but he turned a shoulder to me.

"I hope you know I may have you next year," he said to Roy and Ken. "If I were you I'd take time off fighting to think about that. You won't know yourselves by the time I've finished with you, but if I were you I wouldn't want to. Then again, if I were you I'd be standing staring with my mouth open instead of pouring coffee."

"Thanks for the coffee. Maybe you ought to be heading for assembly," I told them. "No doubt," I said when they'd gone, "they were standing still out of respect. And I had the situation in hand, thanks." Then I sat against the Arts half-partition and hid myself behind a science fiction magazine while I tried to consider the behaviour of my mind.

But by then it had stopped and all I could retrieve were impressions. Such as a vague yet intense feeling that everything around me had been about to shift into a new pattern, rather like an op-art effect, so that my mind had ranged about searching for the point at which to make the optical turn. That was a general impression, so general as to be false: it hadn't been optical, particularly. For example, there'd been my sense of being an element in the process, an object—not of Cox's stare, I decided on reflection. I was still trying to define what had happened when Cox stood up and I, having given him time to be out of sight round a bend, followed to assembly.

Roy and Ken and the rest of their class looked eager to get to the laboratory. "Are we going to do an experiment today?" one of the Lo twins

asked. When I said yes there were so many cheers and smiles I had to give at least the latter an echo, but it was no more than that.

The head gave us a daunted therefore angry glance as he made his way to the stage. At least they might enjoy the lesson, which would please me, since chemistry was the one science for which I had virtually no enthusiasm at their level. It was all dull foundation that had to be learned before you could build, and they knew, which only made it harder for me to communicate enthusiasm. Still, they can look forward to next year, I thought and stopped, wondering if I'd scored over Cox at the expense of his classes.

The head appeared on stage and there was the usual scattering of might-have-been-sneezes of stifled laughter. Beneath the screen which the community film society used he looked like a cinema manager determined to quell a Saturday morning audience, but none of us ever had the courage to tell him why he shouldn't wear a bow tie. He made a slightly drooping shelf of his folded arms and began to peck at the silence. "You're all here to get ready to take your places in the world your parents have made," he said, and I knew most of the staff and who knew how many of the kids were thinking: oh, that one again. So long as he didn't try to convince us. I tried again to look at what had happened earlier.

Suddenly I thought I'd found its context. After all, what I'd felt had been a perception growing so intense that it had to break through to intuition. I'd had a similar experience several times on both trips I'd taken, with Laura of the English Department—trips which, as she'd said, were about the most contemporary way apart from science fiction to unite the two cultures. So perhaps what I'd felt had been an acid flashback. In any case, one thing I'd learned from tripping had been that you couldn't regain perceptions by forcing them. I relaxed inside myself. "We're all here to work," said the head. Fair enough, I thought, and I haven't done much yet today. Enough introversion.

"Are we having crystals?" one of the Lo twins asked.

"Not today, er Marie," I said, hoping she hadn't noticed the er. "Today it's chlorine."

"Gases are last," Ken complained. "Why have we got to do chlorine?"

"Because when you come to do your exams," I said, "we think you'll probably be asked about chlorine. Now come on, let's get the background over with and then we can look at the real thing."

I talked and gazed out at the kids among the laboratory benches full of glass tubing and beakers and flasks. Their faces had formed into listening masks, and they looked to me rather too much like shelves of plates. I resisted the urge to hurry in order not to lose their attention, because even if I'd lost it that never helped. This kind of teaching is an act of faith, I reminded myself, if you need to be reassured that they're responding you shouldn't teach. CHLORINE IS, I squeaked on the board, and said "Does anyone know what chlorine is used for? Do you, Ken?" to stop him before his pen, poised on the edge of boredom, touched the bench. But his eyes just widened, and everyone else's stayed that way, until to break the stasis before I went to absurd lengths to evoke a reaction I said "It's a bleaching agent," A BLEA(snap!)CHING AGENT.

"Isn't that interesting," someone hissed.

"No, it isn't especially interesting," I said. "Not now, at least. But someday you may find yourselves using chlorine, and it may be useful to you to know exactly what you're doing." And what an interesting job you'll have, my mind was already answering back on behalf of the kids. Just think, bleaching for a living. "Now look and I'll show you how it happens," I said, picking up the stub of chalk.

But I hadn't been writing long when the murmur began, the eddying wind that doesn't even sound as if made of words and that whips into silence when you turn to it. I wrote the first equation and said "And when that happens," but the murmur didn't make way for me. I was turning when my mind changed.

I wasn't turning fast to catch the murmurers. On the other hand, I wasn't turning slowly to give myself dramatic stature. Yet I had time to watch what was happening to my mind as I made the turn. It had become an object through which I was perceiving. Just that: it was a transparent thing of no particular shape between me and the world. What disturbed me was that it was solid to the touch of one of my senses, maybe more: which one I couldn't tell. It had been the intangible me for a good many years and now here it was, insisting on being felt.

No time, I told it, because the kids were watching me and waiting for me to speak; I had the advantage. But now my mind was nearer turning things inside out for me to look at. Except that as we came nearer I could see that it had nothing to do with turning things inside out but something quite different, so different that I'd had to produce that approximation to comfort myself. It was something like fossils.

Only although this obviously meant something to me I couldn't, now that I examined it, see what. I stared around the laboratory, and the kids stared back at me, and I began to feel vaguely that my surroundings were fixed in some kind of stratum, that the objects around me were closely surrounded by a material, apparently invisible and certainly indefinable so far as I was concerned, that fixed them like fossils. Particularly the kids—because they were alive; that was the reason, I felt instinctively if incomprehensibly.

I'd no idea what game my mind was playing, but thinking of the kids enabled me to run a short circuit back to my job. I realised that they were still gazing at me because they thought I'd been waiting for them to shut up. I grabbed the speech I'd had ready as I turned. "I know this is pretty dull," I said. "But you know perfectly well that if we did the experiment now we'd still have to go through all this and you wouldn't have the experiment to look forward to. So let's get on."

I turned to the board, but it was worse to feel the undefined fossilisation going on behind me, where I hadn't even the chance of making out what it was. If it's a retrip you can ride it, I shouted at myself, and wrote the second equation to prove my control. But I wasn't explaining as I wrote, and I could hear my grip weakening.

Weakening on Des. "I saw your gran last night," he said to Roy.

"So what," Roy said, but it was it more violent than indifferent.

"Thought your dad didn't let her out by herself."

"You fuck off."

Apparently my filing system was still working, because I remembered it had been Roy who'd said that about his grandmother. If he was objecting now it meant something was wrong there. But even as I built on that, some of the material on which I'd built my teaching and which I'd thus concealed began to tumble into my mind. Something was catching me wrong, maybe a mood, and I was thinking how all I could give a kid like Roy was a little

mental leverage, which I couldn't force him to use: all I could do was give it to him again if he fell back. And again. But wasn't this merely an answer I'd invented to satisfy myself? Wasn't I trying to avoid the truth that these kids weren't important in themselves, that they were functions of a process, simply a step out of the vicious circle of illiteracy, probably far less than one step per generation? Maybe, I shouted myself down. But shut up.

"Now listen," I said, loudly because of a mounting suspicion that my mind had any number of tricks still to play. "If anyone would like to come up here and take over, fine. Otherwise let's just hear me talking until we come to the experiment. The more stops I have to make the less enjoyable this morning's going to be."

By the end of that my voice was quieter and hard and controlled, and the kids had taken on a kind of chastened stillness. But despite their reaction I hadn't been angry, I'd simply been trying to restrain my mind again, because it had been watching my behaviour with an amused slightly patronising fascination. It was rather like the glimpse of my role-playing I'd had while tripping, except that there was no impetus to drop the role in order to catch myself unmasked. I was still trying to shrug all this off as a failed flashback perception when it drained away of its own accord. For a moment I felt that the viewpoint which had been affecting me had now actually physically withdrawn from my mind, and I snatched at that idea, then I let go in the determined hope that it had gone for good. "And these are the other uses of chlorine," I said somewhat hastily. "Now I'm going to set up the apparatus and I want you to do the same in your groups. After break we'll do the experiment."

In the staff area I glanced rather apathetically at my science fiction magazine. I felt a little as if I were a character in a science fiction story, one that was perhaps still being written. That's what you get for reading Pirandello, I thought. If someone knew the ending I wished he'd tell me. I sat down and read a story about a man who didn't know he was a programmed robot.

The kids were lined up outside the laboratory when I arrived. "Call that a line?" I said. "I've seen monkeys draw better lines than that." I said this largely to distract Roy, for Des was saying to Ken "Isn't his dad going to have his gran put away." I could understand if this were true, because since Roy's mother seemed to do little except procreate his grandmother had

become the maternal head of the house, though her mind was long past such responsibility. Which all led to arguments, fights, threats, insomnia, and to make Roy's situation worse he was fond of his grandmother, probably because she didn't keep begetting rivals. "We haven't got the manganese dioxide out yet," I remembered gratefully. "Roy, you be mother."

I watched him doling out the chemical. My mind felt fragile, delicately balanced, glad not to be called on immediately. Fragile in the same way as the kids, in fact. Fragile like a punch in the face, my mind scoffed, becoming a bluff child-hating oldster for a moment. Don't let them kid you they're tough, I retorted. When you had to handle them so carefully lest you crush them against the cages of their childhood while trying to help them at least to see out, what were they if not fragile? Yes, I thought, fragile like Roy, and he was only today's problem. "Pardon?" I said.

"Will Mr Cox be taking us next year?" Susie Lo repeated.

I should have noticed that there was depression drifting like a fog between the groups, making them tense and restless. "I don't know, Susan," I said. "He may be."

"I hope he doesn't," she said, and to loudening agreement, "I wish we could have you again."

"If Mr Cox does take you," I said, "I think you'll find if you try hard enough to get along with him he'll get along with you. Life's like that, you see." Christ almighty, my mind said, disgusted. "Now," I said, turning to the apparatus on my bench. "Don't anyone do anything yet. Watch me first. Here we have a round-bottomed flask" (nudges, giggles) "fitted with a rubber bung," (snorts) *"bung."* I was glad to hear them laugh, glad enough to smile instead of pretending I didn't understand the joke. "Here's the manganese dioxide, at the bottom, here's the thistle funnel and down this very carefully, very carefully, goes the hydrochloric acid."

I'd begun pouring with almost exhibitionistic care when my concentration seemed to blur. Here was a glass thing like a little fat vase, here was liquid dropping into it, but they didn't mean much to me. It wasn't quite that my eyes weren't focusing, more that their information was coming through confused or that I was meeting it with a so what? or even a you must be joking! But mostly it felt as if my sight were menaced, and my mind was worried and was casting about for a means to give my sight back its conviction. It was like searching for the angle that explains an op-art effect.

Then I looked at my hand, pouring the acid.

For a few seconds I didn't know what I was seeing. It reminded me of the effect that occurs if you stare at an object long enough: its shape settles on your retina, blazing up when you blink. Except that in this case it wasn't just one shape; it was the outline left by each movement my hand made. I'd seen episodes in films printed in a slow motion so extreme that you could watch each position a figure occupied parting stickily from its predecessor. This was like that, but the previous outlines didn't fade. It was as if someone had slowed down what I was doing in order to examine it.

What made it more distracting was that it wasn't actually visual. It was so intense that it seemed to be threatening to make itself visible, which no doubt was why my sight had felt menaced. If it had been out there in front of my eyes it might have been easier to deal with. Inside my head it could insist that it had priority over whatever my hand was doing out there. But I knew what my hand was doing; it was pouring concentrated hydrochloric acid, and had been doing so for I had no idea how long—not long enough for the kids to become restless, apparently, nor for the acid to brim over. I thrust away a recurring amused fascination. It was my hand and if I couldn't control it nobody could. So, forcing my mind to catch hold of my hand's most recent movement and to keep pace with it, I did.

"And there it is," I said. "Now let's see you try it. If you're not quite sure of anything, don't be afraid to yell." I was glad when nobody did, and gladder not to hear the hushed disagreement which meant that a group was determined to risk resolving a doubt for itself— encouraging in theory, but not where burners and concentrated acid were involved. I stood behind my bench, reassuring myself by the duplication of activity each group maintained. Around them their movements effluoresced.

So this is what it was all leading up to, I thought. So long as it doesn't overstay its welcome I'll cope. I knew that the worst response to an acid flashback was paranoia, because that was self-perpetuating. If you rode the experience it would fade away eventually, integrated. But it was a year since I'd taken a trip; once I'd discovered the extra perceptions I'd set myself to learn to recapture them unaided, and to some extent I'd been successful. I'd felt my teaching was a discipline that would enable me to master and integrate these experiences, as well as being helped by them. It annoyed me that this belated pointlessly elaborate perception should suddenly appear

unasked. At least it explained everything by cumulation: the impressions of an optical effect, the amused fascination, and I supposed everything did seem fossilised within the persisting movements. But this isn't it, a querulous intuition seemed to be insisting. This is only a stage on the way. Oh shut up, I told it.

"Go on, Roy," Susie said. "Don't mess."

I'd been trying to avoid doing more than glance at the kids, since when I looked away their accumulated outlines faded. I'd been glancing most often at Roy, because I knew his tensions hadn't been released. I looked at him now. He was about to pour the acid. "Who's messing?" he said. I couldn't tell if there were real tension between him and Susie. I started across to the group, trying to be unobtrusive, as reminiscences of their movements bloomed around them.

And my mind arrived where it had been heading.

Maybe it hadn't been able to take the whole thing at once. It had worked up to it by easy stages. Not easy enough so far as I was concerned, though, because they gave no idea of how it was going to feel.

It was the accumulation of outlines, fanning out wilder and faster. It was the slow-motion film, speeded up without eliding any of the visible quanta of movement. I realised that it was my mind, not time, that had gathered momentum, and at once I was lost. Because my mind was blinded by the intricately overlapping webs of movement, and I no longer knew where the present was. Given the speed with which the ripple of outlines had been impressed on my mind I knew that they had overtaken the present; that was surprisingly easy to take, maybe because I'd been timeless on trips. My nagging intuition compared it all with an impatient reader flicking pages, but I didn't see how that helped. Not unless it helped me to feel I'd been hypnotised by the movement of the pages, because I'd halted, hemmed in by impressions that my mind refused to accept.

I was gazing at Roy, because I'd been making for him. There was something about him that communicated to me even through the enormous complicated cocoon of movement which was my mind's version of him, something simple enough for me to grasp. He was afraid.

He'd seen me advancing on him and suddenly halting in the middle of the floor, staring wordlessly at him. That might have been the explanation, but

Roy would more likely have turned sullen and tough. Somehow I didn't think any sight of me was enough to scare him. I thought it was something worse, and I had the sudden dreadful notion that he was feeling what I felt. On a trip your most powerful experiences can often reach other people directly. Perhaps the effect on nearby adolescent minds is all the more immediate and irresistible. I was sure that Roy was suspended helpless and bewildered in the accumulation of his movements, as in amber.

"Stop a moment, Roy," I blurted as if to hold him still while I searched for his present. And, glowering a little because I'd betrayed him to Susie, he did.

So perhaps I was wrong. Or perhaps he was glowering because I'd interrupted him when he was trying to ignore the disturbing behaviour of his mind. Or perhaps that and Susie too, because kids' minds, the same ones that can be harmed by the most minor sort of carelessness, can sometimes effortlessly hold paradoxes and complexities of feeling that would half pulverise mine. All I knew was that I could see Roy again, that I'd traced him back through his movements to the point at which he'd halted for me and there he was, solid and with the acid in imminent danger of spilling on the bench. "No, it's all right," I said. "Go on. Watch what you're doing." And I didn't mind that he resented my interruption; in fact I was glad to see Susie agree with his puzzled shrug.

"Now listen, everyone, I've got a headache," I said, closing my eyes because I couldn't bear the sense of their outlines of movement filling and emptying progressively as they turned to me. "I'm going to sit at the back while you carry on. If anyone thinks I'm needed for anything call at once, all right? At once."

"Shall I get you an aspirin?" Marie said, and "Shall I see if someone else'll take us?" said someone else.

"No thank you, or we won't have time to finish," I said, noticing that they all looked rather bewildered, perhaps because of my behaviour rather than because they were sharing my experience. I made my way between the benches, which since they didn't move seemed aggressively solid within their outlines. "I'll be back here looking something up," I said. "Don't worry."

I sat with a textbook of parapsychology that one of my predecessors had left in the hope of broadening our minds, but the amused fascination began

to mount so fast that I had to turn to the blank flyleaf before I started laughing out loud. After a while I was able to look at the kids and watch the extraordinary silent whirring of movement re-describing the patterns already impressed on my mind. I rather hoped nobody would need me, since the entire laboratory seemed to be looped and crossed by the paths the kids would follow at the end of the lesson. My mind felt transparent and empty, merely a medium, and my heart felt like a fist clenched hard and frequently. I watched and clung to the present and trusted the kids.

When the bell rang they'd cleaned up and labelled their gas-jars proudly and left them by the window for next time. They sped through their paths, erasing them as they went. I sat at the bench and gazed, just gazed. My mind felt scoured.

It was so lightened as to be sensitive to the slightest touch. I sat and let my eyes gradually recover my surroundings, and I felt the drifting feathery touch of a thought on what seemed to be the very edge of my mind. Leave him now, it said.

I didn't respond, I was still gazing. After a while a thought floated towards the first, barely emerging from the other side of my mind, or close and so low as to be a whisper, or so far in some other direction as to arrive delayed and faint. He's all right, it said. We haven't left any marks.

He knows, you fool, said the first in diminutive rage.

How can he, the second scoffed. Nobody could that far back.

Then why is it forbidden? I knew I was right. We shouldn't have.

Look, back then they couldn't even conceive what we're doing now. They thought there'd be some sort of machine that would take you back physically.

Then why did he behave the way he did?

I'm not saying he didn't feel us reading through him. But he'll never know what it was.

But that proves what the law says. No matter how far back you go, there was never anybody you can use as a neutral point of view.

That's not what it means. He may think about what happened for the rest of his life but he doesn't have the concepts. So it doesn't matter.

Then what does?

Let's say he was a good deal further forward, nearer us. Then he might be able to realise that anything he does is fixed, predestined as they called it then, because it has to lead to us. I mean, we're here, that can't change, so nothing that leads to us can change, that kind of paradox doesn't exist. But he mustn't know that, because that means he knows everything he does leads to those who destroyed him, that's us. Destroyed him because either he thinks himself into complete apathy or he goes wild trying to do something that isn't fixed, but of course both ways he knows he's doing what he has to do to lead to us. That's the paradox but it affects only him. But we're talking about someone much further forward. This one is open or we couldn't have used him as the point of view, but he's ordinary otherwise because that's what we wanted to read, an average day. It's beyond his comprehension, don't worry. He'll find some other explanation to satisfy himself.

But suppose he can hear us?

He can't when we're not reading.

You can't be sure! The law doesn't say!

Oh all right, we'll leave him. I think we read all there was to read, anyway. I didn't think it was much. I don't think reading's worth it.

Fading rapidly, and I had to add the last word. I sat at the bench a few minutes longer, but my mind was silent. Meanwhile, before my gaze but unremarked, reality had fallen back together for me. I locked the laboratory and made for the stairs.

I sorted out the crucial elements from the morning and earlier. I'd been preoccupied with the kids' futures and the way they were cramped. I'd been reading science fiction. These elements and the belated effects of acid had constructed this intricate symbolic statement. I was glad that it had reached what I hoped was its final climax, and unsure what it meant, but not entirely sorry that I'd had the experience. At least I'd had a useful glimpse of my mind's tendency to emblemise.

Two flights down I could see Roy and Ken in the doorway to the yard. I thought of trying to discover whether Roy had shared my experience to any extent. I shook my head. The only certain effect that would have was to make it more difficult for him to store and perhaps forget.

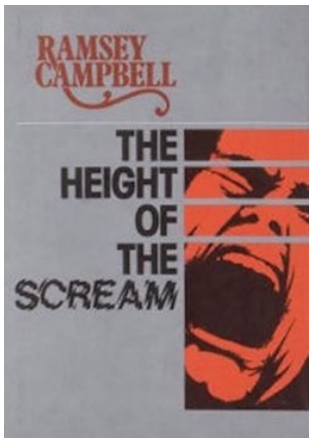
"Up you, you nigger," Roy said.

Right, I thought. This time I'm going to find out what it's really all about. Then maybe I can work on it. From the window on the stairs I saw Cox striding across the yard, bearing down on them. I hurried downstairs. At the back of my mind a doubt was nagging fretfully: surely I didn't think that my mind was capable of producing so complex and subtle an experience as I'd had? Why couldn't I face the possibility that it had been real?

I reached the bottom of the stairs. So if it had been real, I thought, what? I couldn't do anything about it, could I?

"Now come on," I said.

Missing



Written in: 1973
First published in *The Height Of The Scream*, 1976

19/5/73: Well, I went to Lis and Pat's party after all, even though Fran couldn't make it. Though it's more a question of my not being able to make it with her, or her not wanting to make it. Anyway.

I nearly didn't go (I have to finish my essay on Camus by next week!) But I was writing by the window, or trying to—and every time I looked across the road I could see the wall of their flat. Looked like a bright blue abstract—they chose the colours while tripping, of course. Besides, upstairs had started arguing and I couldn't write under those conditions. So I bought a party can and went over.

Wasn't bad as parties go, once I stopped myself thinking how I should be reading *L'Étranger*. (Exams next month; must score some speed). Lis asked after Fran, though I've only taken her over there once. Must have ruined part of the party, because I'd had a really fine joint and too much Johnny Walker, and I ended up crying. We're damaging each other by not making it and not being able to give each other up, which is probably true. Lis must be used to getting my head together by now, and she knows what it's about because Fran admitted to her she hadn't told her parents in case they disapproved of me, but I could see it was turning off the rest of their guests.

Jim was there, which was nice. He's only been back in Liverpool a few weeks and he's already doing a series for the *Echo* on local murders. I talked to him when I came down. Says he's found a particularly gruesome case which happened a few streets away. He's trying to find a picture of the woman who did it. I said I'd help him look through the newspaper files. Well, it might be useful to get my face known around the *Echo*.

There was one rather strange incident while we were talking. Now I think about it there wasn't anything specifically strange, but it seems to have stayed with me more than the rest of the party. So: Jim was telling me how he's concentrating on this case, the Voodoo Murder as he says it's known

locally, when I noticed a girl staring at us from the other side of the room—at least, at Jim. Odd I hadn't noticed her before, because she really was rather beautiful: long black hair, very pale smooth skin like velvet, a kind of controlled grace and watchful stillness that went with her long triangular face. Almost as tall as me and in her early twenties, I'd say. She was watching Jim with a sort of sad eagerness, and I pointed her out to him. "So she is," he said. "That's flattering."

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" I said, though perhaps I was joking or just partying, because she seemed absolutely the opposite of Fran.

"Since I've never seen her before I don't think so. You can always approach her yourself. I don't take my wedding ring off at parties."

The strange thing is that we were whispering and faced away from her as well, so that she couldn't have been lip-reading, yet when we turned back she was gazing at me; didn't spare a glance for Jim. "I'd say that was your cue," he said. I wasn't so sure; I found being the object of her obsession rather disturbing, that sadness and yearning began to affect me until I was sharing them without the least idea why. I actually took a John-Wayne-at-the-saloon gulp of Scotch as if to fortify myself. Then I set out across the room, falling over someone on the way.

I wasn't halfway there before she turned and made for the door. Forget it, I thought. The excitement of the sexual chase isn't my trip. I have enough frustration with Fran. But obviously she wasn't playing at all, because I heard the flat door shut and her hurrying downstairs. I looked out of the window and saw her striding up Princes Avenue, straight through a gang smashing bottles on the pavement. Jim looked dreadfully embarrassed and I had to persuade him it wasn't his fault.

I left soon after. Promised to meet Jim next week. Lis and Pat were arguing as I tried to say goodbye. "You didn't invite her, did you?" Pat was demanding. 'No, did you?" "Why the fuck would I be asking you if I invited her?" The strange sad brunette, no doubt. Don't know why they should make an issue of her.

Just thinking how I'll have to hide this from Fran. Not that there's anything very devastating in here, but there's no point in provoking jealousy. I wouldn't mind her requiring so much if she gave me more. Something's got to change. Only last week she was opening my chest of drawers to inspect my clothes: "What's in this silver paper?" and me with a death-grin as I

grabbed it: "Oh nothing, just an old half a bar of chocolate, I'll throw it away." Half an ounce of Congo bush, and I had to grope among the bacon rind to retrieve it when she'd gone.

Well, they've stopped screaming at the baby downstairs, so perhaps I can snatch some sleep. Christ, this place looks like a dosshouse. Must clean up.

20/5/73: Shouldn't write things like that. It must have got inside my head and kicked everything else out. When I'd had breakfast this morning I just stood looking at the unmade bed and the dirty dishes. Then I lost patience with myself and threw the bed together and attacked the washing-up and broke a plate. I envy Pat, having Lis.

Fran wasn't at lectures today. Probably her period—maybe that was why she wouldn't go to the party. This is where it feels worst, because I can't ring her at home in case one of her parents answers. Suppose it weren't her period? It's not knowing that screws me up.

Two boys were fighting in the front garden tonight. One had a brick, I think. They'd gone when I went down, but there was blood on the path. I came back upstairs, thinking how I know nobody in the building. I can hear them shouting and hitting each other sometimes, but I never speak to them —I don't think I really want to find out any more about them.

I can't read *L'Étranger* under these circumstances. It just makes them seem inevitable. I'll have to take it to the library and read it there.

Must try and get some sleep. Trying makes it harder, of course. I didn't sleep too well last night. There was a reason but I can't remember.

21/5/73: At least now I know why I couldn't sleep. It may help, although I don't see quite how. It was that the bed felt cut in half. When I turned over and came face to face with the wall it was enough of a shock to wake me up. I felt as if the wall had been thrust between me and the other side of the bed. Maybe I should buy a double bed (just like that, write a check, ha ha) with Fran in it. Or someone.

Fran wasn't in again. I could write her a letter, if her parents don't open her mail.

My day was made, to some extent, tonight. I'd gone to the library in Lodge Lane to read Camus. That wasn't one of my more brilliant ideas. The place smells of old cloth, and there's a dull stench of fish and chips clinging to everything. Old men asleep at the tables or fighting over the newspapers,

brandishing their sticks—women wrangling over romances or bringing them back, complaining that they've read them (how can they tell?)—only the kids seem at all alive, and how long can they stay that way? I don't know how the staff fend off suicide. So I was trying to read *L'Étranger* amid all this, trying to ignore it all, and I looked up and saw the sad girl from the party sitting at the next table.

She didn't look at me. She was watching the staff at the desk, and when their *Echo* arrived she went over and asked for it. She moved like a steady flame through the murk of the library. Christ, I've got poetry. But it did seem like that. I was going to look at her and smile as she returned to her table, but at the last moment I retreated to Camus, feeling somehow ashamed. (Of what?) I watched her for a while, wanting her not to change, not to succumb to the surrounding despair. Another bit of romantic style; I'll have to watch that, especially when discussing Camus. At last I gave up, because I knew I'd feel guilty if she caught me watching, and left.

So it wasn't altogether a pleasant trip, but a good one nevertheless. Still I find myself wondering about her. She's too young to sit in libraries in the evening, waiting for the papers to arrive. All right, I was in there too, but students aren't human after all, you don't lodge them where they can work at their best. What bitterness and passion. But that girl—she shouldn't have been in there. It's bloody wrong, that's all.

22/5/73: Fran's back. I think it must have been her period, because she said "You know when my last one was. Please, you don't have to ask." Obviously I don't want to embarrass her. She's going to make us dinner here on Friday, so that's something. It could be more than that.

I met the sad girl in the laundrette tonight. What a conversationalist she is. No, that's unfair, it was really my fault. I'd taken Camus with me (my god, I must be getting desperate) but she came in just after I did. I was putting my washing in the machine, throwing the powder on the floor and dropping the coin under people's feet. She didn't help, just watched sadly. But she was watching, which I suppose is some sort of progress. (Oh come on, progress toward what?)

Two girls were bullying a couple of little boys, so I chased them out. Real hairy-chested stuff. She smiled sadly at me and I felt chastened. More to get rid of that feeling than anything I sat down next to her and said (what a conversationalist I am, come to that) "Do you live round here?" She

nodded. Encouraged beyond words ha ha, I said "Alone?" Another nod. "Don't you find that a bit disturbing?" I said. Nothing, so I tried again. "I mean, the whole area feels hopeless, at least to me it does. You know, half of it's decaying and they're pulling down the other half and putting up concrete shelters. No wonder it's so violent, that's the only vitality that's left." And more of that sort of thing, which proves what a stupid turd I am, because of course she knew it already and that's why she was silent. She just kept gazing at me and I felt as if I were on some sort of truth drug, babbling away. I ended up saying how terrified I am by it sometimes. "Aren't you terrified sometimes?" I said, and she got up smiling sadly and left. Who could blame her.

Message from Jim via Lis and Pat. He's found out more about the Voodoo case. Doesn't think he'll use it, because it's too recent and too grim. Apparently the woman concerned lived round here until it drove her mad. He says he'll keep the material he unearthed for me to see. Just what I need. Still, I'd like to see Jim.

23/5/73: I'm going to have to put myself to sleep with a joint if I don't get my head together. Rolling around in bed last night again. Once I put my hand out and grabbed the wall, which was such a shock that it cost me another hour's sleep. Christ knows what I was reaching for.

I came home tonight and who was here to greet me? Unwashed plates and an unmade bed. Welcome home. I'm falling into the habit of the local despair.

But this is an anonymous dump. It even smells anonymous. I've been feeling something odd tonight: looking around the flat and finding that parts of it look empty. I mean, as if there should be something standing on the chest of drawers. And there's a crack on the wall I couldn't remember having seen before. I started trying to recall what used to hang over it. Nothing, of course. My head's in a weird state.

Found myself becoming obsessed with the whole area, and then I started thinking about the dark-haired girl living alone, and I went over to ask Lis and Pat about her. I had to wait until they and some friends had finished watching Chaplin. Then they didn't know who I was talking about. "But you were arguing about her when I left," I said. "Oh, that," Lis said. 'Pat had been smoking too much again, that's all. He said he'd seen a girl we didn't know at the party. Nobody else saw her." "She was a ghost," Pat said. "She's

waiting for you in the hall." "I wish you wouldn't do that," Lis said. "He just likes to upset me. She wasn't there." "She fucking was," Pat said. I left. Christ, I wish they wouldn't argue so much.

Tried to read the Camus again. Found myself slowing down to a dead stop —it was like a film getting caught in the projector, each phrase I read seemed to hinder me more until I came to one I simply didn't understand. The letters just hung there, looking meaningless. I've got to do something about my head.

Then someone tried to throw a brick through the window. Great fun. It hit the sill and missed the pane. There was a young brunette walking away. At least, she looked young, though I didn't see her face. I ran out but couldn't see anyone, and I tried to catch up with her in case she'd seen who it was. She heard me coming and ran. Can't blame her, round here at night.

No wonder my mind's running down. I was just about to go to bed when I started wondering when I'd bought the single bed. Don't ask me why, because surely I bought it when I moved here. That's what I remembered, but it felt wrong, as if it didn't really happen that way at all. I'm going to have to be puritanical about dope if this continues. I'll see if I can find the arrival of the bed in my diary tomorrow. Right now I'm exhausted.

24/5/73: I'm just pissed off with this whole area. When I came home someone had broken into the flat. What makes it especially stupid is that they didn't take anything, not even the records. Couldn't have been classical freaks. They must have been annoyed that I hadn't left anything worth taking, because they threw all the dirty plates on the bed. Looks as if I'll be sleeping with baked beans tonight. Salvador Dali would be pleased. Their most inspired ploy was to tear up my diary. Or at least most of it, into tiny pieces. They must have gone at it page by page and got bored when they came to Lis and Pat's party. I didn't call the police, not with that excellent bush still in the flat. Of course, my visitors may have read about my vices and may enjoy tipping off the fuzz. That'd make my week.

And then I had to spend an hour unscrewing the broken lock and fitting a new one. Ran the screwdriver into my finger. Left hand, luckily, so it won't stop me writing. Just keep me awake all night.

They're screaming at each other upstairs again. Someone slashed their tires, by the sound of it. It's like living sandwiched in between two reproductions

of my parents. I used to hear them when I was in bed. Makes me clench inside all over again. I've got to start looking for another flat.

25/5/73: I've got to laugh. Got to. Otherwise I'll be walking around all night.

Fran came round to make dinner. She was wearing a very short white dress —whenever she bent down it drew up from the curve of her bottom, which was nice. It was also quite an unequivocal signal for Fran.

It went wrong from the start. I bought some wine while she was making dinner, and when I came back and saw her I thought for a moment she was someone else. That must have been it, because I started when I saw it was Fran and stood there gaping, trying to think who she was (and who she wasn't). Then I had to explain by saying she looked beautiful, which was certainly true. It must have surprised her that I'd said it, though, because it's not my style.

Another thing: the place didn't smell anonymous tonight, but on the other hand it didn't smell right. Perhaps Fran's changed her perfume. No, I'm sure it's her usual. But I know I was searching for another scent. I'm becoming incomprehensible to myself and I don't like it.

We had dinner (which was very fine) and took our time over the wine, and Fran began telling me how her parents had invited some twat from a public school to go on holiday with her and them. "I'm sick and tired of being organised," she said. "They're not happy unless they think they can predict my every move. I told them I was going to a concert tonight. That's what they'd expect me to do, so no questions. It's horrible when you think about it, you know, like schizophrenia—*she'd* go to a concert, so *I'm* free to come here with you. I have to be careful which set of memories I'm remembering with them."

"I know how you feel," I said. "My memory's all to cock."

"Please don't say that," she said. "No, I shouldn't be telling you not to swear. It's envy, you know. Part of me's terrified of this place, and the other part envies you because you can do and say what you want. You can do exactly what you want, you don't know what that means."

"But can I?" I said, and I was kissing her and unbuttoning her dress.

"Did you know? When did you know?" she was saying breathlessly, and her head was twisting back and forth. "Are you predicting me too?" and her

thighs were trembling round my wrist and relaxing again.

"I'm just happy," I said, and we fell in a heap on the bed. I was wriggling my trousers off because she wouldn't let me let go of her, and she began to cry as I took the plunge, and I was brushing her tears away and making her sneeze with the dangling bandage on my finger. Her hands were nailed to my buttocks and dragging me forward, and she was sneezing in my ear and pumping me violently each time she sneezed, and then a brick smashed through the window and landed on the pillow in a shower of glass. Fran leapt upright and screamed, leaving me behind, and all I could do was throw myself back on the bed and explode.

I still had enough energy to drag myself up to the window and see a woman in an old-fashioned dress vanishing into a side street over the road. Nobody else was in sight. I turned back to Fran, but she was already pulling on her dress, sobbing. "Don't," she said when I tried to hold her. "I shouldn't have come. I was trying to be fair to myself and not caring about being unfair to you. Please, get me a taxi." She didn't look at me at any time after the brick. I flagged her a taxi and stuck some cardboard over the pane, and sat around for an hour, and wrote this.

Christ!

26/5/73: Maybe the destruction of memory is the new malaise—further on from Camus: first Lis and Pat, now Jim and of course me.

Spent most of this morning thinking about Fran. Nothing I can do. I can't burst in on her at home, that would only wreck her more. Doesn't stop my head splitting with guilt.

Rang Jim eventually and had lunch with him. Had to force myself to ring him, and to keep the appointment. Perhaps my mind knows what it's doing but it's not telling me. Jim has one fault (two if you count telling horror stories to someone in my state)—the fault of people who tell you the punch line of a joke and then tell you the joke. Told me the whole story over lunch and then took me back to read exactly the same thing. I might as well fill the page with it. Anything to occupy my mind. Let's see how dispassionately I can tell it. The Camus syndrome.

A young woman—he told me and I read it but I can't remember her name—got married during the second World War. Her husband was crippled and so not fighting. They lived in Wavertree Garden Suburb a few miles from

here; she was born there. In 1944 their house was destroyed by a stray bomb. With skilful manipulation of influential friends they managed to buy a cheap house in one of the side streets near here (now pulled down).

Some years later she freaked out completely. Jim tells me that interviews with her suburban friends, who eventually ceased to visit, suggest why. Their house was surrounded by bomb damage, which must have preyed on her mind. So did the whole sense of an area in decay. What obsessed her, apparently, was the sight of the old people round here, shut up in collapsing houses, unable to care for each other. All that and being thrown out of suburbia into the real world shattered her. I can understand that.

When she'd lived in Wavertree she'd been interested in the occult. She'd held séances and was a considerable hypnotist (probably a telepath as well). "Her eyes didn't need words," as someone reportedly said. This was where her insanity focused. She became violently racist and was convinced that the Negroes who lived around her practised Voodoo. "I could beat them at that game. I could make my own magic and see them all dead," she told one of her visitors, who didn't visit again.

In 1947 she murdered her husband, obviously in pursuit of her Voodoo. A meths drinker discovered her in the cellar of a bombed house. She had her back to him and was bending over a man lying on a slab made of bricks. A few candles surrounded her. She seemed to be drawing something from the man's trunk. At first the meths drinker thought she was masturbating him; then he saw that what she was pulling from the body had coiled around her feet, and as he watched she arranged it into a pattern, chanting. My diary really is a load of laughs these days.

Anyway, he fled, upsetting his meths on one of the candles. She must have had petrol to destroy the corpse, because the cellar exploded almost immediately. The meths drinker didn't tell the police, but eventually someone overheard him telling the story. The police found her husband's corpse with the small intestine removed. They didn't find her, but clearly she couldn't have escaped. According to the meths witness when they traced him, she was chanting (as they interpreted the little he could remember) "le pouvoir" and "la jeunesse." Presumably she learned a little French to emulate Voodoo.

"Of course it was an invented ceremony, though her mind may have erased that point," Jim said as we walked back to the *Echo* building. "Entrails may

figure in Voodoo, but not in that way. It's interesting to speculate."

I didn't want to, but I said "On what?"

"Well, on the function of that sort of ritual. I've heard the argument that it's not the ritual that counts at all, but the seriousness of approach it demands. It awakens your own dormant magic. So that could apply even to an invented ritual—if you believed in it, as she obviously did."

Not that he believed in it, of course. "I'm saying that if some of it's based on attitude then the attitude should have carried her. If I believed in it I'd be a fool to concentrate so much on this case. What monstrous and loathsome horrors might I be disinterring? Little did I reck when first I opened that cobwebbed file..."

The *Echo* building's like a warehouse full of labyrinths of shelves, like an Orson Welles set. I felt claustrophobic, actually unwilling to go with Jim, though the poor sod's not that bad. When we reached the files he'd researched I found myself desperate to come back here, to read Camus (or to begin again, with my memory the way it is now). Must have been depressed. There was enough sunlight and petrol fumes coming in the window to stave off morbidity.

So I read through the story, and at one point I stopped short. Because there was a photograph of the woman, and for a moment she looked exactly like the sad girl at Lis and Pat's party (and how come our paths have stopped crossing?)

I pointed this out to Jim and he said "Who?"

"The girl you tried to get me off with at the party. The one who fancied you."

"Listen, mate, I wasn't that drunk," he said. "What did she look like?"

'Like this," I said, and then I had to back down, because she didn't. There was a resemblance to the photograph, but nothing very striking. In fact, I don't know how I made the mistake, because the photograph was rather dim and so was the light at the desk; I found I could hardly see it. It was as if my mind had produced another photograph for me to flash, but I couldn't remember what that was or where I might have seen it. Shows how this whole scene is affecting my mind. I can understand how the woman went mad, and I said so to Jim.

"Yes, but you haven't gone mad, have you?" he said.

Well, that's true. Just about.

27-31/5/73: I'm going to try to write it all down. Might help me to understand myself.

On Sunday I didn't do anything. I sat around and went for a walk and had a few drinks. My mind felt as if it had been scooped out. I didn't smoke, because I felt prone to depression. In fact, I was convinced that dope was damaging me, especially my memory. Obviously my mind was preparing to get itself together.

On Monday I felt worse. I felt depressed and desperate for something, and my finger was on fire. I didn't go to lectures, partly because I couldn't have taken seeing Fran (and seeing me couldn't have helped her). Poor Fran—I hope she makes out with the public-school guy. She's been something of a victim. I suppose in situations like these there has to be one.

I went for a walk in the park, and that was where my trip started. I mean it was like a trip, at least the insights and some of the images were. Maybe my mind structured it that way to make it more comprehensible to me (or more bearable). I was walking by the lake in Sefton Park, and suddenly I began to hear bells. There was a kind of movement in my head as if something were about to flood in. I ran up a slope to be able to see the bells.

There was a church on the edge of the park. A wedding had just taken place, and I could see the bride standing in the churchyard. Her white veil was streaming out, the grass in the park was streaming on the wind, light was scattered in patterns on the lake like the sound of the bells. I knew all this was saying something to me, but I couldn't grasp it.

Then I became obsessed with the idea that the answer was here in the flat. I hurried home, even taking a bus instead of walking. My mind felt like a box that I was struggling to open. I dashed into the flat and gazed around. There was nothing.

It was as if I'd written something crucial on a trip and then come down and found I didn't understand it. I sat down on the bed, and I was nearly in tears. But deep in my mind there was a plea to keep trying. So I got up and started going over the flat, making myself trust my mind to stop me when I found whatever it was.

And of course I already knew, I'd even written it here in my diary. I came face to face with that crack on the wall that had troubled me before, and stood looking at it. I can reconstruct how my mind tried to ease me into remembering. There had been a photograph hanging over the crack. A wedding photograph. A photograph of me and my wife. I'd been married.

I felt as if I'd been groping about in the dark of the flat and suddenly discovered there was no floor. I fell back on the bed and just let my mind go where it would. I was more terrified than if I'd taken too much acid by mistake and suddenly felt it coming on. I didn't know where my mind was taking me.

Well, it didn't take me anywhere. It had given me the insight and now it was leaving me on my own. I had to do the remembering, and I couldn't.

For two days it was like that. I didn't go out. I searched the flat over and over for a clue. I ate what I had and then didn't eat. I figured out a few things: why the place had looked so untidy and anonymous, why I'd felt cramped in the single bed. But that only started me wondering again when I'd bought it, and where the double bed had gone. I didn't know (and Christ, I still don't) why I had destroyed every trace of my wife. She couldn't have taken everything with her. I even began to have a horrible suspicion that I'd murdered her.

But my mind was preparing me beneath all the horrors. It was as if someone were doing a jigsaw in my head, and it just needed one piece for the whole thing to fit together.

And yesterday it did. I was lying on the bed again. I'd realised that I'd be ill if I didn't eat, and I didn't care. I'd loved someone and they'd vanished—what was worse, vanished from my mind. I knew this was a kind of insanity. But I couldn't help myself, and I was terrified to ask anyone who might be able to tell me what had happened.

Then there was a knock at the door. I didn't start, even my muscles no longer cared. I said "Who is it?"

"It's Edna," she said.

And I didn't even have to open the door, because that was the piece of the jigsaw that fitted. Before I reached the door I realised that was the name of the woman in the files Jim had shown me, and that my mind had flashed my

wedding photograph over the photograph in the file. I opened the door and there she was: my sad girl from the party.

Her eyes said everything. We didn't have to speak. We just held each other, and I drowned in memories. No incidents, just a sense of Edna: her stillness, her efficiency whose absence had troubled me so much, her voice that sang as it spoke, her perfume which had returned to the flat at last. When we released each other she said "You've hurt your finger. Let me see," and I knew she was home again.

So much makes sense now: why Jim tried to get me off with her at the party, why Lis and Pat were arguing about the fact that she'd been invited and then wouldn't admit that she'd been there. Because they didn't know how I would take it, of course. But they accepted that I didn't recognise her. They must all know what happened to separate us.

It can't have been anything too bad, surely. Edna wouldn't have come back. We aren't at ease with each other yet, and I sleep in a chair because the bed's too small, but she came back. I suspect that the tensions of the area got inside me and I freaked out, like the woman in Jim's case. He must have been trying to encourage me when he said I hadn't gone mad, though he didn't have the courage to admit that Edna was at the party. Well, I can't blame him. He isn't a psychiatrist.

Don't think I'll need a psychiatrist with Edna here. She'll help me back. But I still feel obsessively guilty about what I may have done, and I can't discuss it with her yet. I know she's waiting for me to talk about it—I see her watching when she thinks I don't. I shall, when we're on holiday. The Lakes for the rest of the week. No exams this year, not with my head as it is. Edna understands. She's paying for the holiday. Can't ask her yet where she got the money.

Went over to Lis and Pat's earlier. I was determined to make them tell me what I'd done, and how long ago. Their car was outside, but they didn't answer—probably tripping. Jim's never there when I ring.

When I came back Edna was staring from the window at an old woman in a wheelchair. She turned to look at me, touching her face as if searching for wrinkles. Hardly, but I know what she was wondering: whether I could look after her for the rest of her life. Well, I'll be useful to her. I scattered my bush out of the window this morning. See if that clears my mind.

Must finish. Edna's packed our luggage. She reminded me to bring my diary, in case someone wrecks it again. I can't remember telling her about that. My memory still isn't working properly.

"It'll be like a second honeymoon," I said, to be able to say it. "Like being married again."

And she nodded and smiled, watching me.

Accident Zone

"For several years Jenny and I spent our summer holidays in Cumbria, generally in the hotel that figures in *Above the World*. Accident Zone derives from some of our walks. The different views of the landscape the two stories take can be ascribed at least partly to the effects of LSD."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

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Blake had walked some miles from his hotel when he saw the mirror. He'd exhausted Keswick and its environs within three days, or the weather had exhausted him; he disliked having to wait outside his hotel for the hourly bus while rain teemed on his head, and disliked being blinded by the grey steamed windows as he rode the bus to the Lakeland coach tour station. Today had been the first fine day of his holiday in the Lakes. He'd had them make him a box lunch and had set out from his hotel, away from Keswick. He was tired of towns.

At noon clouds still overlapped the hills and streamed like smoke between the trees. The sun glinted dully, then as the afternoon progressed began to blaze. Blake followed the road for a while, crossing from one meagre verge to the other to protect himself from blind corners. Eventually, offended by the belches of cars and the glare of litter, he left the road and climbed a hill. The wet earth smacked its lips at his feet. He reached the top, where pale rock protruded like teeth from the grass, and gazed down.

Four hundred feet below, cars scurried like spiders on threads. Blake took deep breaths and felt victorious. For the first time this year he could ignore cars. In Keswick they challenged each other in the narrow streets, snarling; in Liverpool they demanded that he help design housing projects to accommodate them as well as the tenants. He stood up and urinated towards them. Then he sat down on the rocks and ate his lunch.

It was as he threw his head back to catch the dregs of coffee that he saw the mirror. Near the foot of the hill, on the side opposite that he'd climbed, was a hairpin bend. The pin was hardly open. At the hinge of the bend, stuck

into a rough green mat of bushes, was a large mirror on a pole. Equidistant from it two cars were parked, at the verge of each approach to the bend.

Blake frowned. He had planned to descend that side of the hill, but the mirror troubled him. It seemed trivial and in bad taste, like a glass-headed pin thrust into a tapestry. Still, he thought, it was absurd enough to be enjoyable. If he responded to it with the shocked laugh it deserved, it wouldn't spoil his landscape. In Liverpool, to the dismay of passers-by, he sometimes laughed at the sight of the white boxes of high-rise flats against blue sky and clouds: Magritte in three dimensions.

We need surrealism more than ever, he thought. For sanity.

The mirror's there to prevent accidents, he responded.

Oh shut up, he thought. This is my landscape today. The drivers can have it tomorrow.

He descended the hill. The ground was beginning to steam; each hundred feet further down he felt as if he'd pulled on another set of clothes. From the top he'd seen a lake, some miles across the fields. He intended to make for it, avoiding the mirror, but the hill seemed patched with sponge, and his zigzag descent across firmer ground brought him slithering to the slope just above the mirror. There he stopped, gasping, for he felt as if he'd stepped from a hot bath and plunged into ice.

It must be an effect of shade, he thought. But he couldn't see how; the sunlight was pouring over him. Perhaps there was a pond near, steeping the area in clamminess. Shivering, he stepped into the road.

The brandished mirror loomed above him. As he crossed the road his head bulged in the mirror and his body dwindled. He recoiled, reminded of humanoid balloons he'd tried to inflate when a child, squeezing air up into the head and blowing again until the head burst. He surveyed both stretches of road, looking for a route to the lake, but both were edged by tangles of bushes beyond which lay muddy fields. He sensed the mirror staring over his head and turned again, angry with himself. God, the quiet ached. Too much so, he thought suddenly, given the nearby cars. Well, there was no point in standing about. He would follow the road away from Keswick. Sooner or later there must be a path toward the lake.

He strode away from the mirror. There was a sign just beyond the parked car; that might help him. Though it seemed odd to park the car with its

bonnet between the uprights of the sign. In fact, now Blake came closer, he began to suspect that the car had been dumped. Yes, it had: the front of the car looked like a trampled can. Cursing whoever had abandoned it, Blake came abreast of the car and read the sign. ACCIDENT ZONE, it said. DON'T LET THIS HAPPEN TO YOU.

From the edge of his eye Blake glimpsed movement. He glanced toward the mirror. For a moment he was sure he'd seen an object appear in the mirror and dodge out of sight again. An animal, no doubt, which had brushed the edge of the reflection. From his position by the sign he could see the second car and, prepared now, could make out a wrenched door and a smashed windscreen. The second car was also displayed beneath a sign. Blake stared at the empty rusting cars, the attentive mirror, the emphatic almost suburban silence. Then he began to hurry away down the road.

He had taken only a few paces when heard a car rattling toward him. It swerved around a bend ahead and rushed closer. He retreated onto the verge and the car sped by, deafening him and spouting fumes. Blake stared after it furiously. The students piled inside it ignored the wrecked car. As they reached the mirror Blake was attacked by nausea: hot with rage, he'd suddenly felt as if all his heat had been drained from him. The car skidded across the bend, its reflection squeezed like rubber into a curve, regained control at the last moment and sped on.

Blake took a step toward the mirror. Then he turned and made off down the road. He was still shivering from the gulp of heat that had seemed to be drawn from him. An odd image persisted in his mind; as the car had been caught in the mirror, the glass had trembled like a bubble and small pale globules, or so his memory interpreted them, had appeared around the rim. Distortion caused by the heat and the exhaust of the car, no doubt. But he was sure there must be a flaw in the glass.

He was still shivering as he walked. A wind had started to hiss in the trees bordering the road. The clouds were gathering again, and trickled down the hills. Beyond the trees he encountered a path leading from the road in the direction of the lake; it was composed of brown mud and stones. He would have attempted it, but felt weak. He blamed the chill that had crept into him near the mirror, and an insidious depression that he had taken away with him. Should have known cars wouldn't let me alone, he thought.

He continued walking, but mechanically; the depression had robbed him of motive. Above him chiselled rock caught tatters of cloud. After half an hour's walk the landscape softened; trees swayed, asleep on their roots, and butterflies bloomed on the trunks. He rounded a bend and saw a small white cottage before which stood several white wicker tables and chain. A pole held up a rotating double-headed sign: TEAS.

This time he didn't question its taste. He sat down at a table in the artificial glade. He was still weak, and felt exhausted, and hungry. He glanced about for a waitress and saw a hoarding, which had been screened from him by the trees, on the edge of the glade. Protected by glass, a huge enlargement of a newspaper report gleamed between the trunks. I WAS HOSTILE AND AFRAID, SAYS DRIVER.

A car engine whined like a dentist's drill across the hills. Blake read the hoarding; patches of light surrounded by leaf shadow fluttered and slipped across the words. "In the two year period since the erection of the mirror more fatal accidents have occurred at the bend, five less than in the previous two years. Is there a case for stronger action? Mr. Eric Mayne, 42, of Blubberfosters, survived an accident at the bend. 'I saw a car coming in the other direction,' he told us. 'I slowed down but I still thought we were both going too fast. I was afraid there would be an accident. Then I got angry and turned my headlights on full. I was being very aggressive, I felt it was his turn to slow down. I think the lights blinded him.' Mr. Mayne was lucky; the other driver died. It is up to the drivers not to turn our country into a jungle, and up to us to make sure they do."

Forthright but ungrammatical, Blake thought. He turned his back on the hoarding and gazed across the landscape. Clouds were now pouring down the higher hills. An old lady in an ankle-length kaftan, with white hair like a poodle's fur, emerged from the cottage and took his order for tea and scones. "You're not in a car, are you?" she said. "I saw you looking at my board. Well, I'm glad to see someone's still walking."

Five minutes later she returned with the tea. Shadows were rushing across the landscape. "Yes, I do like the Lakes very much," Blake said.

"Any life would be bearable if it ended here. That was always my scheme of things," she said. "It's the atmosphere I love. In ten years it's made me its own."

"I'm fond of atmospheres," Blake said.

"One thing spoils it. That." She pointed to the hoarding. "Oh, not the report. I put that up myself. I meant the place they're talking about. I wish it weren't so near. The bus to Keswick goes through it, and I dread going."

"I don't think I would dread it, just dislike it," Blake said.

"Ah, but have you been there? Well, tell me your opinion."

"I thought it was grotesque," Blake said. "Entirely out of place. But necessary, perhaps."

"You'll have to take the bus to Keswick to get back to your hotel, unless you intend to walk. You'll probably be soaked if you walk. Now, you remember what I'm going to tell you. Notice what happens when the bus comes near the bend. Everyone will stop talking. They always do, and they couldn't tell you why. They'd probably say they're afraid to distract the driver. But why should they be? Driving's his job, and he knows the road. Why should he crash there, particularly? You tell me that."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," Blake said.

"I'm talking about fear and hostility," she said, gesturing toward the hoarding. "So much of that in a place must leave its mark. It's even there when you're walking, let alone driving. You must have felt it."

"What, fear and hostility?" Blake said. "Not at all."

He stood up and paid. "You're welcome to wait here for the bus," she said. "Look at the sky."

"I'll survive. I think I'll walk until the bus comes," Blake said. "Good for me."

Twenty minutes later he heard the bus behind him. He hesitated, then strode on. The bus swept by, and he hurried up a slope at the edge of the road. From there he could watch the lights of the bus dwindling toward the mirror. Clouds had seeped into the sun, dousing it. He strained his eyes. The lighted windows slipped through the mirror, and as they did so they shuddered. The bus itself negotiated the bend with ease. Blake ran down the slope, frowning. Rage was beginning to sputter inside him. He hurried toward the mirror. He was determined to discover exactly what had spoilt his day.

Near the mirror he left the road. He picked his way in the draining light across the side of the hill. Cars were already casting paths of light before

them and rolling them up. He sat on a rock shelving from the hill, and gazed down. The landscape glimmered with the threat of a storm, and the glow coated the wrecked cars. Between them the mirror reared up, an empty eye.

Soon the landscape had lost all its colour. Sky and earth merged. Blake yawned and shivered, for his body heat was dissipating. He'd thought the ground would give out heat at twilight; on the contrary, it seemed to be drinking his own heat. The mirror was only faintly visible now, a thick blob of grey. He drummed his heels on the rock, wishing for the first time in months that he had a cigarette. What the hell he was doing here he didn't know. So much for gestures. No doubt there wouldn't be another bus for almost an hour.

A car crept toward the bend, its headlights awakening almost at the mirror. Blake shook himself alert, The headlights peered out of the mirror, and silhouetted on their reflection a small round shape bobbed up, like a teasing target in a shooting gallery. Blake stood up, squinting, and the headlights swung at him before sweeping away. No, there was nothing except the smouldering impression of the headlights on his eyes. Not so odd, he thought; it had probably been a moth, made to look nearly spherical by the blaze of the lights. The mirror would attract night flyers.

He sat down again. His weakness had returned. Not surprisingly, when it was so cold. If it hadn't been for that bloody woman he would be halfway to Keswick by now. Talking about fear and hostility—well, he wasn't hostile except to the situation he'd allowed to take him over, he wished he could go back and stuff that down her throat. And I'm certainly not afraid, he shouted to himself. Just because he jumped when something appeared in the mirror it didn't mean he was afraid. He would sit for a few minutes to see whether he regained his strength. If not he would walk away.

He watched two cars approaching. Their headlights trickled thinly down the distant roads, then began to widen as they poured closer. As the headlights of one touched the mirror the glass began to shift like a bubble about to burst. No, it wasn't his eyes. The surface of the mirror was perceptibly trembling. It must be a vibration set up by the approach of the car. When the second car drew near and the mirror's shivering increased Blake was sure he was right. The beam was swinging out of the mirror like an uncontrolled searchlight; it roamed across the side of the hill as if

searching for him. The second car drew into the verge and allowed the first to pass. Don't blame him, Blake thought. I'd be afraid too.

The second car moved off slowly. As its light returned to the mirror the reflection was surrounded. Blake leaned forward. An iris of small pale shapes had appeared around the light, jostling like bubbles on the rim of a pan coming to the boil.

Blake ran down the hill, fixing his gaze on the mirror. It couldn't be a flaw in the glass, not one that moved around the edge of the mirror and sank back out of sight and reappeared. He ran faster to reach the mirror before the light withdrew, and tripped on a loose rock. He hit the ground with a sucking thud. A prickling touched the back of his neck. The grass before him hissed. It was raining.

Raindrops on a mirror and I almost break my leg, he thought. My God, I'm overwrought. The rain was springing back from the ground. He ran toward the shelter of the bushes behind the mirror. As he passed the mirror he peered up. As far as he could see the glass was beaded by drops, but few of them were around the edge. He shrugged angrily and made for the bushes.

The leaves sizzled about him. After perhaps ten minutes the rain ceased. He emerged, shaking himself like a dog. His hair dripped about his face; his clothes clung to him like seaweed. He stood beneath the mirror and laughed. No, I'm not going to blame you, he thought. This entire absurd business is my own doing.

He heard a car approaching. Perhaps he could thumb a lift. He waited beneath the mirror, leaning forward to avoid its tassels of rain. Points of light flashed from bush to bush as the car neared the bend. No use; it was coming from Keswick. Might have known, Blake thought. Ah well, I'm saved from importuning. He turned to begin walking, then halted. No point in giving the driver more to avoid. The headlights felt their way toward him, and the mirror sprang up at his feet.

It was reflected in a puddle, which had gathered in a dip in the road. For a moment it shone like the moon. Then it shrank. The iris had reappeared; the bubbles crowded and fought for place. Leaning closer, Blake saw that the lowest bubble was nothing of the kind. It contained a vicious grin and glaring eyes.

All his heat rushed out of him. His skin shuddered. He twisted to stare at the mirror. Apart from the probing headlights it was empty. But he had the impression that as he had turned, a darker iris had retreated into the frame of the mirror. He was still staring upward when the car whipped past, lifting a wave from the puddle and drenching him.

Blake shouted in rage, glaring up at the mirror. How many deaths had been focused in the glass? Ten that he'd read of, and there had been more than a dozen small round shapes in the mirror. The puddle might have given them faces, earth for eyes and ripples for grins, he argued with himself. They hadn't been clear. But he was already struggling up the hillside, searching in the sodden grass for the loose rock.

When he found it he slithered down to the mirror. He imagined the faces peering down at him through the dark. You won't take any more with you, he shouted. Shaking with anger and revulsion and renewed cold, he threw the brick.

The mirror was stouter than he anticipated. The rock thudded at his feet. He thought he could hear a dry sound like that of disturbed mice. Oh no you don't, he thought. He hurled the rock again. Three more throws and shattered glass plunged into the earth in front of him.

He smiled grimly and let his shoulders slump. Then he heard two cars converging toward him. My God, what have I done? he shouted. I must be mad. It's the mirror's fault, no, this whole morbid area. Headlights slashed around bends on both sides of him. He threw the rock into the bushes and ran into the road. Perhaps he could stop them. Perhaps one would drive him into Keswick, where he could report someone's act of vandalism on the mirror.

The car coming from Keswick was nearer. He raised his arms and urged it to slow down. He pushed it back with his hands. It slowed for a moment as the driver surveyed him. Then it gathered speed and swerved past him, missing him by inches.

The second car did not.

He heard a metallic squeal and felt a dull agonising thud across the back of his thighs. He was scooped up and slid clawing wildly over metal. His head struck glass. Then the metal whipped from beneath him and he thumped into the mud of the road.

Pain burned through his legs. Above him he heard the chop of car doors, men saying "Oh Christ", "Now for heaven's sake keep calm", and a woman screaming. He turned his head and laid his cheek in bright spotlighted mud. He saw boots walking past his face, squeezing up walls of mud around their footprints. He saw a trailing bootlace drag by, coated with mud like a worm. He heard a voice saying "I think it looks worse than it is, don't worry." Everything, even the pulse of agony in his legs, felt distant as delirium.

Even the mirror at the top of the pole. Even the jagged black hole in it. "I know first aid," someone said. "Give me a few minutes and I think we can move him. We can't leave him here." Even the pale struggling blobs that had appeared at the hole in the mirror, like the contents of a spider's torn cocoon. Someone was tying something around his legs. "We'll have to make a stretcher," a voice said. "Can you hear me? We're leaving you for a minute but we'll still be here. You'll be all right."

No I won't, Blake thought, but he felt detached. He watched the faces stream out of the crack in the mirror, falling through the light like slow leaden bubbles. He watched the string of faces balance on the air and float toward him in disorder, some on their backs, some hanging toward the ground. He closed his eyes. It was worse than delirium. Not until he felt them settle on him like a swarm of insects did he begin to mutter and scream.

"We're coming, just give us a minute, lie still, we're coming," a voice called. But Blake was writhing as his skin crawled, as light soft objects roved over his body, pulling feebly at him, seeking him beneath his skin. They were trying to prise him out. His skin, or his sense of it, was attenuating.

"My God, what's that?" "Moths, I think. Look, there they go. Like bloody scavengers," and he felt himself rolled onto a hard support and lifted. He jolted and sank onto metal. Doors slammed behind him. An engine whirred and he felt the gears engage. He opened his eyes. The mirror and the other car shrank. The displayed wreck swung by, and a chain of pale blobs rose from it and rushed toward the back windows of the car before drifting scattered across the field. Blake moaned. "Hold on. We'll be in Keswick before you know it," the driver said, driving Blake toward a wheelchair in Liverpool, a fear of mirrors, and a crawling of the skin that he would scratch until blood flowed.

The Man In The Underpass

"One of [my stories] in which I used an actual Liverpool location, *The Man in the Underpass* has a special significance for me: it was the first tale I wrote after having, encouraged by T. E. D. Klein's exegesis of *Demons by Daylight* and by my wife, Jenny, stepped into the abyss of full-time writing in July 1973. To begin with I wrote only on weekdays. Lord, did I need to learn."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Alone With The Horrors*

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First published in *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series III*, 1975
Also published in: *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

I'm Lynn. I'm nearly eleven. I was born in Liverpool, in Tuebrook.

I go to Tuebrook County Primary School. This year I've been taking my little brother Jim to the Infants. Every morning we walk to school. It's only six hundred yards away. I know that because our class had to find out for Mrs Chandler for a project. We cross one street and then walk up Buckingham Road. At the end we go down the underpass under West Derby Road. My little brother calls it underpants. And then just at the other end, there's the school.

The underpass is what my story's all about.

It isn't very high, my best friend June's big sister can touch the roof without jumping. In the roof there are long lights like ice chopped up. That's what Mrs Chandler means when she says something is a nice image. Usually some of the lights are broken, and there are plugs hanging down like buds. When you walk through you can hear the traffic overhead, it feels as if your ears are shaking when buses drive over. When we were little we used to stand in the middle so the buses would make our ears tickle. And we used to shout and make ghosty noises because then it sounded like a cave.

Then the skinheads started to wait for the little kids in the underpass, so they got a lollipop man to cross us over and we weren't supposed to go down. Sometimes we did, because some of the traffic wouldn't stop for the lollipop man and we wanted to watch our programmes on TV. Then the lady in the greengrocer's would tell on us and we got spanked. I think we're too old to be spanked. June would cry when she was spanked, because she's a

bit of a little kid sometimes. So we stopped going down until the skinheads went somewhere else. June's big sister says they're all taking LSD now.

When we could go down again it wasn't like the same place. They'd been spraying paint all over the walls. The walls used to be white, but now they were like the advertisements you see at the films, when the colours keep changing and dazzling you. They were green and gold and pink like lipstick and white and grey and blood-red. They were words we wouldn't say at home, like tits, and all the things skinheads say. Like "TUEBROOK SKINS RULE OK," only they'd painted it over twice, so it was as if something was wrong with your eyes.

June and I were reading everything on the way to school when Tonia came down. She lives in the next street from me, with her father. She used to go to St John the Evangelist, but now she goes to Tuebrook County Primary with us. June doesn't like her because she says Tonia thinks she's better than us and knows more. She never comes round to play with me, but I think she's lonely and her mother doesn't live with them, only a lady who stays with them sometimes. I heard that in the sweetshop before the sweetshop lady started nodding to tell them I was there. Anyway, Tonia started acting shocked at the things they'd painted on the walls. "I don't think you should let your little brother see these things. They aren't good for him." Jim's seen our mother and father with no clothes on, but June said "Oh, come on, Lynn. We weren't looking anyway, only playing," and she pretended to pee at Tonia, and we ran off.

Tonia was nearly late for assembly. She'd been looking at the man painted on the wall where the underpass dips in the middle. Mrs Chandler smiled at her but didn't say anything. If it had been us she'd have pretended to be cross, but she wouldn't really mind if we laughed, because she likes us laughing. I suppose Tonia must have been looking at the man on the wall because she hadn't seen anything like him before, she was flushed and biting her lip and smiling at the same time. My story's about him too, in a funny way, at least I think it is. He was as tall as the roof, and his spout was sticking up almost as far as his chin. Someone had painted him in white—really they'd just drawn round him, but then someone else had written on the wall, so he was full of colours. He'd got one foot on each side of the drain in the middle of the underpass, that the gutter runs down to. Jim said

the man was going to pee, so I had to tell him he wouldn't be going to pee when his spout's like that.

Anyway, that was the day Mrs Chandler told us the theatre group was coming to do a play for us. June said "Are they going to make us laugh?" and Mrs Chandler said "Oh yes, they'll shout at you if you don't laugh." Then we had to write about our parents. I like writing about people, but June likes writing about football and music best. Tonia suddenly started crying and tore up her paper, so Mrs Chandler had to put her arms round her and talk to her, but we couldn't hear what she was saying. June got jealous and kept asking Mrs Chandler things, so Mrs Chandler put her in charge of the mice's cage all week. When we got home Tonia stayed behind in the playground. I saw her go into the underpass, but the last time I looked she hadn't come out. My mother was still at Bingo, and Jim was crying so I smacked him, then I had to make him a fried egg so he'd stop. When my father came in he said "Should have made me one as well. You're a lot better housewife than," and he stopped. But my mother had won and gave him half, so he didn't shout at her.

After tea I went to the wine shop to get them some crisps. Jim sat on the railings at the top of the underpass and was seeing how far he could lean back holding on with his heels, so I had to run out and smack him. I broke my arm when I was little, doing that on the railings. Then I saw Tonia coming out of the underpass. "Haven't you had your tea yet?" I said. She must have been in a mood, because she got all red and said "I've had my dinner, if that's what you mean. We have it exactly the same time every day, if you must know. You don't think I've been down there all this time, do you?" I do try to make friends with her, but it's hard.

The next afternoon we had the play. There were five people in it, three men and two women. It was very good, and everyone laughed. I liked the part best when one of the men has to be the moon, so he has a torch and tries to get into it to be the man in the moon. They borrowed Mrs Chandler's guitar, that she brings when we have singing, and they all sang at the end and we pretended to throw money, then they threw sweets for us. I told Mrs Chandler I liked it, and she said it was from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because it was nearly midsummer. I said I'd like to read it, so she said to ask for it at the library.

Then it was time to go home, and June asked one of the actors to cross her over the road. She told him he'd got a lovely face. Well, he had, but it's just like June to say something like that. She's bold sometimes. She said "Oh, and this is Lynn. She's my best friend, so you can talk to her too." I think she wanted him to come on his own, but he called the others to look at the colours in the underpass. So we all went down there instead. I saw Tonia watching us, and she looked as if she was going to cry, as if we'd found her special hiding-place or something, then she ran after us.

They all started shouting and gasping like little kids watching fireworks. "Look at the figure in the middle. It's almost a work of art," one of the women said. "Ebsolutely Eztec," a man said. I don't think he really talked like that, he was just trying to be funny. Tonia pulled at the one with the lovely face and said, "What does he mean?" "He means Aztec, love," he said. "I'm not your love," Tonia said. The man looked upset, because he was only being friendly, but he spelt Aztec for her. "Just the place for a midsummer sacrifice," one of the men said. "I don't think the Aztecs were bothered about seasons. They cut hearts out all the year round," another one said. Then they all walked us home and said we should try to start a youth theatre with Mrs Chandler. But Tonia stayed in the underpass.

The next day I went to the library after school. It's a nice place, except they chase you if you mess even a little bit. The librarian has a red face and shouts at the little kids if they don't understand what he means, and doesn't like showing you where the books are. But the girls are nice, and they'll talk to you and look for books for you. I got *A Midsummer Night's Dream* out. I didn't really understand it, except for the funny parts we saw at school. I'd like Mrs Chandler to help me with it, but I think she'd be too busy. I can read it again when I'm older.

I saw Tonia's father when I was there. He was getting a book about Aztecs for her. He said it was for a project. She must have told him that. It's stupid, because she could have told the truth. The librarian got him a book out of the men's library. "This will probably be a bit advanced for her," he said. Tonia's father started shouting. "Don't talk about what you don't know. She's an extremely intelligent child. I've had more than enough of that sort of comment at home." The librarian was getting redder and redder, and he saw me looking, so I ran out.

Next morning Tonia brought the book to school. "I've got something to show you," she told June and me. Then she heard Mrs Chandler coming, so she hid the book in her desk. She could have shown her, Mrs Chandler would have been interested. At playtime she brought it out with her. We all had to crowd round her so the teachers wouldn't see. There were pictures of Aztec statues that looked like the floors you see in really old buildings. And there were some drawings, like the ones little kids do, funny but you aren't supposed to laugh. Some of them had no clothes on. "Don't let everyone see," Tonia said. "I don't know what you're worried about. They don't worry us," I said, because the way she was showing us made the pictures seem dirty, though they weren't really. It was like a picture of Jesus we used to giggle at when we were little, because he was only wearing a cloth. I suppose she never used to play doctors and nurses, so she couldn't have seen anything like the man in the underpass.

When we went out to play at dinner time she brought the book again. She started reading bits out of it, about the Aztecs using pee for dyeing clothes, and eating dogs and burning people and cutting their hearts out and eating them. She said one part meant that when they made a sacrifice their gods would appear. "No it doesn't," June said. "They were just men dressed up."

"Well, it does," Tonia said. "The gods came and walked among them."

"You're the best reader, Lynn. You say what it says," June said. Actually June was right, but Tonia was biting her lip and I didn't want to be mean, so I said she was right. June wouldn't speak to me when we walked home.

But the next day I had to be specially nice to June, because Mrs Chandler said so, so we were friends again. June was upset all day, that was why Mrs Chandler said to be nice to her. Someone had left the mice's cage unlocked and they'd escaped. June was crying, because she liked to watch them and she loves animals, only she hadn't any since when her kitten tried to get up under the railway bridge where you can hear pigeons, and fell off and got killed. Mrs Chandler said for everyone to be nice to June, so we were. Except Tonia, who avoided us all day and didn't talk to anyone. I thought then she was sad for June.

On Saturday we went to the baths by the library. The baths are like a big toilet with tiled walls and slippery floors. We said we'd teach Tonia to swim, but her father wouldn't let her come in case she got her asthma and drowned. We had to stop some boys pushing Jim and the other little kids in.

There must be something wrong with them to do that. I think they ought to go and see a doctor, like Tonia with her asthma. Only June's big sister says it isn't the ordinary doctor Tonia needs to go and see.

Then we went home to watch Doctor Who. It was good, only Jim got all excited watching the giant maggots chasing Doctor Who and nearly had to go to bed. My mother had bought some lovely curtains with her Bingo money, all red and purple, and she was putting them up in the front room so our maisonette would look different from the others. There wasn't any football on TV, so my father went out for a drink and gave us money for lemonade. June had to go home because her auntie was coming, so I took Jim to get the lemonade.

On the way we met Tonia. She didn't speak to us. She was running and she looked as if she'd been sick. I wasn't sure, because it had got all dark as if someone had poured dirty dishwater into the sky. Anyway, I went to the wine shop and when I'd bought the lemonade I looked for Jim but he wasn't there. I didn't hear him go out, because I'd told him to stay in the shop but they'd left the door open to let air in. He'd run down the underpass. Little kids are like moths when they see a light sometimes. So I went to get him and I nearly slipped, because someone had just been throwing red paint all over the place. It was even on the lights, and someone had tried to paint the man on the wall with it. Jim said it was blood and I told him not to be soft. But it did look nasty. I didn't even want my supper. It rained all Sunday, so nothing happened. Except June brought the *Liverpool Echo* round because one of my poems was in it. I'd sent it in so long ago that I'd forgotten. They only put your first name and your age, as if you didn't want anyone to know it was you. I think it's stupid.

Next day when we were coming home we saw the man who empties the bins on West Derby Road talking to the ladies from the wine shop. There's a concrete bin on top of the underpass, with a band going round it saying LITTER LITTER LITTER. He'd found four mice cut up in the bin. June started crying when we got to our road. She cries a lot sometimes and I have to put my arm round her, like my father when he heard Labour hadn't won the election. She thought they were the mice from our classroom. I said they couldn't be, because nobody could have caught them.

The next night June and I took Jim home, then we went to the library. We left him playing with the little girls from up the street. When we got back he

wasn't there. My mother got all worried but we said we'd look for him. We looked under the railway bridge, because he likes to go in the workshop there to listen to the noise, that sounds like the squeak they put on the TV to remind you to switch it off. But he wasn't there, so we looked on the waste ground by the railway line, because he likes playing with the bricks there more than the building blocks he got for Christmas. He was sitting there waiting to see a train. He said a girl had taken the little girls to see a man who showed them nice things.

Some policemen came to school one day to tell us not to go with men like that, because they were ill, so we thought we'd better tell our parents. But just as we were coming home we saw Tonia with the little girls. She looked as if she wanted to run away when she saw us, then June shouted "What've you been doing with those kids?"

"It wasn't anything, only a drawing on the wall," one of the little girls said. "You wouldn't even let Jim look at him the other day," I said. "Well, he wouldn't have wanted to come," Tonia said. "You just let them play next time. Jim was having fun," I said.

The next day a puppy came into the playground and we all played with it. It rolled on its back to make us tickle it, then it peed on the caretaker's bike and he chased it away. Tonia played with it most and when it came back to the playground, she threw sweets out of the window for it until Mrs Chandler said not to. We were painting, and Tonia did a lovely one with lots of colours, instead of the ones she usually does which are all dark. Mrs Chandler said it was very good, and you could tell she was really pleased. But she asked Tonia why the man was standing with his back to us, and Tonia blushed and said she couldn't paint faces very well, though she can when she wants to. I painted a puppy eating a bone and Mrs Chandler liked that too.

When it was time to go home Tonia stayed behind to ask Mrs Chandler about painting faces, as if she didn't know how. We thought she wanted to walk along with Mrs Chandler, but instead she ran out of the school when everyone had gone and went down the underpass with the puppy. We saw her because I had to get some apples from the greengrocer's. That's a funny shop, because the boards have got all dirty with potatoes, and sometimes the ladies talk to people and forget we're there. So we were in there a long time and Tonia and the puppy hadn't come up. "Let's see what she's doing,"

June said. Just as we went down the ramp the puppy ran out with Tonia chasing it. She had a penknife. "I was only pretending. I wouldn't kill it really," she said. "You shouldn't have a knife at all," I said. Then she went off because we wouldn't help her find the puppy.

After tea Jim and the little girls were climbing on a lorry, so I had to tell them the man would shout when he came back. They all ran up the street and started shouting "Pop a cat a petal, pop a cat a petal." Little kids are funny sometimes. I asked them what it meant and one of the little girls said "That's what that girl said we had to say to the man on the wall." I told her not to play with Tonia, because Tonia could do things they shouldn't.

Next day I asked Mrs Chandler what it meant. She had to look it up, then she said it was a volcano in Mexico. At dinner time I asked Tonia why she'd told the little girls to say it. Tonia went red and said it was her secret. "Then you shouldn't have told them. Anyway, it's only a volcano," June said, because she'd heard Mrs Chandler tell me. "No, it isn't," Tonia said. "It's his name. It's a god's name." "It's a volcano in Mexico," I said. "Lynn should know. She's the best reader, and she had a poem in the paper," June said. "I didn't see it," Tonia said. "Well, I did. It said Lynn," June said. "That could be anyone," Tonia said. "You're making it up." "No she isn't," June said. "She'll have you a fight." So we went behind the school and had a fight, and I won.

Tonia was crying and said she'd tell Mrs Chandler, but she didn't. She was quiet all afternoon, and she waited for us when we were going home. "I don't care if you did have a poem in the paper," she said. "I've seen something you haven't." "What is it?" I said. "If you meet me tonight I'll show you," she said. "Just you. She can't come." "June's my best friend. She's got to come too or I won't," I said. "All right, but you've got to promise not to tell anyone," Tonia said. "Wait till it's nearly dark and meet me at the end of my road."

So I had to say I was going to hear a record at June's, and she had to say she was coming to ours. We met Tonia at nine o'clock. She was very quiet and wouldn't say anything, just started walking and didn't look to see if we were coming. Sometimes I don't like the dark, because the cars look like animals asleep, and everything seems bigger. It makes me feel like a little kid. We could see all the people in the houses watching TV with the lights

out, and I wished I was back at home. Anyway, we followed Tonia, and she stopped at the top of the underpass.

"Oh, it's only that stupid thing on the wall," June said. "No, it isn't," Tonia said. "There's a real man down there if you look." "Well, I don't want to see him," June said. "What's so special about him?" I said. "He's a god," Tonia said. "He's not. He's just a man playing with his thing," June said. "He probably wouldn't want you to see him anyway," Tonia said. "I'm going down. You go home." "We'll come with you to make sure you're all right," I said, but really I was excited without knowing why. We went down the ramp where nobody would see us and Tonia said we had to take our knickers off and say "Pop a cat a petal," only whisper it so people wouldn't hear us. "You're just like a little kid," June said. "I'm not taking my knickers off." "Well, pull your dress up then," Tonia said. "No, you do it first," I said. "I don't need to," Tonia said. "You've got to go first," I said. So she did, and we all started whispering "Pop a cat a petal," and when we were behind her we pulled our dresses down again. Then Tonia was in the underpass and we were still round the corner of the ramp. We dared each other to go first, then I said "Let's go in together."

So June pushed me in and I pulled her in, and we started saying "Pop a cat a petal" again, only we weren't saying it very well because we couldn't stop giggling. But then I got dizzy. All the lights in the underpass were flickering like a fire when it's going out, and the colours were swaying, and all the passage was like it was glittering slowly, and Tonia was standing in the middle swaying as if she was dancing with the light. Then June screamed and I think I did, because I thought I saw a man.

It must have been our eyes, because the light was so funny. But we thought we saw a giant standing behind Tonia. He was covered with paint, and he was as tall as the roof. He hadn't any clothes on, so he couldn't have been there really, but it looked as if his spout was swaying like an elephant's trunk reaching up. But it must have been just the light, because he hadn't got a face, only paint, and he looked like those cut-out photographs they put in shop windows. Anyway, when we screamed Tonia looked round and saw we were nowhere near her. She looked as if she could have hit us. And when we looked again there wasn't any giant, only the man back on the wall.

"He wanted you," Tonia said. "You should have gone to him." "No thank you," June said. "And if we get into trouble at home I'll batter you." Then we ran home, but they didn't ask me anything, because they'd heard my father had to be on strike again.

Next day Tonia wouldn't speak to us. We heard her telling someone else that she knew something they didn't, so we told them that she only wanted you to take your knickers down. Then she wanted to walk home with us. "He's angry because you ran away," she said. "He wanted a sacrifice." June wouldn't let her, but I said "You can walk on the other side of the road if you want, but we won't talk to you." So she did, and she was crying and I felt a bit mean, but June wouldn't let me go over.

Saturday was horrible, because my parents had a row about the strike, and Jim started crying and they both shouted at him and had another row, and he was sick all down the stairs, so I cleaned it up. Then there wasn't any disinfectant, and my mother said my father never bought anything we needed, and he said I wasn't the maid to do all the dirty jobs. So I went upstairs and had a cry, then I played with Jim in our room, and it was just getting dark when I saw June coming down our road with her mother.

I thought they might have found out where we'd been last night, but it wasn't that. June's mother wanted her to stay with us, because her big sister had been attacked in the underpass and she didn't want June upset. So Jim slept with my parents and they had to be friends again, and June and I talked in bed until we fell asleep. June's big sister had just been walking through the underpass when a man grabbed her from behind. "Did he rape her?" I said. "He must have. Do you think it hurts?" June said. "It can't hurt much or people wouldn't do it," I said.

On Sunday June went home again, because her big sister had gone to hospital. I heard my parents talking about it when I was in the kitchen. "It's most peculiar," my mother said. "The doctor said she hadn't been touched." "I wouldn't have thought people needed to imagine that sort of thing these days at her age," my father said. I don't know what he meant.

On Monday Mrs Chandler said we weren't to go in the underpass again until she said. Tonia said we couldn't get hurt in the daytime, with the police station just up the road. But Mrs Chandler said she'd spank us herself if she heard we'd been down, and you could tell she wasn't joking.

At dinner time there were policemen in the underpass. We went to the top to listen. The traffic was noisy, so we couldn't hear everything they said, but we heard one shout "Bring me an envelope. There's something caught on the drain." And another one said "Drugs, by the look of it." Then Tonia started coughing and we all had to run away before they caught us. I think she did it on purpose. When I went home I had to go to the greengrocer's. So I pretended I was waiting for someone by the underpass, because I saw a policeman going down. He must have gone to tell the one who was watching, because I heard him say "You won't believe this. They weren't drugs at all. They were hearts." "Hearts?" said the other one. "Yes, of some kind of small animal," he said. "Two of them. I'm wondering how they tie in with those mice in the bin up there. They'd been mutilated, if you remember. But there ought to be two more hearts. They couldn't have gone down the drain because it's been clogged for weeks." "I'll tell you something else," the other one said. "I don't think that's red paint on this light." I didn't want to hear anymore, so I turned round to go, and I saw Tonia listening at the other end. Then she saw me and ran away.

So I know who took the mice out of the classroom, and I think I know why she looked as if she'd been sick that night, but I don't want to speak to her to find out. I wish I could tell Mrs Chandler about it, but we promised not to tell about the underpass, and June would be terribly upset if she knew about the mice. Her big sister is home again now, but she won't go out at night, and she keeps shivering. I suppose Tonia might leave it alone now, because it's nearly the holidays. Only I heard her talking the other day in the playground. She might just have been boasting, because she looked all proud of herself, and she looked at the policeman at the top of the underpass as if she wished he'd go away, and she said "Pop a cat a petal did it to me too."

Smoke Kiss

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King was hurrying along London Road, self-consciously carrying the bottle of ink before him, when he saw the old woman. She was sitting in the doorway of a large store. She wore a stained black coat and slippers. "Go on, you sods," she was shouting. "I'm dying. You don't care: I don't either," and she threw back her head and sucked at a bottle of spirits. Her mouth was blackened and her yellow teeth were askew; blood had splashed the whole of her face from within. Shaken, King lit a cigarette as he hurried on.

By the time he reached home he had focused his mind on his work. He sat down at the drawing-board and wrenching the top from the ink-bottle, drew the last panels of *Mucky Matt*. That would see him through the next month's issues of *Nut Cutlet*. He lit a cigarette and addressed an envelope to his agent. He stubbed the cigarette out half-smoked and sat staring at the ashtray. Suddenly it looked to him like a stained mouth full of broken teeth.

None of that, he thought, you can't afford that sort of contemplation, not now you're a professional. Three strips for different comics had enabled him to go freelance full time. To daydream on your boss's time may be immoral, he thought, but when you're your own boss it's suicide. But his mind was full of the face mottled with blood and the staring eyes in which a spark was dimming. All right, all right, he hushed himself. Let's paint for a couple of hours. Good practice. Never know when someone might commission a cover.

The page of *Mucky Matt* was dry. He lifted it from the drawing-board. One corner of it jabbed the ink-bottle. It's all right, he shouted as his lungs gulped and his heart twinged, it's only paper, it won't knock it over—but the bottle rolled and ink leapt over the sheet. Jesus. Oh Christ. Control yourself. Let it dry and copy it.

While the page lay by the window, glistening in the July sun and curling up, he calmed himself harshly with a cigarette and began to paint. He

gouged at the colour, seeking the emotions he wanted to convey. Scrolls of smoke rushed up from the ashtray and curled toward his eyes. He squeezed his lids together and drawing on the cigarette, aimed the smoke at the canvas. Interesting effect of texture. Pockmarked. The *Nut Cutlet* editors would really go for that. Might as well try action painting on them while I'm at it. And sign on at the dole.

When he'd finished he stood back from the canvas and gazed. Really splendid. Quite remarkable. The mouth hung open, broken and slack; in the eyes there was the suggestion of a last faint gleam. I can just see that in someone's entrance hall, he thought. Jesus, how much time I do waste. I know, I'll call it *Death Embodied*. That'll really get the old ladies bidding.

He stood the canvas by the window. Above the roofs smoke poured from factory chimneys like huge black cigarettes. Mucky Matt would love them. He pinned the stained page to the wall and began to copy it. Mucky Matt was having a fine time this week, kicking dustbins over and emptying them over the head of our hero Tom, until Tom lured him into a bin and rolled him downhill into the town dump. 'I think your idea is well-timed," the editors of *Nut Cutlet* had commented. "Like everyone else these days, children are becoming pollution-conscious." I'd take your word for it, King thought, if I didn't think we were trying to kid ourselves. Seems to me that when I was a kid I read comics just for enjoyment. Who knows if the kids read me at all. Who knows what they think. Not me. Maybe if I could talk to them, if I knew how to approach them.

He finished a panel and threw down the pen with enough control not to splash the page. No good, he thought. I've lost it for today. No point in trying to force it. He looked at the painted woman's face, staring upward as if in search of the light that was fading. No wonder, he thought. I know I've wasted an afternoon, no wonder I'm not in the mood. Well, she's not staying here. He grabbed the canvas and carried it out into the unkempt grass of the back garden. Then he tied newspaper in knots and thrust them beneath the canvas. I really must have had a moment when I thought someone would buy that, he pondered. Well, I don't want to be reminded of death either. We all know it's on the way.

Smoke began to squeeze out from beneath the canvas. Washing flapped like sleepy inverted birds on a line in the next garden. They can complain if they like, thought King. It'll be the first time they've spoken to me. But the

smoke swung toward him and slipped up the wall of his house and over the roof. I could have used that canvas. Christ, I am in a self-destructive mood today. Coughing, he turned away and lit a cigarette. The woman's mouth charred and smoke sprang from the hole. As flames sputtered from her lips he threw the cigarette into the fire and waving away the thick smoke, retreated into the house.

Later he walked along Everton Brow. The pale boxes of high-rise fiats were scattered down the rubbly hill to the Mersey, like minutely checked cartons left in a junkyard; on the other side of the river cranes nodded and picked among the sludge. Ah, inspiration. More happy fun with Mucky Matt next week, kids. Suddenly he threw his cigarette away like a grub and stamped on it. Moist brown leaves spurted from its end, but so did smoke. He scraped his heel across it and walked on. Looking back, he saw a thin grey stream still rising from the pavement. Go on, go back, don't let it pollute the air. He walked past waste ground rough with bricks and litter. Just like the inside of my lungs, koff koff.

He couldn't even bear to walk back across Everton; he caught a bus. All the windows upstairs were shut. Smoke hung in layers in the aisle, and its originators coughed. Maybe there's a new race, the pollution-breathers. The sharp tang of nicotine reached his nostrils; he inhaled, held it for a moment, then blew it out loudly and angrily. Christ knows where it's been.

Once home he stared along the terrace. Only a dog and a piece of newspaper moved, and beneath the yellow streetlamp the houses looked flat and synthetic, like a row of clones. He felt trapped inside his head. Someone had washed the pavement in front of his house. Well, that's a start. Could do with some order inside. Inside me, come to that. I should start cleaning there. That night he dreamed that the old woman was lying on her back in the doorway. Fumes billowed from her mouth. He knew that the spirit was charring her from within. He awoke panting and had to smoke a cigarette before risking sleep again.

In the morning he returned to the pages of *Mucky Matt*. The ashtray was full of torn stubs and pieces of ash like grey turds; fragments and a stale pungency surrounded it. He emptied it and reached for the packet. No, let's see how long I can hold off. He drew a few outlines, which looked empty. He felt half-awake and dull. No use. He pulled the tab of the packet and a

cigarette arose. As he absorbed the smoke his mind began to buzz, then grew heavy.

Behind the stain on the pinned page his drawing had become indistinguishable. Never mind. Let's start again. As he redrew the last panels the impulse grew stronger. He was smiling. Christ, this is what it's all about. He drew faster, more surely, lighting a cigarette at the end of each panel, at the end of each dialogue balloon, at the end of each figure, coughing. A squashed stub rolled out of the ashtray and hopped over the floor.

When he'd finished the page he looked up and saw the smoke hovering over him. It had been built up into still grey strata. He waved his hand through it, and it dilated and reformed. He shouldered his way through it and opened the door. But the smoke had settled inertly over the drawing-board. Bugger off, he thought. I don't need you hanging around to remind me. He shoved the window up. Gradually, very gradually it seemed to him, the smoke dissipated. He remembered the fumes from the mouth in his dream, which had settled on his face and lips, growing heavier like mud. He strode around the room waving his arms to drive out the clinging smell. Perhaps the smoke hadn't taken so much longer than usual to disperse. His head was swimming so much he couldn't be sure.

Ravenous, he made himself dinner. When he'd eaten his dizziness had vanished, and he enjoyed the taste of tobacco as dessert. Then he worked out two stories for *Clara Caterpillar*. Let's see how they look. No, must discipline myself. If I feel this way tomorrow I can start early and draw them both.

Instead, he cleaned up. He swept the mites of ash from the table and carried a dustpan full of stubs and empty packets to the dustbin. Then he emptied the remnants of spaghetti into the kitchen bin and dumped the contents. As he washed up an idea was worrying the back of his mind: I had a full packet of cigarettes somewhere. I'd taken the cellophane off and put the packet somewhere. On the table. No, I couldn't have. Oh no. He held his breath and searched among the slime of spaghetti and ash in the bin. All the packets were empty.

He went to the comer shop to buy cigarettes. Among the sweets and tights on the counter he saw a few dog-eared copies of last week's *Nut Cutlet*: none of the current issue. "No, it's not doing very well," the proprietor said.

"The children buy the ones they know. The new ones don't go. They're not very good, that's why." Thanks for the encouragement, King thought. Must tell my bank manager. No doubt he'll be sending me a begging letter soon. He pulled off the cellophane and lit a cigarette. As he passed a refuse wagon he crushed the cellophane and threw it in, and then the packet. Christ, I'm losing my grip entirely. Sorry to trouble you but could I have my cigarettes back. No, my mind knows best even if it doesn't tell me what it's doing. The money was wasted anyway, so let's be blatant about it. If I go to bed I can't want a cigarette. Then I can make an early start.

In the early morning he found himself in the doorway, stooping over the old woman. A light was fanned up in her eyes, and her arms clung to his neck. Vertigo pulled him down toward her mouth, which fastened on his. His eyes sprang open. He was half out of bed, his arms clutching the bedside table. His mouth was moving on the ashtray; stubs adhered to his lips, and one was in his mouth. He reached the bathroom barely ahead of a rush of vomit. Each cough ripped his chest like a saw.

When he awoke later he felt purged. He was weak, but once he'd eaten breakfast some of his strength returned. His head floated. As soon as he'd washed up he sat down at the drawing board. The first panels of *Clara Caterpillar* appeared quickly and easily. In the fourth he had an old caterpillar coiled on a toadstool. Bit for the Lewis Carroll fans. Pipe in his mouth. No, absolutely no pipe! He halted the pen so violently that his elbow jarred the ink-bottle. Christ, not again! But it didn't spill, although it was some time before his harsh breathing ceased to fill his ears.

If he hasn't got a pipe then the next panel doesn't make sense, nor the last. He sat staring at his thoughts. Come on, the pipe isn't essential. He looks too decrepit for a kids' comic, anyway. Maybe I should start again. He grabbed his sketch pad. Christ, why have I made him look so senile? All he needs to complete him is a beard of drool. It's that old woman.

King couldn't think. There seemed to be a grey patch hovering behind his head. He twisted round. Nothing, but his movement drew a stale aroma of smoke from the walls and the furniture, on which his nostrils fastened avidly. This is pointless, he thought. If I'm going to be like this while it seeps out of me I won't be able to work. He hurried out and bought a packet of cigarettes.

For the rest of the day he drew in halting stages. He worked out a new story and sketched it in, stopping to suck on a cigarette and stare at the glowing tip, on which a flaking coat of ash accumulated like thick dust. Then he thrust it into the smouldering tangle in the ashtray and scratched the grey paste from his fingers.

By the time he'd finished the room was heavy with smoke, and the smell from the ashtray stung his nostrils. His head seemed filled with grey mist. Before he reached the window he was coughing uncontrollably; a fire sputtered in his throat and collected in his chest, which clutched at itself in agony. He had to slump into a chair and hug himself, for the grey in his brain had turned red.

All right, he thought. That's it. No more. His limbs were shaking and his lungs felt waterlogged. After an hour he ate some cheese and tottered into the bedroom. He emptied the bedside ashtray into the toilet and left it on the side of the bath. The stubs uncoiled like charred anemones. Then, still trembling, he slipped into bed.

His mouth felt dry and metallic. He lay watching the light sink into darkness. Somewhere behind his eyes the old woman waited. No, I'm not having her tonight. She can stay outside. He let her face swell up toward his consciousness and then with an effort of will thrust her into the darkness of the room. Now stay there. You're no ghost, just death. Let me sleep.

As sleep accumulated he felt his mouth working against the sheets. A drink. A cigarette. Well, you're not having any. He blacked out for a moment, and as he waited for the next more prolonged intimation of sleep he searched his mind for the old woman. Not there.

He awoke coughing, unaware that he'd been asleep. He sat up more shocked than at any time since he'd once fallen into the void of anaesthetic. He fought off the blankets that hung about him. His limbs were free but his face was caught in the sheet. No, it wasn't a sheet. It was smoke.

He wrenched his feet free of the bed and plunged forward through the smoke. He was unsteady, and grabbed the dressing-table to support him as he made for the window. As he did so he glimpsed his head dimly in the mirror. The smoke clustered about his face, and as he strained his eyes it seemed to be pouring from his mouth and nostrils.

He staggered across the room and switched on the light. The smoke was whirling over the bed, but when he forced himself to look in the mirror it was nowhere near his face. He supported himself to the window. Within the pane he could see the smoke drifting closer behind him. He moved his shoulders uneasily and threw the window open.

As he turned back to the room the smoke seemed to gather itself. Then it rushed toward his face. Perhaps it was merely being drawn into the night behind him. He put up a hand to ward it away from his eyes. Before he could cover them he thought he saw the mass extend twin plumes of smoke toward him. He sucked in his breath, and they plunged into his mouth and nostrils.

He stared at the mirror and breathed out until his lungs gulped with pain. No smoke emerged. He panted, tearing at his lungs with air. Nothing. He could feel the smoke growing heavier in his lungs, and his head was spinning. He punched his chest, weeping. He forced himself to cough. He coughed harder, hacking at himself. Nothing; only the taste of stale smoke that emerged as far as his tongue. Then, as his lungs clutched at air, he began to cough in earnest; his body burned as the coughs flayed his throat; the hot agony focused on his chest and magnified, and he fell.

Five minutes later his body felt hot and inert, as if his flesh were rubber. As he crawled and then wavered to his feet, he saw falling away beneath him a butt that had charred the carpet. It was surrounded by saliva where his mouth had rested. When he returned to bed a mouth with smouldering teeth gaped above his sleep.

In the morning he forced himself out of bed and bought a week's supply of cigarettes. As he worked he lit the cigarettes and left them smouldering in the ashtray. The sawtoothed fumes trickled toward his nostrils. Got to wait for my mind. Wait until it's suffered enough to grab the whole lot and burn them. Then it'll always be ready to tell me what a bloody fool I am.

Last night's stale taste had vanished, except where it coated belches. As his nostrils flinched from the interminable smoke he thought: how could I ever have enjoyed inhaling that? I didn't. Because it didn't taste as it smells. That's where I've gone wrong, rationalising. The justification is nothing to do with the smell. He gazed at the empty outlines on the drawing-board. He felt his first and second fingers open tingling toward the ashtray.

Jack's Little Friend

Written in: 1973
First published in *Jack The Knife*, 1975
Also published in: *The Height Of The Scream*

It's afternoon when you find the box. You're in the marshes on the verge of the Thames below London. Perhaps you live in the area, perhaps you're visiting, on business or on holiday. You've been walking. You've passed a power station and its expressionless metallic chord, you've skirted a flat placid field of cows above which black smoke pumps from factory chimneys. Now reeds smear your legs with mud, and you might be proposing to turn back when you see a corner of metal protruding from the bearded mud.

You make your way toward it, squelching. It looks chewed by time, and you wonder how long it's been there. Perhaps it was dumped here recently; perhaps it was thrown out by the river; possibly the Thames, belabouring and dragging the mud, uncovered the box. As the water has built the box a niche of mud so it has washed the lid, and you can make out dates scratched on the metal. They are almost a century old. It's the dates that provoke your curiosity, and perhaps also a gesture against the dull landscape. You stoop and pick up the box, which frees itself with a gasp of mud.

Although the box is only a foot square it's heavier than you anticipated. You skid and regain your balance. You wouldn't be surprised if the box were made of lead. If anyone had thrown it in the river they would certainly have expected it to stay sunk. You wonder why they would have bothered to carry it to the river or to the marshes for disposal. It isn't distinguished, except for the dates carved on the lid by an illiterate or clumsy hand—just a plain box of heavy grey metal.

You read the dates:

31/8/1888

8/9/1888

30/9/1888

9/11/1888

There seems to be no pattern. It's as if someone had been trying to work one out. But what kind of calculation would be resolved by throwing away a metal box? Bewildered though you are, that's how you read the clues. What was happening in 1888? You think you read somewhere that expeditions were returning from Egypt around that date. Have you discovered a lost archaeological find? There's one way to know. But your fingers slip off the box, which in any case is no doubt locked beneath its coat of mud, and the marsh is seeping into your shoes; so you leave off your attempts to open the lid and stumble away, carrying the box.

By the time you reach the road your excitement has drained somewhat. After all, someone could have scratched the dates on the lid last week; it could even be an understated practical joke. You don't want to take a heavy box all the way home only to prise from its depths a piece of paper saying APRIL FOOL. So you leave the box in the grass at the side of the road and search until you find a metal bar. Sorry if I'm aborting the future of archaeology, you think, and begin to lever at the box.

But even now it's not as easy as you thought. You've wedged the box and can devote all your energy to shifting the lid, but it's fighting you. Once it yields an inch or two and then snaps shut again. It's as if it were being held shut, like the shell of a clam. A car passes on the other side of the road and you begin to give in to a sense of absurdity, to the sight of yourself struggling to jemmy open an old box. You begin to feel like a tourist's glimpse. Another car, on your side this time, and dust sweeps into your face. You blink and weep and cough violently, for the dust seems to have been scooped into your mouth. Then the sensation of dry crawling in your mouth recedes, and only the skin beneath your tongue feels rough. You wipe your eyes and return to the box. And then you drop the bar, for the box is wide open.

And it's empty. The interior is as dull as the exterior. There's nothing, except on the bottom a thin glistening coat of what looks like saliva but must be marsh water. You slam the lid. You memorise the dates and walk away, rolling your tongue around the floor of your mouth, which still feels

thick, and grinning wryly. Perhaps the hitchhiker or whoever finds the box will conceive a use for it.

That night you're walking along a long dim street toward a woman. She seems to be backing away, and you can't see her face. Suddenly, as you rush toward her, her body opens like an anemone. You plunge deep into the wet red fronds.

The dream hoods your brain for days. Perhaps it's the pressure of work or of worry, but you find yourself becoming obsessive. In crowds you halt, thinking of the dates on the box. You've consulted such books as you have immediate access to, but they didn't help. You stare at the asymmetrical faces of the crowd. Smoke rises from their mouths or their jaws work as they drive forward, pulled along by their set eyes. Imagine asking them to help. They wouldn't have touched the box, they would have shuffled on by, scattering their waste paper and condoms. You shake your head to dislodge the crawling thoughts. You aren't usually so misanthropic. You'll have to find out what those dates mean. Obviously your brain won't give you much peace until you do.

So you ask your friend, the one who knows something about history. And your friend says "That's easy. They're the dates of Jack the Ripper," and tells you that the five murders everyone accepts as the Ripper's work were committed on those dates. You can't help smiling, because you've just had a flash of clarity: of course you must have recognised the dates subconsciously from having read them somewhere, and the recognition was the source of your dream. Then your friend says "Why are you interested?"

You're about to answer, but your tongue sticks to the floor of your mouth for a moment, like the lid of the box. In that moment you think: why should your friend want to know anyway? They've no right to know, they aren't entitled to a fee for the consultation. You found the box, you'll conduct the enquiry. "I must have read the dates somewhere," you say. "They've been going round in my head and I couldn't remember why."

On the way home you play a game with yourself. No, that bus shelter's no good, too open. Yes, he could hide in that alley, there would be hardly any light where it bends in the middle. You stop, because the skin beneath your tongue is rough and sore, and hinders your thoughts. You explore the softness beneath your tongue with one finger, and as you do so the inflammation seems to draw into itself and spare you.

Later you ponder Jack the Ripper. You've read about him, but when you leaf through your knowledge you realise you're not so well informed. How did he become the Ripper? Why did he stop? But you know that these questions are only your speculations about the box, disguised.

It's inconvenient to go back to find the box, but you manage to clear yourself the time. When you do you think at first you've missed the place where you left the box. Eventually you find the bar, but the box has gone. Perhaps someone kicked it into the hedges. You search among the cramped roots and trapped crisp bags until your mouth feels scraped dry. You could tell the local police, but then you would have to explain your interest, and they would take the credit for themselves. You don't need the box. Tomorrow you'll begin to research.

And so you do, though it's not as easy as you expected. Everyone's fascinated by the Ripper these days, and the library books are popular. You even have to buy a paperback of one of them, glancing sideways as you do so at the people browsing through the book. The sunlight glares in the cracks and pores and fleshy bags of their faces, giving them a sheen like wet wax: wax animated by simple morbid fascination. You shudder and hurry away. At least you have a reason for reading the book, but these others haven't risen above the level of the mob that gloated squirming over reports of the Ripper's latest killing. You know how the police of the time must have felt.

You read the books. You spread them across the table, comparing accounts. You're not to be trapped into taking the first one you read as definitive. Your friends, and perhaps your spouse or lover as well, joke and gently rebuke you about your singlemindedness. No doubt they talk about it when you're not there. Let them. Most people seem content to relive, or elaborate, the second-hand. Not you.

You read. 31/8/1888: throat cut twice, head nearly severed, disembowelled twice. 8/9/1888: handkerchief wrapped around almost-severed neck, womb missing, intestines cast over shoulder, relatively little blood in the yard where the corpse was found. 30/9/1888: two women, one with windpipe severed; the other, less than an hour later, with right eye damaged, earlobe cut off, intestines over shoulder, kidney and entrails missing. 9/11/1888: throat cut, ears and nose missing, also liver, and a mass of flesh and organs

on the bedside table. There's a photograph of her in one book. You stare at it for a moment, then you slam the book and stare at your hands.

But your hands are less real than your thoughts. You think of the Ripper, cutting and feeling his way through the corpses, taking more time and going into more detail with each murder. The last one took two hours, the books tell you. A question is beginning to insist on an answer. What was he looking for?

You aren't sleeping well. You stare at the lights that prick your eyeballs behind your lids and theorise until you topple wakefully into sleep. Sometimes you seem almost to have found a pattern, and you gasp in crowds or with friends. They glance at you and you meet their gaze coldly. They wouldn't be capable of your thoughts, and you certainly don't intend to let them hinder you. But even as their dull gaze falls away you realise that you've lost the inspiration, if indeed it were one.

So you confine yourself to your home. You're glad to have an excuse to do so, for recently you've been growing hypersensitive. When you're outside and the sunlight intensifies it's as though someone were pumping up an already white-hot furnace, and the night settles around you like water about a gasping fish. So you draw the curtains and read the books again.

The more you read the stranger it seems. You feel you could understand the man if a missing crucial detail were supplied. What can you make of his macabre tenderness in wrapping a handkerchief around the sliced throat of Annie Chapman, his second victim? A numbed denial of his authorship of the crime, perhaps? If there were relatively little blood in the yard then surely the blood must have soaked into the Ripper's clothes, but in that case how could he have walked home in broad daylight? Did he cut the windpipe of Elizabeth Stride because he was interrupted before he was able to do more, or because she had seen too much for him simply to leave her and seek a victim elsewhere? An hour later, was it his frustration that led him to mutilate Catherine Eddowes more extensively and inventively than her predecessors? And why did he wait almost twice as long as hitherto before committing his final murder, that of Mary Kelly, and the most detailed? Was this the exercise of a powerful will, and did the frustration build up to an unprecedented climax? But what frustration? What was he looking for?

You turn to the photograph of Mary Kelly again, and this time you're able to examine it dispassionately. Not that the Victorian camera was able to be

particularly explicit. In fact, the picture looks like a piece of early adolescent pornography on a wall, an amateur blob for a face and a gaping darkness between the legs. You suck your tongue, whose underside feels rough and dry.

You read the Ripper's letters. The adolescent wit of the rhymes often gives way to the childish illiteracy of some of the letters. You can understand his feelings of superiority to the victims and to the police; they were undoubtedly at least as contemptible as the people you know. But that doesn't explain the regression of the letters, as if his mind were flinching back as far as possible from his actions. That's probably a common trait of psychopaths, you think: an attempt to reject the part of them that commits the crimes.

Your mind is still frowning. You read through the murders again. First murder, nothing removed. Second, the womb stolen. Third, kidney and entrails stolen. A portion of kidney which had been preserved in spirits was sent to the police, with a note saying that the writer had eaten the rest. Fourth, the liver removed and the ears and nose, but the womb and a three-month-old foetus untouched. Why? To sate the hunger which motivated the killings, presumably, but what hunger was that? If cannibalism, surely he would never have controlled himself sufficiently to preserve a portion of his food with which to taunt the police? If not, what worse reality was he disguising from the police, and perhaps from himself, as cannibalism?

You swallow the saliva that's pooling under your tongue and try to grasp your theories. It's as if the hunger spat out the kidney. Not literally, of course. But it certainly seems, as if the Ripper had been trying to sate his hunger by varying the delicacies, as if it were a temperamental pet. Surely the death of Mary Kelly couldn't have satisfied it for good, though.

Then you remember the box. If he had externalised the hunger as something other than himself, could his mind have persuaded him that the hunger was alive independent of him and might be trapped? Could he have used one of the portions of Mary Kelly as a lure? Would that have seemed a solution in the grotesque algebra of his mind? Might he have convinced himself that he had locked his hunger away in time, and having scratched the dates on the box to confirm his calculations have thrown it in the river? Perhaps the kidney had been the first attempted lure, insufficiently tempting. And then—well, he could hardly have returned to a normal life, if

indeed he had left one, but he might have turned to the socially acceptable destruction of alcoholism and died unknown.

The more you consider your theory the more persuasive it becomes. Perhaps you can write it up as an article and sell it somewhere. Of course you'll need to pursue your research first. You feel happy in a detached unreal way, and you even go to your companion willingly for the first time in, now you think about it, a long while. But you feel apart from the moist dilation of flesh and the hard dagger thrust, and are glad when it's over. There's something at the back of your mind you need to coax forward. When you've dealt with that you'll be able to concentrate on other things.

You walk toward her. The light is flickering and the walls wobble like a fairground corridor. As you approach her, her dress peels apart and her body splits open. From within the gap trails a web toward which you're drawn. At the centre of the web hangs a piece of raw meat.

Your cry wakes you but not your companion. Their body feels like burning rubber against you, and you flinch away. After a minute you get out of bed. You can't stand the sensation, and you want to shake off the dream. You stare from the window; the darkness is paling, and a bird sings tentatively. Suddenly you gasp. You'll write that article now, because you've realised what you need. You can't hope to describe the Ripper or even to meet a psychopath for background. But there's one piece of first-hand research you can do that will help you to understand the Ripper. You don't know why you didn't read your dream that way at once.

Next day you begin searching. You read all the cards you can find in shop windows. They aren't as numerous or as obvious as you expected. You don't want to find yourself actually applying for a course of French lessons. You suppose there are magazines that would help you, but you're not sure where to find them. At last, as the streets become grimmer, you notice a group of young men reading cards in a shop window. They nudge each other and point to several of the cards, then they confer and hurry toward a phone box. You're sure this time.

You choose one called Marie, because that was what Mary Kelly used to call herself. No particular reason, but the parallel seems promising. When you telephone her she sounds dubious. She asks what you want and you say "Nothing special. Just the usual." Your voice may be disturbing her, because your tongue is sticking somehow to the floor of your mouth, which feels

swollen and obstructive. She's silent for a moment, then she says "All right. Come up in twenty minutes," and tells you where she is.

You hadn't realised it would be as swift as that. Probably it's a good thing, because if you had to wait much longer your unease might find you excuses for staying away. You emerge from the phone box and the sunlight thuds against your head. Your mouth is dry, and the flesh beneath your tongue is twitching as if an insect has lodged there. It must be the heat and the tension. You walk slowly toward your rendezvous, which is only a few streets away. You walk through a maze of alleys to keep in the shade. On either side of you empty clothes flap, children shout and barks run along a chain of dogs.

You reach your destination on time. It's in a street of drab shops: a boarded betting shop, a window full of cardigans and wool, a Chinese take-away. The room you want is above the latter. You skid on trodden chips and shielding your face from the eyes of the queue next door, ring the bell.

As you stare at the new orange paint on the door you wonder what you're going to say. You have some idea and surely enough money, but will she respond to that? You understand some prostitutes refuse to talk rather than act. You can hardly explain your interest in the Ripper. You're still wondering when she opens the door.

She must be in her thirties, but her face has aged like an orange and she's tried to fill in the wrinkles, probably while waiting for you. Her eyelashes are like unwashed black paint-brushes. But she smiles slightly, as if unsure whether you want her to, and then sticks out her tongue at a head craning from next door. "You rang before," she says, and you nod.

The door slams behind you. Your hand reaches blindly for the latch; you can still leave, she'll never be able to pursue you. Beneath your tongue a pulse is going wild. If you don't go through with this now it will be more difficult next time, and you'll never be rid of the Ripper or of your dreams. You follow her upstairs.

Seeing her from below you find it easy to forget her smile. Her red dress pulls up and her knickers, covered with whorls of colour like the eye of a peacock's tail, alternately bulge and crease. The hint of guilt you were beginning to feel retreats: her job is to be on show, an object, you need have no compunction. Then you're at the top of the stairs and in her room.

There are thick red curtains, mauve walls, a crimson bed and telephone, a colour TV, a card from Ibiza and one from Rhyl. Behind a partition you can see pans and knives hanging on hooks in the kitchen area. Then your gaze is wrenched back to her as she says "Go on then, tell me your name, you know mine."

Of course you don't. You're not so stupid as to suppose she would display her real name in the window. You shake your head and try to smile. But the garish thick colours of the room are beginning to weigh on you, and the trapped heat makes your mouth feel dry, so that the smile comes out soured.

"Never mind, you don't have to," she says. "What do you want? Want me to wear anything?"

Now you have to speak or the encounter will turn into a grotesque misunderstanding. But your tongue feels as if it's glued down, while beneath it the flesh is throbbing painfully. You can feel your face prickling and reddening, and rooted in the discomfort behind your teeth a frustrated disgust with the whole situation is growing.

"Are you shy? There's no need to be," she says. "If you were really shy you wouldn't have come at all, would you?" She stares into the mute struggle within your eyes and smiling tentatively again, says "Can't you talk?"

Yes, you can talk, it's only a temporary obstruction. And when you shift it you'll tell her that you've come to use her, because that's what she's for. An object, that's what she's made herself. Inside that crust of makeup there's nothing. No wonder the Ripper sought them out. You don't need compassion in a slaughterhouse. You try to control your raw tongue, but only the throbbing beneath it moves.

"I'm sorry, I'm only upsetting you. Never mind, love," she says. "Nerves are terrible, I know. You sit down and I'll get you a drink."

And that's when you have to act, because your mouth is filling with saliva as if a dam has burst, and your tongue's still straining to raise itself, and the turgid colours have insinuated themselves into your head like migraine, and tendrils of uneasiness are streaming up from your clogged mouth and matting your brain, and at the core of all this there's a writhing disgust and fury that this woman should presume to patronise you. You don't care if you never understand the Ripper, so long as you can smash your way out of this trap. You move toward the door, but at the same time your hand is

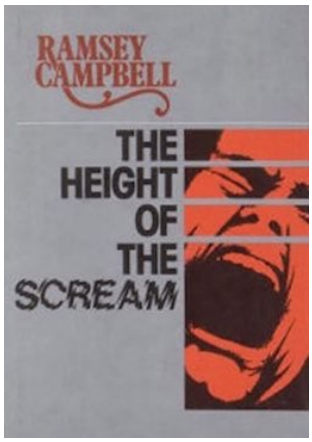
beckoning her, it seems quite independent of you. You haven't reached the door when she's in front of you, her mouth open and saying "What?" And you do the only thing that seems, in your blind violent frustration, available to you.

You spit into her open mouth.

For a moment you feel free. Your mouth is clean and your tongue can move as you want it to. The colours have retreated, and she's just a well-meaning rather sad woman using her talents as best she can. Then you realise what you've done. Now your tongue's free you don't know what to say. You think perhaps you could explain that you sneezed. Perhaps she'll accept that, if you apologise. But by this time she s already begun to scream.

You were so nearly right most of the time. You realised that the stolen portions of Mary Kelly might have been placed in the box as a lure. If only you'd appreciated the implications of this: that the other mutilations were by no means the act of a maniac, but the attempts of a gradually less sane man to conceal the atrocities of what possessed him. Who knows, perhaps it had come from Egypt. He couldn't have been sure of its existence even when he lured it into the box. Perhaps you'll be luckier, if that's luck, although now you can only stand paralysed as the woman screams and screams and falls inertly to the floor; and blood begins to seep from her abdomen. Perhaps you'll be able to catch it as it emerges, or at least to see your little friend.

Horror House Of Blood



Written in: 1973
First published in *The Height Of The Scream*, 1976
Also published in: *Dark Feasts*

"Listen, I'm really sorry to bother you like this," the young man at the door said. "My name's David Lloyd and I'm a film director."

Marilyn drew back her foot, which she'd poised to kick should he try to stop the door. "You've been filming up the street," she said.

"Right, that's me. You've been watching us, right?"

"No, but you can't avoid being gossipped at in the shops round here. Anyway, come in, you're standing in a draft. I'm afraid you'll have to take us as you find us."

Lloyd surveyed the interior beyond the short entrance hall like an airlock: one large room reduced to an L by a partitioned-off kitchen; two settees surrounded by collages of Sunday newspaper sections; a man of about thirty with a chubby pink just-shaved face and a dressing-gown, rising to his feet and swinging up his hand; a dining area next to the kitchen, a table and chairs of plain pale wood; a staircase leading up the pale blue wall on Lloyd's right to a landing and a door. "Knockout," Lloyd said.

"I'm Frank Taylor and this is my wife Marilyn," the man said. "And you're a film director? Quiet on the set for Mr. Hitchcock, that sort of thing?"

"Right, that sort of thing. Not quite that big a name yet, maybe. In fact, that's what I want to talk to you about."

"If you're looking for extras I'm always telling Marilyn she should be in the movies. Go on, do 'Come up and see me sometime' for him. Well, maybe it's a bit early in the day. But you'd swear Mae West was in the room."

"Right on. It's not extras, actually, let me tell you what it is. This is my first film, right, and it just could be in line for a festival. I've got some money in it and so have some other people. We had budget problems but we thought

we'd cracked them by shooting on location in the suburbs, right. Some friends of mine lived up your street here and we were using their house. But they got an offer in America and they just pissed off, sorry, you don't mind, good, they just pissed off after selling the house to these other people who won't let us film there. So zap, no film."

"All your work wasted," Marilyn said.

"A lot of people's six weeks wasted. I mean, you can understand that, Mr. Taylor, Frank, right on, call me Dave. So I don't have to tell you what's on my mind, you can see right through me. We're trying to duplicate the interior we were using and this is just knockout. Exactly the same. Not that you haven't done a lot with it, I mean you can tell it's your house and nobody else's. I'm just no good with words, you can tell that, right? But I want to believe I'm good with visuals. I really think I am. And by Christ I want those stairs."

"What were you thinking of doing with them?" Marilyn said.

"Can I show you?" Lloyd began to pace up the stairs, squinting through a rectangle of his fingers, swaying his head and fingers and body in slow complex syncopation. "It's just the suspense scenes we have to shoot. A lot of this film takes place on the stairs, it saves money and makes for claustrophobia. The paint's the wrong colour but that's okay, we'll be shooting monochrome with a filter. Now here I am tracking up the stairs, I'm the camera, right, I'm swaying a bit toward the wall so it feels as if it's closing in, I'm tracking in on the door, it's almost filling the screen and slowly, slowly, it opens—"

Slowly the door opened.

"It doesn't do that," Marilyn said.

"Yes, it has been," Frank said, 'last week it did, I forgot to tell you. I'll have to fix it."

"Well, we'll have someone inside to move it when we're shooting," Lloyd said. "But that shows you the sort of thing we'll be doing. We won't damage anything, I mean we won't even touch anything. And three days at the outside to pack up and go. I don't know what else to say except, you know, I'd be incredibly grateful."

"I don't see why not, do you?" Frank said.

"Not really, I suppose," Marilyn said. "Only it's a pity you won't be here. Don't expect a technical analysis every night when you come home."

"I only wish we could pay you, I mean except for the electricity," Lloyd said. "That's why the rest of the people we tried wouldn't have us. Anyway, listen, Mrs. Taylor, we won't be asking for anything, even bring our own flasks of coffee. Maybe we can take you out to lunch one day. Make a change from the housework, I mean, we guys don't know what it is to work."

"The boutique where I worked has closed," Marilyn said. "I'm just straightening things before I apply for another job."

"Looks like you've given us a wardrobe mistress, Frank," Lloyd said. "See you tomorrow, Mrs. Taylor, on the set of *Horror House of Blood*. Look, that door's rehearsing again."

When Frank arrived home on Tuesday night he found Marilyn hugging herself on the front lawn. "Have they thrown you out?"

"No, I'm standing guard so you don't spoil their film. That, and I've seen all I can stand."

"Yesterday you were fascinated."

"With the mechanics of it. It's the people I can't bear."

"The cast or the characters?"

"I can't tell. Perhaps both. Your friend Lloyd is an insufferable pig and his wife, if that's what she is in real life, is so meek it's terrifying. I can't see the point, but I know I don't like being in there with it. I don't care if it is only a film, it isn't pleasant to have two strangers in your home goading each other to violence by being what they are, and you not knowing what's going to happen."

"I think we're being invited in," Frank said. "David, would you and your wife like a cup of tea?"

"Love one," Lloyd said. "My wife's making dinner for the crew so you must excuse her. Listen, Frank, I'm sorry to be in your way when you come home. We've had to wedge your bedroom door because it's not cued to open yet, and I moved the phone behind the settee."

"Don't worry about it. I tell you what, though, we wouldn't mind hearing what the film is about. Only it's been disturbing my wife a bit in the wrong

way, hasn't it, Marilyn. Not understanding, if you see what I mean."

"Right on. We've only got one more scene to shoot, Mrs. Taylor, so we won't be in your way after tomorrow. I mean, you've been fantastic, but I know you've got things to do. Let me tell you about this scene. I'm the husband, right, and I'm cracking up because my wife's possessed by this thing. She keeps becoming a real maniac, you know, violent, lots of aggro. So I go upstairs to her with a knife in case I need it. Then I hear her calling out and she sounds okay, so I leave the knife on the stairs. I go in and you hear us talking. You're staring at this door, right, your bedroom door, it's hanging there, it's all you can see, you know something's going to happen, the voices stop and there's dead silence, everything's still and it's like waiting for a snake to strike. Then you see her eyes, right? Straight cut in to closeup, these absolutely mad eyes—"

"Sorry to interrupt," Frank said, "but if I understand what you're trying to do, wouldn't it be better to have it as a dinner scene? With her picking up a knife from the table and stabbing him, if that was your idea? I was just thinking that anyone who wouldn't accept the possession idea would go along with the wife losing her self-control. Right?"

"That's not bad," Lloyd said, peering between the treads of the stairs at the table. "That's good," gliding across the room and circling the table. "That's knockout!" zooming his face in on a knife. "Thing is, we've got the stairs now, and if we shifted to the table we'd have to reshoot some of the stuff in the can. And we could have done a lot with this fantastic low ceiling. Christ, what a film we could make if we had money."

"Yet you still expect it to be a success?" Marilyn said.

"I don't book films. It could make a second feature or it could make a festival where they like this sort of thing. It'll get me more work, that's where it's at. I'm sure you understand that, Frank."

When he'd left Marilyn pulled out the wedge from the bedroom door. She stood on the landing for some minutes, watching the hanging dormant wood and the immobile surrounding crack.

Marilyn was pulling out the dressing table drawers and smiling at the hidden treasures in the corners—a cufflink, two Christmas cards left over from ten months ago, a plastic pawn—when she heard Lloyd downstairs saying "Yes, that might do. Christ, perfect!" She heard the stairs creak as he

padded upward. She tensed, preparing a cold smile in case he should open the door. Then she giggled and turning her back to the door, pulled up her skirt and mimed dressing. But the creaks receded. Curious and determined not to talk herself out of it, she opened the door.

They'd switched off their lamps. She had gone upstairs partly to rest her eyes and her brain, for each time they switched off the glare the room and stairs looked dim and unreal, like a fading photograph, and she resented having to spend energy in adjusting. Lloyd and his cameraman were sandwiching the continuity girl on the couch, passing the script back and forth and scribbling on it with marker pens. Lloyd's wife was staring out of the window at a woman cleaning her car. The continuity girl's eyes met Marilyn's through the gesticulations on the couch. Marilyn smiled in sympathy with her expression, then almost tripped on a knife on the stairs.

It was her little sharp kitchen knife, scratched and discoloured but still clean, which she used for cutting vegetables. One day her mother had let her use it, and that was the day she'd started to learn cookery. She remembered the warmth of the kitchen and the windows blurring, her mother laughing as Marilyn prised the knife from her fingers and her silent eye-corner supervision as Marilyn chopped the carrots, the single wind-troubled rose that swelled and dwindled on the blurred window like a red stain, and the almost inaudible hum as the coffin slid into the crematorium. "Who put this here?" she demanded.

"I did. It's for this last scene," Lloyd said. "I'm sorry, we didn't hear you coming down."

"This is my knife."

'"Yes, but I mean you don't use it, do you? Really? Right, sorry. I'll tell you what it is. You know in horror films knives always look brand new, like it was an advertising film for steel or something. We want something nastier than that, something that looks real, a bit rusty and jagged, you know. It really would be a help if we could use it. Critics might, I know you can't predict critics any more than audiences, but they might think it was imaginative. I mean, imaginative details can add up to a good review."

Lloyd backed out of the bedroom and down the stairs, his whole body focused on an attempt to snatch up the knife before his wife caught sight of it. As he descended slowly, groping with his foot for the next step, his body began to stoop toward his right hand as if a weight were dragging it down.

Then his wife's hand flew out and had the knife. She reared above him and stabbed. "Don't poke with it!" Lloyd shouted, his back to the camera. "Slice, you stupid bitch, slice! Imagine slicing off lumps of flesh with it! Imagine chopping slices off my cock!"

He plodded to the bottom of the stairs, mopping his forehead. "Jesus," he said. "Right, let's do it for real."

"I'm sorry, you mustn't use that," Marilyn said. "It's very sharp and you might have an accident."

"Oh come on. It's not coming anywhere near me. Well be filming all the spouting blood next week."

"I'm sorry," Marilyn said.

"Wait five minutes," Lloyd said to his crew, and hurried out. Marilyn glanced round at them, but they avoided her eyes. Only Lloyd's wife met them for a moment. On the stairs as she'd tried to master the knife Marilyn had seemed to see a tiny fear scuttling inside her eyes, trying to hide and at the same time trying to escape. Now her eyes were as clear and blank as her skin and her dazzling silver hair. Marilyn looked away and stared at herself in the mirror, at the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth that Frank said smiled when she smiled.

Less than five minutes later the telephone rang. It was Frank. "Look, what on earth's the problem?" he said. "They aren't going to kill each other just for a film."

"There's more to it than that," Marilyn said. "I don't want it in my house."

"I'd say that was a tribute to the film. Anyway, look, I was halfway through programming and it doesn't help to be interrupted. It's not as if they've just barged in, after all. I told them they could film and I don't think there's any reason to go back on that. And listen, he didn't have to go out to phone. For heaven's sake be a bit more hospitable."

When Lloyd returned he didn't look at her. "Go on and remember, make it real," he told his wife. As he replaced the knife on the stairs the lamps blazed and glinted dully on the blade. Marilyn felt as if she were in a bunker in the desert, but she restrained herself from making for the kitchen. An urge recurred to snatch the knife and return it to the kitchen, but instead she snorted at herself and sat in a chair against the mantelpiece. "You won't mind if I watch, will you," she said.

"Right on. See how it grabs you." Lloyd was ascending the stairs slowly, hesitantly, listening to an absent voice and nodding and smiling, his face turned slightly to the camera that loomed at his back. He mimed planting the knife and the camera stooped to look at it. Marilyn heard the stairs creak long and deliberately beneath the camera's weight. They'd said it wasn't as heavy as it looked. She almost rose to her feet, then pressed her ankles together to restrain herself.

Lloyd had entered the bedroom. The camera was staring at the door. As it began to retreat, the cameraman's foot feeling for the edge of the stair, the stair emitting a prolonged throbbing creak, Marilyn heard Lloyd's voice beyond the door. "Let's see you do one good scene, right? I may not be Paul Newman but you sure as shit aren't Joanne Woodward. Now you grab that knife and cut great gobs of flesh out of me. Enjoy it, right?"

Slowly, slowly, the door opened. Lloyd emerged backwards like an insect from a hole, as if desperate for the moment at which he could turn and flee. One foot slipped on the edge of the staircase and his hand swung out, fingers frantic as the legs of an impaled spider. He slid his hand down the banister and then without warning ran down and made a grab for the knife.

His wife was quicker. She had the handle as he grasped the knife, and his fingers closed on the blade. His wife let go, and Marilyn cried out, for his hand came up with the blade still hanging from the folded cuts in his fingers. "Now then, real blood!" he shouted. "You felt it, right, like slicing butter! Go on, you stupid cow, you're over the shock, you're mad! Get the knife and slice, slice!" Then he fell back, his hand slithering down the wall in a trail of blood as she went to work on him.

"Get a sponge for the wall," Lloyd said to his wife, running water over his fingers. "That was knockout," he said. "Absolutely real."

As soon as Frank had closed the front door he said "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left you to put up with them by yourself."

"I think I managed perfectly well," Marilyn said.

Later they massaged each other before making love. His arms sometimes grew tense at the computer keyboard, and she freed them. Her neck and shoulders felt like a single plate of metal now the day had accumulated, although she understated this, not wanting it to seem a reproachful symbol or a further turn in the knot of half-felt but unspoken argument. Suddenly,

as he kneaded her shoulders, she was moist and wide. For a moment she felt betrayed by her body, then she knelt forward and speared herself on him. At first his movements were slow and caressing, but as they continued he raised his thighs from the bed and thrust as if to impale her helpless. He must have read the plea in her eyes not to turn her beneath him.

As they lay touching, their breath easing, they heard a creak on the stairs so loud as to be almost an explosion. Marilyn started, then ran to open the door. As she did so the top stair creaked back into shape.

"It was the camera," she said. "All that weight, the stairs couldn't take it. Poor stairs." She hurried into the bathroom and wiped herself. When she lay down beside him again she said "Frank, did that door really open before they came?"

"Yes," he said slipping an arm beneath her neck and stroking her, cheek.

"Really?"

"Yes, of course."

"Really?"

"No, damn it! I don't know why I bothered trying to reassure you. It's you who have to stay at home with it."

She propped herself above him. "But what am I supposed to be frightened of?" she said.

Next morning at breakfast she said "We haven't had a party for a while." Since Lloyd and his crew had left the house felt like a vacuum, and all her reservations about the house returned: its anonymity, its oppressiveness, the sense of being threatened by a kind of middle-class commune where the front door was open to everyone else and their trivia. It's near London, she told herself. That's important.

They managed to call the party for Saturday. Marilyn was surprised how many people were free. Perhaps they were trying to ignore the suburbs too, she thought. She showed the latest arrivals where to throw their coats on the bed. Someone was already vomiting in the bathroom. It's going to be a good party, she thought.

Some of Frank's colleagues had congregated in the kitchen around the makeshift bar. "Oh, that old sod," one said. "Have you seen him since he

came back from holiday? He's got himself a hairpiece. Either that or he's been sticking his head in a dungheap."

Frank picked his way upstairs through guests sitting on the staircase. A few were perched on the side of the bath. "Listen, you can use our bedroom," he said. "There's room in there even with all the coats."

Marilyn passed a group of wives carefully poised on the edge of a settee, blowing out thin cones of smoke with a chorus of soft pops, and joined a poker game. "This is a hard school," one of the men said. "All right," Marilyn said, and won three pounds.

She went upstairs, patting her way among the heads and shoulders. She hadn't realised so many people would bring so many people. In the spare bedroom they were sitting shoulder to shoulder against the wall. Her and Frank's bedroom door was open, but the room was empty. She leaned into the spare room and said to whomever she was looking at "There's a room next door as well."

"Oh no, not me," the girl said. "Try someone else."

Descending the stairs was like groping her way down a strewn hill in a mist. There was a ceiling of tobacco-smoke halfway down. Marilyn coughed and nearly tripped, falling against the shoulders of a man who kneed the woman below him, and so on down the stairs. There were laughs and howls of protest.

"Listen, everyone," Frank said. "If we could shift some of you into our bedroom it would make things a good deal easier."

There was a silence. Then a friend of a friend said "If that's a joke it's in appalling taste. Can we have our coats, please."

When he'd gone, taking with him half-a-dozen others and any hint of an explanation, the party seemed to arrange itself more comfortably. Corks popped and conversation welled. The subject of the bedroom sank at once and seemed not worth the rescuing. Nobody entered the room except to retrieve coats.

Swaying upstairs after turning out the downstairs lights, Frank found Marilyn standing outside their bedroom. "Shall I carry you across the threshold?" he said, steadying himself against the doorframe.

She saw herself caught up and borne into the darkness. "No thanks, you only just managed it the first time," she said laughing, and groped beyond his shoulder for the bedroom light switch. She felt her fingers almost touching the darkness. Then Frank sagged into the dark bedroom, taking her with him. A great gasp rushed into her, pummelling her chest. As she levered herself up from him she felt his body trembling. He was choking back laughter.

"Did you do that on purpose?" she demanded.

"Of course not," he said, roaring with laughter.

She lay in bed with darkness pressing on her open eyes. Just before she awoke the pressure of her eyelids built up a blaze of crimson. Then she was tiptoeing toward the bedroom. As she opened the door cautiously she leapt up from the bed, and her eyes were pools of blood.

On Sunday afternoon they walked in the nearby park. They walked until night and heavy rain began to fall. Marilyn ran to shelter beneath the awning of a deserted kiosk. The rain swung toward them, forcing water through their clothes, and then away. "I wish you hadn't hired out the house," she said.

"They had to get the film in the can somewhere."

"They had to what?" she said, peering at his lips.

"They had to make their film, right?"

At his last word she peered closer. His mind slipped out of synchronisation, and his lips continued moving for a moment without words. "Oh come on," he said.

"It's not going to be the same."

"Don't tell me about it. You're capable of dealing with it yourself, you said so. If you don't need protecting, fair enough. It's a good job I didn't marry you for that, that's all."

She stared at his lips as he spoke. Because his shadow lay across her he couldn't see her eyes.

On Thursday afternoon he telephoned her. "I just thought you'd like to know that those notes I asked you to put in my trousers pocket last night aren't there."

"You're right. They were on the bedroom floor. You must have dropped them."

"Then it must have been the way you hung my trousers."

"Perhaps it was. I was just about to ring you, if we can talk about something else now. There's something here."

"Look, you don't want me to come home, do you? I've got two minutes to conference. Come up here if you must."

"Please don't disturb yourself. It's nothing I can't deal with."

"On your showing with those notes I'd tend to wonder."

"Well, I'll have to try to improve. I should be able to take care of my own house, shouldn't I. After all, my place is in the home."

"Not necessarily. Not without efficiency."

At the door of the conference room he turned and rang the switchboard. "If my wife calls, call me," he said. Later, as he drove home, a frown kept shadowing his vision. I mustn't expect too much of her, he thought. After all, I'm three years older. I shouldn't be upsetting her except as a last resort. That's not what I'm for.

He pulled down the garage door and hurried along the path through the gardens, which most resembled a few scraps of green velvet among which were stuck lamps like white-headed pins. As he neared the back door his fist, raised to knock, sank. Through the frosted-glass panel of the door he could see on the white walls of the kitchen great blurs of dull crimson. A crimson trickle had seeped beneath the door and down the step.

He was stooping and almost touching the trickle with his fingers, while his mind tried to prepare itself to enter the house, when a pale blur opened the back door. It was Marilyn. She looked almost as if she were sleepwalking. "Mind where you walk," she said. "There's broken glass."

Indeed there was, and some of it still bore fragments of the ketchup label. "Why?" Frank said. "Don't answer that, I'm being stupid."

"Perhaps you are," she said, opening a cupboard and removing a mop and sponges.

"I'll do that. You sit down."

"No. After all, it's my job."

He took her arm gently and having led her to the settee, poured her a whisky. When he'd finished cleaning the kitchen she hadn't touched the drink. He'd counted the labels as he cleared up: at least four bottles. It seemed odd to him that she should have bought so many simply in order to express her frustration.

"Why did you buy so much ketchup?" he said, trying to trivialise.

"It's better than real blood, isn't it?" she said and then smiled sadly at him and frowned, hesitating. "To try to get it over with," she said.

On Friday night he was smiling behind a bouquet. He was happy to be home, to be with Marilyn all weekend: perhaps they could talk. A dull crusted trail of crimson hung down the back step. Must clean that, he thought.

Marilyn was cooking, but she turned and hugged him when she saw the flowers. "We've got a vase somewhere. I'll find it," he said. He found it beneath the sink. As he straightened up he saw the handle of a knife protruding from the kitchen bin. It was the small knife Marilyn used for chopping vegetables, its blade broken.

"Did you break this today?" he said.

"Yes, I broke it."

"I'll buy you another tomorrow."

"No. No thanks, I don't want one."

He arranged the flowers in the glass vase and stood it on the table. As he did so he caught sight of his hand refracted through the water, his fingers broken and warped. He pulled his hand away and glimpsed the knife hanging from the fingers, which were cut half through. They felt cold from the metal and exposure to the air that wedged itself icily into the gashes, yet warm with the blood that pumped up. The raw flesh and nerves seemed to be tasting the metal, for the cold flavour somehow seeped into his brain without relating to his tongue.

He had time to dread moving his hand in case the fingers flopped back against the knuckles before the moment passed. She's infecting me, he thought. No, that's unfair, it's a hangover from the film. That's right, that was the knife David Lloyd was going to use in the film. I wonder what he did with it exactly. Well have to wait and see the film. I hope it's soon. I'd

like to see what he's made of our house. Although perhaps I'd better make sure it doesn't catch me in this sort of susceptible mood.

"Will you cut this for me?" Marilyn called.

She pointed to a French loaf on the bread-board. Suddenly he realised that she'd asked him to cut several things in the past few days: string, vegetables, meat. And the meals she'd made tended to involve little chopping and cutting. The only knives she used were the blunt saw-edged table knives. He frowned.

"I know it's my job," she said.

"Well, it is really."

"Perhaps I'll be better in a few days," she said. He saw her hands were shaking.

"Don't worry," he said. Her gaze sought his lips. He turned toward the bread-board, away from her, and tried to think of an approach to the subject that didn't sound like a cliché. There was no use in beginning with alienation. But he couldn't produce an opening, and while he was pondering he saw her reflected dimly in the glass doors of a cupboard. Her hands were calm. Turning suddenly, he said "It's tension, we'll crack it," and saw her swiftly begin trembling her hands in evidence. Well, he thought, she's saying she needs me to protect her. That's what I've been saying all along, but out loud.

"I know what the tension is," he said. "Now listen and don't argue. It wasn't the film, it was you working. I could see it building up. Now you've given up work you don't know what to do with yourself. I tell you what I'll do. I'll come home for lunch every day. Then you won't have any excuse to get bored with the house. I think you feel it's still a bit unfamiliar, more than I do. But it is your house, you know, Marilyn. More even than mine. It's yours and you're stuck with it."

She was staring at the kitchen bin. He reached out to make her look up at him, but didn't touch her; she might simply withdraw further.. "Now look, you know I'm right," he said. "Just think a bit and you'll see I am."

He sat down on one of the settees. A wedge of light from the front window fell across him; He felt spotlighted, held on a stage by the light. He heard Marilyn stirring soup, the unhurried purr of a mower on a lawn, a group of boys bouncing a football toward the nearby field. He felt the tensions of the

day begin to seep out of him. Everything was all right, he thought, essentially.

A tongue of newspaper thrust through the letterbox, clacking then plopping to the floor. Frank shifted on the settee; he'd get the paper in a minute. Then he heard Marilyn moving behind him, near the stairs. "It's all right, don't bother," he said. "I'll get it." He glanced around to smile. Marilyn was not behind him.

For a retarded moment, during which the light seemed to solidify about him, he had the irrational conviction that she was hiding below the back of the settee. He couldn't stop himself from looking to see. "I thought you'd come out of the kitchen," he called, picking up the newspaper. "Can't imagine why I'd think that."

He'd found an item in the newspaper that made him laugh and was rephrasing it in the terms he felt would amuse her most when his ears began to throb. His blood was thumping them like a shoulder against a door. All at once the sounds around him were snatched away, leaving him suspended in silence. He looked up, glaring. No, the sounds were there, but annoyingly muffled. He poked at his ears, swallowing. They felt as if a vacuum were pulling at them, he thought, and something was tugging at his nerves. He flapped the newspaper at himself angrily, tense, distracted. The light isolated him on its stage.

He'd smoothed put the paper again and was relaxing when he heard a vague muffled sound behind him, rolling down the stairs. More than anything else the muffled quality annoyed him, as if a projectionist had neglected to turn up the sound. What's she doing now? he thought irritably. He turned round, and saw Marilyn in the kitchen, quickly nipping hot plates. But as he turned back to his reading he realised the edge of his eye or of his mind had retained another glimpse, of a red shape coming to rest at the foot of the stairs.

What have we got that's red? he thought, folding a page over. Red? he thought, trying to concentrate on the editorial, denying himself the relief of turning to look. Red? We haven't got anything that's red, he thought. "For God's sake!" he shouted, flinging down the newspaper and striding to the stairs.

There was nothing. Marilyn had run from the kitchen and was staring at him. "It's all right, it's all right," he said, gesturing her away. "It's nothing."

She was still staring at him. "Nothing!" he shouted, frowning at her. He started upstairs. "Just off to the loo," he called to placate her, a motive he didn't bother to conceal.

He was almost at the top when the bedroom door swung open. The top stair creaked loudly. As he stooped to examine it he felt a cold tickling sensation on his face, on his hands. He felt air cutting through his clothes, then through his flesh. Warmth leaked over his skin. He was still wondering what was happening when he felt his eyeballs part. He cried out and fell the length of the stairs.

At his cry Marilyn cried out too. She snatched the broken knife-blade from the bin and ran to the stairs. Frank was lying at the bottom. The shadow of a bruise was growing on his forehead, but he was otherwise unmarked. Heedless of the blood that filled the creases of her hand from her clumsy grip on the blade she stood over him, glaring defiantly up the stairs.

He regained consciousness minutes later, as she cradled him. She was about to help him to his feet when the bedroom door began to tremble. She grabbed the knife-blade from the pool of her blood, wondering if it were about to begin.

The Companion

"If I had the time I'd rewrite much of my old stuff, and *The Companion* is a case where I like some of it (the second half) enough to wish the rest were better. Well, my time is limited, and I'd rather work on something new—perhaps I'll write that ghost train tale from forty years ago. In any case, some people have liked the story—Steve King declared it a favourite, and more recently Jeremy Dyson did. Jeremy and I gave a public reading in Liverpool recently, and *The Companion* seemed to go down pretty well with the audience."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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When Stone reached the fairground, having been misdirected twice, he thought it looked more like a gigantic amusement arcade. A couple of paper cups tumbled and rattled on the shore beneath the promenade, and the cold insinuating October wind scooped the Mersey across the slabs of red rock that formed the beach, across the broken bottles and abandoned tyres. Beneath the stubby white mock turrets of the long fairground façade, the shops displayed souvenirs and fish and chips. Among them, in the fairground entrances, scraps of paper whirled.

Stone almost walked away. This wasn't his best holiday. One fairground in Wales had been closed, and this one certainly wasn't what he'd expected. The guidebook had made it sound like a genuine fairground, sideshows you must stride among not looking in case their barkers lured you in, the sudden shock of waterfalls cascading down what looked like painted cardboard, the shots and bells and wooden concussions of target galleries, the girls' shrieks overhead, the slippery armour and juicy crunch of toffee-apples, the illuminations springing alight against a darkening sky. But at least, he thought, he had chosen his time well. If he went in now he might have the fairground almost to himself.

As he reached an entrance, he saw his mother eating fish and chips from a paper tray. What nonsense! She would never have eaten standing up in public—"like a horse," as she'd used to say. But he watched as she hurried out of the shop, face averted from him and the wind. Of course, it had been the way she ate, with little snatching motions of her fork and mouth. He

pushed the incident to the side of his mind in the hope that it would fall away, and hurried through the entrance, into the clamour of colour and noise.

The high roof with its bare iron girders reminded him at once of a railway station, but the place was noisier still. The uproar—the echoing sirens and jets and dangerous groaning of metal—trapped, and was deafening. It was so overwhelming that he had to remind himself he could see, even if he couldn't hear. But there wasn't much to see. The machines looked faded and dusty. Cars like huge armchairs were lurching and spinning helplessly along a switchback, a canvas canopy was closing over an endless parade of seats, a great disc tasselled with seats was lifting towards the roof, dangling a lone couple over its gears. With so few people in sight it seemed almost that the machines, frustrated by inaction, were operating themselves. For a moment Stone had the impression of being shut in a dusty room where the toys, as in childhood tales, had come to life.

He shrugged vaguely and turned to leave. Perhaps he could drive to the fairground at Southport, though it was a good few miles across the Mersey. His holiday was dwindling rapidly. He wondered how they were managing at the tax office in his absence. Slower as usual, no doubt.

Then he saw the roundabout. It was like a toy forgotten by another child and left here, or handed down the generations. Beneath its ornate scrolled canopy the horses rode on poles towards their reflections in a ring of mirrors. The horses were white wood or wood painted white, their bodies dappled with purple, red, and green, and some of their sketched faces too. On the hub, above a notice made in Amsterdam, an organ piped to itself. Around it Stone saw carved fish, mermen, zephyrs, a head and shoulders smoking a pipe in a frame, a landscape of hills and lake and unfurling perched hawk. "Oh yes," Stone said.

As he clambered onto the platform he felt a hint of embarrassment, but nobody seemed to be watching. "Can you pay me," said the head in the frame. "My boy's gone for a minute."

The man's hair was the colour of the smoke from his pipe. His lips puckered on the stem and smiled. "It's a good roundabout," Stone said.

"You know about them, do you?"

"Well, a little." The man looked disappointed, and Stone hurried on. "I know a lot of fairgrounds. They're my holiday, you see, every year. Each year I cover a different area. I may write a book." The idea had occasionally tempted him—but he hadn't taken notes, and he still had ten years to retirement, for which the book had suggested itself as an activity.

"You go alone every year?"

"It has its merits. Less expensive, for one thing. Helps me save. Before I retire I mean to see Disneyland and Vienna." He thought of the Big Wheel, Harry Lime, the earth falling away beneath. "I'll get on," he said.

He patted the unyielding shoulders of the horse, and remembered a childhood friend who'd had a rocking horse in his bedroom. Stone had ridden it a few times, more and more wildly when it was nearly time to go home; his friend's bedroom was brighter than his, and as he clung to the wooden shoulders he was clutching the friendly room too. Funny thinking of that now, he thought. Because I haven't been on a roundabout for years, I suppose.

The roundabout stirred; the horse lifted him, let him sink. As they moved forward, slowly gathering momentum, Stone saw a crowd surging through one of the entrances and spreading through the funfair. He grimaced: it had been his fairground for a little while, they needn't have arrived just as he was enjoying his roundabout.

The crowd swung away. A jangle of pinball machines sailed by. Amid the dodgems a giant with a barrel body was spinning, flapping its limp arms, a red electric cigar thrust in its blank grin and throbbing in time with its slow thick laughter. A tinny voice read Bingo numbers, buzzing indistinctly. Perhaps it was because he hadn't eaten for a while, saving himself for the toffee-apples, but he was growing dizzy—it felt like the whirling blurred shot of the fair in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, a fair he hadn't liked because it was too grim. Give him *Strangers on a Train*, *Some Came Running*, *The Third Man*, even the fairground murder in *Horrors of the Black Museum*. He shook his head to try to control his pouring thoughts.

But the fair was spinning faster. The Ghost Train's station raced by, howling and screaming. People strolling past the roundabout looked jerky as drawings in a thaumatrope. Here came the Ghost Train once more, and Stone glimpsed the queue beneath the beckoning green corpse. They were staring at him. No, he realised next time round, they were staring at the

roundabout. He was just something that kept appearing as they watched. At the end of the queue, staring and poking around inside his nostrils, stood Stone's father.

Stone gripped the horse's neck as he began to fall. The man was already wandering away towards the dodgems. Why was his mind so traitorous today? It wouldn't be so bad if the comparisons it made weren't so repulsive. Why, he'd never met a man or woman to compare with his parents. Admired people, yes, but not in the same way. Not since the two polished boxes had been lowered into holes and hidden. Noise and colour spun about him and inside him. Why wasn't he allowing himself to think about his parents' death? He knew why he was blocking, and that should be his salvation: at the age of ten he'd suffered death and hell every night.

He clung to the wood in the whirlpool and remembered. His father had denied him a nightlight and his mother had nodded, saying "Yes, I think it's time." He'd lain in bed, terrified to move in case he betrayed his presence to the darkness, mouthing "Please God don't let it" over and over. He lay so that he could see the faint grey vertical line of the window between the curtains in the far distance, but even that light seemed to be receding. He knew that death and hell would be like this. Sometimes, as he began to blur with sleep and the room grew larger and the shapes dark against the darkness awoke, he couldn't tell that he hadn't already died.

He sat back as the horse slowed and he began to slip forward across its neck. What then? Eventually he'd seen through the self-perpetuating trap of religious guilt, of hell, of not daring not to believe in it because then it would get you. For a while he'd been vaguely uneasy in dark places, but not sufficiently so to track down the feeling and conquer it. After a while it had dissipated, along with his parents' overt disapproval of his atheism. Yes, he thought as his memories and the roundabout slowed, I was happiest then, lying in bed hearing and feeling them and the house around me. Then, when he was thirty, a telephone call had summoned him to the hole in the road, to the sight of the car like a dead black beetle protruding from the hole. There had been a moment of sheer vertiginous terror, and then it was over. His parents had gone into darkness. That was enough. It was the one almost religious observance he imposed on himself: think no more.

And there was no reason to do so now. He staggered away from the roundabout, towards the pinball arcade that occupied most of one side of

the funfair. He remembered how, when he lay mouthing soundless pleas in bed, he would sometimes stop and think of what he'd read about dreams: that they might last for hours but in reality occupied only a split second. Was the same true of thoughts? And prayers, when you had nothing but darkness by which to tell the time? Besides defending him, his prayers were counting off the moments before dawn. Perhaps he had used up only a minute, only a second of darkness. Death and hell—what strange ideas I used to have, he thought. Especially for a ten-year-old. I wonder where they went. Away with short trousers and pimples and everything else I grew out of, of course.

Three boys of about twelve were crowded around a pinball machine. As they moved apart momentarily he saw that they were trying to start it with a coin on a piece of wire. He took a stride towards them and opened his mouth—but suppose they turned on him? If they set about him, pulled him down and kicked him, his shouts would never be heard for the uproar.

There was no sign of an attendant. Stone hurried back to the roundabout, where several little girls were mounting horses. "Those boys are up to no good," he complained to the man in the frame.

"You! Yes, you! I've seen you before. Don't let me see you again," the man shouted. They dispersed, swaggering. "Things didn't use to be like this," Stone said, breathing hard with relief. "I suppose your roundabout is all that's left of the old fairground."

"The old one? No, this didn't come from there."

"I thought the old one must have been taken over."

"No, it's still there, what's left of it," the man said. "I don't know what you'd find there now. Through that exit is the quickest way. You'll come to the side entrance in five minutes, if it's still open."

The moon had risen. It glided along the rooftops as Stone emerged from the back of the funfair and hurried along the terraced street. Its light lingered on the tips of chimneys and the peaks of roofs. Inside the houses, above slivers of earth or stone that passed for front gardens, Stone saw faces silvered by television.

At the end of the terrace, beyond a wider road, he saw an identical street paralleled by an alley. Just keep going. The moon cleared the roofs as he crossed the intersection, and left a whitish patch on his vision. He was

trying to blink it away as he reached the street, and so he wasn't certain if he glimpsed a group of boys emerging from the street he'd just left and running into the alley.

Anxiety hurried him onward while he wondered if he should turn back. His car was on the promenade; he could reach it in five minutes. They must be the boys he had seen in the pinball arcade, out for revenge. Quite possibly they had knives or broken bottles; no doubt they knew how to use them from the television. His heels clacked in the silence. Dark exits from the alley gaped between the houses. He tried to set his feet down gently as he ran. The boys were making no sound at all, at least none that reached him. If they managed to overbalance him they could smash his bones while he struggled to rise. At his age that could be worse than dangerous. Another exit lurked between the houses, which looked threatening in their weight and impassivity. He must stay on his feet whatever happened. If the boys got hold of his arms he could only shout for help. The houses fell back as the street curved, their opposite numbers loomed closer. In front of him, beyond a wall of corrugated tin, lay the old fairground.

He halted panting, trying to quell his breath before it blotted out any sounds in the alley. Where he had hoped to find a well-lit road to the promenade, both sides of the street ended as if lopped, and the way was blocked by the wall of tin. In the middle, however, the tin had been prised back like a lid, and a jagged entrance yawned among the sharp shadows and moonlit inscriptions. The fairground was closed and deserted.

As he realised that the last exit was back beyond the curve of the street, Stone stepped through the gap in the tin. He stared down the street, which was empty but for scattered fragments of brick and glass. It occurred to him that they might not have been the same boys after all. He pulled the tin to behind him and looked around.

The circular booths, the long target galleries, the low roller coaster, the ark and the crazy house, draped shadow over each other and merged with the dimness of the paths between. Even the roundabout was hooded by darkness hanging from its canopy. Such wood as he could see in the moonlight looked ragged, the paint patchy. But between the silent machines and stalls one ride was faintly illuminated: the Ghost Train.

He walked towards it. Its front was emitting a pale green glow which at first sight looked like moonlight, but which was brighter than the white

tinge the moon imparted to the adjoining rides. Stone could see one car on the rails, close to the entrance to the ride. As he approached, he glimpsed from the corner of his eye a group of men, stallholders presumably, talking and gesticulating in the shadows between two stalls. So the fairground wasn't entirely deserted. They might be about to close, but perhaps they would allow him one ride, seeing that the Ghost Train was still lit. He hoped they hadn't seen him using the vandals' entrance.

As he reached the ride and realised that the glow came from a coat of luminous paint, liberally applied but now rather dull and threadbare, he heard a loud clang from the tin wall. It might have been someone throwing a brick, or someone reopening the torn door; the stalls obstructed his view. He glanced quickly about for another exit, but found none. He might run into a dead end. It was best to stay where he was. He couldn't trust the stallholders; they might live nearby, they might know the boys or even be their parents. As a child he'd once run to someone who had proved to be his attacker's unhelpful father. He climbed into the Ghost Train car.

Nothing happened. Nobody was attending the ride. Stone strained his ears. Neither the boys, if they were there, nor the attendant seemed to be approaching. If he called out the boys would hear him. Instead, frustrated and furious, he began to kick the metal inside the nose of the car.

Immediately the car trundled forward over the lip of an incline in the track and plunged through the Ghost Train doors into darkness.

As he swung round an unseen clattering curve, surrounded by noise and the dark, Stone felt as if he had suddenly become the victim of delirium. He remembered his storm-racked childhood bed and the teeming darkness pouring into him. Why on earth had he come on this ride? He'd never liked the ghost trains as a child, and as he grew up he had instinctively avoided them. He'd allowed his panic to trap him. The boys might be waiting when he emerged. Well, in that case he would appeal to whoever was operating the ride. He sat back, gripping the wooden seat beneath him with both hands, and gave himself up to the straining of metal, the abrupt swoops of the car, and the darkness.

Then, as his anxiety about the outcome of the ride diminished, another impression began to trickle back. As the car had swung around the first curve he'd glimpsed an illuminated shape, two illuminated shapes, withdrawn so swiftly that he'd had no time to glance up at them. He had the

impression that they had been the faces of a man and a woman, gazing down at him. At once they had vanished into the darkness or been swept away by it. It seemed to him for some reason very important to remember their expressions.

Before he could pursue this, he saw a greyish glow ahead of him. He felt an unreasoning hope that it would be a window, which might give him an idea of the extent of the darkness. But already he could see that its shape was too irregular. A little closer and he could make it out. It was a large stuffed grey rabbit with huge glass or plastic eyes, squatting upright in an alcove with its front paws extended before it. Not a dead rabbit, of course: a toy. Beneath him the car was clattering and shaking, yet he had the odd notion that this was a deliberate effect, that in fact the car had halted and the rabbit was approaching or growing. Rubbish, he thought. It was a pretty feeble ghost, anyway. Childish. His hands pulled at splinters on the wooden seat beneath him. The rabbit rushed towards him as the track descended a slight slope. One of its eyes was loose, and whitish stuffing hung down its cheek from the hole. The rabbit was at least four feet tall. As the car almost collided with it before whipping away around a curve, the rabbit toppled towards him and the light which illuminated it went out.

Stone gasped and clutched his chest. He'd twisted round to look behind him at the darkness where he judged the rabbit to have been, until a spasm wrenched him frontwards again. Light tickling drifted over his face. He shuddered, then relaxed. Of course they always had threads hanging down for cobwebs, his friends had told him that. But no wonder the fairground was deserted, if this was the best they could do. Giant toys lit up, indeed. Not only cheap but liable to give children nightmares.

The car coursed up a slight incline and down again before shaking itself in a frenzy around several curves. Trying to soften you up before the next shock, Stone thought. Not me, thank you very much. He lay back in his seat and sighed loudly with boredom. The sound hung on his ears like muffs. Why did I do that? he wondered. It's not as if the operator can hear me. Then who can? Having spent its energy on the curves, the car was slowing. Stone peered ahead, trying to anticipate. Obviously he was meant to relax before the car startled him with a sudden jerk. As he peered, he found his eyes were adjusting to the darkness. At least he could make out a few feet

ahead, at the side of the track, a squat and bulky grey shape. He squinted as the car coasted towards it. It was a large armchair.

The car came abreast of it and halted. Stone peered at the chair. In the dim hectic flecked light, which seemed to attract and outline all the restless discs on his eyes, the chair somehow looked larger than he. Perhaps it was further away than he'd thought. Some clothes thrown over the back of the chair looked diminished by it, but they could be a child's clothes. If nothing else, Stone thought, it's instructive to watch my mind working. Now let's get on.

Then he noticed that the almost invisible light was flickering. Either that, which was possible although he couldn't determine the source of the light, or the clothes were shifting; very gradually but nonetheless definitely, as if something hidden by them were lifting them to peer out, perhaps preparatory to emerging. Stone leaned towards the chair. Let's see what it is, let's get it over with. But the light was far too dim, the chair too distant. Probably he would be unable to see it even when it emerged, the way the light had been allowed to run down, unless he left the car and went closer.

He had one hand on the side of the car when he realised that if the car moved off while he was out of it he would be left to grope his way through the darkness. He slumped back, and as he did so he glimpsed a violent movement among the clothes near the seat of the chair. He glanced towards it. Before his eyes could focus, the dim grey light was extinguished.

Stone sat for a moment, all of him concentrating on the silence, the blind darkness. Then he began to kick frantically at the nose of the car. The car shook a little with his attack, but stayed where it was. By the time it decided to move forward, the pressure of his blood seemed to be turning the darkness red.

When the car nosed its way around the next curve, slowing as if sniffing the track ahead, Stone heard a mute thud and creak of wood above the noise of the wheels. It came from in front of him. The sort of thing you hear in a house at night, he thought. Soon be out now.

Without warning a face came rushing towards him out of the darkness a few feet ahead. It jerked forward as he did. Of course it would, he thought with a grimace, sinking back and watching his face sink briefly into the mirror. Now he could see that he and the car were surrounded by a faint light which extended as far as the wooden frame of the mirror. Must be the

end of the ride. They can't get any more obvious than that. Effective in its way, I suppose.

He watched himself in the mirror as the car followed the curve past. His silhouette loomed on the greyish light, which had fallen behind. Suddenly he frowned. His silhouette was moving independent of the movement of the car. It was beginning to swing out of the limits of the mirror. Then he remembered the wardrobe that had stood at the foot of his childhood bed, and realised what was happening. The mirror was set in a door, which was opening.

Stone pressed himself against the opposite side of the car, which had slowed almost to a halt. No, no, he thought, it mustn't. Don't. He heard a grinding of gears behind him; unmeshed metal shrieked. He threw his body forward, against the nose of the car. In the darkness to his left he heard the creak of the door and a soft thud. The car moved a little, then caught the gears and ground forward.

As the light went out behind him, Stone felt a weight fall beside him on the seat.

He cried out. Or tried to, for as he gulped in air it seemed to draw darkness into his lungs, darkness that swelled and poured into his heart and brain. There was a moment in which he knew nothing, as if he'd become darkness and silence and the memory of suffering. Then the car was rattling on, the darkness was sweeping over him and by, and the nose of the car banged open the doors and plunged out into the night.

As the car swung onto the length of track outside the Ghost Train, Stone caught sight of the gap between the stalls where he had thought he'd seen the stallholders. A welling moonlight showed him that between the stalls stood a pile of sacks, nodding and gesticulating in the wind. Then the seat beside him emerged from the shadow, and he looked down.

Next to him on the seat was a shrunken hooded figure. It wore a faded jacket and trousers striped and patched in various colours, indistinguishable in the receding moonlight. The head almost reached his shoulder. Its arms hung slack at its sides, and its feet drummed laxly on the metal beneath the seat. Shrinking away, Stone reached for the front of the car to pull himself to his feet, and the figure's head fell back.

Stone closed his eyes. When he opened them he saw within the hood an oval of white cloth upon which—black crosses for eyes, a barred crescent for a mouth—a grinning face was stitched.

As he had suddenly realised that the car hadn't halted nor even slowed before plunging down the incline back into the Ghost Train, Stone did not immediately notice that the figure had taken his hand.

The Precognitive Trip

Written In: 1973
First published in *Inconsequential Tales*

Nobody heard the lecture until it had finished, of course. Like the rest, Berger was gazing at the film of the moonlit silver sea unfurling on the wall of the main hall of the Centre. His body assimilated the speech as his consciousness sailed. Then the sea faded and he heard what had been said.

"We are a threat," Rowe had been saying. "If you don't believe me go out and ask someone what's in this building. Evens they'll say witches, Satanists, psychic voyeurs, something they detest. Remember these things if you forget everything else: we could be the next persecuted minority. Make sure we aren't. If you don't wield your image it'll wield you. You have to be a benefit to society and make sure society knows it. But remember also, the majority of us don't choose our talents, they choose us. It's our job to meet their standards."

As the shadow of the Centre peeled back and Berger emerged into dust and sunlight, he realised with a shock not unlike that of precognition that he would probably never enter the building again. The great white walls that had bounded his vision for months were gone. He felt their loss more deeply than the loss of his fellow students. But at the same time he felt vertiginously free.

Rowe came out, his permanent frown cutting a path for him, as Berger and the other precognitives were exchanging a last intricate hand-dance. The dance meant: these movements have no resonance, they can't cause a future, they're neutral. A few people watched as they passed, laughing loudly, shrugging, shaking their heads. "Don't presume to control your future," Rowe said. "You can only ride it. And don't ride too fast or too far. Remember, your body is now."

Berger unlocked his car from its berth, folded the clip into the slim oval body and got in, feeling the single seat embrace him. As the car skimmed

the spiralling ramp into the open air above, he wondered whether Helen would be home yet. Probably not, if her new formula had proved itself in the laboratory. So, good: they could ease into the evening and enjoy a leisurely meal now his nine months' term was over. Sometimes the mere attempt to precognesce would leave him drained and ravenous; sometimes, as now, he felt as if he bounded all time. His first, intensely vivid, memory of Helen's flat tingled through him: cool flat dry colours that touched him as she usually did, calmly and precisely; then the not entirely pleasant shock of his encounter with the bedroom, its glass roof unshuttered and open to the night sky, the rich black shiny surfaces of the material she'd synthesised looking moist and, in the context of the flat, secret. Words she'd spoken tumbled through him, somehow linked. "You may not be a poet but you're the next best thing"—"I'm trusting you with our future"—"Compared with you I'm blind but I think perhaps I'm glad"—"Sometimes I think you've seen something you won't tell me."

Ahead three youths drove, their cars clipped together laterally, one more than legal. A police truck swung around Berger's car, its grapples rising before it. Berger's car snaked around the arrest almost vitally; his fingers seemed hardly to touch the controls, nor his mind to touch his fingers. His mind felt borne on currents of time. Yes, he thought: and Helen anchored him.

He was relaxing into his seat as the car settled into the long straight towards the edge of the city when he saw Helen. She was walking on the side of the barriers nearer the traffic. A thrill that felt like surprise and joy passed through him. He had time to think—what's she doing here?—before he saw that he was walking behind her, that he was hurrying to catch her up, that his foot had slipped, that his hand shooting out to grab the barrier had overbalanced her, that she had fallen in front of a car that scooped her up then trampled her.

He flooded back into now. His mind clasped tight and immobile, he guided the car into a transient berth. Then he glared at the empty stretch where Helen had fallen, swept by cars. The road and everything around him looked and felt dull, as if on the other side of a thin almost invisible plastic sheet. For a moment he tried to convince himself that it had been a false precognition. Some of his fellow students had claimed an ability to distinguish the occasional inevitable fake; he never could. But as he

regained contact with his senses, realised he was hearing the swish of traffic and smelling the dust, he was sure that it had been real. He could still see her rolling and jerking beneath the car.

He felt adrift in time. His shock had given his mind no chance to structure a time or even a date into the vision. Suddenly he realised that the thrill he'd felt on seeing Helen had been that of precognition. He clung to that insight. Gradually, stabilised by it, he began to draw back a little from his emotions. If his feelings for precognition and Helen were indistinguishable then surely he didn't need both. He hurried to a nearby tc booth, but there was no reply from the flat. He sat for twenty minutes, gazing at the place where she'd fallen. Then he grabbed a handful of mud from the edge of a roadside fountain and used it to blind the tc lens before calling.

"Something's wrong with the link," Helen said. "I can't see you."

"I saw my future today."

"Is it good? Am I in it?"

"No," Berger said. "That's why I'm calling."

"At least come home so we can talk about it."

"No," Berger said. "If I do that it might change. I don't know when it starts. I'll send you my address when I know where I am so you can have my things flown. I'll send you money for that and you can keep whatever's left. But please don't try to see me. Goodbye, and thanks for being understanding."

As he emerged from the booth he glimpsed a familiar imagined future dwindling, Helen, the flat. A shudder of emotion passed through him. It faded, leaving him drained and feeling weightless and feverish. He walked slowly back to his car. Beyond it he saw the bare road where he'd seen Helen. Suddenly the significance of its continuing bareness overwhelmed him. He had grasped the present and controlled the future. Now snapped back into focus, and the road, the sky bluer than the domes of the buildings around him, his car, everything became dazzlingly real and immediate. He gasped.

He slid into the car. More! He hadn't destroyed a future, he'd released himself into an infinity of them. He remembered the first time he'd experienced precognition, eight years ago at the age of fourteen: his instantaneous perception of each moment as the centre of an explosion of

possibilities, and a glimpse of some of their effects. He'd lost that intuition and now it was back, more intense than ever. Why? He slipped he car into the stream of traffic. Perhaps Helen had been restricting him. He'd felt defined by their relationship but she'd cramped his future, domesticated his talent as she'd domesticated the night sky. Just imagine, having to predict what children they would have, having to map their futures day by day, draining them and him too of potential, pressured into coming up with fakes! No, he thought, leaning back in his seat and increasing speed. He felt himself exploding with futures. He let go of the controls and hand-danced wildly for a moment, laughing.

It occurred to him to wonder where he was driving so fast. This road would take him ultimately to the southern motorway. Then he remembered that some of the others from the Centre were going south to join research projects, which were including precognitives in their teams experimentally. That was where he was heading. His mind knew what it was doing, he only had to trust it. He recalled how he'd thought of Helen as an anchor. In the sense that she'd weighed him down, perhaps. As their future had been forming he would probably have ended up as a policeman, a good dull job anticipating crimes and, absurd still popular word, accidents. He hadn't needed her to anchor him. He was now.

The sky flickered between trees coursing by on either side of him. He eased himself into the rhythms of the road and the car. As the car rode a hump over a stream he glimpsed a car ahead, concealed from him by the top of the rise. Car from side road: brakes fail momentarily: too far out across main road: crash. His hands anticipated on the controls and he sailed around and past the threat without touching now.

He drove on, laughing freely. Everything around him looked refreshed, luminous with futures. His hands in particular seemed magnificent, guiding the car and him at a touch. Rather than fatiguing him, the latest precognition had filled him with a sense of power. They were collaborators, he and the future.

"You can only ride the future." Rowe had said that, and he should know, even though he wasn't a precognitive. Then I will, Berger thought. For a moment he struggled with his mind to recapture the easy precognition he'd just experienced. The sky and the fields began to look heavy, weighed down

with the present, encumbering his mind. Then he relaxed his struggles momentarily and his mind slipped him the answer, a simple trusting calm.

The car passed a NO SMOKING sign fixed to a tree. The sound of the engine and the slight deliberately alerting vibration of the car faded into irrelevance and were gone. The car passed a NO SMOKING sign fixed to a tree. Berger's consciousness was dragged back into its socket. The sense of passing everything twice was more disturbing than he'd anticipated. A clatter of birds rose from a field; for a few seconds there seemed to be twice as many, exchanging roles as object and image. Berger's hands tightened on the controls for reassurance. Then he realised that he didn't need continually to check the present. All he needed was calm. It was only like entrusting yourself to a computer pilot in flight. The whole of him smiled broadly, amazed by the simplicity of it. Immediately his mind shifted into a light precognitive trance, and precognition locked into control of his hands.

His mind felt full of drifting ideas. Rowe had been right, you can ride the future, he thought, allowing thoughts to touch him gently as they passed. He remembered how Rowe had encouraged him after Berger had had his psychological, how Rowe had made sure that Berger was given his favourite music over the earphone while he absorbed the lectures and explored his talent, how pleased Rowe had been to hear that he was living with Helen. Well, everyone makes mistakes, Berger thought.

He remembered Rowe saying "We could be the next persecuted minority." He saw him saying "Even I don't like to be as right as that."

Berger's mind reverted, striking the present with an almost tangible blow. His hands clutched the controls. Again he hadn't had time to date the precognition. He tried to hold onto it as it faded, already separated from him by haphazard layers of time. Rowe had been, would be in his office, talking to someone Berger's mind hadn't found significant. The office was redecorated, which implied some way ahead in time. Rowe looked older, and his frown wasn't that of habitual telepathic strain, but an expression of heavy defeat. That was all. When? Why?

For a moment Berger's mind was pure despair. If Rowe looked like that it was hardly worth going on. The sky and the fields streaming by were pressed against his eyes, flat and lifeless and immovable. Then he realised that he was merely denying the future and dooming himself. There was time before Rowe's defeat, time beyond it. Nothing could neutralise the future.

He let his mind seek forward and take the controls. It could have been a fake that his mind had created to provide symmetry. And if not—if he could trace it perhaps he could avert it. Nothing's worse than respect for the future, he thought, that's the worst sort of superstition. He drove faster to give himself confidence and calm. Hedges whipped by like streaks of green paint, the snouts of cars winced back into side roads. His mind wove expertly between possibilities and Berger lay back laughing, alert for the drifting future.

The road began to descend towards the great pale star of an intersection among the fields. Cars scurried across it like a nest of painted ants, entering and leaving the motorway. Berger felt as if he were being borne gently from the sky to the star on the ground. Of course I don't need to take more control, he rebuked a stray thought. I'm a better driver this way, much better. Far better than most of them down there, that's sure. If they're going to persecute us I can see why. Incomprehension and envy, that's what persecution's made of.

He wondered if the others had discovered how well they could drive and saw two of them, several years later, saying goodbye outside a dilapidated tenement. "One day perhaps they'll let us mind freaks drive cars again," one said. "They can't steal all the future. Don't do that, not out here," he said as the other began a hand-dance. "Someone might see us."

That was about the same time as Rowe, Berger surmised as his car flashed between two others at the intersection. Two's more convincing, they confirm each other. I need to go back a little. But mind freaks, when do they start calling us that? He felt the beginnings of despair tugging at him; he smiled deliberately and let the emotion spread and calm him. Can't switch in the middle of traffic. Then—not a drifting precognition, not the easy control that was driving the car, but a shock that overwhelmed his whole mind—he saw a car plunge into the sudden convergence of two cars at the top of the motorway approach ramp and explode immediately, hurling a file of notes high among the fragments. It was his own.

Convulsing, his hands almost braked the car. The sounds and sensations of the intersection crashed back into his brain, so hard as to numb him and to rob themselves of meaning. The cars ahead hadn't converged, and they were further ahead than he'd seen them. It hadn't happened. It wouldn't happen. Berger felt as if everything around him, the speeding ovals, the sudden

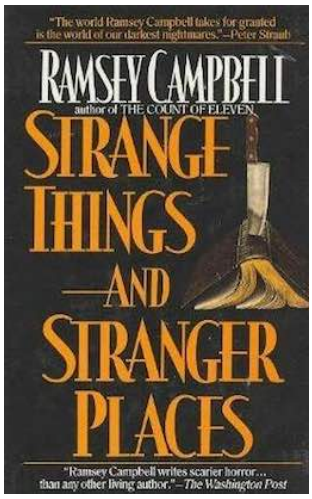
manoeuvres, the light like sharp blows, the juggled colours and hectic white dust, were piling up uninterpreted inside his brain, yet somehow his hands were still guiding the car. He was suddenly terrified that if he tried to examine how he had kept control then he would lose it.

His brain displayed the crash insistently, as if imploring him to see. He let it focus and establish the calm it required in order to persist. The file was sailing through the air to fall by the side of the intersection, its pages flapping feebly and then subsiding. As cars halted in disarray around the crash, someone ran to pick up the file. On the ramp ahead two cars were converging. I've seen that once or is that now? Berger thought, snatching at the man leafing through his file. No, this can't be what I saw. I haven't reached the end of the precognition yet, it can't overlap with now. The man called the other drivers to look at the file. My God, of course! Berger shouted, and crashed.

"Look at this," said the man with the file. "Here's your explanation. He was one of those mind freaks."

"Mind freaks," someone said. "That's a good word for them. A bloody good word."

Medusa


"The world Ramsey Campbell takes for granted is the world of our darkest nightmares."—Peter Straub
RAMSEY CAMPBELL
author of THE COUNT OF ELEVEN
STRANGE THINGS —AND STRANGER PLACES
"Ramsey Campbell writes scarier horror... than any other living author."—The Washington Post

"Several of my other attempts at science fiction saw even less print than this did, and believe me, no wonder. Whereas I wrote a handful of sword and sorcery tales (not counting the Solomon Kane stories I completed) in order to develop images that seemed too extravagant to be accommodated in my usual stuff, my science fiction stories tried to deal with Themes, too consciously, I feel. [...] However, better writers than I have praised it—Dennis Etchison, in his introduction to Bill Minister's three-hundred-copy edition, and T. E. D. Klein—and so they must take some of the responsibility for its presence here."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

"Campbell's first science fiction story is concerned with the individual's need to establish an identity independent of the expectations of family and society."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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For Doug and Lynne Winter—a glimpse of a career that almost was.

I

The shipmen from the *Argosy* had unloaded the supplies and were standing around impatiently waiting for me to say bye. Then Caz came over and took me aside for a moment. His clothes and face looked squashed beneath his snapsuit, earnest in a crumpled way. "You could tell them you've changed your mind," he said. "They survived without you until now. This world won't be good for you. I feel it."

"I thought feeling was my job," I said. I wasn't really laughing at him, and he made me feel less bitter than I sounded.

"It is your job, An, too much so. You let yourself feel without thinking. You haven't thought what life on Fecundity will be like, I don't believe you have."

"Just two men and a worldful of lizards and me, you mean?" I said, catching the image as he thrust it away. 'I know one thing, I'd rather have it

than another year on ship. Even with you," I added, because I shared a little of his sadness; we'd paired a few times.

"Forget me. I know that wasn't important," he said, and I felt him trying to outdistance his self-pity. "*Argosy-18* will be docking here in a few weeks. You could join that if Fecundity's not what you expect. Just don't let them get too much of a hold on you until you're sure."

I said bye and watched them leave. Several Fecunds, their bodies the bright green that I'd been told denoted early adolescence, had gathered at the edge of the jungle. They sucked the sap from a tubular vine and watched the boat dwindle toward the *Argosy*. I realised that I might miss Caz. He'd volunteered to help transport the supplies. Whether he's pilot or steward or, like Caz, a cook, no shipman likes to descend from his ship to a world and its uncontrolled environment. For most shipmen a world is a dirty joke they have to be paid well to visit. That Caz had volunteered and more, had stayed to talk to me meant we'd shared an essence. And of all places, on an *Argosy*.

The Fecunds were looking at the patch the boat had charred. I felt emotion drifting from them, approximately resignation as far as I could tell. I hurried away from them, not because even though only three-quarters grown they were already as tall as me, but because I didn't think I was ready yet to feel them. The gravity was a little less than Earth's or what passes for it, and this combined with the springy braided tangle of pink roots underfoot to buoy me as I went toward the Home.

I had to forget the Code on ship, otherwise I couldn't have done my job. I've never believed in the part about entering buildings, and since they'd left the outest door of the Home open I walked straight in. I peeled off my snapsuit, feeling like a hot raw vegetable, and dropped it in the slot of the sterilizer. Then I opened the inner door and set out to find them.

They were in the bar, drinking from one of the bottles the *Argosy* had sent down. They were sitting on chopped wooden stumps; apart from the white synthetic walls the building was almost entirely furnished from the jungle. Hebby was the smaller wiry man, not as tall as me, four decades and maybe half, a face like a wedge ragged with greying hair at the wide end, a sharp cold expression. Dack was large-boned and approaching three decades like me, and his flesh gave the impression of having melted slightly, especially his face which seemed to hang a little apart from the skull. The climate had

crimped his skin as if he'd been immersed in water. Both of them wore only shorts. I looked at them and at the shoulder-to-shoulder sections of green trunk which were the bar, and at the arcs of wall full of shelves of carved roots and glazed flowers all priced for visitors, and I nearly walked out again. The room was brimming with resigned despair. I caught hold of my mother, shining deep within my mind, and stood where I was.

"We didn't know if you were coming so we started celebrating," Hebby said. "Get yourself a glass."

"I hear you make your own wine."

"Fecundity wine," Dack said, snorting the *f* through his lips. "You don't want that when we've got the real ship brew."

"She can have some if she wants some," Hebby said, and I did. It was strong with a dry harsh taste that suddenly exploded into sweetness. "Good," I said. "*Argosy-18*'s on the way here, full of visitors. We can sell them this."

"They can't have heard about this place," Hebby said. "They'll be the last. The word's been broadcast, be sure. Fecundity will be off the visitors' charts in no time."

"What's wrong with it?" I said. I felt a block. Dack was pulling his shorts away from his skin, sweating, his mind chasing its tail: I can't be sure, what will she think, she mightn't understand. I played it by the Code: never release a block, help it to release itself. "Are you too hot?" I said. "Don't mind me."

"It's just, I don't want," he said.

"Don't worry," I said, stripping. "I'm hot too." I was, and I couldn't believe I would be bothering them, closely paired as they were—not surprisingly, since they'd been here alone for almost a year. It didn't worry me; in fact I found it reassuring. One of them thought: I don't care how sensitive she is, she's assuming, and it was gone before I could place it. "What's wrong with Fecundity?" I said, feeling my buttocks spreading on chopped wood.

"The saurians," Dack said.

"He means the Fecunds," Hebby said. "But he's right. You know what happened to your predecessor."

I'd heard. As soon as the Home had been built *Argosy-8* had docked. One of the visitors had whittled himself a spear one night. He'd been drunk and the spear hadn't killed, only wounded a Fecund. Up to then there had been no communication with the Fecunds; they'd watched the landings and the building of the Home with what my predecessor had felt as mild unease and curiosity, nothing significant. But as the spear struck, the Fecund sent out a blast of emotion so intense that the telepath went into shock and everyone else fled to the boats. Not until a doctor from the *Argosy*, his mind deafened by a struggle between a desire to flee and an imperative to stop the agony, tended to the wound did the silent cry of suffering begin very gradually to wane, although not before two of the visitors had attempted suicide. "Which proves intelligence," I said. "A mind that can do that has to be powerful."

"What mind?" Dack said.

"Doesn't follow," Hebby said. "A defence mechanism isn't intelligent. The Fecunds don't achieve anything, they don't try to approach us, they don't build, they've got no art, no technology, nothing. If they're intelligent it's not in the way we understand it or are ever likely to. So we're sitting here guarding them in case someone comes along and hurts them, in which case we run screaming for help. And maybe someone somewhere's trying to put a research team together. We've food and water and whatever the ships trade for souvenirs and accommodation. Seldom come, because nobody wants to stay in a zoo where you can't even poke the lizards."

"Then I don't know why you've stayed," I said. "Especially nor why you needed me. They told me it wouldn't be a cradling job, so I can't be supposed to look after you. But we aren't authorised to try to communicate with the Fecunds."

"We've reasons that I think will interest you," Hebby said, and the despair in the room lifted for a moment. "They'll take some explaining. Have another drink for now."

I felt them thinking of each other in case I tried to search. I couldn't feel any hint of a threat to me, so I drank.

Later they showed me my room, which was dominated by two wedged sections of trunks between which a hammock was slung. They'd hung the carriers full of my personals, such as they were, on the branches. Hebby showed me where the best shelves and niches were until I told him I would like to find my own. Dack shifted about in the doorway, mumbling that

maybe they could knock out the trunks and trade for some shelves and a bunk next time an *Argosy* docked. "If we're still—" he said, truncated by a glare from Dack and hurried mutual passionate thoughts. Eventually I shooed them out and began to arrange my personals on the trunks.

Then I decided to see a little of Fecundity. I knew I wouldn't sleep much during my first night on a world, not with the feverish heady sensations of lessened gravity and the wine as well. It didn't seem long since I'd sloughed my snapsuit, but the sterilizer warning light was off. I unfolded the suit, made sure it was skin-side in and easing my toes into the feet, pulled it up. As usual I shuddered involuntarily as it snapped shut over my head, but anything's better than a spacesuit.

I'd taken the lenses out of the returns shelf of the sterilizer and was clipping them into my eyes when Hebby and Dack emerged from their room. Like mine, it opened off Welcome. They saw me through the open inner door. "We can't be that intolerable," Dack said.

"I just wanted to have a walk around."

"Show her," Dack said. "It's not far."

"There is something you ought to see," Hebby said. "Before you get any false ideas about Fecundity."

I'd wanted to try to walk myself into the rhythm of Fecundity but I couldn't very well refuse. Besides, I'd half-intended to ask if they would accompany me, although I told myself I could handle the elation my new experience might induce, even the increase in oxygen over shipboard air. "You could sort the visitors' guides if you liked," Hebby said to Dack. "Anyway, we won't be long."

"I know that," Dack said.

"There's no call for you to worry."

"Well, you know you wouldn't want to come."

"Sooner go, sooner back," Dack said, frowning. We emerged into the clearing around the Home. It looked odd, the bald patch of ground extending away four or five hundred yards on each side until it met the jungle. Before they'd built the Home, Argosies had razed the area, grubbed out all the roots and sterilised the ground, then slipped sheets of synthetic beneath it to abort anything they'd missed. In one or two places I could see

the synthetic like exposed bone, and a few greenish-yellow shoots had poked their way up between the sheets. "No danger there," Hebby said. "We can beat the jungle any time we have to."

We made for the gap in the edge of the jungle where the Fecunds had pushed their way through to watch the departure of the boat. It was cooler now, and the sky was tinted a brilliant lemon I could taste. We entered the jungle and I felt as if I'd become the tiny anonymous human in the views I'd been shown on ship, put in to communicate perspective. To give myself some control of the situation I began to appreciate the aptness of the names we'd given the towering vegetation: tridents, devil's candles, the green Venus-mounts set in their cushions of tendrils. Then I thought no, someone's with me if I lose control, and I let myself go.

"Dack says all this makes him feel like an insect," Hebby said. "I wouldn't disagree, except that the feeling bothers him."

Something in me kept sailing up to attain the peaks of the jungle. Huge pink arrowheaded blades with red veins swept up from their roots to a sharp clawed point I had to totter dizzily, head strained back, to see. I remembered the roots which had spread their mat from the jungle across the edge of the sterilised land. The corridor we were following joined another wide corridor. Stars of five or six trunks, bright moist yellow sheathed in hard translucent bark, rose together to a high chord of trembling attenuated tips against the sky. I knew there was something on this world I could love.

"This path leads where we're going," Hebby said, indicating the wider corridor. "You can see they use it more."

"Don't you think the paths show intelligence? In the sense that they could just break their way through the jungle instead of keeping to routes?"

"No. Shows instinct and that's all. Listen, don't think I don't know how you feel. Every time I heard we'd met life I used to hope it would be intelligent. Even when we found they were only animals I used to hope it was a mistake, that it was us not being intelligent enough to understand them. And of course, sometimes it was and no doubt we were better for it when we finally realised. I know you've got to have respect for life. But it's not respect for life if you don't admit that some life doesn't deserve respect, it's idealism and it's dangerous. You shouldn't hurt animals but nor should you respect them, either way you're a traitor to your own race. And what you'll see here is animals with instincts, don't let them delude you. Instincts can be

pretty impressive. Did you know that elephants on Earth, the original Earth, used to remember the place where they all went to die? This world may produce an intelligent race someday, but nobody you or I can imagine will see it. Now that's over. What Earth—I mean, where are you of?"

"I'm not at all sensitive about that, quite the contrary," I said. "Earth-7 and I'm glad I'm here."

"Don't be too glad yet. Dack's Earth-6. They're even more traditionalist there, from what he says. They used to call him Jack. Shows you he wants to leave them behind but he hasn't quite yet. I'm ship. Met Dack on Earth-6 and he told me he was trying to convince himself to work in a Home. There's a few like me each generation, who want life to be a bit messier, a bit unhealthier so we can appreciate health. Saves them having to build quite so many ships." He stopped. "Nothing to worry about," he said.

He meant the Fecunds that were approaching up the corridor, two abreast. I was uneasy, certainly, in fact I was dizzy with emotions. Earlier, when I'd seen the young ones on the edge of the jungle, I'd watched them as I would have watched a view, sealed into myself by the newness of Fecundity and the hot/cold sensation of the snapsuit osmosing my sweat. Now I saw them perhaps as they were, plus impressions and hasty approximations: like great pale green conical fruit, the cone's tip drooping (the long-snouted head); no danger, for they simply walked around anything sentient, breaking themselves a wider path if necessary; the base of the cone separated into two heftily muscled trudging legs; hide like a single piece of thick flexible leaf; the left eyelid of one pursing forward to squeeze out of the eye a stray rolling drop of moisture; the pale adults leading, the progressively brighter young behind; their total lack of vocal sound, the thud and crunch of their tread on roots and leaves; the arms of the two leaders stretching out not quite in unison to crack and bend a wider path; the heads going by above me, snouts puckering; an emotion which perhaps wasn't mine but which through the turmoil I couldn't begin to grasp.

"Couldn't you smell it?" Hebby said, taking his hand away from his face where it had cupped him a snapsuited handful of air.

There was a hot sweet slightly excremental odour trailing behind the plodding Fecunds. "Yes, I suppose so," I said, trying to shake my mind free of pejorative words like plodding.

I saw that the arcade of trunks soon opened into what seemed to be a wide field full of low green mounds. Thick broad-leaved yellow grass sprang up again beneath my feet where the Fecunds had passed. What I'd taken to be a moist cluster of fronds on a trunk separated without warning and came at me, beating gauzy wings and gliding. I closed my mouth, temporarily sealing the snap suit over my lips. Some of the orange glideworms, as my memory named them, brushed against my lenses and I saw the puckered yellow mouth in the tip from which a white tendrilled tongue uncoiled, the glideworm's version of an eye. I walked on, feeling sealed into myself again. "There it is," Hebby said.

I opened myself for a moment, then I sealed. The pale almost white green mounds stretched as far as I could see. They reminded me of stories I'd heard of Old Earth, burial mounds, graveyards. And that was what it was, except that the mounds were dead Fecunds lying in the open. Some were piled in heaps from which gas rose, others lay alone. Within the ruptured skin of the one nearest me I could see yellow eggs and movement.

Fallen trees lay among the corpses. In places, branches had punctured skin as they fell. Nearby I saw a Fecund straddling one of the trunks and eating fruit which it had picked from a purple bush growing through a corpse. The Fecund's weight pressed the trunk down, the branches thrust deeper and fluid welled up from a corpse. "I'm going back now," I said, refusing to admit to Hebby that he'd made his point.

He had to lope to catch up with me. "Stay out a few minutes," he said. "There's something else you ought to see. Not unpleasant, and a good deal more interesting."

I could feel him thinking of Dack again in case I glimpsed the display he was preparing. He had the right to a private mind, of course, but people won't realise that the harder they concentrate on something or even on its concealment the more likely it is to be broadcast in the raw form which makes telepathy unavoidable. I was surprised how conscious his thoughts of Dack were, how much effort he needed to produce them. There was a sense in which I could take them as an insult, as an assumption I had to be reminded that he wasn't interested in me. "That's it," he said.

We'd reached the edge of the Home's patch of ground. He was pointing to a light which glinted on the horizon, through the rising mist. "What is it?" I asked.

"The next planet out in this system. When Argosies were here they had a glance at it, decided it was a form of quartz, uninhabited. We agree it's uninhabited but otherwise we think it's a good deal more interesting. The entire planet's made of it, but we don't think it's quartz. A metal was your staple on Earth-7, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said, sealing.

"Then you'll see what I'm thinking. See it intellectually, I mean. There's nothing in the Argosies contract that says employees can't claim unclaimed territory. We've been observing it for a year and now we need to go up and make an analysis. But first we want to find out something, and that's what you're for."

He'd taken me back to Earth-7 and in my present mood I didn't feel like forgiving. "What?" I said.

"Aren't you wondering why suddenly you can't see any Fecunds? As soon as that planet rises they do that."

After a while I saw where he was pointing. There, and there, and nearer, the pink arrowheaded blades had been pulled down to ground level like huge shells. On some I could just make out the claws of a Fecund, holding the cover down. In one or two places a Fecund's arm, almost as long as its body, exerted itself against the spring of the leaf. Occasionally it would shift to dig its claws deeper, like an uneasy sleeper's arm on a sheet.

"There's usually something else," Hebby said. "Yes, there. Look!"

One of the leaves sprang erect. Two Fecunds, adolescent green, shuffled rapidly out and stood looking at the gleam on the horizon. Then they hurried back, reached up and hung by their claws on the leaf until it creaked down to cover them.

"The bravado of the young," Hebby said. "We want you to read one of them. Find out what they're thinking about that planet."

"Thinking?" I said, pouncing.

"Dogs can think," he said.

"Perhaps when I can feel the Fecunds as they are," I said. "In time."

I hadn't felt anything from the adolescents. Only a dark cold space or an armour around their minds. Taut glideworms slipped past my face. I watched them fertilising the round-lipped flowers of a tree as the tree's

tenant, a chain of large purple fruit with tendrils, snared them. As I walked away, even the sight of the white cylindrical Home and the snapsuited planethopper and redundant groundcar on the bare plain seemed welcoming.

II

By the time I reached my room I felt nauseous, as much from the cumulative effect of the gravity as anything. I didn't sleep for hours. I lay in the hammock. in the silence between the windowless walls. I felt my mother drifting calmly across the far reaches of my mind like a star sailing on the horizon, and I thought a good deal of this:

Once we began to spread from the original Earth (Old Earth as they call it on its imitators, Earth-0 as the shipmen call it) our attitudes had to mature at the speed of our ships. We had to relearn most of them in terms of infinity, and in particular of the infinite variety of life. After the initial few shocks we did so with what I still believe to be admirable determination. The fact that those who couldn't take it were discouraged from leaving Earth helped, of course. Someone must have realised the damage they might do. Instead, contact teams trained in disciplines such as telepathy, comparative culture, comparative psychology and so on were the vanguard, and surprisingly successful too. All this information I found between the lines of a history book which traced our expansion largely through a series of contemporary jokes: "Don't tread on it, federate with it," "Take off those polaroids, I'm saying hello," and the famous one about the benevolent symbionts of Buddha 5, "Don't flush me, I'm your friend."

I say "our" expansion; most Earth-7s wouldn't. Eventually, of course, money overrode the government back on Earth. The industrialists, conscious of having exhausted the world, bought themselves and their employees outward passage. Where they couldn't buy transport they had it built and took the builders with them. They were looking for worlds like Earth, which they could exploit without having to share them with another intelligence. Their surprise was finding so many so easily. Some were colonised direct from Earth, the later ones from their predecessors; all acquired xenophobes from elsewhere. They refused to federate except with each other, but kept to their undertaking not to interfere elsewhere after the horrid example of Earth-3, whose limp attempt at conquest caused it

virtually to destroy itself under the aim of pure telepathic paranoia. I don't know how the idea of calling each world Earth began. Since each Earth believes itself a duplicate of the original if not improved and, as Caz confirmed for me, has history books to prove it, I wasn't supposed to know.

Enough perspective. Knowing these things releases me from Earth-7. Now I can look at my life there.

When I was almost five I often used to visit the assessor's shop in our block. There was one in most blocks, particularly later as people realised that instead of haggling over the worth of third-copy Earth facsimiles they could crossbreed plants and sell them for real ones. I don't think it's only my memory that says his shop was smaller and more crowded than the others; already, among the third- and even fourth-copy books and videotapes, there were ranks of potted flowers which between my birthdays would be replaced by their even more baroque offspring. He gave me a book once, and I remember thinking he looked just like the gnome sitting by himself among the foliage in one of the illustrations, except that he didn't smile until he saw me. One day he lifted me up when I came in, and then each time he lifted me higher until behind his action I glimpsed a sad shadowy face peering up my skirt. I screamed, and I never went in his shop again. My mother wanted him publicly whipped, which was a frequent spectacle but which most people believed to be done with a fake hollow whip filled with synthetic blood, though in fact that was very expensive. But my father (I later learned) gave him the address of the local sexbed house, which included childbeds, and the few times I met him after that I sensed embarrassment, not frustrations. After the incident I heard my father say "We should have known." I gathered he meant both the incident and my perception of it.

I began to become aware that words had shadows, often more solid than they. Some of the shadows were so dark that they settled over my mind like webs heavy with soot. I avoided them instinctively and made straight for the light which, I was delighted to find, often grew brighter when people saw me. I used to be sad when it faded and would play, dance, sing, turn somersaults to coax it forth and to express my joy when it brightened. Not too much or I would exhaust it; I became skilled in determining when to stop. But I was convinced that however much it dwindled, even if it shrank

to a point so minute I couldn't see it, it was still there and wanted nothing more than to be fanned. That was how I decided to become an actress.

I made that ambition the foundation of my life and I didn't look at it again. I went to school and learned all about Earth-7 and a little about the rest of the universe. I registered as a telepath and learned the Code, one of the few things that had survived intact from the original Earth. Never enter a mind uninvited, a room is the extension of a mind so ask to be let into both, always tell people if they're broadcasting. I even practised some of it. My father left us when I was eleven, in pursuit of an affair with the daughter of the family who had the omn synthesising concession on the far side of the world. His virility made him acceptable to a family threatened with barrenness, though he was paid for it in omn, not as he'd hoped in marriage. Sexual disenchantment leading to barrenness was becoming more widespread on Earth-7. I fanned the single light in my mother's mind, which was me.

I left school six years later and enrolled in creativity college. I was surprised to find I was the only telepath in my year. There had in fact been few in my generation, and progressively fewer after that. I remember having a violent argument about the reasons, with the actor I'd paired with for the course (largely to economise on rent). I was convinced that telepathy involved an attitude of mind and discipline, rather than heredity, and that the decline of this attitude was important enough to analyse seriously, even professionally. I wrote a short play and played in it to our first public at the end of the year. It was a failure.

I left it behind and went through two more years' training. I was sure I could have done it in less time, but as the lone telepath I could hardly expect special treatment. At least I knew that like everyone else I was sure of work at the end. They were often forced to minimise casts in the theatres, even the live-and-hologram horror theatres. They had the subsidies and sometimes the audience, but not the creatives. I managed to join the cast of the largest in New York, the Lovecraft Monster Theatre.

It took me five performances to feel what was wrong strongly enough to leave. I'd been cast as comic relief. I was a space explorer whose peak scene involved chasing a hologrammatic monster composed largely of hair and synthetic faeces around the theatre, shouting "Come back here, in some ways you remind me of my husband." I didn't like it but I had to start

somewhere. I felt the way the audience related to the scene and I grabbed hold of it and acted it out. That was what I'd done when I was little, acted out the little girl the adults were seeing. I grasped the heightened image they were seeing and built on that, using their minds as steps to a climax. But then I found that their minds had stopped building. I was trying to climb on nothingness all alone. Ha ha ha ha *ho ho ho* ha ha, clap clap clap ha ha clap clap. I knew the sounds people made when they were enjoying themselves. But I could also look behind the stares and know that the light I'd been trying to fan had gone completely. It hadn't been there at all.

It was here I had to realise that my mind had been so solidly founded that I hadn't even thought to examine my ambition occasionally. When when I came near, with my notions about the decline of telepathy, I didn't relate the concepts. Now I had to admit an explanation.

It was there all around me: omn. One of those words you can't even remember learning. Scratch the ground almost anywhere on Earth-7 and if it isn't already visible it will be then: omn. I was very young when I learned the definition too: by far the commonest mineral on Earth-7, twice as hard as your fingernail. Add that it can be compounded easily into substances as hard or soft or malleable or whatever as you want. Add further that it is a dull green about the colour of an anonymous paint after years of weathering, and that as if to remind you of their origins the compounds persist in that colour. Consider that it represents I should say three-quarters of what Earth-7s see every day: hills, soil, machinery, even some buildings. And that most of them work with it: my father quarried it, my mother compounded it in the laboratory. Omn: it even sounds as it is, the sound of a heavy gong immediately muffled. All that was why I knew I couldn't stand groping around in the dull green inside people's heads. So I left the theatre, determined for the sake of my clarity of mind to write a book about my revelation.

A year later I tore it up, angry and miserable and aware that I couldn't distinguish the point at which the dulling of my own perceptions began to affect my view of everyone else's. I had to persuade myself of that or accept that every mind on Earth-7 was dark, even those of children. A few weeks later I began to wonder if I could write a novel on all these themes. I tried. Meanwhile I worked cross-breeding flowers, because most people's minds came closest to lighting as they watched the progression of colours. Then I

set myself up as an omn creator, which meant learning the elements of sculpture, opening a street stall and sculpting direct from people's minds. It was profitable but more disheartening than the theatre, and I was close to finishing my novel after nineteen months and certain that nobody, even those who didn't specialise in Earth facsimiles, would publish it.

Then my mother died.

Perhaps because we'd grown closer over the years and so I knew where to look for it, or perhaps because I'd devoted myself to it as much for my sake as hers, I could always see the light in her mind when I wanted to, and know it was there even when I didn't call on it. Sometimes it was set in dull velvety green, but however tiny it was always clear. I was miles away across New York when it went out. It was like going blind, except that everything in the street instantly pressed against my eyes, too close for me to see. I stood and cried out. Then I ran for the El.

As the train rocked I felt as if the light was being jerked out of reach as I clutched at it. I nearly had it, but it was fluttering with panic and skipped away. I forced myself toward calm and let my mind mould to the essence of my mother. I closed my mind about her like hands about a moth and began to project: I'm here, I've got you. I'd hardly ever projected before, except once when she'd heard that someone had fallen from the El and had thought it was me. Now I felt as if I were an armour about her, and projected without thinking. I remembered performing aerobatics for her when I was little. As I remembered the light grew.

When I reached home all the windows of our terrace were curtained, a hundred of them. They looked separate yet united, and for the first time I noticed there wasn't a green among them. My mother had died twenty minutes ago of a heart attack, I was told. I felt her glowing in my mind. I watched her corpse being borne away and listened to the onomatopoeic gongs in the church and saw the urn carried into the spire for the wind to scatter her ashes, and wondered how soon I could leave Earth-7. I knew I would have to release my mother, but not here. I could already feel her fluttering restlessly then trying to sink back into the depths of my mind. A mind isn't made for two people.

So I went to Argosies. It's an irony so familiar the shipmen don't even bother to repeat it that the planets most dedicated to the idea of their own superiority produce the greatest number of people anxious to travel. The

richer you are the younger you go, which of course means that most don't go at all. But the irony is basically false, since the visitors are dedicated to seeking inferiority and return brandishing the most repulsive tales of symbiosis and miscegenation the shipmen can produce or, when necessary, invent. As for the shipmen, given the prices they're paid by the visitors they can even bear to pick them up and deviate a little from their trade routes between the federated worlds and build Homes. Their one notorious problem is the reactions of many visitors to the experience of space. The visitors refuse suspended animation: they may be terrified but they won't be robbed of their journey. Which is why, since my father had been told the secret by a telepath friend, I got the job immediately.

In fact I found the prospect exciting. Now that I'd hastened projecting, which seemed to involve nothing more than rechannelling the subject's thoughts or emotions in terms of the structure of the subject mind, I was anxious to make use of it. More: I felt that in space, if anywhere, I could rekindle the lights I missed, however deep they lay. Space would be my great ally. I donned a waitress' costume in the boat and was enormously excited, as if preparing for a game.

They'd examined me before I was allowed near the boat, but somehow I managed to develop a cold during my first day on ship. The shipmen looked at me in horror and one or two hurried away to be sick. By the time I'd shaken it off and emerged from my cabin, acquiring a coat as I went from a disinfectant spray directed by a snapsuited young shipman, I identified the polarised vistas of space with the floating specks of fever. I levered myself up as best I could through the minds of the shipmen, who had domesticated space as a kind of immense constantly changing hologram. I'd waived the Code in their employ and didn't see why they should be exempt. One or two held potential fear, and I avoided them.

Then I took hold of three of the visitors, much to the surly relief of the shipwoman telepath who had been cradling them all during my fever. "Usual material. About average," she described them. That was why I left the ship. One man was sailing forward helplessly into a gigantic gulping vagina. One woman felt huge white masks peering in the windows behind her. Another man was simply falling, diarrhoea and vomit and shame trailing him like a comet's tail. Yet their faces frowned and pouted and strained to smile at the other faces, and didn't even twitch. I felt as if I were

groping in the dark and ignored by everyone, in a nursery full of vague giant objects about to tread or fall on me. I groped and turned the first keys I could find: man riding the ship; woman making up in an infinite friendly mirror; man floating on a childhood picture's cloud. Then I left them, returning only in response to alarms. I couldn't inhabit their fears, they were too large and required me to hire out too much of myself without being sure I could retrieve it. I might either numb myself like the shipwoman and risk losing the motivation of my telepathy, or shatter.

Caz helped me. It was Caz who when I came into the visitors' kitchen ashamed and sodden with disinfectant, invisibly so, said, "You should have seen what they did to me when I came back from Buddha 5." It was Caz who watched my playing at being a waitress while I played at cradling the visitors' minds, watched me and sympathised while I played at smiling at the visitors and never having seen them outside the food-room. It was Caz who, one day when my mother was struggling bewildered in my mind while I began to topple into the vagina as the masks peered closer, sat me down and scooped the floored meal into the disposal and cooked the meal again. It was Caz who paired with me to give me a hold in the void, not realising that I had to battle his dim fear of psychic robbery and castration by my experience of his orgasm. And it was Caz who underwent a spraying as he emerged from the visitors' staff's quarters, and found the Fecundity personnel call near the *Argosy*'s route, and told the bridge I hadn't recovered from the loss of my mother and "you know these telepaths, they have to be like they're made of crystal," all of which I let him believe, and had my contract transferred and arranged for a replacement telepath to be waiting at the next federated dock. All I had to do was grope in the dark a few times and turn the keys tight, and wait for Fecundity.

III

Towards evening some three weeks after my arrival, Hebby was showing me how to clarify the shapes in roots by carving when Dack ran in. "This is it, you won't believe," he said to Hebby. "Come and see."

"He's just showing me," I said, but they'd gone. They came back ten minutes later. "That's it," Hebby said. "Better than we've been waiting for."

"All right, I'll play," I said. "Unless you're going to invite me in."

Hebby's mind clenched protectively around his thoughts. "Shall we tell her?" he said.

"Wouldn't mean anything. You don't know geology, do you?" Dack said to me.

My sciences had grown thinner as I grew older and had snapped long before I left school. Later I associated them with the dull green workday memories in my mother's mind. But I resented Dack's assumption. "You must have the elements in your mind somewhere," I said. "I might just see if I can dig them out and learn that way."

"Don't!" Dack cried, covering his cranium with his hands then pulling them away with an angry rush of dignity.

"She won't," Hebby said, and I shook my head in confirmation. "Listen, An, you'll appreciate this. How would you react to a substance that never stops growing?"

"No way particularly."

"As a creative? You don't see a whole new creativity coming from it? To leave aside the scientific possibilities. I can't even imagine them."

"You're not telling it right," Dack said. "It's that planet you call Eveningstar, An, the one Hebby and me stayed here for. I've been observing it. The structure's crystalline, we told you that. Do you know crystals? Well, I'll try and simplify it for you. They're still growing. I've watched them forcing themselves up through the surface, which is slower. The growth can't be plutonic because they continue to grow on the surface, it isn't magma as I understand it because there's no evidence of heat to speak of, it isn't metamorphic activity because there doesn't seem to be a change in structure."

"Stop showing off," Hebby said. "Straightforwardly, the diameter of Eveningstar has increased while we've been observing it. The planet's growing without releasing any energy that need bother us. We want to take a closer look. But first we want to know quickly what the Fecunds have against it."

"Unauthorised contact is a federal crime," I said. "It's in the Argosies contracts."

"They made you break your Code when you signed that contract," Dack said. "You can't be loyal to them and to what you are. What right do they have to our loyalty? Because there's edible food here they give us hardly any real food. They give us pay which we can't spend here, and not much of that. They don't try to get us visitors. They leave us a planethopper which would get us to three consecutive planets, just about, if we're lucky and they're not too far apart, if trouble broke out here. It won't, but that's not the point. We don't want to hurt the Fecunds. All we want is for you to try to feel what they're feeling." Growing in his mind was a sense of being trapped by jungle, and a broken promise of a holiday.

"Say yes and I'll program the planethopper," Hebby said. "Sooner go, sooner we can file the claim before the next *Argosy* comes in. Each *Argosy* makes it more likely they'll realise that here's a claim worth filing, you know. After your experience I wouldn't have thought you'd have wanted them to have it. And if you're worried that the federal team will find you in the minds of the Fecunds, don't. By the time they arrive, if, we'll be on the other side of space and able to buy them six times over." Eagerness nearing the edge of frustration in his mind.

"I wanted to find out more about the Fecunds first," I said. "I don't know them. But all right, I'll try."

I stood outside the Home while they rushed about, pulling back the snapsuit skin from the planethopper, programming its idiot-savant computer, lifting in the red three-legged globe of the distress signal, loading supplies. A flock of eggbirds, blue ovals with wings and retractable legs, hovered in a down-pointing cone above the jungle. I gazed along the surrounding wall of brilliant intricate rearing bursting vegetation, still but intensely alive in the clear yellow early evening light. "Dack, you attract a Fecund while I finish checking the hopper," Hebby said. "If we wait much longer they'll start covering."

Dack hurried away. "You'd better go with him," Hebby said. "Not too close or they'll just walk round you. A lot of movement at a distance makes them curious. Bring it out where it can see what part of the sky we're pointing at."

It was the first time I'd entered the jungle since Hebby had shown me the field. Since then I'd stood at the edge of the jungle watching the Fecunds, trying to overcome what I'd seen, and of course it had grown in my mind while I searched the Home for jobs the others hadn't already claimed. Dack

had already found a Fecund, sucking on a vine. It was a dazzling youthful green and only a little taller than us. Dack was dancing for it. He was more graceful and alluring than I'd ever been.

I joined him and started leaping, somersaulting, handstanding, surprised that I could still do so effortlessly and in a snapsuit too. No doubt it was the gravity. I was handstanding and laughing at the sight of the Fecund like a great green hanging fruit wrinkling its tip when it began to move. I fell, terror rushing through me. Most of it was Dack's. The jungle towered above him, he was an insect about to be trodden. "Hebby wants it right out in the open," I panted, dancing backwards.

The Fecund hesitated at the edge of the razed area, then came on. I had a faint impression of its response to the area, something vaguely approaching an embarrassed giggle. I disliked thinking of the Fecund as it, which seemed pejorative and alienating, but whatever genitals it had were hidden in a cleft above its legs. I searched gently for sexual awareness, but the search began to mirror itself at once. "It's no good," I said. "There's nothing I can assume. I can't interpret from nothing."

"Bring it further," Dack said, and his mind pleaded.

The Fecund was plodding stumpily after us, toward the Home. Dust puffed beneath its tread. It was looking at the Home, and its silent giggle continued. Or perhaps my hasty interpretation did. I tried to clear my mind and start again. The impression returned. "Over here," Hebby said from the doorway of the Home.

He shoved me into the doorway, behind the Fecund. "You just feel," he said. "We'll point."

All I could see was the stolid green back of the Fecund and squeezed between it and the doorframe, glimpses of Hebby and Dack silently jerking their fingers toward the sky. I closed my eyes. An impression drifted toward my mind and I caught at it. "Lifeless," I said. "Barren. Empty womb."

"Lifeless," Dack muttered. "So much for their prejudices."

"Pairing with stone," I said. "Something like a dirty joke—no, that's probably over-interpretation. Obscene."

The impressions were sailing toward me faster, growing larger, more intense. I had to structure them quickly before they overwhelmed me. "Very approximately, monster story, no, folk tradition, innate knowledge, racial

memory perhaps," I stammered to relieve my mind a little. "Giving birth to stone. Fecunds with stone heads. Bare plain. Ranks of Fecunds with their heads lined with stone. What are you doing?"

I'd opened my eyes. The Fecund was shuffling back and forth, trapped. Its skin was moist and working like a grub's. Eveningstar had risen, and Hebby and Dack had closed in so that the Fecund couldn't escape without knocking one of them aside. "Let it go!" I cried, feeling the distress cry beginning within my mind as if all my nerves were a moment away from exploding with pain.

"Not yet," Hebby said. "What else?"

Then the Fecund purged, narrowly missing Dack, who sprang away. At once the Fecund plunged through the gap he'd left and stumped swiftly away, the threat of its cry fading. "Filthy animal," Dack cried. "Filthy, filthy," and he grabbed a sharp tool from beside the planethopper and ran awkwardly after the Fecund.

I interrupted his motivation. He turned blank-eyed then shocked. "You did that," he said.

"And I'd do it again."

"You're more of a woman than she is," Hebby said to Dack. "Put those tools in the hopper and get in. An, one question now and let's get off before we overshoot the program. Then anything you have to say you can say in flight. Did you feel any warning about Eveningstar?"

My mind told me that I'd felt the terror of a persecuted adolescent, an adolescent hemmed in by terror. "If I had I don't think I would tell you," I said. "But no. However, I'm not going."

"Please," Hebby said. "We don't know what effect this may have had. They just might turn hostile. Whether the federals arrived in time or not this wouldn't be a place to stay. And we still don't know about Eveningstar. There may still be something there you'd notice where we wouldn't. I don't think you'd want anything to happen to us even now. You may not like what we did but remember, we don't feel as intensely as you." Desperation nearing despair. "We need you," he said.

Fecundity had dwindled to a bright arrested kaleidoscope, to a blur of colours, to a greenish-purple sphere when I said, "All that rushing about

was to distract me. And sending Dack into the jungle so I'd feel his fear. It was all planned."

"I'm afraid so," Hebby said, and Dack said, "And you didn't realise. Shows you're not as sensitive as you like to think."

IV

When Eveningstar swelled from a globe of milk with a dazzling rim to a white glittering expanse beneath the planethopper I'd lost all sense of time. For me the flight had been measured by silence, and the taste of dehydrates dryly blooming in my mouth, and the slow growth of Eveningstar ahead. Several times I'd felt a tentative remorse reaching toward me from within Hebby's mind then, as his lips pursed to keep it in, falling back. Dack had kept talking geology with him, and eventually began trying to show me the lights and luminous whorls of space streaming past. I put the empty seat between me and the others and leaned my head against the storage compartments, drifting inside myself. I noticed that the computer must have stolen some of their time-sense as well. Long before we reached the point where they would have to take control they were glancing at the chronom.

We were only a few hundred feet above Eveningstar and hovering in search of a hospitable landing when Hebby said for the second time "No life, you're sure?"

I was observing the landscape, or rather an odd effect it was having on my mind. The eye-filling plain of frozen milk, translucently frosted on the surface with paler crystals, the hint of a pattern where light caught a curve of crystal faces, a pattern something like interlocking and overlapping cogs, all this persisted briefly in my mind even when I looked away, like the image of bright light on the retina. "No life," I said.

The planethopper bumped down, shifted slightly and settled. My mind produced the crackle of upthrust crystals pulverising beneath our weight. I could feel Dack's refreshment as the still glazed plain erased the rioting colours and textures of Fecundity from his mind. From Hebby came only control so powerful it felt like an unbroken sphere.

The sun rested on the horizon. Its rays struck the tips of crystals and shattered them into colour. The plain was strewn with sparks that seemed to hover just above it, blue, pale green, violet, coldly burning red. Further off

they hung in a packed band of throbbing colour, and beyond was grey dimness. I opened myself to the sight but was surprised, even granting my awareness of the intervening polarised windows, to find that my emotions weren't touched. My mind kept trying to fix the point at which the separate static explosions of fight merged into the vibrating band, and that was all.

Dack had put his arm around Hebby's shoulders and was pointing at the spectacle of the landscape. Desire was fretting in his mind, mute because aware of me behind his head like a hindering shadow. Hebby was aware of me in a way that he, therefore I, couldn't define. I felt his resigned acknowledgement of Dack's smothered longing. "We should sleep now," he said. "One good day's work tomorrow and we can be away and ahead."

My mind felt light and difficult to weigh down with sleep, and besides I knew why he wanted me asleep. I almost said: can't you two feel a bit more quietly? But if I saw no reason not to say it I also saw no reason to suffer the argument which would no doubt ensue. They must know they broadcast sometimes, I thought, it's all a game in which we have to pretend we don't know we're playing it. I'm best sitting out. I reclined my chair and closed my eyes.

I was huge and slowly rolling. It took me a long time to awake, because I had to pull myself up through several layers of awareness. The surface, an oppressive crust I had to battle through, was a sense of impotence like that I'd received from Caz while pairing but far worse, stifling. I withdrew from it far enough to see that it came from Hebby, and then I was fully awake. "See, it was her," I heard Dack say above me. "There, you can see she's only pretending to be asleep."

I opened my eyes before I was blinded and deafened by impotence and rage. Hebby was waiting in front of them, and as soon as they opened his face swelled with blood. "So it was you," he said. "That much is in your face. What's the matter, jealous? Do you want some too? I'm ready any time, be sure."

"I'll hold her," Dack said.

"Don't be stupid," Hebby said. "What makes you think I'd need that? Of course, she's making you think so."

I knew I could trace their hatred to its roots and snap it off. But I also knew instinctively that I mustn't manipulate Hebby's mind or his still controlled

rage and disquiet would spill out, scalding us all. Instead I made straight for the defensiveness which his words only partly concealed. "Please don't let Dack do this to me," I said. "I really was asleep until you woke me. I'm not jealous of anyone. I just wanted to be somewhere I didn't need to relate very much. I was glad you two were paired. I just wanted to work and maybe even try not to be a telepath for a while."

"You can't believe her," Dack said. "You can feel her all the time, making you have to shrink so she can't see you. It's like the jungle. She doesn't have to do anything, you can always feel her there."

"I never knew you felt that way," I said. I'd felt his fear that I might steal Hebby, but nothing else. I'd been going blind and hadn't realised.

"Never knew!" Dack shouted. "Listen to her!"

"I don't think she did," Hebby said, gazing at me. "Any more than I did."

"I'm sorry if I haven't let you know me," I said. "I know I've just helped and done jobs and not made myself clear. If I'd known you weren't seeing me I'd have been clearer. But at least it shows I'm not what you think I am. If I had been I'd have known to protect myself." I was surprised how true all this was. I was at the same time disturbed to feel my face and body shifting about to express my conviction. My face felt like a mask I was clumsily trying to sculpt. I saw my head sinking, my expression drooping. My mind was threatening laughter. Instead, I managed to reenter myself enough to weep.

"She's trying to say she isn't affecting us," Dack said.

"Obviously I am," I said. "But I don't mean to. I wouldn't have any reason to inhibit you. It's probably just my being here that did it. And you can't expect me to do anything about that."

"It doesn't matter if I believe you or not," Hebby said, and he'd sphered himself again. "But I must behave as if I do, otherwise this flight will be a disaster. Same for you, Dack. Leave her alone from now on. Remember why we're here and let's stay ahead of Argosies." He lay back in his chair and so did Dack eventually, frowning. But I felt them both waiting for me to fall asleep before they relaxed their minds.

In the morning I awoke first, forcing myself up through sleep like layers of melted cheese. I set out dehydrates and a tube each of juice. When Hebby and Dack awoke they grinned in embarrassment and ate silently. I did catch

a faint suspicion from Dack that I'd tampered with the dehydrates, before he dismissed the idea as absurd. I gazed out onto the plain, where light lay jagged as lightning along the highest tips of crystal.

Then it was suiting time. I found I'd still been hoping that we could survive with snapsuits, quite irrationally since the mass of Eveningstar could hold little atmosphere. I cradled my helmet in my hands and stared at it. "Aren't you ready?" Dack said. "Sooner go, further we're ahead." I screwed it into place and at once my world sounded like the inside of a balloon, and my breathing as if my lungs were pressed against my ears, inflating into them. My flesh squirmed between bone and suit. Nevertheless, I pulled the suit hood over the top of the helmet and sealed them together.

Descending was the worst part: not being able to feel the rungs of the ladder through the thick synthetic soles, risking loss of foothold by trying to see through the too slightly inclined helmet how securely planted my feet were. Then we were down and beginning to walk, and already a somewhat nauseous euphoria was uncoiling in me. Because the spacesuit billowed slightly and plucked at me like a loose skin, while I felt as though floating within it. Because of the sight of the pumped-up figures of Hebby and Dack ahead, each hobbling as if his ankles were chained closely together. Because of the landscape gliding sluggishly by like a retarded silent videotape to which my sucking whistling breath had been added as accompaniment. Because of the way colours stirred and faded above the motionless creamy landscape as I moved, while further off the plain seemed to crack with outlines of light. Because I couldn't relate to the landscape in any way: the fact that I called it motionless proved that. Because, shuffling along above this unheard unfelt world, I felt as if my mind were drifting loose from everything.

A tiny Hebby was squeaking against my ear. "Dack, don't be afraid to go too slow. An, looks like a slippery incline ahead of you. Don't fall but if you do, remember to get your elbows down. They're reinforced for it. Field of very thin crystals ahead, Dack, you can't see them from your angle. Good for samples but don't put your weight on them. Anything interesting, An?" He kept asking me that in what I knew was an attempt to include me, which only made me feel more excluded. I knew my usefulness had ended once I'd confirmed there was no life.

I shuffled forward, feeling nothing. My gaze became caught in the endlessly elaborated pattern of frozen translucent explosions, tiny splayed hexagonal pillars thrown partly out by the ground and interwoven in concatenated series stretching from beneath my feet everywhere I looked. Whole crystal layers wide as fields had been forced up, tilting, grinding together until their contiguous edges shattered, forming a ridge crowned with awry crystals. The rings and interlocking curves of the pattern expanded about me, exploding slowly with a gleam as light linked them to my eye, reiterating their theme: six, six minus a spoke of its explosion or sharing one with its neighbour, a tiny brilliant sexagonal gleam from the tip of a crystal, six, six. Dust glittered where crystals had fought while growing. "See that dust, An," Dack said. "I'm surprised there's not more of it. Perhaps it recombines. You'll have noticed that the surface is relatively level. This is because the crystal growth is slow and even. So much so that if I hadn't been photographing this world regularly I wouldn't have observed it. This means that the conflicts of growth cause pulverisation, so that any uplift or deformation is local and minor. But that brings us back to the dust." I supposed this might be his way of including me. But it occurred to me as his voice nagged against my ear that it had more to do with his need to possess a landscape. Not that it mattered. I didn't feel it, simply registered it intellectually.

"Chisel, Dack," Hebby said. I glanced over as Dack hobbled to him, and saw the dull gleam of omn. No doubt they'd chosen it for its hardness. Since I hadn't told them about Earth-7 and omn and me, I could hardly expect them to know. But all I felt was exclusion, from them and from the landscape.

I gazed at a nearby erect crystal. It was as creamily opaque as the ground underfoot, where several layers of crystal collaborated to reflect light and to make me feel attended by a constant mobile white stage. The shadow of the crystal was poised on the lip of a ridge; in a moment it would slip over. I waited, engrossed. Time attenuated. Perhaps the ridge was growing as the shadow moved and they would maintain equilibrium. No, the ridge was slower. I felt my mind adjusting to the pace of Eveningstar.

I felt a tugging at my mind. A blink of blinding light, searing my mind but gone before I felt it was more than a pure imperative. A light something like my mother. No, she was far back down my mind, and this was too violent

and bright. I had to contain it, it threatened to burn, it was intolerable. I sketched an outline from its after-image and enclosed it next time it came. It was a woman. From her neck grew a featureless head of white crystal. It was me: Hebby's subliminal version of the Fecunds' fears. "An, I've been calling you for minutes," his voice said in my ear. "Is she moving? I think she's heard us at last."

"Sorry, I was thinking," I said, turning back to them resentfully when I saw that while I'd been distracted the shadow had made its move. They were both watching me through masks of reflected crystal.

I hung back when we returned to the planethopper, perhaps because I could at least explain my sense of unreality while outside and suited. When I entered at last and sealed the doors Hebby and Dack had their backs to me and were unscrewing their helmets. They reminded me of jars I'd opened when I was little to see what was inside. Suddenly I became fascinated. What was inside the helmets?

The helmets came off and I saw something strange and disturbing: the backs of two heads. I'd never looked at them before, these faceless featureless swellings covered with growth, one stubbly and dry grey, a bit patchy, the other fatter, sitting on pink rings of neck, its bulb heavy with hanging moist brown coils. Delicate pink protrusions with a thicker rim emerged on either side of the growth. Now the bulbs were moving around through the hollow cramped rectangle of space in the cabin, bobbing on their thick stalks. I removed my own helmet and suit and began to search the cabin for sixes, on which my mind could more easily fasten—a sexagonal accident of shadow on the floor, a chance arrangement of the instruments Dack was removing from storage. Eventually my gaze rested on the landscape outside.

Satisfied after a while, my mind explored the cabin again. The others had been examining and analysing their crystals, pursuing them through magnifications, submitting them to the action of a chemical simulator. "No trace of a solvent. Certainly no metamorphic activity, there's no structural difference between the samples I can see," Hebby said, among other things I couldn't recall. "They're still growing but there's no expenditure of energy. It's like geological evolution speeded up but with no energy perceptible. A life of their own, almost," Dack said. "Notice that they tend to concavity. It's worth considering implosion as their motive force, an implosion

immediately translated into growth." I let their voices drift through me, and watched while Dack trained a heat rod on a crystal, and the flesh beneath his chin glowed red then white, and the surface on which he was working darkened as it prepared to melt or to burst into flame. "Isn't that dangerous?" I said.

"Dack," Hebby said. "We don't want to be that sooner."

"She's doing it," Dack said; then with a strenuous simultaneously resented effort, "I don't mean I'm blaming you, An. Perhaps you're doing it unconsciously."

"Inefficiency's nobody's fault but your own," Hebby said.

"I'll be outside," I said.

"Don't be stupid. Dack, you finish now. We're all tired. I don't think I've ever felt so tired. It's the change in gravity. Eat now then sleep, and tomorrow we can finish and be far."

"You say sleep as if it were easy. It isn't for me," Dack said, primed with frustration.

"Then make the effort."

"I mean to go outside for a while," I said. "I need peace before I can be useful. I began to feel it out there before. I'll be half an hour and I don't intend to hurt myself. You'll be able to see me if you look."

"Stay near the hopper," Hebby said, and a smile in his eyes sought a reflection in mine. I didn't understand why; my own words had meant little to me, I'd simply wanted to attach the sixes that were floating restlessly in my mind to something. Then I realised: he thought I was leaving to give them an opportunity to rid themselves of tension. No doubt that was a good reason. I nodded. Dack watched us, frowning.

I was surprised to find how near the sun was to the horizon. As I descended the colours of the plain were switched on. They distracted me; they weren't sixes, and they blotted out everything else. In some way they reminded me of my mother. It occurred to me that I'd never felt anyone else's death. Of course there hadn't been anyone else close to me who could have died. But it was odd that I'd never even felt a hint of the numerous deaths that must have happened near me. I remembered realising that I'd become partially blind as a telepath; this might have been where the blind spot had begun

growing. Not that I'd felt my mother's death, rather the reverse; I'd felt continuity. Perhaps it wasn't my mother in my mind at all but only my idea of her. Her fight began to flutter wildly deep in my mind, and I hastily directed my thoughts elsewhere.

I floated. Lights, one of them presumably my mother, hung around me. Above me were Hebby and Dack. Globed inside myself, I began to accumulate an impression which, now I let it gather, stretched back as far as an undefined moment in our approach to Eveningstar. Very approximately, it was an impression that my mind had been moving, perhaps rotating, from light to shadow then into light again. So vague was the notion that I couldn't begin to determine in which direction I was now moving, if it were a matter of my moving at all. I assumed there had to be a point at which the umbra reached maximum intensity. I didn't know how to work out whether I'd passed that point, or what happened when it was reached.

My mind felt as if having drifted free of all externals it were imploding. I disliked the sensation, and began to climb back toward the planethopper. But no doubt Hebby and Dack were pairing. At least I could hold myself stable by them. I stood clutching the rungs and entered Hebby and Dack.

They were pairing. I'd never seen men doing so, let alone shared the essence of it. But it confirmed the view of pairing I'd had for as long as I could remember: a rather clumsy rather absurd sort of physical and sometimes mental toil, which worked in proportion to how successfully you could blind yourself to its mechanics. Indeed, both of them were surprised and depressed by the amount of toil required this time.

Hebby was thinking of me outside, reassuring himself that I was safe, wishing he could pair with me both for his sake and mine, but reminding himself that he had to stay faithful to Dack, who needed that. I traced myself through his mind. Thanks, he was thinking, thanks that she didn't ask why the Home was so close to that corpsefield. Especially since it disturbed her and she must have realised how it upset Dack. Image: once a field was sufficiently fertile the Fecunds broke down another less fertile area and went there to die. Thanks that we managed to avoid telling her that. We'd have heard crop rotation and manuring and intelligence, and no flight to Eveningstar.

He was right, I thought. There'd been questions I should have realised needed to be asked. There was more to Fecundity than I'd known or they'd

admitted. Maybe I could go back and have another look.

Dack was thinking about not thinking about Earth-6, which made it easy for me to slip through the lapses in his control. Learning geology on Earth-6, so far as it was taught. Another boy on the same course who agreed that everyone on Earth-6 was trying to live in a mirror. Sharing an apartment with him. Both getting narcoticised one night and pairing, a brief violent desperate image swept aside by Dack's mind but not before I'd examined it: the boy represented everything Dack wanted to feel was true and pairing a gesture against everything false, a rather self-conscious equation I could neither decipher nor solve. Dack's mind was beginning to writhe, barriers sprang up to divert me into endless paths of disguising trivia. I knew he could lure me into the maze he'd built of himself. But drained of sympathy, I suddenly felt colossally powerful. I forged straight to the culmination of his disgust.

I was on the edge of one of the fields on Fecundity. Several dozen Fecunds were standing on fallen trees among the corpses. They were gazing in various directions, and all of them were absolutely still. Dack's mind was writhing frantically, and up in the planethopper his body was squirming to be free of the threat of memory, but I followed the image as it burrowed deeper into his unconscious. It was the emblem of all that was moist, of irrepressible frightful growth. The nearest Fecunds were gazing at a corpse a few yards from me. Its dry mound of skin was stubbled with grass, and beside it lay several burst yellow shells. As I watched a rent in the skin parted further and young glideworms began to emerge, a few at a time. Clouds of pastel colour drifted across their raised wings and instantly vanished as the wings dried. Then the glide-worms rose in a fluttering mass, spread out and sped gliding into the jungle. The heads of the Fecunds rose to watch, and their still gazes followed the flight until it was obscured by the trees. Then Pack's mind shuddered violently, forcing his loathing up almost to the surface. Having learned everything I emerged.

As soon as they'd finished pairing I returned to the cabin. They looked hot, exhausted, flustered. Hebby realised at once what my timing implied. He wasn't sure whether I'd experienced their pairing as a purely impersonal sensation, without reference to them. He thought it had perhaps helped and included me a little. Dack's realisation was more gradual, and I was already in my chair behind my closed eyes, shutting them out because their

presence nagged at my ease, and thinking I would rather return to Fecundity than go with them.

When I awoke it was bright. The sun was almost overhead. Dack was using a microscope while Hebby gazed from the window and made calculations. Light hung around me, trapped into confusions by the surfaces of the cabin. I wondered for a moment why I could see only confusion, then realised that the instruments and controls weren't familiar to me, never had been. I closed my eyes.

My glimpses of the cabin expanded lethargically through my mind. They parted like treacle and sailed away, and six grew in my mind. I began to see and think six. I felt a gradual steady intensification. Of what? My mind was approaching a point of transition. I opened my eyes. Hebby and Dack were where I'd last seen them, it seemed a long time ago. They weren't six. But it did seem an enormously long time since I'd seen them. "Aren't we taking longer than we meant to?" I said at last.

Hebby stared at me as if he were having trouble focusing, he glared at the distraction. "No," he said in a tone meant to express the effort of speaking.

Some time later I heard him say beyond my closed eyelids: "The growth is accelerating. It has been since we landed if my calculations are correct. Not just the samples, the whole place. But there's still no energy to speak of being released. If there's danger it may be of a kind we wouldn't recognise. Dack, I'm talking to you."

I opened my eyes. Hebby was staring at Dack, who was trying to use his microscope at least a foot away from his eye. I felt Hebby's thought, directed consciously straight at me: if you can feel me thinking then try to feel what's happened to Dack. Then it was gone, doused by the knowledge that I couldn't tell him even if I discovered something, because that would destroy the vestiges of trust. What a game, I thought. Not worth playing.

Dack saw us both staring at him. "She's doing it," he shouted. "She's inside us all the time. If she isn't, ask her why she didn't want us to make ourselves clearer instead of just her. She betrayed herself there. She's in my mind and I can't get hold of it."

"I wish I could feel what's wrong with him," I said to Hebby. "But it's gone completely. I only felt you asking because you thought it straight at me. I

think we're all being affected by the crystal somehow. We should leave while we can."

I don't think I could have persuaded them. But they both turned automatically and looked toward the control panels, and realised that they couldn't see them.

The knowledge was so sudden and shocking I even felt it for a moment. All they could see was a jumble of light and metal and synthetic, no sixes. While they had been analysing the crystals then minds had been letting go of anything they weren't referring directly to. And because they had been preoccupied I hadn't felt them going, or if I had I'd confused it with my own experience.

They were on the edge of shock. Hebby looked blinded. Dack's hands were moving restlessly and his thumbs were burrowing into his fists. I realised that I wouldn't be able to have another look at Fecundity. Not unless someone picked us up. "The distress signal," I said.

I felt their minds stirring and reaching tentatively into the chaos of surfaces and light before retreating baffled. I tried to remember the signal. Six. Half six. It had three legs. "It's red," I remembered suddenly. "Look for red."

Eventually they found it, clipped to a wall. I hadn't moved from my seat, because the doors were a little ahead on my left and I had an intuition that if I moved and lost the doors we would be completely disoriented. "You set it up, Dack," I said, because Hebby was hardly moving.

"Do as she says," Hebby said.

I watched Dack moving toward the doors. There was a discordant image in the middle distance of my mind, something about the inside of a balloon. Dack opened the inner door. "Close that," I said triumphantly. "Spacesuit first."

I felt his muffled resentment of the games that were being played with him. I managed to remember where I'd been standing when I'd last closed the balloon over my head, and pointed until my arm grew tired and they found the suits. "Bring me mine, Hebby," I said. "And get yours. If we all suit there'll be less chance of a mistake." I meant that we could watch each other to avoid amnesiac mistakes in suiting but I probably sounded more callous. I was tiring of this game of using words.

We suited in a circle, watching each other fumble. It was like a play acted by cretins. I stood with part of me always touching my chair, to maintain orientation. At last we'd compared our suiting and agreed on the crucial elements we should have in common. Then I opened the inner door. Dack shuffled forward with the signal. "Switch it on," I said, and after some consultation we managed to activate the bulb and presumably its broadcast. I closed the door behind Dack.

An orange bulb lit. After a good deal of slow sticky thought I realised that this wasn't the distress signal but the indicator showing that the outer door had opened. My hand remained on the door controls. Some considerable time probably passed before I said to Hebby: "Let's stand in the door. There's just about room for us both. Then we can see if he needs help."

I managed to close the outer door and open the inner. I guided Hebby in. His mind had obviously collapsed into passivity. I followed him and reversed the opening of the doors.

The sun had almost reached the horizon. Beneath the dusting of pinpoints of light the sixes were reiterated endlessly, imperceptibly yet inexorably growing. I moved forward to stand pressed against Hebby at the top of the ladder. As we looked down our helmets scraped together. Perhaps they would shatter. My mind filled with six.

Then, as we traced the pattern back toward us, we saw Dack. He was standing over the distress signal, which had fallen on its side near the planethopper's jets. He was glaring down at it as if it were an intruder. His posture promised violence.

"No," Hebby said. It was a syllable of almost inarticulate agonised terror. He swung himself out onto the ladder and hurried down. I watched his hooded helmet jerk downward with a silent bump bump bump. Then the sixes stretched before me unobscured. Before I had quite absorbed them I remembered that if the signal weren't set up we wouldn't be able to see Fecundity again. I wasn't so sure now that I wanted to, but I felt it was my right. I grasped the holds and felt my way onto the ladder.

At the bottom I met what looked like a static hologram. Hebby had lost impetus and was standing just beyond the ladder. Dack hadn't moved. He looked engrossed in sixes now, and no doubt the presence of the signal had ceased to disturb him. Both of them were blurred by the hovering mist of multicoloured light suspended almost as far as the horizon.

As I came alongside him Hebby moved with me. Perhaps his renewed terror again gave him impetus, for he outdistanced me and had almost reached the signal before Dack saw him. I was slowing, for my mind and the inexorable rolling had almost attuned. No doubt the same was happening to Hebby and Dack, and perhaps the only instinct left to Dack was physical self-preservation. Perhaps, seeing us both bearing down on the signal, he thought we'd finally united against him. Whyever, he picked up the signal and with one of the legs smashed Hebby's helmet.

There was a crack and a brief high wheeze of breath. Hebby fell beneath the jets. The blow must have damaged his helmet transmitter, for it kept sputtering and buzzing against my ears. I continued walking. Dack backed away, raising the signal over his head, and fell backwards over Hebby. The signal fell near me, I think. It must have been the heavy object I picked up. Drifting images: red, no doubt that of the signal; a high sound (Hebby's broken transmitter?); raising the signal and letting it fall several times, no doubt to test its weight; flinging it as far as it would go.

I found my way back into the planethopper before my suit's air gave out. With a completely irrational notion of making for Fecundity I pulled at a few of the surfaces where I remembered the control panel to be. When some of them moved and a shudder passed through the planethopper I returned to myself a little and hurriedly shoved them back into place. I realised that some indeterminate time ago I'd passed the point where the graduating shadow achieved greatest intensity in my mind. I took off my spacesuit and all my clothes, whose insistent presence was beginning to annoy me, and sat in my chair.

Ahead the landscape was dark. But six was in my mind, implicit there so that I no longer had to search for it. After a long slow growth a concept formed in my mind. It hung there, slowly crystallising until it had translated itself in terms of my mind. Thus: good. It was good. It was useful.

I was useful to think with. I had been added to a mind.

There were other concepts that my mind helped to form:

Unalterable six, increasing. All becomes six.

Slowly rolling.

They took me several weeks.

V

Eventually there was sound, I was being moved, sixes were dimming as they were pulled away from me. There were pale pink bulbs around and above me with moist globes and wet slits moving, making sounds: faces. My mind began to attenuate as its supporting sixes retreated, it became too thin to support even its own weight, and much later I awoke on *Argosy-18*.

People came into the cabin to look at me and I lay looking at them. All of them looked in pain or worried, not necessarily by me. I observed that my time-sense was returning, although I could only assume that it was gradually approaching objectivity. Food was brought in, which I ate. Eventually one of the people who had been looking at me reappeared and introduced himself. He was Lun, a shipman telepath. "I've been reading what happened from you," he said.

"I didn't feel you doing it."

"That's part of what's still wrong." At the back of his eyes was a sad fear. "If it helps, we've been able to deduce approximately what was happening," he said, "that crystal's a unique phenomenon, far as we know. How it grows we can't tell, but the energy it releases is closer to thought than any other form we know. So your consciousness and those of your companions had to restructure themselves to comprehend the effect. That's our physicist's hypothesis. We want nothing to do with the crystal, be sure. We might have it put out of orbit, though the bridge thinks that might upset the balance on Fecundity somehow."

I thought that might or might not be a pity. "Did I kill Dack?" I said.

"Yes, so far as I can tell. Your mind isn't clear on that point. It isn't traumatised, there's simply a perception which can't be translated without a restructuring you would have to achieve yourself. That's where the only evidence is. When you were trying to pilot the hopper you destroyed the bodies. Thank your clumsiness: you didn't put out the distress signal completely, only its broadcast. I've told the bridge that your companions made a suicide pact. Effect of the crystal. If the bridge can't trust their telepath they can't trust anyone."

"Then you don't blame me."

"Not for everything, no. At this stage blame isn't relevant. Cure is, and that's what I'm here to talk about." He halted until I sat up. "Recall what happens when a Fecund is wounded. When we couldn't make contact with the Fecundity Home a party went down. Among them was our visitors welcome officer, new this trip. He turned out to be a latent xenophobe. It was deep, because they hadn't discovered it on his own ship, even our selection panel hadn't. Nor me, too busy cradling our visitors. He shot three Fecunds. They aren't dead, and our doctor who luckily is as nonsensitive a man as you could meet is healing them now. But it's been bad. Recall how people have looked. We're completing our parabola now to pick him up, and it's getting worse."

"I can't feel it," I said.

"Exactly." His eyes repeated the sense of each phrase. That's why I think you could survive if you went down to Fecundity now. Survive in one sense, that is. To survive completely you would have to feel their cry. Your loss of feeling has saved you so far, but you have to be a telepath or nothing. I've seen someone go telepathically blind, and be sure it's death, inevitable passive suicide. Now this could damage you, or it could be gradual enough for you to bear. But there's a draw in you toward Fecundity. And that intuition is all you have left."

There was more to see on Fecundity, fewer people, I thought: that was something. "All right," I said.

"The boat that picks up the doctor will take you down. I've persuaded the bridge that you're capable of withstanding the cry until it's over and incapable of doing harm. That at least will be true, because we're having all potential weapons removed from the Home. No knives, no breakable containers. You'll have to subsist on dehydrates and local edibles, I'm afraid. We've put out a personnel call but you'll be alone until the next *Argosy* docks, maybe longer. And once you're there, even if you want to it may be a long time before you can leave."

I wished he would be quiet. I was sure the Fecunds' cries couldn't be more nagging. "I've said all right," I said.

As the boat sank toward Fecundity I felt nothing. I gazed up at the two hundred yards of the *Argosy*, like a white horizontally hanging drop with its point truncated, reeling out the boat on threads of remote control. I gazed

down at the Home rising on its stage of dust, and the doctor standing near the white pillar, among carriers full of potential weapons.

When he'd gone I entered the Home. I ate a dehydrate and drank some Fecundity wine. I looked into my room. One carrier full of lesser personals still hung on a branch. The personals I'd taken with me in the planethopper I had left on *Argosy-18* for whoever wanted them.

I began to walk through the six levels of crescented rooms and trunks and hammocks. When I tired of that I went into Hebby's and Dack's room. I was surprised how little they'd left: a few carved roots, a diary with Dack's signature but no entries. There was a faint lightening deep in my mind. It annoyed me because I couldn't define what it was.

After some hours I'd exhausted sitting in the Home. It vexed me to have to put on a snapsuit, but I supposed there wasn't much point in suffering from exposure. Besides, it vexed me more to sit brooding on the dimly waxing not quite definable light in my mind, which throbbed dully like the first prolonged threat of toothache. I went toward the jungle.

The colours were fading slightly as evening approached. Still, I found their profusion intolerable; they were too varied and distracting, they wouldn't leave me alone. I entered the main path toward the field, walking because I knew to return to the Home would allow me no relief. The light insisted, flickering almost into coherence. What was it like?

Ahead of me several Fecunds were returning two abreast from the field, and at once my mind produced a memory and seized it. The light was my mother. I could feel her now, fluttering nervously and frantically in the midst of a great cold hollow, fluttering in terror of the hollow that knew her only as a nagging light, in terror of total annihilation. I know I'm the hollow, I said into myself. But I can't feel yet, and it may get worse. I've carried you so as to release you. This is the best place we've been. I'm going to release you here. There may not be anywhere better.

The light began to tremble and my mind moved to close protectively about it, surrounding it with memories. I tried to recapture my feelings when I'd held my mother's continuity in my mind. I couldn't, but I grasped the memory as hard as I could. Then, thrusting with all of me, I let go.

There was a scream, a tearing, a sensation as if there were a raw jagged hole full of nerve-ends somewhere in me. It throbbed, it wept. The scream

stopped, because I'd closed my mouth. Because I was looking at the Fecunds, which had halted and were gazing at me. Apart from in Dack's memory, I'd never seen them so still.

Through the hole I'd gouged in myself slowly trickled, then flowed, then flooded the cry of the wounded Fecunds. That, and more. Carried with it and intensifying, so that I felt as if it were addressed directly to me, was a planetful of wordless soothing.

It was dark when I groped my way onto the clearing around the Home. I'd been sick, my limbs were shaking, I was so weak I made no distinction between walking and crawling. Around me the Fecunds were covered. I let my body make its way toward the Home and gazed inside myself.

Within my mind was an area like a bright cold ray, which couldn't feel the Fecunds. It widened toward my memories of Eveningstar and dwindled toward the further past. Outside it, like a penumbra of colour, was my sense of the Fecunds.

I lay in my hammock. Somewhere within the blinded ray were the deaths of Hebby and Dack. Their continuity was there if anywhere. If I could retrieve their essences they might not be so dead. Perhaps Fecundity would give me my memories, or perhaps I would have to make the journey alone. Either way, delusion would be ready for me. I slept, and then I waited. And wait.

Murders

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ONE

'All right, Mounth,' I said. 'I hope you're ready to die.'

The point of my knife pursued him as if he were magnetic north. Light touched the edge, then spilled across the blade. Mounth had retreated towards the back of Holoshows Studios, until an angle of the wall arrested his shoulders. As he made a timid attempt to scurry free I closed in, and he was crucified and quivering against the walls, and I felt the knife light on my fingers as it sailed forward for the first easy incision, and I noticed that the white walls against which Mounth was pressed were vividly lit. But it was supposed to be night. I tried to ignore the error, but my sense of it wouldn't let me alone. Maird, I swore, and began to reconceive. Without distractions I would have just about enough time.

'All right, Mounth,' I said. 'I hope you're ready to die.'

He was squeezing himself back between the walls. It was dark, and darker within the angle, so that I couldn't see his face. Maird, I thought, maird. Then I heard Thaw getting into his car behind me. Its beam wavered a little, then snapped into place as a frame around Mounth. Thaw sat watching, appreciatively smiling, as I began to open Mounth up with the knife. Mounth's squeals urged me on, but his blood seemed too bright, no doubt because I'd seen little of the real thing, and there wasn't much of it, though my mind would have rejected profusion: indeed, had done so. I finished murdering him and stepped down from my throne, feeling rather disappointed, a minute before they switched off the power.

I stood in the centre of my apartment, gazing at the pastel rainbow whorls and curlicues of the walls, wondering whether Mounth knew I'd been killing him. Probably not, since he was involved in the first of what he'd assured us were the most important shows of his career. Anyway, I didn't

care. I glanced at the holocast receivers pointing down into the corner of the room and thought of finding out what Mounth was saying. But I wouldn't; I kept my nights free from Holoshows completely free. And all because of Mounth, I thought. He was the latest and by far the worst of our troubles.

I switched off the window frames. Activating them had been the product of habit; nobody was ever burgled on the fifteen-mile level, few people were burgled at all. But the government insisted we made ourselves safe during throne-time, so that nobody could accuse them of promoting crime. Nobody except Mounth.

I gazed from the window. At night you might as well be on the viewless ground level as on the fifteen-mile, and even during the day you could seldom see as far as that. I looked down towards the windows of the ten- and twelve-milers, bright discs and polygons set in implicit unseen planes of darkness, their total composition occasionally shifting minutely. I wondered how many people had felt compelled by guilt or fear to watch Mounth's holocast and to forego their thrones. I wondered again if he'd felt me murdering him. I would know tomorrow, I felt vulnerability and triumph swiftly mingling, and my mind retreated to the time before Mounth.

Not that Holoshows had ever been free of troubles. What is? Even the initial advertising of the new experience had fumbled somewhat, largely because the board hadn't wanted the public to dismiss Holoshows as just another disappointment hiding behind the images of an advertising cartel. Tridi was losing huge amounts of cash and credibility to its image, and the inevitable rise in fees was losing it subscribers by the thousand. Holoshows didn't intend to go that way, and we had created our own advertising. But for a while that threatened us as much as it sold. Except you can't touch it, it's solid, we said, and the tridi newscasts grabbed themselves interviewees who said they could see their apartment floor through a perfect holocast—but only by concentrating on one spot for more than an hour, as we eventually discovered and pointed out. If you walk into it you'll harm the holocast, not your health, we said belatedly as the tridis began interviewing mothers who thought their children were being lured into a deadly laser beam (instead of our harmless-for-half-an-hour variety). Our holocasts can't talk but you'll never know, we said to the people the tridis prompted to complain when they found they had to buy speakers as well as receivers and holostage cube. But: she's young, she's pretty, you can't touch but she

doesn't mind what else, we said and had a rush of censorious good taste only just before the government did.

I shouldn't say 'we' about that period, but I feel it. I was working for tridis then. When their sniping at Holoshows became embarrassing, and the ridiculousness of their attacks clear to everyone but themselves, I went to direct for Holoshows. I'd worked out new techniques of tridi editing and camera handling, and now I translated these into holocast terms. Ego break: until I came they hadn't even thought of taking the holocameras 360° around anything, let alone how. But my experiments were all formal. They didn't risk offending the government.

The government: they were our main trouble, or—more accurately—threat. They were teetering between the extremes of their two parties. They would touch an extreme and spark off a bill, then a year later to nobody's surprise they might ratify an almost direct contradiction. Work together, hurt nobody and the rest of your time within your own walls is your own; improve yourself, improve the worlds for your children, without help the future's always worse than now. Of course there was more than that to the parties, but it was often impossible to see what. Which made it especially difficult for Holoshows.

It sometimes amazed us how much we achieved. Our more blatant victories owed all to Thaw's strategy. Thaw was resident lawyer at Holoshows. Like most successful lawyers he'd been trained as a psychologist, and there was a whole psychological method in the way he used his stick as pointer, hinted threat, symbol of imminent victory, distracting pendulum as well as a third leg. But his gaunt frame and almost bone-tight skin, refusing wrinkles, were the emblems of decades of experience. It was Thaw, for example, who meditated a compromise on the holocasting of violence. Not that the majority of the government felt that the emulation of holocasts was consistent enough to be legislated for. No, the psychological effect we were accused of producing was subtler: a sort of vague domestic schizophrenia in which people felt dimly caged by apathy, the effect of violence transmitted so persuasively that it became indistinguishable from the real within one's walls. No use our asking why violence, nor our pointing out that the squirts of always slightly unconvincing studio blood vanished in midair (accurately, at the surface of the holostage cube). All we could do was transmit a bright coloured outline

to the cube itself when violence was imminent and wait for cancellations to arrive from, in the literal sense, disillusioned subscribers.

'If you can stand realising your best isn't always good enough,' Thaw once said to me, 'you'll survive anything life can throw at you.'

He might have been talking about the violence box, as we called the outlined cube, but in fact it was a year later and we'd had worse trouble: indeed, our earlier trouble in purest crystal form. The wife of the Minister for Media had left the room during one of our drama holocasts, and had returned to find a yard-high slightly drooping breast squatting in the corner of the room, the vision of a young holocameraman turned briefly avant-garde director. Arriving home minutes later to find his wife in hysterics, the minister called Emergency Power Control and talked quietly and coldly until they'd cut the domestic entertainments supply for hundreds of miles around the capital. Then: a commission of inquiry, threats of prosecution to half the staff at Holoshows.

Thaw took one glance at the robed bodies of the elderly women who were more than half of the commission and said that the holocast had been meant to express the director's sense of beauty. But meanwhile the minister's wife had wobbled on the edge of a breakdown, and (perhaps from an alarming and astonishingly single-minded sympathy) the majority of the government had upheld the minister's action. Tridis had embraced puritanism and sunk, but we were doing little better as our subscribers relinquished a medium which could be put out of action at whim. Everyone at Holoshows, even Thaw, was chasing the tail of depression.

Then Mounth arrived and offered a telepath show.

Telepath shows had been briefly in fashion some decades ago. They'd been burdened with titles such as the Tridi Telepath Talkshow but these weren't the main reason why they'd died. So you could watch a perfect tridi of someone talking to guests whose evasions he could read: so? Hardly anyone became involved enough to sue. And when someone did, the law established that while unauthorised telepathy was still illegal, assuming the user was stupid enough to make it obvious, anyone who appeared on a telepath show had authorised telepathy by so doing. That decision was worth a few seconds at the end of a tridi newscast, and when the telepath shows were quietly faded, soon after, it was generally agreed that what

they'd needed had been far more purpose and force. Mounth had a great deal of both.

I was at Holoshows the day he was interviewed. I saw him stride into Reception, smile warmly but without familiarity at our receptionist, sit his lumberjack frame like a clear-cut sharply pointed statement on one of Reception's stools, hold his open alert face up to anyone who passed, eager to be called to speak.

It was then I was convinced for the first time that the old sour belief about telepaths was true: that they adjusted their image each time they felt someone's opinion of them, until they'd perfected it. I didn't see him go in, but in another corridor I met the interview board on their way, their faces saying last resort, try anything, what have we come to, and Thaw's reiterating his favourite maxim that you can't afford to lose hope until whatever it is has been proved hopeless. He held up a lazy finger to confirm we would talk in an hour.

In fact it was closer to two, and while Thaw was telling me the interview was already becoming legend at Holo-shows. Especially Mounth's final speech: 'You, sir, you're wondering if the people can identify with a telepath, even one who's fighting for their rights,' he said. 'I think they can if he's fighting as hard as I will. And you, sir, think that I couldn't keep it up for long. But there's a lot wrong with our world, and I think we should give people the chance to see it all. And you suspect my motives because I used to earn so much as a salesman. But I had to earn money before I could do what I should be doing, if only to give my parents a real home. And you' (who was Thaw) 'think I can influence you into hiring me. I can't, I'm not that sort of telepath, which is why I have to be honest. I can't avoid reading what you think about me but I could have avoided admitting it to you. I've been honest and you can show me the door if you wish. But there's no use my avoiding honesty and truth, because they're what my show will be based on if you let me have it. You've said yourselves that today people won't let advertising play with them in any way. I'm sure you'll agree that it's still truth that sells.'

'That man's trouble,' Thaw said to me. 'There's no way of telling them that, without looking as if I'm trying to cheat Holoshows of their last chance. But I for one shall be watching him very carefully.'

TWO

Watching the early, weekly, editions of Truthlight I began to feel that Thaw had allowed himself to be piqued by Mounth's reading of him. That was the period in which Mounth was challenging cartel bosses. He eased in his chat, probing gently and levering open his victim all the way back to a tiny original motivation, perhaps buried deep in a disowned childhood episode, which Mounth would pull forth writhing, shameful and banal. Only then would he slam in the errors which he'd known his victim hoped he wouldn't mention. 'See you in six months,' Mounth would say. 'I know then you'll be able to talk to me and the people as friends.'

'There's nothing you can't reduce to an origin which is trivial or disgraceful, if you try hard enough,' Thaw said to him after one Truthlight show. 'It seems to me the point is what's achieved, not where it came from.'

'I know appearances are your job,' Mounth said, 'but they're not the same thing as truth.'

I was inclined to agree with him. In the six months he gave them, most of the bosses improved things for their subsidiaries, their employees, often for the public too. Most of them now always masked themselves with secretaries, but that was surely a small price for them to pay. A few improved nothing and blustered publicly about attempted brainwashing; but they were the first to discover that those who refused Mounth's invitations were announced on each Truthlight until they gave in. No use anyone saying he had nothing publicly significant to disclose, as Mounth listed the investors, and the investments began to be hastily if apologetically pulled away by vaguely threatened consciences. 'If it's me you object to,' Mounth said into the holocamera as the names he was addressing snapped into a frame behind his head, 'I imagine the government would arrange for you to be examined by a social telepath.' There were smiles of appreciation in the studio at that, and one of them was mine.

I was particularly pleased when he took on the social telepaths themselves. Yes, I knew that the reason he could line up four of them to interview in the studio was that the government didn't dare forbid them to appear; Mounth was already as powerful as that.

'Don't look so uneasy, Thaw,' I said. 'The government never did much for us.' But he was frowning at Mounth addressing the telepaths from within

his almost invisible protective cube, on which a few of his interviewees had thumped wildly.

'Of course we all know that the only thing we mustn't do within our own walls is harm,' Mounth was saying. 'And we know that one of your jobs is defining and preventing harm. It's a difficult job and I know we all admire those who do it well. But outside our own walls it's up to us all to be vigilant. Now I gather a few of the poorer people not a hundred miles north of here have been soliciting. It's quite illegal, of course, and I'm sure we'd agree with the government that nobody's so poor that it's necessary. It's the sort of thing that might make a sentimental person disobey government rules,' his gaze settling on the trapped expression of a telepath which the holocamera didn't catch, 'but I shouldn't be surprised if I didn't even have to mention it again.'

'I've seen the people on the north side,' Thaw said to me, 'and even when Holoshows were at their worst those people made me feel like a millionaire.'

Me too, but I didn't say that; I said 'I'll admit he could have carried his economic redistribution a bit further before starting this.'

'One of these days you'll die of moderation. He'd have to push it a long way further before it took.'

'If Mounth were as dishonest as you want me to believe,' I said, 'the last people he'd challenge would be telepaths.'

Soon Mounth's contract came up for renewal. He didn't want more money; he wanted five shows a fortnight, and he got them. He also wanted me to direct. Most of my work was finding itself in the violence box. I'd felt Mounth's slight pained disapproval and had been distressed, because I respected him enough to identify achievement with his esteem. I agreed to direct Truthlight.

Then he began to extend his range from popular targets and the socially crucial to the accepted and applauded: gardeners, architects, tribalist percussionists. Not that his approach had ever been inflexibly hostile, of course; some of them came out smiling, perhaps even inspired. But more came out gripping their expressions as if they were the only part of them left unshaken, and probably they were.

The worst case was Clement, the lightpainter. 'And this is a copy of your most famous work,' Mounth said to him. 'It's been manufactured frequently. I'd like you to take another look at it with us. This long thin beam going in between these two round pink areas: now what are these? They have a kind of soft rather motherly quality, wouldn't you say? And why does this little jagged ray keep trying to escape? I'm sure you can tell us, but let me help.'

After that it became unbearable, and at last Clement walked out of the studio with nobody behind his eyes. Mounth saw my disquiet or perhaps he felt it, for he was looking at me when he said 'We mustn't be too ready to call things beautiful. Real beauty's beautiful all the way through.' I stopped my head nodding and determined to wait until I knew how Clement had been affected.

Others were quicker to condemn Mounth. Although, or perhaps because, Truthlight had the highest ratings in the career of holocasts or of tridi for that matter, every show was pelted with calls and letters of censure, anger, hatred. Mounth ignored the anonymous but often read out and answered the most pointed of the rest, complete with names and addresses, after his interviews. Then one accusation began to recur: that he was extending the range of his interviews so as not to run out of targets rather than from honest feeling. This time he was hurt and he asked me to help him answer.

We took the holocameras into the north side. Exteriors were still appallingly expensive, but Holoshows agreed this once.

Mounth stood among the rubblegardens which the gardeners had constructed to unify the environment. I had the holocameras watch some children collecting plastic bottles and cans to build a rubbush outside their five-miler, then turned them back to Mounth.

'When I lived here it wasn't a garden,' he said. 'We didn't build with rubble, we hurt each other with it. Over there is where I broke someone's hand with a stone because he wouldn't share his beer with me. And just there under the five-miler is where I thought I'd discovered what sex was about, all sweat and blood and haste and sharp bits of stone. I'm better than I was but I've a long way to go, and I want you all go there with me. Someday I'll get married, but not until I'm worthy to. Tell me my feelings don't make sense, then tell me what else does. We all want improvement, it doesn't matter what our politics are. That's why I do what I do.' As the holocameras returned to the children waiting for the adhesive on the bush to set I realised

that Mounth hadn't been using his body or his image at all. He had answered with pure honest faith.

For the rest of his answer we took the next Truthlight to see his parents. We began at their front door. Everyone has a personal front door and a lift behind it, of course, but few have their own maintenance man living on the next level down. I posed Mounth's parents against the window and a clear twenty-five miles, and I was about to instruct the holocameras to track when I saw Mounth looking at me, and I realised that if anyone was falsifying to make a point it was I.

'I'm disappointed and a little hurt,' he said. 'You still don't quite believe my answers.' Maird, I said, silently, and effaced myself and let the holocameras gaze at his parents: chafing a little against each other but largely calm and self-contained, somewhat bemused by all the technicians, a little bewildered still after two years by their new demandingly clean and tidy home. 'This was the first thing I wanted to achieve, and the easiest,' was all Mounth said.

But it wasn't long after that I first looked up and frowned. While the attacks on him became more vicious, the letters and calls of support multiplied. More than one pleaded with him to interview the only group he'd consistently avoided, the government.

'I've pledged myself not to interfere in politics,' he said. 'To do so would be to interfere with democracy. So I can't lead you in that area, at least not directly. But I hope I don't have to. I hope' (and Thaw mirrored my frown and nodded) 'you've learned from me.'

Then, almost as if responding to Mounth's implicit challenge, the government produced thrones.

Perhaps their inventor was a government man. If he wasn't he must have been shrewd, for he forestalled any battle with the government's arbitrary puritanism by selling the throne direct to them. Which meant monopoly; but since the throne wasn't a medium in the strict sense the government couldn't be accused of using it for dictatorial purposes.

What the throne was, nobody outside the manufacturing process knew. The workers were gagged by the secrets act; the thrones were on hire to subscribers and mustn't be tampered with on pain of prosecution; the power source was concealed and government-controlled, switched on for a quarter

of an hour each evening and otherwise apparently dormant except as an alarm system to betray those who tried to dismantle their thrones. We were reassured that the thrones were physically and mentally harmless. After initial widespread distrust we confirmed the statement for ourselves; and discovered what the thrones did.

Imagine: anything. The thrones made that both an offer and an equation. Sit in your throne, pull the crown forward on its arm and cap your skull with it and there it is, surrounding you and solid: your imagination. It's as though all your senses have become eidetic, and that's as close as you'll come to understanding what you're doing. Don't drift, because if you lose control you'll only be disappointed; construct your quarter of an hour toward a climax and you'll feel enriched, not disillusioned, when you take off the crown. Don't look for advertising; listen to your friends who've tried it.

So we did, and the government thrived, and Mounth disapproved. 'If you want to ignore what's wrong with the world now's your chance,' he said. 'Don't change it, just make a world for yourself. But that world's a selfish world and you shut other people out. I don't even want to think how many people must look at their wife or their husband wearing a crown, and wonder. You won't let yourselves be seduced by advertising, haven't you the will not to be seduced by yourselves?'

I'd been one of the first to hire a throne; I knew Mounth believed what he was saying but that didn't mean he was right all the time. This was too large an issue even for him, I thought, he would have to content himself with comment and with the support of those who agreed with him.

I didn't delude myself long. First we fought the thrones for ratings. Holoshows would have asked him if he hadn't suggested it to them, and so Truthlight was moved to overlap both sides of thronetime. Somehow Mounth arranged for the first set of ratings to reach him before anyone else saw them; but we all knew what they showed when Mounth strode out of Holoshows, looking at nobody. Not all the audience he lost when the thrones were about to be switched on even bothered to return to Truthlight when thronetime was over.

Then he seemed to resign himself to the attitude I'd predicted, though from the first I was disturbed by the way he did so. On the next Truthlight he didn't have a victim; he read out attacks and answered them, and seemed to

be dawdling until thronetime. But there was a tension, a sense that he was delaying for some reason. A minute before thronetime he began to stare silently at the chronometer. We and the holocameras gazed at him. Thronetime clicked into place and he turned to the holocameras.

'Now I can talk to all of you who believe we have free will and that it's worth having,' he said. 'Now the others aren't listening. I think they must be the ones who tell us no murder is premeditated.'

'And he's talking maird if he contradicts them,' Thaw said in my ear.

'Well, perhaps they're right and we've taken care of that problem,' Mounth said. 'Let's leave aside those of you who are old or alone and wouldn't care if they were premeditated, shall we? And let's look at something everyone seems to have forgotten. If premeditated murders became common, if murder became an everyday activity, then the tension that produced them wouldn't be high enough for the social telepaths to track down. There'd be only one way to stop them, as there used to be, and that's the death penalty. Don't say anything yet,' he said. Think about it. And if you think this is just a fantasy of mine, I may surprise you.'

'All the evidence shows there are fewer murders now the thrones are channelling tension,' Thaw told him when he'd finished. And the social telepaths prevented most of the rest, reading emotional tensions unauthorised, by one of those inconsistencies without which no society functions. It was a job in which they could use their talents, and one in which they could feel disliked for what they did rather than what they were: preventing violence by talkouts based on telepathic readings, and if necessary by hypnotic sessions involving a panel of four, popularly regarded as the evil tamperer and the others not seeing, hearing, admitting what he was about. I suddenly realised that Mounth's faith in himself had borne him above and past that sort of work without a glance.

'Fewer murders, are there?' he said to Thaw. 'In that case you needn't worry how my hypothetical murders are punished.'

In the next few days his method began to pay off, perhaps even more spectacularly than he'd anticipated. Letters and calls of support mounted and toppled off his desk, and all from people who'd been crowned during Truthlight but now were angrily demonstrating their free will. Mounth smiled slightly each time he returned to his desk from reading our files on

the government. I had no idea what he was planning, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be involved.

THREE

When Mounth acted nobody had a chance to anticipate. I was just one of the audience, gazing and gaping as he listed the ministers, all the most personally unattractive members of the government, who'd been murdered by their secretaries and aides during the past fortnight's thronetimes.'

'I hardly need to be more honest, but I shall be,' he said. 'I watched most of these murders happen, and I had no authority to do so. But our government has never punished unauthorised telepathy when it's been used in the service of the law. If I misjudged and must be punished, then I accept. But,' he said with wide-eyed innocence to the holocameras, 'in that case our government must accept that these murders are the purest harmless fantasy and do nothing about them.'

When some of those he'd named were demoted he ignored them; he was sure of himself. Once our reporters had established that three of the aides had been dismissed, Mounth pounced.

'I was going to suggest that these people could be examined by social telepaths, but now it seems I needn't,' he said. 'The government lawyers say they want to talk to me about my behaviour. I've said of course they can, here on Truthlight in front of us all. I believe there's a question we all want to ask them. Something on these lines: if these murders aren't a serious matter why have these people been dismissed? If even the government's as worried as that, what are we supposed to do? Not knowing if we've been murdered, is that supposed to reassure us? Do they want us to say never mind, it isn't real? Haven't they been telling us it's absolutely real, isn't that the whole appeal of it? Then where's the law in all this. Is it pretending not to notice? We can't dismiss our murderers, haven't we ordinary people the right to demand protection?'

At the side of my eye Thaw's face turned and loomed at me. I met his expression, for we both knew that Mounth was taking an extraordinary chance in describing himself that way. I saw in Thaw's eyes, and felt moving uneasily in my mind, a sudden conviction that he would succeed.

'Aren't we entitled to ask that these murders are stopped in the only way that works?' Mounth said. 'Are you thinking you don't need protection? How do you know? I can't be sure, can you? Wouldn't you rather know you're safe? If you agree don't call, don't write. Think it to me. Think it now.' And in millions of rooms his smile slowly grew and warmed and embraced his audience.

I didn't direct the first of the Truthlights on the law. A trainee director took over on my free nights, and was overwhelmed by the chance to handle such material. Before the show began I wandered into the studio to make sure no technical disasters were threatening. Thaw, whom Holoshows had self-protectively asked to mediate, was making his way to the stage. I was wishing him good luck when a reporter looked in to give us the news. Mounth had foregone his protective cube as a gesture to the lawyers, and was waiting at the back of the studio to walk on and face the panel.

We closed in on him; 'Clement, the artist you broke down,' I said. 'He's killed himself.'

'He would have in any case. He had a death-wish.'

'I don't think so,' I said.

'It was in his work and I read it in him. He destroyed what he couldn't bear. Truth does that to some people, I'm afraid.'

When I arrived home thronetime had just started, and I sat in my throne and murdered Mounth.

And next morning I was entering my office when Thaw caught up with me. 'Someone murdered Mounth last night,' he said. 'At least, they did until he felt them doing it. It's all recorded. Come and see.'

I followed him, not caring. I thought he was being unnecessarily oblique in breaking the news to me, but perhaps he hoped to convert me to his view of Mounth. If so he hardly needed bother; Mounth would have me dismissed in no time. I sat on a stool in the playback room, beneath the first words of IF YOU VISITED MILLIONS OF PEOPLE YESTERDAY DON'T YOU THINK YOU SHOULD SEE HOW YOU LOOKED, and Mounth opened from a bud of light in mid-air before me, melting a little at the edges until the recording stabilised.

Long before the murder I was watching numbly, knowing Mounth had won against the lawyers.

'If you murder someone and a clone is immediately produced with the identical personality of your victim and total continuity, you're still guilty of murder, not attempted murder,' he said. 'That's not a hypothesis, it's a preventive legal precedent which was established to anticipate the event. If you killed the clone you would be guilty of murder in that instance too, that was also established. But this means that in law if you kill something indistinguishable from a human victim you are guilty of murder. And the whole point about the throne experience is to make it indistinguishable from reality. If that's the case it must be so in law as well. I suppose it's too late to ask the government to switch off all the thrones and repossess them. But the least they must do is retain the social telepaths to be sensitive enough to anticipate these murders.'

'Where's he getting all this?' I said.

'Look at his face, look at the strain,' Thaw said, poking his stick at Mounth's nose. 'He was using us on the panel as a pool. There was nothing we could have done about it short of getting up and leaving, because if we'd challenged him to quote the references he'd been reading he would simply have picked them out from behind the question. Now look, here it comes, the murder.'

Mounth was staring directly at me, smiling with a triumph so confident it hardly bothered to smile. 'Excuse me a moment. There's someone out there getting ready to murder me,' he said. 'A young man called, now let me find his name, Harri Sams. Why is he doing that, I wonder? Ah, because his mother watches Truthlight and because he's heard me saying he won't be able to do exactly what he likes. I don't think he's going to succeed. No, he's off the throne. Thank you, Mrs. Sams, that's right, you keep him away from it. Sorry I had to bring you the news, but I'm sure you can handle it.'

Thaw was watching me. 'Nothing occurs to you about all that?' he said.

'No, nothing.'

'Good. Then do me just one favour. Don't think about it. Wait and see.'

I didn't intend to think about it; I was too busy thinking of anything my mind could grab that didn't relate to Mounth and the possibility that he'd felt me murdering him. I had a grim suspicion that he might make that revelation and my dismissal one of the high points of tonight's show. Or maybe he'd been too preoccupied with Sams. Taking the hint from that

hope, I preoccupied myself with explaining to last night's trainee that the secret of directing Truthlight was to be unobtrusive, even static; he'd been so drawn to Mounth's enthusiasm that toward the end of the show Mounth's head had swelled and sat decapitated in millions of homes, addressing an invisible panel. Then I filled myself with setting up tonight's show and with the fact that since last night's had been more successful than even Mounth had expected, this one would be merely a rerun for the less intelligent and for those who'd been crowned during last night's. Mounth rested in his office and read the response of his supporters. I'd heard that the simplest preoccupations were the best proof against telepaths.

Tell me that day lasted less than a year, the clock told me so but I didn't believe it. Every so often I felt rising to the surface of my mind like the threat of a deafening belch the growing desire to go and tell Mounth I knew he knew I'd killed him, and I would chatter faster and louder to the technicians until it went away. We set up the holocameras so as to contain Mounth and the panel, and placed another pair on standby in case we should need to cut to an emergency setup (always disconcerting in a live holocast: a sudden blurring into a cube of light, then behind the walls of light the figures have shifted). Then the panel began to arrive, and we waited for Mounth.

Mounth strode onto the stage as the Truthlight theme rang out, a two-bar determinedly rising theme on baritone steel drums, and we knew what sort of show it wasn't going to be. As the lawyers had taken their places I'd hoped they might have produced some answers overnight, but their expressions were those of a cast repeating a dismal rehearsal. Only Thaw had his keep-hoping look, and I felt this had more to do with his philosophy than with the situation. Everyone in Holoshows was watching the show, but they'd already accepted there would be no surprises. This was just a recapitulation before the lawyers were called in to talk by the government, then Truthlight would abandon the theme unless Mounth's arguments were denied. The audience which had been persuaded by last night's Truthlight switched this one off after the first few minutes.

'Even within your own walls you mustn't do harm,' Mounth was saying when I began to hear the Truthlight theme. Bom bom, bom bam. At first I thought it had crept into my head uninvited, then as it grew a little less faint

I realised it was somewhere in the building. Perhaps someone was playing back last night's Truthlight to catch Mounth in a contradiction.

'They try to tell us there are fewer murders with the thrones,' Mounth said. 'But we can see that exactly the opposite is true.' He was ignoring the Truthlight theme, which was repeating like a cramped recording loop and growing louder, loud enough to be picked up by the holocast. One of the off-duty audience moved toward the studio door.

'On the contrary, people who would never have thought of murder are now being encouraged to try it and take it for granted,' Mounth said, and I suddenly realised that the theme wasn't only growing louder, it was actually approaching. More than that, an aggressive rather desperate quality was gaining on it, betraying that it was the sound of a human voice. As I realised that, the studio doors were thrown open and in he came, singing.

He was a young man, fashionably-bald head shining, his eyes gazing at Mounth and brighter still. He strode up the studio aisle, roaring the Truthlight theme. An oddmind, I thought, struggling to squeeze my face shut against laughter. Let someone else throw him out, I'm the director. I signalled the cameramen not to cut. As I did so Mounth shouted 'Sams!' and grabbed Thaw's stick and hurled it at the young man.

The heavy end of the stick whipped round and struck Sams between the eyes. He fell. And I'd turned to call cut when I saw Thaw's face as he leapt.

He'd levered himself painfully but swiftly to his feet behind Mounth. And as if his face were a frame three expressions fell into place just separate enough not to be simultaneous: astonishment, comprehension, decision. Sams had fallen just within the transmitted holostage, but only his back as far down as his hips would be visible to the audience unless they were morbid enough to crawl round for a closer look. Thaw launched himself from his stool and fell short of Sams. He dragged himself rapidly across the stage on hands and knees—I'd never seen him move so fast—and slipped his hand beneath Sams' chest. 'He's dead,' he said, and his hand came out displaying a knife.

'He had a knife,' Mounth said.

'We've all seen that,' Thaw said before Mounth's lips had finished moving.

'He was singing to cover his thoughts. He was going to kill me.'

'Were you in his mind?'

'Only just in time.'

'Were you in anyone else's mind?'

'What? No, of course not.'

'Not in mine?'

'Why should I have needed to be?'

'If you weren't,' Thaw said, and his words were following Mounth's so closely they seemed to be attached and Mounth's mind couldn't move ahead of or through them, 'how did you know my stick was behind you to reach for?'

A cameraman gestured to me for authority to cut. I shook my head furiously, and Thaw pulled himself up with his stick.

'Why did you throw my stick?' he said, riding the pause and forcing the pace faster.

'I knew he had a knife.'

'So did we at the time you mentioned it.'

'Only because you were so quick.'

'Weren't you a bit quick to kill him?'

'To stop him killing me. I know everyone else can see that.'

'Remember Clement?' Thaw said, and I wondered how long he could juggle faster than Mounth could follow.

'Of course I do.'

'The artist you said killed himself because he had a death-wish?'

'That's true. He had.'

'I think if anyone has a death-wish you have.'

'I can see what you're doing!' Mounth cried, and suddenly so could I, but Thaw's voice was on top of him.

'You spend weeks arguing for the death penalty and then you commit a murder that certainly looks premeditated to me. You didn't have to look for my stick. You knew it was Sams coming to spoil your show and you got ready to murder him. It's a complicated way to fulfil your death-wish but that's what it sounds like to me. What does it sound like to everyone else?

Do you think he's been trying to get himself executed? Think it to us. Think it now.'

Maybe you've been in a room where someone hates you. Possibly you've experienced a roomful of them. Try to imagine almost instantaneously becoming the focus of millions of people, many of them hating you, many believing that your whole career has been directed at achieving your death, and the rest simply bewildered. That's what Mounth must have felt, for when Holoshows tried to investigate nobody came forward to say they'd supported him. Imagine it, and try to feel it as if you're built on belief in yourself and everyone else's belief in you. Mounth did, and that was why he snatched the knife from Thaw. And then went weak or stumbled? Maybe. And fell on the knife.

And that was when I called cut.

Before the governors dismissed him Thaw told them: 'I didn't think he'd do that. I was being, ironic and, yes, I wanted him to experience his role turned against him. But whether or not you like it, Mounth's death wasn't the important point. If Sams would have killed him that proves that if you inhibit thronetime murders you promote the real thing. We have to decide which we prefer. And that's what I'm going to tell the government.'

Now Thaw works for the government. We still meet sometimes, when he holds the government and Holoshows apart. He often insists to me that he didn't intend Mounth to die. Of course persuasion is his job. At any rate, we agree on one point. The ratings showed that as soon as Mounth fell on the knife almost everyone switched off and didn't wait for me to cut. The experience Mounth had offered was over, and his dying was too realistic and banal. For once we were glad that we hadn't started a trend.

1974

Jack In The Box

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When you awake they've turned out the lights in your cell. It feels as if the padded walls have closed in; if you moved you'd touch them. They want you to scream and plead, but you won't. You'll lie there until they have to turn the lights on.

You're glad and proud of what you did. You remember the red spilling from the nurse's throat. You never liked his eyes; they were always watching and ready to tell you that he knew what you were. The others pretended it was their job not to be shocked by what you did before they brought you here, but he never pretended. You can see the red streaming down his shirt and glueing it to his skin. You relax into memory. It's been so long.

You can go back as far as you like, but you can't remember a time when you didn't kill. Although you can't remember much before you were a soldier, and even that period seems to consist of explosive flashes of dead faces and twisted metal and limbs—until you reach the point where a pattern begins.

It was at the edge of the jungle. You were stumbling along, following the tracks of a tank. You'd been shot in the head, but your legs were still plodding. There was a luminous crimson sky and against it trees stood splintered and charred. Suddenly, among the ruts, you thought you saw a red reflection of the sky. You stood swaying, trying to make it out, and eventually, mixed with the churned earth and muddy stubble of grass, you saw enough of an outline to realise it was a man. The pattern of the tank-tracks was etched on him in red. You leaned closer, reaching toward the red, and maybe that's when it began.

You wonder why you can't hear any sounds outside your cell, not even the savage murmur of the tropical night that always filters in. Your head turns a little, searching, but your memory has regained its hold. When the army discharged you and paid your meagre wage you returned to the city. The

city doctor did his best for your wound, so he said, but shook his head and recommended you to see someone else who knew more about the effects. In the end you didn't. You were too confused by how the city and the people looked to you.

It was the red that confused you. The city was full of red; it was everywhere you looked. But it wasn't real red, not the red that trickled tantalisingly on the very edge of your mind. And the people were wrong; they looked unreal, like zombies. You knew that if zombies were real; they never came into the city by day, they stayed in the jungle. That wasn't what was wrong with the people. You felt as if the most important part of them was hidden.

One evening as you came into your room you caught sight of a red glint within the wall. It was a fragment of the sunset trapped for a moment in a crack. At once you knew how to satisfy the yawning frustration you'd felt ever since your return to the city, knew how to complete the sunset: you must answer it in red. You cut your forearm with a razor. The red responded, but it hurt, and that was wrong. It hadn't hurt before.

You knew what to do, but you had to make yourself. Each evening when the sky was crimson you went out, the razor folded in your pocket. The tropical evening settled heavily about you, and the shadows in which you hid were warm, but each time you soothed yourself into courage and surged forth from ambush you heard witnesses approaching. It was worse than a jungle ambush, because here your people wouldn't praise you if you succeeded, they'd arrest you.

You went farther from home, into the poorest areas. There was so much death here you had the cunning notion that what you did might almost pass unremarked. At last, one evening when the crimson light was just about to drain away into the ground, you saw a young girl hurrying toward you down an alley. Her eyes were specks of reflected red, making her shadowy face into a mask, which you didn't need to see as human. It was as if she were a receptacle for the last drops of red. She was almost upon you when you swooped, your hands grubbing in your pockets for the razor. You'd left it at home. But now you were pressing her face into your chest to stifle her cries, and even without the razor you managed to make the red come.

After that it was easier. You knew now why you'd been confused when you looked at people: because all the time you had been seeing them as pipes

full of red, and you couldn't think why. You could look at them without wanting to tap them except when the sky was calling, and then you made sure you were in the slums. During the day you stayed in your room with the curtains drawn, because outside you might have been stopped for questioning. When you went out you didn't take the razor, which might have betrayed you if you had ever been searched. You never were, although the slum people were complaining that a monster was preying on them. Most of what they said wasn't believed. They admitted believing in zombies, which city people never did.

You can't remember most of the people you caught. They were only shadows making stifled noises, moans, squeaks, and the final desperate gargle. The older ones often seemed dry, children were surprisingly full. You do remember the last one, an old man who giggled and squirmed as he drained. You were still watching the glistening stream when men came at you from both ends of the alley. When you tried to get up they battered you down and dragged you away.

That was how you came here. You're becoming restless, and your mind is nagging, nagging: they would never turn out the light in your cell, because then they couldn't watch you. But your frustration is urging you on; it wants you to see the most recent and most vivid red, the nurse's.

He was from the slums. You could tell that by the way he talked. Perhaps you'd caught one of his relatives, and that was why he tried to kill you. You never saw that in his eyes, only a horror of what you were. But just at dawn you saw him tiptoe into your cell, carrying a straightjacket. No doubt he expected you to be asleep. You were tired, and he managed to restrain you before you saw the sharply pointed bulge beneath his jacket. But you still remembered how to bite, and you tore his neck. As he fumbled gurgling into the corridor the sunlight through the window beyond your door streamed around his body, and two spikes of light pierced your eyes. There your memory ends.

You're half satisfied, half excited, and frustrated by the weight of the dark. You feel penned. Then you realise that you can't feel the straightjacket. They may have left you in darkness but at least they've freed you of that. Roused by your memories, you stretch before getting up to stalk around your cell, and your hand touches a wall. You recoil, and then you snarl at yourself and move your other arm. It touches a wall, too.

All of a sudden you're roaring with rage and fear and arching your body as if it can burst you out of your prison, because you know that what has been pressing down on your face isn't only darkness. You aren't in your cell at all. You're in a coffin.

At last you manage to calm yourself, and lie throbbing. You try to think clearly, as you had to in the jungle and afterward in the slums. You're sure the nurse has done this to you. The gap in your memory feels like a blackout. Perhaps he succeeded in poisoning you. He must have persuaded the others that you were dead. In this climate you'd be buried quickly.

You throw yourself against the lid of the coffin, inches above your face. You hear earth trickling faintly by outside for a moment, and then there's nothing but the padded silence. You tear at the cheap padding until you feel it rip. A nail breaks and pain flares like a distant beacon. It gives you a sense of yourself again, and you try to plan.

You manage to force your arms back until the palms of your hands are pressed against the lid almost above your shoulders. Already your forearms are beginning to ache, and your upper arms crush your ribs. Your face feels as if it's trapped in a dwindling pocket of air by your limbs. Before panic can reach you, you're thinking of how the nurse's face will look when you reach him. You begin to push against the lid.

The first time there's the merest stirring of earth outside the coffin. You rest your cramped arms for a moment and push again. There's nothing. You don't know how many coffin nails nor what weight of earth you're trying to shift. You thrust your elbows against the sides of the coffin and heave. Nothing except the silent pendulous darkness. If the lid rather than the nails gives way, the whole weight of earth above will pour in on top of you. Pain kindles your arms, and you lever while they shudder with the effort.

Then the worst thing you could have imagined happens. The weight above you increases. You feel it at the height of your effort, and you're sure it isn't the weakening of your arms. For a moment you think it's the nurse, standing on your grave in case you try to escape. Then another idea occurs to you. It may be a delirious hope, but you force yourself to rest your arms on your chest, crossed and pulsing. You listen.

For a long time you can't hear anything. You resist the urge to test the weight on the lid again, because by now you've forgotten how it felt before.

You don't even know whether you would be able to hear what you're listening for.

The darkness thumbs your eyes, and false light swirls on them.

Then you think you heard it. You strain all your nerves, and after a stretched time during which you seem to hang poised on darkness it comes again: a faint distant scraping in the earth above you. You have a last nightmare glimpse of the nurse digging down to make sure you're dead. But you know who are the only people who dig up fresh corpses. They've come to make you into a zombie. You lie waiting, massaging your cramped arms and tensing yourself. Will they be surprised enough not to use their spades as weapons?

When you hear metal strike the lid you're ready. But when the first nails pull free and the lid creaks up, light pours in with a sifting of earth. For a second you freeze, trapped. But it isn't daylight, only torchlight. The gap in your memory was daylight, or perhaps it was death. To you they've become the same. You realise that one sound you haven't been hearing is the sound of your own breath.

You leap up and pull one of the startled men into the coffin until you're ready for him. Then you clasp the other to you, unlipping your fangs, thinking: red.

Call First

Written In: 1974
First published in *Night Chills*, 1975
Also published in: *Dark Companions*, *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

It was the other porters who made Ned determined to know who answered the phone in the old man's house.

Not that he hadn't wanted to know before. He'd felt it was his right almost as soon as the whole thing had begun, months ago. He'd been sitting behind his desk in the library entrance, waiting for someone to try to take a bag into the library so he could shout after them that they couldn't, when the reference librarian ushered the old man up to Ned's desk and said "Let this gentleman use your phone." Maybe he hadn't meant every time the old man came to the library, but then he should have said so. The old man used to talk to the librarian and tell him things about books even he didn't know, which was why he let him phone. All Ned could do was feel resentful. People weren't supposed to use his phone, and even he wasn't allowed to phone outside the building. And it wasn't as if the old man's calls were interesting. Ned wouldn't have minded if they'd been worth hearing.

"I'm coming home now." That was all he ever said; then he'd put down the receiver and hurry away. It was the way he said it that made Ned wonder. There was no feeling behind the words, they sounded as if he were saying them only because he had to, perhaps wishing he needn't. Ned knew people talked like that: his parents did in church and most of the time at home. He wondered if the old man was calling his wife, because he wore a ring on his wedding-finger, although in the claw where a stone should be was what looked like a piece of yellow fingernail. But Ned didn't think it could be his wife; each day the old man came he left the library at the same time, so why would he bother to phone?

Then there was the way the old man looked at Ned when he phoned: as if he didn't matter and couldn't understand, the way most of the porters looked at him. That was the look that swelled up inside Ned one day and made him persuade one of the other porters to take charge of his desk while Ned

waited to listen in on the old man's call. The girl who always smiled at Ned was on the switchboard, and they listened together. They heard the phone in the house ringing then lifted, and the old man's call and his receiver going down: nothing else, not even breathing apart from the old man's. "Who do you think it is?" the girl said, but Ned thought she'd laugh if he said he didn't know. He shrugged extravagantly and left.

Now he was determined. The next time the old man came to the library Ned phoned his house, having read what the old man dialled. When the ringing began its pulse sounded deliberately slow, and Ned felt the pumping of his blood rushing ahead. Seven trills and the phone in the house opened with a violent click. Ned held his breath, but all he could hear was his blood thumping in his ears. "Hello," he said and after a silence, clearing his throat, "Hello!" Perhaps it was one of those answering machines people in films used in the office. He felt foolish and uneasy greeting the wide silent metal ear, and put down the receiver. He was in bed and falling asleep before he wondered why the old man should tell an answering machine that he was coming home.

The following day, in the bar where all the porters went at lunchtime, Ned told them about the silently listening phone. "He's weird, that old man," he said, but now the others had finished joking with him they no longer seemed interested, and he had to make a grab for the conversation. "He reads weird books," he said. "All about witches and magic. Real ones, not stories."

"Now tell us something we didn't know," someone said, and the conversation turned its back on Ned. His attention began to wander, he lost his hold on what was being said, he had to smile and nod as usual when they looked at him, and he was thinking: they're looking at me like the old man does. I'll show them. I'll go in his house and see who's there. Maybe I'll take something that'll show I've been there. Then they'll have to listen.

But next day at lunchtime, when he arrived at the address he'd seen on the old man's library card, Ned felt more like knocking at the front door and running away. The house was menacingly big, the end house of a street whose other windows were brightly bricked up. Exposed foundations like broken teeth protruded from the mud that surrounded the street, while the mud was walled in by a five-storey crescent of flats that looked as if it had been designed in sections to be fitted together by a two-year-old. Ned tried

to keep the house between him and the flats, even though they were hundreds of yards away, as he peered in the windows.

All he could see through the grimy front window was bare floorboards; when he coaxed himself to look through the side window, the same. He dreaded being caught by the old man, even though he'd seen him sitting behind a pile of books ten minutes ago. It had taken Ned that long to walk here; the old man couldn't walk so fast, and there wasn't a bus he could catch. At last he dodged round the back and peered into the kitchen: a few plates in the sink, some tins of food, an old cooker. Nobody to be seen. He returned to the front, wondering what to do. Maybe he'd knock after all. He took hold of the bar of the knocker, trying to think what he'd say, and the door opened.

The hall leading back to the kitchen was long and dim. Ned stood shuffling indecisively on the step. He would have to decide soon, for his lunch hour was dwindling. It was like one of the empty houses he'd used to play in with the other children, daring each other to go up the tottering stairs. Even the things in the kitchen didn't make it seem lived in. He'd show them all. He went in. Acknowledging a vague idea that the old man's companion was out, he closed the door to hear if they returned.

On his right was the front room; on his left, past the stairs and the phone, another of the bare rooms he'd seen. He tiptoed upstairs. The stairs creaked and swayed a little, perhaps unused to anyone of Ned's weight. He reached the landing, breathing heavily, feeling dust chafe his throat. Stairs led up to a closed attic door, but he looked in the rooms off the landing.

Two of the doors which he opened stealthily showed him nothing but boards and flurries of floating dust. The landing in front of the third looked cleaner, as if the door were often opened. He pulled it towards him, holding it up all the way so it didn't scrape the floor, and went in.

Most of it didn't seem to make sense. There was a single bed with faded sheets. Against the walls were tables and piles of old books. Even some of the books looked disused. There were black candles and racks of small cardboard boxes. On one of the tables lay a single book. Ned padded across the fragments of carpet and opened the book in a thin path of sunlight through the shutters.

Inside the sagging covers was a page which Ned slowly realised had been ripped from the Bible. It was the story of Lazarus. Scribbles that might be

letters filled the margins, and at the bottom of the page: "people. 491." Suddenly inspired, Ned turned to that page in the book. It showed a drawing of a corpse sitting up in his coffin, but the book was all in the language they sometimes used in church: Latin. He thought of asking one of the librarians what it meant. Then he remembered that he needed proof he'd been in the house. He stuffed the page from the Bible into his pocket.

As he crept swiftly downstairs, something was troubling him. He reached the hall and thought he knew what it was. He still didn't know who lived in the house with the old man. If they lived in the back perhaps there would be signs in the kitchen. Though if it was his wife, Ned thought as he hurried down the hall, she couldn't be like Ned's mother, who would never have left torn strips of wallpaper hanging at shoulder height from both walls. He'd reached the kitchen door when he realised what had been bothering him. When he'd emerged from the bedroom, the attic door had been open.

He looked back involuntarily, and saw a woman walking away from him down the hall.

He was behind the closed kitchen door before he had time to feel fear. That came only when he saw that the back door was nailed rustily shut. Then he controlled himself. She was only a woman, she couldn't do much if she found him. He opened the door minutely. The hall was empty.

Halfway down the hall he had to slip into the side room, heart punching his chest, for she'd appeared again from between the stairs and the front door. He felt the beginnings of anger and recklessness, and they grew faster when he opened the door and had to flinch back as he saw her hand passing. The fingers looked famished, the colour of old lard, with long yellow cracked nails. There was no nail on her wedding-finger, which wore a plain ring. She was returning from the direction of the kitchen, which was why Ned hadn't expected her.

Through the opening of the door he heard her padding upstairs. She sounded barefoot. He waited until he couldn't hear her, then edged out into the hall. The door began to swing open behind him with a faint creak, and he drew it stealthily closed. He paced towards the front door. If he hadn't seen her shadow creeping down the stairs he would have come face to face with her.

He'd retreated to the kitchen, and was near to panic, when he realised she knew he was in the house. She was playing a game with him. At once he

was furious. She was only an old woman, her body beneath the long white dress was sure to be as thin as her hands, she could only shout when she saw him, she couldn't stop him leaving. In a minute he'd be late for work. He threw open the kitchen door and swaggered down the hall.

The sight of her lifting the phone receiver broke his stride for a moment. Perhaps she was phoning the police. He hadn't done anything, she could have her Bible page back. But she laid the receiver beside the phone. Why? Was she making sure the old man couldn't ring?

As she unbent from stooping to the phone she grasped two uprights of the banisters to support herself. They gave a loud splintering creak and bent together. Ned halted, confused. He was still struggling to react when she turned towards him, and he saw her face. Part of it was still on the bone.

He didn't back away until she began to advance on him, her nails tearing new strips from both walls. All he could see was her eyes, unsupported by flesh. His mind was backing away faster than he was, but it had come up against a terrible insight. He even knew why she'd made sure the old man couldn't interrupt until she'd finished. His calls weren't like speaking to an answering machine at all. They were exactly like switching off a burglar alarm.

Illustration by Abigail Moulder, taken from The Oxford Book Of Nasty Endings, 2012.

Dead Letters

"The story was one of a bunch I wrote in emulation of the notorious but subsequently celebrated EC horror comics of the fifties. The market the stories were meant for had second thoughts about buying prose fiction, and they found a home elsewhere."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The dead*

Written in: 1974
First published in *Shadows*, 1978
Also published in: *Told By The Dead*

The séance was Bob's idea, of course. We'd finished dinner and were lighting more candles to stave off the effects of the power cut when he made the suggestion.

'What's the point? The apartment's only three years old,' Joan said, though in fact she was disturbed by this threat of a séance in our home. But he'd brought his usual bottle of Pernod to the dinner party, inclining it toward us as if he'd forgotten that nobody else touched the stuff, and now he was drunk enough to believe he could carry us unprotesting with him. He almost did. When opposition came, it surprised me almost as much as it did Bob.

'I'm not joining in,' his wife, Louise, said. 'I won't.'

I could feel one of his rages building, though usually they didn't need to be provoked. 'Is this some more of your stupidity we have to suffer?' he said. 'Don't you know what everyone in this room is thinking of you?'

'I'm not sure you do,' I told him sharply. I could see Stan and Marge were embarrassed. I'd thought Bob might behave himself when meeting them for the first time.

He peered laboriously at me, his face white and sweating as if from a death battle with the Pernod. 'One thing's sure,' he said. 'If she doesn't know what I think of her, she will for the next fortnight.'

I glared at him. He and Louise were bound for France in the morning to visit her relatives; the tickets were poking out of his top pocket. We'd made this dinner date with them weeks ago—as usual, to relieve Louise's burdens of Bob and of the demands of her work as a nurse—and as if to curtail the party Bob had brought their flight date forward. I imagined her having to

travel with Bob's hangover. But at least she looked in control for the moment, sitting in a chair near the apartment door, away from the round dining table. 'Sit down, everybody,' Bob said. 'Before someone else cracks up.'

From his briefcase where he kept the Pernod he produced a device that he slid into the middle of the table, his unsteady hand slipping and almost flinging his toy to the floor. I wondered what had happened in the weeks since I'd last seen him, so to lessen his ability to hold his drink; he'd been in this state when they arrived. As a rule he contrived to drink for much of the day at work, with little obvious effect except to make him more unpleasant to Louise. Perhaps alcoholism had overtaken him at last.

The device was a large glass inside of which sat a small electric flashlight sat on top of another glass. Bob switched on the flashlight and pressed in a ring of cork that held the glasses together while Marge, no doubt hoping the party would quiet down, dealt around the table the alphabet Bob had written on cards. I imagined him harping on the séance to Louise as he prepared the apparatus.

'So you're not so cool as you'd like me to think,' he said to her, and blew out all the candles.

I sat opposite him. Joan checked the light switch before taking her place next to me, and I knew she hoped the power would interrupt us. Bob had insinuated himself between Stan and Marge, smacking his lips as he drained his bottle. If I hadn't wanted to save them further unpleasantness I'd have opposed the whole thing.

A thick scroll of candle smoke drifted through the flashlight beam. Our brightening hands converged and rested on the glass. I felt as if our apartment had retreated now that the light was concentrated on the table. I could see only dim ovals of faces floating above the splash of light; I couldn't see Louise at all. Silence settled on us like wax, and we waited.

After what seemed a considerable time I began to feel, absurdly perhaps, that it was my duty as host to start things moving. I'd been involved in a few séances and knew the general principles; since Bob was unusually quiet I would have to lead. 'Is anybody there?' I said. 'Anyone there? Anybody there?'

'Sounds like you've got a bad line,' Stan said.

'Shouldn't you say 'here' rather than 'there?'" Marge said.

'I'll try that,' I said. 'Is anyone here? Anybody here?'

I was still waiting for Stan to play me for a stooge again when Bob's hand began to tremble convulsively on the glass. 'You're just playing the fool,' Joan said, but I was no more certain than she really was, because from what I could distinguish of Bob's indistinct face I could see that he was staring fixedly ahead, though not at me.

'What is it? What's the matter?' I said, afraid both that he sensed something and that he was about to reveal the whole situation as an elaborate joke.

Then the glass began to move.

I'd seen it happen at séances before but never quite like this. The glass was making aimless darting starts in all directions, like an animal that had suddenly found itself caged. It seemed frantic and bewildered, and in a strange way its blind struggling beneath our fingers reminded me of the almost mindless fluttering of hands near to death. 'Stop playing the fool,' Joan said to Bob, but I was becoming certain that he wasn't, all the more so when he didn't answer.

Then the glass made a rush for the edge of the table, so fast that my fingers would have been left behind if our fingertips hadn't been pressed so closely together that they carried each other along. The light swooped on the letter I and held it for what felt like minutes. It returned to the centre of the table, drawing our luminous orange fingertips with it, then swept back to the I. And again. I. I. I.

'Aye aye, Cap'n,' Stan said.

'He doesn't know who he is,' Marge whispered.

'Who are you?' I said. 'Can you tell us your name?'

The glass inched toward the centre. Then, as if terrified to find itself out in the darkness, it fled back to the I. Thinking of what Marge had said, I had an image of someone awakening in total darkness, woken by us perhaps, trying to remember anything about himself, even his name. I felt unease: Joan's unease, I told myself. 'Can you tell us anything about yourself?' I said.

The glass seemed to be struggling again, almost to be forcing itself into the centre. Once there it sat shifting restlessly. The light reached towards letters,

then flinched away. At last it began to edge out. I felt isolated with the groping light, cut off even from Joan beside me, as if the light were drawing on me for strength. I didn't know if anyone else felt this, nor whether they also had an oppressive sense of terrible effort. The light began to nudge letters, fumbling before it came to rest on each. MUD, it spelled.

'His name's mud!' Stan said delightedly.

But the glass hadn't finished. R, it added.

'Hello Mudr, hello Fadr,' Stan said.

'Murder,' Marge said. 'He could be trying to say murder.'

'If he's dead, he should be old enough to spell.'

I had an impression of bursting frustration, of a suffocated, swelling fury. I felt a little like that myself, because Stan was annoying me. I'd ceased to feel Joan's unease; I was engrossed. 'Do you mean murder?' I said. 'Who's been murdered?'

Again came the frustration, like the leaden shell of a storm. Incongruously, I remembered my own thwarted fury when I was trying to learn to type. The light began to wobble and glide, and the oppression seemed to clench until I had to soothe my forehead as best I could with my free hand.

'Oh my head,' Marge said.

'Shall we stop?' Joan said.

'Not yet,' Marge said, because the light seemed to have gained confidence and was swinging from one letter to another. POISN, it spelled.

'Six out of ten,' Stan said. 'Could do better.'

'Shut up, Stan,' Marge said.

'I beg your pardon?' Stan said. 'You're not taking this nonsense seriously? Because if that's what we're doing, deal me out.'

The glass was shuddering now and clutching letters rapidly with its beam. 'Please, Stan,' Marge said. 'Say it's a game, then. If you sit out now you won't be able to discuss it afterward.'

DSLOLY, the glass had been shouting. 'Poisoned slowly,' Stan translated. 'Very clever, Bob. You can stop it now.'

'I don't think it is Bob,' I said.

'What is it then, a ghost? Don't be absurd. Come on then, ghost. If you're here let's see you!'

I felt Marge stop herself saying 'Don't!' I felt Joan tense, and I felt the oppression crushed into a last straining effort. Then I heard a click from the apartment door.

Suddenly the darkness felt more crowded. I began to peer into the apartment beyond the light, slowly in an attempt not to betray to Joan what I was doing, but I was blinded by the glass. I caught sight of Stan and knew by the tilt of his head that he'd realised he might be upsetting Louise. 'Sorry, Louise,' he called and lifted his face ceilingward as he realised that could only make the situation worse.

Then the glass seemed to gather itself and began to dart among the letters. We all knew that it was answering Stan's challenge, and we held ourselves still, only our exhausted hands swinging about the table like parts of a machine. When the glass halted at last we'd all separated out the words of the answer. WHEN LIGHT COMS ON, it said.

'I want to stop now,' Joan said.

'All right,' I said. 'I'll light the candles.'

But she'd gripped my hand. 'I'll do it,' Stan said. 'I've got some matches.' And he'd left the table, and we were listening to the rhythm he was picking out with his shaken matches as he groped into the enormous surrounding darkness, when the lights came on.

We'd all heard the sound of the door but hadn't admitted it, and we all blinked first in that direction. The door was closed. It took seconds for us to realise there was no sign of Louise.

I think I was the first to look at Bob, sitting grinning opposite me behind his empty bottle of Pernod. My mind must have been thinking faster than consciously, because I knew before I pulled it out that there was only one ticket in his pocket, perhaps folded to look like two by Louise as she laid out his suit. Bob just grinned at me and gazed, until Stan closed his eyes.

Illustration by Richard Lamb, taken from Told By The Dead, 2003.

Heading Home

"*Heading Home* was written on 14 January 1974 and, I suspect, little altered in the rewrite. It was the fourth of six such tales I wrote that month, having heard from Kirby McCauley that Marvel Comics planned to resurrect horror comics, short filler stories and all. They needed tales about 1800 words long on traditional themes, and the idea seems to have fired up my imagination. Marvel would abort the proposition, but my offerings all found good homes."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

Written In: 1974
First published in *Whispers #11-12*, 1978
Also published in: *Dark Companions*, *Alone With The Horrors*

Somewhere above you can hear your wife and the young man talking. You strain yourself upwards, your muscles trembling like water, and manage to shift your unsteady balance onto the next stair.

They must think he finished you. They haven't even bothered to close the cellar door, and it's the trickle of flickering light through the crack that you're striving towards. Anyone else but you would be dead. He must have dragged you from the laboratory and thrown you down the stairs into the cellar, where you regained consciousness on the dusty stone. Your left cheek still feels like a rigid plate slipped into your flesh where it struck the floor. You rest on the stair you've reached and listen.

They're silent now. It must be night, since they've lit the hall lamp whose flame is peeking into the cellar. They can't intend to leave the house until tomorrow, if at all. You can only guess what they're doing now, alone in the house. Your numb lips crack again as you grin. Let them enjoy themselves while they can.

He didn't leave you many muscles you can use; it was a thorough job. No wonder they feel safe. Now you have to concentrate yourself in those muscles that still function. Swaying, you manage to raise yourself momentarily to a position where you can grip the next higher stair. You clench on your advantage. Then, pushing with muscles you'd almost forgotten you had, you manage to lever yourself one step higher.

You manoeuvre yourself until you're sitting upright. There's less risk that way of losing your balance for a moment and rolling all the way down to

the cellar floor, where you began climbing hours ago. Then you rest. Only six more stairs.

You wonder again how they met. Of course you should have known that it was going on, but your work was your life and you couldn't spare the time to watch over the woman you'd married. You should have realised that when she went to the village she would meet people and mightn't be as silent as at home. But her room might have been as far from yours as the village is from the house: you gave little thought to the people in either.

Not that you blame yourself. When you met her—in the town where you attended the University—you'd thought she understood how important your work was. It wasn't as if you'd intended to trick her. It was only when she tried to seduce you from your work, both for her own gratification and because she was afraid of it, that you barred her from your companionship by silence.

You can hear the voices again. They're on the upper floor. You don't know whether they're celebrating or comforting each other as guilt settles on them. It doesn't matter. So long as he didn't close the laboratory door when he returned from the cellar. If it's closed you'll never be able to open it. And if you can't get into the laboratory he's killed you after all. You raise yourself, your muscles shuddering with the effort, your cheeks chafing against the wooden stair. You won't relax until you can see the laboratory door.

You're reaching for the top stair when you slip. Your chin comes down on it and slides back. You grip the stair with your jaws, feeling splinters lodge between your teeth. Your neck scrapes the lower stair, but it has lost all feeling save an ache fading slowly into dullness. Only your jaws are preventing you from falling back where you started, and they're throbbing as if nails are being driven into the hinges with measured strokes. You close them tighter, pounding with pain, then you overbalance yourself onto the top stair. You teeter for a moment, then you're secure.

But you don't rest yet. You edge yourself forward and sit up so that you can peer out of the cellar. The outline of the laboratory door billows slightly as the lamp flickers. It occurs to you that they've lit the lamp because she's terrified of you, lying dead beyond the main staircase as she thinks. You laugh silently. You can afford to. When the flame steadies you can see darkness gaping for inches around the laboratory door.

You listen to their voices upstairs, and rest. You know he's a butcher, because he once helped one of the servants to carry the meat from the village. In any case, you could have told his profession from what he has done to you. You're still astonished that she should have taken up with him. From the little you knew of the village people you were delighted that they avoided your house.

You remember the day the new priest came to see you. You could tell he'd heard all the wildest village tales about your experiments. You were surprised he didn't try to ward you off with a cross. When he found you could argue his theology into a corner he left, a twitch pulling his smile awry. He'd tried to persuade you both to attend church, but your wife sat silent throughout. It had been then that you decided to trust her to go to the village. As you paid off the servants you told yourself she would be less likely to talk. You grin fiercely. If you'd been as accurate in your experiments you would be dead.

Upstairs they're still talking. You rock forward and try to wedge yourself between the cellar door and its frame. With your limited control it's difficult, and you find yourself leaning in the crack without any purchase on the wood. Your weight hasn't moved the door, which is heavier than you have ever before had cause to realise. Eventually you manage to wedge yourself in the crack, gripping the frame with all your strength. The door rests on you, and you nudge your weight clumsily against it.

It creaks away from you a little, then swings back, crushing you. It has always hung unevenly and persisted in standing ajar; it never troubled you before. Now the strength he left you, even focused like light through a burning-glass, seems unequal to shifting the door. Trapped in the crack, you relax for a moment. Then, as if to take it unawares, you close your grip on the frame and shove against the door, pushing yourself forward as it swings away.

It comes back, answering the force of your shove, and you aren't clear. But you're still falling into the hall, and as the door chops into the frame you fall on your back, beyond the sweep of the door. You're free of the cellar, but on your back you're helpless. The slowing door can move more than you can. All the muscles you've been using can only work aimlessly and loll in the air. You're laid out on the hall floor like a laboratory subject, beneath the steadying flame.

Then you hear the butcher call to your wife "I'll see!" and start downstairs.

You begin to twitch all the muscles on your right side frantically. You roll a little towards that side, then your wild twitching rocks you back. The flame shakes above you, making your shadow play the cruel trick of achieving the movement you're struggling for. He's at the halfway landing now. You work your right side again and hold your muscles still as you begin to turn that way. Suddenly you've swung over your point of equilibrium and are lying on your right side. You strain your aching muscles to inch you forward, but the laboratory is several feet away, and you're by no means moving in a straight line. His footsteps resound. Then you hear your wife's terrified voice, entreating him back. There's a long pondering silence. Then he hurries back upstairs.

You don't let yourself rest until you're inside the laboratory, although by then your ache feels like a cold stiff surface within your flesh and your mouth tastes like a dusty hole in stone. Once beyond the door you sit still, gazing about. Moonlight is spread from the window to the door. Your gaze seeks the bench where you were working when he found you. He hasn't cleared up any of the material which your convulsions threw to the floor. Glinting on the floor you can see a needle, and nearby the surgical thread which you never had occasion to use. You relax to prepare for your last concerted effort, and remember.

You recall the day you perfected the solution. As soon as you'd quaffed it you felt your brain achieve a piercing alertness, become precisely and continually aware of the messages of each nerve and preside over them, making minute adjustments at the first hint of danger. You knew this was what you'd worked for, but you couldn't prove it to yourself until the day you felt the stirrings of cancer. Then your brain seemed to condense into a keen strand of energy that stretched down and seared the cancer out. That was proof. You were immortal.

Not that some of the research you'd had to carry out wasn't unpleasant. It had taken you a great deal of furtive expenditure at the mortuaries to discover that some of the extracts you needed for the solution had to be taken from the living brain. The villagers thought the children had drowned, for their clothes were found on the river-bank. Medical progress, you told yourself, has always involved suffering.

Perhaps your wife suspected something of this stage of your work, or perhaps she and the butcher had simply decided to rid themselves of you. In any case, you were working at your bench, trying to synthesise your discovery, when you heard him enter. He must have rushed at you, for before you could turn you felt a blazing slash gape in the back of your neck. Then you awoke on the cellar floor.

You edge yourself forward across the laboratory. Your greatest exertion is past, but this is the most exacting part. When you're nearly touching your prone body you have to turn round. You move yourself with your jaws and steer with your tongue. It's difficult, but less so than tonguing yourself upright on your neck to rest on the stairs. Then you fit yourself to your shoulders, groping with your mind to feel the nerves linking again.

Now you'll have to hold yourself unflinching or you'll roll apart. With your mind you can do it. Gingerly, so as not to part yourself, you stretch out your arm for the surgical needle and thread.

Conversion

Written In: 1974
First published in *The Rivals of Dracula: a Century of Vampire Fiction*, 1977
Also published in: *Dark Companions*

You're in sight of home when you know something's wrong. Moonlight shivers gently on the stream beyond the cottage, and trees stand around you like intricate spikes of the darkness mounting within the forest. The cottage is dark, but it isn't that. You emerge into the glade, trying to sense what's troubling you.

You know you shouldn't have stayed out so late, talking to your friend. Your wife must have been worried, perhaps frightened by the night as well. You've never left her alone at night before. But his talk was so engrossing: you feel that in less than a night you've changed from being wary of him to understanding him completely. And his wine was so good, and his open-throated brightly streaming fire so warming, that you can now remember little except a timeless sense of comfortable companionship, of communion that no longer needed words. But you shouldn't have left your wife alone in the forest at night, even behind a barred door. The woodcutter's cottage is nearby; at least you could have had his wife stay with yours. You feel disloyal.

Perhaps that's what has been disturbing you. Always before when you've returned home light has been pouring from the windows, mellowing the surrounding trunks and including them like a wall around your cottage. Now the cottage reminds you of winter nights long ago in your childhood, when you lay listening to a wolf's cry like the slow plummeting of ice into a gorge, and felt the mountains and forests huge around you, raked by the wind. The cottage feels like that: cold and hollow and unwelcoming. For a moment you wonder if you're simply anticipating your wife's blame, but you're sure it's more than that.

In any case you'll have to knock and awaken her. First you go to the window and look in. She's lying in bed, her face open as if to the sky. Moonlight eases darkness from her face, but leaves her throat and the rest

of her in shadow. Tears have gathered in her eyes, sparkling. No doubt she has been crying in memory of her sister, a sketch of whom gazes across the bed from beside a glass of water. As you look in you're reminded of your childhood fancy that angels watched over you at night, not at the end of the bed but outside the window; for a second you feel like your wife's angel. But as you gaze in, discomfort grows in your throat and stomach. You remember how your fancy somehow turned into a terror of glimpsing a white face peering in. You draw back quickly in case you should frighten her.

But you have to knock. You don't understand why you've been delaying. You stride to the door and your fist halts in mid-air, as if impaled by lightning. Suddenly the vague threats and unease you've been feeling seem to rush together and gather on the other side of the door. You know that beyond the door something is waiting for you, ready to pounce.

You feel as if terror has pinned you through your stomach, helpless. You're almost ready to flee into the woods, to free yourself from the skewer of your panic. Sweat pricks you like red-hot ash scattered on your skin. But you can't leave your wife in there with it, whatever nightmare it is rising out of the tales you've heard told of the forest. You force yourself to be still if not calm, and listen for some hint of what it might be.

All you can hear is the slow sleepy breathing of the wind in the trees. Your panic rises, for you can feel it beyond the door, perfectly poised and waiting easily for you to betray yourself. You hurry back to the window, but it's impossible for you to squeeze yourself in far enough to make out anything within the door. This time a stench rises from the room to meet you, trickling into your nostrils. It's so thickly unpleasant that you refuse to think what it might resemble. You edge back, terrified now of awakening your wife, for it can only be her immobility that's protecting her from whatever's in the room.

But you can't coax yourself back to the door. You've allowed your panic to spread out from it, warding you further from the cottage. Your mind fills with your wife, lying unaware of her plight. Furious with yourself, you compel your body forward against the gale of your panic. You reach the door and struggle to touch it. If you can't do that, you tell yourself, you're a coward, a soft scrabbling thing afraid of the light. Your hand presses against the door as if proving itself against a live coal, and the door swings inwards.

You should have realised that your foe might have entered the cottage through the doorway. You flinch back instinctively, but as the swift fear fades the panic seeps back. You can feel it hanging like a spider just inside the doorway, waiting for you to pass beneath: a huge heavy black spider, ready to plump on your face. You try to shake your panic out of you with the knowledge that it's probably nothing like that, that you're giving in to fancy. But whatever it is, it's oozing a stench that claws its way into your throat and begins to squeeze out your stomach. You fall back, weakened and baffled.

Then you see the rake. It's resting against the corner of the cottage, where you left it after trying to clear a space for a garden. You carry it to the door, thinking. It could be more than a weapon, even though you don't know what you're fighting. If your wife doesn't awaken and draw its attention to her, if your foe isn't intelligent enough to see what you're planning, if your absolute conviction of where it's lurking above the door isn't false—you almost throw away the rake, but you can't bear the sense of your wife's peril any longer. You inch the door open. You're sure you have only one chance.

You reach stealthily into the space above the door with the teeth of the rake, then you grind them into your prey and drag it out into the open. It's a dark tangled mass, but you hurl it away into the forest without looking closer, for some of it has fallen into the doorway and lies dimly there, its stench welling up. You pin it with the teeth and fling it into the trees.

Then you realise there's more, hanging and skulking around the side of the doorframe. You grab it with the rake and hurl it against a trunk. Then you let your breath roar out. You're weak and dizzy, but you stagger through the doorway. There are smears of the thing around the frame, and you sway back, retching. You close your mouth and nostrils and you're past, safe.

You lean on the rake and gaze down at your wife. There's a faint stench clinging to the rake, and you push it away from you, against the wall. She's still asleep, no doubt because you were mourning her sister all last night. Your memory's blurring; you must be exhausted too, because you can remember hardly anything before the battle you've just fought. You're limply grateful that no harm has befallen her. If she'd come with you to visit your friend none of this would have happened. You hope you can recapture the sense of communion you had with him, to pass on to your wife.

Through your blurring consciousness you feel an enormous yearning for her.

Then you jerk alert, for there's still something in the room. You glance about wildly and see beneath the window more of what you destroyed, lying like a tattered snake. You manage to scoop it up in one piece this time, and you throw the rake out with it. Then you turn back to your wife. You've disturbed her; she has moved in her sleep. And fear advances on you from the bed like a spreading stain pumped out by a heart, because now you can see what's nestling at her throat.

You don't know what it is; your terror blurs it and crowds out your memories until it looks like nothing you've ever seen. It rests in the hollow of her throat like a dormant bat, and indeed it seems to have stubby protruding wings. Its shape expands within your head until it is a slow explosion of pure hostility, growing and erasing you. You turn away, blinded.

It's far worse than what you threw into the forest. Even then, if you hadn't been fighting for your wife you would have been paralysed by superstition. Now you can hardly turn your head back to look. The stain of the thing is crawling over your wife, blotting out her face and all your sense of her. But you open your eyes an agonised slit and see it couched in her throat as if it lives there. Your rage floods up, and you start forward.

But even with your eyes closed you can't gain on it, because a great cold inhuman power closes about you, crushing you like a moth in a fist. You mustn't cry out, because if your wife awakens it may turn on her. But the struggle crushes a wordless roar from you, and you hear her awake.

Your seared eyes make out her face, dimmed by the force of the thing at her neck. Perhaps her gathered tears are dislodged, or perhaps these are new, wrung out by the terror in her eyes. Your head is a shell full of fire, your eyes feel as though turning to ash, but you battle forward. Then you realise she's shrinking back. She isn't terrified of the thing at her throat at all, she's terrified of you. She's completely in its power.

You're still straining against the force, wondering whether it must divert some of its power from you in order to control her, when she grabs the glass from beside the bed. For a moment you can't imagine what she wants with a glass of water. But it isn't water. It's vitriol, and she throws it in your face.

Your face bursts into pain. Howling, you rush to the mirror.

You're still searching for yourself in the mirror when the woodcutter appears in the doorway, grim-faced. At once, like an eye in the whirlwind of your confusion and pain, you remember that you asked his wife to stay with yours, yesterday afternoon when he wasn't home to dissuade you from what you had to do. And you know why you can't see yourself, only the room and the doorway through which you threw the garlic, your sobbing wife clutching the cross at her throat, the glass empty now of the holy water you brought home before setting out to avenge her sister's death at Castle Dracula.

Illustration by Seth Fisher, taken from the November/December edition of Cicada magazine, 2000.

Rising Generation

Written in: 1974
First published in *Worlds Of Horror #4*, 1975

As they approached the cave beneath the castle some of the children began to play at zombies, hobbling stiffly, arms outstretched. Heather Fry frowned. If they knew the stories about the place, despite her efforts to make sure they didn't, she hoped they wouldn't frighten the others. She hadn't wanted to come at all; it had been Miss Sharp's idea, and she'd been teaching decades longer than Heather, so of course she had her way. The children were still plodding inexorably toward their victims. Then Joanne said "You're only being like those men in that film last night." Heather smiled with relief. "Keep together and wait for me," she said.

She glanced up at the castle, set atop the hill like a crown, snapped and bent and discovered by time. Overhead sailed a pale blue sky, only a wake of thin foamy clouds on the horizon betraying any movement. Against the sky, just below the castle, Heather saw three figures toiling upward. Odd, she thought, the school had been told the castle was forbidden to visitors because of the danger of falling stone, which was why they'd had to make do with the cave. Still, she was glad she hadn't had to coax her class all the way up there. The three were moving slowly and clumsily, no doubt exhausted by their climb, and even from where Heather stood their faces looked exceptionally pale.

She had to knock several times on the door of the guide's hut before he emerged. Looking in beyond him, Heather wondered what had taken his time. Not tidying the hut, certainly, because the desk looked blitzed, scattered and overflowing with forms and even an upset ink-bottle, fortunately stoppered. She looked at the guide and her opinion sank further. Clearly he didn't believe in shaving or cutting his nails, and he was pale enough to have been born in a cave, she thought. He didn't even bother to turn to her; he stared at the children lined up at the cave entrance, though by his lack of expression he might as well have been blind. "I'd rather you didn't say anything about the legend," she said.

His stare swivelled to her and held for so long she felt it making a fool of her. "You know what I mean," she said, determined to show him she did too. "The stories about the castle. About how the baron was supposed to keep zombies in the cave to work for him, until someone killed him and walled them up. I know it's only a story but not for the children, please."

When he'd finished staring at her he walked toward the cave, his hands dangling on his long arms and almost brushing his knees. At least he won't interrupt, she thought. I wonder how much he's paid and for what? There was even a propped-up boot poking out from beneath the desk.

As she reached the near end of the line of children he was trudging into the cave. Daylight slipped from his back and he merged with the enormous darkness, then the walls closed about him as his torch awakened them. Heather switched on her own torch. "Stay with your partner," she called, paragraphing with her fingers. "Stay in the light. And don't lag."

The children, fourteen pairs of them, were hurrying after the guide's light. The cave was wide at the entrance but swiftly narrowed as it curved, and when Heather glanced back a minute later, lips of darkness had closed behind them. As the guide's torch wavered the corrugations of the walls rippled like the soft gulping flesh of a throat. The children were glancing about uneasily like young wild animals, worried by the dark sly shifting they glimpsed at the edge of their vision. Heather steadied her beam about them, and the thousands of tons of stone above their heads closed down.

Not that it was easy to steady the beam. In the cave he'd picked up speed considerably, and she and the children had to hurry so as not to be left behind. Maybe he feels at home, she thought angrily. "Will you slow down, please," she called and heard Debbie at the front of the line say "Miss Fry says you've got to slow down."

The guide's light caught a wide flat slab of roof that looked as if it were sagging. Scattered earth crunched softly beneath Heather's feet. About now, she was sure, they would be heading up and out the other side of the hill. Joanne, who hadn't let Debbie convince her as a zombie, and Debbie squeezed back to Heather along the contracting passage. "I don't like that man," Joanne said. "He's dirty."

"What do you mean?" Heather said, sounding too worried. But Joanne said, "He's got earth in his ears."

"Will you hold our hands if we're frightened?" Debbie said.

"Now I can't hold everyone's hand, can I?" Earth slid from beneath Heather's feet. Odd, she thought: must come from the guide's ears and beneath his nails, and began to giggle, shaking her head when they asked why. He was still forcing them to hurry, but she was beginning to be glad that at least they wouldn't have to depend on him much longer. "If you think of questions don't ask them yet," she called. "Wait until we're outside."

"I wish we didn't have to come underground," Joanne said.

Then you should have said before, Heather thought. "You'll be able to look for things in the field later," she said. And at least you haven't had Miss Sharp herding you as well as her own class. If they hadn't come on ahead they would have had to suffer her running their picnic.

"But why do we have to come down when it's nice? Sharon didn't have to."

"It'll still be nice this afternoon. Sharon can't go into places that are closed in, just as you don't like high places. So you see, you're lucky today."

"I don't feel lucky," Joanne said.

The ridges of the walls were still swaying gently, like the leaves of a submarine plant, and now one reached out and tugged at Heather's sleeve. She flinched away, then saw that it was a splintered plank, several of which were propped against the wall, looking as if they'd once been fastened together. Ahead the cave forked, and the children were following the shrinking rim of light into the left-hand passage, which was so low that they had to stoop. "Go on, you're all right," she told Debbie, who was hesitating. Stupid man, she raged.

It was tighter than she'd thought. She had to hold one arm straight out in front of her so that the light urged the children on, leaving herself surrounded by darkness that coldly pressed her shoulders down when she tried to see ahead. If this passage had been fenced off, as she suspected, she was sorry it had been re-opened. The children's ridged shadows rippled like caterpillars. Suddenly Debbie halted. "There's someone else in here," she said.

"Well?" Joanne said. "It's not your cave."

Now all the children had gone quiet, and Heather could hear it too: the footsteps of several people tramping forward from deeper within the cave.

Each step was followed by a scattering sound like brief dry rain. "Men working in the caves," she called, waiting for someone to ask what the dry sound was so that she could say they were carrying earth. Don't ask why, she thought. Something to do with the castle, perhaps with the men she'd seen on the hill. But the footsteps had stopped.

When she straightened up at last the darkness clenched on her head: she had to steady herself against the wall. Her vertigo gradually steadied, and she peered ahead. The children had caught up with the guide, who was silhouetted against a gaping tunnel of bright pale stone. As she started toward him he pulled something from his pocket and hurled it beyond her.

Debbie made to retrieve it. "It's all right," Heather said, and ushered the pair of them with her light toward the other children. Then, cursing his rudeness, she turned the beam on what she assumed he'd thrown her to catch. She peered closer, but it was exactly what it seemed: a packed lump of earth. Right, she thought, if I can lose you your job, you're out of work now.

She advanced on him. He was standing in the mouth of a side tunnel, staring back at her and pointing his torch deeper into the main passage. The children were hurrying past him into the hard tube of light. She was nearly upon him when he plodded out of the side tunnel, and she saw that the children were heading for a jagged opening at the limit of the beam, surrounded by exploded stone sprinkled with earth. She'd opened her mouth to call them back when his hand gripped her face and crushed her lips, forcing her back into the side tunnel.

His cold hand smelled thickly of earth. His arm was so long that her nails flailed inches short of his face. "Where's Miss Fry?" Debbie called, and he pointed ahead with his torch. Then he pushed Heather further into the cave, though she hacked at his shins. All at once she remembered that the boot beneath the desk had been propped on its toe: there might have been a leg beyond it.

Then the children screamed; one chorus of panic, then silence. Heather's teeth closed in the flesh of his hand, but he continued to shove her back into the cave. She saw her torch gazing up at the roof of the main passage, retreating. His own torch drooped in his hand, and its light drew the walls to leap and struggle, imitating her.

Now he was forcing her toward the cave floor. She caught sight of a mound of earth into which he began to press her head, as if for baptism. She fought upward, teeth grinding in his flesh, and saw figures groping past her upturned torch. They were the children.

She let herself go limp at once, and managed to twist out of the way as he fell. But he kept hold of her until she succeeded in bringing her foot forward and grinding his face beneath her heel like a great pale insect. He still made no vocal sound. Then she fled staggering to her torch, grabbed it and ran. The stone wrinkles of the low roof seemed more hindering, as if now she were battling a current. Before she was free of the roof she heard him crawling in the darkness at her heels, like a worm.

When the children appeared at the end of her swaying tunnel of light she gave a wordless cry of relief. She could feel nothing but relief that they were covered with dirt: they'd been playing. They still were just short of the border of daylight, and they'd even persuaded Joanne to be a zombie. "Quickly," Heather gasped. "Run to Miss Sharp's class." But they continued playing, turning stiffly toward her, arms groping. Then, as she saw the earth trickling from their mouths and noses, she knew they weren't playing at all.

The Grip Of Peace

Written In: 1974
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If my wife and I hadn't argued before our first hyperflight together this world would still be haunted, but in quite a different way. That sounds like a shipman's tale, and I'm sure you've had your fill and plateful of those on your way here. But don't put this pamphlet down. I'm not shipping you, be sure. It means what it says on the cover: WELCOME TO HAPPYHOME. Someone will have welcomed you when you left the ship's boat, but they'll have left the welcome tale to me.

I hope you didn't expect me to use a telerecording. We're not much for next best things here. We're personal contact people, and we don't like to undermine that with telecommunication. I may be dead by the time you read this, and I wouldn't want you watching a ghost that's going dim with information decay.

If I'm still around we'll meet at the ragefest tonight. It'll be in the honour of new arrivals, but if you're tensing up for it, don't: that's exactly what you don't need. Just relax and let me tell you my story. My name is Tid Frobes. I'm a doctor. I hope you can read my handwriting. When I came out of hyperflight my wife Luli was staring at me. The cabin screen was telling us we'd been hyperflying for three hours, and we were one and a half real hours out of Happyhome. You must have been through it to get here if they still do it that way, so you know how it feels—as if you've nodded off for a moment and the screen has awakened you, except that all your senses feel on edge and clutching for something just out of reach: the nagging notion that you had a glimpse of some enormously important concept while you were out, what the shipmen call the Unremembered. I had to cope with that and more, because Luli was glaring at me as if I'd fallen asleep while she was speaking. I might well have. We'd been arguing up to the moment of hyperflight, and whatever those activities are that we know the brain

performs in hyperflight, they might well have been three hours' marshalling of arguments so far as Luli was concerned. 'You didn't want to marry me," she said. 'You just wanted a nurse you could work with."

"I wanted to take you out of the group," I said. They may well still group back on Starnose (yes, the red planet that joins its neighbours in making a beery face of its parent body when you catch the orbits right). You could join any group if you knew someone in it, and once in you shared everything, including each other. "You said yourself you needed more real demands made of you."

"But I didn't say I wasn't happy in the group." People matured from one group to the next; sometimes couples married. It's surprising the number of people you meet again in different groups; Luli and I had met in two, though we weren't consciously pursuing each other. You were never asked to leave a group, but the married tended to drift away. "I think you signed for this flight just so I'd have to leave," she said.

"But you didn't have to. No torture or hypnosis was involved." We're doing well, I thought bitterly, for seven weeks married. I'd hoped to persuade the shipmen to perform a timebonding ceremony, their marriage ritual that's based on a shared sense of the way the ageing of the rest of the universe speeds up during hyperflight, but we'd hardly been in the mood. "If you'd waited for the next traderoute ship we'd have had a few years to think about marriage," I said. "Maybe we'd have been better suited then."

"Maybe you should have left me behind your time," she said, her eyes furiously moist.

I wondered if we could be heard in the next cabin, where our travelling companions, inventors of the peacecube, were berthed. "I'll tell you what we're really arguing about," I said. "Not getting married, and not where we're going either. You were the one who couldn't wait to breathe open air. No, you're frightened of remembering the Unremembered. You were frightened before we went into hyperflight, you can only be more so now. I don't know why you can't just worry that the automatics might fail, like I do. Not that they have for centuries."

Her eyes said I was right, but the way they focused past me showed I couldn't have handled my understanding worse. Her mouth was moulding a cold grin around a retort when she was interrupted. "Engineers Pefa Bain, Hodd Tangam, Doctor Tid Frobes, Nurse Luli Frobes," the screen called.

"See," I said, hastily unstrapping myself from my couch, "we're separated already."

"All please report to the communal area to discuss urgent message from Happyhome," the screen said. Only it didn't say Happyhome, since the world was then described and located by a mass of symbols only a computer could pronounce with conviction, or want to.

"Maybe we are better in a group than with each other," I said. "Let's see."

I was glad to leave the rounded-off cube of the cabin, for it made me feel quarantined—which of course I was, along with anyone else who wasn't shipborn. Loudly silent, we walked along the imperceptibly curving corridor to the dining/viewing/recreational area. Pefa was saying "Engineers indeed," and Hodd said "What else are we?"

Ahead through the viewport, Happyhome was a pale apple patched with two giant paralysed amoebae of water, slowly filling with glints as the world turned. "So what do you think is urgent?" Pefa said. "Too much good air, too much fresh food?" I tended to agree with her innuendo: there couldn't be any cause for alarm on Happyhome. We four were heading there not because we thought medical staff were urgently needed, but because we were attracted. Even the local microbes had ready-found answers in the Starnose antibiotics laboratories, and otherwise Happyhome was a world of bright airborne insects and mostly edible vegetation, scattered with all the periods of architecture of a long-gone race like a planet-sized archaeological exhibit.

"I suppose it would have been too much to expect the ship to transmit the message direct to us," Hodd said. "We might have breathed germs all over the transmission."

A disapproving shipwoman's face jerked into frame on the screen beneath the viewport. "Message from [Happyhome] follows," she said. "Unidentified local effect has caused breakdown of colony structure and of many individual personalities. Be ready to conduct psychological stabilising of thirty-one cases. Remaining eighteen colonists have also requested permission to board."

"That's not in their own words," Hodd said.

"That is an accurate digest of the message received," the ship-woman said. "We were unable to record."

"Can we tell them we'll be ready?" Luli said to me.

"We shall transmit your assurance," the shipwoman said, interrupting my nod. "Since we are only an hour from arrival, we have not the time to convert your screens for transmission. You would of course need bridge permission to use the main transmitter, as well as lengthy sterilisation."

"I would just love," Hodd said, sitting forward with a vicious smack of her heels on the deck, "to go and sneeze over the lot of them."

"All cabins in your section will be made available," the screen said. "Five extra couches will be supplied for use in the communal area. We are trying to determine whether your home world will fund our return there with your patients... I am now informed that Starnose has taken responsibility for this deviation. We shall orbit [Happyhome] for three days to allow you to prepare your patients for hyperflight."

"There's a lot that's unremembered on this ship," Hodd said, "such as human feeling." But the screen was blank. "God's bowels."

"I know, but never mind," Luli said. "Let's make sure the couches are ready."

"At least we'll be able to give the peacecubes an optimum test," Pefa said, looking slightly worried.

"That reminds me," I said. "I just want Pefa and Hodd to explain to me exactly how peacecubes work."

"Well, good. Good!" Luli shouted and stalked away, trailing a promise of the next instalment of our argument.

"We'll hurry," Pefa called after her, and Hodd shrugged. When I caught up with them they were already unpacking the foam-lined carriers in their cabin. Hodd lifted out one of the three-inch cubes in its heavy metal sheath and handed it to me with what I immediately discovered wasn't delicacy but controlled strength, for the weight of the cube was considerable. "Forty-eight cabins," she counted. "A cube in the eighth, the twenty-fourth, the fortieth, and one in the communal room."

That was the cube with which they explained. The rim of Happyhome had swelled and was touching the frame of the viewport. "Once it's unsheathed," Hodd said, "the cube is triggered by any form of suffering and goes to work on soothing it, which it does by one of a number of methods that the trigger

selects. Redirecting the patient's preoccupation, intensifying memories of pleasure, focussing on any positive philosophy the patient may have, and so on. It's a little like the old anaesthetics."

"Nothing of the kind," Pefa said. "It's a substitute for telepathic nursing. If there hadn't been so little need for practical nursing on Starnose we wouldn't have had to invent this."

Two young shipmen, sealed from head to foot in sterilised snapsuits over their clothes, were setting up extra couches around us. "Maybe," Hodd said. "Anyway, you can see that's a lot of work for something this size to do, even today."

"Now hold that," Pefa said. "The telepaths who imprinted the cubes did all the work. It took a lot of discipline for them to produce universal responses."

"You don't need to envy them," Hodd said. Luli was trying to help the shipmen as they dodged around the other side of the couches. Her violently silent back was turned to us. "We're going to need to educate the nontelepathic medical profession to use cubes. I mean, we don't want doctors operating with a worry somewhere in their minds and inadvertently getting high on a cube."

And so on, chipping away at each other's ideas. That must have been the way they worked on inventing the peacecubes, I thought, and they succeeded then. The shipmen fled. Pefa unsheathed the pale green crystal cube for a few seconds but I didn't feel anything, perhaps because I didn't feel I was suffering. Pefa said to Hodd "I wish you hadn't made that remark about the Unremembered. It's basically a religion, you know." I went to find Luli, but she snapped a couch cocoon angrily at me.

Yes, all this has to do with the haunting of Happyhome.

If you think we might have been insufficiently prepared for the cases that were boated up from Happyhome an hour later, you're right. We'd expected the kind of fraying of personality that may develop in a small closely dependent pioneer group, the casualties of authority conflict, a few cases of world shock for variety. We weren't ready to meet a biochemist cradling the ghost of her second miscarriage. Nor a nutritionist who had to be ferried separately from an ecologist to prevent his breaking the latter's jaw again. Nor two engineers, transport and electrical, both laughing harshly until one

burst into tears and the other followed, until either led back to laughter. All we could do was persuade everyone to lie down, the worst cases nearest a peacecube, and unsheathe the cubes. Then we wandered among them, feeling our concern dimming as the cubes took hold, then flooding back like adrenaline as we moved beyond them. The boat went down for the rest.

Even those we theoretically weren't treating were lying down. All except the correlator of the group, a psychologist called Hald. If it hadn't been for a sense of tight unrelenting control, as he consciously pre-selected his every movement, you might not have realised he was from Happyhome. He stood in the entrance to the communal area, beyond the radius of the cubes, groping for memories. "It was a model colony at first," he said. "No arguments, no conflicts, total community. Then gradually things went wrong. Some of the most placid of us began to lose their tempers for no reason and commit spur of the moment violence. That was five, six years ago. We called for aid but of course you were on your way in hyperflight. Things became so bad nobody could bear to be touched, they were sure to have a flash of violence. So the colony moved apart. There were no children, only miscarriages. What happened as people were left alone you can see."

His lips didn't move like a talking mouth, they looked as if he were operating them from behind with his fingers. "Whatever it is, it isn't chemical. It isn't in the food or the atmosphere. It isn't microbiotic. And I'm sure it isn't world shock. All I know is it can't be perceived, not even when it's working on you."

The people lying in the communal area were stirring and muttering uneasily; I knew I should go to them, but Hald was staring at me as if he'd fitted his fingertips within his eyeballs. "There was one thing," he said. "People dreamed. I did myself lately. You know a good deal of the local architecture is still standing. No records of the race, those must have been destroyed or decayed. Just the architecture. The more recent it is, the simpler it's become. The early building is complex, then there are things like spiral shells, and the last forms of all are spheres. There's only one place they're found and that's near the colony. They're about a thousand years old. We never knew what they were for. But people dreamed about them. Every night."

His eyes were full of what he thought that meant, but he wouldn't tell me. I might have asked if one of the others hadn't swung himself off his couch, shouting "There it is! That's what's doing it!" and pointing at the peacecube. They were all shouting and pointing. I could hear it spreading into the cabins. The doors were opening and they were all converging on the nearest cube.

Hald stepped within the radius and shrank back. "You mustn't use that, whatever it is," he said. "Not on these people."

That was all he could or would say. Pefa and Hodd sheathed the cubes, looking morose and baffled. Luli and I injected the patients with soporifics. I wondered what we might have to use when they came out of hyperflight. Hald refused his injection and went from couch to couch, gazing down at the sleepers. "It's what I was for," he said.

In the morning—which is to say, when the viewport had to be dimmed because the light on the larger sea was spilling in and searing our eyes—they were all still asleep. We'd given them the maximum dose; if they hadn't improved when they awoke, one more would take them up to hyperflight. Hald awoke on a couch, glaring about with a vengeful look for the thief of his consciousness, as Pefa and Hodd arrived to begin their shift. I heard Hodd begin to ask him something, but Luli and I were trudging away to sleep.

Later, as a timid snapsuited shipgirl brought us food, averting her eyes for fear of having to watch us eat, Hodd explained why she'd consulted Hald. "We stick it up our noses, if you want to know," she called after the girl, and told me "Evidence is that whatever broke up the colony takes years to accumulate and works only down there. I'm assuming brief contact with it won't affect us later. So we're going down."

"We need an inkling why the peacecubes don't work," Pefa said.

"Certainly," Hodd said. "And I can't say I'll mind upsetting the shipmen, either. You know how they dislike the idea of leaving the ship for a nasty unhygienic world. I wonder why. Maybe it makes them feel there's too much universe for the Unremembered to control after all."

I shared the urge she was trying to hide: to prove herself superior to the shipmen, who had mastered and built a philosophy upon the vertiginous clutching of the mind after hyperflight. We four needed to dissociate

ourselves from the shipmen, for Starnose had been a closed environment too: exhilarating gravity, tracts of vegetation and integrated architecture, everyone's favourite hydroponic foods, but domes pressed down over it all to keep out the killer atmosphere. We'd needed the outward call of Happyhome; we'd been settling into the stasis of a disinfected perfection. "How many do we need to look after the patients?" I asked Luli.

"The soporifics have twelve hours to run. One can manage for the rest of the day."

"We'll draw lots," Pefa said.

"Don't bother. I'll stay."

"Are you sure?" I asked Luli. "Wouldn't you like to go in the open?"

"I've said no, haven't I?"

"We'll be away for a couple of hours, no more," I said. "There's no danger. Don't worry." But she'd turned away, almost colliding with Hald, who was frowning anxiously at us.

When we landed the shipman pilot hardly gave us time to clear the field. I felt as glad as Hodd that he would have to brave the world again in two hours to retrieve us. We stood at the edge of the colony and gazed about. After the controlled and unchanging illumination of the ship, what overwhelmed me was the sunlight. A yellowish sun sailed in the blue-tinged sky, brushing off occasional white clouds, and as they slid free the light welled up intoxicatingly. The pale green grass, the fifteen-foot vegetables that clustered nearby like a gathering of melting pink spoons with lowered heads, the squat round flat-topped white buildings of the colony, all swam in the light, piercingly clear. "Let's get the transport," Hodd said.

We'd borrowed a map of the colony and its surroundings from Hald. As we walked through the colony I glanced up at the railed observation roofs. I imagined colonists gazing out on their landscape. When this hospitable world had been discovered, so near in hyperflight terms to Starnose, all we specialists in the minutiae of our world had looked up from our microanalysis and outward again. I remembered my joy at the promise of being able to practise rather than theorise. I was sure that if this world proved uninhabitable it could only add to the suffocating apathy back on Starnose. I gazed up at the empty railed roofs. A few grains of dust sifted down.

One groundcar had been driven into the edge of the parking bay and left there, buckled. We took another car and headed for the oldest of the nearby groups of surrounding architecture, at Pefa's suggestion. Since the colonists must have performed all the obvious analyses, she felt we needed to be intuitive. We left the flexite cover turned back and listened for sounds above the drone of the car. The pale grass stirred in a breeze, as if ruffled by cloud shadow.

Our first sight of the buildings was of a series of irregularly spaced stone loops rising over the horizon. Half a mile separated the furthest apart. The nearer we approached the more bemused our eyes became. Eventually Hodd, who was driving, had to halt the car. The loops were only the highest tips of an intricate filigree structure, formed of intertwining coils and arcs of multicoloured stone. Some arcs were covered with rung-like protrusions, others bulged like a sated snake and were living quarters, to judge from the openings they displayed. The whole was over fifty feet high. "I'm surprised it wasn't this the people dreamed about," Pefa said.

We walked closer but didn't venture beneath the structure. "Look at the foundation," Hodd said. "The whole thing was carved from a single block."

I suddenly saw that the structure looked like a nest of inextricably ossified rainbows. "If we knew anyone as aesthetically obsessed as this race must have been, we'd be treating them," I said.

We were glad to drive on, spreading ripples through the fields of grass, which stirred like the fur of a sleepy cat. The stone maze sank beneath the horizon. "I'd like to think it was back there, but no," said Hodd. "Hald said they went over it thoroughly: nothing. Not all of them visited it, so it couldn't have been a psychological effect. And besides, that wouldn't explain why they dreamed of the other area."

Soon the next set of architecture was mounting the horizon. As Hald had said, they were like spiral shells, revealing themselves ring by coiled white ring as we approached. Each of the forty-nine buildings was composed of seven rings and a topmost point. They were arranged in a square of seven ranks. Grass stirred feebly at their bases as if crushed, and clouds of insects faceted with colours flickered swiftly between them. As I gazed at the cloning of massive cones I became aware of Pefa, who had frozen, listening intently.

"I'm trying to get hold of a feeling I've had since we landed," she said. "Have you ever read what it was like in the eye of a cyclone? A kind of uneasy calm. I suppose it's just so quiet after the ship."

I remembered the call-notes and the whirs and creaks of energy, and listened to the hushed breath of the grass, and nodded. Hodd had entered the base of a cone. As we followed I was counting the narrow viewslits in each ring: seven in the topmost, fourteen in the next down, and so on. We looked through an open exit from the spiral hall into the first room. The ceiling reminded us gently to stoop. The cones were clearly a simplification of some of the forms of the multicoloured structure, but still I felt raw with unease. It wasn't the desertion, for the abandoned colony hadn't bothered me. It wasn't the unfamiliar functions of the seven-slitted room, with its oddly scooped stone benches and its hornlike carvings protruding from the wall. What I found intensely disturbing was the formalism of the place. It made even the clinical life of shipboard and Starnose seem preferable.

I was glad when we left the cones below the horizon. We swathed our way towards the colony. Before we reached it we would encounter the last construction the lost race had made. Pefa was staring ahead, dashing her hair from her face. The grass hissed by and leapt from beneath our wheels, scattering in our faces.

At first I didn't realise I was seeing the spheres. Something was gleaming like trapped stars through the grass. As we came nearer the grass sank like cloud from the lights, leaving them suspended within a faint circular presence. They were manufactured spheres of transparent crystal, at whose centre a steady light was contained. There were five of them, set unequidistantly along a straying line. We stood in front of the central sphere and the light gazed at us.

"They're the lost race," Pefa said suddenly.

"What?" said Hodd sharply, then her eyes widened.

"The light in the crystal. That's where they went, that's why there's no trace of them. They simplified themselves and their environment until they had psychic control. They must have been preventing everyone from realising, it's too obvious to have been overlooked otherwise. Yes, and it was the struggle to realise that made everyone dream and eventually crack."

"We must tell them," I said. "Once they know they may be able to return to the colony." I was full of ideas, spilling them. I pulled aside a long blade of grass that was obstructing my view of the sphere, and tried to grasp an idea about Luli that was staying out of reach. Yes: I realised the way she'd manoeuvred to let me come down here, although she would have loved to visit an open world. We have a fine marriage, I thought, despite the superficial turbulence. "We won't have to leave," I said. "I know we won't."

I was still secure with my thoughts behind a smile when the boat returned. Only when Hodd began arguing with Pefa did I rouse myself, and then only to nod. "You're going to have to force a lot into your explanation," Hodd said. "Such as why any race would leave itself so exposed and vulnerable. You'll agree they would be. The fact that you spotted them at once proves that."

"It's a cumulative effect, remember. Maybe there are some minds their defence mechanism doesn't work on."

"Such as yours? What you'd like to believe is seldom valid science. Ask Hald if they analysed the spheres. I assume you aren't saying the spheres could persuade them they'd run a thorough analysis?"

"I don't know," Pefa said furiously. "Maybe they could."

We'd hardly docked when she was running to the passenger quarters. I'd followed her closely enough to be within earshot of her question to Hald when Luli rushed up to me, crying "What happened? What have you done?"

I glanced down at my hand, directed by her gaze. The skin between the fingers was black with blood. There was a long deep cut in the palm. "It's all right," I said, wanting to know what Hald had replied, not wanting Luli to see my disquiet. "I'll see to it." I hurried to my equipment in the storage area.

When I'd finished examining myself I slumped. The cut wasn't anything antibiotics and a bandage spray couldn't handle. I'd realised by now that I'd cut myself on the blade of grass I'd moved from the sphere. No doubt there'd be no more to feel than the sly tickle of a razor blade, though I couldn't remember even that.

Pefa appeared, looking disconsolate. "Hald says they took one of the spheres into the colony to examine it," she said. "The light is just sunlight,

they blocked it off easily. There's no energy in the spheres. I thought they were something like peacecubes, but they're just objects."

Then I remembered something, but before I could tell her Luli looked in. "As I thought, just a cut," I called. "I'll take over now. You catch up on your sleep." I didn't mean to sound as if I were dismissing her, but after a glare she flounced away.

"You ought to try and see her more," Pefa said. "No, not more. Better."

"You could be right," I said. "But look, there's one question we forgot to ask. Let's go and see Hald."

By now he'd loosened up somewhat, relaxing at least until he caught himself at it. I was afraid he mightn't answer, but he did. "I dreamed the same as everyone else," he said. "I suppose it was like having a blind spot, only you knew there was something hiding behind it. I'd be standing between the spheres and I'd know there was something besides them and the grass. But every time I was on the brink of becoming aware, the awareness was—turned off, I suppose. That's all. It kept repeating until I woke up."

"You and Hodd think," I told Pefa. "I'll think too. It's there somewhere." But all I heard them arguing about was Pefa's image of the eye of the cyclone.

"There's no surrounding violence down there, so where's your cyclone?" Hodd was criticising. It took them long enough, I thought.

I dreamed, not surprisingly, of the spheres. My mind ran through the afternoon's encounter with them. I awoke convinced we'd overlooked something while we were at the spheres, not necessarily anything visual. I lay awake for a long time, pondering.

In the morning the patients were stirring. We gave soporifics to anyone who wanted them, which was everyone except Hald. I hoped we weren't creating a psychological dependence. I was becoming more anxious about the effect of hyperflight on these cradled minds, beginning to dread the risk; it had no precedent.

"I want to go down again," I told Luli. "You can manage for a couple of hours."

She almost dropped a needle, then caught it and herself. "I'll be all right," she said. "I hope you find it, whatever it is."

When Pefa and Hodd had slept we went down. "We told him two hours," said Pefa as the boat fled. "Let's leave the car and walk, try to feel the place. We'll still have an hour at the spheres."

For a moment I disagreed, then I thought her intuition might be useful. We walked away from the colony. Today there were no clouds, and the sun burned within its rim etched on the glassy sky. The light gave the pink spoons and the grass a luminous glaze. Our feet passed through the grass with a faint snap and a hiss.

Gradually the silence that surrounded the sounds, isolating and displaying them with what seemed unnatural precision, began to take on a presence. It felt as if the tranquil dazzling field of grass was in the grip of peace. "I know what it is," I said suddenly. "It's a kind of world shock after all. It's the silence, it's stifling. That's what they couldn't stand."

They stared at me, then their mouths opened and they both nodded solemnly. "Let's go to the spheres anyway," Pefa said after a while.

As we neared the spheres I was thinking how the silence could be tamed. I'd rejected the idea of artificial noises, the piping into the colony of music or natural sound. But we could plant for real natural sound. The calm lights of the spheres seemed to brighten with my mind. We could import some of the Old Earth trees that we dutifully grew on Starnose; we could set the threshing of branches and leaves against the silence. It would be the first time we'd heard those sounds. It seemed right.

We stood gazing at the spheres. Now I could see them for what they were: repetitions of the same statement of aesthetic perfection, the final result of their creators' formalism. There was a poignancy about them; they could only symbolise beauty, and achieved that only by excluding a great deal. They'd been like the peacecubes after all, but perhaps they'd become a way of life. I felt pity for the race that had died gazing on them. The lights hung steadily against the grass like the core of the planet's peace.

At first I didn't register what Pefa was saying. "Suppose the people at the colony were trying to understand the architecture," she said. "We couldn't stand the first set ourselves. They must have gone walking outside the colony, and where else would they go? And the harder they tried to get hold

of the progression of the architecture the less they'd have been able to keep their own cultural balance. That's the kind of world shock it was."

Hodd frowned at her, then her face cleared. "My God," she said. "I think you're right."

I stared at them both. Hodd must be joking. It was a total contradiction of my own—My own what? I couldn't remember. I thought, It's just ridic—And this time I felt, for barely long enough to be aware of it, something reach into my mind and deftly snatch the thought away.

That awareness itself felt threatened. All I could do was think about something else. The time. "Time to get back," I said.

"We've a few minutes yet," Pefa said.

My mind was flinching and crying We must get away! "I'm exhausted," I said. "I'd like to slow down on the way back."

Now I'd committed myself to walking slowly, as if I'd chosen a nightmare. The sun flooded down, the field of grass flexed its muscles, the pink spoons nodded slightly in the breeze, and I felt as if I were trying to creep out of a room unnoticed, unable to see whether I was succeeding. Except that it was worse, because I was trying to creep with my mind. It was a long hot trudge, but I didn't feel hot at all.

When we reached the colony the boat wasn't waiting. We should at least have been able to see it leaving the ship. We sat on the edge of the circular landing field. I closed my eyes to contain my panic. All I could see was Luli. If my mind didn't make it to the ship I would never be able to resolve —What? As the insight was instantly suppressed I realised that I couldn't remember our arguments. Pefa called out, and I saw the boat beginning its descent.

Halfway up I felt my mind slip free. "Tell Hodd your theory again," I said to Pefa.

"Don't bother," said Hodd. "I think it's utter nonsense."

"Then why couldn't you say so before?"

I saw a barrier give way within her eyes. "My God," she said.

We found Hald in the communal area. The sharp lines of his face kept collapsing into weariness, then twitching back into the mask. But we surrounded him and insisted on talking. Around us the ship buzzed softly in

its sleep and the colonists snored. Luli stared from the viewport. Happyhome turned slowly in the frame, reeling in our time before hyperflight.

"I'm beginning to understand the lost race, I think," Hodd said. "You can see them in their architecture. They grew so obsessed with perfection that they became intolerant of anything else. Presumably that might have included interpersonal conflicts."

"And they managed to leave the effect behind them, haunting the planet," Pefa said.

"Which explains why you couldn't argue," I said. "But it isn't only overt conflict of that kind. There were things I couldn't think about. My image of them was forced to be perfect." Luli looked at me. "I think any potential for conflict is censored. No wonder your people disintegrated," I said to Hald.

"It does explain a good deal," he said. "The tensions must have built up until they had to be expressed somehow. And even the violence was over almost before it began; it must have just slipped through. I never felt it myself, though. I mustn't have had any conflicts. Except being unable to help, and even that didn't seem to matter after a while." He shook a finger at Pefa. "I don't go for this idea of haunting, though," he said. "I'd accept that the race left behind them some kind of physical force, even if it can't be traced."

"How do you know they aren't still there?" Luli asked.

I think she enjoyed our silence. She let it hang before she went on. "You know that something was controlling your thoughts," she said. "Why shouldn't they be able to censor your sight as well? You never found evidence of what destroyed them. Why shouldn't they still be down there, gazing at their spheres?"

Imagine our hours of argument for yourself. But the more we argued the more tempting the hypothesis became: a race that had pursued idealisation and simplification in terms of themselves as well as their architecture, until they'd achieved total control and sensitivity at the price of drastic exclusion. "There is only one answer to that kind of sensitivity to hurt," Hodd said; and amid another silence Pefa said "The peacecubes."

There was one way to test the hypothesis: determine whether the solution worked. "Luli, you and I must go," I said. "I felt the effect most strongly."

Besides, since we had the most violent arguments we should be more able to feel the cubes distracting and appeasing the censors, if they had any affect at all.

In the boat down I said to Luli "Try to feel the tension between us."

"I don't have to try," she said.

But as soon as we stepped onto the field she said "I can't feel it now. I don't like it."

The boat was trembling impatiently. "Come on," I said, hurrying her off the field.

We walked, because I wanted her to become familiar with the sense of censoring. Now I had an explanation it didn't seem so terrifying. Shallow hollows were blown through the grass. As we walked Luli kept trying to frown, then smiling as if someone were dragging at her mouth. Tears were struggling to leave her eyes. I put my arm around her shoulders.

We had four peacecubes, one for each gap between the spheres. We placed them in the centre of each gap, then moved back beyond their radius. Everything's fine, I thought, knowing that meant it wasn't at all. I returned to my first cube, moved it a fraction, retreated and tried to feel. Then Luli did the same. It was exactly like trying to tune an invisible musical instrument, except that we were unable to perceive any pitch until it was perfectly tuned.

The sun was sinking, the fields were stubbled with shadow. I'd managed to beg a ship's communicator to call the boat; I'd known this would take time, but not so long. Maybe I'd been wrong to assume the spheres were the significant area. Maybe the human telepathic imprints in the cubes weren't sufficiently universal. Maybe our whole theory was wrong.

Exhausted, I saw Luli returning to move her cube as I moved mine, instead of waiting her turn. "Do you want to wreck this whole thing?" I called. "Just try to contain yourself until I've finished!"—and then I gaped at her. "We've nearly got it!" I shouted. "It's weakening!" It felt like a chess player's flood of inspiration. Two more tiny shifts of the cubes and we felt the clinging presences fall away.

And Luli was staring at me, all her emotion brimming over. "You brought me down here to use my feelings!" she cried. "Just to be sure this worked."

"Your feelings!" I shouted. "My God, it's you who use your feelings. You expect me to share your moods as a matter of course, and when I don't you use that as an excuse not to communicate!" Then we had the most violent row either of us had ever experienced. All the poison burst forth at once. We yelled, pummelled, struggled in the slashing grass.

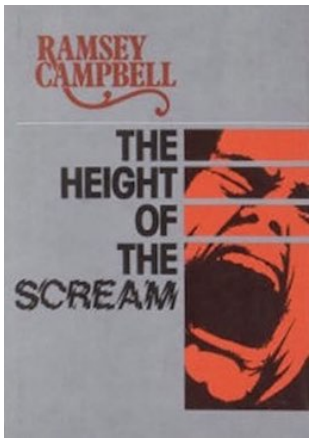
We fell silent only because we were exhausted. In the silence we heard the soughing of the world. We suddenly realised that we'd made it ours. We gazed at each other and saw how quickly we'd become mutually blind. We shared all this wordlessly; then we made love on the grass, beside the dimming spheres.

And that's really how Happyhome began. It was Hald's idea to bring the colonists back down. The shipmen resigned themselves to what they obviously believed was the total insanity of their passengers. Even we weren't sure Hald was right that the new Happyhome was the most convincing form of therapy, not even after he'd been down himself and stood roaring in the fields for half an hour, looking absolutely at ease when he rejoined us. But hyperflight seemed more of a risk, and you can see now he was right.

We've fenced off the spheres, of course. We don't want anyone moving the peacecubes. But it's useful in some ways to be haunted; we're never likely to have an immigration problem. Sometimes I wonder if our solution wasn't like stuffing a baby full of candy to shut it up. But then I think no, they had their chance and made their choice. Now they have to be satisfied with what they wanted. After all, they have perfection.

At least that's my opinion. There are people who disagree and can argue all night. Still, that's what makes a ragefest. Just let your emotions come as they will and don't bother who gets them in the face; they can take care of themselves. We started the ragefests to make sure the cubes were working. But apart from that, they seem to help us get on very well together the rest of the time. We know you will too. As well as Luli and I.

In The Shadows



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The children were beginning to flood into the library when I saw the book. I'd written the tickets for the film show and the queue for them was squashing itself against the counter, pushing, elbowing, chattering. The branch librarian turned from her chat with a reader to glower. They were jostling for the first ticket, though they knew it wasn't a film show at all but only a strip of stills with a pompous script for one of them to read aloud, and though they must know as well as I did that long before the end they'd be loudly restless, when Sharon returned her book with an inadvertent crash on the counter. Its title lit up in my mind. PERFORMING SHADOWPLAYS, it said.

"Mrs. Sim," I said to the branch librarian (someone in the queue muttering Mississippi), "could I do a shadow show instead of the film? Maybe a ghost show, since it's nearly Hallowe'en? Nothing too disturbing, of course."

"So long as they don't disturb anyone else I don't care what you do."

Too many ideas were tumbling into my mind for me to bother about her tone. We used the far wall of the junior section for exhibitions of books and pictures, but we'd just taken the last one down and the wall was a blank white blackboard. Perfect, I thought, and I could use the film projector as the light source, use it to entertain the kids for once. I scribbled a GHOST SHOW notice and substituted it in the frame for the film show placard. Most of the queue cheered. Some of the old men dozing over newspapers in the main library looked up, frowning.

"I'm not coming for ghosts," Sharon said. "They're stupid." One or two agreed, but the others had crumpled their tickets within impregnable fists. "It starts in an hour so don't be late," I said. And I'd better get working on the props, I thought. I've lumbered myself there. But it's worth it. And at least I'm not stuck with my predecessor's choice of the city librarian's suggested children's shows.

I was cutting some of the cardboard backing from the exhibition into a shape I hoped would produce a turnip-face shadow, and the library doors were swinging to admit swathes of rain and the grumbling of balked traffic on the main road outside, and people were drumming their fingers on the counter as I tried not to cut within the outline, and the minute hand opposite me kept jerking two minutes ahead of the time it had been pretending it was. I looked up and saw Lorna and Diane watching me. "Come on now, you, out," I said.

Lorna gazed at me with blank dislike. "We'll be good," Diane said.

Then it'll be the first time, I thought. Even when they began simply by slouching and hiding their detested puberty beneath shapeless grey school uniforms, they'd always end by throwing books on the floor to make me chase them round the library and out. "What are you doing?" Lorna asked me.

"Cutting things ready for the show. These are to make shadows on that wall."

"Can we help?"

It was the first time I'd heard anything like enthusiasm from Lorna, but "Thanks," I said, "I think it'll be quicker if I do them."

"We can come to the show though, can't we?" Diane said.

"Are you quite sure you'll be good? Will you promise?"

"We'll be quiet," Lorna said. "We'll help you keep everybody quiet."

There was a scream of brakes outside, and another chopped-off scream. "Just keep your eye on those two," Mrs. Sim said loudly. "Yes, you two, you know what I'm talking about. We were always having trouble with them years ago, when I got this library. I used to take them home to their father every time. He was a docker and I'll tell you one thing," she called after the two girls, "he knew what to do with his muscles. No use you looking at me like that," she said to me. "It's all very well you feeling sorry for them, and I'm sure you would have then if you'd heard them scream, but you just prove to me that it did them any harm."

But I felt it was more important to make Debbie, who had just come in for her ticket, feel welcome. I was glad she'd come for a ticket, for it meant she

was forgetting the death of her three-month-old sister several weeks ago, whose pram had fallen down the tower-block stairs.

"They won't be real ghosts, will they?" she said.

"Wait and see." It looked as if my audience wouldn't be troubled by unbelievers, all of whom refused to let themselves be attracted by my notice. At least I wouldn't have to fight incredulity, I thought. Only honest criticism.

When I'd finished cutting out the turnip I gave in to my curiosity about the sound of brakes outside. "It was only a cat," one of the dissipating crowd told me, and there it was in the gutter, burst. I caught sight of Lorna and Diane slumped in the entrance to the alley next to the library. A foot behind them, the light from the street was sliced off clean by blackness. I thought sadly, they're probably as happy there as they can be now.

The show was due to begin at six. At five past nobody had arrived. I'd set up the projector on a table near the entrance foyer; drafts sneaked in when the doors swung. Orange light from the street leaked over the wall I would be using as a screen, but we had no curtains. I sat behind the counter, trying to flap a bat's wings without moving my thumbs which formed its head. "Perhaps we'll have some peace," Mrs. Sim said.

Even she was surprised a minute later when the kids came in, because we hadn't heard them coming. Diane was at the head of the line and Lorna trudged at the tail, and between them was an orderly schoolyard rank of seven younger children. I was glad to see Debbie among them. I smiled at any that looked at me, and one or two responded weakly. They took a chair each from the reading tables and sat down in a line facing the blank wall. I waited for them all to converge on me to talk as they always did. I waited for the holders of the remaining tickets to arrive.

Debbie was standing up. "Sit down and shut up. Remember what we told you," Lorna said.

I'd never seen her so enthusiastically involved in anything, let alone a role, but "It's all right," I called to Lorna. "Let her come."

"Don't interfere," Mrs. Sim said. "It's nice to see them behaving themselves for once. I think you'd better start."

"There's eleven kids still to come."

"It doesn't look as if they're coming. The ones you've got will be all the easier to control."

As I made for the junior section I felt a twinge of stage fright. The kids I knew had suddenly merged into an aggressively impersonal entity: an audience. I'd forgotten my props and had to go back for them. I grabbed the cardboard box full of the cut-out figures and the bits I'd pruned from them, and threw it on the table beside the projector. Light slapped the wall in front of the children, and I snatched the shapes from the box and strode forward.

My tension was tightening. What made it worse was that I hadn't had time to prepare a story. I had to rely on whatever improvisation the props suggested. I sat in front of the wall, side on to the kids, and sent a bat flapping across the screen, my drooping fingers waving slowly. "It's Hallowe'en night," I said.

I had to watch what my hands were doing, which meant that I couldn't see the reactions of the audience, if any. Certainly I could hear none: I raised my hand shrouded with a handkerchief, shaking, wagging its head. I managed to summon forth a low hooting noise, suggestive of a quaking owl, to give it voice. I didn't know if it frightened the kids, but it didn't do anything for me, and I faded it out, blushing.

As I picked up a skeleton puppet I sneaked a glance at the kids. Their heads were cut out of darkness by keen light. I couldn't see their faces. It was worse than the times I'd read them stories: then they had at least been visibly restless and I'd tried to adjust my pace and to anticipate the dull passages so I could paraphrase across them, but now it felt simply as if I were being drained by the silence. Their silence and their emotionless faces full of darkness were encouraging me to strain, and they were drinking up the efforts I made and giving nothing back. They were squeezing me dry. I wondered what on earth was the matter with them.

Nonsense, I thought, it's not with them at all. I'm just not reaching them. Try again. I lifted up the skeleton by the threads run through its palms. I hadn't had time to hinge its limbs, but at least it could dance, however stiffly. It dangled and jerked on the wall, skull nodding. This time I heard the kids stir audibly, but although I was looking at them I couldn't read their emotions, they were still masked by darkness. I glanced back at the skeleton and saw why they'd stirred.

When I'd grabbed the props from the box I must have bent them. I'd folded the skeleton's neck so badly that the skull was nodding forward at an angle, and because of the angle the shadow-skull looked as if it were dissolving. It was squashed and pulled down on one side, and it lolled as if its neck were broken: not funny at all. I pushed the skull back into place, but it flopped awry again. I hoped their stir had been of laughter, because for me it was as if blood had begun to spout in the midst of a Punch and Judy show; the skeleton looked altogether too dead.

Above the junior section the windows juddered, jangling faintly in their frame. Everyone, including me, looked up. A bus was revving throatily at the stop outside. I welcomed the distraction. I put down the skeleton and felt around beneath my chair for another prop. I was still fumbling when I heard them gasp. I turned and saw a face on the wall.

Though it was difficult to call it a face. It had a couple of eyes, one largely dogged by a tangle of something like web. Otherwise it had no features except the fragments that seemed to be peeling or sprouting from its surface. "I know what that is," I said, hurrying back to the projector. I'd seen that the draft through the foyer had toppled the box by the projector, and some of the prunings of cardboard had fallen into the beam. I swept the small tangled heap into the box.

The face stayed on the wall.

Adrenaline burned through me. I gazed about, looking for the source of the face. For a moment I suspected Lorna and Diane, but they were nowhere near the projector beam. Otherwise the space above the children's heads was empty of everything but light and the face, gazing out of the wall with its empty socket and its webbed eye.

Then the silence changed. Of course it wasn't silence, there was the sound of the throbbing bus which now was moving away, and that was the change I'd heard. When I looked at the wall the face had gone. Something outside, I thought with relief, a trick of the light from the bus. "I didn't make that one," I said, returning to my chair. "I wonder what it was."

And it was then, as the stupidity of my remark clunked home, that I realised that the tension which was sapping me wasn't mine at all, but theirs. I'd frightened them; that was why they were silent. They should have been responding audibly by now, favourably or not. "Well, that's enough ghosts," I said.

How could I round off the show reassuringly? I couldn't send them out into the night with terror behind their shoulders. "Those bats I showed you before," I said, remembering the idea I'd adapted from the book. "They were butterflies. See?" And I fluttered my hands against the wall. But somehow it wasn't a butterfly; it looked more like the feeble twitching of dying fingers.

It can't look like that to them, I thought. "And here's a dog," I said. His nose was my second and third fingers pressed together and held out straight, his eye was my first finger making a brow. His lower jaw was my little finger, which I tried to open and shut. But my straight fingers trembled uncontrollably and parted, and the dog's nose split open and gaped all the way back under the eye.

And their terror struck me as if the block of light had suddenly become solid. My mind had acknowledged their fear, but now I felt it: as if a swelling full of fear in my stomach had burst and flooded my whole body. I held myself still, not looking at anything, and the light levered its way into the side of my eye. I rummaged through my memories of the book, looking for a shadow that couldn't be frightening. I'd seen one somewhere. A pram. A pram, that's what I would make.

I remembered: clench the fingers of your left hand and press your thumb against the fist, bending back the thumb's tip; that's the pram and its handle. The kids were leaning forward to try to make out what I was doing. Hook the fingers of your right hand and let them overhang the other end of your left fist; there's the hood. One of the kids made a stifled sound. And your right thumb has only to peek over the fist and move about to be a baby. But I was having trouble with my baby, which seemed to be just a limbless object trying feebly to raise itself.

Still, I thought, they can see what it is. I was about to tell them anyway when I found myself gazing at the cut-out black oval that was Debbie's head, and realising that I didn't have to. Because I'd remembered how her sister had died.

I think most of them knew why she was standing up, groping against the violent light, and those who didn't at least knew that something was badly wrong. The shape was peering facelessly over the side of the pram. It was flexing itself as if for a leap. Debbie's huge shadow was looming beside it,

swaying. I pulled my hands apart and the baby fell from the wall, like a grub, and was lost in the darkness that carpeted the floor.

I ran to the projector and switched it off. I snatched at the switch for the overhead lights, whose illumination now looked thick and amber. "Well, that's it," I said and desperately, "I hope you enjoyed the show." They weren't crowding around me, pleading for more; they weren't even asking when the tickets for the next show would be ready. I couldn't blame them, but they were edging out of their chairs as if they couldn't believe they were really free, they were slamming the chairs back against the tables, they were running for the doors. But they hadn't reached the foyer when they halted, almost knocking down Debbie, who was staring beneath the last table.

By their faces it must be a spider, I thought. Lorna and Diane were tidying the replaced chairs. I crossed to the paralysed group of children. They might have been miming fear. Perhaps they were, because all I could see from my side of the table was what might have been the shadow of a wiggling toe on the floor. Except that nobody was barefoot. I was squinting into the dimness when they saw me coming. The mime unfroze and they fled, almost knocking down an old woman in the foyer. There was nothing to be seen beneath the table. One of the kids must have been making the shadow. I thought wryly: that's justice, I suppose.

I returned to the counter, trying to fit the evening's events together. "You two were good for once," Mrs. Sim was saying to Lorna and Diane. "Just shows you can be when you try."

"Good? Not them two," the old woman shouted from the other counter. "You should have seen them before. Pushing children into that alley outside, they were. Her," she accused Diane, "she was telling them what would happen if her shadow touched them and the other one, she was back in the alley grabbing them and making them scream, pretending she was a shadow. Scared some of them off completely. Good my Aunt Fanny."

"But why should they do that?" I said, half knowing.

"To tell stories about you, that's why. Saying the man in the library showed her how to make shadows live. Saying you could do worse with yours if you wanted. They had a dead cat in the alley as well. Said she'd done that with her shadow."

"Get out," Mrs. Sim said, "or I'll call the police," and the old woman helped to chase them, snarling and brandishing her stick.

By the time I was able to leave the counter they'd gone, somewhere in the night with the swaying drizzle and the pasted litter and the peacock's-feather petrol. I wasn't looking for them; I shouldn't have known what to say. I was looking for the others. Eventually I saw Debbie and three others on the next block, waiting for their mothers beneath the awning of the Bingo hall. I had almost reached them before they saw me, but when they did they darted into the traffic, slipping on the wet tarmac, and stood on the other pavement until I'd gone back to the library. I haven't seen them since, nor the rest of the audience. They don't often use the library now, and never when I'm there,

When I reached the counter I saw a dark shape about the size of my thumb squirming across the floor behind Mrs. Sim. I trod on it and felt it give way with a slight crack and flatten softly. But when I looked there was nothing there.

Vacant Possession

Written in: 1974
First published in *The Devil's Children*, 1974

You've been walking for some time when you realise you're lost. Blue haze is already seeping into the farther layers of the forest. A midsummer wind rushes softly through the height of the trees but doesn't reach down to you. You stumble onward, confused by the plushy scented air and the occasional drifting chill from pools. The entire forest floats with you, dimming and altering, offering you new avenues, any of which might lead back to the hut. She can't need you or she wouldn't have let you stray. She's never let you go far enough to be lost.

You were lost the day you met her. Your mind stirs uneasily, reaching for memories more graspable than the forest. You were miles from wherever you'd come from: you try to remember beyond when you met her but everything is opaque, like the words she uses to command you. You were battering your way through the forest, roaring in panic, when you saw her fire through the trees.

She was standing on a hillock. Blurts of flame rose through the rolling smoke of her fire, struggling with the wind. The wind scrubbed her face red and pulled her white robe taut on her body, and her red hair fluttered like flames against the darkly looming sky. You remember all this, yet nothing before. She was gazing at you as you plodded mutely up the hillock; her closed hand had halted above the fire. 'Yes, of course,' she said. 'You're the vessel I need. Just a body, waiting to be filled.' Her hand spilled powder on the flames, which sprang up strong and blue.

Somehow you were in a ring of marked stones, you were standing among them on top of the hillock, encircled by trees like frantic plumes of smoke; you were pinned by the weight of the circles about you. She was muttering, singing, shouting, somewhere, and you were vaguely aware of her voice until suddenly you realised that her words had been gathering into a single piercing stroke which plunged inside you as deep as it could go. You felt it course through your body like fire; your limbs forged themselves against

the air. You stamped the earth, straining your arms back from your welling chest. You were raging to leave the circle.

'Can you speak?' she said. But you'd hardly begun trying when she said, 'No, not you. Hearing you once was enough.' Then she spoke again: a word in no language you knew, yet it seemed to fit over your mind, shaping it to the word. When you moved it was as if the circles had closed on your mind, tethering you to her command.

'Come,' she said, then as her eyes filled with a thought: 'No, carry me.' She seemed light as a cloak on your shoulders, and although the trees had turned into pillars of shadow you didn't blunder into them, which you seemed to remember having done before. Sacks were hidden in the undergrowth, and you carried them too, hardly stooping.

Clouds peeled back from the moon, which was entangled in the lower branches of the forest by the time she told you to halt, in a glade near a hill. She gave you tools from one of the sacks and you lopped branches to make a shelter for her. Then she set you searching for fallen logs and bringing them to the glade. When she awoke you were ready to begin building the hut.

Thus your life began. Sometimes she would go out, leaving you squatting just inside the door, poised to leap at any sound but hers. Sometimes she would return with bunches of herbs, and would let you watch her prepare them, hardly glancing at the dark corner where you lay. At night she would leave you on guard outside the hut. Anything that moved close enough you ate.

There were things you disliked. Once you had to fight a wolf. Blood rusted between your teeth for days, but it was the fur that you couldn't get out of your mouth you hated. And you were terrified the first time you touched fire. She'd made you drag a great hollow stone into the glade, around which to build the hut. She had you bring wood to the hearth you'd chipped out, and once, as you fed the fire, you picked up a blazing ember. At once you saw an old man and woman, shaking their heads as you leapt back from a hearth and clutched your seared hand; you had a momentary impression that this had happened often. Now the ember lay pulsing on your uninjured palm.

A few times when she sent you out of the hut you would hear a man's deep froglike voice within, soon followed by her own high panting cry. But she

wasn't calling to you, nor did you ever see the man. All you could do was range about the glade, howling as she did. You weren't imitating her; you'd made that sound the first time she removed her word from your mind, when you were overwhelmed by a blaze of yearning for her, her slim body sketched on the white robe. You were surging forward when she cried, 'Get out! Get back to your place!' and her next word forced you down on the earth outside the door.

That was the first time you can remember having felt that surge of yearning. It hurt and confused you, so that you tried to ignore it, until one night you had to relieve the implacable pressure. That hurt even more, a searing rush of molten agony. It hurt so much that you would rather writhe and moan than give way to it, until you had to.

You were writhing today. She had prepared her herbs and was becoming increasingly restless as the sun trailed down the sky, until finally she turned on you. 'Go on,' she cried, 'go and hunt or whatever you do.' She swept her word from your mind with a gesture, and when you tired of your explosion of running you were lost. Since then you've been plodding through the forest, snarling and moaning with bewilderment and splintering trees with your fists, while the haze creeps nearer, smudging and merging the outlines of the trees.

You're hurrying towards a wider avenue, like the one that passes near the hut, when you see the man. He's pacing down the avenue towards you. Above the black robe his head twitches a little whenever he hears movement, and he seems to be sniffing the air. The air is swimming with scents, but like a hound he scarcely bothers to ignore them. The taut planes of his face reach forward, searching.

He sees you and his gaze closes on you like tongs.

You're struggling to run when he says, 'Don't be afraid. I am a man of God.' But his nostrils are sipping your smell and quivering, and his words have only made you more afraid; when you cry out the tips of the trees shudder. You see his expression change, it goes cold and clasps you tight. Then he begins to speak.

His words are incomprehensible as hers, but they slither down inside you and probe, plucking at you as if seeking a point from which to turn you inside out. Nausea mounts in you. You choke and roar.

Suddenly you can run. You don't know why, because he's still shouting and his words are trickling into you. All at once you know where to run. Trees club your back like the bars of an enormous cage until you turn to flee. You can feel him pursuing. You glance back and see him rushing after you, a shadow torn from the forest, driving you away from the tiny pool of faint light that is the sun.

In fact you had been wandering back towards the hut. The avenue is the one you remembered, and it takes you only minutes to reach the glade, though those minutes are laden with terror. You surge towards the hut. Her words will overcome his. She'll have him helpless on the earth beside you.

The hut is empty.

You've almost reached the threshold again when he bars your way. He's holding something horrible: two pieces of stick with a little man nailed to them. You can't bear it, you can't even scream because your intestines are crawling like grubs, trying to squeeze themselves out of your throat. He's shouting above you as you claw at the floor, and something is holding on within your body as if with claws, while your brain feels as if it's about to be sucked through a hole. Even now, if you had her word you could shake off his voice and throw him down. But she has left you at the mercy of his pounding shouts, left you contorted and broken on the floor, left you even as your strength is leaving you, rushing out of the trembling hut with a hiss like a blazing forest doused by a waterfall, leaving you alone and empty.

For a moment, as you lie slack in a pool like an after-death, you remember yourself. You remember the cottage whose fire used to guide you home through the forest, the fire for which you mistook hers. You remember the old man and woman, showing you what to do and what to avoid, showing you again and shaking their heads sadly, sometimes finally beating you. Perhaps there was more, but you can't remember. You lie as if boned, at the foot of the black robe. He's leaning down and beckoning you to your feet, his face grim. If he would touch you, you could feel he was human. But nobody has ever touched you, just gazed with the same embarrassed dismay that he's trying to hide.

Then, faint but precise in the silence, you hear her above you on the hill. She must have heard you when you first cried out. It was she who led you back to the hut, and she has been waiting for the man's final shout: waiting

for the moment when, open and raw and fluid, you're ready to accept any form.

He hears her too, and he's struggling to free his crossed sticks from his robe. But her words have already gathered, and you've a frame of strength to lift you to your feet and smash the man to the floor. She has given you a name, and then another and another. You can feel them massing within you, raising you to a height of power where everything is effortless and permissible. Your being seems to stream upward like a great flame.

Over the man's screams you sense that she has finished. You don't need her now. Indeed, she might even hinder you, for your mind is full of ways to make him scream more.

When she reaches the hut and sees his smouldering corpse she cries out too. The luminous evening glows around her body in the doorway and softly illuminates the draped curves of her. She'd donned her white robe for whatever ritual she has abandoned. As she stoops unwillingly to peer at him, you feel the yearning explode within you. Its heat drives you forward.

She gasps and backs away before speaking the word. It falls past you like a stone, hardly brushing you. She shouts it, but now you know you're stronger it doesn't touch you. She's in a corner now, and you clasp her clumsily to you and kiss.

It's a long kiss, and it takes you longer to pull away, for you've charred her mouth to the bone.

The Song At The Hub Of The Garden

Written in: 1974
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Except for one youth and an old man in a corner, all the men in the tavern were gaping at Ryre.

"You were a gateman in Fhodole."

"And a hunter in the forests of Grotoc," the youngest said, snatching the image from the other's opening lips.

"You were an unaugmented stud in the stables of Lelele," a third said, awed.

"And a noblewoman's mercenary in Lelele."

"And a pirate on the sea of Shouting Islands."

They were repeating the words of his tale exactly, Ryre realised; they'd each staked their claim to a phrase in the hope that some of the power of the deed would pass to them through the words. He allowed himself a grin of approval. Perhaps they were right, just as their reverence for the words would add to the strength he'd drawn from the exploits. Besides, their awe showed him he'd succeeded in his purpose: there would be nothing now they wouldn't brave, not even superstition, rather than dare refuse to answer his questions. "And now I am bound for the town of Goam," he said.

They drew back from him as far as they could without seeming discourteous, towards the glowstones in their niches in the walls. As the loops of light slipped over their faces, some of them visibly relaxed. Ryre glanced towards the old man, sitting beneath the dimmest ember in its niched draught glass, then towards the youth who had neither spoken nor moved. None of them looked willing to help without persuasion, and Ryre had exhausted what he believed to be his most powerful words. He was

wondering what else he might say that would add to his magic when the hitherto silent youth said "So you were an unaugmented stud?"

His tone and the incompleteness of the phrase were a slap in Ryre's face. "What, unaugmented?" the youth said, hurling a long thick bone with razor-sharp teeth at Ryre's feet and brandishing another. "Quite unaugmented?" and the youngest had already run outside the tavern and was blowing the glowstones into slow brightness to prepare for the combat.

Through the open tavern door Ryre could hear the stately creaking of the enormous forest overhead, the sound of wind in foliage as if the whole sky were an open breathing mouth. As the glowstones whitened they showed him what he'd forgotten: the sagging smoke-grey animal skins nailed over the rafters, the discoloured skins draped around the men for warmth or thrown over the benches ready for the next patron, the men huddling near fire for reassurance yet dreading it outside a glass. He'd thought their simplicity would help him to awe them. He hadn't expected it to make him fight for his words.

The youth flung his cloak of skin on a bench, wafting up the faint tallowy stench of the room. He was swooping his bone through the air, grinning; the nailed skins stirred. Ryre reached for his sheathed sword, but halted. If he didn't take the preferred weapon their custom might dismiss him as a coward. Had his words not been the prize he would have refused to fight, but now a refusal would spoil all his words in their minds, which in turn would sap their magic in him. He stooped for the bone.

The swooping sound warned him. He rolled aside, and the teeth champed the floor beneath where his head had been. As he leapt to his feet, Ryre saw the men watching him expressionlessly, their custom holding them mute and still as carvings in a glade. The youth tore his weapon free of the splintering boards, and Ryre hurled the arm's length of jawbone in an arc towards the youth's shins. But he sprang above the arc and brought his weapon smashing down on Ryre's right shoulder.

Pain burst from his shoulder like poison from a boil, and his weapon slipped from his hand. He managed to clutch it in both hands as the youth swung his toothed club towards Ryre's face. The teeth ripped past before his eyes, and he ducked and smashed one of the youth's fingers where it gripped the butt of the weapon.

Ryre was turning, feeling the surge of violence blaze within himself and hoping he had halted the combat, when the swaying white-faced youth ran at him, swinging the bone two-handed, low and deadly. Ryre felt his surge of violence on the edge of satisfaction, and tried to smash the other's weapon down—but his toothed bone sprang up from the collision, biting into the youth's throat and drenching Ryre's face with blood and saliva.

The glowstones were dimming, but a wind was coaxing them into brightness again. Some of the men bound a large flat leaf to Ryre's shoulder, while others bore away the youth's body. "He was a young fool," they were saying. "He made you fight," but Ryre could see the sense of loss spreading into their eyes. "The town of Goam," he said quickly, while they were still at the peak of their awe. "You are to tell me the way."

When they gazed at him silently, some of them nipping their lips together, he reached into his pack for two glasses. He had intended to make a gift of them as he left, not to trade as was the custom. "I will trade these glasses for the way to Goam," he said.

"Have you come so far so soon?" the old man said.

He was leaning forward from his corner, brightening as the wind rose in the draughtglass. Ryre felt empty and soiled after the combat, his face still felt sticky, but he dreaded a contest of words with the old man more. The old man might have words encrusted with decades of magic, beneath which those of Ryre's twenty-five years would collapse. "Don't you dare stand still to look back where you've been?" the old man said, and Ryre felt the words creeping up behind him, waiting to slip into him as soon as he relaxed. "You're draining life and you'll leave yourself none," the old man said. "You'll have done all and understood nothing and you'll never be able to return. Have you stood still long enough to hear of the feasts in the court of Marathe? I remember one: a hundred rooms and a hundred tables, laden with every food of the whole globe of Tond. You tasted each food once, and moved on. In the hundredth room you had forgotten what you'd tasted in the first, but there were swordsmen ready for you if you dared even to look back. Since then I have made do with little food, and simple."

"You took that story from a man," Ryre said. "I doubt you even fought him for it, not that he feels you handling his words any more than I would be troubled by a flea."

"I am beyond your words," the old man said, then further disarming Ryre: "Tell me what you know of Goam."

"The town of mages and sages," Ryre said, glancing sideways at the old man and choosing impersonal words on which he couldn't fasten. "Founded by a sect of philosophers as a centre for their thought and that of others. A town where philosophy and the magics were studied and perfected. Where you can be taught."

"Those words are almost pure," the old man said, nodding to himself as if surprised. "They show the power of Goam, that their words can pass to you unchanged. But they are old words. You say that the aim of Goam was perfection. So it was, and having reached it, they moved on."

"Moved on where?"

"Their words do not say," the old man said, "but Goam is no more."

"Then let me see where it was," Ryre said, suddenly convinced that the old man had accepted his words so as to trick him into doing the same.

"Some words, which may not come from Goam, say that not all of them moved on," the old man said. "A few were unable to do so, and one was unwilling. He pursued his own vision of perfection, which was spiced with imperfection. He began with words but moved beyond them a hundred years ago, to build a garden. So these words say."

"Then let me see the garden," Ryre said, then slyly calling to the old man's experience of life: "Your people will not want me here always."

"Ride the way you were going," the old man said, shrugging sadly. "You will come to a solitude. You will know when you are there, and beyond it is the garden."

As Ryre mounted his steed he heard the youngest man repeating "A hunter in the forests of Grotoc." The words were his now, to repeat every time Ryre's saga was told. The light from the open tavern door brushed the small surrounding ring of huts within the barricade; the wind struggled to shake them. One of the men closed the barricade after Ryre, and a moment later the feeble glow over the wall was doused by the tavern door. Ryre's steed was trotting now, having regained its sense of the columnar forest within the blinding night. Over the enormous soughing he heard harsh snarls and cries beyond the barricade. They were beginning to mourn.

Soon the wind faded. Ryre felt the darkness plodding at his back, holding its breath. As the night congealed in his eyes he could see the form with which his mind fleshed the jawbones. He knew that in fact the creatures were vegetarian, stupid and so docile that the forest folk milked them, and that the barricades were chiefly to prevent their blundering into the huts. Nevertheless, in the darkness of his mind they took another form and paced him. Sometimes trunks creaked loudly as if they were being forced apart; once he heard them splinter, and a huge tread passed close to him. Determinedly he trusted himself to his steed. He had rested at the tavern; had he stayed beyond achieving his purpose he might have weakened his words in their minds, and so weakened himself.

At last dawn began to select outlines from the darkness, and Ryre's oppression drew back slowly. The grey ceiling of the forest filled with green. As the tide of light spread through the forest the branches rubbed together overhead, chirring in the wind. It was quite unlike Grotoc, he thought. Nobody but city people would be foolhardy enough to hunt in Grotoc. There, as soon as he'd decapitated one of the long-toothed canines impaled in his trap, he would listen in dread for the sound of snarling coming closer through the trees, for that inevitably heralded the real combat: with the small clawed scuttling scavengers, often a pack of six that he would leave lopped to pieces around the clearing, and he too weak to drag off his prize.

He heard the youth's voice reverberating his deed. He wondered if anyone would fight him for the words, as Ryre himself had done years ago, with a man retelling someone's saga in a tavern at the gate of Phodole: he'd knocked the man down and had swaggered away with his words, intoning them to himself at night alone, until one night they'd blazed straight through his nerves and he was out of the gate and running, a hunter in the forests of Grotoc.

His steed was coursing surely now, towards the risen sun. Ahead the trees seemed to be thinning, unless the blaze of the sun were thrusting their outlines apart. Tendrils of sand crept between the roots, glittering. A few minutes and the last trees lagged behind him, exhausted. Before him stretched a prospect of dunes.

The last trees had been smoothed out by the dunes when Ryre began to glance about, troubled. Around him points of light leapt from grain to grain

of sand. The dunes lay sleek as spangled cats, indifferent to the growing weight of the sun. Ryre stared at them, trying to see. A wind fluttered at his ears. All at once he calmed his steed to silence, and listened. The wind still shifted, but the desert was absolutely mute: not the least whisper of sand.

He dismounted and made to scoop up a handful of sand. Not a grain moved; the undisturbed dune scraped his palm. He peered closer, but his eyes were no more capable of separating the grains; where he knelt looked exactly like a common desert, glowing beneath the sun. He remounted, frowning. The wind had moved on, and the dunes were arrested by an intense unnerving silence broken only by the sound of his steed's pads, unflinchingly negotiating the immobile desert.

As if the desert were a magically halted hour-glass Ryre found his sense of time had left him. The dunes multiplied themselves as he rode on; the sun hung above a dune, above a dune, above a dune. The heat rose up and struck him; through it, the desert flowed as if smelted. He could not have said how long it was before he began to listen again.

At first he only felt the sound. It was so faint that he thought it might be the heat singing in his brain: a trickle of sound so minute that his sense of its presence was little more than an intuition. He slowed his steed's trot. The dunes flowed by. It seemed a long time before he began to grasp the form of the sound, and that only partially. It hovered, it suddenly rose and as abruptly fell below its beginning. What its source might be, or even its timbre or objective pitch, Ryre could not guess.

Focused painfully on the sound, his brain felt paralysed as the desert. He strained himself upright, trying to hear beyond the padding of his steed. Dunes were replaced by dunes, and the sound crept nearer Ryre's reach. Suddenly he thought he knew what it was, and he chilled. It sounded like the wordless song of a human voice, a voice that sang without the need of breath, incessantly. He calmed his steed, but this time it shuffled restlessly. He put his palms over its eyes to soothe it into stillness. It stilled, and the wordless song undulated over the silenced desert, leaping octaves and sexes. Then, without warning, his steed whirled about. He snatched his hands away, but already the force of its turn had dashed him to the ground. It fled, its whole body working like a muscled rope of water.

Ryre crawled to the top of the dune on which he had fallen. His injured shoulder throbbed; the fall had torn free bandage and leaf beneath his shirt,

and he could not reach to replace them. In the distance his steed and his pack were dwindling. He looked in the opposite direction, towards the unbreathing voice. Over the furthest dunes he could make out the tips of trees. At once he knew that he had found the garden.

He rose to his feet, trembling slightly. For a moment he gazed after his steed. Its sudden terrified flight troubled him. But he knew that animals were generally wary of magic, and he had himself been disturbed at first by the song. Now it seemed a beacon. He needed food and salve, and there was nowhere to seek but the garden. He grinned bitterly to think how his motive for seeking Goam had changed.

He remembered straying too near the beach beyond Grotoc the day a marauding party from the matriarchy of Lelele had landed. The women netted him, and he regained consciousness in the noisome hold of a ship on the Sea of Shouting Islands. New islands rose in steam, spewing lava and flame, but Lelele was firm. There he stayed in the stable for a year, chained among the filth and the moans of those, less well equipped than he, who had been augmented. But the noblewoman Yaloyo had withheld her son and lover from the stable, and when he was taken she began to plot against Queen Toloro and her court. Hearing that Ryre had been a hunter, and having learned how he had fought in the net, she called him to her mansion and began to play him into her plan.

He never knew how she had contrived to have him called to the queen's bed. He remembered the hours during which the eunuchs had washed him, shaved him, perfumed him, while all the time the razor-edged blade bit upward into his tongue. At least they had not required him to speak; his mouth had been full of blood. A minute after the queen had signed her guards to leave he had cut her throat and Yaloyo's confidantes held the palace. But there was an immediate counter-uprising, from which Yaloyo alone of the plotters escaped, taking some of the men and a ship. Once afloat they found her attitude to them reverting to imperiousness; but before she could wield her words Ryre threw her into the sea to swim if she could, which she could not.

He knew enough of her words to assume their conviction of power. Thus he became the leader of a band of pirates, standing off Lelele in wait for the next shipload of women fleeing to trade treasures for food. For months he watched the men tie women to the deck and rape them, beat them, mutilate

them, throwing them bleeding into the hold or the sea at whim; Ryre saw the queen trying to pinch her throat closed, and to scream. At last he could stomach no more, and he had them sail to the shore of Thabbe, beyond which Goam was. He had himself rowed to the shore with enough booty to trade for food and a steed. Even there he had to kill the two rowers, who would have silenced him lest he betray them; and even then, to his greater disgust, he found the ecstasy of combat rising high within him before slumping into depression. He watched the ship dwindle charred into the sun on the horizon. Then he set out for Goam.

Ryre gazed from the last dune. Beyond a strip of sand perhaps a hundred yards wide curved the garden. At once his hopes were confirmed: the tall segmented trunks, the vegetation between them, the profusion of blooms, all were regularly spaced and clearly tended. Within the curve, which suggested a garden at least a mile in diameter, the tireless voice seemed to seek a melody; behind it other music loomed, slow as a windless sky.

Pain fingered Ryre's shoulder, musing where to start. He limped down the dune. His mind warily circled thoughts of the tenders of the garden. No doubt they were descendants of the people of Goam, not—as he shivered a little to consider—the original magicians. Surely they could find a place for him. Surely they could help him to be restrained within himself so that his actions would not cause ripples of unforeseen harm. He entered the garden.

Thick heat and scents draped him; colours closed on his eyes; the music burgeoned, new themes sprang into prominence, hemming him in. He halted, confused, waiting for his senses to settle. Around him gleamed great translucent leaves like wings; sap darted suddenly through their veins. Above them petals folded back and lolled like tongues, pink, green, orange, flecked as with soot or snow. Above the rest rose the trunks, each segment hung with pearly thumbs of fruit, and at the top of each trunk stood the latest bud, peeled raw. Behind all this the music massed, filling with themes as Ryre's ears adjusted to it.

Less intoxicated now, he began to walk deeper into the garden. The soil gave a little beneath his feet. A sharp blade was opening his shoulder, carving a gouge of pain. He shook his head angrily. Had he continued on his pirate's way or in whatever direction branched from it he would no doubt have won the badges he'd seen worn through the gates of Phodole: pink stumps of arms and legs, dry empty eye sockets, flourished bitterly or

wheedlingly at all who passed by. Nothing lay on the other side of pain but pain, he was sure. Yet infuriatingly, although he knew these were the thoughts that had turned him to Goam, his feelings now seemed entangled with the subversion of the old man in the tavern. He'd known his saga was past and fixed before the old man told him so; he knew he had. He swept sweat from his forehead. It was the heat that was confusing him, the heat and the sounds. His words were safe. He was his words.

Yet if his words had filled him in the tavern, why must he abandon their course? He glanced about, seeking distraction from his heat-thoughts, and caught sight of a line of tracks. They followed a path between two ranks of trunks, parallel to the one he was pursuing. His shoulder nagged him, but he made his way to the other path, peering at a flower which was a hundred tiny flowers, clustering to form a giant reproduction of themselves.

The music and the voice moved with him. He thought he knew why; the orchestra must be at the centre of the garden, like the ceremonial band of Phodole which one could hear as far as the gates. He was moving at a constant distance from the centre, and hence from the music. He clung to a sense of his original direction, for with each step a new pattern of paths fell into place, radiating from him.

Although the music seemed to surround him, he was unable to distinguish the instruments with any conviction. There was the slow music like untroubled clouds, a rising theme that might be brass, delicate string-like tones through which harmonies darted suddenly, a gradual blooming of something like woodwind. It weighed on him, disturbing him, a constant mouthless shout. Against it the garden seemed unnaturally mute.

He reached the tracks and stared down. They were barefoot, imprinted in the earth, cast so minutely that the turn of each toe was visible. A wispy stubble of grass surrounded the footprints, but none grew within the outlines. Ryre turned, frowning, then started as he saw the way he had come. His own tracks were embedded in the earth, perfectly preserved. Instinctively he knew that his tracks would remain, part of the garden. He knew now there was magic here.

He brushed at his forehead, rubbing away a prickling of unease. It was more the heat, he thought. Deep in the garden as he was, the heat seemed almost solid. The leaves and blooms glistened thickly, as if coated with sweat. No insects hovered about them. Perhaps they'd died of the heat, Ryre

thought sourly, and instantly realised something else. Not only could he hear no sound of insects, he had heard no rustle of foliage since entering the garden: no natural sound at all.

Suddenly he brought his ear close to a green flower. At once the efflorescence of woodwind was upon him, blotting out the rest of the music with its spreading cluster of round smooth tones. He bent lower, to the leaves, and the pale unison of strings swam up to him, carrying its abruptly darting harmonies. He ran to a trunk and heard the brass theme begin, low and rising gradually to a thin steady note that merged imperceptibly with a new beginning. And the ground—yes, the ground was the slow almost immutable music he'd first heard from the edge of the dunes.

He was still stooping when a white figure peered between the trunks at him, then glided soundlessly away.

Ryre jerked up; pain jabbed his shoulder. The figure had been several paths distant, and already must be beyond the solid wall of trunks that distance created. Ryre snatched at the glimpse: a pale face gazing at him from beneath a white hood; white tight-fitting glossy clothes, tall, thin. His mind toyed with an impression that the figure had looked oily and somehow unstable, then consigned the notion to the effects of the heat. It must have been a magician, perhaps the orchestrator of the garden. Ryre made to call out but found, with a pale peering face on the edge of his mind, that he could not.

Nonetheless, when he calmed, he found himself reassured. He had expected magic, and he accepted the music of the garden with awe, but the unceasing song of the voice troubled him. It comforted him that the white figure had been soundless. The voice was unlikely to relate to a man, then; it could not be the sound of a lungless man tethered at the hub with his mouth propped open, after all. Instead, Ryre thought it might be what he had originally surmised: a beacon, guiding him down the path ahead. Pain set spurs into his shoulder, and he hurried forward. Behind him the earth held his footprints.

Reluctantly the vanishing point of the path began to yield up the hub. As Ryre was able to make out his goal the voice grew louder, moving across the rest of the music, leaping, falling, never quite harmonising. Ahead, between the trunks, he could see robed figures in attitudes of conjuration.

They seemed to have halted their enchantment to stare down the path at him.

In sight of his goal, Ryre came to a standstill. Vague purpose had brought him so far; now he realised that he had no words with which to address the mages. All at once he knew that having no words, he must listen. He was open to purpose. Pain drummed like heels on his shoulder, and he limped swiftly to the end of the path. There he stopped again, gaping.

He thought at first that he had come to a huge mirror. At the hub was a wide circular clearing, bare of all but earth. Opposite him and slightly to his right across the clearing a bush bore three flowers: red, pink, white. Ryre gazed down in disbelief at the bush next to him on his left: white, pink, red. Everything was mirrored across the diameter. Facing him he could see the path down which he had just walked. Only the figure opposite him in the clearing, its arms robed with compacted words and raised in a gesture of magical dismissal, was itself.

As Ryre searched the clearing for the source of the voice that wandered in his ears, bounding again and again as if trying vainly to escape the surrounding music, as he gazed at the robed figures frozen in their magic and the several others, armoured or commonly robed, that stood staring at them, the white figure emerged into the clearing; and he saw that it was not wearing white tight-fitting clothes at all.

In a way it was naked, for he could see its pale almost bone-tight skin. It was entirely encased in a smooth transparent gelatinous sheath, half an inch thick, as if mummified in amber. As it moved, carrying itself carefully as a treasure, the gelatine creased into folds at the joints of the body with a soft rubbery squeak. At the centre of the clearing it turned to gaze at Ryre.

The face was young, almost infantile, bland and pink as new flesh. It was entirely without expression, and smooth where its mouth should be. It turned to him like a pink mask spun on a pole of bone; its outlines quivered with its sheath, across which iridescent reflections of the garden played. The gelatine puckered and dilated at its ears, and Ryre knew it was listening to the music of the garden.

At once he knew who it was, and knew all. He remembered the magician of whom the old man in the tavern had spoken; he remembered how a hundred years ago the mage had spiced his vision with imperfection. Ryre thought of the unerased footprints, of the group of magicians paralysed as

they conjured to cast out the evildoer, of the later immobile victims who had been added piquantly to the scheme: all welcomed imperfections.

Retribution blazed within him, purging his doubts. He felt no fear, only revulsion. Around him the song flittered: not a beacon, he realised, a lure. "You have lured your death to you," he told the figure, and at once the words surged through him; he was the words. Whatever words his adversary might have wielded were sealed within it, he saw.

He started forward into the clearing, towards the pink smooth face watching from within its jelly. His sword was half out of its sheath when his song closed on his ears like pincers and sank into his brain.

All feeling drained from him. Only a will to struggle remained, scrabbling in his brain, and as its efforts grew more frantic the voice swelled, minutely depicting the form of his struggles, soaring across the music, almost harmonising. The figure nodded, gazing at Ryre, and the reminiscence of a smile creased the jelly over its face. Then it raised its jellied arms, nodding its wobbling sheath; and a chorus of silenced voices burst forth, almost in harmony, over the figures at the hub.

The Tugging

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I

When Ingels awoke he knew at once he'd been dreaming again. There was an image, a memory clamouring faintly but urgently at the edge of his mind; he snatched at it, but it was gone. He swung himself off the crumpled bed. Hilary must have gone to do her research in the library hours ago, leaving him a cold breakfast. Outside hung a chill glazed blue sky, and frost was fading from the window pane.

The dream continued to nag at his mind. He let it pluck at him, hoping that the nagging would turn by itself into memory. He slowed himself down, dressing slowly, eating slowly, to allow the memory to catch up. But there was only the insistence, like a distant recollection of a plucked tooth. Through the wall he could hear a radio announcer's voice in the next flat, a blurred cadence rising as if to leap a barrier that obscured its words completely. It buzzed at his mind, bumbling. He washed up quickly, irritably, and hurried out.

And found that he couldn't look up at the sky.

The feeling seized his neck like a violent cramp, forcing his head down. Around him women were wheeling prams in which babies and groceries fought for space, dogs were playing together in the alleys, buses quaked at bus stops, farting. But on Ingels, pressing down from a clear rather watery blue expanse to which he couldn't even raise his eyes, weighed a sense of intolerable stress, as if the calm sky were stretched to splitting: as if it were about to split and to let his unformed fear through at him.

A bus braked, a long tortured scraping squeal. When Ingels recovered from his heart-clutching start he'd jolted off the fear. He ran for the bus as the last of the queue shuffled on. Scared of the sky indeed, he thought. I've got to

get more sleep. Pill myself to sleep if I have to. His eyes felt as if floating in quicklime.

He sat among the coughing shoppers. Across the aisle a man shook his head at the tobacco-smoke, snorting like a horse. A woman threw herself and three carrier bags on to a seat, patting them reassuringly, and slammed her predecessor's open window. Ingels rummaged in his briefcase. He'd left one notebook at his own flat, he discovered, muttering. He flicked through the notes for his column, holding them flat on his briefcase. Wonder if the fellow whose knee I'm fighting recognises my style. World's champion egotist, he rebuked himself, hiding the notes with his forearm. Don't worry, he won't steal the copyright, he scoffed, pulling his arm back. He put the notes away. They looked as bleary as he felt.

He gazed around the bus, at the flat stagnant smoke, at the ranks of heads like wig-blocks, and settled on headlines over the shoulder in front of him:

> IS THE SOLAR SYSTEM ON TOW?
> Six months ago an amateur astronomer wrote to us, warning that a planet might pass dangerously close to Earth.
>
> THE ASTRONOMER ROYAL'S COMMENT: 'UTTER TWADDLE'
> Now the world's leading astronomers have agreed to let us have the facts.
>
> TODAY WE TELL ALL
> In an exclusive interview.

But he'd turned over, to the smaller print of the story. Ingels sat back again, remembering how the *Herald* had received a copy of that letter six months ago. They hadn't published it, and the letters editor had gazed at Ingels pityingly when he'd suggested they might at least follow it up. 'I suppose you arts people need imagination,' he'd said. Ingels grimaced wryly, wondering how they would handle the story in tonight's edition. He leaned forward, but the man had reached the editorial comment: 'Even if his aim was to prevent panic, are we paying the Astronomer Royal to tell us what too many people are now suggesting was a lie?'

Ingels glanced out of the window. Offices flashed past, glazed displays of figures at desks, the abrupt flight of perspective down alleys with a shock like a fall in a dream, more displays. The offices thinned out and aged as the

bus gathered speed towards the edge of Brichester. Nearly there, Ingels thought, then realised with a leap from his seat that he'd passed the *Herald* building three stops back. For a second he knew where he'd been heading. So what? he thought savagely, the rims of his eyes rusty and burning, as he clattered downstairs. But once he was on the street he wished that he'd thought to remember: now he couldn't imagine where he could have been going in that direction.

BRICHESTER HERALD: BRICHESTER'S EVENING VOICE. The iron poem (two-thirds of a haiku, he'd thought until he grew used to it) clung to the bricks above him. The foyer was quiet. He wondered how long it would be before the presses began to thump heartily, disproving the soundproofing. Not long, and he had to write his column.

His mind felt flat and empty as the elevator. He drifted numbly through the hundred-yard open-plan office, past the glancing heads behind glass personalised in plastic.

Some looked away quickly, some stared, some smiled. My God, I don't even know his name, Ingels thought of several. 'Hello, Moira,' he said. 'How's it going, Bert.' Telephones shrilled, were answered, their calls leapt prankishly across the floor. Reporters sidestepped through the aisles. Smells of deodorant and sweat, tang of ink, brandished paper, scurrying typewriters, hasty agitated conferences.

Bert had been following him to his desk. 'Don't wait for your personal bulletin,' Bert said, throwing a telex sheet on the desk. 'The latest on your wandering planet.'

'Don't tell me I've convinced you at last.'

'No chance,' Bert said, retreating. 'Just so you don't start turning the place upside down for it.'

Ingels read the sheet, thinking: I could have told them this six months ago. The Americans had admitted that an unmanned probe was well on its way to photograph the wanderer. He rested his elbow on the desk and covered his eyes. Against the restless patches of light he almost glimpsed what he'd dreamed. He started, bewildered; the noise of the newspaper poured into him. Enough, he thought, sorting out his notes.

He typed the television review—a good play from Birmingham, when are we going to see a studio in Brichester—and passed it to Bert. Then he

pawed desultorily at the day's accumulation on his desk. Must go and see my folks this week. Might drain my tension a little. He turned over a brown envelope. A press ticket, elaborately pretty lettering: exhibition of associational painting—the new primitivism and surrealism. Ugh, he thought, and whatever you say to surrealists. Private view this afternoon. Which means now. 'You can have a local arts review tomorrow,' he said, showing the ticket to Bert, and went out.

Once out of the building his mind teetered like a dislocated compass. Again the sky seemed brittle glass, ready to crack, and when he moved to shake off the obsession he found himself urged towards the edge of Brichester. A woman flinched from him as he snarled himself to a halt. 'Sorry,' he called after her. Whatever's in that direction, it isn't the show I've been invited to. But there must be something there. Maybe I went there when I was young. Have a look when I can. Before I sleepwalk there.

Although he could have taken a bus into Lower Brichester, where the exhibition was, he walked. Clear my head, perhaps, if I don't get high on petrol first. The sky was thin and blue; nothing more, now. He swung his briefcase. Haven't heard of these artists before. Who knows, they could be good.

He hadn't been through Lower Brichester for months, and was taken aback by its dereliction. Dogs scrabbled clattering in gouged shop-fronts, an uprooted streetlamp lay across a road, humped earth was scattered with disembowelled mattresses, their entrails fluttering feebly. He passed houses where one window was blinded with brick, the next still open and filmy with a drooping curtain. He examined his ticket. Believe it or not, I'm on the right track.

Soon whole streets were derelict. There was nothing but Ingels, the gaping houses and uneven pavements, the discreet sky, his footsteps alone; the rush of the city was subdued, quiescent. The houses went by, shoulder to shoulder, ribs open to the sky, red-brick fronts revealing their jumble of shattered walls and staircases. Ingels felt a lurking sympathy for the area in its abandonment, its indifference to time. He slowed down, strolling. Let myself go a bit. The private view's open for hours yet. Relax. He did, and felt an irrational impulse pleading with him.

And why not, he thought. He glanced about: nobody. Then he began to lope through the deserted streets, arms hanging, fingers almost touching the

road. Unga bunga, he thought. One way to prepare myself for the primitives, I suppose.

He found his behaviour touched a memory; perhaps the memory was its source. A figure running crouched through ruins, somewhere nearby. A kind of proof of virility. But they hadn't been deserted city streets, he thought, loping. Just flat blocks of black rock in which square windows gaped. Abandoned long before but hardly affected by time. A figure running along a narrow path through the stone, not looking at the windows.

Clouds were creeping into the sky; darkness was suffusing the streets around him. Ingels ran, not looking at the houses, allowing them to merge with the memory they touched. It was coming clearer. You had to run all the way along one of the stone paths. Any path at all, for there were no intersections, just a straight unbroken run. You had to run fast, before something within the windows became aware of you, rather as a carnivorous plant becomes aware of a fly. The last part of the run was the worst, because you knew that at any moment something would appear in all the windows at once: things that, although they had mouths, were not faces —

Ingels stumbled wildly as he halted, glaring up at the empty windows of the houses. What on earth was that? he thought distractedly. Like one of those dreams I used to have, the ones that were so vivid. Of course, that's what it must have been. These streets reminded me of one of them. Though the memory felt much older, somehow. From the womb, no doubt, he shouted angrily at his pounding heart.

When he reached the exhibition he walked straight past it. Returning, he peered at the address on the ticket. My God, this is it. Two of a street of dingy but tenanted terraced houses had been run together; on the front door of one, in lettering he'd taken for graffiti, were the words LOWER BRICHESTER ARTS LAB. He recalled how, when it had opened last year, the invitations to the opening had arrived two days later. The project he'd described after a hurried telephone interview hadn't looked at all like this. Oh well, he thought, and went in.

In the hall, by the reception desk, two clowns were crawling about with children on their backs. One of the children ran behind the desk and gazed up at Ingels. 'Do you know where the exhibition is?' he said. 'Up your arse,' she said, giggling. 'First floor up,' said one of the clowns, who Ingels now

realised was a made-up local poet, and chased the children into a playroom full of inflatables.

The first floor was a maze of plywood partitions in metal frames. On the partitions hung paintings and sketches. As Ingels entered, half-a-dozen people converged on him, all the artists save one, who was trying to relight a refractory cone of incense. Feeling outnumbered, Ingels wished he'd made it to the maze. 'You've just missed the guy from Radio Brichester,' one said, 'Are you going to talk to all of us, like him?' another asked. 'Do you like modern art?' 'Do you want coffee?'

'Now leave him be,' said Annabel Pringle, as Ingels recognised her from her picture on the cover of the catalogue. 'They're new to exhibiting, you see, you can't blame them. I mean, this whole show is my idea but their enthusiasm. Now, I can explain the principles as you go round if you like, or you can read them in the catalogue.'

'The latter, thanks,' Ingels hurried into the maze, opening the typed catalogue. A baby with an ear-trumpet, which was 2: Untitled. 3 was a man throwing his nose into a wastebasket, and Untitled. 4: Untitled. 5, 6, 7— Well, their paintings are certainly better than their prose, Ingels thought. The incense unravelled ahead of him. A child playing half-submerged in a lake. A blackened green-tinged city shouldering up from the sea. A winged top hat gliding over a jungle. Suddenly Ingels stopped short and turned back to the previous painting. He was sure he had seen it before.

22: Atlantis. But it wasn't like any Atlantis he'd seen pictured. The technique was crude and rather banal, obviously one of the primitives, yet Ingels found that it touched images buried somewhere in him. Its leaning slabs of rock felt vast, the sea poured from its surfaces as if it had just exploded triumphantly into sight. Drawn closer, Ingels peered into the darkness within a slab of rock, beyond what might be an open doorway. If there were the outline of a pale face staring featurelessly up from within the rock, its owner must be immense. If there were, Ingels thought, withdrawing: but why should he feel there ought to be?

When he'd hurried around the rest of the exhibition he tried to ask about the painting, but Annabel Pringle headed him off. 'You understand what we mean by associational painting?' she demanded. 'Let me tell you. We select an initial idea by aleatory means.'

'Eh?' Ingels said, scribbling.

'Based on chance. We use the I Ching, like John Cage. The American composer, he originated it. Once we have the idea we silently associate from it until each of us has an idea they feel they must communicate. This exhibition is based on six initial ideas. You can see the diversity.'

'Indeed,' Ingels said. 'When I said "eh" I was being an average reader of our paper, you understand. Listen, the one that particularly interested me was number 22. I'd like to know how that came about.'

"That's mine,' one young man said, leaping up as if it were House.

'The point of our method,' Annabel Pringle said, gazing at the painter, 'is to erase all the associational steps from your mind, leaving only the image you paint. Of course Give here wouldn't remember what led up to that painting.'

'No, of course,' Ingels said numbly. 'It doesn't matter. Thank you. Thanks all very much.' He hurried downstairs, past a sodden clown, and into the street. In fact it didn't matter. A memory had torn its way through his insomnia. For the second time that day he realised why something had looked familiar, but this time more disturbingly. Decades ago he had himself dreamed the city in the painting.

II

Ingels switched off the television. As the point of light dwindled into darkness it touched off the image in him of a gleam shooting away into space. Then he saw that the light hadn't sunk into darkness but into Hilary's reflection, leaning forward from the cane rocking-chair next to him, about to speak. 'Give me fifteen minutes,' he said, scribbling notes for his review.

The programme had shown the perturbations which the wandering planet had caused in the orbits of Pluto, Neptune, and Uranus, and had begun and ended by pointing out that the planet was now swinging away from the Solar System; its effect on Earth's orbit would be negligible. Photographs from the space-probe were promised within days. Despite its cold scientific clarity (Ingels wrote) and perhaps without meaning to, the programme managed to communicate a sense of foreboding, of the intrusion into and interference with our familiar skies. 'Not to me it didn't,' Hilary said, reading over his shoulder.

'That's sad,' he said. 'I was going to tell you about my dreams.'

'Don't if I wouldn't understand them either. Aren't I allowed to criticise now?'

'Sorry. Let's start again. Just let me tell you a few of the things that have happened to me. I was thinking of them all today. Some of them even you'll have to admit are strange. Make some coffee and I'll tell you about them.

When she'd brought the coffee he waited until she sat forward, ready to be engrossed, long soft black hooks of hair angling for her jawbone. 'I used to dream a lot when I was young,' he said. 'Not your average childhood dream, if there is such a thing. There was one I remember, about these enormous clouds of matter floating in outer space, forming very slowly into something. I mean very slowly... I woke up long before they got there, yet while I was dreaming I knew whatever it was would have a face, and that made me very anxious to wake up. Then there was another where I was being carried through a kind of network of light, on and on across intersections for what felt like days, until I ended up on the edge of this gigantic web of paths of light. And I was fighting to stop myself going in, because I knew that hiding behind the light there was something old and dark and shapeless, something dried-up and evil that I couldn't make out. I could hear it rustling like an old dry spider. You know what I suddenly realised that web was? My brain, I'd been chasing along my nervous system to my brain. Well, leave that one to the psychologists. But there were odd things about these dreams—I mean, apart from all that.

They always used to begin the same way, and always about the same time of the month.'

'The night of the full moon?' Hilary said, slurping coffee.

'Funnily enough, yes. Don't worry, I didn't sprout midnight shadow or anything. But some people are sensitive to the full moon, that's well enough documented. And I always used to begin by dreaming I could see the full moon over the sea, way out in the middle of the ocean. I could see the reflection resting on the water, and after a while I'd always find myself thinking it wasn't the moon at all but a great pale face peering up out of the ocean, and I'd panic. Then I wouldn't be able to move and I'd know that the full moon was pulling at something deep in the ocean, waking up. I'd feel my panic swelling up in me, and all of a sudden it would burst and I'd be in the next dream. That's how it happened, every time.'

'Didn't your parents know? Didn't they try to find out what was wrong?'

'I don't know what you mean by wrong. But yes, they knew eventually, when I told them. That was after I had the idea my father might be able to explain. I was eleven then and I'd had strange feelings sometimes, intuitions and premonitions and so forth, and sometimes I'd discovered they'd been my father's feelings too.'

'I know all about your father's feelings,' Hilary said. 'More than he knows about mine.'

Soon after they'd met Ingels had taken her to see his parents. She'd felt his father had been too stiffly polite to her, and when she'd cross-examined Ingels he'd eventually admitted that his father had felt she was wrong for him, unsympathetic to him. 'You were going to let me tell you about my dreams,' he said. 'I told my father about the sea dream and I could see there was something he wasn't saying. My mother had to make him tell me.

Her attitude to the whole thing was rather what yours would have been, but she told him to get it over with, he'd have to tell me sometime. So he told me he'd sometimes shared his father's dreams without either of them ever knowing why. And he'd had several of my dreams when he'd been young, until one night in the mid-twenties—early 1925, I think he said. Then he'd dreamed a city had risen out of the sea. After that he'd never dreamed again. Well, maybe hearing that was some kind of release for me, because the next time I dreamed of the city too.'

'You dreamed of a city,' Hilary said.

'The same one. I told him about it next morning, details of it he hadn't told me, that were the same in both our dreams. I was watching the sea, the same place as always. Don't ask me how I knew it was always the same. I knew. One moment I was watching the moon on the water, then I saw it was trembling. The next moment an island rose out of the ocean with a roaring like a waterfall, louder than that, louder than anything I've ever heard while awake; I could actually feel my ears hurting. There was a city on the island, all huge greenish blocks with sea and seaweed pouring off them. And the mud was boiling with stranded creatures, panting and bursting. Right in front of me and above me and below me there was a door. Mud was trickling down from it, and I knew that the great pale face I was terrified of was behind the door, getting ready to come out, opening its eyes in the dark. I woke up then, and that was the end of the dreams. Say they were only

dreams if you like. You might find it easiest to believe my father and I were sharing them by telepathy.'

'You know perfectly well,' Hilary said, 'that I'd find nothing of the sort.'

'No? Then try this,' he said sharply. 'At the exhibition I visited today there was a painting of our dream. And not by either of us.'

'So what does that mean?' she cried. 'What on earth is that supposed to mean?'

'Well, a dream I can recall so vividly after all this time is worth a thought. And that painting suggests it's a good deal more objectively real.'

'So your father read about the island in a story,' she said. 'So did you, so did the painter. What else can you possibly be suggesting?'

'Nothing,' he said at last.

'So what were the other strange things you were going to tell me?'

'That's all,' he said. 'Just the painting. Nothing else. Really.' She was looking miserable, a little ashamed. 'Don't you believe me?' he said. 'Come here.'

As the sheepskin rug joined their caresses she said 'I don't really need to be psychic for you, do I?'

'No,' he said, probing her ear with his tongue, triggering her ready. Switching off the goosenecked steel lamps as she went, she led him through the flat as if wheeling a basket behind her; they began laughing as a car's beam shone up from Mercy Hill and seized for a moment on her hand, his handle. They reached the crisp bed and suddenly, urgently, couldn't prolong their play. She was all around him, working to draw him deeper and out, he was lapped softly, thrusting roughly at her grip on him to urge it to return redoubled. They were rising above everything but each other, gasping. He felt himself rushing to a height, and closed his eyes.

And was falling into a maelstrom of flesh, into a vast almost lightless cave whose roof seemed as far above him' as the sky. He had a long way still to fall, and beneath him he could make out the movements of huge bubbles and ropes of flesh, of eyes swelling and splitting of flesh, of gigantic dark green masses climbing sluggishly over one another. 'No, Christ no,' he cried, gripped helpless.

He slumped on Hilary. 'Oh God,' she said. 'What is it now?'

He lay beside her. Above them the ceiling shivered with reflected light. It looked as he felt. He closed his eyes and found dark calm, but couldn't bear to keep them closed for long. 'All right,' he said. 'There's more I haven't told you. I know you've been worried about how I've looked lately. I told you it was lack of sleep, and so it is, but it's because I've begun dreaming again. It started about nine months ago, just before I met you, and it's becoming more frequent, once or twice a week now. Only this time I can never remember what it is, perhaps because I haven't dreamed for so long. I think it has something to do with the sky, maybe this planet we've been hearing about. The last time was this morning, after you went to the library. For some reason I don't have them when I'm with you.'

'Of course if you want to go back to your place, go ahead,' Hilary said, gazing at the ceiling.

'In one way I don't,' he said. 'That's just the trouble. Whenever I try to dream I find I don't want to sleep, as if I'm fighting the dream. But today I'm tired enough just to drift off and have it anyway. I've been getting hallucinations all day that I think are coming from the dream. And it feels more urgent, somehow. I've got to have it. I knew it was important before, but that painting's made me sure it's more than a dream. I wish you could understand this. It's not easy for me.'

'Suppose I did believe you?' she said. 'What on earth would you do then? Stand on the street warning people? Or would you try to sell it to your paper? I don't want to believe you, how can you think they would?'

'That's exactly the sort of thing I don't need to hear,' Ingels said. 'I want to talk to my father about it. I think he may be able to help. Maybe you wouldn't mind not coming with me.

'I wouldn't want to,' she said. 'You go and have your dream and your chat with your father if you want. But as far as I'm concerned that means you don't want me.'

Ingels walked to his flat, further up Mercy Hill. Newspapers clung to bushes, flapping; cars hissed through nearby streets, luminous waves. Only the houses stood between him and the sky, their walls seeming low and thin. Even in the pools of lamplight he felt the night gaping overhead.

The building where he lived was silent. The stereo that usually thumped like an electronic heart was quiet. Ingels climbed to the third floor, his

footsteps dropping wooden blocks into the silence, nudging him awake. He fumbled in his entrance hall for the coathook on the back of the door, which wasn't where Hilary kept hers. Beneath the window in the main room he saw her desk spread with her syndicated cartoon strip—except that when he switched on the light it was his own desk, scattered with television schedules. He peered wearily at the rumpled bed. Around him the room felt and moved like muddy water. He sagged on the bed and was asleep at once.

The darkness drew him out, coaxing him forward, swimming softly through his eyes. A great silent darkness surrounded him. He sailed through it, sleeping yet aware. He sensed energy flowering far out in the darkness, vast soundless explosions that cooled and congealed. He sensed immense weights slowly rolling at the edge of his blindness.

Then he could see, though the darkness persisted almost unchanged. Across its furthest distances a few points of light shone like tiny flaws. He began to sail towards them, faster. They parted and fled to the edge of his vision as he approached. He was rushing between them, towards others that now swooped minutely out of the boundless night, carrying cooler grains of congealed dust around them. They were multiplying, his vision was filling with sprinkled light and its attendant parasites. He was turning, imprinting each silently blazing vista on his mind. His mind felt enormous. He felt it take each pattern of light and store it easily as it returned alert for the next.

It was so long before he came to rest he had no conscious memory of starting out. Somehow the path he'd followed had brought him back to his point of origin. Now he sailed in equilibrium with the entire system of light and dust that surrounded him, boundless. His mind locked on everything he'd seen.

He found that part of his mind had fastened telescopically on details of the worlds he'd passed: cities of globes acrawl with black winged insects; mountains carved or otherwise formed into heads within whose hollow sockets worshippers squirmed; a sea from whose depths rose a jointed arm, reaching miles inland and a filmy web of skin to net itself food. One tiny world in particular seemed to teem with life that was aware of him.

Deep in one of its seas a city slept, and he shared the dreams of its sleepers: of an infancy spent in a vast almost lightless cave, tended by a thin rustling shape so tall its head was lost to sight; of flight to this minute but fecund planet; of dancing hugely and clumsily beneath the light of a

fragment they'd torn free of this world and flung into space; of dormancy in the submarine basalt tombs. Dormant, they waited and shared the lives of other similar beings active on the surface; for a moment he was the inhabitant of a black city deserted by its builders, coming alert and groping lazily forth as a pale grub fled along a path between the buildings.

Later, as the active ones on the surface had to hide from the multiplying grubs, those in the submarine city stilled, waiting. Ingels felt their thoughts searching sleepily, ranging the surface, touching and sampling the minds of the grubs, vastly patient and purposeful. He felt the womb of the sea lapping his cell. His huge flesh quivered, anticipating rebirth.

Without warning he was in a room, gazing through a telescope at the sky. He seemed to have been gazing for hours; his eyes burned. He was referring to a chart, adjusting the mounting of the telescope. A pool of light from an oil-lamp roved, snatching at books in cases against the walls, spilling over the charts at his feet. Then he was outside the room, hurrying through a darkened theatre; cowls of darkness peered down from the boxes. Outside the theatre he glanced up towards the speckled sky, towards the roof, where he knew one slate hid the upturned telescope. He hurried away through the gas-lit streets, out of Ingels' dream.

He awoke and knew at once where the theatre was: at the edge of Brichester, where his mind had been tugging him all day.

III

He rose at dawn, feeling purged and refreshed. He washed, shaved, dressed, made himself breakfast. In his lightened state the preamble of his dream seemed not to matter: he had had his inclination towards the edge of Brichester explained, the rest seemed external to him, perhaps elaborately symbolic. He knew Hilary regarded his dreams as symptoms of disturbance, and perhaps she was right. Maybe, he thought, they all meant the theatre was trying to get up through my mind. A lot of fuss, but that's what dreams are like. Especially when they're having to fight their way, no doubt. Can't wait to see what the theatre means to me.

When he went out the dawn clutched him as if he hadn't shaken off his dreams. The dull laden light settled about him, ambiguous shapes hurried by. The air felt suffocated by imminence, not keen as the cold should make

it. That'll teach me to get up at cockcrow, he thought. Feels like insomnia. Can't imagine what they find to crow about. The queues of commuters moved forward like the tickings of doom.

Someone had left a sheet from the telex on his desk. Photographs from the space probe were expected any hour. He wrote his reviews hurriedly, glancing up to dispel a sense that the floor was alive with pale grubs, teeming through the aisles. Must have needed more sleep than I thought. Maybe catch a nap later.

Although his dream had reverted the streets, replacing the electric lamps with gas, he knew exactly where the theatre should be. He hurried along the edge of Lower Brichester, past champing steam-shovels, roaring skeletons of burning houses. He strode straight to the street of his dream.

One side was razed, a jagged strip of brown earth extending cracks into the pavement and into the fields beyond. But the theatre was on the other side. Ingels hurried past the red-brick houses, past the wind-whipped gardens and broken flowers, towards the patched gouge in the road where he knew a gas-lamp had used to guard the theatre. He stood arrested on it, cars sweeping past, and stared at the houses before him, safe from his glare in their sameness. The theatre was not there.

Only the shout of an overtaking car roused him. He wandered along, feeling sheepish and absurd. He remembered vaguely having walked this way with his parents once, on the way to a picnic. The gas-lamp had been standing then; he'd gazed at it and at the theatre, which by then was possessed by a cinema, until they'd coaxed him away. Which explained the dream, the insomnia, everything. And I never used to be convinced by Citizen Kane. Rosebud to me too, with knobs on. In fact he'd even mistaken the location of the lamp; there it was, a hundred yards ahead of him. Suddenly he began to run. Already he could see the theatre, now renamed as a furniture warehouse.

He was almost through the double doors and into the first aisle of suites when he realised that he didn't know what he was going to say. Excuse me, I'd like to look under your rafters. Sorry to bother you, but I believe you have a secret room here. For God's sake, he said, blushing, hurrying down the steps as a salesman came forward to open the doors for him. I know what the dream was now. I've made sure I won't have it again. Forget the rest.

He threw himself down at his desk. Now sit there and behave. What a piddling reason for falling out with Hilary. At least I can admit that to her. Call her now. He was reaching for the telephone when Bert tramped up, waving Ingels' review of the astronomical television programme. 'I know you'd like to rewrite this,' he said.

'Sorry about that.'

'We'll call off the men in white this time. Thought you'd gone the same way as this fellow,' Bert said, throwing a cutting on the desk.

'Just lack of sleep,' Ingels said, not looking. 'As our Methuselah, tell me something. When the warehouse on Fieldview was a theatre, what was it called?'

'The Variety, you mean?' Bert said, dashing for his phone. 'Remind me to tell you about the time I saw Beaumont and Fletcher performing there. Great double act.'

Ingels turned the cutting over, smiling half at Bert, half at himself for the way he had still not let go of his dream. Go on, look through the files in your lunch-hour, he told himself satirically. Bet the Variety never made a headline in its life.

LSD CAUSES ATTEMPTED SUICIDE, said the cutting. American student claims that in LSD 'vision' he was told that the planet now passing through our solar system heralded the rising of Atlantis. Threw himself from second-storey window. Insists that the rising of Atlantis means the end of humanity. Says the Atlanteans are ready to awaken. Ingels gazed at the cutting; the sounds of the newspaper surged against his ears like blood. Suddenly he thrust back his chair and ran upstairs, to the morgue of the *Herald*.

Beneath the ceiling pressed low by the roof, a fluorescent tube fluttered and buzzed. Ingels hugged the bound newspapers to his chest, each volume an armful, and hefted them to a table, where they puffed out dust. 1900 was the first that came to hand. The streets would have been gas-lit then. Dust trickled into his nostrils and frowned over him, the phone next to Hilary was mute, his television review plucked at his mind, anxious to be rewritten. Scanning and blinking, he tried to shake them off with his doubts.

But it didn't take him long, though his gaze was tired of ranging up and down, up and down, by the time he saw the headline:

ATTEMPTED THEFT AT 'THE VARIETY'

TRADESMEN IN THE DOCK

Francis Wareing, a draper pursuing his trade in Brichester, Donald Norden, a butcher [and so on, Ingels snarled, sweeping past impatiently] were charged before the Brichester stipendiary magistrates with forcibly entering 'The Variety' theatre, on Fieldview, in attempted commission of robbery. Mr Radcliffe, the owner and manager of this establishment

It looked good, Ingels thought wearily, abandoning the report, tearing onward. But two issues later the sequel's headline stopped him short:

ACCUSATION AND COUNTER-ACCUSATION IN COURT. A BLASPHEMOUS CULT REVEALED

And there it was, halfway down the column:

Examined by Mr Kirby for the prosecution, Mr Radcliffe affirmed that he had been busily engaged in preparing his accounts when, overhearing sounds of stealth outside his office, he summoned his courage and ventured forth. In the auditorium he beheld several men

Get on with it, Ingels urged, and saw that there had been impatience in the court too:

Mr Radcliffe's narrative was rudely interrupted by Wareing, who accused him of having let a room in his theatre to the accused four. This privilege having been summarily withdrawn, Wareing alleged, the four had entered the building in a bid to reclaim such possessions as were rightfully theirs. He pursued: 'Mr Radcliffe is aware of this. He has been one of our number for years, and still would be, if he had the courage.'

Mr Radcliffe replied: "That is a wicked untruth. However, I am not surprised by the depths of your iniquity. I have evidence of it here.'

So saying, he produced for the Court's inspection a notebook containing, as he said, matter of a blasphemous and sacrilegious nature. This which he had found beneath a seat in his theatre, he indicated to be the prize sought by the unsuccessful robbers. The

book, which Mr Radcliffe described as 'the journal of a cult dedicated to preparing themselves for a blasphemous travesty of the Second coming,' was handed to Mr Poole, the magistrate, who swiftly pronounced it to conform to this description.

Mr Kirby adduced as evidence of the corruption which this cult wrought, its bringing of four respectable tradesmen to the state of common robbers. Had they not felt the shame of the beliefs they professed, he continued, they had but to petition Mr Radcliffe for the return of their mislaid property.

But what beliefs? Ingels demanded. He riffled onward, crumbling yellow fragments from the pages. The tube buzzed like a bright trapped insect. He almost missed the page.

FOILED ROBBERS AT 'THE VARIETY'

FIFTH MAN YIELDS HIMSELF TO JUSTICE

What fifth man? Ingels searched:

Mr Poole condemned the cult of which the accused were adherents as conclusive proof of the iniquity of those religions which presume to rival Christianity. He described the cult as 'unworthy of the lowest breed of mulatto.'

At this juncture a commotion ensued, as a man entered precipitately and begged leave to address the Court. Some few minutes later Mr Radcliffe also entered, wearing a resolute expression. When he saw the latecomer, however, he appeared to relinquish his purpose, and took a place in the gallery. The man, meanwhile, sought to throw himself on the Court's mercy, declaring himself to be the fifth of the robbers. He had been prompted to confess, he affirmed, by a sense of his injustice in allowing his friends to take full blame. His name, he said, was Joseph Ingels.

Who had received a lighter sentence in acknowledgement of his gesture, Ingels saw in a blur at the foot of the column. He hardly noticed. He was still staring at his grandfather's name.

'Nice of you to come,' his father said ambiguously. They'd finished decorating, Ingels saw; the flowers on the hall wallpaper had grown and turned bright orange. But the light was still dim, and the walls settled about

his eyes like night around a feeble lamp. Next to the coat-rack he saw the mirror in which he'd made sure of himself before teenage dates, the crack in one corner where he'd driven his fist, caged by fury and by their incomprehension of his adolescent restlessness. An ugly socket of plaster gaped through the wallpaper next to the supporting nail's less treacherous home. 'I could have hung the mirror for you,' Ingels said, not meaning to disparage his father, who frowned and said 'No need.' They went into the dining room, where his mother was setting out the best tablecloth and cutlery. 'Wash hands,' she said. 'Tea's nearly ready.'

They ate and talked. Ingels watched the conversation as if it were a pocket maze into which he had to slip a ball when the opening tilted towards him. 'How's your girlfriend?' his mother said. Don't you know her name? Ingels didn't say. 'Fine,' he said. They didn't mention Hilary again. His mother produced infant photographs of him they'd discovered in the sideboard drawer. 'You were a lovely little boy,' she said. 'Speaking of memories,' Ingels said, 'do you remember the old Variety theatre?'

His father was moving his shirt along the fireguard to give himself a glimpse of the fire, his back to Ingels. 'The old Variety,' his mother said. 'We wanted to take you to a pantomime there once. But,' she glanced at her husband's back, 'when your father got there all the tickets were sold. Then there was the Gaiety,' and she produced a list of theatres and anecdotes.

Ingels sat opposite his father, whose pipe-smoke was pouring up the chimney. 'I was looking through our old newspapers,' he said, 'I came across a case that involved the Variety.'

'Don't you ever work at that paper?' his father said.

'This was research. It seems there was a robbery at the theatre. Before you were born, it was, but I wonder if you remember hearing about it.'

'Now, we aren't all as clever as you,' his mother said. 'We don't remember what we heard in our cradle.'

Ingels laughed, tightening inside; the opening was turning away from him. 'You might have heard about it when you were older,' he told his father. 'Your father was involved.'

'No,' his father said. 'He was not.'

'He was in the paper.'

'His name was,' his father said, facing Ingels with a blank stare in his eyes. 'It was another man. Your grandfather took years to live that down. The newspapers wouldn't publish an apology or say it wasn't him. And you wonder why we didn't want you to work for a paper. You wouldn't be a decent shopkeeper, you let our shop go out of the family, and now here you are, raking up old dirt and lies. That's what you chose for yourself.'

'I didn't mean to be offensive,' Ingels said, holding himself down. 'But it was an interesting case, that's all. I'm going to follow it up tomorrow, at the theatre.'

'If you go there you'll be rubbing our name in the dirt. Don't bother coming here again.'

'Now hold on,' Ingels said. 'If your father wasn't involved you can't very well mean that. My God,' he cried, flooded with a memory, 'you do know something! You told me about it once, when I was a child! I'd just started dreaming and you told it to me so I wouldn't be frightened, to show me you had these dreams too. You were in a room with a telescope, waiting to see something. You told me because I'd dreamed it too! That's the second time I've had that dream! It's the room at the Variety, it has to be!'

'I don't know what you mean,' his father said. 'I never dreamed that.'

'You told me you had.'

'I must have told you that to calm you down. Go on, say I shouldn't have lied to you. It must have been for your own good.'

He'd blanked out his eyes with an unblinking stare. Ingels gazed at him and knew at once there was more behind the blank than the lie about his childhood. 'You've been dreaming again,' he said. 'You've been having the dream I had last night, I know you have. And I think you know what it means.'

The stare shifted almost imperceptibly, then returned strengthened. 'What do you know?' his father said. 'You live in the same town as us and visit us once a week, if that. Yet you know I've been dreaming? Sometimes we wonder if you even know we're here!'

'I know. I'm sorry,' Ingels said. 'But these dreams—you used to have them. The ones we used to share, remember?'

'We shared everything when you were a little boy. But that's over,' his father said. 'Dreams and all.'

'That's nothing to do with it!' Ingels shouted. 'You still have the ability! I know you must have been having these dreams! It's been in your eyes for months!' He trailed off, trying to remember whether that was true. He turned to his mother, pleading. 'Hasn't he been dreaming?'

'What do I know about it?' she said. 'It's nothing to do with me.' She was clearing the table in the dim rationed light beyond the fire, not looking at either of them. Suddenly Ingels saw her as he never had before: bewildered by her husband's dreams and intuitions, further excluded from the disturbingly incomprehensible bond between him and her son. All at once Ingels knew why he'd always felt she had been happy to see him leave home: it was only then that she'd been able to start reclaiming her husband. He took his coat from the hall and looked into the dining-room. They hadn't moved: his father was staring at the fire, his mother at the table.

'I'll see you,' he said, but the only sound was the crinkling of the fire as it crumbled, breaking open pinkish embers.

IV

He watched television. Movement of light and colours, forming shapes. Outside the window the sky drew his gaze, stretched taut, heavily imminent as thunder. He wrote words.

Later, he was sailing through enormous darkness; glinting globes turned slowly around him, one wearing an attenuated band of light; ahead, the darkness was scattered with dust and chunks of rock. A piece of metal was circling him like a timid needle, poking towards him, now spitting flame and swinging away. He felt a contempt so profound it was simply vast indifference. He closed his eyes as he might have blinked away a speck of dust.

In the morning he wrote his review at the flat. He knew he wouldn't be able to bear the teeming aisles for long. Blindly shouldering his way across the floor, he found Bert. He had to gaze at him for a minute or so; he couldn't remember immediately what he should look like. "That rewrite you did on the TV review wasn't your best,' Bert said. 'Ah well,' Ingels said, snatching

his copy of last night's *Herald* automatically from his desk, and hurried for the door.

He'd nearly reached it when he heard the news editor shouting into the telephone. 'But it can't affect Saturn and Jupiter! I mean, it can't change its mass, can it? ... I'm sorry, sir. Obviously I didn't mean to imply I knew more about your field than you. But is it possible for its mass to change? ... What, trajectory as well?' Ingels grinned at the crowd around the editor's desk, at their rapt expressions. They'd be more rapt when he returned. He strode out.

Through the writhing crowds, up the steps, into a vista of beds and dressing-tables like a street of cramped bedrooms whose walls had been tricked away. 'Can I speak to the manager, please,' he said to the man who stepped forward. '*Brichester Herald*.'

The manager was a young man in a pale streamlined suit, longish clipped hair, a smile which he held forward as if for inspection. 'I'm following a story,' Ingels said, displaying his press card. 'It seems that when your warehouse was a theatre a room was leased to an astronomical group. We think their records are still here, and if they can be found they're of enormous historical interest.'

'That's interesting,' the manager said. 'Where are they supposed to be?'

'In a room at the top of the building somewhere.'

'I'd like to help, of course.' Four men passed, carrying pieces of a dismembered bed to a van. 'There were some offices at the top of the building once, I believe. But we don't use them now, they're boarded up. It would be a good deal of trouble to open them now. If you'd phoned I might have been able to free some men.'

'I've been out of town,' Ingels said, improvising hastily now his plans were going awry. 'Found this story on my desk when I got back. I tried to phone earlier but couldn't get through. Must be a tribute to the business you're doing.' An old man, one of the loaders, was sitting on a chair nearby, listening; Ingels wished he would move, he couldn't bear an audience as well. "These records really would be important,' he said wildly. 'Great historical value.'

'In any case I can't think they'd still be here. If they were in one of the top rooms they would have been cleared out long ago.'

'I think you're a bit wrong there,' the old man said from his chair.

'Have you nothing to do?' the manager demanded.

'We've done loading,' the man said. 'Driver's not been here yet. Mother's sick. It's not for me to say you're wrong, but I remember when they were mending the roof after the war. Men who were doing it said they could see a room full of books, they looked like, all covered up. But we couldn't find it from down here and nobody wanted to break their necks trying to get in from the roof. Must be there still, though.'

"That has to be the one,' Ingels said. 'Whereabouts was it?'

'Round about there,' the old man said, pointing above a Scandinavian four-poster. 'Behind one of the offices, we used to reckon.'

'Could you help find it?' Ingels said. 'Maybe your workmates could give you a hand while they're waiting. That's of course if this gentleman doesn't mind. We'd make a point of your cooperation,' he told the manager. 'Might even be able to give you a special advertising rate, if you wanted to run an ad on that day.'

The five of them climbed a rusty spiral staircase, tastefully screened by a partition, to the first floor. The manager, still frowning, had left one loader watching for the driver. 'Call us as soon as he comes,' he said. 'Whatever the reason, time lost loses money.' Across the first floor, which was a maze of crated and cartoned furniture, Ingels glimpsed reminiscences of his dream: the outline of theatre boxes in the walls, almost erased by bricks; a hook that had supported a chandelier. They seemed to protrude from the mundane, beckoning him on.

The staircase continued upward, more rustily. 'I'll go first,' the manager said, taking the flashlight one of the loaders had brought. 'We don't want accidents,' and his legs drew up like a tail through a trapdoor. They heard him stamping about, challenging the floor. 'All right,' he called, and Ingels thrust his face through drifting dust into a bare plank corridor.

'Here, you said?' the manager asked the old man, pointing to some of the boards that formed a wall. 'That's it,' the old man said, already ripping out nails with his hammer, aided by his workmates. A door peeked dully through. Ingels felt a smile wrenching at his face. He controlled himself. Wait until they've gone.

As soon as they'd prised open the office door he ran forward. A glum green room, a ruined desk in whose splintered innards squatted a dust-furred

typewriter. 'I'm afraid it's as I thought,' the manager said. 'There's no way through. You can't expect us to knock down a wall, obviously. Not without a good deal of consultation.'

'But there must have been an entrance,' Ingels said. 'Beyond this other wall. It must have been sealed up before you got the building. Surely we can look for it.'

'You won't have to,' the old man said. He was kicking at the wall nearest the supposed location of the room. Plaster crumbled along a crack, then they heard the shifting of brick. "Thought as much,' he said. 'The war did this, shook the building. The boards are all right but the mortar's done for.' He kicked again and whipped back his foot. He'd dislodged two bricks, and at once part of the wall collapsed, leaving an opening four feet high.

"That'll be enough!' the manager said. Ingels was stooping, peering through the dust-curtained gap. Bare boards, rafters and slates above, what must be bookcases draped with cloth around the walls, something in the centre of the room wholly covered by a frame hung with heavy material, perhaps velvet. Dust crawled on his hot face, prickling like fever. 'If the wall would have collapsed anyway it's a good job you were here when it did,' he told the manager. 'Now it's done I'm sure you won't object if I have a look around. If I'm injured I promise not to claim. I'll sign a waiver if you like.'

'I think you'd better,' the manager said, and waited while Ingels struggled with his briefcase, last night's *Herald*, a pen and sheet from his notebook, brushing at his eyebrows where dust and sweat had become a trickle of mud, rubbing his trembling fingers together to clean them. The men had clambered over the heap of bricks and were lifting the velvety frame. Beneath it was a reflector telescope almost a foot long, mounted on a high sturdy stand. One of the men bent to the eyepiece, touching the focus. 'Don't!' Ingels screamed. "The setting may be extremely important,' he explained, trying to laugh.

The manager was peering at him. 'What did you say you do at the *Herald?'* he said.

'Astronomy correspondent,' Ingels said, immediately dreading that the man might read the paper regularly. 'I don't get too much work,' he blundered on. "This is a scoop. If I could I'd like to spend a few hours looking at the books.'

He heard them descending the spiral staircase. Squirm away, he thought. He lifted the covers from the bookcases gingerly, anxious to keep dust away from the telescope, as the velvety cover had for decades. Suddenly he hurried back to the corridor. Its walls bobbed about him as the flashlight swung. He selected a plank and hefting it over the bricks, poked it at the rafters above the telescope, shielding the latter with his arm. After a minute the slate above slid away, and a moment later he heard a distant crash.

He squatted down to look through the eyepiece. No doubt a chair had been provided once. All he could see was a blurred twilit sky. Soon be night, he thought, and turned the flashlight on the books. He remembered the light from the oil-lamp lapping at his feet in the dream.

Much of the material was devoted to astronomy. As many of the books and charts were astrological, he found, some in Oriental script. But there were others, on shelves in the corner furthest from the sealed-off door: *The Story of Atlantis and the Lost Lemuria, Image du Monde*, *Liber Investigationis*, *Revelations of Glaaki*. There were nine volumes of the last. He pulled them out, curious, and dust rose about his face like clouds of sleep.

Voices trickled tinnily up the staircase, selling beds. In the close room dimmed by the dust that crowded at the hole in the roof, towards which the telescope patiently gazed, Ingels felt as if he were sinking back into his dream. Cracked fragments of the pages clung beneath his nails. He read on like an incantation, like voices muttering in sleep, melting into another style, jerking clumsily into another. Sketches and paintings were tipped into the books, some childishly crude, some startlingly detailed: M'nagalah, a tentacled mass of what looked like bloated raw entrails and eyes; Glaaki, a half-submerged spongy face peering stalk-eyed from a lake; R'lyeh, an island city towering triumphant above the sea, a vast door ajar. This he recognised, calmly accepting the information. He felt now as if he could never have had reason to doubt his dream.

The early winter night had blocked up the hole in the roof. Ingels stooped to the eyepiece again. Now there was only darkness through the telescope. It felt blurred by distance; he felt the distance drawing him vertiginously down the tube of darkness, out into a boundless emptiness no amount of matter could fill. Not yet, he thought, withdrawing swiftly. Soon.

Someone was staring at him. A girl. She was frowning up at the hole in the roof. A saleswoman. 'We're closing soon,' she said.

'All right,' Ingels said, returning to the book, lying face upward in the splayed light. It had settled into a more comfortable position, revealing a new page to him, and an underlined phrase: 'when the stars are right.' He stared at it, trying to connect. It should mean something. The dim books hemmed him in. He shook his head and turned the pages swiftly, searching for underlining. Here it was repeated in the next volume, no, augmented: 'when the stars are right again.' He glanced sharply at the insistent gap of night above him. In a minute, he snarled. Here was a whole passage underlined:

'Though the universe may feign the semblance of fickleness, its soul has always known its masters. The sleep of its masters is but the largest cycle of all life, for as the defiance and forgetfulness of winter is rendered vain by summer, so the defiance and forgetfulness of man, and of those others who have assumed stewardship, shall be cast aside by the reawakened masters. When these hibernal times are over, and the time for reawakening is near, the universe itself shall send forth the Harbinger and Maker, Ghroth. Who shall urge the stars and worlds to rightness. Who shall raise the sleeping masters from their burrows and drowned tombs; who shall raise the tombs themselves. Who shall be attentive to those worlds where worshippers presume themselves stewards. Who shall bring those worlds under sway, until all acknowledge their presumption, and bow down.'

Ghroth, Ingels thought, gazing up at the gap in the roof. They even had a name for it then, despite the superstitious language. Not that that was so surprising, he thought. Man used to look upon comets that way, this is the same sort of thing. An omen that becomes almost a god.

But an omen of what? he thought suddenly. What exactly was supposed to happen when the stars were right again? He knelt in the dust and flurried through the books. No more underlining. He rushed back to the telescope. His thighs twinged as he squatted. Something had entered the field of view.

It was the outer edge of the wandering planet, creeping into the telescope's field. As it came it blurred, occasionally sharpening almost into focus for a moment. Ingels felt as if the void were making sudden feeble snatches at him. Now the planet was only a spreading reddish smudge. He reached for the focus, altering it minutely. 'We're closing now,' said the manager behind him.

'I won't be long,' Ingels said, feeling the focus sharpen, sharpen—

'We're waiting to close the doors,' the manager said. 'And I'm afraid I'm in a hurry.'

'Not long!' Ingels screamed, tearing his gaze from the eyepiece to glare.

When the man had gone Ingels switched off the flashlight. Now he could see nothing but the tiny dim gap in the roof. He let the room settle on his eyes. At last he made out the immobile uplifted telescope. He groped towards it and squatted down.

As soon as he touched the eyepiece the night rushed through the telescope and clutched him. He was sailing through the void, yet he was motionless; everything moved with him. Through the vast silence he heard the ring of a lifted telephone, a voice saying 'Give me the chief editor of the *Herald*, please,' back there across the void. He could hear the pale grubs squeaking tinnily, back all that way. He remembered the way they moved, soft, uncarapaced. Before him, suspended in the dark and facing him, was Ghroth.

It was red as rust, featureless except for bulbous protrusions like hills. Except that of course they weren't hills if he could see them at that distance; they must be immense. A rusty globe covered with lumps, then. That was all, but that couldn't explain why he felt as if the whole of him were magnetised to it through his eyes. It seemed to hang ponderously, communicating a thunderous sense of imminence, of power. But that was just its unfamiliarity, Ingels thought, struggling against the suction of boundless space; just the sense of its intrusion. It's only a planet, after all. Pain was blazing along his thighs. Just a red warty globe.

Then it moved.

Ingels was trying to remember how to move his body to get his face away from the eyepiece; he was throwing his weight against the telescope mounting to sweep away what he could see. It was blurring, that was it, although it was a cold windless day air movements must be causing the image to blur, the surface of a planet doesn't move, it's only a planet, the surface of a planet doesn't crack, it doesn't roll back like that, it doesn't peel back for thousands of miles so you can see what's underneath, pale and glistening. When he tried to scream air whooped into his lungs as if space had exploded a vacuum within him.

He'd tripped over the bricks, fallen agonisingly down the stairs, smashed the manager out of the way with his shoulder and was at the *Herald* building before he knew that was where he intended to go. He couldn't speak, only make the whooping sound as he sucked in air; he threw his briefcase and last night's paper on his desk and sat there clutching himself, shaking. The floor seemed to have been in turmoil before he arrived, but they were crowding around him, asking him impatiently what was wrong.

But he was staring at the headline in his last night's newspaper: SURFACE ACTIVITY ON WANDERER 'MORE APPARENT THAN REAL' SAY SCIENTISTS. Photographs of the planet from the space-probe: one showing an area like a great round pale glistening sea, the next circuit recording only mountains and rock plains. 'Don't you see?' Ingels shouted at Bert among the packed faces. 'It closed its eye when it saw us coming!'

Hilary came at once when they telephoned her, and took Ingels back to her flat. But he wouldn't sleep, laughed at the doctor and the tranquillizers, though he swallowed the tablets indifferently enough. Hilary unplugged the television, went out as little as possible, bought no newspapers, threw away her contributor's copies unopened, talked to him while she worked, stroked him soothingly, slept with him. Neither of them felt the earth begin to shift.

Run Through

"*Run Through* was based on a dream of seeing a figure repeatedly running towards me, and perhaps the business with the key derives from my own obsessive behaviour: I often have to check several times that I've locked doors or switched off electricity. Writing the story doesn't seem to have helped me stop myself, but the important issue is whether it's a good story."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

Written in: 1974
First published in *Star Book of Horror No. 1*, 1975
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The figure was there again. Glancing up the hill as he searched for the key, Blair could just make it out framed in one of the cottage's small window-panes, a figure standing at the edge of the trees. Never mind, he ordered himself, looking beneath the table for the key. Never mind the key, he snarled, I'm here to write a story, I should be trying to retrieve the plot. But he'd been doing so all day, without success. That was why he had walked up the hill.

He'd been tramping back and forth through the cottage all morning, now and then forcing himself to sit at the table and scribble a page which he would type and at once crumple up. Eventually, feeling as if the low beams were resting all their weight on his head, he went outside. Fields of grass dazzled him, pressing perspectiveless against his eyes. The hint of a breeze touched him, the line of trees on the horizon moved uneasily in their sleep. He began to walk.

Even then he might not have walked up the hill if he hadn't remembered what the landlord of the cottage had said: "Are you fond of trees?" "No, not especially," Blair had admitted. "When I'm writing a book I don't notice much outside it." "Ah, well," and the landlord had clearly been stumbling, "I was only going to say there's a forest half a mile away that's worth seeing." Rather than that senile clump up the hill, Blair had thought, walking. Why would he have bothered to divert me from going up there? Let's go and see.

Perhaps because it was blighted, he'd thought five minutes later. The branches of the oaks which encircled the hill about halfway up were thickly

intertwined overhead like tangled antlers; the tops of the trunks looked crumpled, malformed. The bark was split and peeling, and beneath it squirmed white glistening grubs. Ah, rural charm, Blair thought. Nevertheless he'd slipped gingerly between the trees. There had to be more to the wood, surely.

No, the key won't be in those drawers, I've never opened them, he thought remembering distractedly that darkness had settled over him, and dimness. The next highest ring of oaks stretched its branches toward the first, squeezing out all but trickles of daylight, which lay stranded on the muddy grass. Blair had felt cut off from the summer day, penned in with the dim moist stillness. When he'd looked back the spaces between the outer trees were shrunken, darkening even the glimpses of bright fields beyond. He'd pushed between the slippery trunks of the inner ring, wondering why so carefully grown a wood should have been neglected. There must be a story here.

He'd found himself almost at the crown of the hill. Above him stood an ingrown clump of oaks, their dank-leaved branches resting on one another's trunks like the wings of gossipping bats. The cramped glade seemed as dim as the bottom of a muddy pool. He'd turned, trying to use the sunlight beyond the rings of trees. Gradually his eyes had grasped the light, coaxing details from within silhouettes. And suddenly he'd seen a face staring at him from a trunk.

He'd managed not to cry out during the moments it took him to see what it was: a hollow-eyed face carved from the trees. Great square stern faces thrust forward from the wood of all the trees that made up the inner ring. It was as if the trees still stood guard, though dead. Stood guard on what? Let's see, quickly. This wasn't helping his story.

The key isn't up the hill, he thought angrily, forcing his gaze away from the window, searching. As he'd moved toward the trees at the top of the hill a breeze had shuddered through the glade. As he'd turned toward the sound he'd glimpsed an eye opening in one of the faces. Urging himself closer, he'd seen that it was a bird within a hollow socket—but the bird hadn't moved as he approached. It was decomposed, almost indistinguishable from the splinters that transfixed it.

He'd made himself go back up to the central huddle of trees. When he'd managed to wrench apart some of the lower branches he had been both

relieved and disappointed. Beneath the creaking canopy of branches was a pit, too dark for him to see within.

He'd stood there for minutes, giving his eyes time to adjust, but still he could see nothing except darkness. Cold air seemed to weigh him down like gathering ice. He'd leaned forward into the pit, peering intently, leaning on branches which creaked and suddenly gave way. The open throat of the pit had gaped beneath him. As he'd thrown himself back he had heard, deep in the pit, a bubbling sound like someone chuckling with a mouthful of mud, growing louder or rising toward him.

Then there had been hysterical confusion: battering his way out of the wood and running down the hill, heat clinging to his back, the blue sky cupped oppressively about him; then, for no reason he could grasp, desperately searching the cottage for the key to the outside door. As he was still doing, until he checked himself furiously. He didn't need the key to lock the door from the inside. Why had he begun searching?

If he'd known to begin with, the memory was confused now with the other bewilderments of the day. He had been ranging about the small low rooms when he'd noticed that one of the trees up the hill looked like a figure poised to rush toward him. He'd shrugged off the impression. Enough distractions. The key, for God's sake, the key.

When he'd grown so exhausted he found himself dashing from room to room for no reason at all, his brain feeling crushed and senseless, he made himself stop. What was he looking for? The key. Why? Even then, apparently, he hadn't known. I can see why the landlord tried to steer me away from that wood, he'd thought. Did my mind no good at all. He glanced through the window at the hill, and shrank back.

As soon as he'd looked at the hill a figure had left the trees and come speeding toward him, so fast that he'd taken seconds to react and then had flinched away, as if from a missile. He looked again. There was nothing except the dead wood, trembling with heat haze. The haze must have conjured up the figure. The key. Must find the key. I'll need it. When I have to go out, that's when.

The sky had grown sullen, thunderous, an unbroken grey slab. Blair had stared at his manuscript on the table. The key can't be under there. Must get back to writing. First find the key.

The trees on the hill had caught a last lurid glare of sunlight before they sank back into the dullness. The figure had sprung forward from the smudged mass and hurtled toward Blair. There was no haze now. For God's sake let's see what it is. But his gaze had already flinched away, and when he'd glanced back there was no figure. It's this dim light, he'd thought. Just find the key. It'll ease my mind. I'm going round and round. I can't get at my story.

And he was still looped up in the distractions of his memory. The overcast had merged with twilight now; darkness gathered like unventilated smoke beneath the low beams. Blair made to switch on the light to help him search for the key. I don't need the key. Leave the light off and let's see what this is up the hill.

He gazed through the tiny pane. The hill formed slowly from the twilight, the trees were gouges of deeper darkness upon it. The place where he'd seemed to see the figure was at the opening closest to him in the outer ring of trees: there. And there it was, hurtling out of the twilight at him, rushing down the hill at a speed that clutched him helpless. The key, his mind cried, dragging him away from the window, the key!

Suddenly he realised that every time he had been on the point of seeing the figure as more than an approaching blur, his mind had recoiled, urging him away on any pretext it could find. Not this time, he thought, forcing it back by the scruff of his neck. Maybe if I get to the end of this story I can get on with writing my own.

Slowly his gaze again took hold of the dim forms on the hill. The figure had to wait until he could see it, he realised intuitively. Now he could, and now it was dashing down the hill at him, swelling up in his gaze as terror grew in his mind, as if the figure were a juggernaut that would crush him utterly. But he held his agonised gaze unwavering, and almost at the last moment the figure turned aside. He glimpsed its head, like a bulb squeezed white by fear. Then it was at the outside door.

The door didn't move, but Blair knew that the figure was scrabbling at the handle. It can't get in, he thought numbly. It hasn't got the key. And then he knew.

Even when it came to the window, thudding its hands against the tiny panes, he struggled not to be sure. Its face was pressed against the panes like white putty, leaving smears of panic. It slid snail-like across the panes,

searching for the catch inside the window, trying with its thumping hands to break a pane to reach it. Though the face was squashed out of shape he could see it all too clearly. It was his own.

He tried to scream, but already he was outside, scrabbling in his pockets for the key, tearing at the grass and clods of earth for a rock to break the pane. It was hours ago again, and too late. Behind him he could hear the huge unhurried tread and bubbling chuckle that had followed him from the hill.

The Sustenance Of Hoak

"The first of four sword-and-sorcery stories featuring Ryre the warrior."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1974
First published in *Swords Against Darkness*, 1977
Also published in: *Far Away And Never*

I

"If we ever reach the treasure," Ryre said with bitter humour, "we'll have earned it and twice again."

Glode's mouth opened, but nothing emerged except a thread of blood. He was trying to raise himself against the tree where Ryre had propped him; his fists crushed the earth, his arms trembled like trees, their thick veins swelled. "Keep down," Ryre said as a flight of arrows tore through the leaves overhead. "I'll get you in there if I have to stick the lot of them on their own arrows," he said, gazing narrow-eyed.

And it might come to that, he thought, crawling through the undergrowth. Heat throbbed through the forest like blood, slow and viscous. He remembered how they'd decided to come to Hoak.

Like most of the mercenaries who'd helped win the war against the pirates on the Sea of Shouting Islands, they had been drinking their pay and complaining of its meagreness when talk had turned to the treasure of Hoak. The treasure was buried beneath the town; a now long-lost map showing its location had been found attached to the leg of a migrating bird; the people of Hoak (someone had said, trying to outshout jeers) were willing to give the treasure to whoever found it; nobody who had sought it had returned. Silence followed that, quickly broken by bantering. Ryre and Glode had jeered with the rest, but later they'd agreed that the rumours felt more like the truth than did most tales of treasure. And they knew that unless they moved on they would have to vow allegiance to the local lords, or fight those of their companions who had done so. As for the vanished seekers—they must have failed and been too ashamed to return empty-handed. Ryre and Glode had smashed their wine-mugs in the street below the inn,

splashing the boots of a cursing sailor, and had made their way to the wharves. Next day they had left the continent of Drobond for Thabbe.

Ryre was at the edge of the forest now, two hundred yards from the gate of Hoak. The trees around him were scraggy; the forest must once have been cut further back from the town. Peering across the parched grass, he saw that the gate beneath the archers had been patched with planks, leaving gaps. The town wall was of growing trees, the gaps plugged with logs. His lips pulled back thinly. It would be enough.

Once on Thabbe they'd bought steeds at the port of Zizir. The trader had smiled sadly on hearing where they were bound, but had told them the route readily enough. They had been six days into the forest that covers half of Thabbe, and less than a day from Hoak, when in a long avenue bandits had dropped like ripe fruit from the trees. Ryre and Glode had swerved between them, slashing them as they fell. The bandits must have been used to slower and meeker prey. But some had blowpipes as well as knives; one dart had spilled the last of the water while another, finding a chink in the leaves of Glode's armour, had lodged deep in his guts. Since then he had ridden doubled over, his silence like a cry in Ryre's ears.

He was still propped against the tree, sitting bent low over his stomach, his fist clenched white around a fistful of of earth. "I can break the gate," Ryre said, collecting dry twigs and grass and tying them in a bun at the head of a lopped-off branch. He untied their steeds and brought Glode's to him. "Bid him farewell," Ryre said. "He will help save you."

At the edge of the forest he lit the tip of the firebrand with a flint from the pouch at his belt, then slapped Glode's steed out into the open. At once the arrows responded. The few he had time to watch looked too high for an attack, more like a warning. Certainly he thought it was an inexpert bowshot that spiked the animal's neck.

But he was riding, lying low behind his own steed's broad head. Air streamed smarting over his eyes; the brand dwindled into roaring fire at his shoulder. He was squeezing more speed from his mount with his thighs, urging the implacably distant gate closer as the archers swung toward him; he felt the grass beneath his steed's pads hindering him like water. He was there, and the song of the bowstrings had failed. He plunged his blazing club into the grate.

Here his plan was weakest. His steed was rearing now that the fire which had driven it had sprung before its face, dilating furiously. Above him he heard moving stone, grunts of exertion. During the war against the pirates he'd learned how to coax his steed through fire, but this was another steed. *Hakkthu*, he swore between defiant blasphemy and plea, and covered his beast's eyes with his hands, its ears with his forearms.

It quieted uneasily. Overhead he heard the umistakable sound of heavy stone poised on wood. Then, as a wave of heat surged out from the collapsing gate, Ryre's steed flinched back stumbling, yards clear of the protection of the wall.

He heard the first stones fall. It took him a moment to realise they'd fallen within the gate. The defenders didn't want to kill him, only to keep him out. Why? He grinned and shrugged, snarling.

The gate sagged on the dropped stones with a shout of flame. The defenders were scrambling down from scorching branches. One of them was shouting, directing the others to fetch water from a well, to throw earth on the fire, to bring axes; now he was monkey-climbing down a trunk.

He saw Ryre coming at him through the frame of fire: all six and a half feet of him, reflected fire streaming over the predator's mane that widened in a V from his shaved crown to his shoulders, fire pouring down his long grimly grinning face and over his flexed muscles, tensed for an easy spring. The man twisted, his feet found a branch from which to launch him upward again. Ryre chopped the branch from beneath him and catching him as he fell, stunned him with his sword-hilt.

"Move again, any of you," Ryre shouted, "and I'll knock you down with his head." They were a sorry-looking lot, even the hostage: grimy, dull-faced, ragged. Their shuffling approach had been disordered, tentative. Behind him another tree snatched the fire, cackling. Their faces flickered like embers as they watched him, their gazes plucked fretfully at the fire; shovelfuls of earth drooped from their hands, narrow-necked vessels of water drained.

"My friend is injured," he shouted above the chorus of fire. "Have your best healer ready for him. I shall bring him in now. This man stays with me until my friend is healed. If I've reason even to suspect any of you, we'll see if this man can walk while he's holding his guts from tripping him up."

The growing crowd, fifty or so of them now, was milling as if turned up from beneath a stone. "We'll help," a voice said just audibly within the mass; then, as if drawing strength from its concealment, more loudly: "We promise. Don't take him out."

"He stays with me until my friend is well," Ryre shouted.

They were turning uneasily toward someone in the narrow dry earth street between the low square houses: their leader, Ryre thought—then saw it wasn't a man at all. It was a stump of wood planted in the street, shaped near the top into a fat mouthless face; instead of ears, limp-looking branches hung. The black wood looked wet and was patched with white, as if stretched pale; specks of reflected fire burned in the wide whitish stare. Their god, no doubt.

"Please, not out," someone was muttering; others joined in. "Please."

Ryre had never seen such insularity, not even on the Sea of Shouting Islands. "I will protect him from anything out there," he shouted, riding toward the leap through the blazing gap. "Keep your word and he is safe. If I think you haven't," (their paling faces showed he had found the words to command them) "I'll leave him out there."

Glode was lying beside the tree. His lips were so pale that Ryre couldn't distinguish the slit between them from their trailing threads of blood. He didn't move when Ryre supported his head. Ryre frowned; he had counted on Glode's being conscious and able to hold onto the hostage before him on Ryre's steed. He pondered, stroking the beast's neck. Heat sank thickly through the branches.

As he pondered, his hostage began to move. The man pushed at the beast's ribcage to raise himself. When he saw where he was, he started to flail his limbs and scream incoherently. He lay draped over the animal's spine, screaming and wriggling wildly, then he fell to the ground.

"Be quiet and listen." Ryre had to push the sword's point into the man's neck before he would stop thrashing about. "We are going back to Hoak now. You will ride this steed. You will carry my friend, who is injured. If you loosen your grip on him, or try to ride faster than I walk, I shall cut you down and leave you outside the wall."

Ryre had once seen one of the steeds set ablaze by the warriors of Gurj and sent screaming into enemy camps to cause injury and demoralisation: he

had seen its staring eyes, piteously rolling. He had hoped never to see such terror again, but it was here, in the eyes of the hostage. The man's arms gripped Glode and his entire body shook as if caked with ice; he gazed in supplication at the distant wall pacing closer, at the gap where men were chopping away the charred section of the wall. Glode's inert body trembled with him.

Ryre felt himself to be a stretched rein, holding the man back from utter reckless panic. His sword was out and ready; its point winked a warning beside his hostage. He curbed his mind from pondering the source of the man's terror. *Hakkthu*, he thought, *if I'm going to know I'll know without tempting it nearer*. Behind him he felt the hot bright forest and plain, silently poised.

The healer was waiting in the street. He'd brushed away dust from a space and laid planks there. He was an old nearly bald man, scrawny as if he'd melted himself down in losing a long fight; grey hair made a tidemark around his skull. "Put him there," he told Ryre indifferently.

"Haven't you a house of healing?" Ryre demanded.

"Outside is better." Townspeople were clambering exhausted down the singed trunks. Ryre prodded his panting hostage into lowering Glode from the steed.

"Help him, some of you. Now you get down, slowly. And you, hold my steed." As the hostage dismounted the others were still holding Glode's unconscious body. "Give him to your healer," Ryre said with tight control. *Hakkthu*, he thought, *one day they'll forget how to dung until someone tells them*.

"What's wrong with him?" the healer asked.

"A dart in the gut. Bandits attacked us, half a day from here."

Dust eddied around the restless crowd and crept toward Glode. "Keep still," the healer shouted. Ryre felt the beginnings of trust. What he'd taken for indifference in the healer wasn't the apathy that weighed down the watching faces, but harassed weariness. In the man's eyes alertness still glinted faintly.

Someone was murmuring at Ryre, as if in sleep: a large-boned man with a face like a square slab of rock that might once have looked chiselled but now was less weathered than moss-smoothed by beard, and slackly bland.

"That's who we thought you were," he was saying. "The bandits. They want our treasure. But you can't get at it from inside the town. We wish they'd take it. It's only trouble for us. We're happy without it. We try to keep the bandits out so they'll search outside and take it."

"What is this treasure?"

"Jewels," another voice said. "A cave full of jewels."

"And how is it reached?"

"There are tunnels," the slab-faced man said. "They're easy to find. We can tell you where."

"You're so anxious to keep people out you've convinced me there's something in here worth defending." Ryre turned his back, dismissing them all. The healer had parted the hard yet flexible leaves of Glode's armour, had lifted the shirt beneath and was probing Glode's stomach.

The crowd was fraying, wandering away; people plodded into the low houses. Ryre disliked the way windows were blocked with old wood. The kneeling hostage shifted gingerly beneath his sword. Ryre prodded him toward a house. "Knock the wood out of that window," he said.

The wood scattered clattering, and Ryre laughed grimly. The scene within seemed so typical of Hoak: a man lying on a plank bed in a bare room, drinking from a long-necked vessel, blinking timidly at the intrusion. Apart from the bed, and dust and tracked-in mud, there was nothing in the low-ceilinged room but a replica of the stumpy god from the street. About two feet high, it stood in a corner as if growing through the floorboards, its eyes closed in sleep. Ryre knew instinctively that nothing more sinister was happening behind the masked windows of the other houses.

A woman was carrying a vessel to the healer. Glode's head turned tottering toward the vessel. "Give me drink," he said, his tongue protruding weakly, dry as a sand-burrower's tail. The healer shrugged sadly, and rose.

Glode took one gulp, Ryre's hand behind his head. Then he coughed the liquor into the dust, mixed with what might have been a stomachful of blood. He fell back, unconscious.

For a moment Ryre dreaded that the healer had never intended to drink. He sniffed at the mouth of the vessel: a sharp vinous smell. The healer and the remnants of the crowd were watching him. He put the mouth to his lips.

He was tipping the vessel against his tongue-stopped lips, watching for their reaction, when the hostage knocked the vessel from his hands. He scrabbled after it on all fours, seized it and began to gulp, his throat working like a climber's hand on a parting rope. By the time Ryre had bullied it from him he knew it couldn't be poisoned. His own throat was chafing and pleading, but he pointed his sword to Glode.

"The dart's lodged deep," the healer said. "It's in his stomach, too deep to get out. All he can do is rest. It may work itself out before he starves."

Ryre felt frustrated anger mass within him. He knew from battles that if the dart had lodged so, there was nothing they could do. He tipped the vessel, gulping thick liquor through his throat. A warmth rushed through him, tingling his fingertips.

The healer turned away; he looked disappointed, somehow betrayed. Let him thirst, Ryre thought savagely. His mouth was full of a meadish taste; light sparkled on slow drops of cloudy amber liquid spilling from the vessel's mouth. The squat houses and encircling trees, the dust and dancing ash, seemed to have snapped into a closer clarity, as if the light had hardened. "We need a room," he shouted, to halt the retreating crowd.

"We have one," a girl said. Like the rest she was dressed in shapeless rags, almost colourlessly browned by use and the sun; she was thin and stooped as if by an insistent gale. Only a trace of youth in her face, which was shaped like a starved heart, convinced Ryre she was younger than twenty. She stood beside the slab-faced man, no doubt her father. As she gazed at Ryre, he caught sight of a dull glint of desire.

The house was a dozen house fronts away up the street—more accurately, the trudged path. Each house was surrounded by twice its own area of earth, baked to a cracked crust, in which tufts of grass and weeds browned. Apart from the small procession behind which he was leading his steed, the hot flat blinded streets were deserted.

When they reached the house Ryre let the hostage go. If he needed to defend a room he could best do so without the hindrance of the man. He walked through the house, cursing loose boards, knocking the wood from the windows to admit light. Each room was the same: the plank bed, the sleeping god in the corner, the liquor-vessel, bareness. The first room, into which the sagging street door opened, was entirely bare.

Ryre chose the fourth room, which could be approached only through all the others. It could be a trap of sorts, but at least there was only one doorway to defend. He beckoned the bearers to lay Glode down, then gestured them out. He draped Glode's cloak and his own over his unconscious friend. He called for a bed to be brought for himself. He tethered his steed outside the window, and propped the wood he'd knocked down so that any attempt at entry through the window would send it clattering.

The girl, whose name was Yoce and whose father's was Vald, peered in while Ryre was eating some of the food his steed had carried. The second time, he held out a chunk of cheese to her. He'd seen no food or plates in the house. But she shook her head and went back into the next room. *She needn't think she'll come to me in the night*, Ryre thought, gazing anxiously at Glode. Later, in the twilight, he heard her sucking at her liquor-vessel.

Darkness muffled the houses. The dry ground breathed out thick heat. Ryre sat on the bed with his back against the door, gazing at the god in the corner.

Of everything he'd seen in Hoak he disliked that face most of all. It looked like the face a slow growth on a treetrunk might have: fat and somnolently sated. Beneath the eyes it swelled featurelessly, like a bladder. The branches hanging limply looked obscene, as if flaunting their impotence. It summed up Hoak. He couldn't truthfully believe he would be attacked during the night. He sipped at the liquor-vessel, pondering the contradictions of Hoak. Before him the mouthless face sank sleepily into the embrace of night.

II

It was late the next day when he awoke, and Glode was dead.

Glode's faded eyes stared into a glare of sunlight. His face was slack as melting fat. On his cheeks and beneath his head were the marks of a last bloody cough.

There was no mark of further violence, no culprit on whom Ryre could take revenge; he could only rage dully. Sweat had gathered within the leaves of his armour; they felt close and clammy, he felt closed in upon himself, his emotions muffled. He strained to mourn Glode. But as he gazed at the limp face his grief seemed dulled.

He grabbed the liquor-vessel. Glode would have a mercenary's mourning. Ryre laughed harshly, staring at the desiccated street. Sometimes an unwary passer-by would scoff at a mercenary's tears, and die for it; such deaths were a tribute to the mourned. Ryre hoped someone of Hoak would dare to scoff. He sucked the vessel, which someone had refilled.

He was still trying to drink grief into himself when footsteps sounded in the outer room. Vald and three other men appeared, peering warily; beside them Yoce gazed. Vald thrust the girl into the room. Ryre's nearness quickened her breath; her eyes were wide with awe of him. "They've come to bury your friend," she said too loudly, nervously.

Burial ought to be swift, in this heat. Ryre gestured brusquely to the men. They hefted Glode as if he were a heavy plank, and hurried him out; his sword lay on his chest. Ryre followed, gulping liquor to hasten his mourning. Yoce hung back, in the house.

He hurried after the bearers. Hakkthu, they were anxious to be done with the burying! Hot dust puffed up from their scurrying feet and settled over figures squatting beside the path. All the figures were blankly intent on their hands, which were whittling arrows. It was the only occupation Ryre had seen practiced here. Once, so the trader in Zizir had told him, Hoak had been renowned for the skill of its carvers.

None of the whittlers glanced at the burial-party. Ryre felt numb rage at their indifference, all the more because it seemed to have infected him: he stared at Glode, at the sword jogging on his friend's chest, and could feel nothing.

The town was infecting him. Everywhere he saw slumped apathy: in the parched streets, the senile houses, the whittlers like hollow jerking dummies draped with sacking. Even the well from which water had been drawn to douse the fire was used as a communal cloaca. Yet once, the trader had told him, Hoak had been a station on a trade route between the coast and the interior, until its people had grown sullenly hostile.

It must be the liquor that had brought apathy. Ryre had seen no other food or drink. He supposed it was brewed from the trees in the town walls—there seemed to be no other healthy growth. No wonder the people were dull, if liquor were their only food. He would drink no more of it once Glode was buried. He'd need all his wits to find the treasure.

The bearers stumbled rapidly onward. They had carried Glode almost half a mile; they were nearly at the centre of Hoak. Ahead Ryre saw a group of small figures scattered among the whittlers, dressed in torn knotted rags of larger clothes. He had to peer closely to tell they were children.

They were the only children he'd seen here—hardly three dozen of them. On their faces, which looked already pinched and old, apathy was set like identical masks. They sat or lay in the dust; one child stared flatly from a window. When their muddy eyes moved, it was always to a liquor-vessel standing near them. They drank mechanically. Beside a dull-eyed mother, Ryre saw an infant sucking at a vessel as though it were a breast.

Fury swelled in him; he trembled. Behind the child at the window he saw a stump and its sleepy contented face, the flaccid branches dangling. Perhaps all the drinking was a religious tribute to their self-satisfied god. He would storm into the house and lop off the mouthless head—

He checked himself. However deplorable they were, gods were something whose revenge one couldn't fight. But he smashed his own vessel to the ground.

Some of the children watched the swiftly dwindling stain; a few of the adults gave him a glance like a faint sad shrug. The bearers were trudging ahead indifferently. He stamped angrily in pursuit.

Above the roofs he saw a shiny dome, swaying closer in imitation of his stride. Here at the centre the houses were even more dilapidated. Among them he saw bare patches where houses had stood. In each patch was a deep socket; had that housed a god-stump? The bearers had halted in a wider space. Ryre hurried there.

It was the old market-place. Remnants of stalls and tethering-rails poked from the ground, like bones from a boneyard. At the centre of the space a patch of dark moist earth, no more than twenty yards square, stood out from the dry surround. From this earth protruded a pillar whose crown was the shiny dome. The pillar wriggled with heat haze. Ryre gaped at it, breathing harshly.

It stood twice his height, half again as broad as his chest. Its domed crown was a pale bubble swelling up through the black cracking mud of its bark. On the side nearest him, formed of the same lividly patched substance, was the flabby contented face, several times enlarged. Its left cheek was bloated

out of shape by a large fibroid growth, giving it a fattened cheek-pouched appearance. Ryre felt grubs of disgust crawling over him.

There were no branches sprouting beside the face, nor any room for them. Four faces bulged at various heights on the pillar, identical except for blemishes and variations in size. That on the north side—the one he'd seen first—looked to be encroached upon by the larger fibroid eastern face, which seemed to be eating into its cheek.

Ryre felt passionately that the entire festering thing ought not to be here in the sunlight, but buried beneath tons of earth. He had a sudden crawling notion that the substance of the thing had not ceased growing. He clutched his sword-hilt to feel cold metal amid the soft sticky embrace of the heat.

Vald and the others were digging. Glode lay in the dust, his loose face upturned. They meant to bury him beneath the bunch of swollen faces. Ryre felt harsh rage—but wherever Glode lay in Hoak he would be overlooked by the omnipresent stump. Better he should lie here in this rich tended earth than in the parched ground. He stood over his friend's body, sword bared in tribute, as they dug.

They were digging hastily, exhaustingly, near the foot of the pillar. Ryre had time to wonder at the size of the burial ground, which seemed bewilderingly small, before the diggers turned up a flat rock. The top of it looked like a fleshless hand. Peering, Ryre saw that it was indeed a hand, rotted at the wrist and stuck to the rock. One man scraped it off with his spade and threw it back into the hole. Then they grounded their spades and picking up Glode's body, carried him across to roll him, sword and all, into the hole.

"Not like that!" Ryre roared. His sword trembled between them, darting at their throats. "Make him a coffin!"

They gazed blankly. "A box for him to lie in!" he shouted, prodding them with their burden to the edge of the ground. "Make him a box," he said with cold fury, "and bring it here."

He waited, glaring at the introverted faces on the pillar. Heat rose from the moist ground, fluttering about them; the edge of the fibroid face seemed to bulge, creeping like a grub across its neighbour's cheek. As they had made to drop Glode into the hole Ryre had imagined he glimpsed the eyes of the

northward face opening, a blink, closing before he'd glared at them. It must have been the antics of the heat.

He gazed across the market-place. On the side which he had yet to explore stood a house full of piled timber. Some of the wood looked delicate. Crushed between stacked planks he saw elaborate ladles, stringed instruments, minute figures, one figure lay in a niche between planks, almost unharmed: the figure of a swordsman, poised in easy but assured defence. Its tiny perfect face, hardly the size of Ryre's smallest fingernail, was stern yet peaceful. Ryre slid the figure from its niche. Rough handling had crippled it; one leg was snapped off at the knee.

The burial party returned, carrying a crude box from which protruded bent and rusty nails. They lifted Glode into the box and nailed down a plank for a lid. Then they dropped the box into the hole.

Ryre's fury drained quickly. He saw how they must feel about death. He gestured them back and nicking his forearm with his sword-blade, held his fist above the coffin as his blood dripped. He lifted earth from the grave and sprinkling it over the wound, let the mud of blood fall on the coffin. When they had filled in the grave, he stood the carved swordsman on the mound and watched over it while they wandered away.

Still he had not mourned Glode. His mind seemed to have lost its grasp on his friend. When he managed to recapture a few of their exploits—Glode saving him from a knife-thrust in a dark temple; Ryre trying to swing himself onto Glode's shoulders to snag the ropes that were lowering them into a pit of snakes—they seemed flat, unconvincing. Now the liquor was making him feel light, unconcerned, unburdened. He would mourn Glode when he was free of Hoak—when he had made sure their journey had not been in vain. He must find the treasure.

The sun was low. The shadow of the pillar lay across the glistening patch, like the shadow of a cankered tree. It pointed toward the far side of Hoak. The treasure must be there, where he hadn't explored.

He searched, trying to outdistance night. The earth was grey and cracked as the skin of a senile corpse. Few of the windows were blocked; these he knocked open. He stared into room after room, at fallen planks, at the hole like a burrow in the corner of each floor. The rooms were dimming; twilight rose in them like a mist with which the dark burrows merged. The twilight

was heavy with silence, the silence of midnight in a dead and windless forest.

The heads of the surrounding still trees peered at Ryre over the nearby wall. Desolation waited silently behind him wherever he turned. His mind was chattering: it isn't here, not in these houses, there's nothing here, go back.

And this was all that was left of Hoak: scarcely a hundred people, isolated on this barren island amid the enormous forest. Then he realised something else. The vanished population must be buried in the square, all of them, piled up and rotting beneath the contented pillar. He shrugged off a shudder at the thought of the earth in which Glode lay, and hurried back toward the centre. He had words to scare the truth of the treasure out of slab-faced Vald.

The faces on the pillar were set in the twilight as in plush. Ryre spat in the dust. Corpse-candle of a god, he blasphemed the pillar. He glanced toward Glode's grave. At once he was striding across the yielding ground, clutching his sword. The mound had vanished.

The carved swordsman still lay on the earth. As he snatched it up he heard a faint muffled creaking. It came from the grave. Was Glode pushing his way out of the box, rising up through the soil to punish Ryre's negligence? Blotting out his terror with anger, he began to gouge out the grave with his hands.

The grave was shallow, but his progress seemed slow as the creeping twilight. As the soil squeezed through his fingers he remembered the hand that had been thrown into the hole. At last he reached the box. The lid had split open; soil had widened the split and fallen through. Cursing the makeshift coffin, Ryre lifted the pieces of the lid.

At first, in the twilight, he couldn't distinguish what was in the box. A mixture of earth and pale objects: the pale things were entangled—there were large glistening pale surfaces and paler forms coiled about them. The pale thick tendrils were dragging the larger object, or objects, through the bottom of the coffin. One extremity of the large object slipped an inch lower in the hole, amid a strained creaking and a rattling of earth. Although the large object was losing its form, as if melting, it had Glode's face.

Ryre screamed in fury and brought his sword crashing down on the tangle within the coffin. Tendrils parted and whipped into the earth like pale worms. When Ryre had finished chopping, there was nothing recognisable in the hole.

Weeping, ablaze with shame, he kicked earth into the grave.

The cancerous faces loomed above him, at his back. He rushed at the pillar, brandishing his sword. The faces waited, untroubled. Suddenly full of panic and nausea, Ryre fled toward the gate.

His steed waited outside Vald's house, chewing in its foodsling. Ryre reined back his panic; he must retrieve his satchel of food, which was lying beneath the plank bed. In the dim deserted street that throbbed wakefully with the sound of his heart, Ryre felt the need for stealth. Somewhere he could hear a slow muffled trickling. He shook his head impatiently and paced around to the outer door.

Vald was prostrate on his bed, fingers hanging limply to the floor. Ryre thought he was dead until his nails scraped the boards feebly. Padding softly, Ryre had almost crossed the room before he saw Yoce. She was standing with her back to him, in the corner where the face stood. As Ryre strode loudly toward her, she turned.

The branches dangling from the head were swollen, pale, almost transparent. They glimmered in the dimness. Yoce had been thrusting the neck of a liquor-vessel over one branch; now she pulled the vessel away. Snatching it, Ryre saw that it was brimming with liquor. A drop hung at the tip of the branch.

Yoce grabbed the vessel before he could smash it, and carried it to Vald. Ryre was less horrified by his discovery than by the yearning of his own parched throat for the liquor. "You do that!" he shouted through his nausea, hand at his sword.

"What else can I do for him?" Yoce said furiously. "Where's another food?"

When her words reached him, his hand slumped on the hilt. "What is this town?" he demanded thickly.

Liquor was spilling from Vald's mouth. She stood the vessel beside him, then she took Ryre's hand simply and led him into the inner room. Her fingers read the moist earth on his hand. "You've seen what it does," she said. "To your friend."

The face hung like a clot of the dimness, inscrutable eyelids swollen. "It can't hear us," she said reassuringly. "Anyway, it's dead. It died when my mother did. That's what happens when you die. This was her room. She died a few days ago, I think. I can't remember time very well."

Ryre sat on the bed, away from the face. He shook himself; this wasn't what he wanted to know. "That thing in the burial ground," he snarled.

"Nobody knows what it is. You know it's the same as the ones in the houses. They grow from it."

He felt the dimness closing about him as though it were the heavy exhalation of the faces. "Why do you need to drink that filth?" he shouted, then answered himself dully. "Because you need more and more of it."

"I don't," Yoce said indignantly.

That explained her comparative vitality. "Yes. But there must have been a time once when someone could have killed that thing," he said impatiently. "When it first began growing."

"We could never kill it. It wouldn't let us."

He felt her words giving power to the face. Ripping a splinter from the wood beneath the window, he lit it with his flint. He thrust the flame into the corner, peering. But the face hung on the stump, slack and puffy.

He was about to shake out the flame when the eyes opened.

The lids rose heavily, with the faintest of moist creaks. The widening crescents of dull white looked to Ryre exactly the colour of the marsh-fungus he'd once seen growing on a corpse in a swamp. The eyes were open now, swollen globes of thick white in which he could see no life at all. They seemed to watch the flame. All at once he caught up a stick, lit it from the splinter and thrust it into the face.

The wood, if such it were, of the stump began to sputter. Threads of fire squirmed across it and vanished. The eyes were still, but the lids shivered. Then the stump caught fire; a spot of flame grew and flared up across the face, The eyes burst. In a minute the stump was a dwarf of fire, twisting and writhing as it crumpled into ash.

Ryre kicked the ash down the hole in the floor, laughing harshly. Hot ash crawled on the sides of the hole, and he glimpsed a charred stump

retreating, dousing itself with earth. "What can the rest of it do now?" he demanded.

Yoce was sitting unmoved on Glode's bed. "It won't do anything. It only does if you attack it in the burial ground. That one was dying, anyway. If it had anyone to feed it would have grown again."

He grinned into the darkness. He was the thing's master now. He could destroy it whenever he wanted to, and he would. But first—"It must have made your people forget where they'd hidden the treasure," he said. "Do you know where it is?"

"There isn't any. There never was."

"There is. You've just forgotten, if you ever knew."

"I haven't! I remember that! They made up the treasure so people would come from outside. To kill the eater."

"Then why did your men try to keep us *out*?"

"Because you can't kill it from inside the wall. You have to go underneath. And when people came here they'd drink the milk, even if our people tried to stop them. Then they'd stay and not be able to go out. That's why the men keep people out. Only they've forgotten why. They think there really is treasure."

Everything he'd seen confirmed her words. He felt too defeated by Hoak even to be angry. "If you managed to keep some people out," he said desultorily, "why didn't they kill it?"

"Maybe they didn't get far enough. Or maybe they were frightened. You have to go all the way under the burial ground. There was a map that said the treasure was there."

"Why can't you kill it from up here?"

"Someone tried to, a long time ago." She had lowered her voice; the darkness leaned closer. "It ate his woman. He set fire to the one in her room. He was sleeping there, so it grew again for him. Then he tried to set fire to it at the burial ground, but it reached out of the ground and ate him while he was still alive."

"How do you know all this?" Ryre demanded.

"Trome the healer told me. He tries not to drink too much, like me. He helps babies to come and gives them names, and he tries to teach people

how to do things. The man you took out, he was one Trome taught. He helped me to remember all the things he'd told me, so I could tell you. He said you wouldn't kill me."

Ryre was silent. Heat and darkness and Hoak gathered on him like mud. Yoce came and sat beside him. "I'm sorry there isn't treasure for you," she said. "I never liked stories that weren't true. Vald used to tell me when I was little that I'd be able to go outside the wall, to stop me crying." She took his hand and pressed herself against his side.

"Does your healer expect me to kill that thing for you?" Ryre asked, letting the disbelief of his words soak into him.

"You could do it for us," she said, gripping his hand. "For your friend."

Suddenly he grabbed her shoulders and threw her against he wall. "You called the men to bury my friend!" he shouted.

"I didn't," she said. "It calls in your head when it wants its food." She began sobbing like an exhausted child—exhausted perhaps by the effort of talking to him. Irritably he grabbed her and pulled her roughly to him until she ceased shaking. All of a sudden she was straddling him, her hips gulping. "Have me," she said plaintively. "Nobody else can."

His body was shouting yes, yet he hesitated. Had they reached the true reason why Trome had sent her? Ryre didn't object to even so meagre a bribe, nor did his feeling that she was still a child trouble him. But he felt insulted by her eagerness, in a sense; he could be any man except a eunuch.

"Please," she said. "I always used to wonder. I knew it made some girls happy, until they stopped feeling it. Trome said the milk did that. So I didn't drink much, only as much as I had to. But all the boys did, so they couldn't have me, they didn't work. Trome tried when I asked him, but he was too old."

Even with Yoce's clothing laid over them the floorboards were harsh against Ryre's knees. But once she'd closed around him he felt nothing but their union. She was eager as a parched throat; his heart seemed to be pounding all his blood into his genitals. It was quickly over. Both of them cried out.

They lay together until dawn. "You weren't a virgin," he said drowsily; then, sensing her blankness: "Not sealed."

"I did that myself," she said proudly.

III

As they neared the gate Trome formally wished Ryre "Your day of triumph." At the gate Yoce said "Good fortune. What's your name?"

He was unwilling to leave his name where it might be at the mercy of Hoak. "You don't need my name. You want the deed," he said and reaching into his pouch, handed her the carved swordsman. "Say that was me," he said.

Waiting for Trome to wrench open the repaired wall, he felt a cancer of panic growing within him swiftly as fire. It was the effect of the liquor; it infuriated him. Yet it was only a taste of the panic that ruled Hoak. He averted his face from Yoce as he rode out. He wouldn't betray his fear to her. She had enough of it already.

The baked plain drank his sweat avidly. The forest took him with a slow suffocating hiss of leaves. Foliage swayed like drowned tentacles, luring him in. When he closed his eyes he felt the cooler moist air settle over him like a clammy shroud. His breath racked his throat. He breathed harder, to distract himself. By the time his steed led him to a stream he was a flayed tube of thirst.

The soothing drink felt distant, merely a concept separate from the dull unchanging panic. But the very dullness of the panic helped him by enraging him. He must act. He had dreaded tunnelling beneath the eater; now this seemed less daunting. He had come out of Hoak: he could do anything.

Even the sight of the tunnel entrance failed to daunt him. He passed it once, covered as it was by a tangle of green shoots. But a large mound of earth and a pile of timber showed its position. Beneath the shoots the tunnel descended for a few feet at a steep angle, eased by steps of wood driven into the earth, then levelled into darkness.

Ryre filled his satchel with faggots and dry grass. He lifted the two rusty spades from his steed. Strapping the satchel to his back, he gazed through the trees at Hoak. Trome had left the gap open. Ryre gazed at it, then he climbed down into the earth.

He had made tapers in Hoak. He lit one with his flint and peered ahead. The taper burned feebly, sputtering. At least the flame was slow. The light plucked at the tunnel: a quivering hole of darkness that drew the walls and roof into itself. The roof was roughly but adequately shored with a thick length of timber, supported by two others forced beneath it, against the walls. It was too low for him to stand upright.

He clambered out and began to collect shoring from the pile. Birdsong was scattered over the forest like light on water. His panic at leaving Hoak was ebbing somewhat, baffled.

He climbed down with an armful of props, grinning sourly. Whoever had opened the tunnel must have believed they were outwitting the guardians of the treasure. He would make sure, he vowed grimly, that they were among those who had outwitted the eater of Hoak.

He stuck a burning taper in the earth near the entrance, then hefted his shoring. The burden hardly taxed him, but this was only the first journey. He debated taking off his armour. But it was light, though few blades could cut its flexible leaves, which grew harder under pressure. It might save him —from what, he refused to think. He pulled the taper from the earth and holding it before the pile of shoring on his arms, stooped quickly into the tunnel.

The taper was burning more steadily now, though feebly. He had to walk slowly for fear of extinguishing it. His view ahead was cramped by the pile of wood, which was almost as broad as the tunnel; he could see a dim box surrounding him and keeping pace, shaking as if crumpled by the weight of earth above. At least it was excellent wood, he reassured himself; neither the shoring around him nor the pile outside had rotted.

The dim box swung slightly about him. Its featurelessness lulled him, stealing his sense of time and of how far he'd come. He strained to look back. His shadow flickered forward from the blinding darkness. Within it he thought he could see a tiny point of light, the tunnel entrance. Then it was gone.

He drove himself onward, trying to measure his distance from Hoak by the count of his steps. He had to trust the judgement of those who had dug the tunnel. Assuming that they had followed the original map, the course of the tunnel should lead to a point directly beneath the eater— unless the thing had grown downwards since.

His back was beginning to resent its cramping. In the dim browned light his eyes felt as if mud were gathering on them. His hearing felt muffled, suffocated. Even his legs felt hobbled, for he had to tread carefully on the uneven floor.

He dreaded that the thing knew he was approaching. He felt its vast bulk somewhere above him, and it seemed impossible that it could not sense him. He was struggling so fiercely with his unease that he had almost touched the tendril with the taper before he saw it.

It was a limply coiled pale thread, drooping through a crack between the shoring of the roof. As the flame approached, the tendril drew itself up jerkily and flattened against the wood, groping about convulsively. Ryre flinched back, almost dropping taper and props. Surrounding him beyond his cage of faint light, he heard a muffled creaking whose rhythms imitated the convulsions of the tendril. He lowered his pile of wood to the floor and kneeling, rested on it, willing the spasms of the tendril to subside.

At last they did so, and the creaking faded: but not until half the taper had burned. Ryre walked more deliberately now, his strained gaze urging forward the dim sluggish wave of light. Darkness swelled up solidly beyond it, but yielded only darkness. When something more solid loomed into the glow, he was prepared and hardly started. It was a white root, blocking the centre of the tunnel.

It had forced its way between the shoring, bulging itself a hole. Earth was sprinkled on the floor beneath, but the root had plugged the gap it had made. It spanned the tunnel, fat and glistening white.

He planted the taper. Then he slid the props past the root on their edges, letting them down gently beyond. He pulled up the taper and holding it beyond the root, inched himself past. The root might have felt him if he'd touched it. In any case, he couldn't bear the thought of doing so.

The darkness ahead bobbed closer, thickening, bulging between the props, refusing to give way to the advancing light. He had reached the end of the tunnel, a couple of hundred yards past the root. Ahead sloped a ragged wall of earth, somewhat smoothed by time.

He dropped the timber from his aching arms. After a while he took a taper from his pouch and lighting it from the first, stuck the latter in the floor. He glanced back at the light as he made his way toward the entrance.

There he rested. Light lapped the swaying foliage above him. Should he have left the taper? Wouldn't a flame left underground starve the air? He was arguing himself out of going down again, he knew.

He saw himself spading out the tunnel, carrying back the earth, spading out, trying to prop the tunnel—But was he exaggerating the task? It might have been his fear confusing his feelings, yet he felt the tunnel had almost reached its goal. He'd lost count of his steps at the tendril.

He remembered the carving he'd given Yoce. But his words didn't require him to be like the carving. He thought of Yoce and Trome, trapped within the open wall. He thought of the children, and of Glode. If Ryre succeeded, he would have a tale in which to hold Glode fast and give him power. Already Glode must feel nothingness closing about him as Ryre's words of him slipped away, dwindling to nothing. Ryre refilled his satchel and picked up the spades, then walked into the tunnel.

He'd hoped the taper he had left would look encouraging. But its glimmer swam forward like marsh-gas, emphasising the enormous darkness. He set the two tapers at opposite sides of the tunnel. The darkness massed behind him, seeping into his brain, reminding him of the deceptive stillness of the white tendril, of the way the plump root seemed to have moved and swollen since the first time he'd passed it. He began to dig.

A taper burned down to the floor, and another. He filled his satchel with earth, which he scattered in the dark beyond the flames: again, again. His breath felt rougher than the earth; muddy sweat poured over him; pain clamped his muscles, tightening. He had been digging until the dark felt thickened by midnight when the creaking began.

It was all about him, muffled. It grew, a dull immense writhing mass of sound. Ryre felt as if the darkness were pressing down on him, as if the flimsy tunnel were sinking into depths where the pressure would burst the walls, flooding him with tons of earth, letting in the insidious source of the creaking.

This must be what had scared the dung out of his predecessors. As a youth he'd suffered the lightless hold of a ship for days; if this were the eater's defence it was already defeated. He dug.

The creaking trailed away, leaving the silence thick and close. There was no sound except a sprinkling of earth, ahead of him. The hard earth roof,

which had held up uncomplainingly while he dug the softer earth below, was cracking.

He grabbed a length of shoring and swung it up against the roof. He ground his shoulders against it and reaching back, forced lengths of timber into place alongside him, propping the roof. Beyond it a shadow reached out for him, glistening with earth. He hurried back and brought the tapers forward.

He dug and shored another length of tunnel. Then panic flooded him. He was suddenly sure that the next thrust of the spade would touch the eater. It was waiting for that moment, to close on him. Or it might play him, filling the tunnel with hungry tendrils, until it chose to block his way entirely.

Perhaps the thing was stealing these fears into his mind, or perhaps the darkness was thinking for him. He thrust the spade in furiously, but couldn't help closing his eyes. Glode and Yoce and the rest had fled his mind, leaving him alone.

The spade gouged the earth. Another spilling spadeful of earth for his satchel; another. Then the spade plunged into softness. Ryre fell forward, then threw himself back, wrenching out the spade. But a sliding of earth had already begun. The end of the tunnel was collapsing. He had turned to flee in case the props gave way, or before something emerged, when he realised that the wall was collapsing away from him. He had dug his way into a hollow.

When the sound of scattering earth had ceased he lit a new taper and held it low through the gap. Within was a hollow of moist earth, about seven feet high and twenty feet in diameter. Its walls sloped up to a pale ceiling, a soil-smudged whitish object swollen with dozens of almost translucent veins. He was beneath the eater.

Appalled fascination paralysed him. The surface was bloated like a great veined belly. Amber liquid coursed through some of the veins, others were empty and flabby. He forced himself away, back to his satchel. Emptying it of earth, he stuffed it with faggots and dry grass, and strapped it on.

He bullied himself into leaving the taper in the entrance to the hollow. If he took it in, the thing might act to defend itself. He scrambled down into the hollow, disliking the moistness of the earth. It was only ordinary good earth, he told himself, unlike the dry earth above, which the thing's hunger had

drained. But he couldn't forget that the burial ground was above him. Liquor pumped through the whitish ceiling.

He piled the kindling at the centre, wondering uneasily why the hollow was there at all. It didn't matter. One last trudge to collect kindling, then he would lay a fuse to the hollow. At last all the effort which had led here would be justified; Glode would live in tale. Ryre was making for the taper, thinking of words that would preserve the power of the deed, when the tunnel collapsed.

There was a violent splintering, and a heavy fall of earth. When he seized the taper he saw that the walls of the tunnel twenty yards away had been crushed. Among the debris writhed thick whitish tubes. He kicked at the collapsed wall, and the tubes closed about it, squeezing the earth. He knew that they would crush him even if he managed to broach the barrier.

Now that it was open battle the darkness lost some of its power. He felt it, solid on every side, but he could plan. The thing blocked the tunnel, but could he distract it? He grinned hungrily. He knew what the thing feared.

He slid down into the hollow, carrying a taper. He was about to throw the taper into the kindling—but no, the flame might not catch. Better to venture all the way in. He had almost reached the pile when he heard air moving in the tunnel, a hollow muttering. Suddenly the dim tunnel mouth was a black hole. Air swept across his face, and the taper he was holding went out.

The darkness rushed into his lungs, choking him. Above him he heard a vast creaking, no longer muffled. He scrabbled in his pouch and found the flint. He struck it, struck it again; the creaking lowered toward him. The taper flamed.

When he looked up he saw why there had been a hollow. At some time the eater, perhaps not content to feed through its tendrils, had raised itself bodily toward the burial ground. Now it was descending on him, having trapped him at last. A few tendrils crept down from the edge of the dwindling hollow. The cold moist belly sank and touched his forehead.

Ryre roared wordlessly. He ran, cramped and stooping, to the fuel and thrust in the taper.

A flame groped over the pile. In a minute it was a mound of fire. The fire rushed at the white belly, which sputtered and crackled, blackening. What happened then, hideous as it was, filled Ryre with grim triumph. The thing

was raising itself on its roots, which its haste exposed all round the hollow, as if it were a vast bloated spider raising itself on its web. But its retreat worked the fire like a bellows, and the flames followed it up, flaring higher, roaring.

Fire sprang out from the midst of the belly, snatching whitish fuel that writhed. Veins popped, hissing. A whole piece of the thing fell on the edge of the hollow, torn away by an arc of fire that had charred through its roots. Clods tumbled through the torn gap, smoking, blocking the gap as Ryre considered dashing toward it.

The thing had raised itself above the level of the tunnel. Falling earth had closed the tunnel mouth, but there was still a small gap, and the wall of earth looked weak. Ryre scrambled over the shifting floor. Above him the centre of the belly was drawing up and in, trying to flee its agony; fire rushed into the drawn-in pit, splitting it open. Fire was dividing the eater along its veins, consuming each patch.

Ryre launched himself at the tunnel mouth, but slithered back. As he gathered himself to spring again the fire above him shouted, crackling and popping. It rushed above him, embracing a patch. He heard it give way, and the blazing chunk fell toward him. He tried to throw himself out of its way, but it fell full on him, smashing him into darkness.

IV

He was buried alive. His face was full of earth. A crushing weight lay on him. He clawed at the earth, which squeezed beneath his nails, and the weight moved. His shoulders felt like an open sore, but when he raised them the weight toppled away. It was the fallen wood, quenched by soil. Propping himself on all fours, he looked about.

He was at the bottom of the hollow perhaps fifteen feet deep, open to the sky. Its sides had collapsed, and within it lay mounds of fallen earth and chunks of smouldering wood. Ash flocked over all; he beat away a settling cloud. Opposite him, where most of the earth had slid, leaned the central pillar. It was little more now than smouldering ash that retained its shape. Empty sockets smoked; a face of ash was crumbling in the wind.

Ryre dragged himself upward. His body throbbed with bruises, his mane was charred, but the fallen wood and his armour had protected him from the

fire. He reached the lip of the hollow. The people of Hoak were milling about nearby, wandering blankly, halting, starting constantly as if from traps of sleep. He groped for a hold to pull himself up. Suddenly Yoce and Trome were lifting him.

The girl's left foot was bound—in a shirt patterned with swords, that Glode had worn. His fury faded quickly: Glode would have given it to her, and they must need cloth. "What's wrong with your foot?" he asked.

"Someone smashed it," Trome said.

"I broke all the milk vessels," Yoce interrupted, so swiftly Ryre could tell she didn't want revenge. "So we couldn't save any milk. Now we'll have to go outside." She saw Ryre's hunger for vengeance, gleaming in his eyes. "You mustn't kill anyone," she said. "There are too few of us."

Trome hurried to fetch ointment. Ryre hobbled to a window and knocking out the wood, began to chop brands. "Come here," he shouted at the wandering crowd. "All of you! Here!" He handed out the brands and lit them. The crowd stood gazing; nothing moved about them but the flames. "Wherever you find that thing's head," he shouted, "burn it. Let one live and by Hakkthu, I'll feed you to it in pieces. When I'm gone, Trome has a sword to rule you. Quickly!" he shouted as they stumbled away.

Trome was staring uneasily at him. "Haven't you my friend's sword?" Ryre demanded. "Then use it as wisely as he did."

Trome fussed about him, salving and binding.

"Enough, enough. I'll live, unless you smother me to death. Bring the children to the gate," he said to Yoce.

Ryre felt no qualms as he passed the wall. The power of the eater was dead. At the tunnel mouth he untethered his steed, then he filled his scorched satchel with fruit. Some hard-shelled fruit were as big as his head; the halves of the shell could be used to carry water.

Yoce was standing with the children just inside the gate. Adults stood nearby, restless and threatening; Trome was holding them back with the sword. Ryre piled the fruit a few feet outside the gate. He bit into the largest and juiciest fruit. Then he held it out to Yoce.

She stepped forward hesitantly. As she reached the wall fear clamped over her face like a mask. Behind it he could see her struggling. The mask's

forehead puckered. Sweat streamed from it. Then she stumbled forward, eyes closed, across the boundary. She gripped Ryre's arm, bruising it, and opened her eyes.

Fear still pinched her face like a claw, but she managed to smile. She bit into the fruit. Juice trickled from her mouth, tears from her eyes. She held out the fruit to the children.

They shuffled, glancing away. Suddenly the youngest ran out and grabbed the fruit. Her sister ran to drag her back. The older girl halted abruptly, gaping, as she realised where she was. But Yoce stuffed a fruit into her open mouth.

Ryre showed Yoce the use of the half-shells, and pointed toward the stream. In time they would venture there. Trome forced himself to emerge, breathing heavily, and exchanged swords for a moment with Ryre in farewell. All the children were out now; their parents were scurrying timidly to rescue them, glancing suspiciously at the pile of fruit, sniffing at it, snatching a fruit and nibbling like rodents afraid of a trap. Ryre looked at Yoce, but she was rounding up the children, who were laughing hysterically, discovering their voices. He rode away.

Just within the forest he halted on a rise. By a caprice of the heat he could see Hoak vividly, minute and detailed. A group of people were lustily smashing the pillar of ash, while near the gate the guardian stump was ablaze. Some old men sat obstinately in the burial ground, arms huddled over their heads, refusing to move. Yoce was leading the children into the town, pointing in the direction in which he'd ridden, showing them a small object. It was the carved swordsman. He turned and rode into the forest, toward the sea.

Through The Walls

"*Through The Walls* was a part—an odd one, you may think—of the process of working myself up to try a major psychedelic. When I dropped acid for the first time soon afterwards, the experience had thankfully little in common with the tale, though the flashback I suffered in late 1976 had far too much. I originally intended the story for *Superhorror*, the first anthology I edited, but several informed friends—Hugh Lamb, Kathy Murray and T. E. D. Klein, all of them presently less active in the field than they deserve to be—pointed out flaws in the version I showed them. Later I rewrote it, and here is its final form."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

Written in: 1974
First published as the chapbook *Through The Walls*, June 1981
Also published in: *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

Hugh Pears was gathering mint in the back yard when he heard the crash. It sounded like someone hurled onto a sheet of tin. God, not the children! As he ran through the kitchen, Chris glanced at him, puzzled; she hadn't recognised the sound. "You aren't going out now," she protested. "The children will be home any minute." But he hadn't reached the front door when they ran in.

"There's a man hurt outside," Linda shouted.

"They nearly ran us over," Andrew shouted louder.

Pears let go of his fear with a gasp of relief. He hurried out. A red Mini had slewed into the wall of the house next door. The driver was lifting a figure from the passenger seat. Its head was a raw red bulb; blood had rusted its hair.

When Pears opened his eyes he'd regained control. The driver was supporting his passenger, whose forehead was bleeding copiously. Pears wondered why he should have seen anything else. He wasn't fond of the sight of blood, but nor was he given to building nightmares out of it. "Bring him in here," he called. "My wife's a nurse."

As Pears helped them up the path, he saw the young man in the ground-floor flat next door gazing expressionlessly at them. Only his gaze moved, as if he were peering from behind a pale gaunt mask. If you can't help, Pears raged, then have the decency to take yourself elsewhere. The gaze

followed them blankly, indifferent as the fog that massed at the edge of the streetlight, like dim spectators.

Chris sat the man in one of the white wood dining-chairs. "What happened?" she asked, tilting his head back.

"We skidded on a patch of oil," the driver said. "It looked big enough for a lorry. I wouldn't have thought they were supposed to come down a residential street, not a narrow one like this."

"Too many people don't care about that," Chris said.

The passenger was holding his trouser-leg away from his shin down which blood was running incontinently into his shoe. "This'll teach me to wear my seat-belt," he said, shaking.

She cleaned the wound and gave him a compress to hold against it. "I don't think it's serious, but we'd better be sure," she said, turning down the cooker. "I'll drive you to the hospital."

Andrew was sponging blood from the back of the chair. That jarred Pears out of the reverie through which he'd watched Chris caring for the man. The thoughts had streamed through his mind like smoke; he felt vaguely that he would prefer not to remember them. He shook his head. All this nonsense came of boredom, inertia, probably of feeling incapable of helping Chris. Get on with something. He strode into the back yard.

He'd finished gathering the mint when he heard Linda's cry of disgust. A spider, he thought, or a crane-fly or a slug. As he hurried through the kitchen and the dining area he saw, beyond the open front door down the hall, the young man from the flat standing on the pavement, gazing in. If he's what you're saying yuk to, Pears told Linda, I can't say I blame you. But she was staring at the hall wall.

Just inside the front door, the wallpaper had acquired a splotch of blood. Trickles were making their way toward the skirting-board. "Damn," Pears said. "He must have done it as they went out. Get me a cloth, Linda, quick."

He closed the front door. As Pears hid the blood from him, the young man gaped in appalled disbelief. You're absolutely right, Pears told him, we're going to scrape it off and use it for soup.

He dabbed at the blood. Mrs Tarrant can get the worst of it off, she'll be here tomorrow. That's what she's paid for. He scrubbed as hard as he dared.

The stain remained, but fainter. Eventually he sat and waited for his dinner, minutely lining up the cutlery, listening to Linda and Andrew playing pole-vaulting in the yard. His mind felt full of rapid formless smoke.

Over dinner Chris asked "What exactly happened?"

"He shouldn't have driven down our road so fast," Andrew said.

"If someone hadn't been so stupid they ran out in front of him, there wouldn't have been an accident," Linda said.

"I didn't see him. He came straight round the corner." He glared at her, the threat of angry tears in his eyes. "I bet you'd have been glad if I'd been run over."

"That's right. No, I wouldn't," Linda amended, trying to head off his mood. She put an arm round him, but he threw her off.

"You're quite right, Andrew," Chris said. "He shouldn't have been driving so fast. But for your own sake you must be more careful how you go."

Pears listened blankly. He heard the words, but it was as though he heard them through a wall; they seemed separate from him. He stared at the table, at the white wood and its reflected hints of the violet and lilac walls. The words affected him in the same way: they were there, that was all.

He gazed at his food as he ate. Wherever he looked, there seemed to be movement at the edge of his eye. Dark spots moved on the walls, as though the kitchen were a sweating cave, or as if the walls were the throat of a chimney, fluttering with soot. When he looked, the movements snapped into corners of the room or behind the furniture. His eyes must be tired. Perhaps he could blame the tree in the next yard, its shadow on the curtain swaying sluggishly, blurred by the gathering November fog. Perhaps he was overworked, though he hadn't thought himself to be more so than anyone else at the bank.

Andrew had been mollified, or nearly. "Sisters," he said witheringly. When he'd eaten his fruit he said "May I leave the table? I'm going to dust Fritz."

Linda had been waiting for a chance at the last word in the argument. She was too much of a young lady now to stick out her tongue. "Aren't you too old for that thing yet?" she demanded. "When are you going to throw away that horrible doll?"

"Linda, you're only two years older," Chris said. "Hardly the voice of maturity."

"Well, *I* didn't want that doll when *I* was eight."

An aunt had brought her Fritz from Germany, but Linda had mislaid the doll behind her bed almost at once, complaining "Alice's father brought her back a lovely German dress." "Give me the doll if you don't want him," Andrew had said. Pears supposed that now it was up to him to intervene. Anything to drag his mind free of the slow heavy dance of the nodding shadow on the curtains, to shake off the darkly teeming walls. "There's nothing horrible about Andrew's doll, Linda," he said.

"There is too. You come and look."

She pulled him into the hall. "Go outside and see," she said. "I used to like to look up at our bedroom when I came home. Now he makes it look nasty. I'll switch on the light so you can see."

She ran upstairs, pleats flirting from her bare thighs. A Majorca tan was fading from her legs. He must talk to Chris about making her wear longer skirts. She was far too enticing. One of these days—What? He snatched his gaze away from Linda as she reached the top of the stairs, and rushed himself out.

As Pears emerged, the young man next door was letting in three others. One displayed a fat hand-rolled multicoloured cigarette for approval. Stupid fools. No wonder the fellow in the flat looked so inert. And him an industrial chemist, if Pears wasn't misinterpreting his salary cheque: should know better.

When Linda switched on the light, the fog sprang forward, towering blankly on the opposite pavement. It settled clammily on Pears, who shivered and looked up. Fritz the doll was standing on the sill in the centre of the bay window, grinning out. Pears could just see his red knees over the sill, beneath his lederhosen. His raised tankard was halfway to his mouth; his painted wooden face was edged with light. He looked hideous.

Fog crept insinuatingly down Pears' spine, fog was a dwindling blank-faced box around him. The lawn stirred feebly, as if drowned. He tried to shake himself, but shuddered. Good God, he was standing in his own front garden, looking at his own house: what could be so terrible in that? But he could hardly keep his eyes on the doll.

It looked like an overgrown bloated schoolboy mottled with red paint as if its skin were bursting. Beneath the blue glass eyes, the grin had become secretive, knowingly obscene. Its free hand hovered near its flies. It was all the effect of the fog; fog had tinted its face shinily grey, slimy, diseased. It looked swollen with waste that might gush forth at any moment.

Linda read his expression. "See?" she called.

"I must say," Pears said warily, "he looks rather a nasty little man today."

He didn't realise that Andrew was in the bedroom until the boy appeared behind Linda, weeping. He pushed her out of the way and threw up the sash, then he hurled the doll into the road. Pears heard it break.

"Did you see that?" someone said in the flat. "Far out!"

Cretins, Pears snarled. Tears were streaming between Andrew's fingers, Linda was trying to comfort him and fighting to pull his hands away from his face, Chris was hurrying upstairs, irritably shouting "What's going on?" Pears opened the front gate; wet flakes of rust chafed beneath his fingers. He stooped to pick up the doll. Then he recoiled.

The fog had dimmed the streetlights. The shadow of the doll was blurred, the wet road was uneven. He wasn't really seeing a thick dark lumpy fluid, seeping slowly from the doll's cracked head.

The fog was muttering; the sound grew into an open-mouthed snarl. A car swung into the road. Pears reached for the doll, then he pulled back his hand and ran toward the house. Behind him he heard the car grind the doll into splinters.

Andrew had heard it too; Chris was trying to calm him down. "Will you *stay out of this*!" she shouted. Pears gladly took the order for himself. He went into the living room. Beyond the garden the privet leaves looked thick, coated with fog; he knew how they felt. He drew the curtains and sat in the bay window.

When Chris came down, she stared at him. He frowned enquiringly. If she didn't say what she was thinking, they couldn't talk about it. His mind seemed clearer now; he relaxed, smiling. She sat opposite him, shaking her head. The subdued children trudged into the next room, the playroom; Linda whispered. "It's not my job to run this family single-handed," Chris said.

"I never said it was."

"But you act it. If you don't intend to help at least don't make things more difficult."

She sounded weary. "Have you a migraine?" Pears said.

"It's taken you long enough to notice."

"I'm not feeling too well myself. I expect that hasn't helped my behaviour."

"Your behaviour isn't that unusual."

This was hardly the time to discuss it: if she felt as odd as he did, they would only end up screaming. He moved his chair out of the bay and switched on the television.

He found he couldn't watch for long. The image whirred silently, as his eye refused to aid the illusion of continuous movement. Black-faced minstrels danced and sang, hurtling forward to fill the bulging screen, grimacing with painted lips. Pears reached for the switch. "I'm listening to that," Chris said. He sank back and gazed at the fire. On the edge of his vision colours boiled beneath glass, as if an aquarium had gone mad.

The fire swayed gently, flickering high and vanishing. When he emerged from his reverie, the programme had been ousted by another. A sandy brown desert, a bright amber sky: the colours didn't clamour for attention. Calm now, he looked. Men in khaki shorts were gently spading out a pit. Archaeologists? Two of them were coaxing something from the soil. He leaned closer.

It came up with its arms held stiff at its sides, its skin pulled back from a yellowing fixed smile. The pit was surrounded by fleshless bodies, rigidly contorted or lying supine with their lips wrenched back as if by hooks, grinning.

"So far the mass graves have yielded at least five hundred dead," an announcer was pronouncing. The camera tilted up to show that it had been keeping back a vista of ranked corpses as far as the horizon. In the next room the children were putting toys away. "I don't think we should risk the children seeing this," he said, turning to Chris. As he spoke something moved to the edge of the screen and emerged into the room.

A shadow, of course. When Pears glared at the corner where it had halted, there was nothing. How could television cast a shadow? It must have come

from the street. The screen piled up with swarms of brown emaciated manikins. Their dried-out sockets were turned to the sun, their jaws protruded through their skins. He surged out of his chair and switched off the television.

All he achieved was to send the announcer into hiding. "There are almost certainly further graves to be discovered," the man continued, muffled now, as if he'd put his hand over his mouth. Not until Pears heard someone shout "Jesus, that's sick. Turn it off!" did he realise that the voice was persisting in the flat through the wall.

He slumped back, and began to cough. Had the fog managed to insinuate itself into the room? There was a faint unpleasant smell. In the corner a faint shadow remained—an after-image, of course. The smell reminded him of old meat, but wasn't quite like that. Had a mouse died beneath the floor? He'd look tomorrow—he didn't feel at all like searching now. "I think we'd all benefit from an early night," he said. "It's past their bedtimes, anyway."

"Do what you want," Chris said.

Andrew was morosely obedient, and Linda made only a token protest; yet Pears found himself becoming irritable. Suppose Chris noted the smell, what might she find? Nothing, for God's sake. Get to bed.

Reading his mood, the children allowed themselves to be herded quickly to the bathroom. Pears stood outside as they splashed; Linda was trying to wheedle Andrew into her game. We aren't such a bad family, Pears thought. I can hold Chris, we don't need to talk.

Abruptly Linda was out of the bathroom. She ran naked to him, towelled pink, her bald pubis and tentatively swelling breasts framed in her tan, and put her arms around him. "Carry me to bed," she pleaded.

Her hair was warm beneath his chin. She moved against him, soft to his touch, instinctive and guileless as a young animal. As she gazed up at him, sleepy and innocently sensuous, she looked exactly as Chris sometimes did. For a moment of illusion she was Chris, renewed.

"Not tonight, love," he said. "Your mother and I aren't feeling very well."

He smacked her bottom gently. She wriggled with delight, gazing at him.

Suddenly he pushed her away. "Go on, now," he said, close to panic. "We want to get to bed."

He hurried into the bathroom. "Finish your teeth quickly, Andrew, and I'll tuck you in." He leaned against the wall, his nails squeaking on the tiles. As soon as Andrew had closed the door, Pears was seized by a violent and prolonged orgasm.

He lay in bed, making a lair of the darkness. Even there he wasn't safe. When he closed his eyes, grinning faces floated up, plump and sticky. Suppose Chris wanted him to make love to her? That was often the way they expunged their arguments. He could hear her scrubbing the blood from the wall.

Her climbing footsteps seemed to take forever, as if she were sadistically prolonging her approach. She knows, he thought. I've broadcast to her what I've done. He pressed himself as near to his edge of the bed as he could, pretending to sleep.

He held himself still as she slipped into bed. Too still. He moved slightly, muttering. "Hugh?" she said. He glared into the darkness, grinding his teeth silently. "Hugh, listen," she said.

He turned over violently. "What is it?" He hadn't meant to shout.

"Nothing," she said, turning away.

"No, what is it?"

"It doesn't matter."

He could feel her turning restlessly for hours. He held himself rigid, willing her to sleep. She turned against him, rubbery; the bed felt like a tropical tent. When at last she was quiet, he couldn't be sure she wasn't pretending. He didn't dare leave the bed in case he disturbed her. Fog hung in the gap between the curtains, glowing feebly, thick and blank as his mind. His eyes itched hotly. He gazed at nothing.

At breakfast his eyes felt bloated and raw. Around dawn the chattering of birds had suddenly toppled with him into sleep. He stared at his plate. His knife sliced a poached egg; yellow liquid leaked from its pupil. The sounds of Chris and the children nagged at him, annoying as radio voices bumbling against an exhausted battery. He didn't know how he would be able to face work.

"I don't want to go to school today," Andrew said. "I don't feel well."

"Neither do I," Linda said.

"What's the matter with you?" Chris demanded.

They looked at each other, baffled. "Come on, both of you," she said. "No nonsense. Once you come home tonight, you've the whole weekend."

Pears forced himself to look at them directly. They were rummaging for an argument. "Listen, don't fret," he told them. "It won't be so bad, once you're there. I don't always want to go out in the mornings, you know. I don't this morning. But we have to go."

"And what about me?" Chris demanded angrily. "Do you think it's a picnic for me to go shopping, the way they look at you round here? It's an effort of will, I assure you."

He stared at her. "Only last week you said you liked these shops."

She was flushed with anger that she'd let her feelings show. "Well, that's how I feel now," she said defiantly.

"Well," he said, glancing at his watch. "Time's getting on. If I go now, I can walk up with you two. Are you coming?" he asked Chris, rather discouragingly: her revelation had annoyed him, for he didn't know how to handle it.

"I've the washing-up to do. I'll manage, don't worry." When he hesitated she said "I've told you not to worry about me."

Fog was blocking the way just outside the gate, a dull featureless fug. Behind the thickening grey screen, the privet leaves looked fat and plastic. Pears could see nothing he would be able to bear to touch. He gazed back down the hall, past the dining-table to Chris at the sink, and almost retreated. Then he urged the children out. Glancing back at their bright orange curtains, which looked shabby now with fog, he caught sight of the young man in the flat, gazing apathetically through the uncurtained window.

The hinges of the gate shrieked jaggedly; Pears felt as if the sound were being dragged through his ears. The children waited restlessly. "Go on, then," he said, impatient with everything, and strode out, thinking: I should make them want to go, not bully them.

The fog settled on him like wet cobwebs, drawing him deeper into itself. It closed him in with silence. He could hear no sound from the main road two

hundred yards away. His muffled footsteps clopped; he could hardly hear the children's. Andrew and Linda were diluted, dissolving smudgily into the fog.

Odd blurs bobbed past: the mirror of a parked car, the overhanging tips of a tree. They faded, and the street seemed to fade with them. He was alone with fog. It closed on his face like a cold soft mask, trickling thickly into his lungs. A single paving-stone repeated itself underfoot, again and again, in a frame of fog. He couldn't see the children now. He began coughing uncomfortably. Nor could he hear them.

He gagged himself with one hand, and strained his ears. All his senses were muffled; his mouth and nose felt stuffed with wet smoke. The flat inexorable wall of fog stood close to him, boxing him in. He opened his mouth to shout, but it filled with a foggy cough. The children had gone.

As he fought to speak, a dreadful suspicion choked him. He and the children hadn't been alone in the fog. There had been a hulking shape that had paced them just behind the blinding wall, waiting until they became separated. He could feel its stealthy presence now, somewhere near. Its hands had grabbed the children's mouths. It had dragged the children into an alley and stuffed gags into their mouths. Now it was turning to Linda—

He heard the children's muffled screams.

For a moment he was fog, fluid, helpless. Then he smashed his way blindly forward, toward the cries. The grey slammed against his eyes, then fell back, acquiring an orange tinge. The children were waiting beneath the sodium lights of the main road, giggling nervously. Traffic moved by like a glacier, bleary lights gazing tearfully ahead. He'd never expected to be so glad to see a traffic jam.

The children must have been playing hide and seek in the fog, they must have scared each other. Pears felt angry, and anxious to be sure that that was what had happened. But to interrogate them, or to lose his temper, would only cause further unpleasantness: best to leave it alone. Abruptly, Linda said to Andrew "I'm sorry I was rude about your doll. I was mean."

"I was growing out of it anyway," Andrew said.

Oddly, they became less reluctant as they neared the school. They ran into the underpass eagerly enough, casting him a last glance as they went, flushed oval portraits in Balaclavas. He strolled to the bank, musing.

They couldn't have felt more reluctant to come out than he had. But now, away from the house, he felt no reluctance at all. At home they were all caught in a tight spiral of neuroses. Now he saw that, he knew how to free them. They must go away at the weekend, into the countryside. The fog stepped back before him, parting.

He enjoyed the day. He joked with those of his colleagues who seemed gloomily befogged, until their polite smiles broke into spontaneity. He'd cleared his desk of the convoluted cases which had been gathering, piling up against his mind. He rang Chris at work. She sounded happier, and said she liked the idea of a day out.

He felt affectionate toward everyone he saw or thought of. Almost everyone. He stole a look at the young industrial chemist's account. No salary cheque had been received this month, and the account was overdrawn. So that's why he sits around all day.

Walking home, Pears felt ashamed of his snooping. It hadn't even gained him anything. He hardly knew the man; he'd spoken to him only once, to ask him to subdue a howling guitar at midnight. These days the chemist's flat was usually silent—inert was more the word. As he reached his road, Pears saw the chemist driven away in a van by one of the friends who'd visited him last night. Pears couldn't help feeling glad to see him go.

At dinner the children cheered the proposal of a day out. "I did feel odd yesterday," Pears said. "And this morning too. It must have been something I ate. Didn't you feel odd, Chris?"

"You know I had a migraine. I don't know about anything else."

"What about you two?" But they didn't know what he meant any more than Chris seemed to; and when he remembered how he'd felt it seemed healthier to forget.

The next day was cold and bright. They drove into North Wales. Slate hills were silver against pastel blue, white watery clouds streaked the horizons. They parked in a village whose name they stumbled over, laughing helplessly. The village seemed full of slim spires, of churches built of plump bricks of creamy dough around rose windows. They sat outside a pub, watching tractors pass, a market in the street opposite, a pony cantering by. "I wish I had a book about ponies," Linda said.

They bought her one, and *Watership Down* for Andrew. As they walked back to the car, Chris said "Do you think there's a hotel?" There was: two cottages knocked together, with a double room and a single free. "I bet you're called Mrs Jones," Linda told the landlady, who was. Andrew ran upstairs to read his book, and later they had to open the bedroom door to let the smell of dinner tempt him down.

After dinner they walked through the village. The streets were full of greetings and good-nights; distant windows came alight on the hills. An elderly couple said good night to them. They put the children to bed. Glancing through Andrew's book, Pears found a poem which he thought was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever read. He read it aloud to them, letting himself go completely into the poem and into the children's eyes; by the end he was almost in tears. The children said good night quietly. Later Chris and he made love tenderly, unhurried, tranquil. They lay and felt the wide night calm around them.

"Now I think about it, you were right," Chris said. "I did feel strange on Thursday."

"In what way?"

She was asleep as soon as she'd said "I don't know why, I was jealous of you and Linda."

On Sunday Mrs Jones invited them to visit a friend's farm. The farmer's children were playing on a collapsed haystack. Andrew and Linda plunged into it shouting, pleading with their parents to join them. Urged on by Mrs Jones and her friends, Pears and Chris climbed the stack, pretending reluctance. At the top Linda began tickling Pears to make him roll down. Feeling her small fingers move over him, he froze for a moment. Then he retaliated, and while Andrew played with the other children—bringing him out of himself, Pears thought, good—he and Linda set about Chris. They rolled to the bottom entangled, laughing.

The farmers wife insisted they stay for dinner. They drove home leisurely, through thin drifts of mist. The children slept in the back, nestling against Chris. Whenever he caught her eye in the mirror she smiled gently. Even Liverpool seemed refreshed by their outing; the long carriageway of Tuebrook was polished clean by frost and sodium light. The yellow paintwork of their house surged forward from the terrace to greet them. The

flat next door was dark. Pears couldn't remember ever having been so pleased to return home.

On Monday evening he hurried home. Chris wouldn't be back for an hour, the children were staying late at school for recorder practice. He'd had enough of the rusty gate. The tin of paint nudged his thigh. Paint now, oil tomorrow. Fog unrolled the street like a carpet for him, yards ahead. A light appeared in the flat next door. He didn't bother looking.

He'd climbed to the loft in search of a paint-brush when the sound began. It was a low rumbling, almost inaudible; for a while he wasn't sure he heard it. Dust stirred wakefully in the dim charred light beneath the roof. The sound seemed to be deep in the walls; momentarily the uncoloured shapes around him in the loft appeared to be vibrating. Surely it couldn't be thunder. Of course, it was a plane approaching overhead.

He had just climbed down to the landing when he felt the sound inside him.

It was growing there. It was a huge rusty lump of metal, sharp-cornered and jagged, exploding slowly from the centre of his cranium, forcing its dull saw-toothed way out through his ears. He could taste it. His mouth tasted full of coins.

Don't let it be starting again! Please, no!

He rushed for the stairs. Downstairs he wouldn't be so close to the sound. But he had to halt at the top, clutching at the banister, for he was plummeting toward the hall like a plane out of control. As he'd moved, his head had gone hurtling uncontrollably forward and down, as if on a cable. Within him metal rasped heavily.

By the time he reached the hall, gripping the banister and holding himself immobile on each step while his momentum subsided, the plane was fading. He sank gingerly into a chair in the living room. The sound drained lazily away, a murmur, a whisper, cold and rough in his head; he couldn't tell when it began to persist only in his imagination. He sat still. If he didn't move nothing else would happen. It would all fade, he would feel it go and know when it was safe to move. The walls held themselves still, almost trembling with the effort.

Soon he felt there was nothing wrong except the fog, which now had night on its side. The privet hedge was sliced thin by a block of grey. He stood up

to draw the curtains, but fell back into his chair. There was something out there he must watch for, to be prepared when it came. Each time he looked the fog had inched more of his surroundings into itself.

Because the window was closed he didn't hear them coming. The fog within the gateway stirred. Two small forms were rising to the surface. They came slowly, like bodies floating up from grey mud. He heard the faint clang of the gate, then they were rushing toward the house. They came to the window and peered in at him, mouthing. Then a key was scrabbling at the front door.

He knew their names, Andrew and Linda. But that didn't help. He struggled to grasp memories before they came in. Andrew was both younger and older than his age, prone to trip over his own feet, over-sensitive. No use. Pears was coldly analysing a stranger, and every phrase was a cliché. And Linda—

Memory deluged him, one image smashing against him again and again. Oh my God. Oh my God. How could he have had such feelings about a ten-year-old child, his own daughter? Even worse, how could he have tried to ignore them, forget them, pretend he'd meant Chris all the time? What was he becoming? Or had this secret self been waiting within him all the time?

Linda ran in, flushed, excited. "Bet you can't guess what we did today," she said.

She was all freed hair and pink flesh, palpitating. He clenched his fists down the sides of his chair, gouging his palms, trying to lock in a threatened explosion of nausea. "Tell me, tell me later," he managed to say. "Go and play."

"But I wanted to tell you," she said, hurt.

"Not now." Each time he spoke another voice, muffled, joined him in chorus. It was his own. He tried to ignore it long enough to speak. "Go, go on," he stammered.

Their sounds in the playroom annoyed him like the bumbling of flies, but at least he'd avoided further speech. He stared emptily at the encroaching fog. He wasn't going mad, he wasn't. But he couldn't bear to think that what he'd been experiencing was real. Yet if he were going mad the horror was himself, dragging him deeper, saving its worst until all his defences were down—not yet even hinting at its worst. His thoughts slithered, eluding

him. He wasn't mad. But there were states of mind similar to madness. Suddenly he knew he'd been drugged.

How? In food. The chemist next door—Nonsense. He had neither opportunity nor motive. Detectives always looked for those. But Pears had detected a drug in himself, however it had got there. Chris, experimenting on behalf of the hospital—Rubbish. It was temporary. Bearable. Drugs didn't drive sane people mad, drugs couldn't overcome a strong mind, a mind that wouldn't weaken, that was in control, they couldn't. Perhaps Chris could determine what drug it was, and the antidote. The wall of fog shifted forward, hanging dull and slack, leaving only a cramped strip of dark bedraggled lawn.

The children muttered in the playroom, blurred. Pears lay back gingerly; his head felt thin-shelled, rocking with liquid. He closed his eyes and let sounds pass him by: Andrew's toy train rattling on its cramped line, Linda's padding bare-socked footsteps, Linda's voice. His eyes sprang wide, glaring.

"I want the bunny." That was all she'd said. A frayed stuffed rabbit sat in the corner of the playroom, the children rarely bothered with it now. But Linda had just asked for it.

She hadn't really said "He wants to fuck me."

Or perhaps she had. After all, she needn't have meant her father. Of course she hadn't meant him, Pears thought, his face burning. Then whom had she meant? God, surely nobody! She had just been trying out the word, as children do.

She could have meant Pears. Young girls were supposed to go through a period of sexual love for the father. But wasn't she too young? Perhaps not: perhaps hidden in her mind were pictures of her father pulling off her clothes, his huge hairy body pressing down on her, forcing her wider—

He leapt up snarling. But his rage relieved him of nothing. He had to know. All he could hear now was what he thought she'd said. He strode into the hall, and balked. What could he say? He couldn't accuse her directly, in case his mind had tricked him. But why should his mind play that particular trick? He stood, trying to force himself forward; his hands felt bloated, and spiky with sweat. Andrew's voice squeaked. The playroom door hung immobile, smugly threatening. Linda answered.

She'd said "We want to stick these blocks up here." She hadn't said—

Pears slammed the door wide. The children stared at him: startled? innocent? pretending? Some building blocks were scattered amid the clutter on the floor, but he demanded "What were you saying?"

When Linda gazed at him, perhaps without guile, and opened her mouth, he interrupted savagely "You know what I mean. Just now. What were you saying?"

She looked uneasy now. "I don't know. What was I saying?"

"Leave Andrew out of it, don't try and make him answer for you. Don't drag him into it, you little—"

Her eyes were wider, rimmed with moisture. In a minute she would run to him in tears. He couldn't bear to have her near him. If she touched him —"All right. All right. It doesn't matter," he stammered, to escape. "Just keep quiet," he said, and slammed the door.

He couldn't shake off the suspicion that Linda had got the better of him. She had seduced him again: into silence. She was knowing, evil; her body was. It was taking over, possessing the little girl he'd loved. He mustn't think of her.

The fog had fitted to the windows like the backing of a mirror. A dull discoloured lump of flesh sat in his reflected armchair, staring at him. They were still gazing at each other when he heard Chris's key in the lock.

Fear burned through him. The children might tell her how he'd behaved. She'd know he was going wrong again. His eyes might betray him if she looked closely; drugs were supposed to show in the eyes. If her terror were added to his the onslaught would disintegrate him completely.

Wasn't he looking at it the wrong way? The inspiration lifted him to his feet. Being near her should help. It was exactly what he needed. He hurried after her, into the kitchen.

"Hello," he said. "I was going to paint the gate but the fog came down. I'll do it tomorrow without fail. I'll make myself if I have to. Not that I'll have lost interest." He was saying too much, too fast, trying to outrun his muffled other voice. "Do you like that colour paint? Never mind, don't answer, you must be tired. Was your day all right?"

"It was all right." She sounded a little weary. "You can get your own drink, Andrew. Don't start nibbling, Linda, dinner won't be long."

He avoided looking at the children. "Can I help you at all? Have you a migraine?"

"No, not yet." But all of a sudden Pears had. Perhaps she was in fact suffering secretly; but he was experiencing it directly. Perhaps he was imagining what migraine felt like. All he knew was that open metallic sores were burning coldly through his scalp; his cranium felt like a raw wound. Yet somehow he wasn't yet feeling the pain. If he weren't with Chris it might fade. "You don't want me to do anything, do you?" he gabbled, hurrying away, his scalp corroding.

He'd managed to attune himself to the fog, to its untroubled colourless calm, when Chris called him to dinner. He walked down the hall, bearing his calm carefully. That telephone is red. That wall is yellow. No need to touch them with his mind.

In the dining-area he found he felt invulnerable. He smiled surreptitiously. The effect was wearing off. He raised a forkful of dinner to his mouth.

He couldn't taste it. He almost reached into his mouth with the fork to examine the food. Lamb chop, mint sauce, potatoes, sprouts; no taste of any of them, just solids moving in his mouth. It was all right. No need to strain. This was only reaction against what he'd been suffering, what did they call it, sensory overload.

He chewed. Linda was gazing toward him as she ate.

He'd been chewing for hours. Linda gazed at him.

He chewed faster. Faster, faster. No use: he couldn't make Linda move. His time was slowing to a halt. Each moment was only a fraction of the one before. They would never add up to the next; he was trapped in this moment forever. And Linda's pictures of him were creeping toward his mind. "What are you doing?" he shouted. "What do you think you're staring at?"

Linda gasped. "I was just thinking."

Oh no, she couldn't trick him again so easily. Her gaze had been slowing him down, as though time were amber. "Ah," he snarled triumphantly. "And just what were you thinking, eh? Would it have been about me?"

"I was just thinking about my recorder. I played a whole page today." She was nearly crying.

Chris was staring at him. If he went on, she might suspect what had happened to him on Thursday night—when Linda had got the better of him. She mustn't know that, nobody must know, he must wipe it out of his mind. "All right," he told Linda abruptly. "It doesn't matter. Get on with your dinner."

Faces gazed at him. "I'm sorry," he said, to turn them away. "All right!" he shouted. "I'm sorry! I am sorry," he said quietly. Maybe Linda had been telling the truth. At least he'd escaped the trap of the dwindling moment, though his time still felt more intolerably stretched than it had since his childhood. Perhaps that was how Linda's time felt too.

Having eaten all he could, he retreated to the living room. He lay back in its stillness, letting its shapes and colours lie on his eyes. If he didn't move they would stay still. But they grew harsh, alert. Someone was coming down the hall.

He'd forgotten: he had to get through an entire evening with Chris and the children. Surely the effect would fade before then. He had only to keep still, calm.

Chris read while the children watched television. They were pretending. They knew something was wrong with him, they were watching covertly, until he betrayed himself. But he wasn't going to. Let them watch how calm he was. He closed his eyes.

Which sprang open. Rushing up from their depths there had been a doll whose head was cracked wetly like an egg of blood, a doll with Andrew's face. As Pears glared at Andrew, he glimpsed the cracks fading into the boy's hair.

Worse was waiting for his eyes to close. He stared at the television. Too hectic. He stared at the palely coffee-coloured wall. If he kept his eyes open the images would die away. His eyes twinged, smarting, and he blinked.

Linda sailed up, naked, posturing, ready to engulf him. He gasped, then tried to smile convincingly: he could just have woken from a doze, they couldn't prove anything. He blinked. Chris flashed out at him and was etched on his mind. All her nerves were laid bare; small sharp hooks like

dentist's instruments plucked at them. Her head was a mass of buried razor-blades.

He sprang from his chair and stumbled upstairs. If he couldn't see the three of them they wouldn't be able to provoke these nightmares. He lay on the bed. Ahead hung the window, a faint grey smudged rectangle. It was receding from him.

Instead of yielding more light to his eyes it grew fainter, dwindling. The bedroom was enormous and very dark. The floor was crowded with figures, creeping lopsidedly toward him on all fours. The heads of the foremost, grey blurred ovals, were peering at him over the edge of the bed.

Little of his scream escaped between his fingers. His other hand groped for the light switch, found something, switched it on. The room was defiantly bare. He examined that fact for a long time, until he felt it might be true. The depths of his mind waited for him. It was only a temporary lull. The tide would flood back soon. Each time it returned it was more overpowering.

He was descending the stairs, which felt still in the way a booby-trap might, when a terrible certainty gripped him. The effects must wear off eventually, no drug could last for the rest of one's life; but his nightmares must be imprinted on the house. Exactly as if some dreadful tragedy had happened there, the house was haunted now.

His gaze was drawn to the hall wallpaper. It was faintly speckled with a brownish stain. Blood. That was the beginning of the nightmare, when he'd seen the accident victim. If he could wipe off the last of the blood perhaps it would erase the imprint of his terror. Sickly he felt that the walls were soft within, as if subtly corrupted from their core, by the haunting; but he bent closer.

Peering, he wasn't sure whether the spots were blood or shadow. He sniffed the wall. Still unsure, he touched the stain with his tongue. A faint metallic taste: blood. Before he knew what he intended he was supporting himself, palms flat against the wall, while he licked avidly, searching for the taste.

He threw himself back, but couldn't escape himself. Maybe, he thought in a desperate bid for distraction, that's what the dopey chemist thought I meant to do when he saw me in the hall. Now his fantasy's true.

Chris and the children looked up when he opened the door. His face froze. He didn't know what expression he wore, but dared not alter it in case his face betrayed his terror. A tight mask he'd never seen before was clamped on him. As he paced to his seat the mask tugged painfully at his face, determined to reshape itself. He sat down and had to pass his hand over his face, as if brushing away sweat, in order to change the mask.

"You don't feel well, do you," Chris said. He managed to shake his grinning head. "You ought to lie down," she said.

He realised fully how helpless and alone he was. "No!" he shouted.

"You two had better go and play."

"I want them here." He wanted to keep an eye on Linda. "Stay here," he told them.

He seemed to have earned himself a lull. Someone was knocking and ringing the bell next door, but he could bear that. Now they were banging on the window of the ground-floor flat, several of them talking in low voices. "Come on," one said. "I can't stand this." Pears was glad to hear someone else feeling that, for a change. They were going; the gate clanked. He looked up, smiling emptily, and saw Linda gazing beyond him in horror.

He twisted about. A dark blotch was scuttering over the wall, hectic tendrils quivering. It was—it was a crane-fly; its legs fluttered hysterically, as if in a dying paroxysm. Still the lull. It scuttled into a corner. "I'll get it," he told Chris. She usually dealt with intruding insects; this time he'd do it, to show that he could.

He had trapped the whirring fly, it was trembling violently yet feebly in his fist like an essence of terror, when he glimpsed Chris's expression.

At once she was thrusting the poker deeper into the fire. He opened the window and released the fly, then he gazed at the fog, trying to understand. She wasn't frightened of insects. Then he knew: he'd projected his own fading terror onto her face. His nightmare had lent her a mask. He sat down, smiling at her.

When he looked away her weak smile collapsed into naked terror.

This time her smile wasn't swift enough. He forced himself to look behind him at the corner toward which she'd been glaring. He wouldn't panic, he'd

fought through, the effect was fading, vanquished. But as he turned, a faint smell of something like meat touched his nostrils.

The corner was bare. He felt weak with relief, yet uneasily baffled. Briefly he'd dreamed that he was infecting Chris. He must have been right before: he was simply imposing the last of his terror on his perception of her. Mightn't that show that the terror was leaving him? He glanced at her.

She smiled at him. She smiled. She was almost convincing. But he knew what was happening, and reality parted beneath him. The smell filled his nostrils. She hadn't been looking at the corner, but at him. He had already smelled what she smelled: himself. Behind her smile her eyes were transfixed by slivers of growing horror. As if her eyes were mirrors he could see what she saw.

In his chair she saw an eyeless face of mottled bone, grinning at her through its gaping cheeks.

At last he managed to look down at his hand. He felt his neck-bone creak. His hand was still flesh. But he could feel his corpse. It was inside him, slowly corroding its way to the surface, a core of numbness spreading outward, reaching lazily for him. It was unhurried. It had as much time as he.

He suppressed his scream, even though it would say he was still alive. There was worse to come, he realised almost dispassionately. He looked at Andrew and Linda, watching television, sitting still. Still as corpses.

Suddenly he knew, gazing at their immobile faces on which colours flickered lightly, that they were feeling rigor mortis stake its claim on them. Death was squeezing their windpipes experimentally, like a witch in a dream. But it was no dream, for he could smell them. It must be terror that was fluttering trapped in their eyes.

All he could do was close his own. It no longer mattered what was waiting in there. Anything would be more bearable than the sight of his dead children. He closed them out.

Blank.

White.

Nothing.

When he opened his eyes, feeling purged and somehow released, he was in a room with three strangers.

There was a woman, and a small imitation of her: a girl, less haggard, pinker, more plump. There was a small boy who reminded him vaguely of someone. All three of them were pretending his presence in the room was natural—pretending that they knew who this man was. But they didn't, any more than he did.

They were watching him surreptitiously. He had to get out before they moved on him, the stranger. But they would never let him reach the door unless he defended himself.

He caught sight of the poker. Half of it was buried in the fire and red-hot, but the handle was insulated. He stood up gingerly and began to move stealthily toward the fire. He felt the three of them pretending not to watch him. If he used the weapon he would have to close his eyes, though he wouldn't be able to close his ears.

He had to escape. He inched toward the poker, trying to seem casual, aimless. For a moment he was surrounded by the three; his held breath burned in him. But they didn't leap.

The presence of the young girl disturbed him most of all. She was his greatest danger. There was something in her he must destroy; her freshness was deceitful, her soft plumpness was a snare. She was like the walls of the house, whose corrupted cores oozed now, thick with evil. Her innocence was disgusting, intolerable, false. He'd make sure her body could never again lure anyone. He stooped to the fire. As the poker stirred, its nest of cinders fell open, brightening.

Something came howling toward the house.

He jerked and almost fell. He stumbled to the window, knocking the television askew. They'd trapped him in his room until the howling came for him. He shouldered the clinging curtains aside and wrenched up the sash. The howling growled into silence.

A blue glow pulsed through the fog. The fog's dead heart was beating. It took him minutes to discern a blue will-o'-the-wisp, flashing sluggishly. Uniformed men strode toward him out of the fog. No, they were heading for the next house.

He turned to watch, and came face to face with a pinched white almost fleshless mask, peering through the neighbouring window.

It was his own reflection. No: it was his enemy, the man who'd been trying to drive him mad. At last Pears had found him. Now he would make him suffer.

Pears was trying to remember where he'd put the poker when the uniformed men closed around his enemy. Pears snarled in frustration. The white mask was still as they lifted the body to its feet, but the body was breathing. They could have him, so long as they used the poker on him. Pears would give them his. He turned, but the ambulance had gone.

He was staring emptily at the fog when the chemist's friends returned. They were the three he'd seen on Thursday night. He could remember. He let memories drift back as they might, hoping he wouldn't remember anything he couldn't bear.

One of the young men hurried into the flat and rummaged in a rickety chest of drawers. He snatched out a piece of paper, and something else. He moved offstage, and Pears heard a toilet flushing.

As he emerged, one of his friends demanded "Have you got the formula?"

Pears tried to control himself, but already was screaming with laughter. The three glanced sharply at him. "I'm sorry," he gasped, weeping, and was hoarse with laughter again. He ran out, ashamed and spasmodically hilarious, to explain if he could.

One frowned at him from beneath a red mock-leather cap and edged away. "Don't get paranoid," said the one who'd entered the flat. "We aren't going to make this stuff. Neither is anyone else," and he tore up the piece of paper minutely. The fragments swarmed away on the hint of a wind.

"He'd freaked out completely, that guy in there," the third said, winding his long scarf tautly into his fists. "We had to call the ambulance."

"He'd synthesised a new trip," the man in the red cap chattered, released apparently from guilt into speech. "It was too much. It got worse every time you tripped. But he said it was worth learning how to control it."

"The last one was so bad we took him away for the weekend. We thought we'd persuaded him off it. But tonight he was even deeper into it."

"I never took any," said the man with the stretched scarf. "But I was picking up his trip while we were waiting. It was that powerful, being near him could turn you on even if you hadn't taken any. It was bad. We had to call the ambulance."

"I think you had," Pears reassured him, feeling his surroundings start the long slow fall back into familiarity. He remembered the face he'd seen carried away. The eyes had been sunken, passive, immobile, at the mercy of whatever passed before or within them. They had looked exactly like red-cracked glass.

Weeks later he told Chris some of what had happened, and why. Perhaps she believed him. "Did you feel any of it?" he asked. "Anything at all?"

"I don't know."

"Anything you can describe?"

"No."

Perhaps she was telling the truth; he couldn't be sure. Had she forgotten her jealousy of Linda? If so, what should that convey to him? How should he react? Since his experience he seemed to be approaching decisions more and more gently and circuitously, and making fewer.

He carried the paint and brush down the hall. Today would be the rusty gate's last day. The children shouted in the playroom. Had they felt any of it? How could he find out? It would be better to let them forget. Besides, he seemed to have forgotten all he'd ever learned about how to talk to them.

"The shuttlecock's under the stairs," Linda said, muffled.

So it was, behind a tangle of nesting chairs. Andrew ran into the hall, bursting into brighter colour as he entered the path of sunlight. He stooped beneath the stairs, but shrank back at once. "I can't find it," he called, his voice unnaturally high.

What had the boy flinched from? "There it is, Andrew," Pears said, and handed him the shuttlecock.

When Andrew had gone Pears forced himself to stoop beneath the stairs again. Under his hand the wall felt thin, a crust over softness. He made himself look at what he'd glimpsed from the corner of his eye.

It was snarling silently from the dark corner where the underside of the stairs met the floor. It was pale and smooth, and had no eyes that he could

see. A mat of grey hair like a lump of dust hung over most of the face. Its mouth was huge and red with an unbroken ring of teeth, gibbous with rage.

He managed to save the tin of paint before it fell, and saw at once what the face must be. Someone had wiped a splotch of red paint with a wad of paper. The matted hair was a tangle of dust.

But the corner was bare. There was no paper beneath the stairs, and the corner was clean of dust.

Only The Wind

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Note: The square-bracketed 'break' is a guess at a missing word from the Inconsequential Tales version.

There's just one more thing I want you to see," Truman called to Hope. "Over here." As Hope walked toward the edge of the roof the wind caught him, rushing him forward. Truman was standing at the gap in the railing at the edge, holding onto the railing at either side. He'd waited for a strong gust, but it was almost too strong; it was fumbling to pluck him free and send him over the twelve-storey drop. He was just able to yank himself out of the gap as Hope came hurtling towards him, sliding on a patch of rain.

Truman shouted inarticulately, still dragging himself along the rail. The inspection party looked up in time to see Hope fall, a whirling helpless doll, a spreading splash at their feet. Truman stared across at the next multistorey block, crumpled by a gale six months ago. He tried to ignore the peremptory thumping of his heart. The wind carried sounds of dismay up to him like an accusation.

But when the case reached the court, the accusations weren't aimed at him. The police had found documents in Hope's safe that betrayed his accomplice: Price, a stooped man with wistful eyes whom hardly anyone knew outside the city council chamber. The multistorey block that had collapsed had been let down by inferior materials, and the documents showed that these materials had been supplied by Price from his builder's yard. Clearly Hope had kept the documents to protect himself. Price was sent for trial, and the court forgot him. At least he hadn't tried to kill Truman.

"I took Hope on the roof and told him that all the evidence pointed to him," Truman told the court. "I thought that seeing the damage he'd done to the other building might spur his conscience. I'll be frank: I chose the day the buildings were being inspected so as to have people nearby in case he did anything impulsive." His speech was carefully prepared, but he was

becoming distractingly hoarse through having to shout over the rattling of the windows. Even when an usher closed them the March wind continued to rattle them viciously.

"I saw him coming toward me and stepped back instinctively," Truman croaked. "I didn't know whether he meant to push me or to throw himself off. I prefer to think the latter. He may have yielded to temptation once, but he wasn't essentially a bad man." He made way for the chairman of the inspection party, who confirmed that Truman had been nowhere near Hope when he fell. Not that anyone was suggesting anything else. The windows shook as if with a fit of rage.

Truman read the newspaper reports as they appeared. No, he'd told a reporter outside the court, he didn't think there was any further corruption among his fellow councillors, but he would be the first to lead a committee of inquiry if corruption were suspected. The interview never appeared, since the reporter's notebook had blown away during it, down a grid. Price pleaded guilty and was sent to jail, which was reported at length in the national newspapers, as Hope's death had been.

The national publicity worried Truman. He barricaded himself behind his work as chairman of the housing committee. But the letter was waiting on his hall table one night. It was from his brother Mike. *Please come at once, George. Bernadette knows. I am sure you would prefer to keep our discussion as private as possible.* In the morning Truman packed a bag and told his housekeeper he hoped to return the following day.

He drove out of the city, past the collapsed building. Nobody had been killed; the building had been evacuated in time. Homes had been destroyed, of course. But what homes, Truman thought. More like filing cabinets, those buildings. His committee had recommended them reluctantly, only for reasons of speed and cheapness. I'd have been glad to see the last of a home like that, he thought.

On the motorway he relaxed. No need for haste. Mike wouldn't do anything until they'd talked, even if his wife Bernadette urged him to. Driving easily, Truman thought back.

Hope had approached him one day to confide his suspicions. A man had left Price's yard to work for Hope, who had deduced from hints that Price had provided disguised inferior materials for the multistorey block, supplying the original materials to someone else. Hope had wanted Truman

to help him find out who that was. Truman wondered whether he'd realised at the end. Even though Hope owned a builder's yard, which had seemed to confirm his guilt in court, he couldn't have known that Truman's brother owned one too.

The hills beside the motorway smoothed out. A wind swooped over the fields, grabbing Truman's car, nudging it out of its lane, shaking it violently. He curbed the wheel. A few minutes later the first of a series of flyovers closed about him, warding off the wind, and he relaxed again.

He'd paid Price to plead guilty and to name Hope as his accomplice. The man would in any case have gone to jail, he'd been pathetically grateful that the money would be waiting in trust for him. He'd been as grateful before, when Truman had promised not to reveal Price's sexual life if he'd help in a deal that would pay him as well; and later, when Truman successfully nominated him as chairman of the committee to investigate the building's collapse. Mike had been grateful too, for his yard was failing, even though he knew Truman had added the materials into a council contract in order to pay for them. Perhaps he was still grateful. But as for Bernadette—

A gust of wind seized the car and hurled it into the fast lane, into the path of a lorry. The lorry blared, slowing hardly at all in the fifty yards between it and Truman. But he'd wrenched the wheel over and had fled back into his lane, almost skidding with haste. The lorry swept past enormously, flourishing a tiny fist.

When he reached the service area Truman parked to let his heart quiet. It shook him like a great soft gong. He couldn't understand; he'd been deep in the flyovers, there'd been no gap for the wind to enter. But it had. He drove the rest of the way gingerly, never freeing his mind to think.

When he reached Mike's yard it had been dark for hours. Nobody was about. He climbed onto the roof of his car and over the wall. Two hours later he climbed back panting, kicking away a crate and lifting his coat from the topping of jagged glass. Near the car the April wind was raising a small cloud of brick dust, like someone stamping as he waited for a meeting. In a minute Truman had driven to Mike's house.

Bernadette opened the door. Behind her, ranked neatly on the stairway wall, Truman saw miniatures she'd taken from a friend of her mother's, having contested her mother's will. "Don't bother talking," she said. "We've made up our mind."

"Let him in," Mike said. "He's still my brother."

Bernadette set out dinner, every movement sharply proclaiming that she felt obliged to do so. They ate timidly, embarrassed by their sounds. Truman felt surrounded by her taste: her decor, her arrangement of the house. He and Mike had been brought up by relatives, indifferently; he'd always helped Mike, advised him, supported him, given him things. Now she'd replaced him.

After dinner Truman talked. He told them he hadn't realised that Price's stock was so limited he would need to make the substitution. In fact he hadn't realised, to begin with. "I was only thinking of you," he told Mike.

"That's what we're doing, Mr Truman," Bernadette said. "But we're doing it like normal people."

"I'd be glad if you'd call me George."

"You must have done some good, Mr Truman," Bernadette said, "or you wouldn't be a councillor. But you have to pay for your mistakes in this life. I know that embitters some people, but I have a feeling about you. You defended your friend in court, you could have said he meant to kill you. I think when you've paid your debt you'll find you want to do all the more for people."

Truman gazed sadly at her. I'll do for you, he thought, that's for sure. "Have you any of the materials still? Then at least let me take them away," he said to Mike. Bernadette frowned, shaking her head. "If you help me load the lorry I'll get rid of the materials," Truman said. "Now, while it's dark. You come too, Bernadette. I don't want you to think I'm getting at Mike behind your back."

In the end they persuaded her. Pursing her lips, she went upstairs to dress. "She wants to tell the police," Mike said. "I'll stop her, though. I'll talk to her after you've gone."

And lose, Truman thought. They heard her open the front door, silently rebuking them for keeping her waiting. A moment later the door slammed violently as the wind forced its way in. Glasses chattered on the sideboard. The wind was still coming, out of the dining-room, chiming through the hall chandelier, dwindling but still coming, nudging open the door of Mike's den. It fell just short of Truman's face. "We're coming now," Mike called.

Truman drove them to the yard. "I'll park and meet you at your office," he said.

When he'd parked he sat in the car. He didn't want to enter the yard until it was over. He fought an urge to call Mike back. If there had been only Mike this wouldn't have been necessary. It was Bernadette's fault. Truman cursed her.

Mike's office was built into the back of one of the two storehouses. It was approached by a path between the two buildings, along planks laid over mud and rubble. Earlier, Truman had substituted thinner planks. They would [break] beneath the weight of two people, and the bricks that he'd piled precariously to a height of seven feet against the walls in the middle would topple inward on them both. If they were only stunned Truman would have to finish the job. He hoped Bernadette was only stunned.

At last he began to walk toward the gate. He'd heard nothing from inside the car. Silver light from the streetlamps veiled the sockets of the surrounding derelict houses, lay flat on Mike's yard, dimming almost to darkness on the path to the office. It took time for the eyes to adjust to it, but Mike knew his way without looking.

Inside the gate a dilapidated lorry huddled beneath a long tarpaulin. Piles of timber and brick stretched away into dimness. Truman began to pick his way over the ruts. Then he heard a rattling of brick between the storehouses. He began to run.

He had almost reached the path when Mike called "Come and see what someone's done."

Truman would have run for the gate, except that this was his last chance. When his eyes adjusted to the dimness of the path he saw that the bricks had fallen, but not on Mike and Bernadette. They had nearly tripped over them. "Someone had thrown all these down here," Mike said.

A wind was bumbling between the walls. It was the wind that had thrown the bricks down, Truman realised. It had helped him on the roof, but not here. He strode toward Mike and Bernadette. It was his last chance. "Look there!" he cried, pointing behind them. As they turned he picked up a brick in each hand.

And something hurled him forward, face down on the toppled bricks, thrusting him down among them. They cut into him and bruised him as he

struggled onto his back to face his assailant. But there was nothing, although it was crushing him, pressing into his eyes and ears until all he could see was the inside of a ringing crimson mask. He opened his mouth to cry out and it rushed in, feeling as if it were wedging down his tongue, forcing his jaw wider like a too-large gag. It had filled his nose too. The crimson mask was being hammered into his head, growing blacker now, squeezing him out of his body. He had one last glimpse of Mike and Bernadette pressing themselves against the walls, staring down at him and trying to make out what he was struggling against. But it was only the wind.

Morning Call

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A soon as the phone rang Craig jerked awake. Green blotches hung beside his eyes. The clock face. Four o'clock. He groped for the light cord and pulled it, then he lifted the receiver.

The phone was still ringing, slowed down and rustily painful, in his head. "Yes?" he said feebly. At four in the morning he could think of nothing else to say.

The line sounded like a beach. There might have been breathing mixed with the static, but he wasn't sure. He was about to replace the receiver when a voice said "Is that you, Peter?"

It was faint and sexless. It sounded like someone talking in sleep, or under a drug; it seemed to strain to hold onto the words and get them through. Perhaps the caller was mentally disturbed; Craig had had enough such calls in his time. "Who do you want?" he said.

"Don't you know?" the voice said sleepily. "I thought you were supposed to be clever."

"I think you have the wrong number."

"Then I've had it for a year." The voice had grown harsher. Craig could hear it was a woman's, but so strained it didn't sound like any voice he knew. "May you be damned," it said. "That's all I wanted to say. Just thought you'd like to know that you've killed me."

While the silence challenged him to reply, Craig replaced the receiver. That's all I need, he thought, something like this. As if I'm not asked to do enough during the day. All I need is something like this to drag me in and knot myself up with the rest of my life. I can't even see where the knots are any more.

He debated leaving the receiver off the hook. He was sure that wouldn't be the only call. But he couldn't; he didn't know who else might ring. He lay

back and tried to relax. He'd just begun to sink into sleep when the phone rang again.

"You don't believe I'm dying, do you?" the voice said at once.

Craig sank back on the bed as if the weight of the receiver had pulled him down. He recognised only too well the sort of hysteria that was mounting at the other end. If he cut the woman off it would only grow worse. But he knew from experience that far from being able to calm it down, he was likely to become infected by the hysteria himself.

"Can't you say anything?" the voice said. "Hoping I'll forget you're there? Don't you worry, I'll remember you until my dying breath. And that won't be long, you swine. Don't you even want to know why?"

"Look, I'm sorry," Craig said. "If you're really as you say you are, you should call a doctor immediately."

"But that's what I am doing! Or have you decided to give up your, what did you pretend it was, your vocation? Are you being honest at last? Come on, you dirty little swine, stop hiding. You were always good at that, hiding behind your job, pretending you cared about people. I know it's you. What's the matter, afraid to hear—"

The voice faded, squeaking, as Craig dropped the receiver back on its hook. He lay, eyes closed. This was too much. All his sense of being burdened weighed on him; he felt helpless, unable to move. When the phone rang he lay counting the peals, wondering when it would tire. Thirty. Forty. He grabbed the receiver and immediately slammed it back.

A moment later it rang again. He cut it off at once. Then began a game of reactions, of Craig interrupting the bell almost as soon as it threatened to sound. Once, in the tiny gap between lifting and replacing the receiver, he heard a thin wordless scream at the other end, a squeezed cry of frustrated rage. He started and let the receiver drop. He gazed at the bottle of barbiturates next to the phone. No, not those either. I can't knock myself out, in case someone needs me.

He'd lost count of the number of times he'd silenced the phone when he realised that among the repeated calls, someone else might be trying to reach him. He had an idea. The next time, he answered. "Hello," he said, hoping he sounded like a policeman. "Who is this?"

But she didn't even bother to taunt him about his ruse. Her voice was dull; she sounded stunned. "I can't move my fingers," she said. "You didn't tell me it would do that, you swine."

For the first time he felt that she might be more than hysterical. "Hoping I wouldn't be able to dial, weren't you?" she said. "But you forgot the operator. I can still pick up the phone and rattle the hook. You've left me that much."

"Then the operator must be incompetent," Craig said. "If she weren't I'd advise you to call a hospital."

"In other words, anyone but you? You know I wouldn't do that. Because you wouldn't really like it, would you? I'd have to tell them what you gave me. And how you made sure I'd read what it said in that book you left lying around, how you're dead in two hours when you've taken as much as I have. You're supposed to fall asleep before that. That's what you must be hoping I'll do. But I'm going to keep talking until I die. You won't stop me talking."

Craig sighed. He still wasn't sure whether the woman had simply been taken over by some insomniac hysteria. Perhaps she might say something by which he could tell. He didn't know what to do except listen. That wasn't too taxing, after all. He closed his eyes, which were rough and burning. "Go on, then," he said.

"There it is, the bedside manner. You think that makes people think you care, don't you? It certainly worked on me, for a while." Her voice was beginning to falter occasionally; she was shouting—to wake herself up, he thought. "You put it on when I told you how my husband used to treat me. But you should have seen your face then, when I told you what he was really like as soon as you'd closed his eyes. You did your job well, though, I'll give you that. Don't you worry, you said, I'll help you in any way I can. But I don't imagine that your medical association would approve of some of your ways."

She seemed to be trying to winkle him out of his silence. He lay inert, the receiver at his ear. This early in the morning I don't help people, he thought. Not this morning, anyway. Not strenuously, at least; I'm listening. Her voice kept jarring him awake.

"You really were absurd sometimes," she said. "When you used to pretend I was pestering you when you visited me. You thought I believed you. Until

the day I took you upstairs. You didn't mind that so much, did you? You didn't mind—"

Craig gazed at the receiver. She'd lost control completely, he thought. Well, let her run on. It doesn't matter whether I'm listening. He stuffed the receiver into his pillow. Her voice mumbled on, as if battling suffocation. He found the noise even more unsettling. When he could no longer stand it he put the receiver to his ear.

"—drink so much, don't smoke so much. You didn't want me to do anything except put up with you. You made me feel as if I'd dragged you into bed, as if you weren't a poor lonely little swine. We couldn't even be seen together, because of your job. That was always more important than me. You thought I was demanding, didn't you?"

Can you wonder, Craig found himself about to say.

"But you didn't mind having me. That was all right, until the baby came. Just a poor little baby that might have given you away. Of course you didn't say that, you said it might harm me to have it. Do you remember telling me that the one thing you always respected was human life? I wonder what you called that. Maybe there wasn't enough of it to be respected. I don't suppose you even looked at it. Something to be thrown away."

She snarled back a sob. "But even that wasn't enough for you. You had to make me so I'd never have children. Oh, no, of course that wasn't you. Just an unavoidable complication, wasn't it? And of course it wouldn't do for me to ask for a second opinion. That would have given you away. So you gave me this stuff to calm me down. To shut me up, you mean!" She was shouting; her voice was rawly distorted by the microphone. "You thought I didn't know why you wanted to shut me up. I could lose you your job, but that wasn't it. That wasn't why you hated me. You hated me because you'd had to betray your ideals. And that had to be my fault."

Her voice picked at Craig's ears like a rusty chisel. He moved restlessly, his fingers working on the receiver. She had to run down soon. She was saying anything that came into her head.

"I've decided," she said suddenly. "Talking isn't enough. I want you to come here and see what you've done. I want to watch you see what your ideals have accomplished. You've got time. If you don't come I'm sure the police will. Especially when I tell them your name."

Craig's eyes opened, and he glanced at the clock. "You said that whatever you've taken took two hours to work," he said. "You rang me at four. It's six now."

She was laughing, a dry rattle. "You lying little swine. You'd say anything to avoid me, wouldn't you? I've got my watch in front of me. It's five o'clock. Better get a move on. I'll give you half an hour, then I'm calling the police."

Craig switched on his bedside radio. After a minute the six o'clock news began. "You heard that," he said.

"Oh dear God," she said. He heard her start the plunge toward death. He'd never heard death quite like that, the death of someone falling wide-eyed and unbelieving into darkness. 'You've done it," she said. "Are you proud, Doctor Peter Craig, you swine?"

"All right, Kathleen," he said. "Yes, it's me. There's nothing either of us can do now. Close your eyes. Just close your eyes and I'll talk to you."

But he didn't know what to say. In any case, there was no response from the other end. Even the static had been swept away, and there was only a gaping silence. "Kathleen?" he said. Still silence.

He was about to replace the receiver when, distant but unmistakable, he heard the door of her room open.

It was impossible. Something on the line. It couldn't be Kathleen, she didn't have a housekeeper, she could hardly have anyone else in the house now. Unless—unless the operator had noticed how odd her voice was—unless she'd been so troubled by it that she'd listened in— unless, having listened in, she'd called the police—

Heavy footsteps approached the phone at the other end. A man's voice said "I don't know who you are, mister. But you won't have time to make it difficult for us to find you."

Craig opened the full bottle of barbiturates. Quickly, abstractedly, he swallowed the contents. He lay down and closed his eyes. After a moment he opened them. Reaching out, he left the phone off the hook.

Pet

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When I was old enough my father took me to see the market. I'd looked forward to it for years, because I'd had to wait until my body was old enough to keep me awake all day. I don't think I could have fallen asleep in the market, though. Everything made me want to run ahead and see what was on the next stall. I just kept running, even though people were laughing and pointing at me. I didn't stop until I saw Pet.

He didn't look much. I'd seen other things in the market that had made me dizzy, they were so beautiful. A black jewel the size of a big apple, which an exploding sun had made of a planet; when you picked it up you felt you were holding a world in your hand, and I felt so sad and uneasy I started to shiver and had to put it down. And time-record crystals that you gazed deep into, until you saw a world begin to form; you could watch the whole history of a world in a day if you wanted to, because the crystals speeded up your mind as they went faster. And dust-dancers that were a cloud of all colours of glittering dust, that would dance for you and make patterns almost too fast for you to follow, and go back in their box when you held it open, because they were thousands of tiny creatures that lived like that on their own planet, dancing for anyone who came near. But when I saw Pet I forgot everything else I'd seen, and forgot there was anything else to see.

He was the only thing left on the stall. He was half as tall as me, covered with a short smooth amber fur. His eyes were black and very big, and they looked as deep as I dreamed the night sky must be. Under the fur he had a little pink face that looked old and very peaceful. He was squatting on top of the crystal that made the field that kept him caged, with his legs crossed and his arms folded under his knees. He was looking at the sky. I'd never seen anything like him, and I thought he must be from galaxies away. I didn't know anything else about him, except that I wanted him.

When my father caught me up I said "Can I have him?"

"He's the only one on the planet," the trader said. "Maybe the only one anywhere."

"Then he must be far too expensive for me," my father said.

The trader named a price that sounded expensive even to me, though I didn't know much about those things. "There, you see," my father said.

He could see I was disappointed. He bought me an orchestra pipe instead, the kind that can both play a tune for you to follow and improvise along with any tune you choose to play on it, six different added lines at once. A little computer does that. But I kept running back to look at Pet.

The last time the trader was folding up his stall. "Can I touch him?" I asked.

He looked at me to decide whether I was going to run off with Pet, then he made the sign at the crystal to shut off the cage-field. I reached out and stroked Pet's head.

His fur felt like grass in the sun, only it was softer and finer and warmer. He didn't move when I stroked him. He kept gazing at the sky. Only his eyelids moved, blinking. "What's he looking at?" I said.

"He isn't looking," the trader said. "He's listening. Listening to hear if there are any others like him left."

I don't always remember when I dream, but I did that night. My father had brought some of his friends into our home-field, but that didn't disturb me; that wasn't what made me dream. I dreamed I could see Pet in his cage on the stall, gazing up. But he was gazing up at me, and his eyes said: please take me home. I told my father the dream next day, and he frowned and said "Not at that price."

After that, every time we went to the market I would run straight to Pet. Every time my father would say to the trader "How much is he today?" The trader would say a price that was a little less than last time, but my father would say "Still too much." Pet would squat there peacefully, gazing at the sky. He never seemed to have moved.

Once my father said "Why do you want him? He won't play with you. He'll just sit there."

"I want to look after him," I said.

Then, one day, we arrived at the stall just as two people were walking away with what they'd bought. For a moment I hated my father, because he'd let someone else buy Pet. But they hadn't. They'd bought a pair of silverspinners, the most valuable pets of all. Pet was where he always was. "How much is he today?" said my father.

The trader looked at me. "He's the only one on the planet. Probably much rarer," he said. "He's quiet and clean. He doesn't cost me anything to feed. But nobody can be bothered with him. I've had a good day. He's yours for half of what I asked last time." "You'll get tired of him," my father said to me. "No I won't," I said. "I promise."

My father and the trader began talking, about where Pet had come from, things like that. I wasn't listening; I was stroking Pet's head. He didn't look at me, but I knew he must be able to feel me. It was enough for me to know that. "You'll have to think of a name for him," the trader said, but I already had.

At first I couldn't see how we would take Pet home. I thought perhaps I'd have to carry him. But the trader took hold of one of his paws, which were like little furry hands, and drew it out from under his knees. Then he put the paw in my hand.

I could feel each of its fingers resting on my palm. I could feel blood pumping in the fingertips. It felt small and easily hurt. It didn't take hold of my hand; it just lay there, trusting me. Pet was waiting for me to lead him, as if he were blind.

When we started for home he walked along beside me, his legs reaching out so far in front of him that his bottom almost touched the ground, as if he were making up a new way to walk. People laughed at him; I did, a little. As he walked he gazed up at the sky.

He almost bumped into our home, and I had to pull him back. I jerked his arm rather hard, because I'd forgotten that he wouldn't be able to see our home even if it was visible. The jerk must have been a shock, but his pulse stayed steady. He was even more peaceful than he looked.

My father made the rapid movements of his hands that cut off our crystal's field. The movements are like birds dancing, so fast I could never copy them exactly, although I'd always tried. He always used to say that when I could copy them I'd be ready to use them.

I led Pet around our home. I somehow thought he might like it, because it's almost all natural unchanged. I thought he was like that. There's no furniture, except for the crystal at the centre, if you call that furniture. There are ridges of rock with natural seats to sit in, there are fields of grass to lie in, a stream running all the way through and bringing air in with it, though its gaps in our crystal-field. The crystal-field surrounds it all. The field is shaped like a dome, my father says, but completely transparent. "Put as little between yourself and the world as possible," he always says. But even he had a heating system built into the crystal's brain.

I might just as well have shown all this to myself, because Pet didn't look. He followed me, but his gaze never left the sky. The sun was two fingers' length above the horizon. One thing I'd overheard the trader telling my father was that Pet ate the light, took it in through his fur and made it feed him. I wondered if he'd fall asleep when the light went, like us. "No," my father said. "He never sleeps."

I took Pet up on one of the ridges. I thought that since he was listening for something from the sky, the higher he was the better. He squatted there, gazing. That was all he'd done during the half a day I'd had him. But I wasn't impatient. I knew he had feelings, and this was what he wanted to do. I sat very still and watched him. I wanted to see if he ever moved by himself. That seemed very important.

When the light began to slip over the horizon I tried to stay awake. I thought Pet might move while I was asleep. But of course I couldn't. Your body puts you to sleep to stop itself being worn out too quickly, like a machine. As you grow older your body lets you stay awake longer, until when you're very old you see the middle of the night. You can't trick your body—at least you can't at my age, though a good many older people, including my father, were trying to keep themselves awake to have more time to work. I was trying to keep awake, staring at Pet beside me on the ridge, and the next moment I was asleep.

The next thing I knew, I was awake. And it was night.

I was lying in my nest, which I'd made in the middle of one of the fields, using some of the grass. My father had carried me there. I could feel the grass, but I was blind. There was darkness close against my eyes. I knew it was only the night, and I lay quiet until my pulse slowed. Then I rolled onto my back, and I nearly cried out. The sky had gone.

There was nothing above me but blackness, that could have been as close as my eyes or so far away that I felt myself spreading into all the space between, as if I couldn't hold myself back. Then a tiny glint of light at the edge of my eye caught my attention. I stared directly at it, and after what seemed a very long time I saw it was the blink of a star. Now I'd seen one I could see others. There were six, there were a dozen, dozens. Perhaps Pet had come from one of them. That made them feel closer, less distant and lifeless and frightening. I let out my breath, which I'd been holding as if afraid that the darkness might hear me.

I turned on my other side to see Pet. My nest rustled. My father had called a small circle of light from the crystal, so that he could see to work. As the nest rustled he glanced up sharply from the calculations he was making. I held myself still, because I knew he would be worried or angry if he knew I was awake. After a moment he went back to his work.

Pet was squatting at the edge of the light. He looked as if he didn't care whether it was there or not. He was gazing at the stars. Suddenly I wanted him to come to me, to show that he knew I was there. I thought that, very hard. Sometimes, if you think hard enough at animals that know you, they'll respond. But Pet didn't move, even when my father kept glancing at him as if Pet were disturbing him. I kept thinking at Pet, until I began to dream I was doing so. Then I was asleep.

When I next awoke it was dawn. I could feel that without opening my eyes. You shouldn't be able to; you aren't supposed to be able to tell when the heating system gives way to the sun's heat. But I can. I like to feel the wave of light spilling over the horizon towards me. I opened my eyes. Pet hadn't moved from where I'd seen him during the night. The light was sweeping past him.

I didn't tell my father I'd been awake before. We ate leaf and flour pie, then I went to the crystal for my lessons. The crystal's smaller than my hand, but besides making our home it teaches me the history of the universe, and mathematics, and sciences. One day when I'm old enough it will teach me how it works.

It shows you things in the air just in front of your eyes, words and ideas and happenings in the past, then it asks you questions that tie all these things together. My father says it always makes learning a little difficult for you, so that your mind will grow. I try to make it teach even faster, so that

it'll reach the point where it tells me how it works. But I can't make it believe I'm cleverer than I am.

Only that day I couldn't concentrate. I kept looking at Pet, sitting patiently near me, his head tilted back. The crystal was repeating my lessons, speeding them up so I'd have to concentrate. Finally it slowed down to let me catch up, and made a gong-note in the air to call my father. It had never done that before.

My father frowned at Pet, then he gestured to switch off our home-field. "We'll let him sit in the open," he told me, taking Pet's paw. "He might like that." But I knew he thought Pet was distracting me from my lessons. He left Pet near the edge of our home. Eventually I managed to concentrate.

Later my father took me walking, for the second half of the day's lessons. I always enjoy that part, because he shows me how to read the landscape, what you can eat, where it's easiest to walk and run, the best places to set up home. I'd asked whether we could bring Pet, but he said "Better not. He'll be quite safe in our field." So he was, when we came back; he was still sitting where we'd left him. But I felt mean, even so. I hadn't enjoyed our walk as much as usual.

That night I woke again. I'd already grown used to it. I was lying on my back, and when I opened my eyes I saw the stars, appearing one by one as my eyes took hold of them, like buds of light growing through dark soil. I wondered if this was what Pet saw.

Nearby I could hear voices. One of them was my father's; the others were friends of his. I realised that they were forcing themselves to stay awake. They'd decided that if you forced yourself long enough your body would have to give in and let you choose how long you wanted to sleep. I lay listening to them.

"He just sits there and listens," my father was saying. After a moment I realised they were talking about Pet. "Look at him now," my father said. "Sitting on top of our crystal. He can if he wants to. He isn't doing it any harm. I can control it without even moving him off it. But he's a distraction. I think it's the very fact that he isn't doing anything that's distracting. You find yourself waiting for him to do something, anything."

"You sound as if you want to get rid of him," someone said.

"Well, put it this way. If there were anyone who wanted to study him or would even look after him, I might. But I don't think there is. Sometimes I think we've become too interested in our own minds to bother about anything else."

I'd started, and my nest had rustled. "I think we've woken the child," someone said.

There wasn't any use pretending. I sat up. There was my father with six of his friends, in the pool of light from our crystal; I could see them between two of the ridges of our home. Pet was squatting on the crystal, but the light still spread around him, making his fur look like a halo. "Please don't sell Pet," I said.

My father came over. "You should be asleep, not listening," he said. "But I didn't say I'd sell him. That depends on how he's affecting you."

"We'd better go," someone called. "We didn't mean to keep anyone else awake."

If I'd thought I would have said nothing, but I blurted "It wasn't you. I woke up last night as well."

"Then there's only one thing that can have done it," my father said sharply. "We'll talk about it in the morning."

I knew he didn't want to take Pet away from me unless he had to. In the morning he decided that it was having Pet after wanting him for so long that had excited me. "But you'll have to get used to him soon," he said.

I led Pet away from the crystal and up on one of the ridges. My father switched off the field. Then I went to my lessons, and managed to learn faster than I had for weeks. On our walk I read a landscape all the way to the horizon by myself. My father was pleased, and so was I. I was pleased he'd been right about Pet.

Except that I woke again during the night.

I tried to go back to sleep at once. I tried to pretend to myself that I wasn't really awake, that it wasn't Pet's fault. But even with my eyes closed I could see the stars as I'd seen them before, and I could feel Pet listening, straining to hear through our field.

I tried to make myself comfortable, and my nest rustled. After a long time, when I still couldn't get to sleep, I moved again. This time I felt my father

looking, and he looked for so long I couldn't stop myself moving. "I can't sleep," I said.

"Well, you won't be able to force your body to sleep," he said. I could tell he was angry that I couldn't, but he was holding himself back in case he disturbed me more. "Do you want me to talk to you?" he said.

"Yes please," I said, sitting up. "Tell me about Pet. Why does he sit on our crystal?"

"I'm not sure. He only does it when the field's on. Perhaps he feels that the field is making it hard for him to listen. There wouldn't have been anything like it where he came from. You know he isn't listening for a sound. He's listening for a call in his head, one of his kind sending a thought to tell him where they are."

"Are there others like him?" I said. I wanted there to be.

"I don't think so, or he'd have heard by now. Though it's possible they've forgotten how to send."

"But what happened to them all?"

"We don't know much about them. We know a little from other races who tried to trace their history. They had complete control of their minds, they could make their minds do anything, though whether they always could we don't know. They could stand on a planet and read off everything about it, its history, its geology, its place in the universe, just by standing there. So they say."

"Can Pet do all that?" I said, looking at Pet sitting on the light.

"No, not any more. They lost it, you see. They decided they could read the universe between them. They must have had space travel, because they scattered through the universe, one to a planet. They read the planets and sent each other what they'd read. But they were so busy doing that, they forgot everything else. They didn't have to eat, they could even stop breathing if they had to. They lived as long as ten of us, but because there was nothing for their bodies to do, they began to die out. There weren't any children. And as the ones who were left had fewer to call to, or to hear, they pined away faster. You can see why. This one must have been the strongest of the lot, and look at him."

"But why should our field worry him?"

"I don't know. But I think it does."

"Switch it off for a while," I pleaded. "They may be calling him, and he won't be able to hear."

"Just for a moment," my father said and gestured it off.

I gasped. I wouldn't have believed it could be so cold. As soon as the field was off the cold rushed in, as if it had been waiting to pounce. I felt as though I'd been covered in ice, so thickly that I couldn't feel my nest around me.

Pet didn't move. He was as still as the light around him. "Now you see why we need a field," my father said, closing it down again.

"Oh, don't," I cried. For a moment I'd felt that Pet was just about to hear his call. Before I knew it, without thinking, I'd made the gestures to lift the field, and the cold rushed back in.

"Now that is quite enough!" my father shouted, closing it down. "Just you go to sleep! And even if you can't sleep, I don't want to see your eyes open again tonight!"

It took me a long time to fall asleep, because I was afraid of what he might say in the morning. But it wasn't all what I expected. "I'm sorry I shouted at you," he said. "You're growing up faster than I realised. I was a good deal older before I could lift our field. But now you're growing up you must think as if you are."

I knew what he meant, but I said "I want to keep Pet."

"Don't you want to sleep?" he said. "It's the field that disturbs him, I'm sure of that now. And when he's disturbed he disturbs us— yes, me as well, though not as much as you. You found out last night why we need the field. So I'm afraid we're going to have to part with him. We'll take him to the market tomorrow."

I think my father was surprised when I hurried away to my lessons. I think he expected me not to be able to concentrate. But I needed as much time to myself as I could earn, so I made myself concentrate. When I'd finished I asked if we could leave our walk today, because I didn't feel like it. My father thought I wanted to stay with Pet for the rest of the day, and so I did. He let me stay. I took Pet up on the ridge and began to think at him.

I stroked his head softly as if to soothe him to sleep, and I tried to tell him I was sorry that he was the only one left. I told him I'd care for him, I'd think at him whenever he wanted to listen, so that he wouldn't feel lonely. He gazed up at the sky.

I stroked him and thought harder. If he wanted, I thought, he could listen to me as I learned. Then it would be like listening to one of the others like him reading a planet. I knew I wasn't as clever, I told him, but in time I'd be able to tell him anything anyone knew about our planet. And if he wanted to keep on looking at the sky I'd take him for walks and think at him everything I saw, then he could see it too. I'd do all this if he would just look at me once, so that I'd know he wanted me to.

I thought this at him hard, for a very long time. The sunlight was fading and I was beginning to feel sleepy. Once I thought his face moved. I jumped up, but it was only his eyelids blinking as he gazed at the sky.

I began to cry. I stroked him and cuddled him, and I told him that if he wouldn't stop listening to the sky and listen to me we'd have to get rid of him. Then he might be owned by somebody who'd be angry when he listened, and they might hurt him, or take him out and lose him. And all because he wouldn't look at me or let me care for him.

I was sobbing. My father looked up at me and frowned. The light was draining away over the horizon. "Please," I said to Pet, and then I began to fall off the ridge. Sleep hit me as I fell.

While I was asleep I dreamed about Pet. It wasn't a dream I should have expected to have. I was lying in my nest at night, and Pet was lying just outside, near my feet. His eyes were closed. I felt very peaceful, and so did Pet.

I woke at dawn. My father was standing by my nest, watching me. I couldn't read his expression. Because I couldn't, I felt panicky. "Where's Pet?" I cried.

My father's voice sounded surprised and puzzled, like his expression. "He's there," he said.

I looked down. Pet was lying at my feet, his eyes closed. He opened them and looked at me.

"He came here while you were asleep," my father said. "I caught you when you fell and put you here. He sat up on the ridge for a long time. Usually he

goes and sits on the crystal as soon as you're asleep, as soon as the field's switched on. But this time he just sat up there. I believe he was thinking, if he still can. Then you started moving. I thought you'd woken up, but you were dreaming. And that was when he came and lay down here."

"Can I keep him?" I pleaded.

"Yes," my father said. "I don't know what you've done, but I think you can keep him."

I lay back in my nest. "I'll look after him," I said. "I want to find out everything about him, so I can look after him better. I want to find out all about his kind. I don't even know what they were called."

"You'll have a lot of work to do. I'll help you when I can," my father said, taking my hand in all of his. "But one thing we do know. They managed to trace what his kind were called. They were called men."

Hain's Island

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Everyone watched the supply ship down, except the man it was intended to save. Since they'd just finished battle drill, it had been an unusually eventful day. "Events are supposed to come in threes," Temeran said as they watched the ship. "What's next, do you think? Something uncommonly spectacular, I hope. Maybe someone will trip over, or sneeze."

When the ship had appeared, first in the scanner and then in the sky, they had tried to persuade Hain to watch instead of going away by himself again. But even Rads the doctor hadn't succeeded. "Just because they're bringing the stuff you want to pump into me," Hain had retorted, "doesn't mean I have to hang around until they show up," and he'd slumped away through the trees, back to the plants that had given him cancer.

Some of the watchers laughed as the supply ship came down. They were used to the sight of the six-hundred-yard trade ships standing off in the sky, sending down their boats; they hadn't expected this one to be so tiny. In fact it was owned by a private company from a nearby colonised planet. For speed in an emergency, and for the human touch amid their efficiency, they were preferable to the shipmen in their trade ships. Still, the watching colonists thought, nothing much could come out of a ship that size.

They were wrong.

When the ship cut its drive the forty-nine colonists converged on it. It squatted on the landing-field like an overfed beetle with a rounded head, twice the height and four times the length of a man. One of the supplymen emerged from its disproportionately bulging midriff as they reached the ship.

He looked rolled in his fat. He had the face of a petulant baby, but much of his weight was muscle. "He will help you unload," he said, jerking his thumb at his partner in the cabin. "I'll try some of your local food."

If the colonists had been used to imperiousness they might have stopped him there. But all their decisions were made communally, and they'd grown unused to behaviour such as his. Besides, his behaviour might be normal for his culture and hence, in a way, privileged. He wouldn't be on their world long enough to do harm. Thus they let him through unopposed—though by the time they'd thought all this, he was already past.

Rads hurried after him, frowning, and some of the others followed. The rest began to unload the ship. Although much of the space was occupied by cabin and drive there was a surprising amount of supplies, ingeniously stored. Luice, Temeran's wife, took the supplies from the second supplyman and handed them down the chain. "Is your partner always like that?" she said.

"No, he isn't," the man said. "Only this trip."

He sounded worried. She was about to pursue the subject when he said "You all look healthy enough to me."

"Oh, you mean Hain. The man with cancer," she said. "He's down looking at the relays. Do you know about them, the relay plants? They're an indigenous species—of course, because we mustn't grow anything exotic—but quite rare. They each produce one seed, fertilise it and immediately die. Hain was studying the fertilisation. But they have defences, and one pricked him. That's what gave him cancer."

"The only danger on the planet," Temeran said. "Of course the observation satellite couldn't pick that up. It had to be one of us that found it, to his cost."

Luice could sense her husband's bitter frustration rising. "So that's where Hain is," she told the supplyman. "Only now he isn't so much studying the relays as blaming them. I wish he wouldn't. It isn't helping him."

"What can?" Temeran said. "He knows as well as we do that he's dead. Your supplies won't change that, friend, I'm afraid. Whatever the initial reaction was, all that's perceptible now is a runaway cancer nothing can head off. Rads knows that, but he has to try. At least the relays give Hain an interest."

They finished unloading and made their way to the communal area. The afternoon was sinking into evening. Plants were closing the jaws of their pollen traps; one plant snapped a last trapful from the incessant gentle wind.

The communal area was between the long wooden buildings of the colony: an open glade, since except when the rains swept over the land the colonists had no reason to shelter. Segmented trees nodded in the wind, the loose segments of the trunks working like pistons, quickening their sap.

Most of the colonists were at the trestle tables, eating. Hain had left the relays and was sitting near Tilp, the first supplyman. Their end of the table had been ostentatiously avoided by the rest. "There can't be much to learn from your relays," Tilp was saying. "I reckon you're wasting your time."

"The next one is always stronger and healthier," Hain said. "That's how they breed. It's not true of many things in this universe. Consistency like that is worth studying."

Luice sat near them. She could see that Tilp would depress Hain more unless he was interrupted. "We think all our work is worth doing," she said.

"I don't believe that," Tilp said. He pointed at the observation satellite, glinting in the whitish sky. "It seems to me that's doing all the work," he said. "You're just here for it to watch, to see how you and the environment interact. That's the purpose of this colony."

"That's part of it," Luice said. "But we're qualified to study the environment too, you know. We can do so in ways the satellite can't."

"I can see one way," Tilp said, looking at Hain. Temeran gripped the table with both hands and leaned across to Tilp. "Shut up, you fool," he said. "You're not only a fool but a liar. You've done nothing but lie since I sat down here."

The nodding trees creaked. Everyone was gazing at Temeran, thinking that they'd been about to say exactly the same themselves. If he hadn't spoken they would certainly have massed against Tilp. But he had, and now it was too late. "I'm sorry," Tilp said at once, holding out his hand to Temeran.

Temeran clasped it brusquely. Then at once he thrust it violently away. After a moment Tilp stood up, looking dazed, and went to his partner. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what's been the matter with me."

Luice gripped Temeran's hand, but he dragged it away. "I don't need you to patronise me," he said. Luice withdrew a little, hurt. She'd only meant to convey that she knew he'd silenced Tilp even though he agreed with much of what Tilp had said. She'd often had to distract Temeran from his

bitterness; she'd learned to deal with that, but a cold rebuff like this was new, wholly untypical.

"What work do you do?" the second supplyman asked Temeran.

"I'm balancing the ecology."

"Well, you're going to," Luice amended, still upset.

He seemed to ignore her. "We can construct a perfect ecosystem here," he said. "I know we can. We can form a perfect symbiosis with this world. As for you," he told Luice, "I suggest you save your observations for your laboratory."

At the other end of the table Rads the doctor glanced up, frowning.

"I can see how to balance this system," Temeran said, "but this world keeps fighting me. It keeps tipping the balance."

"You know it isn't like that," Luice said. "Just keep trying. Thinking like that won't help you."

"You may be competent in your own field," Temeran said, "but if you've got time to poke around in mine then it's time you extended yourself beyond botany. Now shut up. You've got your flowers to mother, for God's sake don't do it to me."

"I certainly won't shut up," Luice said, and she didn't. The evening soughed around them, creaking. After a while the others began determined if subdued conversations. Hain trudged away to stare at the relay plants.

Rads gazed down the table, at the argument. This was wrong, it wasn't the way the colony worked. Conflicts were always resolved communally, without rancour. But there was something about the increasing violence of this argument that was exclusively private, that made it difficult for the others to listen, let alone to intervene. It was defiantly alien.

Rads felt obliged to lead an intervention. But he couldn't help feeling relieved when, while he was searching for an impersonal way to halt the argument, Temeran and Luice stood up and left, still shouting. Their argument faded into one of the dormitory buildings. Everyone relaxed. A few stray explosions of pollen drifted by, locked out of the pollen traps by the evening.

It wasn't long after that the screaming began.

It came from the dormitory building. Someone sitting near to it turned, tumbled clumsily off his bench and ran into the building. Others followed. Rads was faster than most, and urged aside those ahead of him in the pale green corridor. He knew he was needed.

The screams had turned to sobbing now. They came from Temeran's and Luke's room. Two men were throwing their weight against the door. It couldn't be locked; Temeran must be braced against the other side, for he was shouting "Go away! This is my room!" None of them had time to think how unlikely a protest that was for one of them to make, because the door had given way, and they could see in.

Luice was huddled in one corner of the room. Bruises were already darkening her face and arms. She was holding her right arm, flexing its fingers painfully, gingerly. Her right leg was stretched out awkwardly before her, as if she were afraid to move it. Temeran stood in front of her, blocking the way, looking defiant. For a moment everyone stared incredulously. Then two men pinioned Temeran's arms viciously behind him.

The violence was infectious, Rads saw. He had to halt it. "Leave him," he told them. "I'll deal with this."

They could see what he was doing, and let go of Temeran reluctantly; one of them twisted his arm before letting go.

"Come here," Rads ordered Temeran. After a moment he did so, slowly, shaking his head at himself. The others drew back warily. Rads took hold of Temeran's chin firmly and lifted his face, to examine his eyes.

But he hadn't looked into Temeran's eyes when he flung him violently back, banging his head against the wall. The others started anxiously, bewildered. Rads paid him no further attention, but went to Luice. "Now let's see you," he said.

He gripped her injured arm and leg rapidly. Luice winced and bit her lip hard. "Nothing broken," he said. "They'll ache, but you'll have to put up with that. Get yourself some ointment if you must, then get to bed."

"I'll get you the ointment," Temeran said to Luice. She gazed at him for a moment, then looked away and nodded. The others relaxed. The incident had been profoundly disturbing, but it was all right now. They could remember it and learn from it.

Rads strode out, and after a pause Temeran left too, looking at nobody. The others made comforting approaches to Luice, but because she only nodded and smiled shortly, abstractedly, they soon left her alone.

The night was quiet, disturbed only by the slow creak of the segmented trees.

Next morning the supplymen left. Rads led a small party to watch farewell. He seemed to feel it was his place to do so, though nobody had delegated him. "Do you know what was wrong with me? Was it a kind of space fright?" Tilp asked him, but Rads said "I couldn't put a name to it."

Most of the colonists had gathered in the communal area. Even Hain was there, for there was a general feeling that the colony's principles had been threatened. Nobody referred to yesterday's violence, but all felt that it had been the ugly result of inaction and frustration. They needed to act more.

Temeran and Luice sat together, listening. Luice was shiny with ointment, and the wind fluttered a little inside the improvised sling on her arm. She and Temeran glanced at each other warily.

Eventually all agreed that they should begin studying the sea. The colony was near the edge of a continent. They'd planned to begin submarine studies in a year's time, but all agreed they needed the activity now. Enough of them would always stay at the colony for the satellite to observe in those conditions. And if it didn't like that, they decided, glancing up at the glint, let it complain. Though they could have called a print-out map from the satellite, a group went to the field to ready one of the two flyers for a mapping flight.

As the discussion became more speculative Hain wandered slowly away, toward the relay plants. Luice watched him go. At the edge of the communal area he passed Rads, returning from the field. Hain didn't look at him, nor did Rads acknowledge Hain.

Luice limped quickly over to Rads. "When are you going to try to help him?" she demanded quietly.

"Hain knows there's no point in my trying to help him," Rads replied, loudly enough for Hain to hear. "I see no point in wasting time and supplies on him."

For a moment Luice was speechless. Then she said "Don't be stupid. It's your job."

"Then you must allow me to know how to do it," Rads said, and strode away to his laboratory.

Luice stared at the others. "What's happened to us?" she cried. When she limped after Rads, a couple of them followed her. Hain hung about the edge of the glade, looking half-embarrassed, half-amused.

Rads was sorting supplies on a bench near the door of his laboratory. At the far end, transparently screened, was the surgery area. He was examining and laying out a set of surgical knives. He didn't falter as Luice came in.

"What's wrong?" she demanded. Her tone was challenging, but her words were almost a plea; too much was suddenly happening that was unfamiliar. "This isn't you," she said.

"Then it should be," he said, not bothering to look up.

"You don't believe that," she said. "You could be cold when you had to be, but not like this. And you'd never let a patient overhear the sort of thing you said about Hain. I don't think you'd say it in the first place or even think it. There's something wrong here, and I think you know what it is."

"Then leave me to know how to handle it."

"It isn't as simple as that," Luice said. But he'd slipped half the knives into their case and was carrying it away, leaving the rest of the knives on the bench, by their case. "Don't you walk away," Luice said, and grabbed at him. Her hand missed, and she began to overbalance.

She'd almost regained her balance when her injured leg gave way. She clutched at the bench. Her hand, slick with ointment, slipped. She grabbed at anything, which was a surgical knife. The handle sprang from beneath her fingers, and the blade entered her thigh.

She fainted as Rads pulled out the blade and probed the wound. He fetched disinfectant and an instant dressing, and handed them to her two companions. But they stood watching him as he made a space in the surgery area for the cases of knives. "What are you waiting for me to do?" he said without turning. "That was stupidity. I'm not treating that."

"You're here to treat whatever you're needed for," one of them said.

"And I've done as much as I intend to," Rads said. "That won't kill her. I could stand it. So must she."

"If you won't do your job we'll have you relieved," the other one said.

"You mean the satellite will," Rads said. "It sees all, so when it prints out back home no doubt they'll send someone eventually. But you can't communicate with it, you know. Unless you want to write a message on the ground."

They were glaring impotently at him. "Or you could radio the world across the way. But if they can spare a surgeon I doubt he'll be as reliable as their supplymen," he said. "Go on. Take her away and put her on her bed. If she keeps still she'll be all right. You know where the anaesthetics are, see if you can use them. Better still, see if you can find some indigenous natural remedies to help her. That would be closer to the terms of this experiment. That's what we're here for."

They carried her to her bed, then they told everyone outside what had happened. A frown was growing on Hain's face. Before they'd finished Temeran was shaking with fury, holding himself back only to hear all. Then he strode into Rads' laboratory. "Help my wife," he demanded.

Rads was leisurely inspecting the second set of knives. "That's an ironic thing for you to ask me," he said.

"I know that. But I'm asking."

"And I'm saying no—or rather, that I've done all I propose to do."

"Then I'm telling you. And I'll make you if I have to."

"You should know there's nothing you're less capable of."

Temeran snatched a knife and held the blade near Rads' face. "I think I can make you suffer a good deal without making you incapable of operating," he said.

"Then please try. I can stand it." Temeran waved the blade, and Rads said "Do you really think you can do what you say? And do you expect it to achieve something?"

Temeran tried to outstare him, but couldn't. His hand slumped. "She's my wife," he said. "If she jerks her leg she'll tear that muscle more. Nobody else can make sure she doesn't." But Rads was slipping the knives into their case, was carrying them away down the room. Temeran trembled with frustration. At last he turned to go.

He had almost reached the door when Rads called "Wait."

Temeran whirled. Rads was staring at him through the transparent screen. "Don't even you know what's going on?" he said "You caught it from Tilp, I caught it from you. It's contagious. It's a disease. But you of all people should know that it feels fine. Better than you've ever felt before."

Outside, Temeran told them "He says it's a disease. And he's enjoying it."

Hain gasped. Everyone turned to him. They could see an idea forming in his eyes. "Yes," he said. "I think—" They waited eagerly. After a minute he hurried away, toward the relay plants. They turned away in disgust, dismissing him.

"I'll talk to Rads," one of the women said. In a few minutes she emerged, shaking her head in bafflement. Others tried, singly and in groups. Once those outside heard a crash of glass, and Rads' smooth voice: "Destroy whatever you want. It won't touch me." The party returned from readying the flyer and were told what had happened.

Temeran kept hurrying away to ask the women who were watching over Luice how she was. One of them had succeeded in anaesthetising her with an ampoule someone had brought from the surgery. The two women were holding Luice still, but every so often she tried to stir.

At last, when most of them had tried to persuade Rads, Temeran said "Get the battle weapons. Even he won't like what the lasers can do to him."

They stared at him, disturbed. They'd never used the weapons except in drill. They were hardly expected to be attacked. They'd been provided with the weapons and the drill largely to maintain their aggressive instincts at a healthy level. It was a game most of them enjoyed, but to play it in reality was altogether more disturbing. "Get the weapons!" Temeran shouted at the three who were keyed to the store.

Eventually they had all strapped on their power packs. They each coiled the leads around one arm and held the vicious needle-pointed tube in front of them awkwardly, as if embarrassed by it. They surrounded the laboratory in a disorganised way. They'd worked out their battle-drill places between them, and in a drill they would take their places without thinking; but now, with Temeran directing, they felt clumsy and incompetent.

"I'll go in first," Temeran said. "I'll get him out, however I have to. Then it's up to all of you to make him go to Luice. The more we can make him do, the easier he'll be."

"Wait a minute," someone said. "Here comes Hain."

"We can do without him," Temeran said, advancing on the laboratory.

But Hain was hurrying toward them, waving his arms. "You don't need that," he called, gesturing Temeran to lower his weapon. "Rads!" he shouted.

"That's no good," Temeran said, pushing him back. "We've tried talking. Now we're going to try my way."

Hain ignored him. "I know what's happened to you, Rads," he shouted. "And I'm equal to it. Come here and let me show you I am."

Temeran stared at him, confused. The others had already lowered their weapons, glad of the respite from threatened violence. Hain was gazing calmly at the laboratory door. Temeran let his laser-tube sink. The segments of the trees pumped, creaking; great bladders of fibre drifted by in clumps, bearing seeds on long threads; the pollen traps snapped. Many of the watchers saw the laboratory door move while it was doing nothing of the kind. But at last Rads opened it and stood waiting.

Hain was already striding toward him. Temeran thought he had the look of a man compelling himself into an action before he could regret it. He could imagine how that felt. Hain grasped Rads' hand as he reached him. Then he thrust him away, back into the laboratory. "Wait until I come out," Hain told the others, and closed the door.

For a long time the voices in the laboratory talked. Nobody outside could distinguish a word. At first the voices were calm, but later the doctor's was raised in protest. Hain's never varied in its calm, and eventually the doctor's seemed to sink into resignation. Outside, the others moved restlessly, avoiding each other's gazes. They looked up at the satellite sailing untroubled above them, considering them indifferently, betraying nothing to their receiver.

When the voices ceased, the creaking of the trees seemed to retard time. The door opened and Hain appeared. He was alone. They were starting toward him when he seemed to take their measure. He brought Rads forward around the door, urging him out with an arm around his shoulders.

"He's well now," Hain said. "He'll help Luice, then he'll tell you what's been happening. Believe what he says."

He hurried away, in the direction of the landing-field. Rads made a gesture as if he was only just preventing himself from calling Hain back. Nobody else noticed Hain's departure; they were staring at Rads. "I'll give you a stretcher," he said to Temeran. "Then you can bring her to the surgery."

He had just finished, and Temeran was relaxing, only now sure that Luice had been in no danger from him, when one of the men hurried in. "A flyer's lifted from the field," he said breathlessly.

"Yes, I know," Rads said. "That was Hain. Get Luice to her bed, then I'll explain."

When everyone had gathered in the communal glade he said "I was wrong. It wasn't a disease. It was contagious, and Tilp brought it here, but there was far more to it than I thought. I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said it was equal to the best of us."

"How do you know this?" Temeran said. "I must have had it, but I can't even describe it, let alone say what it was."

"It was an entity," Rads said. "That's all we know. There's a good many things drifting round in space we've yet to put a name to. Tilp picked it up on the way here. However it was composed, it was obviously capable of penetrating the cabin wall. Hain thought it was pure energy, a sort of spore of energy. Certainly it had to remain dormant until it encountered another entity, because that was how it grew."

"But how could Hain know that?" Temeran demanded.

"By looking at his relays, he said. Think of how the relays reproduce, each one stronger than the last. That was what gave him the hint what to do. He realised that it didn't migrate indiscriminately from person to person. I wasn't the first to touch you, Temeran, but it waited for me to pick it up. Because I had a stronger personality, you see. It was always attracted to the one who could dominate its present host. That was how it grew."

"Grew how?" Temeran said. "Why?"

"We can only guess. Hain figured that it matched the host personality, or at least its drive towards power. Only he figured that power had to be wielded externally to satisfy it, over others."

"So that was what made me hurt Luice?"

"It must have been." Some of the others frowned at that, and Rads hurried on. "The externalisation was crucial. Otherwise it wouldn't have needed to make us behave that way. It could have exerted its power internally, over itself—presumably, in that case, without using us at all."

"And Hain has it now?"

"Yes, he has." Rads gazed toward the sea, walled off by the trees. "He thought he might be able to turn the power inwards. I tried to make him see that in that case there was no need for him to go. But he said that even if he succeeded, someone else might challenge him and pick up the thing. So he's flown to an island. He says we can drop food in six months if he's alive, but he has a laser to stop us trying to go down."

"But how did he manage to take it from you?" Temeran said. "I don't think even you would have picked him as our strongest personality."

"Yesterday I wouldn't have," Rads said. The trees creaked sharply, but the others gazed at him, hoping for a resolution. "But even if anyone else of us knew they were going to die," he said, "would they deliberately do what he did?"

In a month the satellite began to print out ONE OF SUBJECTS HAS LEFT EXPERIMENTAL COLONY AREA. PLEASE ARRANGE HIS RETURN. Later it became less polite, but none of them would go near the sea; some were convinced that the force could reach to them from Hain through the water, like a gigantic electrical charge.

In three months a group of men with disapproving expressions arrived to rebuke the colonists, fly out to the island and bring Hain's body back. Tilp's broadcast testimony helped to vindicate the colonists' inaction. Then men acknowledged this disapprovingly, and took Hain's body with them.

The colonists waited for news, but none came. At last they accepted that Hain had been right in his unspoken surmise: that the entity would die with its host if it were unable to migrate in time. Luice had a permanent limp to remind them all that Hain had saved them. Some of them felt privately that the glint in the satellite's eye had turned suspicious, as it scrutinised them for traces of lingering infection. Beyond that they didn't care to think. They preferred not to realise that Hain had given them the chance to believe he had taken with him all that had threatened the colony.

Wrapped Up

"*Wrapped Up* was done for Michel Parry, for a mummy anthology which failed to appear."- Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

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As they neared the camp the archaeologist began to sing. Twill started violently and tried to hush him, but Long shook his head. The rheumatic groaning of their jeep on the cliff road must already have woken the camp. "That's your tent, isn't it?" Long demanded loudly of the archaeologist. "Over there, by the tomb?"

"There's my tent," the man said, pointing amid the camp; then, as he began to doze as if the effort of squinting had exhausted him, he added, "We're just passing the tomb."

Driving, Drabney smiled at Long's cleverness. Now they knew exactly where to go. The swaying headlights fastened on the tents and coaxed from the darkness behind them the outlines of palms like split and splintered poles. He made to switch off the lights, but restrained himself; it would look suspicious.

They were helping the archaeologist out of the jeep when a shadow rose up stiffly in one of the tents, like a joke-shop mummy. "All right," the archaeologist shouted, without slurring. "It's only me and some friends in need." They half-carried him to his tent, where he commenced singing at the darkness and offering it a drink. Then they hurried back to the jeep, whose motor was still running.

As they passed the place where he'd said the tomb was Long and Twill jumped from the vehicle, clutching the sacks on which they'd been sitting. At once Drabney accelerated and drove loudly away, grinning. He couldn't believe it was going to be so easy.

When they'd seen the archaeologist in Cairo they had been dumbfounded by their luck. They had been sitting in a sidewalk café, so downcast they were almost prepared to drink. They'd had to flee Britain and America,

where their faces were known. That had infuriated Drabney. All right, so they took wealth from people who were gullible enough to part with it. But it was because the people were susceptible to alcohol or other drugs that they left themselves so open. They were the ones to blame. The three had decided that a long time ago.

They'd heard that Cairo was full of drugs, but none of the susceptible people had seemed worth the effort. Then Twill, gazing dully on the packed dusty street, had recognised the archaeologist. The man whose last expedition had almost been ruined by his alcoholism! Who could only be here on another dig!

Twill knew something of archaeology, and it had taken only half a bottle to pry loose the location of the dig, and the other half to make the man forget he'd told Twill. Then they'd merely had to camp nearby before the archaeologist and his party arrived, to become known locally as geologists on their own expedition, and to greet the archaeologist eventually as someone he vaguely remembered. "What a coincidence!" Twill had exclaimed. But even they hadn't expected their second encounter to coincide with the day the dig reached the tomb itself.

Once he was out of earshot of the camp Drabney parked the jeep and began to walk back, carrying his sack, checking his path intermittently with his torch. It had sounded as if the archaeologist was even going to leave his tomb open for them, the fool. "We aren't worried about the workers pilfering," he'd said. "I told them the mummies were those of magicians."

"That was clever," Twill had said.

"True, as well. The people who made this tomb for themselves blasphemed the whole Egyptian concept of life after death." Then he'd drifted off, muttering about tomb-robbers not daring to touch this tomb.

That's natives for you, Drabney thought as he walked. Gullible. Believed us when we said we were geologists. Full of drugs, probably, all of them. The rough cliff-top bit bluntly into his soles through his shoes. He reached the place where the tomb should be, and blinked his torch down the dark cliff at a faint glow. In a moment the torch-beams turned outward from the tomb twenty feet below and winked slyly at him.

They lit the stepped path while he clambered down. Then, as he entered the mouth, the beams swung about and gouged a rough narrow passage of

tawny limestone brightly from the blackness. Rubble gnashed underfoot.

"Whoever they were, they must have impressed the people of their day," Twill whispered. "Notice there are no false doors, no pitfalls. They were sure nobody would dare to venture in. Still, it must have been easy enough to frighten people then."

Thirty feet into the cliff a stone door stood ajar. "We managed to move it a little," Long said. "They must have closed it again in case the air harmed anything."

Dust billowed thinly about them as they strained at the door with crowbars. Dust swarmed in the bowls of light balanced on the upturned torches planted on the rock floor. As the three heaved at the stone, chafing themselves against rock and against each other, their tethered shadows struggled overhead, bloating as if air were being squeezed up into them. When the door gave, a suddenly blacker shadow engulfed Drabney's. They inched out from behind the partly open door, then Drabney probed the gap with his torch.

He was expecting walls crowded with bright figures, the looming lustre of golden coffins. Instead, his abashed torch revealed only rough limestone coffins with cracked lids, eight in all. The walls, when he turned to them, were muddily plastered but otherwise almost bare. In the corners, or what passed for such in the crudely-hollowed room, stood dark vague shapes like half-opened buds. Drabney wavered, disappointed and bewildered. It seemed less like a tomb than a cave-lair.

"He did say they didn't believe in possessions," Twill said anxiously.

"If you'd been him," Long retorted, "what would you have said? He wasn't that drunk."

Drabney realised why he'd thought of a lair. The hot, unpleasantly musty air which hung in the tomb reminded him of a zoo. The air, and something else. There was a faint creaking rustle in the depths of the room, beyond the dim edge of the light, as of something crawling torpidly in its lair.

"Go on," Twill said impatiently, and pushed him into the tomb. The light of his torch staggered forward as he did. The figure standing in the darkness, against the furthest wall, seemed to step forward jerkily to meet the light. It creaked softly, like leather.

Drabney felt as if a pitfall had opened in his stomach. Only the others, pressing close behind him, prevented his instinctive flight. When his torch-hand steadied, when the figure's wrappings of shadow had ceased to flap and writhe, the three stepped forward between the two ranks of coffins to see what was standing there.

It was a mummy, featureless and brown with wrappings. Yet somehow it was unlike the mummies Drabney had seen. The wrappings looked less like bandage than thick dry skin. He was sure he'd seen something like them before. The entire tall body creaked. As Drabney bent closer and the erased face peered blindly above him, he saw that the wrappings were minutely but perceptibly shifting, as if filling out.

"That's the change in temperature," Long said. "Come on. He's no use to us."

But Twill had stooped to pick up an object near the mummy's feet. It was a gilded sceptre two feet long, surmounted by a stylised pair of spread wings. "This is a symbol of power," Twill said. "A high priest's, I'm sure it is. Why's a high priest standing there?"

"Maybe he put them all to bed and then couldn't tuck himself up."

"Come on, come on," Long said. "Time enough to joke when we're out of it."

Drabney hadn't intended his remark entirely as a joke. He watched Twill wrap the sceptre and put it in one of the sacks. Now it looked as if Drabney were playing the fool instead of filling his sack. Just because he didn't twitch like Twill didn't mean he couldn't equal him.

He shone his torch on a coffin and began to prize the lid apart along the crack. The lid was lighter than he'd expected; it parted easily, and the halves smashed on the floor. Drabney froze, trying to hold the silence still, as the others glared in speechless disgust. At last, when he was sure nobody at the camp had woken, he dared to move. He sank his light into the dustily fuming coffin.

The mummy within was clasped in wings of gold. The golden case which contained the body was almost featureless. The golden head was round and entirely blank, the feet were merged into a tapering tail. The rest of the case embraced itself with two enormous ribbed wings. Otherwise the coffin was empty. Shadows stirred the ribs of the wings as Drabney's torch moved.

"This one's the same," Long said when Drabney told him what he'd found. "The bastard, he was telling the truth. They weren't interested in anything but their religion. Look there."

He jabbed his light at the walls. In the centre of each. faded and crumbling now, a stylised series was painted: a man, a mummy, a winged figure poised to fly. "And there," Long said, snatching the shapes in the corners forward with his light. They were carved stone wings, about to open and reveal their ill-defined bodies.

"Maybe this is where the idea of angels came from," Drabney said.

"No need for that kind of talk," Twill said.

"No need for you to shout just because you can't find anything. What's wrong, is your friend there upsetting you?"

The mummy behind Twill was still creaking, with a sound like the stealthy flexing of disused leathery muscles. "Yes, it is," Twill said harshly. "How long is it going to make that row?"

He strode challengingly to the figure and thrust his torch at it. "Sometimes you act as if you need a shot yourself," Drabney said.

As Twill whirled furiously, brandishing a huge vague club of light, the end of his torch caught the mummy's neck. There was a sound of tearing.

All three lights seized the figure, like nooses. A long ragged strip of wrapping hung down its chest; the head, with its rudimentary face, was tilted askew. With a rush of horror, unable to bear the grotesque parody of what might lie beneath, Twill began to rip the wrappings from the mummy. Before Long could restrain him he had uncovered the head.

Perhaps they'd tried to make it look taller than it was. Or perhaps it hadn't been wrapped properly, and had partially decayed. Whatever the cause, the bald yellowed head within was barely half the size of its wrappings. It must be decay, Drabney thought, because the face looked sucked into itself, its features half-absorbed into the skull. Their lights wavered over the face, disturbing its shadows.

The face was moving. It wasn't the shadows at all. The head was shrinking, the eyes were collapsing into the skull. The head withdrew into the shoulders of the wrappings, and as it sank it fell back for a moment, as if with a soundless jagged-tooth laugh. It was the exposure to air, Drabney

thought, the mummy was hurriedly decaying. Yet he felt uneasily that it was less like decay than like something else he'd once seen.

"I don't know what that achieved," Long said, hurrying through a capering of shadows to the door. "Come on, let's get these sacks filled and go."

"How?" Twill demanded shakily.

"Like this, since we have to." Long had removed the lid from the coffin nearest the door, now he plunged in a crowbar and began to wrench free pieces of the golden mummy-case. Twill recoiled, but Long said "We've no time to be delicate now. We want to be finished and out." Drabney hurried to help him, looking away as he shook out the contents, which the crowbar had crushed and broken.

From the back of the tomb came a large incessant rustling. Drabney imagined the figure collapsing entirely within its wrappings. Sweat crawled on him; the inert air pressed close. All three men fastened their lights determinedly on the coffin and the sacks.

They glanced toward the camp as they emerged, but it was dark and silent. They forced themselves to walk slowly, so as to hush their rattling sacks. Ahead was an inkling of dawn which had yet to touch the rock underfoot. At least, Drabney thought, they weren't so loaded that he would have to risk driving the jeep back to the others. He walked automatically, musing. Now he was out of the tomb he wanted to remember what he'd almost recognised in there.

He was still pondering when he heard the sound on his left, away from the cliff-edge: a faint creaking rustle. He peered, but sky and rocks had seeped together. Twill had heard it too, and started, jangling his sack. "Palms," Long explained. "That's all, for God's sake." But they could feel no wind. They began to hurry, heedless of the loud sacks at this distance from the camp.

Drabney struggled to unlock his mind. The dry leathery case of the mummy, the way its head had writhed and shrunk within—these were the things he recognised. But from where? He strode faster, shaking his head violently to dislodge a dark blot which it carried at the edge of his eye, seeming to pace him where sky and rock were dimly separating.

When he heard the creaking again he was sure it came from beyond the cliff-edge, from the void, moving leisurely with them. It was an acoustic

effect, Drabney thought, an effect of the air which was congealing hotly about him as if it had clung to him from the tomb. That was all. For God's sake, he was fighting panic as if he were drugged. And all because of something he couldn't even remember, buried deep in his mind.

A dim form stood ahead, against the hint of dawn. It was not a rock. It was the jeep. "There was something not right about that tomb," Twill chattered, relieved, panting. "Those mummy-cases. Mummy-cases were a kind of sympathetic magic, you know. They were made to represent what you hoped to be after death."

"That wasn't what struck me as wrong," Long wheezed. "I'll tell you what I want to know. If that mummy standing against the wall really did attend to all the others, then who wrapped him?"

Suddenly Drabney remembered what he'd forgotten, and his heart began to thump him, urging him faster, faster. He ran, the treasure in his sack scraping harshly together. Somewhere, beyond the vast perspectiveless grey that hung close to his eyes, he heard a slow rhythmic creak and rustling, not at all like the sound of palm trees. It was drawing swiftly nearer.

"Come on!" Drabney shouted wildly, grabbing at the jeep, bruising himself cruelly as he struggled in, cursing the ignition key as it squirmed out of reach in his pocket, cursing the others as they fumbled into the jeep. He could see nothing but the memory that had jarred loose at last, of what he'd once seen that had been like the mummy: a chrysalis, writhing in the throes of its final transformation.

He was still scrabbling at the ignition when the shrunken glaring wide-mouthed head pressed itself against the windscreen, smearing the glass as it clambered over and enfolded them all beneath its wings.

Looking Out

"*Looking Out* derives, I suspect, from my mother's increasing reluctance to venture far from her house once Jenny and I were living together. It was a trait that chafed her sister and brother-in-law, whom she regularly arranged to visit only to cancel at the last moment. Many were the arguments we had when I tried to persuade her that my aunt and uncle might be inconvenienced, and great was her pique if they proved to have invited a friend the next time she announced a visit. All that had its comic side, but Nairn's plight became hers too, anticipated by the tale. At least, that's my sense of it, though the notes for its development should be in the library vaults of Liverpool University if anybody wants to challenge my account."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

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The first time Nairn saw the figures in his house, he thought the landlord had won.

Nairn hammered his stick triumphantly on the pavement as he neared home. Even his legs weren't hobbling him so much; he was almost striding. The girl at the supermarket had tried to cow him: "I can't let you have this sugar. You haven't bought enough goods. You can see the sign, a pound for a pound." I can read well enough, he'd thought, in my day we went to school to learn. When she continued to refuse he'd thumped the sugar down on her counter, and the bag had split. "You can't sell that to anyone else now," he'd pointed out. "It's damaged goods." She still hadn't sold it to him, bitch in the manger that she was, but they both knew she was the loser. He was smiling as he arrived home.

He was reaching in his pocket for the key, smiling more broadly as he remembered that for the first time in months he wouldn't be greeted by the scrabble of rats nagging at the house, when a movement in his bedroom caught his attention. He glanced up in time to see a group of dim-faced figures peering out at him.

At once he was hurrying toward the house, slashing his stick through the net of grass which overgrew the path. He locked the front door behind him and hobbled toward the back, kicking a letter along the hall. When he'd locked the back door he leaned on his stick, smiling grimly. Let them try to

get out now without his seeing who they were. Both doors had mortice-locks. The intruders would get the keys over his dead body. No doubt they were capable of that, if they were like most people today. But let them try to explain away his corpse. Eventually, when they'd still made no sound, he crept upstairs in search of them.

The house was empty. It took Nairn some time, his heart labouring despite his resolve, to be convinced of that. They weren't hiding behind his dressing-table, and they couldn't be under the bed: the bedclothes didn't hang so as to conceal anyone, they were folded over in the centre of the double bed for warmth. But nor could anyone hide in the other two bedrooms; the door of one was missing, the other room was crowded with furniture and trunks unbrokenly coated with dust.

Nairn crept back through the house. Even he, knowing where to tread, couldn't avoid making the loose boards spring and creak beneath the mangy carpets. Nobody could have left the house before he locked the back door without his hearing them.

He was stooping to pick up the letter from the hall floor when he realised what he must have seen. Through the fanlight above the front door he could see people bunched in the window of the first-floor flat opposite. He'd glimpsed their reflections in his bedroom, staring out, possessive and darkly faceless. Let them watch, he thought. They won't see much. They'd love to come in and look round, I know. Over my dead body. He took the letter into the living room, his feet gritting on coal-dust.

It was from the landlord. Nairn could tell by the envelope, by the misspellings and the handwriting, which was that of an ignorant man. The sort who thinks everyone as ignorant as himself, Nairn thought. On his last visit the landlord had scurried through the house, not even waiting for Nairn to catch up; he'd stared at the bedroom door leaning next to the frame from which its hinges had rusted free, he'd peered at the damp peeling away the sitting-room wallpaper, he'd gazed into Nairn's bedroom, sniffing. "I'm sorry to hear you've a cold," Nairn had said satirically. The man had offered to ask friends to do the repairs, but Nairn knew what that meant: sending his friends to sneer at the way the old fool couldn't cope, to snoop and report back. "I'll see to it myself," Nairn had said, "when I have the money and time."

The following day he'd had the mortice locks fitted. Since then he'd had three letters from the landlord, and here was the fourth. He tore it up unopened and built a small pile of coal over it in the grate. Soon the brownish walls and ragged floor were fluttering about him, amid the darkness; a cold fire flickered in the mirror on the wall. He sat gazing at the sputtering coal. If the landlord and his friends thought they'd picked a helpless victim, they'd find out how mistaken they were.

On the day the next letter arrived, he saw the face.

The postman was crossing the road to the flats opposite when Nairn returned from collecting his pension. "Good day," Nairn said, but the man didn't touch his cap, though he couldn't have been more than twenty. Watching him pass, Nairn saw that the first-floor flat was still curtained. You'll have to get up earlier than that to catch me, he thought. He turned toward his house, and saw it staring down at him from his bedroom window.

The face seemed to be perched on top of a shapeless heap of grey material. The body must be hidden within the mass, Nairn thought, even though he found it impossible to distinguish the material: they couldn't trick him into believing anything else, his eyes might be growing weak but not his mind. The face, however, he could make out clearly enough: a thing of bone and discoloured sucked-in skin, patched with colourless hair that was sodden with sweat, grinning out at him. The dark October sky drifted across it and peeled away, leaving the wide mirthless grin untouched.

Nairn limped toward the house, stamping his stick. He locked the doors and searched. When he'd searched twice and found the building empty, he knew the landlord and his friends were responsible. Nobody else would have keys to the house. The man was trying to frighten Nairn out. He'd soon see who he was dealing with. Nairn strode unsteadily back to the hall, drubbing dust from the carpet with his stick.

Though Nairn's name was still misspelled on the envelope, the letter wasn't from the landlord. It was officially franked, from the courts: a summons. Another attempt to frighten him. He halved the unopened envelope slowly and deliberately, until the pile was too thick to tear. He couldn't bear a man who was underhand. If the landlord had anything to say to him, let him come and say it to his face.

It took him most of the day to drag the bed into a position from which, lying down, he could watch his bedroom door. He'd managed to manhandle chairs to block the front and back doors, skinning the walls as he did so. He lay on the bed in the dark, resting sleeplessly. The bedroom door, which he'd closed fast, merged with dimness; closed fast, it hung in the darkness, distant and invisible. He lay waiting for the dark and the silence to burst open. He must hear a chair fall first. He saw the grey shapeless mass advancing toward his room, bearing the yellowed grinning face toward him. "Come on!" he shouted furiously, but only his voice clattered flatly about the house.

Nothing came that night nor the nights following. But each time he made to pull the chair away from the front door, he halted. Maybe they thought he was a fool, who'd go out and give them the chance to get in. He knew they were watching. He was sure they were in the first-floor flat opposite. If the people there felt about him as he felt about them, they would be delighted to see him beaten. Besides, the landlord owned them. No doubt he thought Nairn hadn't noticed him collecting rent from the flats.

When at last he had to go out he gathered dust in a dustpan beforehand and spread it over the sashes of the windows and on the floor in front of the exterior doors. Perhaps their footprints would betray them; the landlord's shoe-soles were imprinted in the mud of the lawn. Let them explain that away.

Nairn collected his pension and shopped on the same journey. Long before he reached home he was exhausted; the November wind tugged viciously at his wheeled basket, like a dog. His legs ached dully, and the pain left him no room to be surprised to see his bedroom crowded with figures.

The face was there, protruding from its grey mass and grinning. The other figures, four or five of them, clustered dimly behind it, staring out. Nairn was sure that they were all sneering down at him. He stared up at the window, clenching his fist on his stick, to see how long they dared taunt him.

At last he hurled himself forward, nearly falling, and wrenched open the front door. They hadn't time to descend the stairs, and nobody was halted in flight on the staircase; but his bedroom was empty. He hardly bothered to search the house and confirm that the dust on the sashes was undisturbed. He already knew that the dust before the door was untouched.

They were very clever. Too clever for their own good. They'd shown they could enter his house whenever he was out without leaving a trace. But they had overlooked one possibility: that he would never go out. Then let them try to take over his house. "Over my dead body," he shouted, sending his voice to stake his claim on every recess of the building.

They didn't believe him, didn't they? He stumped into the kitchen and grabbing the rat poison, thumped his way upstairs and dropped the packet triumphantly by the bed. Let them try to bully him out now, let them lay a finger on him, they'd see what would happen.

He spread his food more thinly on his plate. He sat nearer to a smaller fire. He tore up a letter. He lay in his cocoon and heard the restless sounds of the house tiptoeing toward him through the dark. He saw the sunken patched face grinning at him, perched atop the grey mass. He started awake and saw it at the end of his bed, hulking. But it was only the dawn, creeping into his room like a cloud of dust.

Soon he'd used up all his coal. He sprinkled a last crackle of dust from the coal-scuttle and watched the fire dimming again to somnolent pink. About to brew a cup of tea, he controlled himself. He'd only start nibbling at food if he went into the kitchen. He wasn't a rat. And he didn't need tea just to cheer himself up. He could keep warm in bed.

The first thing he saw when he entered his room was the packet of poison. He stared at it, confused. Had he intended to use that on himself? Oh no, they wouldn't drive him to that. They thought they could win that way, did they? He'd bent stiffly to pick up the poison when, reflected in the muddy sky in the window, he saw the figures behind him.

There were five of them, converging swiftly on him, a fluttering heartbeat away. He twisted about; his stick slipped on a board, and he fell. By the time he'd levered his throbbing body to its feet it was useless to pursue them; he hadn't even glimpsed which way they'd fled.

They were showing him how bold they could be, were they? His fury mounted in time with the pulsing of his bruises. Their spies had told them he had to go out now to get coal, had they? Then he wouldn't move from this room except for the calls of nature.

Nor did he. He lay thinking: if they want to get me out now they'll have to carry me, bed and all. Such big brave fellows, it should be easy for them to

carry an old man downstairs. They'll see what sort of old man they're dealing with if they try.

The house creaked like a boat, the light swelled and drained away; Nairn drifted. Once he heard a sound at the front door, a metallic snap. He reached the window in time to see that it had been the postman, but after that he sat in a chair at the bedroom window, wrapped in his blankets. They would have to come through the front garden to reach the house. Even they wouldn't dare to be seen climbing over the back-yard wall.

His mouth, his throat, his stomach felt like parchment. His body seemed light as paper. They won't blow me away, he thought. The postman stared back at Nairn's window, frowning. No, they haven't got rid of me, Nairn told him. Frown all you like.

The walls of the room looked, and moved, like a stormy sky. As the December clouds sailed by Nairn felt them pulling gently at him, coaxing him out of his room. You won't get me out, he thought. Not you or anybody else. He kept his eyes on the garden gate, through which any intruders must pass; he ignored the stealthily pacing creak of the floorboards, ignored his bedroom door as it fumbled in its frame.

Once, downstairs, something fell, its hollow clatter cackling through the house. Nairn turned sharply and saw his wife lying on the bed, a grey stick-figure gasping open-mouthed but voicelessly. Only in his dreams had the doctor let him see her like that. He turned his back on the room, on the walls that rose slowly like smoke, and felt the room turn with him like a staggering roundabout. His unkempt beard crawled moistly on his cheeks. As he gripped the arms of the chair and fought dry nausea, he caught sight of figures in the flat opposite, watching him. Keep watching, he told them. You won't see me blow away.

When he saw the policeman ring the bell of the flat, when someone came to the street door and pointed to Nairn's room, he knew they thought they'd won. He was hardly surprised, as the dark sky began to hang lower like damp paper, to see the landlord drive up and join the watchers.

Nairn tried to hook the poison toward him, but his stick flew from his hand and slid under the bed, and he had to crawl to the poison. Never mind the stick. He didn't need that to beat them. He grasped the chair, fell back on the floor and the second time managed to clamber in, wrapping the blankets about himself.

The watchers were standing outside the flats, no doubt to taunt him. No, because now he could see what they'd been waiting for: an ambulance. They were striding toward the house, two ambulancemen, the policeman, a man from the flat, the landlord. Even now the landlord didn't dare tackle Nairn alone. This time he'd tricked himself, for there would be witnesses to what he'd made Nairn do. Nairn gripped the poison beneath the blanket like a concealed weapon.

They were knocking on the front door, knocking louder, battering. That's right, Nairn thought, break it down. Eventually they did so, by the sound of it. He heard their footsteps beating the boards of the hall, knocking on the house to show how hollow it was. As their tread came thudding upstairs he remembered the day the landlord had given him the key, remembered his wife running up the stairs, agog at the size of the house.

As they strode across the landing he tried to rise and face them, but his legs trembled and threw him back into the chair. To face them would give them the satisfaction of being acknowledged, anyway. Better to ignore them. He turned to the window as his bedroom door slammed back, and saw the five of them hurry into the room, spreading out to converge on him. He cupped his hand to his mouth and swallowed the poison.

There's your house, he told the landlord. You didn't believe it would be over my dead body, did you? Try and make your tenants forget this was my house now, if you can. He grinned at himself in the glass of the window, as the blackening sky reached out for him. He saw the five of them at his back, staring. He saw his own starved hair-patched face grinning through the window, above the grey shapeless swathe of the blankets.

Then the poison clamped the grin to his face.

Bait

Written in: 1974
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"That light is all that is left of your life," Lord Robert said, gesturing negligently toward the torch set in its niche in the wall opposite that to which Thomas was chained. "Though perhaps I should not be so niggardly. You would scarcely have time to savour the attentions of your new companion. Perhaps when you have had a taste of the dark, I may return to discover whether your thoughts are of your wife or of what will visit you."

He turned away. Then, as if inspired, he swung back and slit Thomas's forearm with his sword. A minute later Thomas heard the door slam stoutly, amid the new stone which walled off this extremity of the cellars. The torch-flame streamed away from the gust, dragging its niche and part of the wall by their shadows.

Thomas slid down to squat on the damp stone floor. The short chains gyved to his ankles collected in a heap beneath his thighs, cutting dully into them, but he squatted unmoving. The wall before him panted with the flame.

The light reached out along the grey stone and fell back, unable to maintain its grip. At its farthest reach it snatched forward what Thomas had taken to be part of the darkness: a fissure in the grey wall, moist-edged as a wound. From its apex plopped a slow deliberate drip, mud-thick. Within the fissure, muffled and distant, Thomas heard an awakening scrape of claws.

Rats, he told himself. They must be the companions he had been promised. He hoped they would find him dead. He hoped death would come to him softly as sleep, and as quickly. He closed his eyes and let the plump drip pace his breathing, slow his thoughts. But the flame tyrannised his eyelids, demanding that he watch the light plucking nervously at the fissure.

Already the light was fading, unless a clinging shadow of sleep was gathering on his eyes. Deep in the fissure the claws scraped, growing bolder. He stared into the unsteady cleft of darkness and tried to coax its

depths to draw him into sleep. The depths only filled with his memories, the hut at the edge of the forest, Marie.

Marie was crying. "Don't let him take me, I couldn't bear it. If he takes me I won't be yours." Thomas's friends were nodding their heads angrily. "He has no right," they said. "Someone must stand against him. We would have if we'd known. It only needs someone to tell him we know there is no such right, and he will never dare claim it again. We'll stand by you."

Marie was screaming, for Lord Robert had thrown open the door of their hut. Behind him at a distance, blurred and surreptitious in the twilight, Thomas's friends peered. Thomas stood before Marie, warding off Lord Robert. "There is no lord's right, no other lord claims it. You cannot have her. The other lords will come to our aid if you try."

Lord Robert did not speak. His sword, infamous for its sharpness that clove men as a scythe mows grass, trembled a fingernail's breadth from Thomas's eye. Through the doorway Thomas saw that his friends had retreated behind then-barred doors. Lord Robert gazed at Marie and held his sword carelessly at Thomas's face until Thomas fell back. Marie was screaming, no longer in terror of her husband's fate but of her own. She was hugging her breasts and pressing her legs together closely as Lord Robert's lips. Lord Robert threatened her with the sword, prodding her gently with it here and there, each time drawing blood. Abruptly he seemed to tire of trying to persuade her. In a moment he had deflowered her expertly with the sword. After a while he silenced her cries with the blade.

Thomas stood drained of all feeling, too drained even to impale himself on the sword. He waited for the blade to cut him down, but Lord Robert was speaking. "Since you desire a companion who will be yours alone, you shall have one."

The turnkey had led Thomas through the cellars, his torchlight glancing at huddles of chain and starved flesh. Behind Thomas, Lord Robert's sword was ready in its scabbard, a fang in a snake's mouth. When the turnkey had unlocked the door in the depths of the cellars, he'd thrust his light through the opening so sharply that the darkness had almost gulped it up. He'd held the light while Lord Robert had fettered Thomas; then, at a gesture from his master, he'd niched the torch and had fled beyond the new stone wall. Now Thomas wondered dully what that wall had been built to contain.

The torch was sputtering. The cellar wall gasped feebly as its light drained. Thomas was trying to determine how close the sounds within the fissure were, the sounds of something hard scratching faintly and stealthily against stone—he was trying to think how rats could make so measured and purposeful a sound—when darkness doused everything.

The chains bruised his thighs, which throbbed. He wished he had moved before. Now, if he moved, he would betray himself to the rats, which would fasten unseen on him. Unseen: that was the worst, as Lord Robert had intended.

It denied Thomas the chance to fend them off before they reached him. It denied him everything save the sounds of encirclement, the tearing of sharp teeth.

He moved, spreading the chains on either side of him. Let the rats come, he would best them yet. Without the nagging of the iron links, he could sleep. Lord Robert was starving his body to weaken him, but had forgotten that he had already starved Thomas's soul. All Thomas need do was let himself sink into the void he had become. Not even rats could awaken him from that sleep.

But sleep hung back, its presence close yet impalpable as the dark. As Thomas tried to muffle himself in sleep, strove to calm himself so that it could take hold of him, part of him remained doggedly alert to the sounds within the fissure. He tried to judge if they were approaching, to satisfy the sleepless part of him, but each time he had almost grasped their distance the slow drip interrupted, distracting him. The hushed claws scraped in the dark. The drip prodded Thomas awake. Exhausted, he forced himself to listen. The drip pulled his mind down, down into sleep.

He awoke in the forest. Lips were moving timidly over his cheek. It was Marie. He opened his eyes gradually. Above him, swarms of leaves drifted gently over one another; pools of light rippled over him, soft as breath. He couldn't see Marie, for she was kissing his forearm shyly. If he raised his head he would see her. He awoke, and a tongue was lapping thirstily at his sword-wound in the dark.

He roared and kicked out, until the fetters wrenched his ankles. Amid his terror was a deeper horror, that his mind had accepted what Lord Robert had given him in exchange for Marie, accepted it even if only in sleep. He thrust the thing from him, and his hand touched an arm. He felt bone and

dust-stubbled wiry muscle that twitched his fingers away, but no flesh at all. Then the thing scuttled dryly back into the fissure.

Thomas held himself still, though the links bit into his thighs. The lethargic drip mocked the scurrying of his heart. Now he knew why the turnkey had fled, knew the extent of Lord Robert's cruelty. Thomas had heard tales of hungry cadavers that roamed from their graves at night, writhed where they lay impaled beneath crossroads, tapped stealthily at doors to be let in. Only Lord Robert could have made a pet of such a thing. Thomas's folded legs trembled, blazing with pain, but he held himself still, clinging to the silence.

When the hollow scrape of bone emerged from the fissure onto the cellar floor he began to roar like a beast in a fire, shaking his chains. There was nothing else he could do. In a moment he froze aghast, for his noise might have allowed the thing to creep to his side unheard.

But it was scuttling back into the cleft. He listened to the aimless shuffling of bone, and thought the darkness was deceiving him until he remembered how the thing had waited for the light to fail. Suddenly he realised why it had delayed until he had fallen asleep. It was as timid as anything else that might crawl from a hole in a rock.

It was less timid now that it had tasted its victim. The tentative dry groping retreated into the cleft when Thomas shouted and rang his chains against the stone, but each time it came closer to him. Soon it failed to retreat even as far as the wall. He roared and shook the chains desperately, but his noises seemed to be snatched away at once and muffled, scarcely echoing. They hardly stirred the air, which hung damply upon him, dragging him down into sleep.

He sawed his wrists against the gyves to fend off sleep. Then he clutched his wrists, gasping. He had almost drawn blood and offered it for feasting. When he touched the sword-wound and found it moist, he plastered it with gritty mud from the floor. He hammered his elbows against the wall to keep himself awake. Nearby in the blindness he heard bone scrabbling toward him over the floor.

The dark nestled against him, urging the bony claws forward. It settled insidiously about his mind and held him more tightly than the gyves, imprisoned him outside time, choked off his furious sounds. It pressed faces of bone and working muscle against his eyes, jarring him awake. It flooded his mind entirely, while the thirsty bones crept closer.

Lord Robert returned to Thomas several hours after leaving him. He motioned the turnkey to precede him beyond the partition wall, then he took the nervous torch from the man and gestured him out. Holding the torch above Thomas, he gazed down at the slumped unmoving figure from which iron links spilled.

"You have days yet, perhaps weeks," Lord Robert said. "The last man to wear your chains lived for a month, for the others heard his screams. They found your new companion crouched over him like a spider, and you will know it has a spider's appetite. The wall was meant to help it hoard its attentions for those who most deserved them. I am glad they were kept for you."

Thomas did not move. "You are not dead," Lord Robert said, "nor yet so weak that sleep may shield you from me. Show me your face while I prepare you further."

Still Thomas squatted, huddled into himself. Lord Robert thrust the torch into its niche and stooped to Thomas, grasping his hair. The tip of the scabbard touched the floor.

As the hilt inclined toward him Thomas snatched the sword. His chains betrayed his movement, the hilt rang dully against the wall, but the razor-keen blade pierced Lord Robert's groin.

The point glanced from bone and, slipping upward, emerged beside his spine.

Though Lord Robert screamed and writhed heavily, Thomas held the hilt fast until his captive fainted. Presently the turnkey's scared face peered in. The door slammed at once, and Thomas heard the key turn.

Lord Robert found himself propped against the wall next to Thomas, impaled on the sword. His cloak lay across Thomas's knees. Thomas gazed at him while he moaned. "I shall call the turnkey," Lord Robert said, not daring to move on the sword. "He will free you and escort you unchallenged from my castle and my domain. None shall pursue you."

"The turnkey has imprisoned us both," Thomas said, lifting the blade. "Stand up. You will be my bait. We shall see if your sword will destroy your pet."

Lord Robert obeyed. He stood before Thomas, moving with minute delicacy on the axis of the sword. Sweat poured down his face. When

Thomas withdrew the blade slowly until the point was flush with his captive's back, Lord Robert moaned but stood firm.

"Let him come now," Thomas said. Within the fissure an impatient desiccated rattling had ventured almost to the edge of the light. "He will have to come as many times as I need to impale him. We shall live until that is done."

Lord Robert was gazing down, seeking in Thomas's eyes some sense of what was to come, when Thomas threw the cloak at the torch and gave them both to darkness.

Dolls

Written in: 1974
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Cold as the February wind, the full moon blazed over the fields. Anne Norton heard the wind ruffle the wheat a moment before it plucked at her naked body. She shivered, but not from the cold, which hardly touched her. Already the power was coursing through her; already the belladonna and the aconite were shivering through her genitals and her legs. She ran behind her husband John through the gate in their stone wall.

Once out of the garden she glanced back at the cottages of Camside. Some were empty, she knew, and so was the Cooper farmhouse at the edge of the village. The rest were dark and sleeping, without the faintest gleam of a rush-light. Across the common, the high voice of a sheep joined her in derisive mirth. Ahead of her, John had reached the edge of the wood. Shadows streamed down his naked back.

The wood was quiet, muffled. Only the Cambrook stream gossipped incessantly in the darkness. The others must already be waiting at the meeting place. Now the ointment seemed to pour hotly down her legs. She ran more swiftly, gliding through splashes of moonlight, as the trees began to toss in their sleep. The wind stroked her genitals, which gulped eagerly.

She plunged into the Cambrook, shattering the agitated ropes of moonlight. Beneath her feet pebbles gnashed shrilly, with a hard yet liquid sound. When she reached the bank she looked back sharply, for she'd heard the stream stir with more life than belonged to water. But the water was flowing innocently by.

As if the gnashing of the pebbles had been the earth's last snatch at her she felt herself leave the ground. She saw the luminous ground race by beneath the skimming blur of her feet. Ranks of trees danced beside her, huge and slow but increasingly wild, branches about one another's shoulders. She felt all the strength and abandon of the trees flood through her.

In a moment, or perhaps an hour—for the wood seemed to have swelled like fire, to cover the whole countryside—she had reached the glade.

Everyone was there. The four Coopers were standing in a row at the edge of the glade, waiting impatiently, restless as the trees. Elizabeth Cooper glared at Anne with open hostility. Anne grimaced at her; she knew it was John at whom the old woman wanted to glare, jealous of his power. The Coopers had preserved the witchcraft for so long alone that now they were unwilling to allow power to anyone else. But they dared not oppose John. Giddy with borrowed power and borne up by the fierce ointment, Anne strode into the glade, feeling her feet sink to earth.

John had been halted by Robert Allen. The man's eyes were rolling out of focus, so that he seemed to address someone behind John's shoulder. "Celia Poole called my Nell a witch," he said. "She meant it as a joke, till she saw how Nell looked. She thinks slowly, but she'll come to the truth."

John nodded. He seemed to withdraw from his eyes, sinking down to a secret centre of himself, leaving his eyes glazed by moonlight. Watching, Anne flinched away. Though his power sustained her, it was unthinkably terrifying; it was something she dared not ponder, just as her wedding night had been. "Celia Poole," he said. "By the time she is sure, she will be unable to tell."

Adam Cooper stepped forward, defiantly impatient, almost interrupting. "Introibo," he shouted.

At once Elizabeth Cooper began to chant. It was in no language Anne knew, she wasn't sure it was even composed of words: a howling and yodelling, a clogged gurgle. Sometimes sounds were repeated monotonously, sometimes Anne recognised no sound that she'd heard from the previous meeting. She suspected the old woman of making up the chant. None of this mattered, for the Coopers had linked arms and were dancing wildly around the glade, the outermost dragging the bystanders into the dance as they passed.

Anne was snatched away by Adam, almost overbalancing. John had been caught by Jane Cooper, scarcely fifteen but already plumply rounded. Anne felt a hot pang of jealousy. But now that John had joined the dance they were whirling faster, spinning her away from her jealousy, from everything but the linked circle of thirteen turning about the axis of the centre of the glade, whizzing above the ground.

Clouds shrank back from the moon; light washed over the glade, and the shadows of the capering trees grasped at the earth. Anne felt her husband's power surging through the circle, lifting her free of the ground. When she opened her mouth the chant spilled out, incomprehensible yet exhilarating. Beside her Adam's penis reared up, unsheathing its tip, enticing her gaze.

Suddenly the dance had spun her out of the circle; she rolled panting over the damp grass. The circle was breaking up, and Adam ran to the edge of the glade, where he'd hidden a basket. From the basket he produced a black hen, which he decapitated, squeezing the body between his thighs to pump the gory fountain higher. "Corpus domini nostri," he shouted, elevating the head towards the moon.

He'd changed the ritual again, Anne realised; last time they'd eaten fish which he'd consecrated, and the time before there had been biscuits like flattened communion wafers. All the Coopers' magic changed from month to month, largely because of Elizabeth's failing memory. In this case it didn't matter, for the meaning of the ritual remained the same. "Amen!" Anne cried with the rest as they lay on the ground, hearts pounding. That would show Parson Jenner how frightened she was of him.

"Amen!" they shouted. "Domini nostri! Domini nostri!" And nodding to Robert Allen, John rose to his feet and left the glade.

The twelve fell silent. The moon hung still and clear. Even the trees were subdued, like uneasy spectators holding their breath. Their shadows wavered to stillness, as if the frightened anticipation of the twelve had gripped them fast. Anne's heart scurried as time paced, slow, slower.

Before John returned his power had filled the glade, cold and inhuman as the moonlight. Nobody looked at his face. Everyone gazed at his hands, where all his power was focused. His hands displayed a knife and a faceless wooden doll.

Robert Allen refused to take the doll at first. He gazed at it, and at the immobile moon-bright hand that held it out to him, with something like dread. Not until Nell gestured furiously at him did he clutch the doll, closing his eyes and squeezing his face tight about a silent curse.

As soon as Robert handed back the doll, John slashed at its head half-a-dozen times with the knife. His movements seemed casual, negligent,

practically aimless. But now there was a face on the doll: low brow, long blunt nose, high cheekbones and wide mouth: Celia Poole's face.

Though she had watched him carving before he had turned to witchcraft, Anne was terrified. His carving had the economy and skill of pure hatred. That, and more: carving, he became a total stranger—not the man who had courted her, not the man she'd lain coldly beneath on their wedding night, not the man their marriage had made of him. When he strode away into the trees, gazing at the doll, she felt exhausted with relief. Even had he not forbidden them to watch his curse, she could never have followed.

John was hardly out of the glade when Elizabeth Cooper seized Robert Allen. She slid down his belly and thrust her head hungrily between his legs. To Anne it looked as if a grey hairy spider had fastened itself beneath Robert's belly and was plucking at its web. His entire body strained back like a bow from the arrow of his genitals. His face glowed coldly with moonlight as his mouth gaped wider, wider.

Elizabeth's action released them all from their dread. Adam pushed Jenny Carter against a tree and thrust into her from behind as she clawed at the trunk. James Carter was tripped by Alice Young and Nell, who fastened on him with their genitals as if they were famished mouths. Arthur Young had pinioned Mary Cooper to the ground with her arms stretched wide, but she lifted her hips higher to shackle him too, gasping.

Jane Cooper lay on top of Thomas Small, her plump young breasts crushed against his chest as his thick arm pressed her to him. He'd torn up a bunch of nettles and was flailing her round buttocks with them. Her buttocks churned, pumping him, as her hands yanked frantically at his hair. She cried out as he did, almost lifting herself free of him.

Elizabeth lifted her head and looked at Anne as Robert Allen slumped to the ground, spent. "Your John never shows his face now, does he?" she taunted. "Does without, does he? You mark my words. No man has that kind of power."

There was nothing behind her words but envy, Anne knew. Envy had made her seize Robert Allen as soon as John had gone. Nevertheless, Anne suddenly felt rejected by the others, as she had tried not to admit to herself while she waited for a partner. She grabbed Adam as he left Jenny Carter still clinging to the tree, and dragged him on top of herself. Deeper in the

wood she heard a creaking, as of trees flexing in the wind. But there was no wind.

Her body closed on Adam's penis, sucking him deeper, quickening his thrust. Her thighs crushed his ribs, her toes arched upward, straining him closer still. Her buttocks rolled against the damp grass, and the ointment blazed through her legs, exploding in her genitals almost at once. At her third orgasm his penis seemed to double its size, pumping long and uncontrollably.

As she lay beneath him she heard the tread approaching through the wood, creaking.

She tried not to think. She tried to feel nothing but Adam's heavy body crushing her against the grass; but he pushed himself away and sat waiting, suddenly subdued. She tried to hold the cold bleached glade still, empty except for the twelve. She tried to fend off what was approaching. What the orgiasts had been trying to ignore was unthinkable. Since she couldn't think it, it couldn't happen.

She was trying to convince herself when the devil stalked creaking into the glade.

He surveyed the twelve, sneering, and his head brandished horns that could gore a bull. His eyes, his wide mouth and the hollows of his cheeks were thick with shadow. So much Anne saw before she wrenched her gaze away. But it was no use averting her eyes, for she could feel his body massive as an oak dominating the glade, and smell the fetid leather of him. She looked up.

He was beckoning. One finger thick and knotted as a branch hooked towards them, creaking faintly. Perhaps that was the most terrible aspect of him: that he never spoke, because he had no need. Anne felt a sudden wound gouged out where her stomach had been. It must be her turn now. Then she realised he was not beckoning to her, but to Jane. His enormous penis stood ready before his featureless belly, glistening with moonlight.

He waited, finger hooked, while Jane went trembling to him in the centre of the glade. His presence seemed to weigh down time; her paces were hours long. When she reached him and at last touched his shoulders timidly, he threw her to the ground.

At once he was on her, his knotted fingers pinning her shoulders down. As the huge penis entered her she gasped as though it had clubbed all the breath from her. Her stinging buttocks struggled wildly beneath him, on the grass. He drove himself deeper into her, with long slow deliberate strokes. Even when she tore at his back with her nails and bruised her thighs against his sides, his sneering mouth neither spoke nor moved.

When she fell back exhausted he thrust her away and strode out of the glade, creaking slowly and massively as the trees.

Parson Jenner was screaming.

"The carnal mind," he screamed, "is enmity against God! To be carnally minded is death!"

The church hurled his voice back behind Anne. She dwindled into herself. He wasn't looking at her. He couldn't know.

"This is God's word," the parson said quietly, intensely; then screamed "Will you silence him with the words of men? Will you tell him lust is natural, God-given? Wallowing in filth is in the nature of animals! Is that your nature? Will you glorify your own slime and call it Christian love?"

Anne wished she dared cover her burning face. She knew he was right. She knew it more certainly every time he preached on the subject. She'd known it on her wedding night, as soon as she'd seen John's uplifting penis. She'd known as he drove it into her, dry and hard and rough, for no better reason than that Parson Jenner had licensed him to. Her body had stiffened against the intrusion and grown cold, and so it always behaved with John.

Yet it hadn't behaved so when she was sixteen, when she'd joined (she had to hurry her mind past the words, lest God and Parson Jenner overhear) the coven. The ointment had helped her then, initiating her into ecstasy; it had always done so since. Only at home, on her bed with John, did her body feel rigid and grimy. After much thought she had decided why. In the village the parson's power was everywhere. She was free of his power only in (she thought it loudly, defiantly) the coven.

The entire coven was here in church, subdued by Jenner's power. Anne glanced about surreptitiously. There was Adam, sitting stiffly upright as if held to attention by his long black jacket, his genitals muffled beneath the

folds of its full skirts. There—Anne felt an inexplicable violent surge of jealousy—Jane, her breasts laced tightly into a corset-bodice, her buttocks surely throbbing still beneath the many petticoats and long skirt and apron; they could hardly have recovered in less than a day. And there were all the others, hiding behind their intent respectful faces. In the gallery at the west end Anne saw Robert Allen and Arthur Young, Robert's oboe and Arthur's horn at their sides ready to accompany the next hymn.

"Did Jesus Christ Our Lord," Parson Jenner screamed, "bring shame upon His Blessed Mother's virgin flesh by lusting after woman?"

This must be the only time he ever felt passion, Anne thought in a bid to reassure herself. But that made it worse. It meant that the force of the whole man was behind his words. She snatched her gaze back to the altar, trying to pretend she'd never looked away.

His power was too strong for them. By hiding their bodies and their thoughts from him they had acknowledged his power. The coven was nothing but an escape from him, an escape dictated to them by the whims of the full moon. The rest of the month they were his.

She knew that the Carters and the Youngs had joined the coven simply in order to escape the sermons by which Jenner had restricted their marriages. She imagined his furious contempt if he ever found them out. She felt diminished, ashamed. She could hear him telling her that the coven was nothing but a delusion.

She shook her head; at least, it trembled. Her thoughts were confused. She tried to force her way through the grey mist which always descended on her mind after each coven and hung about her until the next full moon. There was more to their witchcraft than delusion. Once, running through the Cambrook at midnight, she'd heard the entire stream rise up behind her, a glittering mantle coldly boiling in the moonlight, sweeping forward to follow her to the coven; but when she'd turned the water had been playing aimlessly between its banks. She was sure she'd heard that.

And there was something she had seen. Once, at the height of the coven's ecstasy, she had looked up to see a gigantic white moonlit face grinning at them from the sky. Its eyes and mouth had been full of night; their tattered rims had smoked slowly. As it had gradually spread to encompass the whole of the sky, still gazing down and grinning, horns had streamed from its forehead.

"Lust is a delusion, a trick played on us by the devil!" Parson Jenner screamed. "Did Our Lord Jesus Christ feel lust? Did His Blessed Mother?"

A delusion, Anne thought. If the devil could make her feel what she felt at the coven, he could certainly make her see faces in the sky. Her face grew ashen. The coven had no power except the power of delusion.

But it had, she thought suddenly. It had real power, terrifying power. For the first time that day she was able to look up at Parson Jenner's face. "We shall sing in praise of God," he declared. She rose to her feet, buoyed up beyond the music. The coven and the parson had battled within her. And the coven had won, because it had John's power.

Colour flooded back into her mind and into the church, and for the rest of the service she felt as if she were caught in a blaze of light: until, as she emerged from the church, she saw Celia Poole walking ahead of her, unharmed.

At once John, strolling beside her powerful and secret behind his calm face, became what the others had been in the church: a hollow puppet skulking behind a God-fearing expression. He'd said Celia Poole would be struck down before she could speak. But how could he be sure unless he silenced her immediately? His power had failed. Parson Jenner had won.

At their cottage she sat wordlessly. The parson's power was here too. While others enjoyed a Sunday stroll she and John must sit at home, insisting on their piety. Her stomach ached dully. Having starved herself for the coven she must now abstain on the Sabbath. She gazed towards her spinning wheel, then looked away. She could not even mend their clothes, lest the parson chance to call.

Her mind felt dark as the earth floor. The grandfather clock marked off the approach of the evening service, loudly, lethargically. She imagined Celia Poole springing to her feet in the church, not for a public penance but to denounce Nell. Then Nell would break down and implicate them all. And Parson Jenner would have them, his voice surrounding them, binding them with a noose of villagers. Never mind George II's Witchcraft Act. That kind of leniency wasn't for Jenner, nor for the village he had made his own.

She watched John place wood on the fire, carefully, untroubled. She refused to be deluded by his calm. Behind his discreetly secretive face there was nothing. He was the only one who could have saved her from Jenner.

She'd thought the parson's first victory over him, years ago, had filled him with cold hatred—the source of his power. But that power had faded.

He sat opposite her, his face unchanging. For a moment she realised that his days outside the coven might be as grey as hers. But at least she had her ecstasies beneath the moon. What pleasure could he have that carried him through life?

It didn't matter, she thought, shrugging dully away before the thought took shape. Neither of them could look forward to pleasure, now that Jenner had won. A wind forced smoke out of the fireplace towards them, billowing darkly up to the rafters.

On her way to the later service she stumbled continually in the deep ruts of the road. It was as though they were forcing her feet towards the church. The red-brick cottages stood back from her in their large gardens. The sun hung low over the wheat, and her shadow bumped over the ruts, dragging her along.

Before she reached her appointed place in the pew she passed the Coopers. None of them looked at her and John, nor did she dare look directly at them. The parson's power was absolute; they dared not even acknowledge each other. She wondered whether they were as numb with dread as she.

Then she saw that the Pooles' places were empty.

She didn't dare hope yet. But she felt the possibility of hope for the first time in church since Jenner had taken up residence. The Pooles were almost always half an hour early for the service; they preferred not to suffer each other's awkward silences alone.

Kneeling, she gazed about. The church had been neglected in the previous parson's day. Then Jenner had come and blamed them all, fastening his words deep in their most secret flaws. Some of the villagers had welcomed him, as the solution to what they saw as the laxity of the time; the others had not dared oppose him, for his contempt was spreading through the villagers like an epidemic. Most of the villagers infected themselves before the contempt could be turned against them.

Then Jenner had called them to clean and renovate the church, to renew its whitewash. It gleamed around Anne, in the evening light. But now she felt that perhaps this was not the victory Jenner thought it was. After all, it was Jenner who preached the unimportance of earthly things. The real victory

was over Celia Poole, and that was John's—When Anne heard the footsteps approaching down the aisle she knew without turning that it was Celia Poole.

Turning with the rest as they disapproved of the latecomer, Anne saw Celia take her place unruffled in her pew—in the pew which, like the rest, had been built to Jenner's order by John. In Celia's eyes, biding its time, Anne saw the denunciation. Beside her Richard sat, red-faced and puffed up by their recent argument. Celia's eyes showed that she had won.

As if he had been awaiting his moment of triumph Jenner strode to the altar, robes flying. His Latin rang through the church, hard and imperative. Anne responded dully, though the words were virtually meaningless to her. They sprang from her, bypassing conscious thought, as the chant at the coven had done. But these words were closing on her like a trap. Each word Jenner or the congregation spoke held her more tightly, binding her in readiness for Celia's accusation. She felt Celia behind her, ready to pounce to her feet.

There was a clattering and a heavy thud.

The Latin broke off. Everyone looked round. There was something in the aisle, writhing helplessly as a baby. Its face was black and strained about a protruding silent tongue; the mouth worked, but only foam emerged. It was Celia Poole.

"Be vigilant!" Jenner screamed, pointing. "Because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour!"

Anne could hardly contain her smile. She knew this was not the devil's victory. It was the coven's.

Then, as Richard looked up from his writhing wife, his eyes blank and moist with fury, she realised he knew also.

It was the day before the next full moon that Elizabeth Cooper's words began to grow into Anne's suspicion.

Anne was mending clothes. Unafraid now, her mind moved smoothly as her needle through her memories. For the first time since her marriage she found herself spontaneously enjoying her work. She dwelt on it. She remembered the initiations of the Carters and the Youngs, remembered their wild writhing and cavorting as they had experienced their own untrammelled sexuality.

Her mind snagged on that. Suddenly she wondered what had happened to John's sexuality.

She tried to think. John wasn't sexless, quite the contrary; his fierce desire had terrified her on their wedding night, when sex had confronted her unsteady with rush-light rather than luminous beneath the full moon. When he knew he was unable to coax or bludgeon a response from her he had withdrawn his desire into himself, but she couldn't believe it had vanished entirely. "No man has that kind of power," Elizabeth had said.

Of course. That was where his sexuality had gone: into his magic power. Elizabeth's jealous words had inadvertently shown Anne the truth. But somehow Anne wasn't entirely convinced. She heard John in his room, finishing a piece of furniture. She'd often caught him looking at her when he thought she was unaware; she'd seen the desire in his eyes. She'd shudder then: she couldn't, that was all, it was no use trying to force her. Now, thinking about it instead of hurrying past, she couldn't believe that he had managed to translate his desire so easily into his power. Surely the ecstasy of the coven must inflame him beyond control.

Besides, she was sure John had always had the power. It had been Parson Jenner who had channelled it into hatred. John was an expert furniture-maker, as his father had been; he worked cheaply yet with style, and many of the farm labourers boasted a canopied bed rather than a trestle or a flock mattress on the floor. But John's genius had been for the figures he carved; tiny riders, shepherds, farmers, animals—even, in his room, an entire miniature Camside populated with minute replicas of the villagers. He'd used to take some of his carvings to Brichester; he had seldom brought any home.

Near Christmas he had used to display his work at the edge of the road outside their cottage. Since their marriage he had devoted more time to his carvings; that last Christmas he had displayed more work than was likely to be bought even by the villagers and the folk who made a special journey from Brichester.

He had been standing by his display, and almost the entire population of Camside had been admiring his work, when Parson Jenner stalked up. He stared at the display as if it confirmed the rumour of some awful sin. "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image!" he'd shouted at John. "Do you

not understand the word of God? A graven image is a carved image. It is not for man to steal perfection from God."

Anne had felt the crowd change in an instant from admiring to condemning John's work, had felt their disapproval seize her too, almost palpably. She'd felt frightened but safe; John would overcome them. But then he'd betrayed her. He had given in to Jenner and asked what he could do. "Burn them," Jenner had said, "and give thanks to Almighty God for your salvation."

Half an hour later John's work had been a cone of flame. Anne had felt contemptible, hollow. When John had retreated into the cottage she had thought he'd gone to hide his miniature Camside, or mope over it; but he'd brought it out in pieces and had thrown it on the fire.

Since their marriage she had avoided the coven, for she'd thought that John was becoming suspicious. The Coopers had let her lapse, for the other couples had recently been initiated. But that month, desperately pursuing her sense of self, Anne had obtained the ointment from the Coopers and had gone to the meeting. Running through the nodding wood, leaving behind the cottage and its air of terrible defeat, she felt released at last. Behind her, urging her on, she'd heard the faint padding of the wood's heart—except that when she'd reached the glade and had turned to see what everyone was looking at, she'd realised the sound had been John's footsteps.

"I thought so," he'd said, though he'd gazed in surprise at some of them. "Well, I have more reason to hate the pratings of the religious than any of you. You had better let me join you."

"And then we shall be thirteen at last," Anne had said, suddenly sure that he'd saved himself for this victory over Jenner.

"You would have been more use to us," Elizabeth had said, "when you had it in you to carve your dolls. They would have given us power over the ones you carved."

He'd taken a knife from his pocket; Anne had seen decision flood his eyes, like the moonlight that spilled over the blade. "Perhaps they still may," he'd said.

Within the week Jonas Miller had smashed both knees beneath his wheel. Jonas had helped John throw his dolls on the fire, with virtuous relish; John had carefully gouged out both knees from the image of Jonas he'd carved in the glade. After that, the coven had called John to strike down their enemies

at whim, but he had cursed a victim only for good reason, lest a spate of injuries and afflictions betray the presence of the coven. Roger Place, the Brichester landlord, had been prevented from enclosing land in Camside by a chronic urinary infection that had confined him to his house, so that Arthur Young had kept his job day-labouring on the widow Taylor's land. And those who John heard had begun to suspect the witches were silenced: most recently, Celia Poole.

As she remembered Celia's fate Anne's doubt faded. To wield such power John must draw on the whole of himself, on his frustrated desires too. Such power must be capable of subsuming all of him into itself. Her needle moved easily again.

Musing on Celia, Anne felt pity for Richard Poole: a timid man, anxious to avoid unpleasantness and bad feeling; no doubt he had tried to argue Celia out of her proposed denunciation. Now that his wife had been stricken with epilepsy, Anne imagined that he would withdraw further into himself, poor man. Still, the coven had had to protect itself. Able to feel comfortable again, Anne encouraged the fire with the bellows.

She was warming her hands gratefully when Jane Cooper arrived to collect the chair that John had finished. Anne felt an almost habitual jealousy at the sight of the girl. A moment later, when Jane had gone into John's room, Anne felt ashamed; she was too much at peace with the world to spoil it with such unworthy emotions.

One luxury John's work afforded them was tea, something Jane was unlikely ever to have tasted. A pot full of water stood ready by the hearth, and Anne hung it over the fire. Then she hurried to tell Jane to wait.

When Anne entered the room John scarcely bothered to conceal his expression. He was gazing at Jane, his eyes full of the memory of coupling and the promise of more. After what felt to Anne like many minutes, he glanced at her with weary impatience and put away his feelings, like a master brusquely hiding a book when a maid enters.

Jane went out, the upturned chair on her back. Anne returned to her own room, stumbling, and stood aimlessly. For a moment she battled with the truth. John couldn't have touched the girl. He never had done so at the coven, and the elder Coopers would never allow it under any other circumstances. They were as strict as Jenner on that point. Indeed, she

thought (or almost thought, for her mind shied away), if they were able to take each other at will, there would be no need for the coven.

But the truth was waiting patiently for her to look at. John was the devil that appeared at the coven; that was how he gratified his sexuality.

Even now, urged on by that insight, she had to struggle in order to think of the devil. He had appeared eight full moons ago, creaking out of the wood as if the trees and wind and moonlight had combined in him. Since then he had always appeared at the height of their ecstasy. He had never been seen before John had joined the coven; they had taken that as proof of the power of thirteen, and of John's power. The women had cried that his penis was hard and unyielding, as Elizabeth had said it would be, remembering the covens of her childhood. Everything had seemed to show the old magic had returned to them. Now Anne saw there was another explanation.

The devil had never taken her. She had been unthinkingly grateful to be spared, so grateful that she dared not think of her good fortune lest thinking bring the devil upon her next time. Sometimes she moaned and writhed in her sleep as the massive sneering face weighed on hers, the enormous penis conquered her. At the last two covens she had been sure the devil must take her, and she'd locked away dread deep in her mind; but he had chosen Nell and Jane again. At last she knew why she had felt instinctively jealous of Jane.

Within her mind, memories bound themselves into a certainty. The devil never appeared until John had vanished into the wood to curse his dolls. Even when nobody had petitioned him to curse, he said he must renew the existing curses so that their power would not weaken. Always the devil appeared from the direction in which John vanished. And—remembering this, Anne realised that the truth had always been in her mind—whomever John danced with before the sacrifice, the devil later chose.

Before she had time to be terrified of him, she strode into his room. He was carving the leg of a chair, with a lover's delicacy. "The devil who comes at the full moon," she said, tightly aware that they had never discussed the coven outside its time before. "I know who he is."

"He is our master," he said, not looking up.

"He is not mine. He is you in disguise, so that you can have all the women at your mercy. That's how you get your fucking."

"I would not touch any of them," he said with a contempt as profound as Jenner's.

She recoiled, back into her own room. Yet somehow, when she reflected, his words hadn't quite the power she was sure he intended. He hadn't said he wasn't the devil. Of course he wouldn't touch other women, since his head-to-toe disguise would always intervene between their touching bodies: not if he meant "touch" that way.

She might have contented herself with that, with the sense that he was having to strain at his words in order to deceive her, since that was a kind of victory: she'd trapped him into a position where he couldn't use his power directly. But all at once "I would not touch any of them" turned and insulted her. Not "any of you"; he excluded her out of pity, out of indifference; she was beneath even his contempt. She was sure in her bitterness that there could be no other reason. The water rose up in the pot, hissing, brimming over. She snatched it away from the fire, coldly, calmly. She knew what she was going to do.

Later she told John that she was going to church. Jenner had been looking at her oddly, she said, and she wanted to head off his suspicions. She hurried down the road, towards the church. As soon as she was out of sight of the cottage she doubled back, into the wood.

She strode into the coven's glade and halted, confused. The sun was a silver wafer decomposing into a grey pond, and beneath its light the glade looked bare and cramped, hemmed in by denuded trees: not at all like the expanse of ground about which the trees danced deasil. But she recognised the gnarls of the trees between which the devil always emerged. She hurried toward them, calming her heart. Around her the wood creaked slowly and deliberately, like the pendulum of an enormous wooden clock.

She knew that John never brought his dolls with him to the coven: that he hid them and his knife beforehand, somewhere in this area. The devil-disguise was here also, she was sure. That was the proof she needed.

Someone was coming towards her through the wood. She hushed the creaking trees frantically with an unthinking gesture, but they swayed slowly on, interrupting her view of the depths of the wood with a dense net of branches. The branches made passes over each other, like the hands of a conjurer she'd seen in her childhood. Within the slow net of sound and black wood, someone was approaching.

After a long breathless time she told herself that it must have been a stroller, and went on. She peered between the trunks, anxious to find John's disguise, anxious to be gone. The trunks moved apart stolidly as she walked, revealing trunks beyond. Twigs groped blackly against the dull blurred sky. The trees swayed in unison, creaking with the effort, but their roots stayed firmly buried. Someone was following Anne through the wood.

She twisted around, glaring through the trees. There was nobody. At last she turned back, and came face-to-face with the devil.

He was sneering sightlessly out between two close-grown trees. He was almost hidden within a pile of twigs and branches, which had slipped down from his cheeks and left his face protruding, as from an impossible beard. His fixed mouth sneered; his eyes were sockets from which all but deep darkness had been gouged.

Even immobilised as he was, his massiveness was terrifying. But she forced herself closer and began to pull away the branches. At once she realised that the devil's leather hide was stretched over a wooden frame. No wonder he was massive. She remembered the tale she'd heard that a large quantity of leather had been stolen from a Brichester cobbler's; she didn't need to wonder where the wooden frame came from. As she separated the branches, she saw that the devil had no penis, only an orifice. She nodded grimly.

She was preparing to touch the devil, to prove that she could do so, when a movement back in the direction of the coven's glade caught her attention. Her imagination had not deceived her, after all; someone else was in the wood. It was Richard Poole.

She wrenched the branches together over the devil, and shrank back behind the trees. Peering out, she glimpsed Richard's face. He was no longer timid. His gaze was blazing with hatred. She knew he was searching for signs of the coven.

As she slipped between the trees and fled, she heard a creaking as if the devil had stirred in its sleep. Startled, she stumbled, snapping a branch. When she regained her balance she saw Richard staring at her. She nodded casually to him and strode away, ignoring her frantic heart.

When her heart slowed she found she was able to plan, and smiled wildly. Everything had fallen in her favour. She felt powerful enough to be

reckless. She had hidden the devil completely; she had been too far from it when she stumbled to have betrayed it to Richard. She could afford to wait until tomorrow night. Already she had two plans, and she wanted to enjoy them both to the full.

It was the next night. Anne was running behind John. The full moon had cleared the sky; its light seeped through the hard ground, the starved trees, the restless grass furred with frost. When the branches stirred their movements lingered on Anne's eyes, like trails of luminous mist. Even John seemed to glow coldly from within. The weeks since the previous coven felt like a dream from which she had awakened at last.

But the weeks weren't so dreamlike that she could not interpret them, or plan from them. As she entered the glade she saw that everyone was waiting again, and realised why she and John always arrived last: in order that the others should feel bound to wait, to confirm their faith in his power. Very well, she thought. She could make an entrance too.

Loudly enough for everyone to hear she said to John "Make me a doll of Parson Jenner."

Before he turned inward, towards the core of his hatred, she thought he looked at her in something like admiration. "Why should you curse him?" he demanded.

"He saw how I smiled when Celia Poole was taken by her fits," she said. "Now he watches for me to betray myself. Every night I dream that I have. Soon it will be true."

John's eyes stared at her, and within them was someone old and overwhelmingly vicious, famished of everything save hatred. "He will never watch you again," he said.

A confusion of emotions welled up through her: satisfaction, terror, admiration, a poignant sense that they could admire each other only in this moment of inhuman power. She had often wondered why he had never cursed Jenner. At times, with a contempt as deep as that she'd felt when he'd burned his carvings, she had believed he was terrified of the parson. But perhaps, she had thought yesterday, he was too afraid of being engulfed by his own power ever to use it for himself. Yesterday she had seen that she could both test him in this and render Richard Poole harmless. If Jenner

were destroyed, the villagers would never dare move against the coven. She smiled at the cold bland moon.

Elizabeth Cooper was chanting impatiently, almost shouting—scared, Anne thought, of the enormity John had undertaken to perform. The Coopers were dancing, stamping defiantly like animals. She ran to join the chain of dancers, holding fast to Jane's arm. Elizabeth frowned spitefully down the chain at her; it had always been the Coopers who chose the order of dancers. But Anne smiled back triumphantly and dragging the others with her, danced to John and took his arm. She let the chant seethe through her and pour from her mouth.

Her legs felt aflame with the ointment, urging her to dance more wildly. She gripped John's arm and capered, anxious to exhaust the dance, willing him to go in order to return to her—as the devil, if he must. Her heavy breasts rolled with the dance, their nipples taut and tingling; her genitals smacked their lips eagerly. She looked down at herself as her hips flexed powerfully. She would make him forget Jane and the rest. Beyond John she saw the circle of dancers close, as he took Alice's hand.

Anne was lying at the edge of the glade, legs loose and trembling. Adam had ripped open a fish and was displaying it to the moon. "Domini nostri," they shouted. All of a sudden John wasn't there; they were all huddled close to the trees, waiting amid the rusty creaking of the wood, and Anne's stomach suddenly felt as empty and cold as the glade.

John was striding towards her through the trees. His face was fixed and bland as the moon. His glowing colourless hand thrust a doll towards her. As she grasped the doll she stifled a cry. It had seemed to move in her grasp, as if Jenner were trapped in the wood, struggling frantically within her curse, his buried struggles making the surface crawl.

She closed her eyes to curse, and found panic waiting. If they tried to curse Jenner he would know; God would tell him; he would destroy them. She gripped the doll fast, hearing it creak. She entrusted herself to John's power. She squeezed everything from her sight except burning red, and cursed.

When John had taken the doll from her she opened her eyes. She didn't see him carve the face; Jenner was already there when she looked, glaring up from the wooden head, tiny but vastly contemptuous of her. It was if the core of Jenner had burst out of the wood and was staring at her from John's hand, all the denser and more concentrated for its size. For a second she felt

its power take hold of her. Then she stared back at the paralysed mannequin, and felt colossal with triumph.

John vanished into the wood, fading as he walked, only feebly luminous now, entirely dark, gone. Silenced by what he had done, the twelve waited unmoving. They needed their master to appear, to reassure them that their presumption had not destroyed him; all except Anne, who lay untroubled as her excitement grew, spreading through her thighs. When she heard the creaking among the still trees she knew it was John, returning to take her. Her genitals gasped with excitement.

The devil stalked into the glade, bearing his immobile sneering face towards them, beneath the moon. His deep eyes rolled with shadow. For the first time Anne dared look closely enough to see that his feet were cloven. The leather of his limbs gleamed dully as it wrinkled, creaking. Above his thighs his penis stood like a swollen rod of moonlight.

Anne was on her feet before she saw that he was beckoning to Alice Young.

As Alice rose Anne knocked her sprawling and strode towards the devil. The others gasped in outrage, more loudly as she took hold of his penis with her hands. It was far bulkier than any of the men's, and stiffer; it seemed wholly unlike John's, as she remembered it from the beginning of their marriage. The inhumanly still face leaned towards her, the shadows of its great horns drooping over its forehead. Within the staring sockets she could see no eyes at all.

Then the devil gripped her shoulders, bruising them cruelly. He twisted her about and threw her down. The crackling grass struggled beneath her breasts and legs. She felt his icy knees forcing her thighs apart, and strove to hold them closed. But his hands closed on her shoulders like vises, trapping her before she tried to crawl away, and his penis thrust peremptorily between her buttocks.

She began to cry with pain and rage—with a frustration she hadn't felt since her wedding night. Her legs shoved helplessly at the earth; her feet clawed at the crackling grass. He was riding her, butting deeper into her, his body creaking stiffly as the trees. The heavy smell of leather clogged her nostrils. His movements rubbed her nipples against the ground. She sobbed, for the ointment was responding to him in defiance of her will, causing her

to squeeze him deeper into herself. She could not distinguish the blaze of her pain from the fire of the ointment.

Suddenly he withdrew and released her shoulders. She began to crawl swiftly towards the edge of the glade. When she heard him creaking slyly above her she turned on her back to fend him off. He had been waiting for her to do so. As she kicked out he lifted her knees and forced them wide, then, as her genitals and her mouth gaped, he slid himself into her.

She shouted in protest, writhing like an impaled moth. She felt stretched to breaking, on the lip of pain, but as she waited for the pain, a slow explosion began to spread through her from her genitals. The huge unyielding bludgeon rubbed within her, lifting her from the ground at each stroke. The sneering mask pressed against her face. She pummelled his unresponsive chest with the heels of her hands.

Suddenly something broke deep within her, in her mind, as the explosion reached it. It was as if the pent-up blaze of the ointment had engulfed her all at once. She was inundated by the force of the explosion, blinded. She tore at the brittle grass and earth with her hands as her knees dragged him closer again, again.

She fell back, drawing long slow hungry breaths. The devil was raising himself from her when she saw Richard Poole rush into the glade.

She screamed a warning, but the devil still moved slowly, unheeding. The watching eleven stared blankly at her, then at the man who had already dashed through their midst. Moonlight streaked across the blade of Richard's axe.

The devil regained his feet, and was turning when the axe swooped. Perhaps the sight of the sneering shadow-eyed face reminded Richard he was timid after all; for the axe, which had been aimed at the devil's neck, faltered aside and lopped off the devil's right arm.

The coven screamed, and Anne screamed the loudest. The arm fell across her legs. Richard whirled the axe and buried it between the devil's shoulders; then he fled into the wood, snapping branches. The devil tottered and began to fall beside Anne. She kicked the severed arm away hysterically. Then she stared at her legs, searching for spilt blood. There was none, for the arm was made entirely of wood.

She was so furious at the deception, furious with herself for having responded to this dummy, for having even feared for its life, that she gave herself no chance to wonder how it had been made to move. She turned on the devil, lying on its back next to her. She wrenched at its brandished penis. It was a shaft of young wood carefully pared to smoothness. As she twisted it violently, it turned in the socket and came away in her hand.

He'd made sure the wood was as moist as possible by renewing it each time, she explained to her startled heart. How thoughtful of him, she thought viciously. In her hand the penis now felt exactly like wood. But a sound was intruding on her musings. As the clamour of Richard's flight faded, they all heard someone moaning nearby.

John had ceased moaning by the time they found him. He lay on the ground close to where Anne had discovered the devil. He seemed to be sinking into what at first looked like an enormous expanding shadow, that surrounded him completely. He was lying on his right side in the undergrowth; they could not see his right arm. His left hand was gripped deep in his crotch, and the blood pulsed uncontrollably between the fingers.

He was not quite dead. He gazed at them with a last surge of power, and Anne felt his contempt condemn them all. She hadn't believed him when he'd said he would never touch any of them. She saw him watch her realisation, and begin to smile mirthlessly. Then all the power drained from his eyes, and it was as if the entire wood drooped.

A chill wind carried to them the sound of Richard fleeing towards the village, shouting Parson Jenner's name.

In The Bag

"Winner of the British Fantasy Award for best short story in 1978."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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The boy's face struggled within the plastic bag. The bag laboured like a dying heart as the boy panted frantically, as if suffocated by the thickening mist of his own breath. His eyes were grey blank holes, full of fog beneath the plastic. As his mouth gaped desperately the bag closed on his face, tight and moist, giving him the appearance of a wrapped fish, not quite dead.

It wasn't his son's face. Clarke shook his head violently to clear it of the notion as he hurried towards the assembly hall. It might have been, but Peter had had enough sense and strength to rip the bag with a stone before trying to pull it off. He'd had more strength than... Clarke shook his head hurriedly and strode into the hall. He didn't propose to let himself be distracted. Peter had survived, but that was no thanks to the culprit.

The assembled school clattered to its feet and hushed. Clarke strode down the side aisle to the sound of belated clatters from the folding seats, like the last drops of rain after a downpour. Somewhere amid the muted chorus of nervous coughs, someone was rustling plastic. They wouldn't dare breathe when he'd finished with them. Five strides took him onto the stage. He nodded curtly to the teaching staff and faced the school.

"Someone put a plastic bag over a boy's head today," he said. "I had thought all of you understood that you come here to learn to be men. I had thought that even those of you who do not shine academically had learned to distinguish right from wrong. Apparently I was mistaken. Very well. If you behave like children, you must expect to be treated like children."

The school stirred; the sound included the crackling of plastic. Behind him Clarke heard some of the teachers sit forward, growing tense. Let them protest if they liked. So long as this was his school its discipline would be his.

"You will all stand in silence until the culprit owns up."

Tiers of heads stretched before him, growing taller as they receded, on the ground of their green uniforms. Towards the middle he could see Peter's head. He'd forgotten to excuse the boy from assembly, but it was too late now. In any case, the boy looked less annoyed by the oversight than embarrassed by his father's behaviour. Did he think Clarke was treating the school thus simply because Peter was his son? Not at all; three years ago Clarke had used the same method when someone had dropped a firework in a boy's duffel hood. Though the culprit had not come forward, Clarke had had the satisfaction of knowing he had been punished among the rest.

The heads were billiard balls, arranged on baize. Here and there one swayed uneasily then hurriedly steadied as Clarke's gaze seized it. A whole row shifted restlessly, one after another. Plastic crackled softly, jarring Clarke from his thoughts.

"It seems that the culprit is not a man but a coward," he said. "Very well. Someone must have seen what he did and who he is. No man will protect a coward from his just deserts. Don't worry that your fellows may look down on you for betraying him. If they do not admire you for behaving like a man, they are not men."

The ranks of heads swayed gently, hypnotically. One of them must have seen what had happened to Peter: someone running softly behind him as he crossed the playing-field, dragging the bag over his head, twisting it tight about his neck, and stretching it into a knot at the back... Plastic rustled secretly, deep in the hall, somewhere near Peter. Was the culprit taunting Clarke? He grew cold with fury. He scrutinised the faces, searching for the unease which those closest to the sound must feel; but all the faces were defiantly bland, including Peter's. So they refused to help him even so meagrely. Very well.

"No doubt some of you think this is an easy way to avoid your lessons," he said. "I think so, too. Instead, from tomorrow you will all assemble here when school is over and stand in silence for an hour. This will continue until the culprit is found. Please be sure to tell your parents tonight. You are dismissed."

He strode to his office without a backward glance; his demeanour commanded his staff to carry on his discipline. But he had not reached his office when he began to feel dissatisfied. He was grasping the door handle

when he realised what was wrong. Peter must still feel himself doubly a victim.

A class came trooping along the corridor, protesting loudly, hastily silent. "Henry Clegg," he said. "Go to IIIA and tell Peter Clarke to come to my office immediately."

He searched the faces of the passing boys for furtiveness. Then he noticed that although he'd turned the handle and was pushing, the door refused to move. Within, he heard a flurried crackling rustle. He threw his weight against the door, and it fell open. Paper rose from his desk and sank back limply. He closed the window, which he'd left ajar; mist was inching towards it, across the playing-field. He must have heard a draught fumbling with his papers.

A few minutes later Peter knocked and entered. He stood before Clarke's desk, clearly unsure how to address his father. Really, Clarke thought, the boy should call him sir at school; there was no reason why Peter should show him less respect than any other pupil.

"You understand I didn't mean that you should stay after school, Peter," he said. "I hope that won't cause embarrassment between you and your friends. But you must realise that I cannot make an exception of them, too."

For an unguarded moment he felt as though he were justifying himself to his own son. "Very well," Peter said. "Father."

Clarke nodded for him to return to his lesson, but the boy stood struggling to speak. "What is it?" Clarke said. "You can speak freely to me."

"One of the other boys... asked Mr Elland if you were... right to give the detention, and Mr Elland said he didn't think you were."

"Thank you, Peter. I shall speak to Mr Elland later. But for now, you had better return to his class."

He gazed at the boy, and then at the closed door. He would have liked to see Peter proud of his action, but the boy looked self-conscious and rather disturbed. Perhaps he would discuss the matter with him at home, though that broke his own rule that school affairs should be raised with Peter only in school. He had enough self-discipline not to break his own rules without excellent reason.

Self-discipline must be discussed with Elland later. Clarke sat at his desk to draft a letter to the parents. Laxity in the wearing of school uniform. A fitting sense of pride. The school as a community. Loyalty, a virtue we must foster at all costs. The present decline in standards.

But the rustle of paper distracted him. He'd righted the wrong he had done Peter, he would deal with Elland later; yet he was dissatisfied. With what? The paper prompted him, rustling. There was no use pretending. He must remember what the sound reminded him of.

It reminded him of the sound the plastic bag had made once he'd put it over Derek's head.

His mind writhed aside, distracting him with memories that were more worthy of his attention. They were difficult enough to remember—painful indeed. Sometimes it had seemed that his whole life had been contrived to force him to remember.

Whenever he had sat an examination someone had constantly rustled paper behind him. Nobody else had heard it; after one examination, when he'd tackled the boy who had been sitting behind him, the others had defended the accused. Realising that the sound was in himself, in the effect of stress on his senses, Clarke had gone to examinations prepared to hear it; he'd battled to ignore it, and had passed. He'd known he must; that was only justice.

Then there had been the school play; that had been the worst incident, the most embarrassing. He had produced the play from his own pared-down script, determined to make an impression in his first teaching post. But Macbeth had stalked onto the heath to a sound from the wings as of someone's straining to blow up a balloon, wheezing and panting faintly. Clarke had pursued the sound through the wings, finding only a timidly bewildered boy with a thunder-sheet. Nevertheless, the headmaster had applauded rapidly and lengthily at the curtain. Eventually, since he himself hadn't been blamed, Clarke ceased cross-examining his pupils.

Since then his career had done him more than justice. Sitting at his desk now, he relaxed; he couldn't remember when he'd felt so much at ease with his memories. Of course there had been later disturbing incidents. One spring evening he had been sitting on a park bench with Edna, courting her, and had glanced away from the calm green sunset to see an inflated plastic bag caught among branches. The bag had seemed to pant violently in its

struggles with the breeze; then it had begun to nod sluggishly. He'd run across the lawn in panic, but before he reached the bag, it had been snatched away, to retreat nodding into the darkness between the trees. For a moment, vaguely amid his panic, it had made him think of the unidentified boy who had appeared beside him in a class photograph, face blurred into a grey blob. Edna had asked him no questions, and he'd been grateful to forget the incident. But the panic still lay in his memory, now he looked.

It was like the panic he'd felt while awaiting Peter's birth. That had been late in the marriage; there might have been complications. Clarke had waited, trying to slow his breath, holding himself back; panic had been waiting just ahead. If there were any justice, Edna at least would survive. He'd heard someone approaching swiftly beyond the bend in the hospital corridor: a purposeful crackling rustle—a nurse. He had felt pinned down by panic; he'd known that the sound was bearing death towards him. But the nurse must have turned aside beyond the bend. Instead, a doctor had appeared to call him in to see his wife and son. For the only time in his life, Clarke had rushed away to be sick with relief.

As if he had vomited out what haunted him, the panic had never seized him again. But Derek remained deep in his mind, waiting. Each time his thoughts brushed the memory they shrank away; each time it seemed more shameful and horrible. He had never been able to look at it directly.

But why not? He had looked at all these memories without flinching. He had dealt with Peter; later he would deal with Elland. He felt unassailably right, incapable of wrong. He would not be doing himself justice if he did not take his chance.

He sat forward, as if to interview his memory. He coaxed his mind towards it, trying to relax, reassuring himself. There was nothing to fear, he was wholly secure. He must trust his sense of innate rightness; not to remember would be to betray it. He braced himself, closing his eyes. At the age of ten, he had killed another boy.

He and Derek had been playing at the end of the street, near the disused railway line. They weren't supposed to be there, but their parents rarely checked. The summer sun had been trying to shake off trails of soot that rose from the factory chimneys. The boys had been playing at spacemen, inspired by the cover of a magazine crumpled among the rubble. They'd found a plastic bag.

Clarke had worn it first. It had hung against his ears like blankets when he breathed; his ears had been full of his breathing, the bag had grown stuffily hot and misty at once, clinging to his face. Then Derek had snatched it for himself.

Clarke hadn't liked him really, hadn't counted him as much of a friend. Derek was sly, he grabbed other people's toys, he played vindictive tricks on others then whined if they turned on him. When he did wrong he tried to pass the blame to someone else—but that day Clarke had had nobody else to play with. They'd wanted to play spacemen chasing Martians over the waste ground of the moon, but Derek's helmet had kept flying off. Clarke had pulled it tight at the back of Derek's neck, to tie a careful knot.

They ran until Derek fell down. He'd lain kicking on the rubble, pulling at the bag, at his neck. The bag had ballooned, then had fastened on his face like grey skin, again and again. His fingernails had squeaked faintly on the plastic; he'd sounded as though he were trying to cough. When Clarke had stooped to help him he'd kicked out blindly and viciously. Dismayed by the sight, infuriated by the rebuff, Clarke had run away. Realising that he didn't know where he was running to he'd panicked and had hidden in the outside toilet for hours, long after the woman's screams had gone by, and the ambulance.

Though nobody had known he and Derek had been together—since Derek's sister and her boyfriend were supposed to have kept the boy with them in the park—Clarke had waited, on the edge of panic, for Derek's father to knock at the front door. But the next day his mother had told him Derek had had an accident; he'd been warned never to play with plastic bags, and that was all. It wasn't enough, he'd decided years later, while watching a fight; too many of his classmates' parents weren't enough for their children; he'd known then what his career was to be. By then he had been able to relax, except for the depths of his mind.

He'd allowed himself to forget; yet today he was hounding a boy for a lesser crime.

No. It wasn't the same. Whoever had played that trick on Peter must have known what he was doing. But Clarke, at ten years old, hadn't known what he was doing to Derek. He had never needed to feel guilt at all.

Secure in that knowledge, he remembered at last why he had. He'd sat on the outside toilet, hearing the screams. Very gradually, a sly grin had spread

across his mouth. It served Derek right. Someone had played a trick on him, for a change. He wouldn't be able to pass it back. Clarke had hugged himself, rocking on the seat, giggling silently, starting guiltily when a soft unidentified thumping at the door had threatened him.

He gazed at the memory. It no longer made him writhe; after all, he had been only a child. He would be able to tell Edna at last. That was what had disturbed him most that evening in the park; it hadn't seemed right that he couldn't tell her. That injustice had lurked deep within their marriage. He smiled broadly. "I didn't know what I was doing," he told himself again, aloud.

"But you know now," said a muffled voice behind him.

He sprang to his feet. He had been dozing. Behind him, of course, there was only the window and the unhurried mist. He glanced at his watch. He was to talk to his sixth-form class about ethics: he felt he would enjoy the subject even more than usual. As he closed his door he glimpsed something moving in the indistinct depths of the trees beyond the playing-field, like a fading trace of a memory: a tree, no doubt.

When the class had sat down again he waited for a moment, hoping they might question the ethics of the detention he'd ordered. They should be men enough to ask him. But they only gazed, and he began to discuss the relationship between laws and morality. A Christian country. The individual's debt to society. Our common duty to help the law. The administration of justice. Justice.

He'd waxed passionate, striding the aisles, when he happened to look out of the window. A man dressed in drab shapeless clothes was standing at the edge of the trees. In the almost burnt-out sunlight his face shone dully, featurelessly. Shadows or mist made the grey mass of his face seem to flutter.

The janitor was skulking distantly in the bottom corner of the pane, like a detail squeezed in by a painter. He was pretending to weed the flower-beds. "Who is that man?" Clarke called angrily. "He has no right to be here." But there was nobody except the janitor in sight.

Clarke groped for his interrupted theme. The age of culpability: one of the class must have asked about that—he remembered having heard a voice. The age of legal responsibility. Must not be used as an excuse. Conscience

cannot be silenced forever. The law cannot absolve. One does not feel guilt without being guilty. Someone was standing outside the window.

As Clarke whirled to look, something, perhaps the tic that was plucking at his eye, made the man's face seem the colour of mist, and quaking. But when he looked there was nothing but the field and the mist and the twilight, running together darkly like a drowned painting.

"Who was that?" Clarke demanded. "Did anyone see?"

"A man," said Paul Hammond, a sensitive boy. "He looked as if he was going to have a fit." Nobody else had seen anything.

"Do your job properly," Clarke shouted at the janitor. "Keep your eyes open. He's gone round there, round the corner." The afternoon had crept surreptitiously by; he had almost reached the end of school. He searched for a phrase to sum up the lesson. "Remember, you cannot call yourself a man unless you face your conscience." On the last words he had to outshout the bell.

He strode to Elland's classroom, his gown rising and sailing behind him. The man was chatting to a group of boys. "Will you come to my office when you've finished, please," Clarke said, leaning in.

Waiting in his office, he felt calm as the plane of mist before him. It reminded him of a still pool; a pool whose opaque stillness hid its depths; an unnaturally still and opaque pool; a pool from whose depths a figure was rising, about to shatter the surface. It must be the janitor, searching behind the mist. Clarke shook himself angrily and turned as Elland came in.

"Have you been questioning my authority in front of your class?"

"Not exactly, no. I answered a question."

"Don't quibble. You are perfectly aware of what I mean. I will not have the discipline of my school undermined in this way."

"Boys of that age can see straight through hypocrisy, you know," the teacher said, interrupting the opening remarks of Clarke's lecture. "I was asked what I thought. I'm not a convincing liar, and I shouldn't have thought you'd want me to be. I'm sure they would have found my lying more disturbing than the truth. And that wouldn't have helped the discipline, now would it?"

"Don't interrogate me. Don't you realise what you said in front of my son? Does that mean nothing to you?"

"It was your son who asked me what I thought."

Clarke stared at him, hoping for signs of a lie. But at last he had to dismiss him. "I'll speak to you more tomorrow," he said vaguely. The man had been telling the truth; he had clearly been surprised even to have to tell it. But that meant that Peter had lied to his father.

Clarke threw the draft of the letter into his briefcase. There was no time to be lost. He must follow Peter home immediately and set the boy back on the right path. A boy who was capable of one lie was capable of many.

Far down the corridor the boys shouted, the wooden echoes of their footsteps fading. At the door to the mist Clarke hesitated. Perhaps Peter found it difficult to talk to him at school. He would ask him about the incident again at home, to give him a last chance. Perhaps it was partly Clarke's fault, for not making it clear how the boy should address him at school. He must make sure Edna didn't intervene, gently, anxiously. He would insist that she leave them alone.

The fog pretended to defer to him as he strode. It was fog now: trees developed from it, black and glistening, then dissolved again. One tree rustled as he passed. But surely it had no leaves? He hadn't time to go back and look. The sound must have been the rattling of the tree's wire cage, muffled and distorted by the fog.

Home was half a mile away, along three main roads. Peter would already have arrived there, with a group of friends; Clarke hoped he hadn't invited them in. No matter; they would certainly leave when they saw their headmaster.

Buses groped along the dual carriageway, their engines subdued and hoarse. The sketch of a lamppost bobbed up from the fog, filling out and darkening; another, another. On the central reservation beyond the fog, a faint persistent rustling seemed to be pacing Clarke. This was always an untidy street. But there was no wind to stir the litter, no wind to cause the sound that was creeping patiently and purposefully along just behind him, coming abreast of him as he halted, growing louder. He flinched from the dark shape that swam up beside him, but it was a car. And of course it must

have been disturbing the litter on the road. He let the car pass, and the rustling faded ahead.

As he neared the second road the white flare of mercury-vapour lamps was gradually mixed with the warmer orange of sodium, contradicted by the chill of the fog. Cars passed like stealthy hearses. The fog sopped up the sodium glow; the orange fog hung thickly around him, like a billowing sack. He felt suffocated. Of course he did, for heaven's sake. The fog was clogging his lungs. He would soon be home.

He strode into the third road, where home was. The orange sack glided with him, over the whitening pavement. The fog seemed too thick, almost a liquid from which lampposts sailed up slowly, trailing orange streaks. Striding through the suppressed quiet, he realised he had encountered nobody on the roads. All at once he was glad: he could see a figure surfacing darkly before him, fog streaming from it, its blank face looming forward to meet him. He could see nothing of the kind. He was home.

As he fumbled for his keys, the nearby streetlamp blazed through a passing rift in the fog. The lamp was dazzling; its light penetrated the thickset curtains Edna had hung in the front rooms; and it showed a man standing at its foot. He was dressed like a tramp, in ancient clothes, and his face gleamed dully in the orange light, like bronze. As Clarke glanced away to help his hands find his elusive keys he realised that the man seemed to have no face, only the gleaming almost immobile surface. He glared back at the pavement, but there was nobody. The fog, which must have obscured the man's face, closed again.

One room was lighted: the kitchen, at the far end of the hall. Edna and Peter must be in there. Since the house was silent, the boy could not have invited in his friends. Clarke closed the front door, glad to see the last of the fog, and hurried down the hall. He had taken three steps when something slithered beneath his feet. He peered at it, on the faint edge of light from the kitchen. It was a plastic bag.

In a moment, during which his head seemed to clench and grow lightless as he hastily straightened up, he realised that it was one of the bags Edna used to protect food. Several were scattered along the hall. She must have dropped them out of the packet, she mustn't have noticed. He ran along the hall, towards the light, towards the silent kitchen. The kitchen was empty.

He began to call to Edna and to Peter as he ran back through the house, slipping on the scattered bags, bruising his shoulder against the wall. He pulled open the dining-room door, but although the china was chiming from his footsteps, there was nobody within. He ran on, skidding, and wrenched open the door of the living room. The faintest of orange glows had managed to gather in the room. He was groping distractedly for the light switch when he made out Edna and Peter, sitting waiting for him in the dark. Their heads gleamed faintly. After a very long time he switched on the light.

He switched it off at once. He had seen enough; he had seen their gaping mouths stuffed full of sucked-in plastic. His mind had refused to let him see their eyes. He stood in the orange dark, gazing at the still figures. When he made a sound, it resounded through the house.

At last he stumbled into the hall. He had nowhere else to go. He knew the moment was right. The blur in the lighted kitchen doorway was a figure: a man, vague as fog and very thin. Its stiff arms rose jerkily, perhaps hampered by pain, perhaps savouring the moment. Grey blotches peered from its face. He heard the rustling as it uncovered its head.

Baby

"*Baby* began on 29 November 1974 and drew to a close on 4 December. [...] For some reason I didn't identify the location by name, but *Baby* is set around Granby Street in Liverpool; in those days finding Chinese vegetables and Indian spices in a grocer's was worthy of remark. The following year I returned to the area in *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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When the old woman reached the shops Dutton began to lag further behind. Though his hands were as deep in his pockets as they could go, they were shaking. It's all right, he told himself, stay behind. The last thing you want is for her to notice you now. But he knew he'd fallen behind because he was losing his nerve.

The November wind blundered out of the side streets and shook him. As he hurried across each intersection, head trembling deep in his collar, he couldn't help searching the doorways for Tommy, Maud, even old Frank, anyone with a bottle. But nobody sat against the dull paint of the doors, beneath the bricked-up windows; nothing moved except tangles of sodden paper and leaves. No, he thought, trying to seize his mind before it began to shake like his body. He hadn't stayed sober for so long to lapse now, when he was so close to what he'd stayed sober for.

She'd drawn ahead; he was four blocks behind now. Not far enough behind. He'd better dodge into the next side street before she looked back and saw him. But then one of the shopkeepers might see him hiding and call the police. Or she might turn somewhere while he was hiding, and he would lose her. The stubble on his cheeks crawled with sweat, which clung to the whole of his body; he couldn't tell if it was boiling or frozen. For a couple of steps he limped rapidly to catch up with the old woman, then he held himself back. She was about to look at him.

Fear flashed through him as if his sweat were charged. He made himself gaze at the shops, at the stalls outside: water chestnuts, capsicums, aubergines, dhal—the little notices on sticks said so, but they were alien to

him; they didn't help him hold on to his mind. Their price-flags fluttered, tiny and nerve-racking as the prickling of his cheeks.

Then he heard the pram. Its sound was deep in the blustering of the wind, but it was unmistakable. He'd heard it too often, coming towards the house, fading into the room below his. It sounded like the start of a rusty metal yawn, abruptly interrupted by a brief squeal, over and over. It was the sound of his goal, of the reason why he'd stayed sober all night. He brought the pockets of his coat together, propping the iron bar more securely against his chest inside the coat.

She had reached the maze of marshy ground and broken houses beyond the shops. At last, Dutton thought, and began to run. The bar thumped his chest until it bruised. His trousers chafed his thighs like sandpaper, his calves throbbed, but he ran stumbling past the morose shoppers, the defiantly cheerful shopkeepers, the continuing almost ghostly trade of the street. As soon as she was out of sight of the shops, near one of the dilapidated houses, he would have her. At once he halted, drenched in sweat. He couldn't do it.

He stood laughing mirthlessly at himself as newspapers swooped at him. He was going to kill the old woman, was he? Him, who hadn't been able to keep a job for more than a week for years? Him, who had known he wasn't going to keep a job before he started working at it, until the social security had reluctantly agreed with him? Him, who could boast of nothing but the book he cashed weekly at the post office? He was going to kill her?

His mind sounded like his mother. Too much so to dishearten him entirely: it wasn't him, he could answer back. He remembered when he'd started drinking seriously. He'd felt then that if the social security took an interest in him he would be able to hold down a job; but they hadn't bothered to conceal their indifference, and soon after that they'd given him his book. But now it was different. He didn't need anyone's encouragement. He'd proved that by not touching a drink since yesterday afternoon. If he could do that, he could do anything.

He shoved past a woman wheeling a pramful of groceries, and ran faster to outdistance the trembling that spread through his body. His shoes crackled faintly with the plastic bags in which his feet were wrapped. He was going to kill her, because of the contemptuous way she'd looked at him in the hall, exactly as his mother had used to; because while he was suffering poverty,

she had chosen worse and flaunted her happiness; because although her coat had acquired a thick hem of mud from trailing, though the coat gaped like frayed lips between her shoulders, she was always smiling secretly, unassailably. He let the thoughts seep through his mind, gathering darkly and heavily in the depths. He was going to kill her—because she looked too old for life, too ugly and wizened to live; because she walked as if to do so were a punishment; because her smile must be a paralysed grimace of pain, after all; because her tuneless crooning often kept him awake half the night, though he stamped on her ceiling; because he needed her secret wealth. She had turned and was coming back towards him, past the shops. His face huddled into his collar as he stumbled away, across the road. That was enough. He'd tried, he couldn't do more. If circumstances hadn't saved him he would have failed. He would have been arrested, and for nothing. He shifted the bar uneasily within his coat, anxious to be rid of it. He gazed at the burst husk of a premature firework, lying trampled on the pavement. It reminded him of himself. He turned hastily as the old woman came opposite him, and stared in a toy-shop window.

An orange baby with fat wrinkled dusty joints stared back at him. Beside it, reflected in a dark gap among the early Christmas toys and fireworks for tomorrow night, he saw the old woman. She had pushed her pram alongside a greengrocer's stall; now she let it go. Dutton peered closer, frowning.

He was sure she hadn't pushed the pram before letting go. Yet it had sped away, past the greengrocer's stall, then halted suddenly. He was still peering when she wheeled it out of the reflection, into the depths full of toys. He began to follow her at once, hardly shaking. Even if he hadn't needed her wealth to give him a chance in life, he had to know what was in that pram.

What wealth? How did he know about it? He struggled to remember. Betty, no, Maud had told him, the day she hadn't drunk too much to recall. She'd read about the old woman in the paper, years ago: about how she'd been swindled by a man whom nobody could trace. She'd given the man her money, her jewels, her house, and her relatives had set the police on him. But then she had been in the paper herself, saying she hadn't been swindled at all, that it was none of their business what she'd gained from the trade; and Maud supposed they'd believed her, because that was the last she had seen of the woman in the paper.

But soon after that Maud had seen her in town, wheeling her pram and smiling to herself. She'd often seen her in the crowds, and then the old woman had moved into the room beneath Dutton, older and wearier now but still smiling. "That shows she got something out of it," Maud said. "What else has she got to smile about? But where she keeps it, that's the thing." She'd shown Dutton a bit she had kept of the paper, and it did look like the old woman, smiling up from a blot of fluff and sweat.

The old woman had nearly reached home now. Dutton stumbled over a paving-stone that had cracked and collapsed like ice on a pool. The iron bar nudged his chest impatiently, tearing his skin. Nearly there now. He had to remember why he was doing this. If he could hold all that in his mind he would be able to kill her. He muttered; his furred tongue crawled in his mouth like a dying caterpillar. He must remember.

He'd gone into her room one day. A month ago, two? Never mind! he thought viciously. He'd been drunk enough to take the risk, not too drunk to make sense of what he'd found. He'd staggered into the house and straight into her room. Since he knew she didn't lock the door, he'd expected to find nothing; yet he was astonished to find so little. In the strained light through the encrusted window, stained patches of wallpaper slumped and bulged. The bed knelt at one corner, for a leg had given way; the dirty sheets had slipped down to conceal the damage. Otherwise the room was bare, no sign even of the pram. The pram. Of course.

He had tried to glimpse what was in the pram. He'd pressed his cheek against his window whenever he heard her approaching, but each time the pram's hood was in the way. Once he'd run downstairs and peered into the pram as she opened her door, but she had pulled the pram away like a chair in a practical joke, and gazed at him with amazement, amusement, profound contempt.

And last week, in the street, he'd been so drunk he had reeled at her and wrenched the pram's handle from her grasp. He'd staggered around to look beneath the hood—but she had already kicked the pram, sending it sailing down a canted side road, and had flown screaming at him, her nails aimed straight for his eyes. When he'd fallen in the gutter she had turned away, laughing with the crowd. As he had pushed himself unsteadily to his feet, his hand deep in sodden litter, he was sure he'd glimpsed the pram halting inches short of crashing into a wall, apparently by itself.

He had decided then, as his hand slithered in the pulp. In his mind she'd joined the people who were laughing inwardly at him: the social security, the clerks in the post office. Only she was laughing aloud, encouraging the crowd to laugh. He would kill her for that. He'd persuaded himself for days that he would. She'd soon have no reason to laugh at his poverty, at the book he hid crumpled in his hand as he waited in the post office. And last night, writhing on his bed amid the darkly crawling walls, listening to her incessant contented wailing, he'd known that he would kill her.

He would kill her. Now.

He was running, his hands gloved in his pockets and swinging together before him at the end of the metal bar, running past a shop whose windows were boarded up with dislocated doors, past the faintly whistling waste ground and, beneath his window in the side of the house, a dormant restlessly creaking bonfire taller than himself. She must have reached her room by now.

The street was deserted. Bricks lay in the roadway, unmoved by the tugging of the wind. He wavered on the front step, listening for sounds in the house. The baby wasn't crying in the cellar, which meant those people must be out; nobody was in the kitchen; even if the old man in the room opposite Dutton's were home, he was deaf. Dutton floundered into the hall, then halted as if at the end of a chain.

He couldn't do it here. He stared at the smudged and faded whorls of the wallpaper, the patterns of numbers scribbled above the patch where the telephone had used to be, the way the stairs turned sharply in the gloom just below the landing. The bar hung half out of his coat. He could have killed her beyond the shops, but this was too familiar. He couldn't imagine a killing here, where everything suffocated even the thought of change—everything, even the creaking of the floorboards.

The floorboards were creaking. She would hear them. All at once he felt he was drowning in sweat. She would come out and see the iron bar, and know what he'd meant to do. She would call the police. He pulled out the bar, tearing a button-hole, and blundered into her room.

The old woman was at the far end of the room, her back to him. She was turning away from the pram, stooped over as if holding an object against her belly. From her mouth came the sound that had kept him awake so often, a contented lulling sound. For the first time he could hear what she

was saying. "Baby," she was crooning, "baby." She might have been speaking to a lover or a child.

In a moment she would see him. He limped swiftly forward, his padding footsteps puffing up dust to discolour the dim light more, and swung the iron bar at her head.

He'd forgotten how heavy the bar was. It pulled him down towards her, by his weakened arms. He felt her head give, and heard a muffled crackling beneath her hair. Momentarily, as he clung to the bar as it rested in her head against the wall, he was face to face with her, with her eyes and mouth as they worked spasmodically and went slack.

He recoiled, most of all because there was the beginning of a wry smile in her eyes until they faded. Then she fell with a great flat thud, shockingly heavy and loud. Dust rolled out from beneath her, rising about Dutton's face as he fought a sneeze, settling on the dark patch that was spreading over the old woman's colourless hair.

Dutton closed his eyes and gripped the bar, propping it against the wall, resting his forehead on the lukewarm metal. His stomach writhed, worse than in the mornings, sending convulsions through his whole body. At last he managed to open his eyes and look down again. She lay with one cheek in the dust, her hair darkening, her arms sprawled on either side of her. They had been holding nothing to her belly. In the dim light she looked like a sleeping drunk, a sack, almost nothing at all. Dutton remembered the crackling of her head and found himself giggling hysterically, uncontrollably.

He had to be quick. Someone might hear him. Stepping over her, he unbuttoned the pram's apron and pulled it back.

At first he couldn't make out what the pram contained. He had to crane himself over, holding his body back from obscuring the light. The pram was full of groceries—cabbage, sprouts, potatoes. Dutton shook his head, bewildered, suspecting his eyes of practical joking. He pulled the pram over to the window, remembering only just in time to disguise his hand in the rag he kept as a handkerchief.

The windowpanes looked like the back of a fireplace. Dutton rubbed them with his handkerchief but succeeded only in smudging the grime. He peered into the pram again. It was still almost packed with groceries; only, near the

head of the pram, there was a clear space about a foot in diameter. It was empty.

He began to throw out the vegetables. Potatoes trundled thundering over the floorboards, a rolling cabbage scooped up dust in its leaves. The vegetables were fresh, yet she had entered none of the shops, and he was sure he hadn't seen her filching. He was trying to recall what in fact he had seen when his wrapped hand touched something at the bottom of the pram: something hard, round, several round objects, a corner beneath one, a surface that struck cold through his handkerchief—glass. He lifted the corner and the framed photograph came up out of the darkness, its round transparent cargo rolling. They almost rolled off before he laid the photograph on the corner of the pram, for his grip had slackened as the globes rolled apart to let the old woman stare up at him.

She was decades younger, and there was no doubt she was the woman Maud had shown him. And here were her treasures, delivered to him on her photograph as if on a tray. He grinned wildly and stooped to admire them. He froze in that position, hunched over in disbelief.

There were four of the globes. They were transparent, full of floating specks of light that gradually settled. He stared numbly at them. Close to his eyes threads of sunlight through the window selected sparkling motes of dust, then let them go. Surely he must be wrong. Surely this wasn't what he'd suffered all night for. But he could see no other explanation. The old woman had been wholly mad. The treasures that had kept her smiling, the treasures she had fought him for, were nothing but four fake snowstorm globes of the kind he'd seen in dozens of toy shops. He convulsed as if seized by nausea. With his wrapped hand he swept all four globes off the photograph, snarling.

They took a long time to fall. They took long enough for him to notice, and to stare at them. They seemed to be sinking through the air as slowly as dust, turning enormously like worlds, filling the whole of his attention. In each of them a faint image was appearing: in one a landscape, in another a calm and luminous face.

It must be the angle at which you held them to the light. They were falling so slowly he could catch them yet, could catch the face and the landscape which he could almost see, the other images which trembled at the very edge of recognition, images like a sweet and piercing song, approaching

from inaudibility. They were falling slowly—yet he was only making to move towards them when the globes smashed on the floor, their fragments parting like petals. He heard no sound at all.

He stood shaking in the dimness. He had had enough. He felt his trembling hands wrap the stained bar in his handkerchief. The rag was large enough; it had always made a companionable bulge in his pocket. He sniffed, and wondered if the old woman's pockets were empty. It was only when he stooped to search that he saw the enormous bulge in her coat, over her belly.

Part of his mind was warning him, but his fingers wrenched eagerly at her buttons. He threw her coat open, in the dust. Then he recoiled, gasping. Beneath the faded flowers of her dress she was heavily pregnant.

She couldn't be. Who would have touched her? Her coat hadn't bulged like that in the street, he was sure. But there was no mistaking the swelling of her belly. He pushed himself away from her, his hands against the damp wall. The light was so dim and thick he felt he was struggling in mud. He gazed at the swollen lifeless body, then he turned and ran.

Still there was nobody in the street. He stumbled to the waste ground and thrust the wrapped bar deep in the bonfire. Tomorrow night the blood would be burned away. As he limped through the broken streets, the old woman's room hung about him. At last, in a doorway two streets distant, he found Tommy.

He collapsed on the doorstep and seized the bottle Tommy offered him. The cloying wine poured down his throat; bile rose to meet it, but he choked them down. As the wind blustered at his chest it seemed to kindle the wine in him. There was no pregnant corpse in the settling dust, no room thick with dim light, no crackling head. He tilted his head back, gulping.

Tommy was trying to wrest the bottle from him. The neck tapped viciously against Dutton's teeth, but he held it between his lips and thrust his tongue up to hurry the last drops; then he hurled the bottle into the gutter, where it smashed, echoing between the blank houses. As he threw it, a police car entered the road.

Dutton sat inert while the policemen strolled towards him. Tommy was levering himself away rapidly, crutch thumping. Dutton knew one of the

policemen: Constable Wayne. "We can't pretend we didn't see that, Billy," Wayne told him. "Be a good boy and you'll be out in the morning."

The wine smudged the world around Dutton for a while. The cell wall was a screen on which he could put pictures to the sounds of the police station: footsteps, shouts, telephones, spoons rattling in mugs. His eyes were coaxing the graffiti from beneath the new paint when, distant but clear, he heard a voice say "What about Billy Dutton?"

"Him knock an old woman's head in?" Wayne's voice said. "I don't reckon he could do that, even sober. Besides, I brought him in around the time of death. He wasn't capable of handling a bottle, let alone a murder."

Later a young policeman brought Dutton a mug of tea and some ageing cheese sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper, then stood frowning with mingled disapproval and embarrassment while Dutton was sick. Yet though Dutton lay rocking with nausea for most of the night, though frequently he stood up and roamed unsteadily about the cell and felt as if his nausea was sinking deep within him like dregs, always he could hear Wayne's words. The words freed him of guilt. He had risked, and lost, and that was all. When he left the cell he could return to his old life. He would buy a bottle and celebrate with Tommy, Maud, even old Frank.

He could hear an odd sound far out in the night, separate from the musings of the city, the barking dogs, the foghorns on the Mersey. He propped himself on one elbow to listen. Now that it was coming closer he could make it out: a sound like an interrupted metal yawn. It was groaning towards him; it was beside him. He awoke shouting and saw Wayne opening his cell. It must have been the hinges of the door.

"It's about time you saw someone who can help you," Wayne said.

Perhaps he was threatening to give Dutton's address to a social worker or someone like that. Let him, Dutton thought. They couldn't force their way into his room so long as he didn't do wrong. He was sure that was true, it must be.

Three doors away from the police station was a pub, a Wine Lodge. They must have let him sleep while he could; the Wine Lodge was already open. Dutton bought a bottle and crossed to the opposite pavement, which was the edge of the derelict area towards which he'd pursued the old woman. The dull sunlight seemed to seep out of the ruined walls. Dutton trudged over

the orange mud, past stagnant puddles in the shape of footprints; water welled up around his shoes, the mud sucked them loudly. As soon as there were walls between him and the police station he unstoppered the bottle and drank. He felt like a flower opening to the sun. Still walking, he hadn't lowered the bottle when he caught sight of old Frank sitting on the step of a derelict house.

"Here's Billy," Frank shouted, and the others appeared in the empty window. At the edge of the waste land a police car was roving; that must be why they had taken refuge.

They came forward as best they could to welcome him. "You won't be wanting to go home tonight," Maud said.

"Why not?" In fact there was no reason why he shouldn't know—he could have told them what he'd overheard Wayne discussing—but he wouldn't take the risk. They were ready to suspect anyone, these people; you couldn't trust them.

"Someone did for that old woman," Frank said. "The one in the room below you. Bashed her head in and took her pram."

Dutton's throat closed involuntarily; wine welled up from his lips, around the neck of the bottle. "Took her pram?" he coughed, weeping. "Are you sure?"

"Sure as I was standing outside when they carried her out. The police knew her, you know, her and her pram. They used to look in to make sure she was all right. She wouldn't have left her pram anywhere, they said. Someone took it."

"So you won't be wanting to go home tonight. You can warm my bed if you like," Maud said toothlessly, lips wrinkling.

"What would anyone want to kill her for?" Betty said, dragging her grey hair over the scarred side of her face. "She hadn't got anything."

"She had once. She was rich. She bought something with all that," Maud said.

"Don't care. She didn't have anything worth killing her for. Did she, Billy?"

"No," Dutton said, and stumbled hurriedly on: "There wasn't anything in that pram. I know. I looked in it once when she was going in her room. She was poorer than us."

"Unless she was a witch," Maud said.

Dutton shook the bottle to quicken the liquor. In a moment it would take hold of him completely, he'd be floating on it, Maud's words would drift by like flotsam on a warm sea. "What?" he said. "Unless she was a witch. Then she could have given everything she owned, and her soul as well, to that man they never found, and still have had something for it that nobody could see, or wouldn't understand if they did see." She panted, having managed her speech, and drank.

"That woman was a witch right enough," Tommy said, challenging the splintered floor with his crutch. "I used to go by there at night and hear her singing to herself. There was something not right there."

"I sing," Frank said, standing up menacingly, and did so: "Rock of Ages." "Am I a witch, eh? Am I a witch?"

"They weren't hymns she was singing, I'll be bound. If I hadn't seen her in the street I'd have said she was a darkey. Jungle music, it was. Mumbo-jumbo."

"She was singing to her baby," Dutton said loosely.

"She didn't have a baby, Billy," Maud said. "Only a pram."

"She was going to have one."

"You're the man who should know, are you?" Frank demanded. "She could have fooled me. She was flat as a pancake when they carried her out. Flat as a pancake."

Dutton stared at Frank for as long as he could, before he had to look away from the deformed strawberry of the man's nose. He seemed to be telling the truth. Two memories were circling Dutton, trying to perch on his thoughts: a little girl who'd been peering in the old woman's window one day, suddenly running away and calling back—inappropriately, it had seemed at the time—"Fat cow"; the corpse on the dusty floor, indisputably pregnant even in the dim light. "Flat as a pancake," Frank repeated.

Dutton was still struggling to understand when Maud said "What's that?"

Dutton could hear nothing but the rushing of his blood. "Sounds like a car," Betty said.

"Too small for a car. Needs oiling, whatever it is."

What were they talking about? Why were they talking about things he couldn't understand, that he couldn't even hear, that disturbed him? "What?" Dutton yelled.

They all stared at him, focusing elaborately, and Tommy thumped his crutch angrily. "It's gone now," Maud said at last.

There was a silence until Betty said sleepily "If she was a witch where was her familiar?"

"Her what?" Dutton said, as the bottle blurred and dissolved above his eyes. She didn't know what she was talking about. Nor did he, he shouted at himself. Nor did he.

"Her familiar. A kind of, you know, creature that would do things for her. Bring her food, that kind of thing. A cat, or something. She hadn't anything like that. She wouldn't have been able to hide it."

Nowhere to hide it, Dutton thought. In her pram—but her pram had been empty. The top of his head was rising, floating away; it didn't matter. Betty's hand wobbled at the edge of his vision, spilling wine towards him. He grabbed the bottle as her eyes closed. He tried to drink but couldn't find his mouth. Somehow he managed to stopper the bottle with his finger, and a moment later was asleep.

When he awoke he was alone in the dark.

Among the bricks that were bruising his chest was the bottle, still glued to his finger. He clambered to his feet, deafened by the clattering of bricks, and dug the bottle into his pocket for safety, finger and all. He groped his way out of the house, sniffing, searching vainly for his handkerchief. A wall reeled back from him and he fell, scraping his shoulder. Eventually he reached the doorway.

Night had fallen. Amid the mutter of the city, fireworks were already sputtering; distant chimneys sprang up momentarily against a spray of white fire. Far ahead, between the tipsily shifting walls, the lights of the shops blinked faintly at Dutton. He took a draught to fend off the icy plucking of the wind, then he stuffed the bottle in his pocket and made for the lights.

The mud was lying in wait for him. It swallowed his feet with an approving sound. It poured into his shoes, seeping into the plastic bags. It squeezed out from beneath unsteady paving-stones, where there were any.

He snarled at it and stamped, sending it over his trouser cuffs. It stretched glistening faintly before him as far as he could see.

Cars were taking a short cut from the main road, past the shops. Dutton stood and waited for their lights to sweep over the mud, lighting up his way. He emptied the bottle into himself. Headlights swung towards him, blazing abruptly in puddles, pinching up silver edges of ruts from the darkness, touching a small still dark object between the walls to Dutton's left.

He glared towards that, through the pale fading firework display on his eyeballs. It had been low and squat, he was sure; part of it had been raised, like a hood. Suddenly he recoiled from the restless darkness and began to run wildly. He fell with a flat splash and heaved himself up, his hands gloved in grit and mud. He stumbled towards the swaying lights and glared about whenever headlights flashed between the walls. Around him the walls seemed as unstable as the ground.

He was close enough to the shops for the individual sounds of the street to have separated themselves from the muted anonymous roar of the city, when he fell again. He fell into darkness behind walls, and scrabbled in the mud, slithering grittily. When he regained his feet he peered desperately about, trying to hold things still. The lights of the street, sinking, leaping back into place and sinking, sinking; the walls around him, wavering and drooping; a dwarfish fragment of wall close to him, on his left. Headlights slipped past him and corrected him. It wasn't a fragment of wall. It was a pram.

In that moment of frozen clarity he could see the twin clawmarks its wheels had scored in the mud, reaching back into darkness. Then the darkness rushed at him as his ankles tangled and he lost his footing. He was reeling helplessly towards the pram.

A second before he reached it he lashed out blindly with one foot. He tottered in a socket of mud, but he felt his foot strike metal, and heard the pram fall. He whirled about, running towards the whirling lights, changing his direction when they steadied. The next time headlights passed him he twisted about to look. The force of his movement spun him back again and on, towards the lights. But he was sure he'd seen the pram upturned in the mud, and shaking like a turtle trying to right itself.

Once among the shops he felt safe. This was his territory. People were hurrying home from work, children were running errands; cars laden with

packages butted their way towards the suburbs, honking. He'd stay here, where there were people; he wouldn't go home to his room.

He began to stroll, rolling unsteadily. He gazed in the shop windows, whose contents sank like a loose television image. When he reached a launderette he halted, frowning, and couldn't understand why. Was it something he'd heard? Yes, there was a sound somewhere amid the impatient clamour of the traffic: a yawn of metal cut short by a high squeal. It was something like that, not entirely, not the sound he remembered, only the sound of a car. Within the launderette things whirled, whirled; so did the launderette; so did the pavement. Dutton forced himself onward, cursing as he almost fell over a child. He shoved the child aside and collided with a pram.

Bulging out from beneath its hood was a swollen faceless head of blue plastic. Folds of its wrinkled wormlike body squeezed over the side of the pram; within the blue transparent body he could see white coils and rolls of washing, like tripe. Dutton thrust it away, choking. The woman wheeling it aimed a blow at him and pushed the pram into the launderette.

He ran helplessly forward, trying to retrieve his balance. Mud trickled through the burst plastic in his shoes and grated between his toes. He fell, slapping the pavement with himself. When someone tried to help him up he snarled and rolled out of their reach. He was cold and wet. His coat had soaked up all the water his falls had squeezed out of the mud. He couldn't go home, couldn't warm himself in bed; he had to stay here, out on the street. His mouth tasted like an abandoned bottle. He glared about, roaring at anyone who came near. Then, over the jerking segments of the line of car roofs, he saw Maud hurrying down a side street, carrying a bottle wrapped in newspaper.

That was what he needed. A ball of fire sprang up spinning and whooping above the roofs. Dutton surged towards the pedestrian crossing, whose two green stick-figures were squeaking at each other across the path through the cars. He was almost there when a pram rushed at him from an alley.

He grappled with it, hurling it from him. It was only a pram, never mind, he must catch up with Maud. But a white featureless head nodded towards him on a scrawny neck, craning out from beneath the hood; a head that slipped awry, rolling loose on its neck, as the strings that tied it came unknotted. It was only a guy begging pennies for cut-price fireworks.

Before he realised that, Dutton had overbalanced away from it into the road, in front of a released car.

There was a howl of brakes, another, a tinkle of glass. Dutton found himself staring up from beneath a front bumper. Wheels blocked his vision on either side, like huge oppressive earmuffs. People were shouting at each other, someone was shouting at him, the crowd was chattering, laughing. When someone tried to help him to his feet he kicked out and clung to the bumper. Nothing could touch him now, he was safe, they wouldn't dare to. Eventually someone took hold of his arm and wouldn't let go until he stood up. It was Constable Wayne.

"Come on, Billy," Wayne said. "That's enough for today. Go home."

"I won't go home!" Dutton cried in panic.

"Do you mean to tell me you're sending him home and that's all?" a woman shouted above the clamour of her jacketed Pekinese. "What about my headlight?"

"I'll deal with him," Wayne said. "My colleague will take your statements. Don't give me any trouble, Billy," he said, taking a firmer hold on Dutton's arm.

Dutton found himself being marched along the street, towards his room. "I'm not going home," he shouted.

"You are, and I'll see that you do." A fire engine was elbowing its way through the traffic, braying. In the middle of a side street, between walls that quaked with the light of a huge bonfire, children were stoning firemen.

"I won't," Dutton said, pleading. "If you make me I'll get out again. I've drunk too much. I'll do something bad, I'll hurt someone."

"You aren't one of those. Go home now and sleep it off. You know we've no room for you on Saturday nights. And tonight of all nights we don't want to be bothered with you."

They had almost reached the house. Wayne gazed up at the dormant bonfire on the waste ground. "We'll have to see about that," he said. But Dutton hardly heard him. As the house swayed towards him, a rocket exploded low and snatched the house forward for a moment from the darkness. In the old woman's room, at the bottom of the windowpane, he saw a metal bar: the handle of a pram.

Dutton began to struggle again. "I'm not going in there!" he shouted, searching his mind wildly for anything. "I killed that old woman! I knocked her head in, it was me!"

"That's enough of that, now," Wayne said, dragging him up the steps. "You're lucky I can see you're drunk."

Dutton clenched the front door-frame with both hands. "There's something in there!" he screamed. "In her room!"

"There's nothing at all," Wayne said. "Come here and I'll show you." He propelled Dutton into the hall and, switching on his torch, pushed open the old woman's door with his foot. "Now, what's in here?" he demanded. "Nothing."

Dutton looked in, ready to flinch. The torch-beam swept impatiently about the room, revealing nothing but dust. The bed had been pushed beneath the window during the police search. Its headrail was visible through the pane: a metal bar.

Dutton sagged with relief. Only Wayne's grip kept him from falling. He turned as Wayne hurried him towards the stairs, and saw the mouth of darkness just below the landing. It was waiting for him, its lips working. He tried to pull back, but Wayne was becoming more impatient. "See me upstairs," Dutton pleaded.

"Oh, it's the horrors, is it? Come on now, quickly." Wayne stayed where he was, but shone his torch into the mouth, which paled. Dutton stumbled upstairs as far as the lips, which flickered tentatively towards him. He heard the constable clatter up behind him, and the darkness fell back further. Before him, sharp and bright amid the darkness, was his door.

"Switch on your light, be quick," Wayne said.

The room was exactly as Dutton had left it. And why not? he thought, confident all at once. He never locked it, there was nothing to steal, but now the familiarity of everything seemed welcoming: the rumpled bed; the wardrobe, rusted open and plainly empty; the washbasin; the grimy coinmeter. "All right," he called down to Wayne, and bolted the door. He stood for a long time against the door while his head swam slowly back to him. The wind reached for him through the wide-open window. He couldn't remember having opened it so wide, but it didn't matter. Once he was steady he would close it, then he'd go to bed. The blankets were raised like a cowl

at the pillow, waiting for him. He heard Constable Wayne walk away. Eventually he heard the children light the bonfire.

When blackening tatters of fire began to flutter towards the house he limped to close the window. The bonfire was roaring; the heat collided with him. He remembered with a shock of pleasure that the iron bar was deep in the blaze. He sniffed and groped vainly for his handkerchief as the smoke stung his nostrils. Never mind. He squinted at the black object at the peak of the bonfire, which the flames had just reached. Then he fell back involuntarily. It was the pram.

He slammed the window. Bright orange faces glanced up at him, then turned away. There was no mistaking the pram, for he saw the photograph within the hood strain with the heat, and shatter. He tested his feelings gingerly and realised he could release the thoughts he'd held back, at last. The pursuit was over. It had given up. And suddenly he knew why.

It had been the old woman's familiar. He'd known that as soon as Betty had mentioned the idea, but he hadn't dared think in case it heard him thinking; devils could do that. The old woman had taken it out in her pram, and it had stolen food for her. But it hadn't lived in the pram. It had lived inside the old woman. That was what he'd seen in her room, only it had got out before the police had found the body.

He switched off the light. The room stayed almost as bright, from the blaze. He fumbled with his buttons and removed his outer clothes. The walls shook; his mouth was beginning to taste like dregs again. It didn't matter. If he couldn't sleep he could go out and buy a bottle. Tomorrow he could cash his book. He needn't be afraid to go out now.

It must have thrown itself on the bonfire because devils lived in fire. It must have realised at last that he wasn't like the old woman, that it couldn't live inside him. He stumbled towards the bed. A shadow was moving on the pillow. He baulked, then he saw it was the shadow of the blanket's cowl. He pulled the blanket back.

He had just realised how like the hood of a pram the shape of the blanket had been when the long spidery arms unfolded from the bed, and the powerful claws reached eagerly to part him.

The Other Woman

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Outside the window, in the park, the trees were glossy with June sunlight. The sky floated in the lake; branches were rooted in the water, deep and still. Phil gazed out, then he glanced back at the strangled woman and pushed her aside. He had painted her before. She wouldn't do.

He read the publisher's brief again. *Throttle* ("racing driver by day, strangler by night!"). You could see the sunlit racing car, and the moon sailing in a splotch of night, behind the woman. But that was it exactly: it was the details that caught your eye. The woman wasn't at all compelling. She looked like just another murder victim on the cover of another book.

And why shouldn't she? Art didn't sell books—not this kind of book, anyway. People looked for the familiar, the predictable, the guaranteed product. There would be tense scenes on the racetrack, a girl with her dress ripped away from one nipple would be strangled (and probably more that the cover couldn't show); that was enough for the commuters glancing hastily at the station bookstall. But it wasn't enough for Phil. He'd painted this victim before, on *Her Dear Dead Body*. He was copying himself.

All right, so he was. There was only one way to halt that tendency, and he had the time. He'd left the rest of the day clear so that he wouldn't be tired tomorrow in London. Two satisfying cheques had arrived that morning. He felt more than equal to the task. Gazing out the window, he began to rethink the cover, and to sketch.

A woman screaming at a hand groping into the picture—no; he tore that up impatiently. A corpse with a bruised throat—no, too static. A woman's throat working between intrusive thumbs—no! He'd just painted that! "God's bloody teeth!" he shouted, hurling the crumpled sketch across the room. "God damned bleeding—" He went on at length, until he began to repeat himself. Thank heavens Hilary was at work. If she had been here he

would only have found an excuse to lose his temper with her, wasting half his energy.

When he'd calmed down he stared at the branches hanging limply into the depths of the lake. He felt himself draining into the view. Suddenly he closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like to strangle a woman.

You would throw her down on the floor. You'd lie on top of her so that she couldn't kick, you'd pin her flailing forearms down with your elbows. You'd lean your weight on your thumbs at her throat. Her throat would struggle wildly as a trapped bird. Her eyes would widen, trying to spring free of the vice: one blue eye, one brown.

At once she was there in his mind, complete. Her lips were a natural dark red and very full; they strained back now from her large white perfectly even teeth. Her nose and cheeks were long and thin, gracefully simple. Her red hair rippled as her head swung violently from side to side, uncovering her small delicate ears. He had never seen her before in his life.

He was painting furiously, without wasting time on a preliminary sketch. She wasn't Hilary. Some of his women were: Hilary running in terror across a moor on *Murder By Moonlight*, Hilary suspended in the plight of falling in front of a train (though looking unfortunately like a displaced angel) on *Mind The Doors*. It didn't matter who this woman was. Because she wasn't anybody, of course: she was a fantasy his imagination had released at last, when he needed her. He painted.

When he'd finished he stepped back. It was good, no doubt about it. She lay between the patches of day and moony night. She might be dead, or might be writhing in the clutch of an invisible attacker; though she was corpse-like, there was still a suggestion of life in her. Standing back, Phil realised that whoever looked at her became the attacker; that was why he'd painted her alone. Her legs were wide beneath the thin dress, her heels digging into invisible ground. Her nipples strained at the white fabric. It was as though she were offering herself for choking.

Eventually he looked away, confused. Usually when he'd finished a cover he felt lightened, hungry, freed of the painting. Now he felt inexplicably tense, and the presence of the painting loitered in his mind, nagging him. He signed the painting Phil, and his attention wandered from the corner back to the woman. Perhaps it was that she was so alluring; his covers of

Hilary never had been. He felt an irrational conviction that the woman had somehow been put into his mind, at the precise moment when he was susceptible to her. And why shouldn't she turn me on? he shouted himself down. Only hope it does the same to the readers.

He was still musing vaguely when Hilary came home. "That's good," she said, looking at the cover. "It's really good. But frightening."

"What do you mean, *but* frightening?" he demanded.

He ate dinner tensely. Hilary read his mood and tried to soothe him with her talk, her movements, her silences. Awareness of what she was doing made him more tense. He found he was anxious to photograph the *Throttle* cover and develop the slide with the rest. Of course, that was what was keeping him on edge: the thought of meeting publishers tomorrow. Yet he'd met one of them before; he hadn't been tense then. It must be the anticipated strain of meeting two in one day. He gazed at the victim as he photographed her, and felt his tension ease. With her to show to the publishers he had nothing to worry about. Gladdened and relieved, he hurried to make love to Hilary.

He couldn't raise an erection. He'd masturbated on Friday, when she'd begun her period, but it was Monday now. "Never mind," she said, pushing his head gently away from her thighs. "Tell me about what you did today."

"What do you mean, what I did today? You've seen it, for God's sake! You don't want to hear what a bloody strain it was to paint, do you?"

"If you want to tell me."

"I'd rather forget, thanks." He crawled into bed. "Surely to God you can understand that," he said.

"There was a woman in the shop today wanting to know the best vintages for claret," Hilary said after a while. "I said I'd get the manageress, but she kept saying I ought to know." She went on, something about the end of the year, while a woman reached up to Phil. He tried to make out her face, but she was growing larger, spreading through him, dissolving into his sleep.

"That was remarkable, that murder victim," Damien Smiles said. "Let's see her again."

Phil recalled the slide of the cover for *Throttle*. "That's amazing," Damien said. "If you do anything as good as that for us you'll be our star artist.

Listen, if Crescent don't use it we'll get someone to write it a book."

He switched on the light and the basement office flooded back around Phil, startling him out of his euphoria. He wished he hadn't to go on to Crescent Books. Apollo Books were offering him better rates and the security of a series all to himself; even the lunch Damien had bought him was better than Crescent's. But at least Apollo were offering him all the work he could handle. If Crescent didn't increase their offers, they'd had him.

"Something else you might think about," Damien said. "We'll be going in for black magic next year. Take this one to read and see what you can get out of it, no hurry. Awful writing but good sales."

The Truth About Witches And Devils. Phil read snatches of it in the Underground, smiling indulgently. That foulest of secret societies, the coven. Every possible filthy excess diseased minds could conceive. Are today's hippies and beatniks so different? They could have a point there, Phil conceded, with abnormal people like that. Satan's slaves, human and inhuman. The vampire, the werewolf. The succubus. Here was the station for Crescent Books. Phil hurried off, almost leaving the book on the seat.

Crescent Books took the *Throttle* cover and fed him drinks. They were sorry they couldn't increase his fees, sorry to see him go—hoped he would have every success. Phil didn't care that they were lying. He meandered back eventually to Lancaster Gate. With the money that was coming to him he could have afforded a better hotel, if he'd known. Still, all he needed was a bed.

Surveying the rest of his room, he decided the curtains must have been bought secondhand; they were extravagantly thick. He struggled with the window until it developed lockjaw, but the room's heat leaned inertly against the heat outside. He found that if he left even a crack between the curtains, an unerring glare of light from the streetlamp would reach for his face on the immovable bed. He lay naked on top of the bed, amid the hot dense cloud of darkness that filled the room, smelling heavily of cloth and, somewhere, dust. Once or twice a feeble gleam crept between the curtains and was immediately stifled.

It might have been the alcohol, or the disorienting blackout, or the heat; quite possibly all of them. Whatever the reason, the darkness felt as if it were rubbing itself slowly, hotly over him, like a seducer. His penis levered itself jerkily erect. He reached for it, then restrained himself. If he held back

now he would have no problem with Hilary tomorrow—except haste, maybe! He smiled at the dark, ignoring his slight discomfort, hoping his erection would subside.

The darkness moved on him, waiting to be noticed. His penis twitched impatiently. Still no, he insisted. He continued to smile, reminiscing; he refused to be distracted from his contentment. And all thanks to the *Throttle* cover, he thought. That was what had sold Apollo on him. At once the slide clicked brightly into place in his mind: the limp helpless body beneath the thin dress. The blue eye and the brown gazed up at him. In his mind he picked up the slide and gratefully kissed the tiny face. Somehow it was like kissing a fairy, except that the face was cold and still. She was receding from him, growing more tiny, drawing him down into darkness, into sleep.

It must be sleep, for suddenly she was struggling beneath the full length of his body. She was trying to drive her knees into his groin, but his thighs had forced her legs wide. His elbows knelt on her forearms; her hands wriggled as though impaled. His hands were at her throat, squeezing, and her eyes welcomed him, urging him on. He closed his mouth over hers as she choked; her tongue struggled wildly beneath his. He drove himself urgently between her legs. As he entered her, her genitals gave the gasp for which her mouth was striving. He drove deep a half-a-dozen times, then was trying to hold back, remembering Hilary: too late, too late. He bit the pillow savagely as he came.

Next day, on the train home to Liverpool, he was preoccupied. Trees sailed by, turning to display further intricacies, slowly glittering green in the sunlight. He should have saved his orgasm for Hilary. He was sure she looked forward to sex; they were closest then, when he could give all his time to her. He had the impression, from odd things that she'd said but which he couldn't now remember, that she wasn't entirely happy working at the wine shop—all the more reason for her to value sex. But he couldn't always manage two erections in twenty-four hours: particularly when, now he tested himself, even the most elaborate fantasy of Hilary couldn't arouse him. Still, there was no point in blaming himself. After all, he had been half-asleep, susceptible. The theme of last night's fantasy didn't bother him; it wasn't as if it had been real. In fact, that was all the more a tribute to the conviction of his painting. Unzipping his case, he turned from the streaming grain of the fields to *The Truth About Witches And Devils*.

A few miles later the cover was ready in his mind: a nude woman resting one hand on the head of a smouldering gleeful snake. Her genitals were hidden by something akin to the reptilian stage of a human embryo, appearing between her legs, conceivably being born between them. In her free hand she held a wand with a tip like a sparkling glans. He read the briefs on the Apollo crime series and began to plan the covers, though he had yet to see the books. His mind urged the scurrying of the wheels as he finished each cover: hurry up quick, hurry up quick.

Hilary must have been waiting for him; she opened the door of the flat. "Did it go well?" she said eagerly, already having read his face.

"Yes, very well," he said. "Very well," and hurried into his studio.

He was painting by the time she brought the coffee; she stood watching, hovering at the edge of his attention, nagging silently at him like a difficult statement whose difficulty grew with silence. Perhaps something of the sort was keeping her there but for God's sake, he hadn't time now. "Thanks," he said for the coffee. "Just put it there. Not there, damn it, there!" He could feel his temper slipping. Not now, please not now, not when he had so much to paint: bloody woman, get out. He painted with deliberate intensity for a minute, then he realised with relief that Hilary had gone.

If she had wanted to say something she didn't take the chance to say it at dinner, which had to be postponed twice while he painted out the last of his ideas. "Sorry I spoiled dinner," he said, then tried to step back from his *faux pas*: "I mean, it's very good. Sorry I kept you waiting." He told her about Crescent and Apollo, but didn't quote Damien Smiles; he realised he would be embarrassed to repeat the praise to anyone, except to himself as encouragement. "What did he say?" she asked, and Phil said "That he wanted me to do some work for them."

As he'd feared, he couldn't summon an erection. When Hilary realised she ceased caressing him. Her genitals subsided, and she lay quiet. Come on, help me, he thought, good God! No wonder he couldn't will life into his penis. At that moment there seemed to be less life in Hilary than in the strangled woman. She turned on her side above the sheets to sleep, holding his hand on her stomach. With his free hand he turned out the light. Once she was asleep he rolled quickly away from her. He heard their bodies separate stickily. In the summer humidity she'd felt hot and swollen, tacky, actually repulsive.

When he entered his studio next morning to photograph the covers, he gasped. The woman with the blue and brown eyes was waiting for him, four of her.

He had painted so intensely that he hadn't realised what he'd done. He was bewildered, unnerved. She gazed at him four times simultaneously: wicked, submissive, murderous, cunning. So why need he feel disturbed? He wasn't repeating himself at all. The woman brought life into his paintings, but also infinite variety. The ease with which he'd painted these covers proved that.

He photographed a group of earlier unpublished covers to show Damien next time they met, then he went into his darkroom, behind the partition, to develop the slides. The red glow hung darkly about him like the essence of the summer heat made visible, not like light at all. The tiny faces swam up from it, gazing at Phil. He remembered kissing the slide. That was the truth of the woman, that cover; all the others were derivations. He remembered strangling her.

He was strangling her. Her body raised itself to meet him, almost lifting him from the floor; her throat arched up toward him, offering itself. The breathless working of her mouth sucked his tongue deeper, her struggles drew his penis into her. Suddenly all of her went limp. That's it, he thought, stop now, wait for tonight, for Hilary. But he had only begun to stoop to peer at the slides, in order to distract himself, when the orgasm flooded him.

He leaned weakly against the partition. This must stop. It wasn't fair to Hilary. But how could he stop it, without risking his new and better work? Depression was thickening about him when the doorbell rang. It was the postman.

The parcel contained five American crime novels. We're considering reprints, Damien's letter told him. If you can give us your best for them that should swing it. Phil shook his head, amazed and pleased. He made himself coffee before sitting down to read the first of the books. He took the letter into his studio, then carried it back into the living room: Hilary might like to see it.

"That's good, isn't it?" she said when she came home.

"It's promising," he said. "I'll be with you in a few minutes. Just let me finish this chapter."

He was painting the second of the covers, afternoons later, when the underbelly of a storm filled the sky. He painted rapidly, squinting, too impatient to leave the painting in order to switch on the light. But the marshy dark swallowed the cover, as if someone were standing behind him, deliberately throwing a shadow to force him to notice them.

As he hurried irritably to the light switch he realised that was no use; if he switched on the light now he wouldn't be able to paint. There was something he had to do first, an insistent demand deep in his mind. What, then? What, for God's sake? The limp body rose toward him, offering its throat. Don't be absurd, he thought. But he couldn't argue with his intuition, not while he was painting. He took hold of his penis, which stiffened at once. Afterward he painted easily, swiftly, as the storm plodded crashing away beyond his light.

The August evening faded gently: gold, then pearl, merging with night. Hilary was reading *Forum*, the sex education magazine, which she had recently taken to buying. Phil was dutifully finishing *Necromancers In The Night*. When he glanced up, he realised that Hilary had been gazing at him for some time. "Aren't you ever going to paint anyone except that woman?" she said.

"There's bound to be a book sometime that needs a man."

When he looked up again impatiently she said "Aren't we going to have a holiday this year?"

"Depends on whether the work eases off. I don't want to leave it when it's going so well."

"The atmosphere at the shop's terrible. It's getting worse."

"Well, we'll see," he said, to satisfy her.

"Don't you want to go away with me?"

"If you let me finish my work! Jesus!" All right, he thought. Let's talk this out once and for all. "I want to finish what I'm doing before I see Damien next month," he said. "He likes my stuff. The more I can show him the better. I've got some ideas he might be able to use. He was talking before about getting writers to do books around covers. Right? So don't say I never tell you about my work. Just let me finish what I'm doing, all right? I'd like a chance to relax sometime too, you know."

"You don't even talk to me at weekends now," she said.

Well, go on, he thought irritably. She said nothing more, but gazed at him. "This *is* the weekend!" he shouted. "Have I just been talking to myself? Jesus!" He stormed away, into his studio.

But Hilary was there too; her photograph was, gazing at him mildly, tenderly. He avoided the unassailable gaze. He knew what was wrong, of course. They hadn't had sex for almost three months.

He threw the book into his chair. God knows he'd tried with Hilary. Perhaps he'd tried too hard. Each time there had been a grey weight in his mind, weighing down his limp penis. As the weeks passed Hilary had herself become less and less aroused; she'd lain slack on the bed, waiting to be certain she could say "Never mind" without enraging him. Occasionally she'd been violently passionate, but he had been sure she was manufacturing passion, and the feeling had simply made him more irritable. For the last few weeks they hadn't even bothered with the motions; she had begun reading *Forum*. All right, he thought, if it kept her happy.

He was happy enough. Each time he failed with her he would masturbate later. He needed only a hint to bring him to the boil: the sleek submissive throat, the thin dress ready to be torn down, the struggling body beneath him, the invitation hidden in the blue eye and the brown, hardly hidden now. The first time he had masturbated wildly in bed; he had been on the brink of orgasm when Hilary had moaned and rolled over, groping for his hand. He'd held his twitching penis as if it were a struggling creature that might break free and betray him. When she'd quietened he had inched his hand out of hers and had hastened to the bathroom, barely in time. He always crept there now when Hilary was asleep, carrying his victim with him, in the dark.

He felt no guilt. If he were frustrated he couldn't paint. He'd felt guilty the first time; the next night he'd failed with Hilary he'd lain for hours, refusing to think of the woman in his dream, trying to clear his mind, to let sleep in. In the morning he'd been on edge, had spilled paint, had broken a brush; the inside of his head had felt like dull slippery tin. He had never risked controlling himself after that, nor could his work afford the luxury of guilt.

But he did feel guilty. He was lying to himself, and that was no use; the lurking guilt would only spoil his work eventually—sometimes he felt he was painting to outrun it. Hilary made him feel guilty, with her issues of

Forum. You read those things as a substitute, he told himself. But that wasn't why she left them lying around. She scattered them in the hope that he would read them, learn what was wrong with him. Nothing was wrong with him! Sex wasn't everything. Jesus! He was rushing from success to success, why couldn't she just share in that? Why was she threatening to spoil it, by her pleading silence?

As he glared at her, at her tenderness trapped beneath glazed light, he remembered kissing the slide.

He had never kissed Hilary's photograph. Yet she was at least as responsible for his success. It was she who made the effort to stay out of his way while he was working, so as not to distract him; and the job she'd taken for this reason was clearly less enjoyable than his. Yet he had never thanked her. He stepped forward awkwardly and, resting his palms against the wall, kissed her photograph. The glass flattened his lips coldly. He stepped back, feeling thoroughly absurd.

So he'd kissed her photograph. Well done. Now go to her. But he knew what frustration that would lead to. He couldn't give up the victim of his dream; even if he did, there was no reason to suppose that would reunite him with Hilary. Maybe, he thought—no more directly involved with the idea than he had been with the novels of which it was a cliché—he could see an analyst, have Hilary substituted back in his mind. But not now, when he needed his dream for his work. Which meant that he couldn't go to Hilary. He had learned that he couldn't have both Hilary and his dream.

Then his eyes opened wider than her eyes beneath the glass. Unless he had Hilary and the dream simultaneously.

The solution was so simple it took his mind a moment to catch up. Then he hurried out of the studio, down the hall. He knew he could do it; the strength of his imagination would carry him through. As he hurried, he realised that his haste wasn't like the urgency of needing to paint; it was more as if he had to act swiftly, before someone noticed. That slowed him for a moment, but then he was in the living room. "Come on," he said to Hilary.

She looked up from her magazine, puzzled but ready to understand. "What is it?" she said.

"Come on," he said rapidly, "please."

He propped himself beside her on the bed and began to caress her. The intermittent breathing of the curtains gently imitated his fumbling. When she lay smiling hopefully, knees up and wide—smiling bravely, infuriatingly, he thought—he began again, systematically stroking her: her neck, her back, her buttocks, her breasts. Veins trailed beneath the pale skin of her breasts, like traces of trickles of ink; a hair grew from one aureole. At last she began to respond.

He stroked her thighs, thinking: woman struggling beneath me, eager to be choked. He coaxed out Hilary's clitoris. Her thighs rolled, revealing blue veins. He thought: sleek throat straining up for my hands. It wasn't going to work. All he could see was Hilary. When she reached for his limp penis her hand was hard, rough, rubbing insensitively, unpleasantly. He almost pushed her hand away to make room for his own.

Suddenly he said "Wait, I'll turn out the light."

"Don't you want to see me?"

"Not that," he said urgently, irritably. He hadn't much time, he didn't know why. He must be near orgasm without feeling so. "It might help," he said.

The dark gave him the woman at once. She was lying helpless, and immediately was fighting him off to draw him on. Her tongue was writhing about her lips, eager to be squeezed out farther; her dress slipped back over her stomach as her hips clutched high for him. She struggled violently as his penis found her. Somewhere he could feel himself working within Hilary. The sense of division distracted him. There was a barrier between him and his orgasm. He was going to fail.

Then he found himself thrusting deep within the woman. Her throat was still; so was the rest of her. Only his furious excitement moved her, making her roll slackly around his penis as he quickened. Yet he knew there was life within her somewhere, for otherwise she couldn't return to him, as she always did. The thought made her lifelessness all the more exciting; he drove brutally into her, challenging her to stay lifeless. But she was still limp when he came. When he heard himself shouting, he became aware of Hilary's gasps too.

She didn't even blink when he switched on the light. She was staring up at him in exhausted gratitude. He felt enormously pleased with himself. He loved her.

When Phil boarded the Underground train he was preoccupied.

There was tension in him somewhere. There had been since he'd succeeded with Hilary. Since that night he had determined never to masturbate. But the first time he had entered his darkened room he'd succumbed. Since then he had used a commercial firm of developers, though it was more costly, and had restricted his dream to his sex with Hilary. The woman was still there in his new paintings, of course, though she had begun to look more purposeful, consistently menacing.

Perhaps that was the source of his tension. No, it wasn't that. He suspected the source was Hilary. He was sure she was happy now he could make love to her; certainly he was. But he'd sensed a tension in her whenever he'd mentioned this trip to London, as if she disliked the idea, almost as if she were suspicious of him. He'd begun to feel something disturbing would happen to him in London. Rubbish. She felt he shouldn't be going away so much when he hadn't promised her a holiday, that was all. Well, maybe they could manage one after all.

He glanced up, and discovered that in his preoccupation he'd sat opposite a girl in an otherwise empty carriage.

She was staring at him. Her head swayed with the rocking of the carriage, her glossy black shoulder-length hair swung against her cheeks, but her brown eyes were still. They stared at him in undistinguished challenge. You dare, they threatened. Within the sheath of her thin short skirt her thighs clung together, clipped but rubbing softly, inadvertently. She reminded him —her expression particularly—of the woman in his dream.

He couldn't get up now. That would look even more suspicious. Besides, she had no reason to suspect him: he wasn't going to let her will him to move. He felt uncomfortably hot, frustratingly tense. The wind through the Underground seemed to touch the September heat of the train not at all; the heat pressed on him, oppressive as the grimy yellow light. He toyed with the zipper of his case, gladly aware of the slides within, while the girl gazed at him. He was still distracting himself when, at the edge of his eye, a shape leapt past him and then past the girl.

He stared and met her gaze. She must have seen what it was, although he had seen nothing but movement. But the challenge in her eyes remained unchanged, and he felt she wasn't pretending not to have noticed. Perhaps

the movement had been an aberration of the lights. As he thought so, the lights of the carriage went out.

Phil grabbed his case to him with both hands. He was rushing forward, borne by clattering hollow darkness. For the first time he was aware of the girl's breathing, rapid, harsh. It was near his face, too near. He had just realised that when her nails jabbed into his shoulders.

She was struggling with him. She was fighting him off. Yet he knew that if she were genuinely afraid of him she would have groped away down the carriage, however painfully. She was fighting him so that he could find her. The force of her struggles, the jerking of the train, threw him on top of her on the seat. Her arms were flailing at his face, but not so viciously that he couldn't trap her wrists in one hand. His penis was pounding. With his free hand he dragged up her skirt.

He could see her now, could see the welcome in the blue eye and the brown. That wasn't her. It didn't matter. That was the woman he was raping. The swaying of the train rolled her violently on his penis. He came almost at once.

He was lying face down on the seat, and she had somehow vanished from beneath him, when the lights flickered on.

He was still gasping: but the girl was standing at the other end of the carriage, gazing at him in open disgust. Her hand was on the communication cord. It didn't seem possible that she could have moved so far so quickly. At the next station she left the train, or at least changed carriages, leaving him a last contemptuous glance.

He sat with his case on his lap, retrieving his emotions. He was stunned. He'd read of women who needed to pretend to be raped, in Hilary's *Forum*, but he had never expected to encounter it. It could only happen in London, he thought.

He didn't feel ashamed. Why should he? Once she'd touched him his orgasm had been inevitable; he couldn't have prevented it. If anything he felt self-righteously pleased. Despite her pretence of contempt, it had been she who had approached him. She hadn't been a fantasy, a self-indulgence, but a real woman. He was concerned only that she might have infected him. But he didn't think so; she had looked clean, no doubt she needed to be especially clean to keep up her pretence. When he reached the station for

Apollo Books he was smiling. There was no need for Hilary to know; he would be able to satisfy her too.

"Here are some of your covers printed," Damien said. "People have been saying good things about them."

Phil smiled and admired the covers while Damien examined the new slides. "I'm sure we can get some books for these," Damien said. "They're the Phil woman again, I see."

Phil smiled more broadly, amazed at himself. He'd always tried to paint as well as he could, but he'd never realised that he wanted to be recognised for a personal style. Now Damien had shown him—no, the woman of his dream had shown him. He was kissing the slide.

"Will you have time to see a film tomorrow?" Damien said. "I want to get a book out of it, and I'd like you to do the cover. I'll fix it with the film people for you to go. *Father Malarkey's Succubus*, it's called. It's French."

They went out to a nearby pub. Phil was pleased he got on so well with Damien, despite the man's long hair and mauve silk shirt. Afterward Phil wandered about the shops, buying himself a book of nudes, and an Indian necklace for Hilary; she liked Indian paintings. Then he had dinner at his hotel, after enjoying his private shower-bath.

Oddly, he found that most of all about his room he enjoyed the light which penetrated the pale curtains. Indeed, he left the bedside lamp on that night. He was unwilling to sleep in the dark. Perhaps it was just the strangeness of luxury. He felt too euphoric to spoil his mood by pondering. He lay smiling, remembering the girl on the train, until he fell asleep.

Next morning he misjudged the trains; the supporting film was under way when he arrived at the cinema. He could no more piece a film together that way than he would begin reading a book in the middle; he strolled around Soho, and bought the latest *Forum*. Hilary wouldn't have been able to buy it yet in their local newsagent's.

"I'm Phil Barker," he told the girl in the pay-box. "You're expecting me." She called a doorman to usher him past the queue, to the manager's office. This treatment pleased him immensely; it was part of his success. The manager, a dapper man with a black moustache shiny as his dress shoes, gave Phil a glossy folder of information about the film, which had originally been called *Le Succube du Père Michel* and had run four minutes

longer, revised in ballpoint. The director had previously made *Le Chant des Petomanes*. The manager asked Phil about his work. "I'm best known for my women," Phil began. Eventually it was time for the film.

It took place in a small rather featureless film studio, scattered with stateless anachronisms. Father Malarkey, a French priest translated into American Irish, was lusting after the nuns in the nearby convent. Frustrated, he began to masturbate. Stop that, the censor said, snipping. Afterward, when the priest went to bathe, his stained robe started jigging about his room; eventually a girl's face faded into the cowl, grinning gleefully. Bejesus, now what's this, he said the first time she visited him in bed. I want to confess, she said. Not here, he protested, huddling beneath the blankets. But otherwise I'll have nothing to confess, she pouted, slipping her hand under the uncontrollably rising blankets. That's enough, the censor said. Her name was Lilith; she visited him every night, encouraging him to rape her, spank her, and so on. Later, when he succeeded in sneaking into the convent, she forced her way between him and his unseeing bedmates. Eventually the priest entered the cell of two entangled nuns. Now look here, the censor said. Discovered, the priest and Mother Superior were defrocked and, disapprovingly, married. But Lilith clung to his other arm. As far as Phil was concerned she had one blue eye and one brown. He could see the cover now.

He sat and waited for *The Fall of the Roman Knickers*. An usherette was chasing a cat which persisted in sharpening its claws on the purple furry walls. Though it was a small cinema, one of a unit of four, the cat was eluding pursuit. An old man snarled and hurled an ice-cream carton at it. The usherette stopped to remonstrate, and Phil began to leaf through *Forum*. The secret sexuality of the outsize woman. Sex can prevent heart attacks. Rub him up the right way. He turned to the letters, which he liked reading best; they made him glad to be normal. A heading caught his attention at once:

> Promiscuous painter?
>
> My husband paints pictures. Until recently he used to paint me. Then he began painting a woman I have never met, and now he paints nobody else. He often goes away on business trips, and I'm sure he met this woman on the last one he took before he began to

paint her. I know it is a real woman because her eyes are different colours

No, Phil thought numbly. No, no.

and he must have based that on someone real. He still makes love to me—more passionately, if anything—although he was impotent for a while after meeting her, which must have been caused by guilt. Now I feel he is thinking of her even when he makes love to me. What can I do to keep him? I would never leave him.

H. B.

(Address withheld by request)

Oh Christ, Phil thought. Tell her it isn't true. Don't make her believe it. She's wrong, tell her. The lights were fading. He peered desperately at the reply.

If you have no more evidence of your husband's "affair" than you describe in your letter, I really don't think you have much to worry about. You say you are sure he is thinking of the woman in his paintings when he makes love to you; does this really mean that you feel estranged from him when he paints? Perhaps, since apparently you can't ask him where he got his idea for his painting, you need to involve yourself more in his work. (I assume it is his work, rather than a hobby.)

As for the woman herself—our artists tell me they would be very surprised and bewildered if anyone thought they had affairs with all the women they paint! Doesn't your husband use his imagination in his work? Then why, if he had a particularly good inspiration and wants to make the most of it, does it have to be based on some unknown rival? I suspect that you see the woman as a rival simply because she is unlike you, or unlike your image of yourself (the two aren't always the same, you know). If you are sure your husband isn't involved with you in your love-making, perhaps sameness is to blame. Is there some fantasy he would like you to act out? If you become

But the page had dragged his head forward and down into the darkness. He started, completely disoriented. He was floating forward on the darkness,

sailing toward a band of chattering men running through the dark Roman streets. He clung to *Forum*, to his case, to anything. He was at the mercy of the waves of darkness. He couldn't think. He must get out. He was preparing to stand up when something caught his leg.

He looked down. In the dark, amid the crumpled cartons and the spilled ash sticking to stains of orange juice, a woman was reaching up to him. Her nails tore at his hands, pulling him down among the cigarette butts, into the secret darkness. Her dress was up; her thighs yawned on the dusty floorboards; her head lolled on the bruised snapped neck. "Jesus!" he screamed. "Get away!"

The usherette's torch-beam swung toward him along the row. At his feet the floor was bare; nothing moved but the shadows of rubbish. "It was the cat," he stammered. "I didn't know what it was." He stumbled out. Of course it had been the cat; no wonder he had turned it into his dream, after what he'd read. He'd dropped *Forum* beneath the seat. Thank God, he thought. He must reach Hilary before it did. She mustn't think he'd read it and was taking her on holiday to deceive her. There was time.

The train was nearing Liverpool when Phil realised how like the succubus his experience had been.

Exactly like. Well, no, not exactly: of course there weren't such things. But his dream had come between him and Hilary, just as the succubus had behaved in the film. It was almost as if it had been deliberately blinding him to her. When he tried to visualise Hilary he could reach nothing but a dull blank in his mind.

The dream had come from inside him. He had to remember that. The notion he had had originally, that it had been put into his mind, was nonsense. That must have been his mind, trying not to admit the truth. Since the dream had come from him, he could destroy it. What they advised in *Forum* was wrong, that you should act out your fantasies; that was wrong.

All at once he saw how much of a mute appeal Hilary's issues of *Forum* had been. He felt admiration and compassion; she suffered a good deal, without burdening him with it. Only because he wouldn't let her speak! My God, he thought numbly. With that insight came another. She didn't go out to work so that he could paint undisturbed. That was a sentimental lie. She went out in order to stay away from his temper. He'd driven her out of the house.

He felt lightened by his insights, buoyant, capable of anything. At last he could see Hilary as she was. But he couldn't; still there was only the dull blank. Overhead the rush hour traffic clogged the bridge. Deep in his mind there seemed to be a grey vague weight, waiting. Never mind. Once they were on holiday the last of his depression would lift. No time to think further. Here was Lime Street Station, home.

At the flat he packed their cases. He'd booked their hotel before leaving London. When he'd finished he glanced at his watch. Hilary would finish work in an hour; tonight was early closing. They could catch a train at once. He took a taxi to the shop, amid the Jaguars and Japanese front gardens.

The shop was open for half an hour yet. He was sure they'd let Hilary go when they saw the taxi waiting. He could see her behind the counter, watching a woman who was talking to the manageress. Good; he wouldn't have to wait to speak to Hilary. He strode into the shop.

"This is absolutely ridiculous," the woman was saying loudly. "That woman knows nothing about her job. If you're so hard up for staff my daughter is looking for work."

Only when he saw Hilary's expression—mutely furious, ashamed—did he realise the woman was talking about her. "That's my wife you're insulting," he said.

The woman turned to examine him. "Then your wife is ignorant," she said.

"Not ignorant where it counts, like you." He tried to hold onto his temper, but couldn't deny himself the pleasure. "Go on, you fucking old whore," he shouted.

The woman whirled and stalked out. "There's the taxi," he told Hilary. "Your holiday begins right now."

"Do you want me to lose this job?"

"We can do without it. Come on," he said, restraining his irritability. "Don't you want to go to the Lakes?"

She smiled as broadly as she could. "Yes, I do," she said. She was about to speak to the manageress, but he headed her off. "The least you could have done was stick up for her," he told the woman. "You've been paying her little enough, God knows."

In the taxi Hilary said "I told you I was going to give that job until the end of the year."

"I never heard you."

"You never hear anything I say."

He gazed at the taxi-driver's attentive neck and succeeded in focusing his irritability there. "I know I've been drifting away," he told Hilary. "I'm sorry." He said loudly, "I'm going to get close to you tonight."

It was still light when they reached the hotel. Streamers of mist were caught in the branches on the hilltops; a mass of mist was groping down toward the nearby lake. From their window Phil could see perfect trees in the lake, reaching down into the sunset water. The corridors were thickly carpeted: hushed, gentle. He read the same feelings in Hilary. He felt she had had to make an effort to be happy—to forget the scene in the shop, of course. Never mind; she was happy now.

They were late for dinner, but somebody cooked them a meal. They had a cobwebbed bottle of wine. Afterward they drank in the bar and played billiards, which they hadn't played since before their marriage. When the bar closed they went up to their room. The corridor closed softly about them.

Phil gazed into the night. The mist had reached the road now, greedy for headlights. It felt like the grey blank that was still in his mind. He tried to grasp the blank, but it wouldn't come out until it was ready. He turned as Hilary emerged from the bathroom naked and lay down on the bed. Quickly drawing the curtains, he smiled at her. He smiled. He smiled. He felt no desire at all.

"Are you going to get close to me now?" she said.

He nodded. "Yes, I am," he said hurriedly, lest she sense his mood. Undressing, he gazed at her. Her breasts lay slack, faintly blue-veined; the golden hair still grew from one. The grey blank hung between his penis and his mind. He had to make love to her without the dream. If he relied on the dream it would estrange them further, he was sure. But so, he realised miserably, would failure.

"Will you leave the light on?" she said.

"Of course I will," he said, but not for her reason.

She smiled up at him. "Do you want to do anything different?" she said.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I just thought you might."

At once he knew what he'd seen back home at the flat as he'd packed: a copy of *Forum* lying on the settee. It had been a copy of the issue he had bought in London. In his hurry he hadn't realised. She had read the reply to her letter.

She gazed up, waiting. His mouth worked, suddenly dry. Should he tell her he knew? Then he would have to explain about the dream—to tell her everything. He couldn't; it would hurt her, he was sure. And he didn't need to. She had already suggested the solution. His penis was stirring, and so was the grey blank. "I'll rape you," he told Hilary.

He knelt above her. "Go on, then," she said, laughing.

That wasn't right. If she laughed it wouldn't work. "Put your legs together," he said. "Fight. Try as hard as you can to stop me."

"I don't want to hurt you."

The grey was returning, seeping through his mind; his penis was shrinking. "Don't worry about that," he said urgently. "Defend yourself any way you can." His penis was hanging down. God, no. He pinched her nipple sharply. As she cried out and brought her hands down to protect it, he seized both her wrists. "Now then," he said, already inflamed again, thrusting his knees between hers.

She was struggling now. The bed creaked wildly; the sheets snapped taut beneath them as her heels sought purchase. She had ceased playing; she was trying to free her hands, gasping. His hand plunged roughly between her legs. In a moment she was ready. This is the way she liked it, he thought, and he'd never known.

On the lip of her, he hesitated. The grey blank was still there in his mind, like a threat. He could hear people in the corridor, the television in the next room, the cars setting off into the mist, intruding on his passion, distracting him. He was sure his penis was about to dwindle.

Then he knew what he'd omitted. He dragged Hilary's hands up to her shoulders and, digging his elbows into her forearms, closed his fingers tightly on her throat. She was panting harshly. The sound of her breath

tugged him violently into her. The presence was gone from his mind at once. His penis pulsed faster with each stroke, his fingers pressed, her eyes widened as his penis throbbed, her hands fluttered. He strained his head back, gasping.

Like the sound of a branch underfoot betraying the presence of an intruder, there was a sharp snap.

He came immediately, lengthily. His breath shuddered out of him. His hands let go of Hilary and clawed at the sheets. He closed his eyes as he finished, drawing deep breaths.

When he looked down Hilary was gazing at the wall. One cheek rested on the sheet; her head hung askew on her broken neck.

Phil began to sob. He took her cheeks in both hands and turned her face up to him. He rubbed her cheeks, trying to warm life back into her eyes. He stroked her hair back from her eyes, for it lay uncomfortably over them. He grasped her shoulders, shaking them. When her head rolled back onto its cheek he slumped on her body, grinding his fists into his eyes, moaning.

Then her legs closed over his, and he stared down to see her eyes gazing up at him: one blue eye, one brown.

Passing Phase

"As for "*Passing Phase*, I've no idea where it came from."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

Written in: 1974
First published in *The Horror Show*, Summer 1985
Also published in: *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

When he realised where the song was coming from Cox felt all the more confused. Today he'd begun listening as soon as the children reached the playground. He'd heard it once, but had still been peering among the cramped games of football, the leapfrogging little girls, the boys grunting kung-fu style, when it ceased. The second time he was ready; he hurried across the playground as stealthily as he could—which was hardly at all, for most of the children's faces turned up to him at once, steaming with December breath. "Sign my autograph book, Mr. Cox," someone pleaded. "I will later, Debbie," he said, holding her small hand in his until she fell behind. He had to find the song. The more he heard it, the more he had to find out what it was. He'd thought it was a child's voice, but the closer he came—almost there now, quick—the less he thought so. The lilting treble was too pure; it was none of the voices he'd heard singing carols at assembly. And the song itself, the winding stream of obscurely harmonic melody, wasn't at all like the vocal doodling of an unselfconscious child. It meant something.

It was there, behind the young Bruce Lees. He pushed between them, risking threatened instant death. The song streamed on. It was coming from one of his class, Olivia, as she leaned against the wall. She was taking it out of her pocket. The song ceased, unfinished. But Cox had seen where it came from.

He stared at it, disappointed, bewildered. It was simply one of the coloured balls he'd seen some of the children carrying recently.

Not that these toys weren't themselves fascinating. He gazed at it, and so did Olivia, not even bothering to notice him. It was about an inch in diameter, fashioned smoothly of plastic or something equally light—Olivia handled it as if it weighed nothing at all. It spilled colours.

A kind of kids' psychedelic, he thought: harmless enough. The ball must be somehow prismatic, though he couldn't understand why it was more luminous than the surrounding light. Colours welled up, washing over the surface of the ball, colliding silently and recoiling, thrust apart by new colours. As they flooded over the ball and broke. Cox was momentarily sure he had never seen some of the colours before, as if the ball were helping him dream them. Though he was engrossed he felt oddly detached. Perhaps he needed to hold the ball to be wholly engrossed. It was a bubble of green which burst at once, releasing blue, mauve, lemon, something else his mind snatched at vainly. He shook himself. "What's that called?" he asked Olivia.

"It's a ball." Surprisingly, she answered at once. She was one of his slower children, though appealingly protective. She wanted to be a vet. "It's only a toy," she added solemnly.

"I know that, Olivia," he said, as solemnly. "Doesn't it have a name?"

"I don't know."

She let him hold it when he asked, and watched him anxiously. Though he turned it close to his eye for as long as he could bear, he couldn't see a soundhole. No doubt it was obscured by the colours. "Why does it make that noise?" he asked.

She thrust the ball into her pocket, evicting an unwrapped toffee; then she stared at him, trapped. At once he was angry with himself. "I expect it's to go with the colours," he said. It wasn't any part of his job to spoil her toy.

Later, in class, he realised how oddly she had been behaving.

The children were painting mangers; he'd just told them the Christmas story. When the ball's song began abruptly, everyone started—everyone except Olivia, Tommy and Sharon, each of whom had one of the toys, and Linda, whom none of the others liked and who was pretending today not to be interested in anything of theirs. Cox searched for the owner of the toy; the sound had made Susan splash her painting, at which she was gazing tearfully. He saw Sharon opening her desk to hush the globe, which had apparently been singing to itself. "If it does that again you'll have to leave it at home," Cox said.

When he'd rescued Susan's painting he let her show him her brother's wedding photographs again. There was our Rose, wrapped in a pinkish-mauve mock satin bridesmaid's dress, like an expensive candy. Lovely, Cox

agreed, ignoring the black roots of Rose's ash-blonde hair. Always be interested, he reminded himself. Kids always want to tell you everything.

But Olivia hadn't, he thought suddenly. She hadn't wanted to tell him anything.

He sat at his desk, frowning. The children always brought their new toys to show him. Only that afternoon Roy had handed him yet another model plane, which he had apparently constructed in the lunch-hour. At least, it had looked like that; Cox hadn't dared move his hands in case the wings came away. Olivia and Tommy and Sharon had competed for his attention in the past with new toys, yet none of them had shown him this latest toy, the singing globe. And kids always knew the names of their toys; why had Olivia avoided telling him?

He shrugged. No point in being disappointed. The less they depended on him the better, since he had them only for a year—so his colleagues always told him. Maybe his colleagues were right, maybe he was too involved with the kids. He began to pace again. "That's a beautiful painting, Susan," he said.

He was clearing up after class when he saw that Roy's desk was partly open. Propping the lid was the model plane. It wasn't like Roy to leave that behind. He'd hurried away amid a small excited group, but even so he always carried his planes carefully home in a cardboard box, whatever else he might be doing. Cox hurried to the window in case he could call Roy back.

The boy was crossing the dark playground. The three children with him held globes in their hands; their faces bobbed about Roy, teeming luminously with colours. They'd passed through the gates before Cox could call out, and were hurrying in the opposite direction from Roy's home. Frowning, Cox tucked the plane into his own desk.

"Thank you," Roy said next day, and squashed the plane beneath his desk-lid, splintering a wing.

Ah well. Cox thought. Kids are fickle. At playtime Roy did nothing except gaze at his new toy. Could the globe harm the boy's eyes, or the other children's? Was it worth trying to break through the headmaster's blandness, to have their eyes examined? No, God forbid, Cox thought—few things were worth that effort. He'd ask the school nurse when she next visited.

By the end of the week every child in the class except Linda had a globe.

It was only a craze. Cox told himself. But it was worse than television. The children no longer played together. At playtime they stood or sat or leaned alone, gazing at the colours, though he noticed that they stayed close together, solitary yet grouped—his class, and a few of their friends. The other children avoided them, no doubt finding such inwardness uninteresting.

They must tell their friends where to buy the globes. But why had none of the other children bought them? Why hadn't he seen children from other schools with the toys? He'd never seen a craze so localised. Suddenly he was determined to know where the toys could be bought. He was sure they weren't helping the children's eyes.

Roy was standing at the edge of the group, intent on his handful of colour, the swooping petals of it thinning and transforming as they spiralled swiftly around the globe. "Where did you buy that, Roy?" Cox asked.

"Near us."

He was lying. He'd acquired the toy when Olivia and the others had led him toward their homes that night, away from his: Cox was sure. "Where exactly?" Cox said.

"Just a shop near us. I don't know what it's called."

Kids always know their neighbourhood shops by name. The rest of the group were pretending not to listen. For a moment Cox suspected theft. But the police would have notified the school of the theft of so many toys. Perhaps someone's relative owned the shop, perhaps the child wanted to choose who owned the limited stock of toys. Cox left them gazing at the flowering colours, beneath the dull snow-laden sky.

On Monday morning they made Christmas decorations. The sky gathered darkly, close to the window. Without warning Sharon said, "How do they get rockets into space?"

Now where had that question come from? Ah, Cox thought: the round decorations, the rounded shapes of the vehicles in *2001* on TV last night. He explained, and then they were all interrogating him as if their lives depended on the answers. When did the first rocket go? How far can they go? Why do they go? Olivia said, "How long will it be before they can reach the stars?"

An untypically sophisticated question, Cox thought—too much so for him. "Did you have a particular star in mind?" he countered.

She gazed at him, mouth ajar. Her forehead wrinkled, trying to squeeze out a speedy answer. But there was already an answer in her eyes. Susan said, "She doesn't know what she's talking about. She's just being stupid."

But Olivia was being nothing of the kind. Cox pondered as they made decorations silently, efficiently. It had been almost as if Susan had silenced the girl. For a moment, when Olivia had grasped his question, he'd been sure he had read *Yes* in her eyes. *2001* must have inspired her.

He was still pondering in the staffroom when Harry Turner said, "Have you calmed Susan Ellis down yet?"

Cox hadn't seen Susan excited since she'd shown him the photographs of Rose as a bridesmaid. "Why should I need to calm her down?" he asked.

"Don't tell me she hasn't told you. Her cousin told us all first thing. Our Susan's no longer the youngest of the litter. It's not like you to be late with that kind of news." He stared at Cox, thrusting his venous face close. "Don't look so hurt, man," he shouted. "You look like a bloody mother-in-law, expecting to be told everything."

It wasn't that. Cox's mind was held fast by the signs he'd ignored during the past few days. The children were changing. They were too quiet. Always, at this time of year. Cox felt as if the classroom were preparing for an enormous family Christmas party; but not this year. There was more to it than his feelings. A week ago Susan wouldn't have been happy until she'd told him about the new baby, nor would Roy have spoiled his plane. Something had happened to all of them, and Cox hadn't dared notice. Only habit had made him continue to see them as they had been.

He stared from the window, searching for them. They were standing about in a loose group. Linda was trying to join them, as she often did—pestering them, then losing her temper and starting a fight, running to complain that they'd hit her. She was the only one who hadn't changed. Cox thought: because she didn't have a globe. The globes were the culprits. It didn't matter how; they were. They must be banned. But it needed the whole staff to forbid them.

He couldn't talk about personality changes, for the others would think he was being subjective. He tried to persuade them to observe the toys more

closely. He tried to convince them the globes harmed one's eyes. He tried. "Come on," he shouted at last, "I don't want my kids going blind."

"Your kids?" Harry Turner demanded. "Get married, Frank. You're turning into a bloody old maid."

"You mustn't mother them so much, Frank," Sheila Bliss said. "It'll be enough of a wrench for them to change schools at the end of the year."

"We aren't talking about the same thing."

"You know damn well we are," Harry Turner said.

Perhaps they were right. Cox thought after school. Perhaps he was so involved with the kids he was reading them too obsessively. Kids always tired of toys, after all. When they did, they'd be the kids he used to know again. If the toys were so dangerous they would hardly be sold.

Next morning it snowed. The children gazed out at the heavy slow flakes. "Haven't you ever seen snow before?" Cox said, but nobody even bothered to be cheeky. Still, they wouldn't have done much work anyway, not with the school Christmas party later. They all gazed out, except for Linda, who hadn't been clamouring for attention today. She held herself still, pressing her elbows against her waist, within the boundaries of her desk. She wouldn't tell him what was wrong. He hoped she would enjoy the party. Poor kid, nobody had ever let her adjust to the idea of her father in prison.

His class put up the trestle tables in the assembly hall, and were the first to sit down. Linda sat alone at the end nearest the tree, as if challenging people to sit by her. The other classes began to pour in. Cox helped direct them, dutifully ate presents of food or disposed of them unobtrusively, sang carols, stopped fights, danced with a succession of little girls. He wondered whether he should invite Linda to dance. He glanced toward her, but she was gazing at the tree. She was gazing at the tree in frozen horror.

When he saw her expression his stomach seemed to gape. "What's the matter?" he whispered to her through the uproar, trying to see. She was gazing at a tinsel decoration on the tree: just a tinsel ball. But as he stooped to talk to her, he saw it from her viewpoint: a swaying globe, full of hectic reflections of colour. At once he knew what had terrified her.

"All right, love," he said. "Nobody can harm you here." He watched her as she sat frozen until the party was over, until her mother came to collect her for once. Then he went to see the headmaster.

To tell him what? Cox had seen what the globes were doing, but how could he convince the headmaster? How could he tell him how Linda had been terrified, when he didn't know exactly himself? We must be certain, Mr. Cox. Feelings aren't enough. He told the headmaster he was sure that the toys were severely damaging the children's eyes.

"Remember we're trying to involve the parents, not antagonise them." For a moment Cox didn't know what the man was talking about. "We must beware of suggesting the toys they buy their children are dangerous unless we have definite proof. Without that we could find ourselves in a good deal of trouble. And we mustn't try to do too many other people's jobs. There are people employed to keep an eye on the safety of toys, you know."

He'd achieved his position by avoiding trouble; he always sidestepped it now. "I'm not sure the parents bought them," Cox said. "I don't think some of these families could afford it this close to Christmas."

"Have you proof of theft? No?" When he'd failed as a lawyer he had gone into teaching. "Bring me definite proof and I'll speak to the parents personally. You have my word. But vague feelings aren't much good to me, now are they?"

At the school gates Cox halted, the snow close and cold around his feet. Perhaps he should give up now. If it became known that he'd acted without the headmaster's authority, he would have made himself real trouble. But all he could see was the trapped terror in Linda's eyes. He began to trudge toward the street where Olivia, Tommy and Sharon lived.

The snow had stopped falling, but the drifts packed themselves around his boots. By the time he reached the tenement buildings, the wind against which he'd been leaning had glazed his cheeks. The wind rushed along the open corridor as Cox knocked again. The streetlamp's light swung wildly, raking the glittering wall.

"It's the teacher," Olivia's brother called, and slammed the door in his face. The wind pulled Cox's collar down. After a while Olivia's parents appeared. Tommy's behind them. "The children aren't here," Olivia's father said impatiently. "We're wrapping their presents."

"It was you I wanted to speak to." The wind tugged Cox's coat from his iced spine, but he ignored it. "I'm afraid we've discovered that these new toys they've got are dangerous," he said. "You know, the little globes. Very

dangerous indeed. I'm going to warn the shopkeeper at once, if you'll tell me where I can find him."

"Do you know what he's on about?" Olivia's father asked his wife. "If she's been thieving I'll take the skin off her behind."

"I know what he means. Tommy had one," the boy's mother said. "It's not our fault if they play with things. We can't watch them all the time."

"Anyway, they have to learn for themselves," Tommy's father said.

Cox restrained himself. "Do you know where they bought them?" he asked the boy's mother.

"They didn't buy them anywhere. They found them up the road, on the waste ground." Cox hurried away down the corridor. "I think they took all there were," the woman called after him, "and they've thrown theirs away now."

So they had. Cox had nearly reached the waste ground, which began where the houses ended, when he saw three of the globes lying on the snow. They were only husks now, dark and empty. They'd run down. Cox thought gratefully. No doubt it had happened to all the globes by now. Nevertheless, he should make sure. He slipped stumbling off the pavement onto the waste, where patches of swung light scooped vainly at the treacherous dark snow. At once, thin amid the wind, cold and clear as the glaring stars, he heard the song.

Its source was buried in the snow, hundreds of yards out across the slippery hummocks, the disguised and unreliable bricks and rubbish, the traps of snow. But when Cox reached it, having almost crawled there on his frozen hands and knees, he didn't need the distant streetlamps. The swirling colours glowed clearly through their mantle of snow.

As he plucked the globe from the snow Cox realised that it had been resting against something else, in the shallow pit among the broken foundations.

He shook snow from the object. At once a second globe rolled from its mouth, singing. It was a metal cylinder about four inches long, almost weightless, rough and scarred; its closed end looked melted. As long as he held it globes dropped from its mouth, a dozen of them, two dozen. Their reflected colours scintillated wildly on the cylinder, demanding his

attention, dismissing the miracle of the cylinder. The globes sang. They pleaded with him to look.

As soon as he did so the colours leapt inside his mind. The song ceased, having served its purpose. The colours adjusted his mind to their pace, starting thoughts and visions. They showed him the surrounding snow, the muted glow of each fragile crystal. They showed him the sparkling stars. Without looking away from the globe he felt one with the stars, with the immense cold distance to them, with the enormous dormant voyage to this spot. And this was the least of what his mind could hold. Just let the colours help him a little more. Just let him help the colours to live, let them have somewhere to live again, someone to live in, someone to build them a way for the rest of the colours to make the journey. Then the world would be full of colours, a wonderful sight. There was nothing to fear. There was nothing for Linda to fear.

His mind slipped that in, saving him. He recoiled, falling. He was back in the cold and the dark, as the colours tried to snatch his gaze again, chorusing beautifully. He picked up a brick and flattened them. When the flat discs continued to sing and to boil with colours he dug in the pit with the brick and stuffed the cylinder deep into the earth, hurling the crushed globes after it.

God knows what they were. Some kind of transmitter. The cylinder must have been the core of their vehicle, pared down by friction. They must have lost power en route from wherever they'd originated, otherwise the children could never have thrown the first ones away. They'd all be dead soon. Cox grinned viciously as he tamped earth down on them until their song was completely muffled.

His furious enjoyment was so hysterical he almost didn't hear the children.

They were converging on him from the street. There were dozens of them, shadows approaching unerringly over the dim snow. It must be his whole class and their friends. They were coming to find the rest of the transmitters. He must be sure they couldn't find them. He dodged behind a nearby wall.

He heard the children halt, and dig. They couldn't remember the location of the cylinder so accurately, it wasn't possible. They must be searching. He listened to the soft thump of thrown snow. The wind sifted the drifts around him. The children made no sound at all.

They'd ceased digging, and he was waiting for their squeaking footsteps to move away, when the colours began to encroach on his hiding place, around both sides of the wall.

They must have seen him hide. Now they'd disinterred the globes and were using them to light their way to him. He wasn't Linda. If anyone had to be frightened it would be the children. He was still telling himself these things when the children appeared around the wall.

The globes were concealed in their hands. That was why their faces were glowing, exploding with colours. But they didn't respond to his commands, his appeals, his cries. The noose of light slipped over the snow around him, tightening; above it, above the darkness of their bodies, bobbed the translucently luminous faces—Olivia, Tommy, Sharon, all the rest, expressionless and writhing with colours. Now he knew why the globes they'd thrown away had been merely husks, for their hands were empty.

The chain of children was directing him between them now, along a narrow lane of closed glowing faces. He backed away from their silence, their stillness. It was only an X-ray effect, he thought; something like that. But where the bones of the skull would loom in an X-ray was only the turmoil of colours, streaming through the skin. He slithered backwards wildly over the snow, and tripped on the edge of the pit they'd dug for him.

The earth they'd piled ready followed him at once. His last sight was of the calm purposeful faces, glowing down hectically through a hail of earth and bricks. At once he saw that the movements of the colours were very much like the writhing of larvae.

Snakes And Ladders

Written In: 1974
First published in *Inconsequential Tales*

The shop was totally silent. Even the man who had beckoned Booth in managed to pad back to his place without making a sound. Thick curtains were tight at the window. The sole light came from a candle waxed to the table set in the middle of the floor, between the counters.

The woman who stood behind the table ignored Booth; so did most of the dozen watchers. But the old man lying on a mattress before the table, his knees drawn up by arthritis, turned his head painfully on its worn-out neck as Booth tried to tiptoe in. The boards caught Booth's footsteps, reverberating them hollowly.

When you enter Mrs Cooper's toyshop, you step into a world of faith and magic, Booth scribbled in his mind, defensively. But is the magic real?

At the table Mrs Cooper waited patiently for silence, waited for Booth's last movements to fade. She waited while the whistle of the ferry on the nearby river trailed away; even the lapping of the canal at the edge of the street was closed out by the curtains. Then she opened the drawer of the table and took out a doll, whose flat face she touched to the old man's forehead. She held it there for minutes, as if she were holding the taut silence still, challenging it to break. Even the candle's flame streamed up true. The old man's face wizened with intentness, and a tear squeezed out beneath one eyelid.

Without moving his head, Booth glanced at the watchers. An awkward red-faced girl, a middle-aged man leaning pugnaciously forward over a walking-stick, a woman weeping with hope; behind them dim chessmen stared palely through glass. The two people who had turned when he'd entered were still watching him.

One was an enormous woman whose breasts, sucked out of shape, had been forced into an almost colourless flowered dress, along with her belly

and hips. Each breath strained at the dress above the swollen legs as if against suffocation, yet her eyes were alert. The other was a broad man, uncomfortably tall; above the lit chin his face was a dark blank that watched Booth steadily. Despite the atmosphere of the shop, Booth thought, you soon begin to suspect that you're meant to be impressed.

Mrs Cooper was holding the doll above the old man's glimmering eyes. Very slowly, tenderly, she straightened the doll's bent legs. The old man's hands gripped the edge of the mattress, trembling. His left foot began to quiver. It shook violently, straining to reach the end of the mattress. It worked within his shoe, nails scraping; it inched forward, quivering; it reached the floor. He was struggling to rise. The pugnacious man hurried to offer his stick. The old man stumbled limping on his left leg toward the weeping woman. At once, as if at the end of a play, the lights came on.

The shop was smaller than its darkness had seemed. It was full of the table, three glass counters full of toys and games, the dozen people clustering about the old man. Booth could hardly sidle his way to the table. Mrs Cooper was scraping drops of wax from the wood. "I'd like to ask you a few questions," Booth said.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was thin and high, not at all commanding. But her eyes held the conviction her voice lacked; her gaze was neither challenging nor defiant, but completely sure. "You've seen all there is," she said. "I can't add anything to that."

"I must have some background."

"There is none." She turned as the red-faced girl—clearly her daughter—whispered to her, and Booth knew he'd been dismissed.

The enormous woman plodded up, beaming. "She's a miracle, isn't she?" she demanded of Booth.

He glanced about at the chessmen, the board games, the dolls: all Mrs Cooper's work. There was a board game lying half painted on one counter. "She's very talented," he said.

"What are you going to say about her in your paper? Listen now, Elsie," she shouted to Mrs Cooper. "He'll tell you what he's going to write."

"I don't know yet." They had all turned toward him, even the old man, who gave him a weak smile of encouragement as if to win a favourable report. "I'm sorry," Booth said as the woman expostulated. "I don't know."

"She wouldn't let just anyone watch, you know. You were quick enough to come when we asked. It's only that she needs more people to come to her, so she can afford to send her Bernadette away to school. At least you can give her an idea of what you'll say. Play the game."

Though the October night was cold, Booth was growing clammily hot. The bare light bulbs, and the tin cymbals they wore, poured heat over him. In a minute he really would tell them what he intended to write, and damn Mrs Cooper's feelings. "I'll send Mrs Cooper a copy as soon as it's written," he said. "Now you must excuse me."

"Oh no," the enormous woman said, blocking his path. "You think she's a fake, don't you? Eh, don't you?"

This was unbelievable; it couldn't be happening. He tried to slip past her, but her belly trapped him, hot and soft. Her thick fingers gripped his shoulders. Mrs Cooper was helping the old man to hobble; the others watched Booth's plight, smiling, enjoying their triumph. He ducked out of her grasp, sweating, furious. "Let's say I'd have been more easily persuaded if I'd been allowed to bring a doctor," he threw back defiantly, nearly at the door.

The tall man stalked forward. "I'm a doctor. That man's legs were crippled, if that's what you're wondering."

"Where is your surgery?" Booth said, clutching the door handle for reassurance.

"I'm retired. But I haven't forgotten what I knew."

"Well, thank you," Booth said, nodding to Mrs Cooper, and pulled at the handle. The door rattled, but refused to yield. He tugged at the handle; sweat trickled over him, prickling. This was the last time he'd follow up a story phoned in by the public.

The door pulled free of the obstruction; but as it moved, fingers closed fatly on his wrist. "Not so fast," the woman said. "You're going to say she's a miracle, aren't you? The last one who lied about her found out what else she can make happen."

Booth's control broke. He threw her off and pushed her back into the shop. "I'll say nothing of the kind," he said viciously. "I'll say this looks to me like a fake, set up to exploit the gullible and desperate."

He wrenched open his car door and thrust the key into the ignition. As the engine started, he looked back. They were hurrying out of the shop a dozen yards away, running to close in on the car from both sides. The girl Bernadette had picked up a handful of litter and was poised to throw it at the car. Booth fumbled hastily with the gears. The girl's hand went back. The car leapt, accelerating wildly. His hand had slipped on the lever. The car was accelerating in reverse.

No, this wasn't happening. The girl Bernadette hurtled toward him in the mirror; she looked like a picture on a tiny screen, unreal. But he heard the dull thud, and felt the rear wheels buck. As he braked convulsively, the enormous woman stumped quaking past the car and stood in its way.

Surely she didn't expect him to flee. He pushed himself out of the car and peered down. The girl was lying beneath the car, her neck broken; she stared blindly towards him, slack-mouthed and drooling blood. Mrs Cooper straightened up from her daughter's body and gazed expressionlessly at him. Then she paced deliberately back to the shop, walking steadily, erect, purposeful. When she halted in the doorway, Booth turned to the others. Only his movement saved his hand as the pugnacious man kicked the car door shut.

"Now wait," Booth said. "It wasn't my fault. She distracted me." Half of them were blocking the street behind the car, while ahead the enormous woman waited for him, arms spread. The old man leaned against the shop window, bewildered. The rest of them were closing around Booth as he backed away from the pugnacious man. The doctor strode slowly toward him, arms rising from his towering shoulders.

Booth saw escape, and leapt. He vaulted over the car's hood, skinning his elbow on the windscreen. He rolled over the metal, then was running. He reached the bridge over the canal beside the street before they could stop him. Ahead, beyond the warehouses, were the docks. Through the docks he could reach the ferry.

The railing of the bridge scraped between his fingers, shedding rust. On the cobbled pavement before the warehouses, he glared back. They hadn't followed him. The canal slopped over his feet. His pursuers had returned to the shop doorway and were conferring with Mrs Cooper. With a shock Booth realised that he'd left his key in the ignition. Still, they could have the car. He was too glad of his escape.

To his right the canal curved round at the end of the line of warehouses, leading the street to the ferry's landing-stage. There might be other bridges back to the street, but if he could reach them, so could his pursuers. He was sure his first instinct had been right: he must go through the docks. Ahead was an alley, a dark crack between the warehouses. He ran forward.

He'd thought the alley must be wider than it looked, but it was hardly an alley at all—more a gap. The dark cold stone loomed over him, almost touching his shoulders, blinding him at once. It was as though he were being led blindfold by captors that paced him relentlessly, close and alert in case he tried to flee. He ran, trying to outdistance panic, hands outstretched to save him if he tripped. Around him, against him, his footsteps clapped.

He made out a pool of light ahead, lying stranded on the floor of the alley. It had splashed up a side alley, which finished where it joined his. At the far end of the side alley he could see the canal; its light struggled feebly between the alley walls, trapped. He hurried on, faster now that he could see the next gleam ahead.

The dead girl's face hung in his mind. It was Mrs Cooper's fault; it had been her game. She could have called off her friend and let him go, she could certainly have called off her daughter. But it was all a game to her, he was sure. An ingenious one: he admired the way the old man hadn't been entirely cured, to make it more convincing, as though her results were only approximate.

He ran across the gleam; at the end of his path he could see the water of a dock. The old man must have been a considerable actor, and the weeping woman too. And why not? Out-of-work actors, that was all. The key to Mrs Cooper was the array of games that filled the shop. He found himself trying to remember what the half-painted game had been. But the walls fell back. He was at the dock.

The water stretched before him, dimly lit by glimpses of moon that squeezed out between grey clouds. It swayed sluggishly; in the middle he could see the moon, a dull whitish underwater movement. The water was penned on three sides by a warehouse, a single five-storey bracket-shaped building. A few hundred yards beyond the mouth of the dock, a ferry was tying up at the landing-stage.

Booth began to hurry along the pavement of the dock as fast as he dared. Water sprang up the stone with a flat smack, pooling toward his feet,

draining away, glistening. He'd seen a bridge for vehicles linking the far side of the dock to the road near the landing-stage. There was no sign of pursuit. In any case, there would be people at the landing-stage; his pursuers wouldn't dare touch him.

He had reached the second side of the dock when he heard a wallowing like the sound of oars. Had they followed him by water? But there was nothing on the water; even the drowned moon had gone, though in the sky it had fought off the clouds. He must have heard fish. He hurried on, faster, faster, and almost fell through a gap in the pavement.

It was at least six yards wide, and as broad as the pavement. Dim water slapped the jagged stone. Peering, he made out a crane beneath the water at the side of the dock, quivering like jelly. It must have torn free, taking the pavement with it. Glancing desperately about, he saw that the dock was disused.

He couldn't cross here. He might try to make his way through the warehouse. He gazed at the thick walls, their massiveness merely accentuated by dozens of square lightless holes, and knew he couldn't. There was something about the place that made him dread the darkness within; something about the rocking of the dark water, the whitish gleams that swelled and thinned to threads beneath the ripples. He ran back to the alley.

He started uncontrollably when he saw, beneath the water near the alley, a length of piping as stout as a man, exactly the colour of the drowned moon. When he'd seen the moon moving underwater he had been standing here, yet there was no sign of it now. Distracted, he stumbled towards the alley. As he plunged between the walls he saw the ferry, smoothly riding its inversion across the river.

He halted, panting, on the first gleam. He stared down the side alley, but could see no bridge. He might lose himself time in searching for one. In fact, he thought, his pursuers might have headed that way. They certainly seemed to have lost him. Perhaps now he could reach his car.

He was between the gleams when he heard the wallowing again. This time it sounded like someone emerging hugely from a bath. He faltered, then hurried on; it couldn't be anything to do with him, any more than the sound he could hear now of something—an enormous sack, he thought—being dragged intermittently over stone. Someone unloading in a nearby dock, he

thought: it must be the acoustics of the alleys that made it sound so close. He glanced down the second side alley, and gasped.

It was all right. Anything would be a shock in this dimness. But he was sure he hadn't seen it when he'd passed here before—a row of whitish tires at the far end of the alley, stacked together like a pipe. In the flapping reflected light they seemed to shift restlessly. He shook his head violently and ran to the end of the main alley, dragging the walls back with his hands. Three of his pursuers were waiting for him.

The enormous woman, the doctor, the pugnacious man: they were standing just beyond the bridge. They'd known he couldn't escape through the dock. They came alert when he emerged, but made no further move. Behind them, framed in the shop window, Booth saw Mrs Cooper sitting at the table, painting by candlelight. He knew at once she was finishing her half-finished game.

Her disinterest terrified him. He was being trapped on her behalf, yet she wasn't even bothering to watch. It was inhuman. But his pursuers, he thought, were human. "Listen here, doctor," he said, stepping forward. He fell back at once, for the gangling man had loped forward onto the bridge, arms spread eagerly, while his companions blocked the way behind him.

Frantic, Booth gazed down the canal. The meagre light from the street lay in it like mud; moonlight trickled over the ripples. The rest of his pursuers had reached a bridge for vehicles and were coming back along the cobbled pavement on his side of the canal. If he made a run in the other direction, even if there were a bridge one of the three people opposite him could head him off—the long-legged doctor, no doubt. He was trapped.

His fist clenched on an iron rung. As if she felt his terror, Mrs Cooper looked up and gazed at him over the empty street. The old man and the dead girl had gone. Keeping her gaze on Booth, she painted a last detail. Then she came to the shop doorway and stood watching. She had won.

The cold iron dug into Booth's palm, and he realised that the ladder led to the warehouse roof.

The roof was flat. He'd seen that from the dock. If the roof were whole, if the ladder held, if there were a ladder for him to descend on the far side of the dock, he could reach the landing-stage. It was his only chance. He heard the rapid clattering of his pursuers drawing close; somewhere nearby he

heard the moist intermittent dragging make a final surge, and halt. He tugged at the rung. He braced his heels against the wall, and pulled. The ladder held. At once, silencing his fears, he began to climb.

A few rungs up, he twisted about to see what his pursuers were doing. Mrs Cooper was still in the doorway, gazing at him. The three at the bridge were approaching leisurely; the others continued to run. He almost lost his hold, and swung back, his blood throbbing wildly. But the ladder hadn't shifted at all. It would hold. He had won after all.

He climbed swiftly. He felt the ground fall away beneath him. There was nothing to fear so long as he held on. No doubt Mrs Cooper expected the ladder to part rustily from the wall. No doubt her friends were expecting that too, or perhaps they were waiting for him to lose his head for heights. Let them wait. He might have been nervous in the shop, but he had no time to be nervous now.

He was nearly there. He glanced up. The sky swam greyly; the wall sailed free in space. He closed his eyes, gasping, and the wind tugged at him, at the same time dragging at something on the roof. Nothing to fear. He'd seen the iron handholds at the top of the wall. Take it slowly. They couldn't reach him now.

He grasped the holds and rested for a moment, eyes shut. He wouldn't take the ferry. He would telephone the police from the landing-stage. Let Mrs Cooper try to blame him for her daughter's death then. The police might well be interested in her deceptions. She'd played her last game for a while, he thought, smiling. At once he remembered what the half-finished game had been: snakes and ladders. He hoped she'd appreciate how lucky she was to have had the time to finish it.

He was still resting at the top of the ladder when the moon-coloured fat-lipped mouth, puckered wide as its body and wider than his head, stooped toward him.

1975

Lilith's

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Palin must have noticed the shop shortly after it opened. He rode home that way every weekday evening. The district depressed him; its sameness did—the same colourless tower blocks everywhere on the slope above the river, the same slow procession of derelict terraces as the bus ground uphill, the same hostilities scrawled on walls, attacking the nearby travellers' camp. The January rain on the glass of the bus made the view worse, more the same: the houses were smudged brown blotches, the boards in their windows were bedraggled slashes of dark crayon; huge pale unsteady lumps of tower-blocks floated past. Palin sat swathed in layers of tobacco smoke, coughing; the driver had driven him upstairs when he'd tried to stand, bloody little Hitler. The bus throbbed throatily at a stop. As Palin glanced about, trying to blink the smarting from his eyes, he caught sight of an unfamiliar protrusion on a terraced house, like a railway signal at STOP but written on: the streaming letters said—The bus shook itself and breasted the headlong rain.

The next day the grey sky was saving up its rain. LILITH'S, Palin read before the bus whipped the sign away. The window of the terraced house contained a display; many of its neighbours were plugged with bricks or boards. The main road framed the side street with an anonymous dilapidated shop and an abandoned gap-toothed WO LWO TH'S. Palin craned back as the progress of the bus closed the side street. What on earth was that in the window beneath the sign?

For the rest of January he made sure he sat upstairs, on the right side. He opened the window to clear the glass, despite the protests of coughing smokers. If the bus failed to stop by the street, angry frustration welled in him, threatening to explode his silence—it felt like his impotence with Emily. The morning journeys began to frustrate him too, for then the bus used another road, higher up the slope. But even when the bus dawdled, and

daylight spread further into the evenings, Palin couldn't make out what was sitting in that window.

It looked something like a person. It sat pinkly in the display, wearing a woman's black underwear. Around it were books, posters, vaguer objects. Perhaps it was only a mannequin—of course that was what it must be. But why did it have a huge white blossom in place of a head?

In March, determined to know, he got off the bus opposite the shop.

It was only two stops before his. Nevertheless he'd had to argue himself off the bus. It was a long walk home, his mind had reminded him. He didn't like the area, he just wanted to rest after wrestling with people's taxes and their complaints all day; it was raining, it was absurd to give in to his impulse. One evening he'd determined to get off, but his arguments had carried him past the stop. The next day, despite drizzle, he hustled himself to the doors of the bus.

Beneath the bus stop's metal flag he felt isolated, faintly ridiculous. Among the paved paths between the tower blocks rectangles of unkempt grass lay juicily stranded, like life thrown away by a sea. Children spied on him from concrete balconies. A doll with a trampled head lay at the foot of a stack of balconies; the doll's mouth was burst wide. Down the slope men plodded home, stopping to threaten the travellers' camp.

Palin crossed the road. On one corner of the side street, within the anonymous shop, a dog biscuit lay on bare boards, gathering dust. He hurried along the blinded terrace. LILITH'S signal waved him on, gesturing in the moist wind. The pink figure sat waiting, its face lost in white convolutions like coral.

It wasn't a mannequin. It was a Love Mate; the carton against which it rested said so. Its title on the carton was clumsily stencilled, but its limbs and body were well-shaped, even attractive if that kind of thing attracted you. Its head was wrapped in tissue paper.

Palin shrugged wryly. At least he knew now; it wouldn't bother him again. Behind the display he could see what looked very much like the front room of a terraced house, patched with astrological posters. Bare floorboards supported a counter of bare boards, piles of books about witchcraft, odd objects beneath cloth; on a book a girl held a carved man toward the carving's living subject, who stumbled toward her, glassy-eyed. There was

something deeper in the dimness, Palin saw, between the books and Tarot decks and phallic ornaments. It was a girl, dim beyond the counter. Her large dark eyes gazed from her heart-shaped face. Her beauty shivered through him.

What beauty? He could hardly see her. He shook his head, frowning. He didn't intend to be lured in. He'd had enough of feminine allure, that promised but frustrated; he'd had enough with Emily. So stop gazing at this dim girl. He was still trying to see what was so beautiful about her when something tapped him on the shoulder.

Only rain. But when he turned, a man was staring at him from the steps of the house opposite, front-door key in hand. As he gazed at Palin, his expression burned with hatred and disgust. Palin tried to stare him out, then strode toward the main road; he felt the stare following him. At the road he looked back. The man was staring at the shop now, a crusader in dirty overalls; his stance was a furious threat.

A fortnight later Palin returned to the shop.

It was spring, it was pleasant to walk home a little way. If he got off the bus here he needn't sit upstairs, suffering smoke for the sake of a glance. He might see a present for Emily in the shop. None of these was his real reason. For a fortnight he had been trying to fathom what had made the girl so beautiful.

It wasn't just her large eyes, her small softly rounded heart-shaped face. Then what? He never saw her body; she always wore a long dress and the dimness. Her full lips and her eyes smiled at him, an encouraging smile, promising, mysterious. Promising what, for heaven's sake? He snorted at his eager fantasies. But the next evening he went back, peering for her slight smile.

Often he was watched from the house opposite. Once, when children stood in an alley to gaze at the shop, the man rushed out and chased them away. Sometimes Palin saw the man's head displayed in a small upstairs window above the front door, a hostile Toby jug. Let him try to chase Palin away, just let him try.

But it was absurd, this fascination. What could come of it? Traffic droned along the main road, dust and fumes swirled. Perhaps he should buy Emily a present and be done with the shop. She'd been aloof from him today—her

period, no doubt, some such excuse. Among the plain-wrapped books—*Joy of the Body, Glory of the Flesh*—and unlabeled vials and what he guessed from the coy pictures on their closed boxes to be penis candles, Palin saw several packs of Tarot cards. They were the kind of thing she might like. He didn't: too inexplicable, unpredictable.

No. He wouldn't buy her a present for being moody. When she was friendlier, maybe. If she ever was. He and Emily were drifting apart, slowly as flight in a nightmare, each making timid attempts to break it off, giving hints of impatience and boredom; neither was willing to make a decisive move. He couldn't be sure they had drifted too far to reunite. But it was so much work, judging her moods, trying to keep her happy, to know what she was thinking. It was always work, with women. The girl gazed smiling from deep in the shop.

That was the girl's appeal. He gasped; his face hung open-mouthed on the window. She wasn't like Emily, she hadn't encouraged him only to make him struggle to please her. She simply waited, displaying her smile on the velvety dimness, an intimate smile if he wanted it to be. She would be willing, anxious to please, peaceful and quiet and submissive. She was there if he wanted her. All that was in her smile, her eyes.

Nonsense. It was only his fantasy. For a moment he wondered whether she had fantasies. She was always sitting behind the counter in the dimness; what could she think all day? But it would be wonderful to have a woman who would do exactly what he wanted, whenever he wanted it. Like the Love Mate. Oh no. He didn't need that sort of thing.

Why not?

His answers to that seemed weaker each day. On the neck of the figure was a bulb of coralline convolutions, as if white brains had boiled from the head: but beyond that shock the body was beautiful—the long slim arms and delicate hands, the smooth thighs mysteriously closed, the round full breasts that he was sure were clothed for decency, not for support. The figure looked soft, not rubbery at all; even the pink flesh no longer looked unnatural, simply new, young, virgin. The girl's body beneath the long dress could be no more beautiful. It was as if she veiled herself in the dimness the better to display her body in the window.

He couldn't. It wasn't the florid glaring Toby jug that held him back; but he couldn't go into the shop and ask. Asking a girl would be all the more

difficult. She knew whose face was beneath the blossom of tissue paper; somehow that would be most disturbing of all. But to have a body waiting when he came home, ready for whatever he'd worked up during the day—He'd feel absurd, a fool. He listened to his mind debating, astonished. That he, of all people, should be trying to counter argument with feelings! The girl's face flickered softly on the dimness, smiling.

It was Emily who decided him.

He'd invited her home to cook dinner. She had offered him dinner at her flat earlier that week, but he found her flat intimidating: the old warmly dark furniture, inherited or bargained for in obscure shops; a huge soft smiling lion; Kafka, Mick Jagger, *The Story of O*, women's magazines for recipes, *Taxes: the Journal of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation, The Magus*—too many contradictions, they bewildered him. He blamed her flat for inhibiting him sexually.

The first time there he'd been too eager; he had barely entered her before ejaculating. Then for weeks his erections had dwindled nervously; her flat had watched like a crowd of critics. When he managed erections again he felt sure Emily was growing bored with his lack of consistent rhythm, the time he took to come—sometimes she was dry before he came. In his house he felt easier, more in command.

But he hadn't felt easier this time. All day Emily had kept glancing at him from her desk. He sensed that she wanted to call off their evening; perhaps she was waiting for him to give her the chance. He avoided talking to her, except briefly.

On the bus they were silent. Around them conversations shifted beneath the labouring of the bus. LILITH'S signalled, then sank back into the side street. Bricks of Palin's house glowed orange, painted amid the dark terrace. The hall carpet welcomed him, borrowing orange from the Chinese lampshade.

They'd planned an elaborate dinner. "I know, shall I cook you something simple, a surprise?" Emily said now. She glanced at his face. "If you don't mind," she said.

No, no, he didn't mind: but why couldn't she have said before instead of skulking around the subject all day? Still, a simple meal gave them more

time to get to the local cinema, as they planned. "Oh, do we have to go out after dinner?" Emily said. "Let's just stay in."

He enjoyed dinner. He drank just enough wine and felt mellow. He was glad they were staying in. When they'd washed up he switched on the light over the stairs and waited for her. "Oh, not tonight," she said.

"What do you mean, not tonight?"

"I can't. You know. My period," she said irritably. "What do you think I mean?"

That really made the evening, that did—her having that now, of all nights. And she looked at him as if he should have known, have kept count! There was nothing to do except switch on the box, and he could have watched that by himself. He'd tried talking to Emily over wine before, but she didn't seem very interested in model soldiers or even war games. Abruptly, halfway through a film he was watching, she said "I'm going." She didn't wait for him to see her out.

Next day brought a raise in salary. Emily went out at lunchtime to buy clothes. She didn't speak to Palin all day, not even to show him what she'd bought. At her desk she presented her back to him; her long blond hair looked defiantly indifferent, shaking at him when she shook her head.

He sat downstairs on the bus home. Why shouldn't he get off at the shop? He did so, although the day was overcast: the sky was like dishwater, spilling into the river. The dog biscuit was still displayed, unattainable beyond dusty glass.

He dawdled toward LILITH'S. Should he buy Emily an apologetic present —Tarot cards, perhaps? No, he was damned if he would. He'd bought her too much already just to get her in the right mood, and then half the time it wasn't worth the effort. This time he was going to pay for something assured, for pleasure he needn't struggle for. The white coralline bulb went by. Before he was quite ready Palin's strides had carried him into the shop.

Dimness floated over him. It felt as if he'd walked into someone's front room by mistake, where they were musing in the dark; the room was full of the girl, it didn't feel like a shop at all. Though it was irrational, Palin almost fled. But he could see the counter now, which helped make the room a shop. The girl's smile formed from the darkness. Very slowly her heart-shaped face began to glow.

Her smile waited for him to speak. Could he really ask to buy the figure? He needn't commit himself yet, he realised gratefully. "How much is the, the er..?" he said, waggling his fingers toward the window.

"What thing do you mean?"

Her voice was low. He had to strain to perceive it, like her face. But straining, he heard how appealing it was: its musical lilt, its rich huskiness; welcome, readiness to please, a mysterious sexual tension. Perhaps more of that was in his strain than in her voice.

"The thing in the window," he said. "The er..." What was it called, for God's sake? "The Love Mate!" he remembered, almost shouting with relief.

"How much will she be worth to you?"

He'd wanted her to tell him. He didn't want to commit himself yet, to admit he wanted to buy the thing. But she smiled from the shadows, glowing, waiting. "Well, I don't know." Then he must guess. "Ten pounds," he said, hoping that wouldn't offend her, hoping she'd name a price now; haggling with a woman made him uncomfortable.

"Ten pounds for her?" She seemed sad but resigned. Her face rose through the dimness; she stood up from her easy chair behind the counter. She was very tall. "I must take your offer," she said. If she sounded as if she were submitting to the inevitable, somehow her tone included Palin too.

As she moved toward the window he realised with an unpleasant shock that she was crippled. Beneath the long dress she was hobbling unsteadily, lopsidedly. He could see nothing of her except her face and delicate hands.

She lifted the pink figure gently from the display. Then she pulled off the underwear and threw it into a corner of the room. Palin realised she had dressed the figure only so as to avoid possible prosecution. Naked now, the figure glowed.

The girl straightened the figure's arms at its sides, then pulled the legs up until the feet rested under the armpits. Palin saw the hairless genitals gape in shadow, and was momentarily excited. The girl was opening the carton. He must ask her to unwrap the head. But he couldn't; he was sure it was her face, on the perfected body; he could only buy so long as the knowledge remained unspoken between them, unacknowledged. He fumbled in his wallet. The open genitals slid into the carton. Beyond the window he saw the Toby jug, frowning down.

As he handed her the notes the girl clasped his hand deliberately. Her smile seemed a promise. But what did her clasp mean? *Au revoir*, an appeal to him, a gesture of friendship? He saw her long body twist lopsidedly beneath her dress as she sat down in the easy chair. Suddenly he felt oppressed, a stranger who'd strayed into a house that had too strong a personality. "Goodbye," he said curtly, and was out amid the comforting grey of sky, pavement, river. The gaze of the Toby jug turned on him.

He was glad to escape the gazes, from the shop and from the house opposite. He felt the figure shifting within the carton. Buses carried friezes of faces beside him, staring. It was all right, they couldn't see into the carton. He draped his coat wider over the stencilled name. As the Love Mate thumped against its box, he felt absurd. What on earth had persuaded him to buy this dummy? Well, it was only ten pounds. He wondered how one went about selling such a thing.

The damn thing was heavy. He dumped it on the front doorstep while he groped for his key. Suddenly he remembered he had yet to see the face. All at once he was excited: to have that face waiting for him in the dimness, mysterious, welcoming—perhaps it was money well spent, after all. He hurried into the front room to open the carton. He halted; then he carried the carton to his bedroom and drew the curtains.

The pink genitals yawned from the box. He found the bare pink hole unnerving, so still in its cardboard frame. After a while he grasped the upturned buttocks to pull out the doll. They felt velvety as peaches, and shockingly warm; he couldn't imagine what they were made of. He pulled the doll out as far as its knees, then shook it onto the bed. It landed on its splayed buttocks and rolled back; he almost expected it to roll upright again. The bandages of tissue faced him. He could see her face already. He arranged the limbs, arms limp at the sides, knees high and wide; they resisted him a little, but stayed placed. Then he reached for the convoluted paper mask. His fingers dug beneath it at the chin and tore it upward. He recoiled, almost slipping off the bed. The head was bald and faceless.

The doll lay ready for him. The front of the head was smooth, pink, slightly flattened. The smooth vacancy lay turned up as if gazing at the ceiling. Palin thrust himself off the bed and shoved the doll's limbs roughly together, then he stuffed the doll into the carton and threw it into the spare

bedroom. As he hurried downstairs he felt cheated, uneasy, vaguely angry, somehow disgusted.

But why? He mused as he cooked his fish fingers. Suppose it had had a face? The face would have been stiff, lifeless, gazing with fake eyes. A mask of the girl's face would have been dismaying. His dreams were supposed to give the doll a face, the face he most wanted; only he could provide that. He hadn't been cheated. It was just that he doubted it would work.

There was only one way to find out. By the time he'd eaten, the sun had sunk beyond the roofs opposite. He drew the squashed figure from its box. He was sorry he'd been so brutal; the body was beautiful, it seemed a pity to spoil it. He straightened the limbs and carried it into his bedroom. The curtain filled the room with orange twilight. Instead of a pink blank, the face was a vague oval orange glow.

He raised the knees wide. As he undressed he gazed at the figure. All right, Emily. I'm going to have you as you've never been had before. He didn't believe a word of it. Emily's thighs were looser, a little flabby; her breasts flattened somewhat when she lay back. His penis dangled unconvinced.

The body glowed warmly, enticing. It looked unnatural only in its perfection. It was wrong for Emily, for her contradictions. Suddenly he remembered the girl's face in the dimness, her body hidden beyond the proffered body. That face on that body would be perfection. He stared, astonished by a coincidence: the figure's right hand lay almost in the shape of the girl's clasp on his.

He gazed. As its glow flickered with his gaze, the unfeatured head seemed to shift. He imagined the heart-shaped face, her glowing smile, gradually gathering light to its outlines, gazing intimately at him. Her smile formed from the orange glow. The slow growth of his imagination made the prospect more arousing. She lay waiting for him, arms and legs wide. His penis jerked erect at once.

He knelt above her. Impulsively he clasped the hand. A shock ran through him; her hand was soft and warm, firm in his—indistinguishable from the girl's hand, for the moment anyway. He raised her hands above her head. He stared at the wall behind the bed; her face glowed vaguely. Though his penis jerked impatiently, thumping in time with his heart, he was putting off

the moment of entry. He was sure disappointment lay there, in the bald pinkish crevice. At last he lowered himself on her, and gasped.

It wasn't like Emily's slick ridges, sometimes rough. He didn't have to thrust. It gave softly as he slid in; it felt like velvet. It seemed to ripple back over the shaft of his penis, kissing each nerve. As his crotch touched hers her legs closed softly, warmly over his back. He lay in her, feeling the ripples of sensation along his penis.

She waited. He could take as long as he liked, move her any way he wanted. He wouldn't have to suffer an unsatisfactory position, as had happened with Emily; it annoyed him to have to direct her, he felt she should know when she was wrong. Now he could have exactly what he wanted.

The thought excited him. His penis swelled, filling the velvet more snugly; pleasure trickled through his nerves, intensifying. The velvet rippled over his penis; as he thrust wildly, the ripples became waves. He clutched the velvety shoulders, he pressed his face against the smooth cheek. The ripples were velvet lips around his penis, drawing out his orgasm as he clawed at her shoulders, biting the pillow.

He lay in her. Her breasts were firm beneath his chest. The velvet stayed snug on his dwindling penis. Her legs clasped him.

Her face was a dark glow now; it smiled warmly. Suddenly he gasped. For the first night of his life he was achieving a second erection.

The dark blot hung almost still on the blue sky. Everyone on the bus gazed ahead at it, wondering. It was black smoke, spread wide and thin on the sky above the terrace. Palin gazed; anxiety swelled in his stomach. The smoke filled an enormous patch of sky over the slope down by the river. It grew; its formlessness hardly shifted. Its tail hung down toward a terraced street. It wasn't that street, it couldn't be. But it was.

He thrust aside the closing doors of the bus. There was little to see except smoke and charring. The houses on both sides protruded bricks and blackened struts. Between them lay a black tangle from which poked sooty metal, bits of glass coated with smoke, crumbling bricks, most of LILITH'S signal.

The man stood on the steps opposite. As he recognised Palin, something like triumph filled his eyes. "She was in there," he said grimly. His voice

rang flatly in the dilapidated street. "She's dead. Burned alive."

Palin thought the man intended him to hear how right that was. But he grinned at the man; he'd destroyed his triumph. "Oh no she isn't," he said, and walked away. He felt no sorrow at all. She was still alive, in his mind. Somehow the burning would bring her more alive, in the submissive body. He would keep her alive.

He hurried home. He need feel no guilt about his lack of feeling. He could hardly say he'd known the girl; only the image he kept in his mind. But he was anxious to make love to her body—because it *was* her body, he'd wished it on her. He felt she would like to be remembered so.

He'd left the front-room curtains drawn. That was foolish, it told thieves the house was empty. He hurried into the room: a bit late now, but never mind. Sunlight fanned through a gap. His model soldiers glittered on the mantelpiece on a bookcase; he glimpsed bright pink where the sunlight fell on the chair facing the window. He turned, frowning.

The faceless head met him, shining bright pink in the sunlight. It was as if the face had been lopped off cleanly, leaving the smooth chopped flesh. "God!" He flinched back; his fist thumped the window through the curtain.

He'd carried the figure downstairs this morning. Of course, he'd been half-asleep. He'd arranged the body in the chair, knees parted, hands on knees, face upturned slightly. Why, for God's sake? Because, because he'd thought she might seem welcoming when he returned.

She did. He drew the curtains and gazed at her—her long legs, her soft firm breasts. Beautiful. He hadn't grown too used to her, over the weeks. Yet he flinched from her. "I'm sorry," he said, seeking the smile in the orange glow.

He gazed at the naked slightly parted lips of her vagina. She sat waiting for him. He picked her up tenderly. As she lay on the bed, compassion and excitement mingled in him: he wouldn't let her die, he'd keep her with him, make sure she would never slip from his memory.

While he undressed, an idea excited him further. He'd often wanted to ask Emily but had never dared. He turned her over and spread her buttocks gently; they glowed, soft, warm. His breath hissed between his teeth as he slid in. The sensation of velvet streamed along his penis. Around the bed, soldiers glittered coldly.

When he went up to bed that night she still lay there. He lifted her, she lay warm in his arms. After a moment he slid her between the sheets. She seemed welcoming among the cold stiff soldiers, too welcoming for him to put away: there was welcome even on the smooth head, its perfect curve, its softness. In the dark he drew her clasping hand around his chest. Her face nestled warmly against his shoulder, a large constant kiss.

A few weeks later he gave away his soldiers. He couldn't stand them now. They looked dwarfed, tinny, absurdly unreal. When he thought how painstakingly he'd painted in each historical accuracy, it seemed childish. It was childish to work to make them lifelike, when he had her.

He sent them to John Hulbert, as an apology for cutting short their postal war game. Palin had been enjoying the game; it relaxed him, the leisurely research, the long slow pondering, the week-long rests between moves. Now he found she distracted him. As she sat near him, in her chair within the orange curtained glow of the front room, her empty face seemed like a mute reproach, a plea. He became impatient with the game. He left Napoleon hanging about outside Waterloo, and sent the model soldiers. When he took her to bed that night he felt enormously virtuous.

It was the tea break. Palin cleared a space among his work as best he could; he was helping someone slower to move all their post over seven days old off their desk before the 5CI count. Piles of paper lay on the floor among the cabinets, where the clerical assistants were searching for the misfiled files. One of Palin's colleagues was showing a letter around the office; another taxpayer had written to H. M. Inspector of Taxis—the joke would appear in *Taxes* eventually, if it hadn't been printed there too often. "Are you going to the Lakes this year?" Palin's neighbour asked.

"Yes, that's right." It was always restful in the Lakes. Palin realised with surprise that he hadn't thought about his holidays for weeks. Usually by this time of year he was anticipating them eagerly, even impatiently. He must be relaxing more at home.

Emily was answering her phone. She came over to Palin. "It's one of yours," she said, handing him her scribble of the taxpayer's name. There had been a time when she and Palin would deal with each other's telephone inquiries. Now they never did; they would have been too nervous, wary of making a mistake on each other's territory. In fact Emily hardly spoke to him now, although she made sure he overheard her phone conversations

with her new boyfriend. Palin found the file and went to the phone. He was uneasily aware of Emily, sitting beside him.

The caller was a married woman. She'd bought some life insurance, but her tax code hadn't changed. Palin explained patiently that it had been allowed for in her husband's code number. He explained patiently again. Again. Yes, madam. Yes, you see. The point is. I'm afraid there's nothing I can do. "I'm sorry, madam. As far as the Inland Revenue is concerned, once you're married your money is your husband's."

Emily was gazing silently at him. What was wrong with her? How could he ever have been involved with a woman who stared like that? "What's up with you?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing. It just sounded so much like you."

"What did? What the hell do you mean?"

She gazed at him for a pause, then said it anyway. "Your attitude to women."

"It's the Revenue's attitude." She gazed at him. "Seems to me that when a woman gets married," and his rage rushed him past whatever he'd meant to say, "she ought to know her place."

"Marriage doesn't enter into it as far as you're concerned."

"And just what's that supposed to mean?"

"I'll tell you what it means. It means," though he tried to hush her, "that women are fine so long as they don't have feelings. They're good to have around to cook your dinner. And for stuffing, when you're capable of it. But by God, don't let their feelings get in your way. Who are you kidding that that's the Revenue's attitude?"

It was as if he'd lifted a lid and couldn't replace it. Well, his own lid was off now. "I've a girl at home who's a damn sight more willing!" he shouted.

"God help her, then." Everyone was listening. The Tax Officers (Higher Grade) watched, frowning; one stood up to intervene. Palin hurried back to his desk, ducking his hot red face. "A damn sight more willing," he muttered. And a hell of a lot cheaper to take on holiday.

He was at home and staring at the pink figure in her chair before he wondered how on earth he was going to take her.

The carton was too cumbersome, and there wouldn't be room in his luggage. How could he get her to the hotel—post her ahead? No, that would be heartless. Suddenly he imagined the chambermaid finding her in his room, in his bed. God, no. He stared at her dim glowing face. He would have to hope a solution came to him. If none did, he'd simply have to stay at home.

Everyone from the office stood around his bed. Emily was pointing, laughing. As his penis thrust violently, desperately, the doll's body parted; a pink split widened up the belly, through the chest; it opened the head wide, cleaving a flat pink vertical mouth. Palin fell into the chill plastic crack, and awoke. A weight rested on his shoulder, against his cheek: smooth, slick, chill. He flinched, and the blank head rolled limply on its pillow. He calmed his breathing, then embraced her, angry with himself. But it took him a long time to call forth the girl's smile, and sleep.

Emily was transferred to another section of the office. When Palin saw her moving he was glad. But next day everyone seemed to glance persistently at him, even the girl who had taken Emily's place. Were they blaming him? Couldn't they see the scene had been Emily's fault, her and her moods?

His dull anger grew. When he reached home he had to let it out. "I've had a bloody awful day. All because of women, bloody women. And you're not much bloody good, are you? Don't have my dinner waiting, do you?"

He'd said too much. He'd filled the pink bulb of a head with misery; he could feel the misery swelling unbearably, because it had no outlet. "All right, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said. He was just depressing himself, that was the misery he felt. He needed a holiday. "Can't even take you on holiday, can I?" he shouted. "You'll just have to sit at home for a couple of weeks. It won't do you any harm."

He was being a swine. He felt worse as he cooked and ate dinner. Leaving her alone after a scene like that—When he found he was gobbling, he restrained himself. Don't be ridiculous. She could wait. He'd nearly finished dinner.

She hadn't moved. As he sat her face was turned aside from him a little. He leapt up and turned her head, but then she faced him only because she had no choice. Her still head reproached him.

Cowboys galloped tinnily on a twenty-inch desert; the dim face nagged at the edge of his vision. "Oh, for God's sake. Can't I even watch television now?" No need to shout; he lowered his voice. "Look, I've said I'm sorry. But I've got to have a holiday."

He leapt up and shoved her head away. She faced the wall, unprotesting. Minute steers stampeded. Her bare pink shoulder held still. "Can't you see I'm sorry?" he shouted. "God almighty, are you trying to make me feel worse? Can't you say anything?"

He hurled himself forward and switched off the television. "Satisfied now?" he shouted. He was throwing the silence at her, challenging her to maintain her aloofness. He waited, already triumphant. Then, in his silence, he heard what he had been saying.

God, had he had such a bad day that he was talking to a bloody dummy? That was all it was. "That's all you are!" he shouted. It was alive only when he made it live. But he knew that wasn't true, for he could feel its presence now.

Only because he'd worked himself up. That, and the way he'd given the dummy the girl's presence. Well, the girl was very dead. "You're dead," he told it, and wondered why he'd been so morbid as to sit a corpse in his front room. No, not a corpse—something that had never been alive. He was beginning to dislike the sight of it. "You're going in your box for a while," he said.

Couldn't he stop talking to it, for God's sake? No, not while he was oppressed by so much stifling emotion—mute reproach, wounded rebuff, heavy as gas in the air. Even the dim orange light seemed thicker. He hurried from the room, slamming the door.

Standing aimlessly in the hall, he knew he must get rid of the figure. He had been overworking, he needed a holiday—when he allowed a dummy to make him think twice about that, it was time to get rid of it. God, it had made him give away his soldiers, call off the war game. That was more than enough.

He'd grasped the door handle when it occurred to him to wonder why he'd bought the doll at all. He had never found such things attractive. He remembered the witch on the book in the window, the stumbling glassy-

eyed man. Had the girl learned something from the books to lure him into the shop? In that case, what might she have meant the Love Mate to be?

It didn't matter. He didn't believe in that sort of thing. The Love Mate was just a doll, and the girl was dead. He shoved the door open.

The figure sat glowing in the orange twilight, face turned aside. He strode to the curtains and wrenched them wide. Now the figure's long legs, slim arms and delicate hands were unnaturally pink; the genitals gaped like a split in plastic. But when he went to pick up the figure, the girl's face began to settle on the head at once, smiling reproachfully, trying to be brave. Palin brought an opaque plastic bag from the kitchen and dragged it over the blank head.

He carried the figure into the backyard. Grass straggled, squared by concrete; a vague cat scurried away from the dustbin. He couldn't burn the figure, it might be too violently inflammable. Instead he thrust it into the bin, tangling its limbs. He pressed down the plastic lid on the bagged head and turned away.

He heard the lid spring off. As he whirled, the doll popped up like a faceless Jack-in-the-box. It sat in the bin, dim pink in the twilight, its white faintly fluttering head turned up to him.

It was only the spring in its limbs. Palin thrust it down again, clamping the lid tight. But the head pushed the lid up; the white bag stared at him. He needed to settle the lid more firmly. He found a saw in the shed.

But he couldn't bear sawing through the neck. He couldn't stand the sight of the head rolling from side to side in its bag as the throat began to part. He disentangled the figure from the bin and sawed half through the left arm at the shoulder and elbow. That'd keep her down. He thrust the head into the garbage, stuffed in the limbs. This time the lid stayed clamped. Ten pounds down the drain, he thought. Cats spied warily from the alley walls.

He gazed from the kitchen window. The lidded bin looked reassuring, actually calming. Palin felt enormously relieved, free at last. He'd never fall for anything like that again. By God, he was going to enjoy his holiday. That was what he needed. Cats were staring down at the bin. Let them fish in it if they wanted to, they'd be disappointed.

The gathering darkness was warm. Soon he went to bed. He missed his soldiers; the room looked bare. Could he beg them back from John Hulbert?

He didn't see how. Even that didn't seem to matter. He sank easily into untroubled sleep.

He was making love to a girl. Her eyes sparkled; she panted; she smiled widely, laughing—he made her feel alive as she never had before. As soon as he was free he'd gone to her. He'd dressed and run to find her. He was laughing too, as they worked together toward orgasm. He'd found her and carried her easily to bed. Her left arm lay carelessly above her head, carelessly twisted, impossibly twisted. He'd found her and dragged her out the rest of the way, as cats struggled from between her limbs.

When he awoke screaming he was lying face down on the bed, in her.

The bag had gone. Dawn twilight crawled on her face. For a moment it gave her a face, a charred fixed grin, eyes like holes in coal. Then he was screaming again, struggling with her slippery limbs; his erection nailed him in her. He began to wrench at her head. The neck gave way almost at once. The head rolled from the pillow; he heard it thud on the floor.

The thighs clamped about him in a last convulsion, stiff as rigor mortis.

The Pattern

"The collection *Dark Companions* was the first Campbell book I read, and *The Pattern* still stands out in my mind as one of his finest stories. It took a situation I'd already encountered numerous times in horror fiction—a nice family in peril—and turned it on its ear somehow. The last few paragraphs contain some of the most graphic, shocking imagery I'd ever encountered, yet the story was (and is) about more than blood and guts; it is about nothing less than the sheer inevitability of horror, and the conviction that your horrors will find you no matter how you try to run from them."—Poppy Z. Brite, taken from his introduction to the story which he selected for the anthology *My Favourite Horror Story*, 2000.

Ramsey Campbell, incidentally, chose M. R. James' *A Warning To The Curious*; his introduction and the story are included in this collection.

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First published in *Superhorror*, 1976
Also published in: *Dark Companions*

Di seemed glad when he went outside. She was sitting on the settee, legs shoved beneath her, eyes squeezed tight, looking for the end of her novel. She acknowledged the sound of the door with a short nod, pinching her mouth as if he'd been distracting her. He controlled his resentment; he'd often felt the same way about her while painting.

He stood outside the cottage, gazing at the spread of green. Scattered buttercups crystallised the yellow tinge of the grass. At the centre of the field a darker green rushed up a thick tree, branching, multiplying; towards the edges of the field, bushes were foaming explosions, blue-green, red-edged green. Distant trees displayed an almost transparent papery spray of green. Beyond them lay curves of hills, toothed with tiny pines and a couple of random towers, all silver as mist. As Tony gazed, sunlight spilled from behind clouds to the sound of a huge soft wind in the trees. The light filled the greens, intensifying them; they blazed.

Yes, he'd be able to paint here. For a while he had feared he wouldn't. He'd imagined Di struggling to find her final chapter, himself straining to paint, the two of them chafing against each other in the little cottage. But good Lord, this was only their second day here. They weren't giving themselves time. He began to pace, looking for the vantage point of his painting.

There were patterns and harmonies everywhere. You only had to find them, find the angle from which they were clear to you. He had seen that one day, while painting the microcosm of patterns in a patch of verdure. Now he painted nothing but glimpses of harmony, those moments when distant echoes of colour or movement made sense of a whole landscape; he painted only the harmonies, abstracted. Often he felt they were glimpses of a total pattern that included him, Di, his painting, her writing, life, the world: his being there and seeing was part of the pattern. Though it was impossible to perceive the total pattern, the sense was there. Perhaps that sense was the purpose of all real art.

Suddenly he halted. A May wind was passing through the landscape. It unfurled through the tree in the field; in a few moments the trees beyond the field responded. It rippled through the grass, and the lazy grounded swaying echoed the leisurely unfolding of the clouds. All at once he saw how the clouds elaborated the shapes of the trees and bushes, subtracting colour, lazily changing their shapes as they drifted across the sky.

He had it now. The wind passed, but it didn't matter. He could paint what he'd seen; he would see it again when the breeze returned. He was already mixing colours in his mind, feeling enjoyment begin: nobody could ever mass-produce the colours he saw. He turned towards the cottage, to tiptoe upstairs for his canvas and the rest without disturbing Di.

Behind him someone screamed.

In the distance, across the field. One scream: the hills echoed curtly. Tony had to grab an upright of the cottage porch to steady himself. Everything snapped sharp, the cottage garden, the uneven stone wall, the overgrown path beyond the wall, the fence and the wide empty flower-sprinkled field. There was nobody in sight. The echoes of the cry had stopped at once, except in Tony's head. The violence of the cry reverberated there. Of what emotion? Terror, outrage, disbelief, agony? All of them?

The door slammed open behind him. Di emerged, blinking red-eyed, like an angrily roused sleeper. "What's wrong?" she demanded nervously. "Was that you?"

"I don't know what it was. Over there somewhere."

He was determined to be calm. The cry had unnerved him; he didn't want her nervousness to reach him too—he ignored it. "It might have been

someone with their foot in a trap," he said. "I'll see if I can see."

He backed the car off the end of the path, onto the road. Di watched him over the stone wall, rather anxiously. He didn't really expect to find the source of the cry; probably its cause was past now. He was driving away from Di's edginess, to give her a chance to calm down. He couldn't paint while he was aware of her nervousness.

He drove. Beside the road the field stretched placidly, easing the scream from his mind. Perhaps someone had just stumbled, had cried out with the shock. The landscape looked too peaceful for anything worse. But for a while he tried to remember the sound, some odd quality about it that nagged at him. It hadn't sounded quite like a cry; it had sounded as if— It was gone.

He drove past the far side of the field beyond the cottage. A path ran through the trees along the border; Ploughman's Path, a sign said. He parked and ventured up the path a few hundred yards. Patches of light flowed over the undergrowth, blurring and floating together, parting and dimming. The trees were full of the intricate trills and chirrups of birds. Tony called out a few times: "Anyone there? Anybody hurt?" But the leaves hushed him.

He drove farther uphill, towards the main road. He would return widely around the cottage, so that Di could be alone for a while. Sunlight and shadow glided softly over the Cotswold hills. Trees spread above the road, their trunks lagged with ivy. Distant foliage was a bank of green folds, elaborate as coral.

On the main road he found a pub, the Farmer's Rest. That would be good in the evenings. The London agent hadn't mentioned that; he'd said only that the cottage was isolated, peaceful. He'd shown them photographs, and though Tony had thought the man had never been near the cottage, Di had loved it at once. Perhaps it was what her book needed.

He glimpsed the cottage through a gap in the hills. Its mellow Cotswold stone seemed concentrated, a small warm amber block beyond the tiny tree-pinned field a mile below. The green of the field looked simple now, among the fields where sheep and cattle strolled sporadically. He was sorry he'd come so far from it. He drove towards the turnoff that would take him behind the cottage and eventually back to its road.

Di ran to the garden wall as he drove onto the path. “Where were you?” she said. “I was worried.”

Oh, Christ, he thought, defeated. “Just looking. I didn’t find anything. Well, I found a pub on the main road.”

She tutted at him, smiling wryly: just like him, she meant. “Are you going to paint?”

She couldn’t have made any progress on her book; she would find it even more difficult now. “I don’t think so,” he said.

“Can’t you work either? Oh, let’s forget it for today. Let’s walk to the pub and get absolutely pissed.”

At least the return journey would be downhill, he thought, walking. A soft wind tugged at them whenever they passed gaps; green light and shadow swarmed among branches. The local beer was good, he found. Even Di liked it, though she wasn’t fond of beer. Among the Toby jugs and bracketed rifles, farmers discussed dwindling profits, the delivery of calves, the trapping of foxes, the swollen inflamed eyes of myxomatosis. Tony considered asking one of them about the scream, but now they were all intent on the dartboard; they were a team, practicing sombrely for a match. “I know there’s an ending that’s right for the book,’’ Di said. “It’s just finding it.’’

When they returned to the cottage, amber clouds floated above the sunset. The horizon was the colour of the stone. The field lay quiet and chill. Di gazed at the cottage, her hands light on the wall. After a while he thought of asking why, but her feelings might be too delicate, too elusive. She would tell him if she could.

They made love beneath the low dark beams. Afterwards he lay in her on their quilt, gazing out at the dimming field. The tree was heavy with gathering darkness; a sheep bleated sleepily. Tony felt peaceful, in harmony. But Di was moving beneath him. “Don’t squash,” she said. As she lay beside him he felt her going into herself, looking for her story. At the moment she didn’t dare risk the lure of peace.

When he awoke, the room was gloomy. Di lay face upturned, mouth slackly open. Outside the ground hissed with rain beneath a low grey sky; the walls of the room streamed with the shadows of water.

He felt dismally oppressed: he had hoped to paint today. Now he imagined himself and Di hemmed in by the rain, struggling with their balks beneath the low beams, wandering irritably about the small rooms, among the fat mock-leather furniture and stray electric fires. He knew Di hoped this book would make her more than just another children's novelist, but it couldn't while he was in the way.

Suddenly he glimpsed the landscape. All the field glowed sultry green. He saw how the dark sky and even the dark framing room were necessary to call forth the sullen glow. Perhaps he could paint that glimpse. After a while he kissed Di awake. She'd wanted to be awakened early.

After breakfast she reread *The Song of the Trees*. She turned over the last page of the penultimate chapter and stared at the blank table beneath. At last she pushed herself away from the table and began to pace shortly. Tony tried to keep out of her way. When his own work was frustrated she seemed merely an irritation; he was sure she must feel the same of him. "I'm going out for a walk," she called, opening the front door. He didn't offer to walk with her. He knew she was searching for her conclusion.

When the rain ceased he carried his painting materials outside. For a moment he wished he had music. But they couldn't have transported the stereo system, and their radio was decrepit. As he left the cottage he glanced back at Di's flowers, massed minutely in vases.

The grey sky hung down, trapping light in ragged flourishes of white cloud. Distant trees were smudges of mist; the greens of the field merged into a dark glow. On the near side of the fence the path unfurled innumerable leaves, oppressive in their dark intricacy, heavy with raindrops. Even the raindrops were relentlessly green. Metallic chimes and chirrs of birds surrounded him, as did a thick rich smell of earth.

Only the wall of the garden held back the green. The heavy jagged stones were a response to the landscape. He could paint that, the rough texture of stone, the amber stone spattered with darker ruggedness, opposing the overpoweringly lush green. But it wasn't what he'd hoped to paint, and it didn't seem likely to make him much money.

Di liked his paintings. At his first exhibition she'd sought him out to tell him so; that was how they'd met. Her first book was just beginning to earn royalties; she had been working on her second. Before they were married he'd begun to illustrate her work.

If exhibiting wasn't too lucrative, illustrating books was less so. He knew Di felt uneasy as the breadwinner; sometimes he felt frustrated that he couldn't earn them more—the inevitable castration anxiety. That was another reason why she wanted *The Song of the Trees* to sell well: to promote his work. She wanted his illustrations to be as important as the writing.

He liked what there was of the book. He felt his paintings could complement the prose; they'd discussed ways of setting out the pages. The story was about the last dryads of a forest, trapped among the remaining trees by a fire that had sprung from someone's cigarette. As they watched picnickers sitting on blackened stumps amid the ash, breaking branches from the surviving trees, leaving litter and matches among them, the dryads realised they must escape before the next fire. Though it was unheard of, they managed to relinquish the cool green peace of the trees and pass through the clinging dead ash to the greenery beyond. They coursed through the greenery, seeking welcoming trees. But the book was full of their tribulations: a huge grim oak-dryad who drove them away from the saplings he protected; willow-dryads who let them go deep into their forest, but only because they would distract the dark thick-voiced spirit of a swamp; glittering birch-dryads, too cold and aloof to bear; morose hawthorns, whose flowers farted at the dryads, in case they were animals come to chew the leaves.

He could tell Di loved writing the book—perhaps too much so, for she'd thought it would produce its own ending. But she had been balked for weeks. She wanted to write an ending that satisfied her totally; she was determined not to fake anything. He knew she hoped the book might appeal to adults too. "Maybe it needs peace," she'd said at last, and that had brought them to the cottage. Maybe she was right. This was only their third day, she had plenty of time.

As he mused, the sluggish sky parted. Sunlight spilled over an edge of cloud. At once the greens that had merged into green emerged again, separating: a dozen greens, two dozen. Dots of flowers brightened over the field, colours filled the raindrops piercingly. He saw the patterns at once: almost a mandala. The clouds were whiter now, fragmented by blue; the sky was rolling open from the horizon. He began to mix colours. Surely the dryads must have passed through such a landscape.

The patterns were emerging on his canvas when, beyond the field, someone screamed.

It wasn't Di. He was sure it wasn't a woman's voice. It was the voice he'd heard yesterday, but more outraged still; it sounded as if it were trying to utter something too dreadful for language. The hills swallowed its echoes at once, long before his heart stopped pounding loudly.

As he tried to breathe in calm, he realised what was odd about the scream. It had sounded almost as much like an echo as its reiteration in the hills: louder, but somehow lacking a source. It reminded him—yes, of the echo that sometimes precedes a loud sound-source on a record.

Just an acoustic effect. But that hardly explained the scream itself. Someone playing a joke? Someone trying to frighten the intruders at the cottage? The local simpleton? An animal in a trap, perhaps, for his memory of the scream contained little that sounded human. Someone was watching him.

He turned sharply. Beyond the nearby path, at the far side of the road, stood a clump of trees. The watcher was hiding among them; Tony could sense him there—he'd almost glimpsed him skulking hurriedly behind the trunks. He felt instinctively that the lurker was a man.

Was it the man who'd screamed? No, he hadn't had time to make his way round the edge of the field. Perhaps he had been drawn by the scream. Or perhaps he'd come to spy on the strangers. Tony stared at the trees, waiting for the man to betray his presence, but couldn't stare long; the trunks were vibrating restlessly, incessantly—heat haze, of course, though it looked somehow odder. Oh, let the man spy if he wanted to. Maybe he'd venture closer to look at Tony's work, as people did. But when Tony rested from his next burst of painting, he could tell the man had gone.

Soon he saw Di hurrying anxiously down the road. Of course, she must have heard the scream. "I'm all right, love," he called.

"It was the same, wasn't it? Did you see what it was?"

"No. Maybe it's children. Playing a joke."

She wasn't reassured so easily. "It sounded like a man," she said. She gazed at his painting. "That *is* good," she said, and wandered into the cottage without mentioning her book. He knew she wasn't going in to write.

The scream had worried her more than she'd let him see. Her anxiety lingered even now she knew he was unharmed. Something else to hinder her book, he thought irritably. He couldn't paint now, but at least he knew what remained to be painted.

He sat at the kitchen table while she cooked a shepherd's pie in the range. Inertia hung oppressively about them. "Do you want to go to the pub later?" he said.

"Maybe. I'll see."

He gazed ahead at the field in the window, the cooling tree; branches swayed a little behind the glass. In the kitchen something trembled—heat over the electric stove. Di was reaching for the teapot with one hand, lifting the kettle with the other; the steaming spout tilted above her bare leg. Tony stood up, mouth opening—but she'd put the kettle down. "It's all right," he answered her frown as he scooped up spilled sugar from the table.

She stood at the range. "Maybe the pub might help us to relax," he said.

"I don't want to relax! That's no use!" She turned too quickly and overbalanced towards the range. Her bare arm was going to rest on the metal that quivered with heat. She pushed herself back from the wall, barely in time. "You see what I mean?" she demanded.

"What's the matter? Clumsiness isn't like you."

"Stop watching me, then. You make me nervous."

"Hey, you can't just blame me." How would she have felt if she had been spied on earlier? There was more wrong with her than her book and her irrationally lingering worry about him, he was sure. Sometimes she had what seemed to be psychic glimpses. "Is it the cottage that's wrong?" he said.

"No, I like the cottage."

"The area, then? The field?"

She came to the table, to saw bread with a carving-knife; the cottage lacked a bread knife. "I like it here. It's probably just me," she said, musing about something.

The kettle sizzled, parched. "Bloody clean simplicity," she said. She disliked electric stoves. She moved the kettle to a cold ring and turned back.

The point of the carving-knife thrust over the edge of the table. Her turn would impale her thigh on the blade.

Tony snatched the knife back. The blade and the wood of the table seemed to vibrate for a moment. He must have jarred the table. Di was staring rather abstractedly at the knife. "That's three," he said. "You'll be all right now."

During dinner she was abstracted. Once she said "I really like this cottage, you know. I really do." He didn't try to reach her. After dinner he said "Look, I'm sorry if I've been distracting you," but she shook her head, hardly listening. They didn't seem to be perceiving each other very well.

He was washing up when she said "My God." He glanced anxiously at her. She was staring up at the beams. "Of course. Of course," she said, reaching for her notebook. She pushed it away at once and hurried upstairs. Almost immediately he heard her begin typing.

He tried to paint until darkness began to mix with his colours. He stood gazing as twilight collected in the field. The typewriter chattered. He felt rather unnecessary, out of place. He must buy some books in Camside tomorrow. He felt restless, a little resentful. "I'm going down to the pub for a while," he called. The typewriter's bell rang, rang again.

The pub was surrounded by jeeps, sports cars, floridly painted vans. Crowds of young people pressed close to the tables, on stools, on the floor; they shouted over each other, laughed, rolled cigarettes. One was passing around a sketchbook, but Tony didn't feel confident enough to introduce himself. A few of the older people doggedly practiced darts, the rest surrounded Tony at the bar. He chatted about the weather and the countryside, listened to prices of grain. He hoped he'd have a chance to ask about the scream.

He was slowing in the middle of his second pint when the barman said "One of the new ones, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right." On an impulse he said loudly enough for the people around him to hear "We're in the cottage across the field from Ploughman's Path."

The man didn't move hurriedly to serve someone else. Nobody gasped, nobody backed away from Tony. Well, that was encouraging. "Are you liking it?" the barman said.

“Very much. There’s just one odd thing.” Now was his chance. “We keep hearing someone screaming across the field.”

Even then the room didn’t fall silent. But it was as if he’d broken a taboo; people withdrew slightly from him, some of them seemed resentful. Three women suddenly excused themselves from different groups at the bar, as if he were threatening to become offensive. “It’ll be an animal caught in a trap,” the barman said.

“I suppose so.” He could see the man didn’t believe it either.

The barman was staring at him. “Weren’t you with a girl yesterday?”

“She’s back at the cottage.”

Everyone nearby looked at Tony. When he glanced at them, they looked away. “You want to be sure she’s safe,” the barman muttered, and hurried to fill flourished glasses. Tony gulped down his beer, cursing his imagination, and almost ran to the car.

Above the skimming patch of lit tarmac, moths ignited; a rabbit froze, then leapt. Discovered trees rushed out of the dark, to be snatched back at once by the night. The light bleached the leaves, the rushing tunnels of boles seemed subterraneously pale. The wide night was still. He could hear nothing but the hum of the car. Above the hills hung enormous dim clouds grey as rocks.

He could see Di as he hurried up the path. Her head was silhouetted on the curtain; it leaned at an angle against the back of the settee. He fumbled high in the porch for the hidden key. Her eyes were closed, her mouth was loosely open. Her typescript lay at her feet.

She was blinking, smiling at him. He could see both needed effort; her eyes were red, she looked depressed—she always did when she’d finished a book. “See what you think of it,” she said, handing him the pages. Beneath her attempt at a professional’s impersonality he thought she was offering the chapter to him shyly as a young girl.

Emerging defeated from a patch of woodland, the dryads saw a cottage across a field. It stood in the still light, peaceful as the evening. They could feel the peace filling its timbers: not a green peace but a warmth, stillness, stability. As they drew nearer they saw an old couple within. The couple had worked hard for their peace; now they’d achieved it here. Tony knew

they were himself and Di. One by one the dryads passed gratefully into the dark wood of the beams, the doors.

He felt oddly embarrassed. When he managed to look at her he could only say "Yes, it's good. You've done it."

"Good," she said. "I'm glad." She was smiling peacefully now.

As they climbed the stairs she said "If we have children they'll be able to help me too. They can criticise."

She hoped the book would let them afford children. "Yes, they will," he said.

The scream woke him. For a moment he thought he'd dreamed it or had cried out in his sleep. But the last echo was caught in the hills. Faint as it was, he could feel its intolerable horror, its despair.

He lay blinking at the sunlight. The white-painted walls shone. Di hadn't awakened; he was glad. The scream throbbed in his brain. Today he must find out what it was.

After breakfast he told Di he was going into Camside. She was still depressed after completing the book; she looked drained. She didn't offer to accompany him. She stood at the garden wall, watching him blindly, dazzled by the sun. "Be careful driving," she called.

The clump of trees opposite the end of the path was quivering. Was somebody hiding behind the trunks? Tony frowned at her. "Do you feel—" but he didn't want to alarm her unnecessarily "—anything? Anything odd?"

"What sort of thing?" But he was wondering whether to tell her when she said "I like this place. Don't spoil it."

He went back to her. "What will you do while I'm out?"

"Just stay in the cottage. I want to read through the book. Why are you whispering?" He smiled at her, shaking his head. The sense of someone watching had faded, though the tree trunks still quivered.

Plushy white and silver layers of cloud sailed across the blue sky. He drove the fifteen miles to Camside, a slow roller-coaster ride between green quilts spread easily over the hills. Turned earth displayed each shoot on the nearer fields; trees met over the roads and parted again.

Camside was wholly the colours of rusty sand; similar stone framed the wide glass .of the library. Mullioned windows multiplied reflections.

Gardens and walls were thick with flowers. A small river coursed beneath a bridge; in the water, sunlight darted incessantly among pebbles. He parked outside a pub, The Wheatsheaf, and walked back. Next to the library stood an odd squat building of the amber stone, a square block full of small windows whose open casements were like griddles filled with panes; over its door a new plastic sign said *Camside Observer.* The newspaper's files might be useful. He went in.

A girl sat behind a low white Swedish desk; the crimson bell of her desk lamp clanged silently against the white walls, the amber windowsills. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I'm, I'm doing some research into an area near here, Ploughman's Path. Have you heard of it?"

"Oh, I don't know." She was glancing away, looking for help to a middle-aged man who had halted in a doorway behind her desk. "Mr Poole?" she called.

"We've run a few stories about that place," the man told Tony. "You'll find them in our files, on microfilm Next door, in the library."

"Oh good. Thanks." But that might mean hours of searching. "Is there anyone here who knows the background?"

The man frowned and saw Tony realise that meant yes. "The man who handled the last story is still on our staff," he said. "But he isn't here now."

"Will he be here later?"

"Yes, probably. No, I've no idea when." As Tony left he felt the man was simply trying to prevent his colleague from being pestered.

The library was a long room spread with sunlight. Sunlight lay dazzling on the glossy tables, cleaved shade among the bookcases; a trolley overflowed with thrillers and romances. Ploughman's Path? Oh, yes—and the librarian showed him a card file that indexed local personalities, events, areas. She snapped up a card for him as if it were a tarot's answer. Ploughman's Path: see Victor Hill, *Legendry and Customs of the Severn Valley.* "And there's something on microfilm," she said, but he was anxious to make sure the book was on the shelf.

It was. It was bound in op-art blues. He carried it to a table; its blues vibrated in the sunlight. The index told him the passage about Ploughman's

Path covered six pages. He riffled hastily past photographs of standing stones, a trough in the binding full of breadcrumbs, a crushed jagged-legged fly. Ploughman's Path—

> Why the area bounding Ploughman's Path should be dogged by ill luck and tragedy is not known. Folk living in the cottage nearby have sometimes reported hearing screams produced by no visible agency. Despite the similarity of this to banshee legends, no such legend appears to have grown up locally. But Ploughman's Path, and the area bounding it farthest from the cottage (see map), has been so often visited by tragedy and misfortune that local folk dislike to even mention the name, which they fear will bring bad luck.

Farthest from the cottage. Tony relaxed. So long as the book said so, that was all right. And the last line told him why they'd behaved uneasily at the Farmer's Rest. He read on, his curiosity unmixed now with apprehension.

But good Lord, the area was unlucky. Rumours of Roman sacrifices were only its earliest horrors. As the history of the place became more accurately documented, the tragedies grew worse. A gallows set up within sight of the cottage, so that the couple living there must watch their seven-year-old daughter hanged for theft; it had taken her hours to die. An old woman accused of witchcraft by gossip, set on fire and left to bum alive on the path. A mute child who'd fallen down an old well: coping stones had fallen on him, breaking his limbs and hiding him from searchers—years later his skeleton had been found. A baby caught in an animal trap. God, Tony thought. No wonder he'd heard screams.

A student was using the microfilm reader. Tony went back to the *Observer* building. A pear-shaped red-faced man leaned against the wall, chatting to the receptionist; he wore a tweedy pork-pie hat, a blue shirt and waistcoat, tweed trousers. "Watch out, here's trouble," he said as Tony entered.

"Has he come in yet?" Tony asked the girl. "The man who knows about Ploughman's Path?"

"What's your interest?" the red-faced man demanded.

"I'm staying in the cottage near there. I've been hearing odd things. Cries."

"Have you now." The man pondered, frowning. "Well, you're looking at the man who knows," he decided to say, thumping his chest. "Roy Burley.

Burly Roy, that's me. Don't you know me? Don't you read our paper? Time you did, then." He snatched an *Observer* from a rack and stuffed it into Tony's hand.

"You want to know about the path, eh? It's all up here." He tapped his hat. "I'll tell you what, though, it's a hot day for talking. Do you fancy a drink? Tell old Puddle I'll be back soon," he told the girl.

He thumped on the door of The Wheatsheaf. "They'll open up. They know me here." At last a man reluctantly opened the door, glancing discouragingly at Tony. "It's all right, Bill, don't look so bloody glum," Roy Burley said. "He's a friend of mine."

A girl set out beer mats; her radio sang that everything was beautiful, in its own way. Roy Burley bought two pints and vainly tried to persuade Bill to join them. "Get that down you," he told Tony. "The only way to start work. You'd think they could do without me over the road, the way some of the buggers act. But they soon start screaming if they think my copy's going to be late. They'd like to see me out, some of them. Unfortunately for them, I've got friends. There I am," he said, poking a thick finger into the newspaper: "The Countryside This Week," by Countryman. "And there, and there." "Social Notes," by A. Guest. "Entertainments," by D. Plainman. "What's your line of business?" he demanded.

"I'm an artist, a painter."

"Ah, the painters always come down here. And the advertising people. I'll tell you, the other week we had a photographer—"

By the time it was his round Tony began to suspect he was just an excuse for beers. "You were going to tell me about the screams," he said when he returned to the table.

The man's eyes narrowed warily. "You've heard them. What do you think they are?"

"I was reading about the place earlier," Tony said, anxious to win his confidence. "I'm sure all those tragedies must have left an imprint somehow. A kind of recording. If there are ghosts, I think that's what they are."

"That's right." Roy Burley's eyes relaxed. "I've always thought that. There's a bit of science in that, it makes sense. Not like some of the things these spiritualists try to sell."

Tony opened his mouth to head him off from the next anecdote: too late. "We had one of them down here, trying to tell us about Ploughman's Path. A spiritualist or a medium, same thing. Came expecting us all to be yokels, I shouldn't wonder. The police weren't having any, so he tried it on us. Murder brings these mediums swarming like flies, so I've heard tell."

"What murder?" Tony said, confused.

"I thought you read about it." His eyes had narrowed again. "Oh, you read the book. No, it wouldn't be in there, too recent." He gulped beer; everything is beautiful, the radio sang. "Why, it was about the worst thing that ever happened at Ploughman's Path. I've seen pictures of what Jack the Ripper did, but this was worse. They talk about people being flayed alive, but—Christ. Put another in here, Bill."

He half emptied the refilled glass. "They never caught him. I'd have stopped him, I can tell you," he said in vague impotent fury. "The police didn't think he was a local man, because there wasn't any repetition. He left no clues, nobody saw him. At least, not what he looked like. There was a family picnicking in the field the day before the murder, they said they kept feeling there was someone watching. He must have been waiting to catch someone alone.

"I'll tell you the one clever suggestion this medium had. These picnickers heard the scream, what you called the recording. He thought maybe the screams were what attracted the maniac there."

Attracted him there. That reminded Tony of something, but the beer was heavy on his mind. "What else did the medium have to say?"

"Oh, all sorts of rubbish. You know, this mystical stuff. Seeing patterns everywhere, saying everything is a pattern."

"Yes?"

"Oh, yes," Roy Burley said irritably. "He didn't get that one past me, though. If everything's a pattern it has to include all the horror in the world, doesn't it? Things like this murder? That shut him up for a bit. Then he tried to say things like that may be necessary too, to make up the pattern. These people," he said with a gesture of disgust, "you can't talk to them."

Tony bought him another pint, restraining himself to a half. "Did he have any ideas about the screams?"

"God, I can't remember. Do you really want to hear that rubbish? You wouldn't have liked what he said, let me tell you. He didn't believe in your recording idea." He wiped his frothy lips sloppily. "He came here a couple of years after the murder," he reluctantly answered Tony's encouraging gaze. "He'd read about the tragedies. He held a three-day vigil at Ploughman's Path, or something. Wouldn't it be nice to have that much time to waste? He heard the screams, but—this is what I said you wouldn't like—he said he couldn't feel any trace of the tragedies at all."

"I don't understand."

"Well, you know these people are shupposed to be senshitive to sush things." When he'd finished laughing at himself he said "Oh, he had an explanation, he was full of them. He tried to tell the police and me that the real tragedy hadn't happened yet. He wanted us to believe he could see it in the future. Of course he couldn't say what or when. Do you know what he tried to make out? That there was something so awful in the future it was echoing back somehow, a sort of ghost in reverse. All the tragedies were just echoes, you see. He even made out the place was trying to make this final thing happen, so it could get rid of it at last. It had to make the worst thing possible happen, to purge itself. That was where the traces of the tragedies had gone—the psychic energy, he called it. The place had converted all that energy to help it make the thing happen. Oh, he was a real comedian."

"But what about the screams?"

"Same kind of echo. Haven't you ever heard an echo on a record before you hear the sound? He tried to say the screams were like that, coming back from the future. He was entertaining, I'll give him that. He had all sorts of charts, he'd worked out some kind of numerical pattern, the frequency of the tragedies or something. Didn't impress me. They're like statistics, those things, you can make them mean anything." His eyes had narrowed, gazing inwards. "I ended up laughing at him. He went off very upset. Well, I had to get rid of him, I'd better things to do than listen to him. It wasn't my fault he was killed," he said angrily, "whatever some people may say."

"Why, how was he killed?"

"Oh, he went back to Ploughman's Path. If he was so upset he shouldn't have been driving. There were some children playing near the path. He must have meant to chase them away, but he lost control of the car, crashed

at the end of the path. His legs were trapped and he caught fire. Of course he could have fitted that into his pattern," he mused. "I suppose he'd have said that was what the third scream meant."

Tony started. He fought back the shadows of beer, of the pub. "How do you mean, the third scream?"

"That was to do with his charts. He'd heard three screams in his vigil. He'd worked out that three screams meant it was time for a tragedy. He tried to show me, but I wasn't looking. What's the matter? Don't be going yet, it's my round. What's up, how many screams have you heard?"

"I don't know," Tony blurted. "Maybe I dreamt one." As he hurried out he saw Roy Burley picking up his abandoned beer, saying "Aren't you going to finish this?"

It was all right. There was nothing to worry about, he'd just better be getting back to the cottage. The key groped clumsily for the ignition. The rusty yellow of Camside rolled back, rushed by green. Tony felt as if he were floating in a stationary car as the road wheeled by beneath him—as if he were sitting in the front stalls before a cinema screen, as the road poured through the screen, as the bank of a curve hurtled at him: look out! Nearly. He slowed. No need to take risks. But his mind was full of the memory of someone watching from the trees, perhaps drawn there by the screams.

Puffy clouds lazed above the hills. As the Farmer's Rest whipped by, Tony glimpsed the cottage and the field, laid out minutely below; the trees at Ploughman's Path were a tight band of green. He skidded into the side road, fighting the wheel; the road seemed absurdly narrow. Scents of blossoms billowed thickly at him. A few birds sang elaborately, otherwise the passing countryside was silent, deserted, weighed down by heat. The trunks of the trees at the end of Ploughman's Path were twitching nervously, incessantly. He squeezed his eyes shut. Only heat haze. Slow down. Nearly home now.

He slammed the car door, which sprang open. Never mind. He ran up the path and thrust the gate back, breaking its latch. The door of the cottage was ajar. He halted in the front room. The cottage seemed full of his harsh panting.

Di's typescript was scattered over the carpet. The dark chairs sat fatly; one lay on its side, its fake leather ripped. Beside it a small object glistened red.

He picked it up, staining his fingers. Though it was thick with blood he recognised Di's wedding ring.

When he rushed out after searching the cottage he saw the trail at once. As he forced his way through the fence, sobbing dryly, barbed wire clawed at him. He ran across the field, stumbling and falling, towards Ploughman's Path. The discoloured grass of the trail painted his trouser cuffs and hands red. The trees of Ploughman's Path shook violently, with terror or with eagerness. The trail touched their trunks, leading him beneath the foliage to what lay on the path.

It was huge. More than anything else it looked like a tattered cut-out silhouette of a woman's body. It gleamed red beneath the trees; its torso was perhaps three feet wide. On the width of the silhouette's head two eyes were arranged neatly.

The scream ripped the silence of the path, an outraged cry of horror beyond words. It startled him into stumbling forward. He felt numb and dull. His mind refused to grasp what he was seeing; it was like nothing he'd ever seen. There was most of the head, in the crotch of a tree. Other things dangled from branches.

His lips seemed glued together. Since reaching the path he had made no sound. He hadn't screamed, but he'd heard himself scream. At last he recognised that all the screams had been his voice.

He began to turn about rapidly, staring dull-eyed, seeking a direction in which he could look without being confronted with horror. There was none. He stood aimlessly, staring down near his feet, at a reddened gag.

As all the trees quivered like columns of water he heard movement behind him.

Though he had no will to live, it took him a long time to turn. He knew the pattern had reached its completion, and he was afraid. He had to close his eyes before he could turn, for he could still hear the scream he was about to utter.

Slow

"I also wrote some science fiction, my agent having advised me to try, but my style and imagination tended to stiffen at the challenge. *Slow* was the last attempt, and relatively sure of itself."—Ramsey Campbell, afterword to the anthology *Told By The Dead*, 2003.

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Also published in: *Told By The Dead*

Gradually he became aware of the cottage around him, as he emerged from himself again. This time he'd gone back as far as his childhood. A landscape of hills, green beyond green beyond green: he hadn't thought of that for years, he'd decided the memory was more frustrating than useful. He was grateful for it now. It was somewhere to go.

He stretched, taking his time. The clock showed 8:37. He was hungry. No wonder, he thought as he glanced at his wrist: he'd stayed within himself for over two hours, he should have eaten an hour ago. Well, it didn't matter. He'd achieved self-discipline, he needn't overrate routine.

He picked his way between his games to the kitchen, and reached through the trap in the wall for the plate of food. Meat and vegetables—or at least, that was what it looked disgustingly like. For a long time he hadn't been able to touch the food. At last, starving, he'd discovered that it tasted synthetic enough; he could even manage to eat it with his eyes open.

He knelt down and peered through the trap. In twelve hours a larger plate of meat and vegetables would click into place; twelve hours after that, a smaller one again. He could see the plates lined up in their cool colourless store, just beyond his reach. A vague irrational hope—why hope?—made him count them again. But he knew (they) had left him enough food to last almost a year. (They) had gone away.

There was no use denying his feelings. He had been hoping they hadn't really gone; incredibly, he found himself already missing (them).

He shook his head wryly. He would never have believed how much he could adjust to. Returning to the living room he poked the wall with a finger, and felt the surface yield a little, like rubber. He wouldn't have

believed he could grow to bear that, yet now he didn't mind it, so long as he avoided thinking how the appearance of the cottage should have felt. And how soon he'd grown used to the view from the cottage windows, the steely blue shine of the folds of rock, the icy glow they retained for an hour after the white sunsets. Even (they) weren't unpleasant to look at, though sometimes he wondered whether they disguised themselves for him.

Staring out at the empty landscape, he began to wish (they) would appear. Perhaps they hadn't gone far, perhaps they would come back occasionally to look at him. Surely they wouldn't leave him for a whole year without a glimpse of life, with nothing but the bare metallic rock. Not entirely bare, he realised with a disagreeable start. There was something outside the window—the thing (they) had once chased away.

It was almost the colour of the rock. It ought have been a shadow, except that there was nothing to cast it. Its head resembled a swollen egg, precariously perched on a long thin neck that bulged toward the midriff. Beneath the belly, if that was what it was, the body tapered; the thing seemed to float on the point of its tail. It was more than a foot taller than he.

It hung in the mouth of a passage through a low table of rock, a metre away. There was no way to tell whether the blank egg was watching. When the thing had first appeared (they) had rushed at it, whirling and blazing; they'd waited until it had retreated into the rock passage. Let it watch, if it was watching. It couldn't reach him.

After a while he tried to assemble the cube, the most difficult of the games (they) had provided. One of these days he would solve it. But whenever he glanced up, his gaze was drawn from the wide retreating levels of rock to the nearby rock table, to the thing hanging balanced on its tail. An hour later he could see that it was coming toward the window.

Let it come. Whatever the windows were made of, they were unbreakable. He'd tried violently enough to break them when first he'd found himself here. He only wished (they) had supplied curtains, to that he could close out the sight of the thing. No, he didn't really need curtains, he wouldn't let it worry him.

The cube defeated him again. It was made of hundreds of slotted metal planes; whenever he fitted them together there were always five or six left over. He'd find the secret. He had plenty of time.

He accepted his defeat. The memory of the green day had calmed him. Somehow the memory seemed to reach back further than itself; it touched something at the centre of him. Tomorrow he might find out what that was, or the next day.

When he'd eaten his evening meal he returned to the living room, and frowned. The thing had almost reached the window. How slowly it moved, to have advanced hardly a metre since he'd caught sight of it. Surely it must be vegetarian, surely there couldn't be living prey that was slower than it was. He had no idea what lay beyond the rockscape: there must be vegetation.

He wasn't frowning because of the thing's sluggishness, however. Now the sun had set, the folds of rock were shining like a steely afterimage. Something in this light must be playing a trick with the window, for an image of the blank egg on its scrawny neck clung to the glass. Although he moved about the room, changing his angle of vision, the image overlapped its source, blurring the blank head. It was unpleasant to watch; his eyes smarted. Besides, although he knew the thing couldn't reach him, he found its encroaching presence disturbing. It reminded him he was—Perhaps in the morning it would have gone away, baulked.

Around him the cottage began to glow. The furniture, the low beams, the clock-face set at 8:37, glimmered grey; the dim light trembled like almost stagnant water. Perhaps (they) had meant it to imitate electric light, but it was the one thing he found impossible to bear. At least he'd trained himself to sleep once it began. He climbed the luminous stairs. Lying on the bed, eyes closed, he hoped the thing outside was turning away.

When he came downstairs the next morning, it was entering the cottage.

What he'd taken for an image on the glass was nothing of the kind. It looked more solid now than its source outside the window. Nor was it confined to the glass; there was a shadow of the rest of the body, outlined more darkly in the wall beneath the window. In the room, an arm's length in front of the shadow, a faint transparent darkness was forming. It already had the shape of the faceless thing.

Before he could hold on to his control, it broke. He grabbed a handful of planes from the slotted cube and hurled them at the intruder. They passed through the darkness, disturbing it not at all. He threw another handful, then he began to curse (them) for bringing him here. Them. His owners.

For the first time in years all his paranoia flooded over him, all the nightmares and suspicions he'd thought he had disciplined out of himself. Had (they) really rescued him? Or had they snatched him out of space, for a pet?

All the memories he'd dismissed as useless filled him. He had been ferrying supplies between the outer orbits. Suddenly the ferry was whirling helplessly, spinning out beyond the outermost orbit. He'd never known what had happened. Had that been (them) snatching him?

He'd blanked out. Regaining consciousness, he'd recognised he was drifting somewhere beyond the star maps, beyond rescue. His distress beacon was only interorbital. He was going to die. Eventually the knowledge helped him toward peace; there was no point in panicking. He'd used the techniques he had learned to help himself sleep when he'd first gone into space, as a member of a crew; he'd become his breathing, he'd drifted deep into his memories. He had thought of Old Earth, which he'd never seen. Then, as he'd eaten the last of his food and gazed out at space—abruptly: nothing. He had wakened in the cottage.

It was the cottage in the pictures in his book, the book of Old Earth he always kept sealed into his pocket. He'd bought the book in a bazaar; it was centuries old, each page coated with preservative. He'd paid its price, for he had always wanted a glimpse of Old Earth. Now it was as though he'd fallen into the book. It had taken him weeks to soothe his nerves, to regain some sense of inhabiting reality.

And longer to be sure of what he saw through the window: the three glittering veils—crimson, indigo, luminous green, the colours swarming over one another in two-metre curtains of light—that stood fluttering outside the cottage for hours. Eventually he saw them surrounding the food-store; when he looked through the trap, the store had been replenished.

He'd tried to communicate with them, shouting in the close silence of the cottage, gesturing. But the only response he ever got was another, more complicated puzzle or game; the cottage was full of them. (They) never entered the cottage while he was awake, however hard he fought sleep. They simply weren't interested in what he had to say. They'd attempted to provide what they thought was a familiar environment; they gave him food that looked like the food in his book, they pumped something like the ferry's air through a valve in the wall above the staircase; often they

watched him for hours. But they didn't think he was so important; they went away somewhere, leaving him at the mercy of the planet's wildlife. The faceless egg stood on the stalk of its neck.

He didn't need them to protect him, he thought furiously. He could easily outdistance the thing. It was too slow to trap him, he would outmanoeuvre it all over the cottage, until it became frustrated and went away. He was sure it must be stupid as well as slow; no doubt it wouldn't think to use the empty doorways, it would retard itself further by seeping through the walls.

But it was unnerving. Though he knew he wasn't in danger he found himself unable to look away from the thing. The fascination infuriated him, he felt helplessly resentful; as long as it was in the cottage the thing would distract him from the peace he'd achieved.

He watched the thing enter the cottage. Gradually the outline, hardly more than a misty silhouette, began to round, to fill out. Beyond the window the original shape was suddenly empty air. Now the shape that stained the glass and the wall was fading. The thing in the room swelled darker, opaque now. When the outline in the wall drained completely, he knew the thing was full. It stood next to a low flowered couch. It was in the room with him, little more than a metre away.

For a moment there was nothing between him and terror. The thing stood glistening, dull blue; its bald featureless head almost touched the beams. Close up the thing looked slick and oily. He felt a nervous horror of touching it, of feeling the swollen glistening skin.

Never mind. It couldn't touch him. It was wasting its time, he reassured himself as he saw—with a snigger as much of unease as of mirth—that while entering, it had begun to poise itself to catch him: the head was stooping forward on the neck, and at the top of the egg an orifice was puckering. Within the orifice he could make out rows of fangs, pointing inward. They didn't look like the teeth of a vegetarian. They wouldn't touch him. He could soon be calm.

All he need do was measure the thing's speed. Then he would be able to ignore its impotent menace. He watched the thing creep forward toward him. To reach the window it had moved at a rate of about ten centimetres to the hour. There was no reason to suppose it would move faster now. No reason to suppose so—but it had doubled its speed.

He glared at his chronometer. It never lied, but neither did his eyes in judging distances. The thing had advanced ten centimetres toward him in half an hour. Perhaps the nearness of its prey gave it the impetus. The head had stooped a fraction more, the mouth had opened further, imperceptibly.

He could still stay out of its reach without trying. It couldn't double its speed indefinitely. It couldn't. In half an hour he knew he was right; it had moved only ten centimetres. He snarled at it, at its fatuous empty face, its trailing tail. It didn't frighten him. It just annoyed him. He wished he could block it off so that he needn't look at it.

Block it off. Yes. He might not be able to hide the thing away, but at least he could slow it down further; perhaps then, happily triumphant, he could ignore it. He carried one of the games down from the second bedroom. It was a cubical maze, as high as his waist. He thumped it down in the thing's path. It wouldn't get through that in a hurry.

He forced himself to leave the thing for a while. He gazed out of his bedroom window. The white sunlight bared the landscape, the gleaming metallic corrugations of rock. At the horizon the sky was bright silver. Were there more of the things out there? Oddly, he found himself almost welcoming the notion. At least it made the landscape feel less barren, now the sparkling coloured veils were gone.

He made himself wait for an hour, then went downstairs. The thing had reached the block; a shadow of its tail was seeping into the far face of the cube. Three hours later, when he returned again, two pale silhouettes confronted each other patiently across the cube. Before he went to bed the thing hung half-embedded in the cube, looking exactly like a retarded Jack-in-the-box. He couldn't control his laughter. He wondered whether he might grow fond of the thing. It was beginning to amuse him, in its ugly stupid way.

He lay on the glowing bed. He must be sure to lure the thing into one of the downstairs rooms each evening—never to allow it to reach the hall late in the day, where it could begin coming upstairs while he slept. As the room dimmed slowly, he visualised the layout of the cottage. No, he would never be trapped. He could always keep at least one wall between him and the thing, if he felt he needed to.

He let his breathing carry him down into himself. He remembered the green day, the hills multiplying green to the horizon. For a while, when he'd

found himself in the cottage's parody of Old Earth, that memory had seemed flat, false as the cottage's clock—he was sure the clock was empty inside, or solid. The green of his remembered hills had been metallic, not like Old Earth's at all.

But now the green of the metal hills seemed to lead him back further. Perhaps it was inherited memory, perhaps it was only the book: but for a moment the green was the swaying of grass, which he'd never seen. The swaying was peaceful, was sleep.

He awoke refreshed, feeling as if he'd slept for days. The room was dazzling with light. Too dazzling. He twisted round; the white sun stood at the centre of the window. He had overslept.

At once he remembered the thing. He glanced warily toward the doorway, glad (they) had omitted the doors. The landing was empty. He rose hastily, hardly glancing at his clothes beside the bed—he never wore them now, the cottage was too hot. He hurried across the landing. His gasp of shock was the only sound in the cottage.

The thing was waiting for him on the staircase, on the third stair up. The egg had stooped further; if it reached him, it would be on a level with his head—the mouth would, and the mouth had gaped wider now, a fanged ridged hole as wide as his fist.

Did it move faster at night? Had he slept for days? The questions tumbled about in his mind, but his panic was ahead of them. He mustn't be trapped upstairs, there was a nightmare in that somewhere. He mustn't be cut off from food. He climbed over the banisters, hung by his fingertips from the edge of the landing, let himself fall.

Too fast! He hadn't time to bend his knees; the fall jarred his ankles painfully. Panic must be blocking his responses somehow. Well it was only a four metre drop; it hadn't killed him. The thing was already backing downstairs toward him. Its averted head wobbled on the thin neck, as if about to turn.

It was moving faster. It was going to overtake him. But he forced himself to time it. The chronometer insisted the thing was still restricted to twenty centimetres an hour. It must be his fear that had lent it the seeming of speed.

He hurried into the kitchen. He felt as if he were trying to run through the marsh of a nightmare. Each step seemed slower than the last. He'd grown

unused to panic. He must reach deep into himself for calm, otherwise the situation would overcome him. But first, food. He reached into the trap and took the plate.

Though he knew he should carry the plate across the hall, to manoeuvre further out of reach of the thing, his panic seemed to have exhausted him; he had to make an effort even to cross to the kitchen table. The surface of the table gave like elastic beneath his elbows.

He must time the thing tonight. If it moved faster at night, he could block its path effectively. But if it could somehow make him oversleep—He ate sluggishly, irritably, staring nervously at the blank wall of the kitchen for the thing's outline. He ate, he ate. How much time it took.

He was still eating when the thing glided into the kitchen doorway and stood waiting, head lowered, mouth almost as wide as his head.

His panic burst, flooding him. Then almost at once he felt very calm. So the thing could move faster, but only did so when he wasn't watching. And it must have learned that it could move more quickly through space than through walls. It wasn't as stupid as he'd thought.

But he was still faster. If it could have moved as fast as he, it would have been able to catch him by now. He would always outdistance it. Except that it wasn't pursuing him now, it seemed content to block the doorway.

He laughed out loud. It had trapped him with the food, trapped him in the one place he couldn't have afforded to be blocked from. He could live in here if he had to. There were games and chairs in the kitchen, they would slow the thing down while he slept. Did it expect him to walk over and stuff his head into its mouth? What could it gain by standing there?

Well, let it stand. He felt calm, unnaturally so. He ate slowly—no hurry, the thing was two metres distant. Chew, chew. Chew. His jaws were racing the sun, which had nearly reached the horizon.

When he realised what that meant he felt himself become slowly, slowly cold. He hardly needed to consult his chronometer. Even to raise his wrist toward his face, and turn it to be read, took minutes. At once—although even the thought seemed to drift very slowly into focus—he knew that the thing wouldn't move from the doorway until he was slower than it was.

So that was how it caught its prey. Well, it wouldn't catch him, he would block it. But in the time it took him to rise from his chair the sun sank

beneath the horizon. There was no use pretending; he was caught. Time surrounded him thickly, like amber.

Night gathered, and the room began to glow. Beneath his hands the table yielded treacherously, glowing. The walls glimmered grey; the glow shone faintly on the figure waiting in the doorway. The mouth was ready for his head now. The faceless egg was hardly more than a thin stretched frame for the dim fanged tunnel.

He began to writhe frantically within himself, within his stopped body. All he managed was a scream, and even that seemed weak; he tried to make it louder, rawer, but it sank into the silence. Darkness was seeping into the dim glow now. He heard the oppressive silence of the cottage, of the dead clock. He heard his slow harsh breathing, each breath slower than the last. The thing waited near him in the dark, mouth ready.

He heard his breathing. And he knew that the thing hadn't quite trapped him. He couldn't move, but he could still escape.

Perhaps the calm he'd felt before had been false, part of the thing's preying. It didn't matter. He could use that too, to take him to his own peace. He made himself relax, to sink into the green day, the green hills.

The day had gone. There was nothing but the mouth, waiting for him in the darkness. He wouldn't know when it was coming closer, not until it reached him. It might be coming now.

He struggled wildly, feebly within himself, within the dark. At last he gave up, exhausted. That wasn't the way. He couldn't reach for the memory, for escape, it was in him already. He must let it come to him. Listen to his breathing. His slow breathing. Become his breathing, slow. Become all of himself. There was green in the dark, in his mind. There were the hills.

He lay calm, cradled in his breathing. His arrested body stood hunched over the table, but it didn't matter. In a moment the green would begin to sway slowly in the wind, the wind of Old Earth. He knew Old Earth was there at his centre, inherited. He must be aware only of his breathing. The darkness didn't matter. His breathing would take him to his centre. His breathing was slow as the swaying of the leaves.

The Chimney

"Winner of the 1978 World Fantasy Award for best short story."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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Maybe most of it was only fear. But not the last thing, not that. To blame my fear for that would be worst of all.

I was twelve years old and beginning to conquer my fears. I even went upstairs to do my homework, and managed to ignore the chimney. I had to be brave, because of my parents—because of my mother.

She had always been afraid for me. The very first day I had gone to school I'd seen her watching. Her expression had reminded me of the face of a girl I'd glimpsed on television, watching men lock her husband behind bars; I was frightened all that first day. And when children had hysterics or began to bully me, or the teacher lost her temper, these things only confirmed my fears—and my mother's, when I told her what had happened each day.

Now I was at grammar school. I had been there for much of a year. I'd felt awkward in my new uniform and old shoes; the building seemed enormous, crowded with too many strange children and teachers. I'd felt I was an outsider; friendly approaches made me nervous and sullen, when people laughed and I didn't know why I was sure they were laughing at me. After a while the other boys treated me as I seemed to want to be treated: the lads from the poorer districts mocked my suburban accent, the suburban boys sneered at my shoes.

Often I'd sat praying that the teacher wouldn't ask me a question I couldn't answer, sat paralysed by my dread of having to stand up in the waiting watchful silence. If a teacher shouted at someone my heart jumped painfully; once I'd felt the stain of my shock creeping insidiously down my thigh. Yet I did well in the end-of-term examinations, because I was terrified of failing; for nights afterwards they were another reason why I couldn't sleep.

My mother read the signs of all this on my face. More and more, once I'd told her what was wrong, I had to persuade her there was nothing worse that I'd kept back. Some mornings as I lay in bed, trying to hold back half past seven, I'd be sick; I would grope miserably downstairs, white-faced, and my mother would keep me home. Once or twice, when my fear wasn't quite enough, I made myself sick. "Look at him. You can't expect him to go like that"—but my father would only shake his head and grunt, dismissing us both.

I knew my father found me embarrassing. This year he'd had less time for me than usual; his shop—The Anything Shop, nearby in the suburbanised village—failing to compete with the new supermarket. But before that trouble I'd often seen him staring up at my mother and me: both of us taller than him, his eyes said, yet both scared of our own shadows. At those times I glimpsed his despair.

So my parents weren't reassuring. Yet at night I tried to stay with them as long as I could—for my worst fears were upstairs, in my room.

It was a large room, two rooms knocked into one by the previous owner. It overlooked the small back gardens. The smaller of the fireplaces had been bricked up; in winter, the larger held a fire, which my mother always feared would set fire to the room—but she let it alone, for I'd screamed when I thought she was going to take that light away: even though the firelight only added to the terrors of the room.

The shadows moved things. The mesh of the fireguard fluttered enlarged on the wall; sometimes, at the edge of sleep, it became a swaying web, and its spinner came sidling down from a corner of the ceiling. Everything was unstable; walls shifted, my clothes crawled on the back of the chair. Once, when I'd left my jacket slumped over the chair, the collar's dark upturned lack of a face began to nod forward stealthily; the holes at the ends of the sleeves worked like mouths, and I didn't dare get up to hang the jacket properly. The room grew in the dark: sounds outside, footsteps and laughter, dogs encouraging each other to bark, only emphasised the size of my trap of darkness, how distant everything else was. And there was a dimmer room, in the mirror of the wardrobe beyond the foot of the bed. There was a bed in that room, and beside it a dim nightlight in a plastic lantern. Once I'd wakened to see a face staring dimly at me from the mirror; a figure had sat

up when I had, and I'd almost cried out. Often I'd stared at the dim staring face, until I'd had to hide beneath the sheets.

Of course this couldn't go on for the rest of my life. On my twelfth birthday I set about the conquest of my room.

I was happy amid my presents. I had a jigsaw, a box of coloured pencils, a book of space stories. They had come from my father's shop, but they were mine now. Because I was relaxed, no doubt because she wished I could always be so, my mother said "Would you be happier if you went to another school?" It was Saturday; I wanted to forget Monday. Besides, I imagined all schools were as frightening. "No, I'm all right," I said.

"Are you happy at school now?" she said incredulously.

"Yes, it's all right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, really, it's all right. I mean, I'm happy now."

The snap of the letter-slot saved me from further lying. Three birthday cards: two from neighbours who talked to me when I served them in the shop—an old lady who always carried a poodle, our next-door neighbour Dr Flynn—and a card from my parents. I'd seen all three cards in the shop, which spoilt them somehow.

As I stood in the hall I heard my father. "You've got to control yourself," he was saying. "You only upset the child. If you didn't go on at him he wouldn't be half so bad."

It infuriated me to be called a child. "But I worry so," my mother said brokenly. "He can't look after himself."

"You don't let him try. You'll have him afraid to go up to bed next."

But I already was. Was that my mother's fault? I remembered her putting the nightlight by my bed when I was very young, checking the flex and the bulb each night—I'd taken to lying awake, dreading that one or the other would fail. Standing in the hall, I saw dimly that my mother and I encouraged each other's fears. One of us had to stop. I had to stop. Even when I was frightened, I mustn't let her see. It wouldn't be the first time I'd hidden my feelings from her. In the living room I said "I'm going upstairs to play."

Sometimes in the summer I didn't mind playing there—but this was March, and a dark day. Still, I could switch the light on. And my room contained the only table I could have to myself and my jigsaw.

I spilled the jigsaw onto the table. The chair sat with its back to the dark yawn of the fireplace; I moved it hastily to the foot of the bed, facing the door. I spread the jigsaw. There was a piece of the edge, another. By lunchtime I'd assembled the edge. "You look pleased with yourself," my father said.

I didn't notice the approach of night. I was fitting together my own blue sky, above fragmented cottages. After dinner I hurried to put in the pieces I'd placed mentally while eating. I hesitated outside my room. I should have to reach into the dark for the light switch. When I did, the wallpaper filled with bright multiplied aeroplanes and engines. I wished we could afford to redecorate my room, it seemed childish now.

The fireplace gaped. I retrieved the fireguard from the cupboard under the stairs, where my father had stored it now the nights were a little warmer. It covered the soot-encrusted yawn. The room felt comfortable now. I'd never seen before how much space it gave me for play.

I even felt safe in bed. I switched out the nightlight—but that was too much; I grabbed the light. I didn't mind its glow on its own, without the jagged lurid jig of the shadows. And the fireguard was comforting. It made me feel that nothing could emerge from the chimney.

On Monday I took my space stories to school. People asked to look at them; eventually they lent me books. In the following weeks some of my fears began to fade. Questions darting from desk to desk still made me uneasy, but if I had to stand up without the answer at least I knew the other boys weren't sneering at me, not all of them; I was beginning to have friends. I started to sympathise with their own ignorant silences. In the July examinations I was more relaxed, and scored more marks. I was even sorry to leave my friends for the summer; I invited some of them home.

I felt triumphant. I'd calmed my mother and my room all by myself, just by realising what had to be done. I suppose that sense of triumph helped me. It must have given me a little strength with which to face the real terror.

It was early August, the week before our holiday. My mother was worrying over the luggage, my father was trying to calculate his accounts; they were

beginning to chafe against each other. I went to my room, to stay out of their way.

I was halfway through a jigsaw, which one of my friends had swapped for mine. People sat in back gardens, letting the evening settle on them; between the houses the sky was pale yellow. I inserted pieces easily, relaxed by the nearness of our holiday. I listened to the slowing of the city, a radio fluttering along a street, something moving behind the fireguard, in the chimney.

No. It was my mother in the next room, moving luggage. It was someone dragging, dragging something, anything, outside. But I couldn't deceive my ears. In the chimney something large had moved.

It might have been a bird, stunned or dying, struggling feebly—except that a bird would have sounded wilder. It could have been a mouse, even a rat, if such things are found in chimneys. But it sounded like a large body, groping stealthily in the dark: something large that didn't want me to hear it. It sounded like the worst terror of my infancy.

I'd almost forgotten that. When I was three years old my mother had let me watch television; it was bad for my eyes, but just this once, near Christmas... I'd seen two children asleep in bed, an enormous crimson man emerging from the fireplace, creeping towards them. They weren't going to wake up! "Burglar! Burglar!" I'd screamed, beginning to cry. "No, dear, it's Father Christmas," my mother said, hastily switching off the television. "He always comes out of the chimney."

Perhaps if she'd said "down" rather than "out of"... For months after that, and in the weeks before several Christmases, I lay awake listening fearfully for movement in the chimney: I was sure a fat grinning figure would creep upon me if I slept. My mother had told me the presents that appeared at the end of my bed were left by Father Christmas, but now the mysterious visitor had a face and a huge body, squeezed into the dark chimney among the soot. When I heard the wind breathing in the chimney I had to trap my screams between my lips.

Of course at last I began to suspect there was no Father Christmas: how did he manage to steal into my father's shop for my presents? He was a childish idea, I was almost sure—but I was too embarrassed to ask my parents or my friends. But I wanted not to believe in him, that silent lurker in the chimney;

and now I didn't, not really. Except that something large was moving softly behind the fireguard.

It had stopped. I stared at the wire mesh, half expecting a fat pale face to stare out of the grate. There was nothing but the fenced dark. Cats were moaning in a garden, an ice-cream van wandered brightly. After a while I forced myself to pull the fireguard away.

I was taller than the fireplace now. But I had to stoop to peer up the dark soot-ridged throat, and then it loomed over me, darkness full of menace, of the threat of a huge figure bursting out at me, its red mouth crammed with sparkling teeth. As I peered up, trembling a little, and tried to persuade myself that what I'd heard had flown away or scurried back into its hole, soot came trickling down from the dark—and I heard the sound of a huge body squeezed into the sooty passage, settling itself carefully, more comfortably in its burrow.

I slammed the guard into place, and fled. I had to gulp to breathe. I ran onto the landing, trying to catch my breath so as to cry for help. Downstairs my mother was nervously asking whether she should pack another of my father's shirts. "Yes, if you like," he said irritably.

No, I mustn't cry out. I'd vowed not to upset her. But how could I go back into my room? Suddenly I had a thought that seemed to help. At school we'd learned how sweeps had used to send small boys up chimneys. There had hardly been room for the boys to climb. How could a large man fit in there?

He couldn't. Gradually I managed to persuade myself. At last I opened the door of my room. The chimney was silent; there was no wind. I tried not to think that he was holding himself still, waiting to squeeze out stealthily, waiting for the dark. Later, lying in the steady glow from my plastic lantern, I tried to hold on to the silence, tried to believe there was nothing near me to shatter it. There was nothing except, eventually, sleep.

Perhaps if I'd cried out on the landing I would have been saved from my fear. But I was happy with my rationality. Only once, nearly asleep, I wished the fire were lit, because it would burn anything that might be hiding in the chimney; that had never occurred to me before. But it didn't matter, for the next day we went on holiday.

My parents liked to sleep in the sunlight, beneath newspaper masks; in the evenings they liked to stroll along the wide sandy streets. I didn't, and befriended Nigel, the son of another family who were staying in the boardinghouse. My mother encouraged the friendship: such a nice boy, two years older than me; he'd look after me. He had money, and the hope of a moustache shadowing his pimply upper lip. One evening he took me to the fairground, where we met two girls; he and the older girl went to buy ice creams while her young friend and I stared at each other timidly. I couldn't believe the young girl didn't like jigsaws. Later, while I was contradicting her, Nigel and his companion disappeared behind the Ghost Train—but Nigel reappeared almost at once, red-faced, his left cheek redder. "Where's Rose?" I asked, bewildered.

"She had to go." He seemed furious that I'd asked.

"Isn't she coming back?"

"No." He was glancing irritably about for a change of subject. "What a super bike," he said, pointing as it glided between the stalls. "Have you got a bike?"

"No," I said. "I keep asking Father Christmas, but—" I wished that hadn't got past me, for he was staring at me, winking at the young girl.

"Do you still believe in him?" he demanded scornfully.

"No, of course I don't. I was only kidding." Did he believe me? He was edging towards the young girl now, putting his arm around her; soon she excused herself, and didn't come back—I never knew her name. I was annoyed he'd made her run away. "Where did Rose go?" I said persistently.

He didn't tell me. But perhaps he resented my insistence, for as the family left the boarding-house I heard him say loudly to his mother "He still believes in Father Christmas." My mother heard that too, and glanced anxiously at me.

Well, I didn't. There was nobody in the chimney, waiting for me to come home. I didn't care that we were going home the next day. That night I pulled away the fireguard and saw a fat pale face hanging down into the fireplace, like an underbelly, upside-down and smiling. But I managed to wake, and eventually the sea lulled me back to sleep. As soon as we reached home I ran upstairs. I uncovered the fireplace and stood staring, to discover what I felt. Gradually I filled with the scorn Nigel would have felt, had he

known of my fear. How could I have been so childish? The chimney was only a passage for smoke, a hole into which the wind wandered sometimes. That night, exhausted by the journey home, I slept at once.

The nights darkened into October; the darkness behind the mesh grew thicker. I'd used to feel, as summer waned, that the chimney was insinuating its darkness into my room. Now the sight only reminded me I'd have a fire soon. The fire would be comforting.

It was October when my father's Christmas cards arrived, on a Saturday; I was working in the shop. It annoyed him to have to anticipate Christmas so much, to compete with the supermarket. I hardly noticed the cards: my head felt muffled, my body cold—perhaps it was the weather's sudden hint of winter.

My mother came into the shop that afternoon. I watched her pretend not to have seen the cards. When I looked away she began to pick them up timidly, as if they were unfaithful letters, glancing anxiously at me. I didn't know what was in her mind. My head was throbbing. I wasn't going home sick. I earned pocket money in the shop. Besides, I didn't want my father to think I was still weak.

Nor did I want my mother to worry. That night I lay slumped in a chair, pretending to read. Words trickled down the page; I felt like dirty clothes someone had thrown on the chair. My father was at the shop taking stock. My mother sat gazing at me. I pretended harder; the words waltzed slowly. At last she said "Are you listening?"

I was now, though I didn't look up. "Yes," I said hoarsely, unplugging my throat with a roar.

"Do you remember when you were a baby? There was a film you saw, of Father Christmas coming out of the chimney." Her voice sounded bravely careless, falsely light, as if she were determined to make some awful revelation. I couldn't look up. "Yes," I said.

Her silence made me glance up. She looked as she had on my first day at school: full of loss, of despair. Perhaps she was realising I had to grow up, but to my throbbing head her look suggested only terror—as if she were about to deliver me up as a sacrifice. "I couldn't tell you the truth then," she said. "You were too young."

The truth was terror; her expression promised that. "Father Christmas isn't really like that," she said. My illness must have shown by then. She gazed at me; her lips trembled. "I can't," she said, turning her face away. "Your father must tell you."

But that left me poised on the edge of terror. I felt unnerved, rustily tense. I wanted very much to lie down. "I'm going to my room," I said. I stumbled upstairs, hardly aware of doing so. As much as anything I was fleeing her unease. The stairs swayed a little, they felt unnaturally soft underfoot. I hurried dully into my room. I slapped the light switch and missed. I was walking uncontrollably forward into blinding dark. A figure came to meet me, soft and huge in the dark of my room.

I cried out. I managed to stagger back onto the landing, grabbing the light switch as I went. The lighted room was empty. My mother came running upstairs, almost falling. "What is it, what is it?" she cried.

I mustn't say. "I'm ill. I feel sick." I did, and a minute later I was. She patted my back as I knelt by the toilet. When she'd put me to bed she made to go next door, for the doctor. "Don't leave me," I pleaded. The walls of the room swayed as if tugged by firelight, the fireplace was huge and very dark. As soon as my father opened the door she ran downstairs, crying "He's ill, he's ill! Go for the doctor!"

The doctor came and prescribed for my fever. My mother sat up beside me. Eventually my father came to suggest it was time she went to bed. They were going to leave me alone in my room. "Make a fire," I pleaded.

My mother touched my forehead. "But you're burning," she said.

"No, I'm cold! I want a fire! Please!" So she made one, tired as she was. I saw my father's disgust as he watched me use her worry against her to get what I wanted, his disgust with her for letting herself be used.

I didn't care. My mother's halting words had overgrown my mind. What had she been unable to tell me? Had it to do with the sounds I'd heard in the chimney? The room lolled around me; nothing was sure. But the fire would make sure for me. Nothing in the chimney could survive it.

I made my mother stay until the fire was blazing. Suppose a huge shape burst forth from the hearth, dripping fire? When at last I let go I lay lapped by the firelight and meshy shadows, which seemed lulling now, in my warm room.

I felt feverish, but not unpleasantly. I was content to voyage on my rocking bed; the ceiling swayed past above me. While I slept the fire went out. My fever kept me warm; I slid out of bed and, pulling away the fireguard, reached up the chimney. At the length of my arms I touched something heavy, hanging down in the dark; it yielded, then soft fat fingers groped down and closed on my wrist. My mother was holding my wrist as she washed my hands. "You mustn't get out of bed," she said when she realised I was awake.

I stared stupidly at her. "You'd got out of bed. You were sleepwalking," she explained. "You had your hands right up the chimney." I saw now that she was washing caked soot from my hands; tracks of ash led towards the bed.

It had been only a dream. One moment the fat hand had been gripping my wrist, the next it was my mother's cool slim fingers. My mother played word games and timid chess with me while I stayed in bed, that day and the next.

The third night I felt better. The fire fluttered gently; I felt comfortably warm. Tomorrow I'd get up. I should have to go back to school soon, but I didn't mind that unduly. I lay and listened to the breathing of the wind in the chimney.

When I awoke the fire had gone out. The room was full of darkness. The wind still breathed, but it seemed somehow closer. It was above me. Someone was standing over me. It couldn't be either of my parents, not in the sightless darkness.

I lay rigid. Most of all I wished that I hadn't let Nigel's imagined contempt persuade me to do without a nightlight. The breathing was slow, irregular; it sounded clogged and feeble. As I tried to inch silently towards the far side of the bed, the source of the breathing stooped towards me. I felt its breath waver on my face, and the breath sprinkled me with something like dry rain.

When I had lain paralysed for what felt like blind hours, the breathing went away. It was in the chimney, dislodging soot; it might be the wind. But I knew it had come out to let me know that whatever the fire had done to it, it hadn't been killed. It had emerged to tell me it would come for me on Christmas Eve. I began to scream.

I wouldn't tell my mother why. She washed my face, which was freckled with soot. "You've been sleepwalking again," she tried to reassure me, but I wouldn't let her leave me until daylight. When she'd gone I saw the ashy tracks leading from the chimney to the bed.

Perhaps I had been sleepwalking and dreaming. I searched vainly for my nightlight. I would have been ashamed to ask for a new one, and that helped me to feel I could do without. At dinner I felt secure enough to say I didn't know why I had screamed.

"But you must remember. You sounded so frightened. You upset me."

My father was folding the evening paper into a thick wad the size of a pocketbook, which he could read beside his plate. "Leave the boy alone," he said. "You imagine all sorts of things when you're feverish. I did when I was his age."

It was the first time he'd admitted anything like weakness to me. If he'd managed to survive his nightmares, why should mine disturb me more? Tired out by the demands of my fever, I slept soundly that night. The chimney was silent except for the flapping of flames.

But my father didn't help me again. One November afternoon I was standing behind the counter, hoping for customers. My father pottered, grumpily fingering packets of nylons, tins of pet food, Dinky toys, babies' rattles, cards, searching for signs of theft. Suddenly he snatched a Christmas card and strode to the counter. "Sit down," he said grimly.

He was waving the card at me, like evidence. I sat down on a shelf, but then a lady came into the shop; the bell thumped. I stood up to sell her nylons. When she'd gone I gazed at my father, anxious to hear the worst. "Just sit down," he said.

He couldn't stand my being taller than he was. His size embarrassed him, but he wouldn't let me see that; he pretended I had to sit down out of respect. "Your mother says she tried to tell you about Father Christmas," he said.

She must have told him that weeks earlier. He'd put off talking to me—because we'd never been close, and now we were growing further apart. "I don't know why she couldn't tell you," he said.

But he wasn't telling me either. He was looking at me as if I were a stranger he had to chat to. I felt uneasy, unsure now that I wanted to hear

what he had to say. A man was approaching the shop. I stood up, hoping he'd interrupt.

He did, and I served him. Then, to delay my father's revelation, I adjusted stacks of tins. My father stared at me in disgust. "If you don't watch out you'll be as bad as your mother."

I found the idea of being like my mother strange, indefinably disturbing. But he wouldn't let me be like him, wouldn't let me near. All right, I'd be brave, I'd listen to what he had to say. But he said "Oh, it's not worth me trying to tell you. You'll find out."

He meant I must find out for myself that Father Christmas was a childish fantasy. He didn't mean he wanted the thing from the chimney to come for me, the disgust in his eyes didn't mean that, it didn't. He meant that I had to behave like a man.

And I could. I'd show him. The chimney was silent. I needn't worry until Christmas Eve. Nor then. There was nothing to come out.

One evening as I walked home I saw Dr Flynn in his front room. He was standing before a mirror, gazing at his red fur-trimmed hooded suit; he stooped to pick up his beard. My mother told me that he was going to act Father Christmas at the children's hospital. She seemed on the whole glad that I'd seen. So was I: it proved the pretence was only for children.

Except that the glimpse reminded me how near Christmas was. As the nights closed on the days, and the days rushed by—the end-of-term party, the turkey, decorations in the house—I grew tense, trying to prepare myself. For what? For nothing, nothing at all. Well, I would know soon—for suddenly it was Christmas Eve.

I was busy all day. I washed up as my mother prepared Christmas dinner. I brought her ingredients, and hurried to buy some she'd used up. I stuck the day's cards to tapes above the mantelpiece. I carried home a tinsel tree which nobody had bought. But being busy only made the day move faster. Before I knew it the windows were full of night.

Christmas Eve. Well, it didn't worry me. I was too old for that sort of thing. The tinsel tree rustled when anyone passed it, light rolled in tinsel globes, streamers flinched back when doors opened. Whenever I glanced at the wall above the mantelpiece I saw half a dozen red-cheeked smiling bearded faces swinging restlessly on tapes.

The night piled against the windows. I chattered to my mother about her shouting father, her elder sisters, the time her sisters had locked her in a cellar. My father grunted occasionally—even when I'd run out of subjects to discuss with my mother, and tried to talk to him about the shop. At least he hadn't noticed how late I was staying up. But he had. "It's about time everyone was in bed," he said with a kind of suppressed fury.

"Can I have some more coal?" My mother would never let me have a coalscuttle in the bedroom—she didn't want me going near the fire. "To put on now," I said. Surely she must say yes. "It'll be cold in the morning," I said.

"Yes, you take some. You don't want to be cold when you're looking at what Father—at your presents."

I hurried upstairs with the scuttle. Over its clatter I heard my father say "Are you still at that? Can't you let him grow up?"

I almost emptied the scuttle into the fire, which rose roaring and crackling. My father's voice was an angry mumble, seeping through the floor. When I carried the scuttle down my mother's eyes were red, my father looked furiously determined. I'd always found their arguments frightening; I was glad to hurry to my room.

It seemed welcoming. The fire was bright within the mesh. I heard my mother come upstairs. That was comforting too: she was nearer now. I heard my father go next door—to wish the doctor Happy Christmas, I supposed. I didn't mind the reminder. There was nothing of Christmas Eve in my room, except the pillowcase on the floor at the foot of the bed. I pushed it aside with one foot, the better to ignore it.

I slid into bed. My father came upstairs; I heard further mumblings of argument through the bedroom wall. At last they stopped, and I tried to relax. I lay, glad of the silence.

A wind was rushing the house. It puffed down the chimney; smoke trickled through the fireguard. Now the wind was breathing brokenly. It was only the wind. It didn't bother me.

Perhaps I'd put too much coal on the fire. The room was hot; I was sweating. I felt almost feverish. The huge mesh flicked over the wall repeatedly, nervously, like a rapid net. Within the mirror the dimmer room danced.

Suddenly I was a little afraid. Not that something would come out of the chimney, that was stupid: afraid that my feeling of fever would make me delirious again. It seemed years since I'd been disturbed by the sight of the room in the mirror, but I was disturbed now. There was something wrong with that dim jerking room.

The wind breathed. Only the wind, I couldn't hear it changing. A fat billow of smoke squeezed through the mesh. The room seemed more oppressive now, and smelled of smoke. It didn't smell entirely like coal smoke, but I couldn't tell what else was burning. I didn't want to get up to find out.

I must lie still. Otherwise I'd be writhing about trying to clutch at sleep, as I had the second night of my fever, and sometimes in summer. I must sleep before the room grew too hot. I must keep my eyes shut. I mustn't be distracted by the faint trickling of soot, nor the panting of the wind, nor the shadows and orange light that snatched at my eyes through my eyelids.

I woke in darkness. The fire had gone out. No, it was still there when I opened my eyes: subdued orange crawled on embers, a few weak flames leapt repetitively. The room was moving more slowly now. The dim room in the mirror, the face peering out at me, jerked faintly, as if almost dead.

I couldn't look at that. I slid further down the bed, dragging the pillow into my nest. I was too hot, but at least beneath the sheets I felt safe. I began to relax. Then I realised what I'd seen. The light had been dim, but I was almost sure the fireguard was standing away from the hearth.

I must have mistaken that, in the dim light. I wasn't feverish, I couldn't have sleepwalked again. There was no need for me to look, I was comfortable. But I was beginning to admit that I had better look when I heard the slithering in the chimney. Something large was coming down. A fall of soot: I could hear the scattering pats of soot in the grate, thrown down by the harsh halting wind. But the wind was emerging from the fireplace, into the room. It was above me, panting through its obstructed throat.

I lay staring up at the mask of my sheets. I trembled from holding myself immobile. My held breath filled me painfully as lumps of rock. I had only to lie there until whatever was above me went away. It couldn't touch me.

The clogged breath bent nearer; I could hear its dry rattling. Then something began to fumble at the sheets over my face. It plucked feebly at

them, trying to grasp them, as if it had hardly anything to grasp with. My own hands clutched at the sheets from within, but couldn't hold them down entirely. The sheets were being tugged from me, a fraction at a time. Soon I would be face to face with my visitor.

I was lying there with my eyes squeezed tight when it let go of the sheets and went away. My throbbing lungs had forced me to take shallow breaths; now I breathed silently open-mouthed, though that filled my mouth with fluff. The tolling of my ears subsided, and I realised the thing had not returned to the chimney. It was still in the room.

I couldn't hear its breathing; it couldn't be near me. Only that thought allowed me to look—that, and the desperate hope that I might escape, since it moved so slowly. I peeled the sheets down from my face slowly, stealthily, until my eyes were bare. My heartbeats shook me. In the sluggishly shifting light I saw a figure at the foot of the bed.

Its red costume was thickly furred with soot. It had its back to me; its breathing was muffled by the hood. What shocked me most was its size. It occurred to me, somewhere amid my engulfing terror, that burning shrivels things. The figure stood in the mirror as well, in the dim twitching room. A face peered out of the hood in the mirror, like a charred turnip carved with a rigid grin.

The stunted figure was still moving painfully. It edged round the foot of the bed and stooped to my pillowcase. I saw it draw the pillowcase up over itself and sink down. As it sank its hood fell back, and I saw the charred turnip roll about in the hood, as if there were almost nothing left to support it.

I should have had to pass the pillowcase to reach the door. I couldn't move. The room seemed enormous, and was growing darker; my parents were far away. At last I managed to drag the sheets over my face, and pulled the pillow, like muffs, around my ears.

I had lain sleeplessly for hours when I heard a movement at the foot of the bed. The thing had got out of its sack again. It was coming towards me. It was tugging at the sheets, more strongly now. Before I could catch hold of the sheets I glimpsed a red fur-trimmed sleeve, and was screaming.

"Let go, will you," my father said irritably. "Good God, it's only me."

He was wearing Dr Flynn's disguise, which flapped about him—the jacket, at least; his pyjama cuffs peeked beneath it. I stopped screaming and began to giggle hysterically. I think he would have struck me, but my mother ran in. "It's all right. All right," she reassured me, and explained to him "It's the shock."

He was making angrily for the door when she said "Oh, don't go yet, Albert. Stay while he opens his presents," and, lifting the bulging pillowcase from the floor, dumped it beside me.

I couldn't push it away, I couldn't let her see my terror. I made myself pull out my presents into the daylight, books, sweets, ballpoints; as I groped deeper I wondered whether the charred face would crumble when I touched it. Sweat pricked my hands; they shook with horror—they could, because my mother couldn't see them.

The pillowcase contained nothing but presents and a pinch of soot. When I was sure it was empty I slumped against the headboard, panting. "He's tired," my mother said, in defence of my ingratitude. "He was up very late last night."

Later I managed an accident, dropping the pillowcase on the fire downstairs. I managed to eat Christmas dinner, and to go to bed that night. I lay awake, even though I was sure nothing would come out of the chimney now. Later I realised why my father had come to my room in the morning dressed like that; he'd intended me to catch him, to cure me of the pretence. But it was many years before I enjoyed Christmas very much.

When I left school I went to work in libraries. Ten years later I married. My wife and I crossed town weekly to visit my parents. My mother chattered, my father was taciturn. I don't think he ever quite forgave me for laughing at him.

One winter night our telephone rang. I answered it, hoping it wasn't the police. My library was then suffering from robberies. All I wanted was to sit before the fire and imagine the glittering cold outside. But it was Dr Flynn.

"Your parents' house is on fire," he told me. "Your father's trapped in there. Your mother needs you."

They'd had a friend to stay. My mother had lit the fire in the guest-room, my old bedroom. A spark had eluded the fireguard; the carpet had caught fire. Impatient for the fire engine, my father had run back into the house to

put the fire out, but had been overcome. All this I learned later. Now I drove coldly across town, towards the glow in the sky. The glow was doused by the time I arrived. Smoke scrolled over the roof. But my mother had found a coal sack and was struggling still to run into the house, to beat the fire; her friend and Dr Flynn held her back. She dropped the sack and ran to me. "Oh, it's your father. It's Albert," she repeated through her weeping.

The firemen withdrew their hose. The ambulance stood winking. I saw the front door open, and a stretcher carried out. The path was wet and frosty. One stretcher-bearer slipped, and the contents of the stretcher spilled over the path.

I saw Dr Flynn glance at my mother. Only the fear that she might turn caused him to act. He grabbed the sack and, running to the path, scooped up what lay scattered there. I saw the charred head roll on the lip of the sack before it dropped within. I had seen that already, years ago.

My mother came to live with us, but we could see she was pining; my parents must have loved each other, in their way. She died a year later. Perhaps I killed them both. I know that what emerged from the chimney was in some sense my father. But surely that was a premonition. Surely my fear could never have reached out to make him die that way.

The Sneering

"As well as addressing its obvious themes of the difficulties of ageing and of the costs of change, *The Sneering* is a somewhat bitter celebration of an area of Liverpool where I once attended school —Ryebank Private School, to be precise, from 1953 to 1957. I remember being ragged on my arrival by some seniors and declaring with what must have been insufferable precociousness that I wouldn't stand for it. 'Sit down for it, then,' one of my tormentors duly responded."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

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When they'd come home the house had looked unreal, dwarfed by the stalks of the streetlamps, which were more than twice as tall as any of the houses that were left. Even the pavement outside had shrunk, chopped in half by the widened roadway. Beneath the blazing orange light the house looked like cardboard, a dolls house; the dark green curtains were black now, as if charred. It didn't look at all like his pride. "Isn't it nice and bright," Emily had said.

Bright! Seen from a quarter of a mile away the lights were ruthlessly dazzling: stark fluorescent stars pinned to the earth, floating in a swath of cold orange light watery as mist. Outside the house the light was at least as bright as day; it was impossible to look at the searing lamps.

Jack lay in bed. The light had kept him awake again, seeping through the curtains, accumulating thickly in the room. The curtains were open now; he could see the lower stretch of a towering metal stalk, gleaming in the July sunlight. Progress. He let out a short breath, a mirthless comment. Progress was what mattered now, not people.

Not that the lights were the worst. There was the incessant jagged chattering and slow howling of machinery: would they never finish the roadworks? They'd finish a damn sight faster if they spent less time idling, telling vulgar jokes and drinking tea. And when the men had sneaked off home there was still the traffic, roaring by past midnight, past one o'clock, carrying the racket of passengers, shouting drunkenly and singing—the drivers too, no doubt: they didn't care, these people. Once or twice he'd leapt out of bed to try to spot the numbers of the cars, but Emily would say

"Oh, leave them. They're only young people." Sometimes he thought she must walk about with her eyes shut.

The machinery was silent. It was Sunday. The day of rest, or so he'd been brought up to believe. But all it meant now was an early start for the cars, gathering speed on the half-mile approach to the motorway: cars packed with ignorant parents and their ill-spoken children, hordes of them from the nearby council estate. At least they would be dropping their litter in the country, instead of outside his house.

He could hear them now, the cars, the constant whirring, racing past only to make way for more. They sounded as if they were in the house. Why couldn't he hear Emily? She'd got up while he was asleep, tired out of wakefulness. Was she making him a pot of tea? It seemed odd that he couldn't hear her.

Still, it was a wonder he could hear anything over the unmannerly din of traffic. The noise had never been so loud before; it filled the house. Suddenly, ominously, he realised why. The front door was open.

Struggling into his dressing-gown, he hurried to the window. Emily was standing outside the shop across the road, peering through the speckled window. She had forgotten it was Sunday.

Well, that was nothing to worry about. Anyone could forget what day it was, with all this noise. It didn't sound like Sunday. He'd best go and meet Emily. It was dim in the pedestrian subway, her walk wasn't always steady now; she might fall. Besides, one never knew what hooligans might be lurking down there.

He dressed hastily, dragging clothes over his limbs. Emily stood hopefully outside the shop. He went downstairs rapidly but warily: his balance wasn't perfect these days. Beneath the hall table with its small vase of flowers, an intruding ball of greasy paper had lodged. He poked it out with one foot and kicked it before him. The road could have it back.

As he emerged he heard a man say "Look at that stupid old cow."

Two men were standing outside his gate. From the man's coarse speech he could tell they were from the estate. They were staring across the road at Emily, almost blocking his view of her. She stood at the edge of the pavement, at a break in the temporary metal fence, waiting for a chance to cross. Her mind was wandering again.

He shoved the men aside. "Who are you frigging pushing?" demanded the one who'd spoken—but Jack was standing on tiptoe at the edge of the traffic, shouting "Emily! Stay there! I'm coming! Emily!"

She couldn't hear him. The traffic whipped his words away, repeatedly shuttered him off from her. She stood peering through a mist that stank of petrol, she made timid advances at gaps in the traffic. She was wearing her blue leaf-patterned dress; gusts from passing cars plucked at it. In her fluttering dress she looked frail as a grey-haired child.

"Stay there, Emily!" He ran to the subway. Outside his gate the two men gaped after him. He clattered down the steps and plunged into the tunnel. The darkness blinded him for a moment, gleaming darkly with graffiti; the chill of the tiled passage touched him. He hurried up the steps on the far side, grabbing the metal rail to quicken his climb. But it was too late. Emily had crossed to the middle of the roadway.

Calling her now would confuse her. There was a lull in the traffic, but she stood on the long concrete island, regaining her breath. Cross now! he willed her desperately. The two men were making to step onto the road. They were going to help the stupid old cow, were they? He ran to the gap in the metal fence. She didn't need them.

She had left the island, and he was running to it, when he saw the car. It came rushing around the curve toward Emily, its wide nose glittering silver. "Emily, watch out!" he shouted.

She turned and stood bewildered in the roadway. The men had seen the car; they retreated to the pavement, gesturing at Emily. "Get back!" they shouted, overlapping, confusing.

He couldn't reach her in time. The car rushed toward her. He saw the driver in his expensive silver-painted frame: young, cocksure, aggressive, well-groomed yet coarse as a workman's hands—everything Jack hated, that threatened him. He should have known it would be such a man that would take Emily from him.

The driver saw Emily, dithering in his path. His side-whiskered face filled with the most vicious hatred Jack had ever seen. He wrenched at the wheel. The car swooped round Emily, coiling her with a thick swelling tentacle of dust. As she stood trembling, one back wheel thudded against the kerb outside the house. The car slewed across the roadway toward the lamp-

standard. Jack glimpsed the hate-filled face in the moment before it became an explosion of blood and glass.

Emily was running aimlessly, frantically, as if her ankles were cuffed together. She staggered dizzily and fell. She lay on the road, sobbing or giggling. The two men went to her, but Jack pushed them away. "We don't want your help, thank you. Nor yours either," he told the drivers emerging from their halted cars. But he accepted Dr Tumilty's help, when the doctor hurried over from glancing at the driver, for Emily was beginning to tremble, and didn't seem to recognise the house. More drivers were gathering to stare at the crash. Soon Jack heard the approaching raucous howl of the police. The only thought he could find in his head was that they had to be deafening in order to shout everyone else's row down.

"What are you doing?"

"Just looking."

She turned from the front-room window to smile at him. Looking at what, for heavens sake? his frown demanded. "I like watching people go by," she said.

He could see no people: only the relentless cars, dashing harsh sunlight at his house, flinging dust. Still, perhaps he should be grateful she could look. It seemed the doctor had been right: she didn't remember the accident.

That had been a week ago. Luckily the doctor had seen it happen; the police had questioned him. A policeman had interrogated Jack, but had left Emily alone, calmed by a sedative. Jack was glad she hadn't encountered the policeman, his sarcastic deference full of innuendo: "Does your wife take any drugs, sir? I suppose she doesn't drink at all? She wouldn't be under treatment?" He'd stared about the house in envious contempt, as if he had more right to be there than Jack—just as the people from the estate would, if they saw something different from their concrete council houses.

The council—They provided such people with the homes they deserved, but not Jack and Emily, oh no. They'd offered compensation for the inconvenience of road-widening. Charity, that was all that was, and he'd told them so. A new house was what he wanted, in an area as quiet as this had used to be when he'd bought the house—and not near any estates full of rowdies, either. That, or nothing.

Emily was standing up. He started from his reverie. "Where are you going?"

"Over to the shop to buy things."

"It's all right, I'll go. What do you want?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'll see when I get there."

"No, you stay here." He was becoming desperate; he couldn't tell her why he was insisting. "Make me a list. There's no need for you to go."

"But I want to." The rims of her eyes were trembling with tears.

"All right, all right. I'll help you carry things."

She smiled brightly. "I'll get my other basket," she said, and ran upstairs a few steps before she had to slow.

He felt a terrible dry grief. This nervously vulnerable child had been the woman he'd married. "I'll look after you," he'd used to say, "I'll protect you," for he'd loved to see her turn her innocent trusting smile up to him. For a while, when they'd discovered they could have no children, she had become a woman, almost a stranger—neurotically irritable, jealous of her introversion, unpredictably morose. But when he'd retired, the child had possessed her again. He had been delighted, until her memory had begun to fail. It was almost as though his love for the child in her were wiping out the adult. His responsibility for her was heavier, more demanding now.

That was why they had gone to the seaside while the road was widened: because the upheaval upset Emily, the glistening mud like ropes of dung where the pavement had been. "Our house will still be here," she'd said. "They won't have knocked that down"—not like the post office up the road. Their months by the sea had cost the last of their savings, and when they'd returned it was too late to accept the council's offer of compensation, even if he had intended to. But he mustn't blame Emily.

"Here's your basket. Won't you feel silly carrying that? Come on, then, before it gets too hot."

As they reached the gate he took her arm. Sunlight piled on them; he felt as though the clothes he wore were being ironed. Up the road, near where the post office had been, a concrete lamp-standard lay on the new roundabout, protruding rusty twisted roots. A drill yattered, a creaking mechanical shovel hefted and dumped earth. Men stood about, stripped to the waist,

dark as foreigners. He pursed his lips in disapproval and ushered Emily to the subway.

The tunnel was scattered with bottles and wrappings, like leavings in a lair. The tiles of the walls were overgrown with a tangle of graffiti: short white words drooled, red words were raw wounds, ragged-edged. Another of the ceiling lights had been smashed; almost the whole of the tunnel was dim, dimmed further by the blazing daylight beyond. Something came rushing out of the dimness.

He pulled Emily back from the mouth of the tunnel. It must be a cyclist—he'd seen them riding through, with no thought for anyone. From the estate, no doubt, where they knew no better. But nobody emerged from the dimness: nothing at all.

A wind, then, or something rolling down the steps on the far side. He hurried Emily through the chill darkness; she almost stumbled. He didn't like the subway. It felt cold as a flooded cave, and the glimmering graffiti seemed to waver like submarine plants: he mustn't overexert himself. The sunlight leapt at him. There was nothing on the steps.

"Oh hello, Mrs Thorpe," the shopwoman said to Emily. "Are you better?" Stupid woman. Jack chattered to her, so that she couldn't disturb his wife. "Have you got everything?" he kept asking Emily. He was anxious to get back to the house, where she would be safe.

They descended the subway steps more slowly, laden now. The passage was thickly dark against the dazzle beyond. "Let's get through quickly," he said. The darkness closed around him, snug and chill; he held Emily's arm more firmly. Cars rumbled overhead. Dark entangled colours shifted. The clatter of their hurry filled the tunnel with sharp fluttering: that must be what he heard, but it sounded like someone rushing toward them. Someone had almost reached them, brutally overbearing in the dark. For a moment, amid the writhing colours and the red filter of his panting hurry, Jack glimpsed a face. It was brief as lightning: eyes gleaming with hatred, with threat.

Jack rested in the sunlight, gripping the metal rail. No wonder he had glimpsed the face of the driver from the accident: he had almost panicked then too. And no wonder he'd panicked just now: suppose roughs had waylaid Emily and himself down there? "I think we'll use the shops on this side in future," he said.

Back in the house he felt ill at ease, somehow threatened. People stared through the windows as if into cages. Were they what Emily liked watching? The sounds of cars seemed too close, aggressively loud.

When the evening began to settle down Jack suggested a walk. They wouldn't use the subway, for the pavements across the road glittered with grit and glass. As he closed the gate carefully behind him a car honked a warning at Emily: impertinence. He took her arm and led her away from the road, into the suburb.

The sounds of the road fell behind. Trees stood in strips of grass laid along the pavements; still leaves floated at the tips of twigs against a calm green sky. He felt at home now. Cars sat placidly in driveways, cars were gathering outside a few of the semi-detached houses; people sat or stood talking in rooms. Did the people on the estate ever talk to each other, or just watch television all day? he wondered, strolling.

They'd strolled for several streets when he saw the boys. There were four of them, young teenagers—not that one could be sure these days, with them all trying to act older than they should be. They were dressed like pop singers: sloppily, not a suit among them. As they slouched they tugged at garden hedges, stripping leaves from privet twigs. "Do you live there?" Jack demanded. "Then just you stop that at once."

"It's not your house," said one, a boy with a burst purple lip; he twisted another twig loose.

"Go on. You just move along or you'll get something you won't forget."

"Oooh, what?" the purple-lipped boy cried, pretending effeminacy. They all began to jeer at Jack, dancing around him, dodging out of reach. Emily stood by the hedge, bewildered. Jack held himself still, waiting for one of them to come close; he could feel blood blazing in his face. "Go on, you young ruffians. If I get hold of you—"

"What'll you do? You're not our father."

"He's too old," one giggled.

Before even Jack knew what was happening Emily leapt at the boy. She'd pulled a pin from her hat; if the boy hadn't flinched back the point would have entered his cheek or his eye. "Mad old bitch," he shouted, retreating. "My father'll do you," he called as the four ran off. "We know where you live."

Jack felt stretched red, pumped full of blood. "We'd better get home now," he said harshly, not looking at her. The dull giant pins of the lamp-standards stood above the roofs, looming closer. The rough chorus of cars grew louder.

A car snarled raggedly past the gate. As Jack started and glanced back, he glimpsed movement in the subway. A pale rounded shape glimmered in the dark mouth, like the tenant of a burrow: someone peering out, framed by the muddle of graffiti. Up to no good, Jack though distractedly. Unlocking the front door, he glanced again at the subway: a brief pale movement vanished. He turned back to the door, which had slammed open as something—a stray wind—shouldered past him.

He sat in the front room. Now, until the streetlamps glared, the drawn curtains were their own dark green. He could still feel his urgent startled heartbeats. "You shouldn't have flown at those boys," he said. "That wasn't necessary."

"I was defending you," she said plaintively.

"I had control of the situation. You shouldn't let these people make you lose your dignity."

"Well, you needn't have spoken to them like that. They were only young, they weren't doing much harm. If you make them resentful they only get into worse trouble."

"Are you really so blind? These people don't have any love for us, you know. I wish you could see what they'll do to this house after we're gone. They'll be grown up by then. It'll be their kind who'll spoil what we've made. And they'll enjoy it, you mark my words." He was saying too much, but it was her fault, with her blind indulgence of the young—thank God they'd never had children. "You just watch these people," he said. "You'll have them taking over the house before we're gone."

"They're only young, it's not their fault." As though this were incontestable proof she said "Like that poor young man who was killed."

He gazed at her speechlessly. Yes, she meant the driver in the crash. She sounded almost as if she were accusing Jack. All he could do was nod: he couldn't risk a retort when he didn't know how much she remembered.

The curtains blackened, soaked with orange light. Emily smiled at him with the generosity of triumph. She parted the curtains and sat gazing out.

"I like it now it's bright," she said.

Eventually she went up to bed. He clashed the curtains together and sat pondering sombrely. All this harping on youth—almost as if she wanted to remind him he had been unable to give her children. She should have married one of the men from the estate. To judge from the evidence, they spent half their time stuffing children into their wives.

No, that was unfair. She'd loved and wanted him, she still did. It was Jack she wanted to hold her in bed. He felt ashamed. He'd go to her now. He switched out the light and the orange oozed in.

As he climbed the stairs he heard Emily moaning, in the grip of a dream. The bedroom was full of dim orange twilight, pulsing with passing lights. The bedclothes were so tangled by her writhing it was impossible to decipher her body. "Emily. Emily," he called. Her face rolled on the pillow, turning up to him. A light flashed by. The dim upturned face grinned viciously. It was a man's face.

"You, you—" He grabbed blindly for the light switch. Emily's face was upturned on the pillow, eyes squeezed into wrinkles against the light, lips quivering. That must be what the flash of light had shown him. "It's nothing, nothing. Go back to sleep," he said sharply. But it was a long time before he was able to join her, and sleep.

He had bought the house when he was sure they could have no children. It had cost their old home and almost the whole of their savings. It was meant to be a present for Emily, a consolation, but she hadn't been delighted: she had thought they should leave their savings to mature with them. But property was an investment—not that he intended ever to sell the house. They had argued coldly for weeks. He couldn't bear this new logical disillusioned Emily: he wanted to see delight fill her eyes. At last he'd bought the house without telling her.

Unlocking the door, he had held his breath. She'd gazed about, and in her eyes there had been only a sad helpless premonition that he'd done the wrong thing. That had been worse than the day the doctor had told him he was sterile. Yet over the years she'd come to love the house, to care for it almost as if it were a child—until now. Now she did nothing but gaze from the window.

She seemed content. She seldom left the house, except for the occasional evening stroll. He shopped alone. The scribbled subway was empty of menace now. Once, returning from the shop, he saw Emily's face intent behind the shivering pane as a juggernaut thundered by. She looked almost like a prisoner.

The imitation daylight fascinated her most—the orange faces glancing at her, the orange flashes of the cars. Sometimes she fell asleep at the window. He thought she was happy, but wasn't sure; he couldn't get past the orange glint in her eyes.

She was turning her back on their home. Curls of dust gathered in corners, the top of the stove looked charred; she never drew the curtains. Her attitude depressed him. In an indefinable way, it felt as though someone were sneering at the house.

When he tried to take over the house-work he felt sneered at: a grown man on his hands and knees with a dustpan—imagine what the men from the estate would say! But he mustn't upset Emily; he didn't know how delicately her mind was balanced now. He swept the floor. His depression stood over him, sneering.

It was as if an intruder were strolling through the house, staring at the flaws, the shabbiness. The intruder stared at Emily, inert before the window; at Jack, who gazed sadly at her as he pretended to read. So much for their companionship. Didn't she enjoy Jack's company any more? He couldn't help not being as lively as he was once. Did she wish he was as lively as the mob outside the window?

He couldn't stand this. He was simply depressing himself with these reveries. He could just make out Emily's face, a faint orange mask in the pane. "Come upstairs now," he said gently.

His words hung before him, displaying their absurdity. The sneering surrounded him as he took her arm. It was coarse, stupid, insensitive; it jeered at them for going to bed only to sleep; but he couldn't find words to fend it off. He lay beside Emily, one arm about her frail waist; her dry slim hand rested on his. It distressed him to feel how light her hand was. The orange dimness sank over him, thick as depression, dragging him down toward a dream of sleeping miserably alone.

It was all right. She was beside him. But something dark hung over her. He squinted, trying to strain back the curdled dimness. It was a face; curly black hair framed its vicious sneer. Jack leapt at it, punching. He felt no impact, but the face burst like a balloon full of blood. The blood faded swiftly as a fireworks star. He knew at once that he hadn't got rid of the face. It was still in the room.

His fist was thrust deep into the blankets. He awoke panting. He tried to slow his heart with his breathing. The orange light hammered at his *eyes*. He turned over, to hold Emily, to be sure he hadn't disturbed her. She was not there.

At once he knew she'd wandered out on the road. The sneering surrounded him, still and watchful. He fumbled into his dressing-gown, his feet groped for his slippers. He heard the rapid swish of cars. His head was full of the thud of a body against metal, although he had heard no such sound. He ran downstairs. He felt his mouth gaping like a letter-slot, making a harsh sound of despair.

He stumbled down into the dark. He was rushing uncontrollably; he almost fell. Parallelograms of orange light lay stagnant inside the front door. He scrabbled at the lock and bolts, and threw the door open.

The road was bare beneath the saucers of relentless light. Only a blur of dust hung thinly above the surface. Perhaps she was in the subway. His thoughts had fallen behind his headlong search. He had slammed the gate out of his way before he realised she couldn't have bolted the door behind her.

He was awake now, in time. But he was still running, toward the snarl of a car swinging around the curve. He tottered on the edge of the pavement, then regained his balance. When he turned back to the house he saw Emily gazing between the front-room curtains. The car sped round the curve. Its light blinked in the window beside Emily: a pale bright flash, an oval glimpse of light, a face, a sneering face.

He ran into the room. "Will you get away from there and come to bed!" he shouted. His shock, his treacherous imagination, were rushing his words out of control. "Why don't you bring everyone into the garden if you want to look at them? Bring them into the house?"

She turned and stared at him. For an awful moment he was sure she'd forgotten who he was. "I'm Jack! I'm your husband!" but he couldn't bear to say it, to know. After a while she began to walk slowly, painfully toward the stairs.

But perhaps she'd heard what he'd said. The next day several children were playing football on the pavement, using the top of the subway steps as a goal. "Don't play there," she shouted through the open window, "you'll get hurt." They came to the hedge and pointed at her, laughing, making faces. When she didn't chase them they ventured into the garden. Before Jack could intervene she was chasing them wildly, as if she thought the pavement was as wide as it had used to be.

They were returning for another chase when he strode out. "If I see you again I'll get the police to you." He glanced at Emily, and his stomach flooded with raw dismay. Perhaps he was mistaken, but he was sure that as the children had run out of the far end of the subway he'd glimpsed in her eyes a look of longing.

Chasing the children had exhausted them both. She sat at the window; he read. The day was thickly hot and stagnant, nothing moved except the cars. He felt as though he were trapped in someone's gaze.

"These children these days," she said. "It isn't their fault, it's the way they're brought up. Do you know, some parents don't want their children at all?"

What was she trying to say? What was she sidling towards? He nodded, gazing at the book.

"Did you see that little girl before, that we were chasing? She had such a pretty face. It's such a pity."

Surely she wasn't heading where he suspected, surely she knew better. The heat held him limp and still.

"Don't you think it's up to people like us to help these children?" The longing was clear now in her eyes. "The unwanted ones, I mean. We could give them love. Some of them have never had any."

"Love won't feed them," he told the book.

"But we could go without. We always buy the best meat, you know. I've still a little money that I've saved from housekeeping."

He hadn't known that. Why didn't she invest it? But he felt too exhausted even to change the subject with that argument—exhausted, and depressed: she wasn't musing any longer, she was serious. "And we don't really need such a large house," she said.

Before he could recover from this betrayal she said "Don't you think it would be nice to bring up a little girl?"

She had never mentioned adoption before. Nor had he; the idea of a strange child in his house had always seemed disturbing, threatening. Now there was a stronger reason why they couldn't adopt a child: they were too old. "We wouldn't be able to," he said.

"Why not?"

Because we're too old! But when he met her bright trusting childlike gaze, he couldn't tell her. "Too much work. Too exhausting," he said.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that. I could do it." Every objection he made she demolished. She had more experience of life than most parents, she'd been brought up decently herself, she would love the child more than its own parents could, it would have a good home, they'd keep the child away from bad company. All day she persisted, through dinner, into the evening. Her eyes were moist and bright.

The orange light sank into the room, stifling. Emily's words closed him in. He was trapped, shaking his head at each point she made; he knew he looked absurd. He mustn't remind her they were old, near death. Why must she persist? Couldn't she see there was something he was trying not to say? As he stared at the book the orange light throbbed on his eyes like blood. "We could sell the house, that would leave us some money," she said. "Wouldn't you like a little girl?"

"No," he blurted at the book. "No."

"Oh, why not?"

His answer was too quick for him. "Because the authorities wouldn't let us have one," he shouted, "you stupid old woman!"

Her face didn't change. She turned away and sat forward, toward the window. Her shoulders flinched as though a lash had cut them. "I didn't

mean that. I'm sorry," he said, but she only sat closer to the pane.

He must go to her, hold her—except that when he made to stand up he felt intolerably fatuous. Every nuance of his apology echoed in his head; it sounded like a bad actor's worst line, he felt as if he were at the mercy of an audience's contempt. The sense of his own absurdity, more relentless than the heat or the orange light, pushed him back into his chair.

Emily leaned closer to the window. Suddenly he knew she was trying to see her face in the glass. She went to the hall mirror. He saw her see herself, her age, perhaps for the first time. Her face seemed to slump inward. She walked past him without a glance and sat before the window.

"Look here, I'm sorry." He was whining, each word made him feel more contemptible. Perhaps it was her contempt for him that he was feeling. It gathered darkly on him, atrociously depressing.

He couldn't comfort her while he felt like this. In fact, if it were his own depression, it might be affecting her too. He must go upstairs, hoping she would heal by herself. Even to stand up was a struggle. She sat still as he left the room, glancing back miserably at her.

Upstairs he felt a little better. At least he could close his eyes and clear his mind. He lay limply in the heat; orange painted the dark within his eyelids. Emily would get over it. She would have had to realise eventually. He couldn't think for her all the time, he shouted defensively. He couldn't protect her all her life. The orange glow didn't contradict him. It was soothing, empty, calm.

No, not entirely empty. Something was rushing toward him from deep in the emptiness. As it came it breathed depression at him, thick as fumes. It was rushing faster, it was on him. A face was pressed into his, bright with hatred. Before he had time to flinch back, there was nothing—but something was rushing toward him again. It thrust into his face for a moment, grinning. Again. The face. The face. The face.

He woke. His hands were clenched on the sheets. The face was gone, but for a moment, though depression muffled his thoughts, he knew why it had been there. The man had been killed without warning; he meant Jack to feel the sudden ruthless terror of death. And Jack did. He lay inert and appalled.

All of a sudden, for no reason, his depression lifted—as if someone standing over him had moved away. His mind brightened. He scoffed at his

dream. What nonsense, he had killed nobody. It took him a while to wonder what Emily was doing.

He needn't run. She would only be sitting at the window. But he fought away the soothing of the orange calm and hurried to the stairs. Emily was in the hall, at the front door. Her hand was on the lock.

"Where are you going?" She glanced up at the sound of his voice. As she saw him her eyes filled with a mixture of disgust and fear. She pulled the door open; orange light spilled over her.

"Emily, wait!" She was on the path. He ran downstairs, almost falling. He was halfway down when the depression engulfed him like sluggish muddy water. At once he knew that it was surrounding Emily, blinding her to him. It had reached its intended victim.

She was running, a small helpless figure beneath the orange glare. The light spoiled her blue dress, staining it patchily black. She was moving headlong, as fast as the threat in his dream. She snatched the gate out of her way. Amid the nocturnal chorus of the city, a car was approaching.

"Stay there, Emily!" Perhaps she heard him; something made her run faster. The light throbbed, his eyes blurred. For a moment he saw something perched on her shoulder, a dark thing as big as her head, trembling and vague as heat. When he blinked his eyes clear it had gone, but he was sure it was still beside her. He was sure he knew its face.

She was on the roadway now, still running—not toward the far pavement, but toward the speeding car. Jack was running too, although he knew he couldn't save her. She was determined to be killed. Even if he caught her, their struggle would take them under the car.

But she mustn't die alone, with the whisper of hatred and depression at her ear. That death would be like his dream, but prolonged endlessly. She must see that he was with her. He ran; the road and the lamp-standards swayed; the orange light pounded, and his breath clawed at his lungs. He had no chance of overtaking her. She wouldn't see him.

Suddenly she slipped and fell. Jack ran faster, panting harshly; he felt the pavement change to roadway underfoot. Perhaps he could drag her out of the way—no, he could hear how fast the car was approaching. He ran to her and cradled her in his arms. She seemed stunned by the pain of her fall, but when her eyes opened he thought she saw him and smiled weakly. He

managed to smile too, although he could feel a darkness rushing toward them. Suddenly he wondered: since her tormentor had stayed here, would they be tied here too? Was this only the beginning of their struggle?

He pressed her face into his chest to hide from her what was upon them: the car, and the grinning face inflated with blood.

The Seductress

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He hadn't taken her home before. His mother was out tonight, he told her, smiling a secret smile. "Which is your room, Alastair?" she said eagerly. "Oh, let me see." She heard him call out behind her; he must have been telling her not to go in—but she had already opened the door. After a while she went closer, to be sure of what she was seeing. When she came out she pushed him aside violently, saying "Don't you touch me!"

He followed her through the empty twilit streets, plucking timidly at her sleeve. "It's not what it looks like, Betty. I only did it because I wanted you." She slapped his hand away as if it were an insect, but couldn't stop his voice's bumbling at her. "I'm not interested!" she shouted. "I don't want anything to do with that sort of thing!"

Her voice seemed small between the blank walls. She had never seen the streets so deserted. She hoped someone would come to a door to see what the noise was, but nobody did. "Get away or I'll go to the police!" she shouted. But he followed her to the police station, pleading.

When she emerged, having pretended to a policeman that she'd lost her way home, Alastair had gone. He must have fled as soon as she'd gone in. He wouldn't dare to lie in wait for her, he must be worrying about what she might have told the police.

The streets were darker now, yet they made her feel oddly secure. Her father would never have let her walk through these streets. There were too many things he wouldn't let her do. She was free of him now, and of Alastair. She felt free, ready for anything—for anything she chose.

As she came in sight of her flat, the ground floor of the last house in the Georgian terrace, she smiled. The empty rooms, the spaces between her posters on the walls, were waiting to be filled with new things: as she was.

Next morning she found Alastair's note.

The unstamped envelope lay on the hall floor, on a tray of sunlight. It bore only her name. Should she tear it up unopened? But she was free of him, free enough to be able to read what he'd written. It might give her insights. Insights were what a writer needed.

She walked upstairs, reading. The stairs shook the page in her hands. Halfway up she halted, mouth open. In her flat she read the note again; phrases were already standing out like clichés. Was it a joke? Was he trying to disturb her?

I suppose you told the police everything. It doesn't matter if you didn't. I've never seen anyone look with such contempt as you did at me. I don't want anyone to look at me like that again, ever. When you read this I shall be dead.

What an awful cliché! Betty shook her head, sighing. His note read like an amateur's first story. But did that mean it wasn't true? Could he have killed himself? She wasn't sure. She had realised how little she knew about him when she'd opened the door of his room.

At first, peering into the small dim cluttered room, she had thought she was looking at a mirror on a table beside the bed: she was there, gazing dimly out of the frame. But it wasn't a mirror; it was a photograph of her, taken without her knowledge.

Venturing into the room, she had made out diagrams and symbols, painted on the walls. Magic. The unknown. She'd felt the unknown surrounding her dimly, trapping her as she was trapped in the photograph: the many shadows and ambiguous shapes of the room, Alastair looming in the doorway. But she'd strode to the photograph. Herbs were twisted about it; something had been smeared over it. It stank. She swept it to the floor, where it smashed.

Alastair had cried out like an animal. Turning, she had seen him as though for the first time: long uneven mud-coloured hair, a complexion full of holes, a drooping shoulder. All of a sudden he looked ten years older, or more. Had he managed to blind her in some way? When he tried to block the doorway she shoved him aside, unafraid now of him and his furtive room. "Don't you touch me!" She could see him clearly now.

But could she? Could she tell how true his letter was? Of course she could —if she wanted to; but she wasn't interested. She buried the note beneath

her notebooks. It was time she worked on her new book.

She couldn't. Her notes gave her no sense now of the people she'd talked to. The void of her room surrounded her, snatching her ideas before they formed. One strong emotion remained, where she'd pushed it to the back of her mind. She had to admit it: she was curious. Had Alastair really killed himself?

To find out she would have to go near his home. That might be what he'd intended. Still, she would be safe in daylight: good Lord, at any time of day—he couldn't harm her. Early that afternoon her curiosity overcame her apprehension.

Alastair's home was one of a terrace of cottages in central Brichester, washed and dried by April sunlight. Betty ventured along the opposite pavement. A cyclist was bumping over cobbles, a van painted with an American flag stood at the end of the terrace. Sunlight glared squarely from the cottage, making Betty start. But in a moment she was smiling. None of the curtains in the cottage was drawn. Alastair had been bluffing. She'd known that all along, really.

She was walking past the cottage—it would be silly to turn, as if fleeing—when the door opened.

She gasped involuntarily. It was as though she'd sprung a trap, snapping the door open, propelling a figure forward into the sunlight. But it wasn't Alastair. It was a tall woman, somewhat past middle age, wearing a flowered flat-chested cotton dress. She gazed across the street and said "You're Betty, aren't you?"

Betty was still clutching at her poise; she could only nod.

"You must come in and talk to me," Alastair's mother said.

Betty was aware of her own feet, pressed together on the pavement, pointing like the needle of a compass—halfway between Alastair's mother and flight. She could feel the effort she would need in order to turn them to flight. Why should she? The woman seemed friendly; it would be rude to walk away, and Betty couldn't think of an excuse.

"Please," the woman said, smiling bright-eyed; her smile was a gentle plea. "Talk to me."

Perhaps she wanted Betty to help her understand Alastair. "I can't stay very long," Betty said.

The front door opened directly into a large room. Last night the room had been dim; blocks of sunlight lay in it now. Brass utensils hung molten on the walls, jars of herbs on shelves were tubes of light, large containers stood in the corners. There was no sign of Alastair.

Betty sat in a deep armchair; the knees of her jeans tugged at her, as if urging her to rise again. "I'd love to live somewhere like this," she said. Perhaps Alastair's mother meant her to talk without interruption; she nodded, busy with a kettle over the grate.

Betty chattered on, surrounded by silence. Alastair's mother brewed tea and carried the pot to the table between the chairs. She nodded, smiling gently, as Betty drank; her square plump-nosed face seemed homely. Not until Betty had begun her second cup did the woman speak. "Why did you do it?" she said.

Betty had become tense, had been sipping her tea more rapidly because there seemed no other way to respond to the gentle smile. Now her heart felt hectic. "Do what?" she said warily.

The woman's smile became sadder, more gentle. "What you did to my son," she said.

But what was that? Betty felt heavy with undefined guilt; heat was piling on her, though the day was cool. She was about to demand what she was supposed to have done when the woman said "Seducing him then turning him away."

Betty had never had sex with him—thank God, she thought, shuddering a little. "Oh really, Mrs.—" (annoyed, she realised that she didn't know the woman's name) "—I didn't seduce him at all."

"Whatever you choose to call it." The woman's mouth smiled gently, but her eyes gleamed. "It didn't take you long to get him into bed with you," she said.

An odd taste had accumulated in Betty's mouth. Her tongue felt gluey; she sipped more tea, to loosen her tongue for a denial, but the woman said "Perhaps you didn't appreciate how sensitive he was." She smiled sadly, as if that were the best excuse she could find for Betty.

"Perhaps you don't realise what he's been up to," Betty said.

"Oh, I think I know my son."

There was a tic at the root of Betty's tongue. It made her irritable, made her almost shout "Do you know he practises witchcraft?"

"Is that what it was. Is that why you turned him away." The woman gazed sadly at her. "Just because of his beliefs. I thought you young ones weren't supposed to believe in persecution."

"I don't believe in that sort of thing," Betty said furiously. "It's against life. He was trying to trap me with it."

The woman's voice cut through hers. "His body was good enough for you but not his mind, hey? You should like me less, then. I'd only begun to teach him what I know."

She was smiling triumphantly, nodding. "Yes, he'd just begun to learn his craft. And just for that, you killed him."

Betty felt her eyes and mouth spring wide; the odd insistent taste of the tea filled her mouth. "Oh yes, he's dead," the woman said. "But you haven't seen the last of him."

The teacup clung to Betty; the handle seemed to have twined around her finger like a brittle bony vine. She tugged at it. She must leave hold of it, then she would walk straight out. As the cup rolled in her hands the black mat of tea-leaves seemed for a moment to writhe, to grin, to be a man's wet face.

Her hand jerked away from her, the cup smashed against the table. She stood up unsteadily, but the woman was already on her feet. "Come and see him now," the woman said.

She was pulling Betty toward the door to the stairs. The door was ajar on a glimpse of dimness. The dimness was widening, was darkening; it was reaching to pull Betty in. And in the dimness, lying on the bed, or sitting propped on the stairs, or lying ready for her at the bottom—She dragged herself violently out of the woman's grasp. For a moment fury gleamed in the woman's eyes, as she realised Betty was still stronger. Betty managed to head straight for the front door, although the walls moved like slow waterfalls.

But the door was retreating, moving faster than she could gain on it. She could feel Alastair's mother behind her, strolling easily to catch her, smiling gently again. Suddenly the door surged toward her; she could touch it now. But it was shrinking. The doorknob was enormous in her hand, yet the door was too small for her even if she stooped. It was no larger than the door of a small animal's cage. The door was edging open. Sunlight fell in, over her head. As she staggered into the street, turning to support herself against the door-frame, she saw that the woman hadn't moved from the stairway door. "Never mind," she called to Betty, smiling. "You'll see him soon."

Betty squeezed through the shrinking frame. The street dashed sunlight into her face; the frame pressed her shoulders down, toward Alastair. He lay on the pavement, his head twisted up to her over his drooping shoulder, his huge tongue reaching for her through a stiff grin. The frame thrust her down, thrust her face into his.

It wasn't broad daylight, it was only six o' clock. But as she lay blinking in bed, having fled awake, that did little to rid her of her dream. Her room felt deserted, it offered no defence against the memory. After a while she dressed and went out to the park two streets away.

The tea had been drugged. Perhaps she wasn't yet free of its effects; she felt a little unreal, gliding lightly through the gradually brightening streets. Never mind. Once the drug had worn off she would be free of Alastair and his mother.

Mist shortened the streets. It dulled the railings of the park, lay like a ghost of metal on the lake. The colours of the trees were faded, the perennial leaves were glazed; the most distant trees looked like arrested smoke. Betty felt vulnerable. Reality seemed to hold itself aloof, leaving her menaced by her imagination.

On a rise in the ground within the mist, a sapling moved. It was walking toward her: a slim dark form, swaying a little as it descended the path. It was tall and dim. It was coming leisurely toward her, like Alastair's mother.

When it stepped from the mist onto the clear path she saw it was a man. Her gasp of relief was so violent that the mist snagged her throat; she was coughing as he neared her. He halted while she spluttered silent, except for the occasional cough which she could make sound like an apologetic laugh. "Are you all right?" he said.

His voice was light, soft with concern; his long slim face smiled encouragement. "Yes, thank" (cough and smile) "you."

"Pardon my intrusion. I thought you looked worried."

His tone was friendly without familiarity; it offered reassurance. Did she look more worried than she realised she felt? "Just preoccupied," she said, thinking of an acceptable excuse. "I'm working on a novel." She always enjoyed saying so.

His eyes widened, brightening. "Do you write? What do you write about?"

"People. That's what interests me." She wrote about them well, according to the reviews of her first novel.

"Yes. People interest me too."

In what way? But if she asked, she would be interviewing. That was how she'd met Alastair; she had been searching for someone worth interviewing in a cellar disco, where underground lightning made everyone stagger jaggedly. He had watched her searching, had come over to her; he had seemed fascinating, at the time.

The man—perhaps twenty years older than her, about forty-five—" smiling at her. "What do you do?" she said neutrally.

"Oh—know about people, mainly."

She deduced he meant that he had no job. Some of the most interesting people were unemployed, she'd found. "I'm in Brichester to talk to people," she said. "For my new book."

"That must be interesting. I know some people who might be worth your talking to," he said. "Not the common kind."

Oh yes? But Alastair and his mother still seemed too close for her to feel quite safe in trusting this man. "Well, thank you," she said. "Perhaps I'll see you again. I must be going now."

She thought she glimpsed the sign of a twinge of rejection. He must be vulnerable too. Then he was smiling and raising his hand in farewell, and she was walking away, forcing herself to walk away.

At the gate she glanced back. He was standing as she'd left him, gazing after her. Nearer her, a movement caught her attention: between the trees, against the muted glitter of misty ripples on the lake—a dark figure watching her? There was nothing when she faced it: it must have been the

effect of the light. The man waved briefly again as she left the park; he looked small and rather frail and lonely now, on the thin path. She found herself wishing she'd asked his name.

Brichester was disappointing in the wrong way.

She had shown it to be disappointing in her first novel, *A Year in the Country*. She'd shown its contemptuous openly reluctant pandering to tourists; the way decay and new estates were dissolving the town's identity; the frustrations of the young and the middle-aged, the young settling for violence or hallucinations while they yearned for London, the middle-aged extending their sexual repertoire in glum desperation. She hadn't called the town Brichester, but the local papers had recognised it: their reviews had been peevishly hostile. That had added to her sense of triumph, for most reviews had been enthusiastic.

All she'd written had been partly true; the rest of Brichester she'd imagined, for she had been living in Camside. Perhaps she had underrated her imagination. She had moved to Brichester to write her second book, a portrait of the town in all its moods and aspects, based on observation and interviews. But the reality proved to be less interesting than her version of it; it was full of clichés, of anticlimaxes. No wonder Alastair, with his sense of a secret to be revealed, had seemed interesting.

The more she saw, the more it dulled her. In particular the young people were worse than bored: they were boring. She spent the rest of the day after she'd left the park, and the following day, finding that out. Some trendy phrases she heard a dozen times; if she heard them once more she would scream.

She walked home through the evening. Unpleasantly, she felt less like an observer than an outsider. She knew nobody in the town. But she wasn't going back to Camside, to her father; that would be admitting defeat. She nodded to herself, pressing her lips together, trying to feel strong.

Above the roofs the sky was flat; its luminous unrelieved grey was almost white. Its emptiness was somehow disturbing, as though it were a mirror clear of any reflection. The trees that bowed over the pavement, the bricks of the houses, looked thin, brittle, unreal; their colours seemed feeble. All this fed her alienation. The only real thing she could find in her recent memory was the man in the park, and he was distant now. If only she'd

talked to him. Dully preoccupied, she took a short cut through an alley behind two streets.

The walls paced by, half as tall again as she. Their tops were crowded with shards of glass, dull as ice. Old doors went by amid the brick, bolted tight, no doubt on rusty hinges. She made her way between double-parked bins, their lids tilted rakishly. The whitish sky glowed sullenly in everything. Someone was hurrying behind her.

He wouldn't be able to squeeze past. She could hear his quick footsteps approaching. She began to hurry too, so that she'd be out of the alley before he reached her, so they wouldn't have to squeeze between the bins; that was why she was hurrying. But why couldn't she look back? Wasn't it silly to hurry as if fleeing? The footsteps stopped, leaving abrupt silence at her back.

He had leapt; he was in the air now, coming down at her. The idea was absurd, but she turned hastily. The alley was deserted.

She stared along the blank walls. There was nowhere he could have turned. She would have heard if any of the doors had opened. Had he leapt onto a wall? She glimpsed a figure crouched above her, gazing down—except that he couldn't have leapt onto the glass. The dead light and the brittle world seemed unnaturally still. Suddenly panic rushed through her; she fled.

She ran past her street. The building might be empty, her flat would feel all the more unsafe for being on the ground floor. She ran to the park. The man was there, at the lake's edge. She had never been so glad to see anyone in her life.

He turned as she came near. He was preoccupied; she thought she saw a hint of sorrow. Then he read her face, and frowned. "Is something wrong?" he said.

What could she say? Only "I think someone was following me."

He gazed about. "Are they still there? Show me."

She could feel his calm, the directness of his purpose; they made her feel secure at once. "Oh, they'll have gone," she said. "It's all right now."

"I hope so." He made that sound like a promise of justice and strength. She was reminded of her father's best qualities; she turned her mind away from that, and said "I'm sorry I interrupted whatever you were thinking."

"Please don't trouble yourself. I've time enough." But for a moment what he had been thinking was present between them, unspoken and vague: a sense of pain, of grief, perhaps of loss. When she'd said goodbye to her father—Perhaps the man wanted to be alone, to return to his thoughts. "Thank you for looking after me," she said.

As she made to walk away she sensed that he felt rebuffed. She had had that sense as she'd left her father: the sense of his mute sorrow, the loss of her like a bond she was stretching between them until it snapped. She thought of tomorrow, of talking to people whom she could hardly distinguish from yesterday's batch, of explaining about her new book over and over until it sounded like an old stale joke, of going to her empty room. "You said you could introduce me to some people," she said.

His name was James; she never tried to call him Jimmy or Jim.

She had no idea where he lived. They always met at her flat; she suspected he was ashamed of his home. His job, if he had one, remained a mystery. So did his unspoken suffering.

She was often aware of his suffering: twinges of pain or grief deep within him, almost concealed. She tried to comfort him without betraying her glimpses. Perhaps one day she would write about him, but now she couldn't stand back far enough to observe him; nor did she want to.

And the people he knew! There was the folk group who sang in more languages than Betty could recognise. They sang in a pub, and the barman joined in; in the intervals he told her the history of the songs, while his casually skillful hands served drinks. There was the commune—at least, it was more like a commune than anything else—trying to live in a seventeenth-century cottage in a seventeenth-century way: six young people and an older man, one of what seemed to be a group of obsessed local historians and conservationists. There was the painter who taught in the evenings, a terrifying woman whose eyes shone constantly; all her pupils painted landscapes which, when stared at, began to vibrate and become mystical symbols.

Betty enjoyed meeting them all, even the unnervingly intense painter. She felt invulnerable within James' calm. But she wasn't sure how much use these meetings would be. Sometimes when she thought of her book, she felt irritable, frustrated; it was changing form, she could no longer perceive it clearly, couldn't grasp it. Surely its new form would be clear to her soon;

meanwhile she avoided touching it, as if it were a raw wound in her mind. Instead, she enjoyed the calm.

Sex with James was a deeper calm. She learned that the first time he had to calm her down. He'd taken her to a meeting of the British Movement, addressed by a man who looked like a large peevish red-faced schoolboy, and who spoke in generalisations and second-hand anecdotes. A few of the audience asked most of the questions; later these people gathered in someone's front room, where Betty and James had managed to accompany them. They proved to be British Supremacists. Some were young, and shouted at Betty's disagreements; some were old—their old eyes glanced slyly, suspiciously at her notebook, at her. They examined her as if she were a misguided child. Didn't she believe in her country? in tradition? in helping to make things the way they used to be? Just what did she think she was doing? Eventually, mute with fury, she strode out.

James followed her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought it would be worth your meeting them." She nodded tight-lipped, not caring whether he realised she didn't blame him. When they reached her flat she still felt coiled tight, wound into a hard lump in her stomach.

She tried to make coffee. She spilled hot drips over her hand, and dropped the cup. "Bloody fucking shit!" she screamed, and kicked the fragments against the skirting-board, ground their fragments smaller with her toes.

James put his arm about her shoulders. He stroked her hair, her back, massaging her. "Don't get yourself into a state," he said. "I don't want you like that." She nestled more snugly against him; her shaking slowed, eased. He stroked the small of her back, her buttocks, her legs; his hand slid upward, lifting her skirt, slowly and gently baring her. She felt enormously safe. She opened moistly.

He switched off the light as she guided him to her bed. Shortly she felt him naked beside her; warm, gentle, surrounding her with calm. In fact he seemed almost too calm, as though he were an observer, detached. Was he doing this simply to soothe her? But his penis felt hard and ready. Her body jerked eagerly.

He held himself back from her. I'm ready, ready now! she pleaded with him, gasping, but he was still fondling more pleasure into her, until it was almost pain. She tried to quicken him: his penis tasted salty, much more so

than her first boyfriend's, the only boy (she'd vowed) her father would ever lose her.

Eventually James raised her knees leisurely and slipped into her: thick, heavily knobbed, unyielding yet smooth. The growing ripples of her pleasure were waves at once; they overwhelmed her; all of her gasped uncontrollably. She didn't feel him dwindle. As she lay slack he kissed her forehead. In a minute she was alone.

That was the only thing she disliked: the way he left her as if he were late for an appointment. Once or twice she asked him to stay, but he shook his head sadly. Perhaps he had to return to his home, however poor, so as not to admit he was ashamed of it. She feared to plead, in case that troubled his calm. But alone in her flat at night, she felt uneasy.

She was disturbed by what she had seen looking in at her. A dream, of course: a pale form the size of a head that was never really there in the gap between the curtains when she sat up, frightened by her own cry. She'd seen it several times, at the edge of sleep: an impatient dream, tugging at her while she was awake. But once, when she'd sat up, she had seen it dimly, nodding back from the window. She'd seen something—a bird, a flight of waste paper, the glancing of a headlight. Or a hallucination.

Perhaps it was the last of the drug. She'd thought it had worn off after the footsteps in the alley; surely it had caused them. But it might still be able to touch her near her sleep. She couldn't tell James about the business with Alastair; she didn't know where to start. That helped her to accept that James was entitled to his own unspoken secret, but at the same time her muteness seemed to refuse the reassurance of his calm, to leave her vulnerable there.

Then one day she saw her chance to be reassured. It was evening; they were walking back to her flat. He had introduced her to an antique dealer whose house was his shop, and who lived somewhere among rooms that were mazes of bookcases. James talked about books now as they strolled: for some he'd had to search for years. Did James keep them all in his mysterious home, she wondered? Houses sauntered by. The cottage where Alastair's mother lived was approaching.

Betty tried not to be uneasy. Nothing could happen, she was with James. The sky steamed slowly, white and thick, low above the roofs; it pressed down the quiet, oppressively, until their footsteps sounded like the

insistence of relentless hollow clocks. It held down the flat thin light of the streets. The terraces between Betty and the cottage were full of the mouths of alleys. Any of them might propel a figure into her path.

Abruptly the terrace halted. A railing led to open gates; between the bars grass glowed, headstones and a church shone dull white. All at once it occurred to Betty that she still wasn't sure whether Alastair was dead. Wouldn't he be buried here, if anywhere? She was sure any truth would be a relief. "Let's go in here," she said.

The evening had darkened before she found the stone; it was darker still beneath the trees. The new smooth marble gleamed between stains of the shadows of branches. She had to kneel on the grave before she could read anything. At last she made out ALASTAIR, and the date his letter had arrived.

"Who was he?" James said as she rose.

She thought she heard jealousy, a secret pain. "Oh, nobody," she said.

"He must have been somebody to you."

There was no mistaking the sound of hurt now. "Nobody worth bothering about," she said. "I wouldn't have bothered with him if I'd known you."

She held him tight and thrust his lips open. One of his hands clasped her buttocks hard. She was still kissing him when she felt his other hand at work between their bodies. He freed his penis; she could barely see it, a darker shadow, gleaming. "Oh no, James," she gasped. "Somebody might see."

"There's nobody else about. Besides, it's dark." He didn't bother to conceal his pain. He sounded rejected, as though she were refusing him for fear of offending Alastair. She dug her nails into his shoulders, confused. When he began to strip her beneath her skirt and caress her, she protested only silently.

As he entered her, her back thumped against a tree. His glans stretched her again and again, like a fist, as he thrust. Sections of her mind seemed to part, to watch each other. She saw herself proving she was free of Alastair, to herself and to James. It was as though this were a chapter she was writing, an almost absurdly symbolic chapter.

But she could just see James' face, calm, uninvolved. She wanted him to feel something this time, to let go of his calm. Couldn't he feel her giving herself? She strained her body down on his, she wrapped her thighs about his hips, squeezing; the treetrunk rubbed her buttocks raw through her skirt. But when she'd exploded herself into limpness he took himself out of her at once.

She lay on the grass, regaining her breath. The red flashes her lids had pressed into her eyes were fading. Above her something pale nodded forward, peering down from the tree. A bird, only a bird. Before she could make herself look up it had withdrawn into the darkness, rustling.

She must satisfy him. That goal became clearer every time she met him. She loved his calm, but he shouldn't be calm during sex: it made her feel rejected, observed, though she knew that was irrational. Once she seemed almost to reach him, but felt his unspoken pain holding him back. She felt obscurely that he didn't enjoy sex in her flat, that for him there was something missing. If only he would invite her home! Whatever it was like she wouldn't mind. All she wanted was to feel his orgasm.

Ironically—perhaps because she had been too preoccupied with Alastair to worry about it—her book was taking shape. Now she could see it properly, it excited her: an answer to her first novel, a book about the character of Brichester, about its strangenesses.

She found herself thinking inadvertently of her father. "How can you write such stuff?" he'd demanded. "Oh well, if you *have* to get known that way," he'd greeted the reviews of her novel. They had had a row; she had fled its viciousness, for she'd seen that it could be an excuse to leave him—him and his possessiveness, his cold glum moralising, his attempts to mold her into a substitute for her dead mother. And now she was contradicting her novel, admitting it was false. She saw her father standing back from his bedroom window where he thought she couldn't see, mouth slack, eyes blindly bright with tears—She didn't need to remember these things. James would be here soon.

He seemed to have run out of people to introduce her to; he was showing her places now. Today's was a church, St. Joseph's in the Wood. They climbed Mercy Hill, which was tiered with terraces. Huge dark stains uncurled sluggishly over the sky. The church stood beyond the top of the slope, deep in trees.

Betty walked around it, taking notes: thirteenth-century; some signs of the Knights Templar had been partially erased; Victorians had slipped stained glass into the windows. The trees surrounded it with quiet. The foliage was almost as dark as the clouds, and moved like them; above her everything shifted darkly, ponderously. In the silence dim vague shadows crawled over the church, merging. She hurried back to the porch, to James. "Shall we go in?" he said.

It was quieter within, and dim. Though small, the church was spacious; their footsteps clattered softly, echoed rattling among the pews. Unstable dark shapes swayed over the windows, plucking at saints' faces. Betty walked slowly, disliking to stay too far ahead of James. But while she stayed close she could feel he was excited, eager. Had he planned a surprise? She turned, but his face was calm.

The stone void rang with their echoes. She stood in the aisle, gazing at the arch before the altar: a pointed arch, veined with cracks but unshaken. On either side of the altar stood a slim window; amber-like, each glass held a saint. She leaned over the altar-rail to peer. She felt James' hands about her waist. Then one was pushing the small of her back; the other was lifting her skirt.

At once she knew why he had been excited. Perhaps that was why he had brought her here. "Not here!" she cried.

His hands stopped, resting where they were. She glanced back at his face. For the first time she saw unconcealed pain there. He needed to make love to her here, she realised; he'd admitted it to her, and she'd recoiled from it—the means to his satisfaction.

"Oh, James." She couldn't help sounding sad and bewildered. Part of her was pleading: anywhere but here. But that was how her father would moralise, she thought. His moralising had turned her against her childhood religion long ago. If James needed it to be here then that was natural, that was life. Nobody would see them, nobody would come here on a day like this. She turned her face away from him, letting her body go loose. She closed her eyes and gripped the rail.

She felt him baring her buttocks; the cool air of the church touched them. Now he was parting them; her sphincter twitched nervously. Why didn't he turn her? What was he—He stretched her buttocks wide and at once was huge and snug within her. That had never been done to her before. Her

shocked cry, an explosion of emotions she couldn't grasp, fled echoing around the church, like a trapped bird.

It was all right. She had reached her goal at last. It was experience, she might write about it sometime, write about how she felt. But she suppressed her gasps; the church mustn't hear. God, would he need this every time? She felt him thumping within her, the sounds of her body were strident amid the quiet. Shadows threshed toward her from the altar; the church frowned darkly, hugely. Someone stood at the window on the left of the altar, watching her.

Only the stained glass. But the figure of the saint seemed to fill, to become solid, as if someone were standing within the outline. He pressed against the glass, dim and unstable as the shadows, gazing at her with the saint's face. The glass cleared at once, but with a wordless cry she thrust her hands behind her, throwing James out of her. Her buttocks smacked shut.

She ran down the aisle, sobbing dryly. When she heard James pursuing she ran faster; she didn't know what to say to him. She stumbled out of the church. Which way had they come? The darkness stooped enormously toward her, creaking; shadows splashed over the grass, thick and slow. Was that the avenue, or that one? She heard the church door open, and ran between the trees.

The dimness roared about her, open-throated. The heavy darkness tossed overhead, thickening. She lost the avenue. Dim pillars surrounded her with exits beyond exits, leading deeper into the roaring dark; their tangled archways rocked above her, thrashing loudly. Someone was following her, rapid and vague. She wasn't sure it was James.

The trees moved apart ahead. The wider gap led to little but dimness, but it was an avenue. She ran out from beneath the trees. Foliage hissed wildly on both sides of the avenue, darkness rushed over the grass, but her way was clear ahead. She ran faster, gasping. The avenue led to an edge full of nothing but sky; that must be the top of Mercy Hill. The avenue was wide and empty, except for a long dim sapling in the middle of her path. A crack rolled open briefly between the clouds, spilling grey light. She was running headlong toward the sapling, which was not a sapling at all: it was a dreadfully thin figure, nodding toward her, arms stretched wide. She screamed and threw herself aside, toward the trees; a root caught her foot; she fell.

As soon as they reached her flat, James left her.

When she'd recovered from the shock of her fall she had seen him bending down to her. He had helped her to her feet, had guided her through the hectic darkness, without speaking. There was no sapling on the path. His silence rebuked her for fleeing.

He left her at her gate. "Don't leave me now," she pleaded, but he was striding away into the dark.

He was being childish. Had he no idea why she'd fled? Most women wouldn't have let him get so far. She'd tried to understand him, yet the first time she needed understanding he refused to try. She slammed her door angrily. Let him be childish if he enjoyed it. But her anger only delayed her fear of being alone. She hurried through the flat, making sure the windows were locked.

Days passed. She tried to work, but the thought of the nights distracted her; she couldn't stand the flat at night, the patient mocking stillness. She drifted toward the young people she'd interviewed. They knew she was a writer, they showed her off to friends or told her stories; they were comfortingly dull. Occasionally boys would invite her home, but she refused them—even though often as she lay in bed something moved at the window. If she drew the curtains tight, they moved as if it had got in.

Each morning she went to the park. Flights of ducks applauded her visits, squawking, before they plunged into their washes on the lake. The trees filled with pink, with white. There was never anyone about: never James.

One night a shadow appeared on her bedroom wall. She lay staring at it. It was taller than the ceiling; its head folded in half at the top of the wall. Its outline trembled and shifted like steam. It was only a man, waiting for someone outside beneath the lamp. It dwindled to a man's size; it ceased to be a menacing giant. Suddenly she realised that the dwindling meant he had come to the window—he was staring in, and his head still seemed oddly dislocated. She buried her face in the pillow, shaking. It seemed hours before she could look to see that the shadow had gone.

The next day James was in the park.

She saw him as she neared the gate. He was standing at the edge of the lake, against the shattering light. She blinked; her eyes were hot with

sleeplessness. Then she began to pace stealthily toward him, like a hunter. He mustn't escape again.

No, that was silly. He wouldn't like her playing tricks on him. She strode loudly; her heels squeaked on the gravel. But he gazed at the sunlight scattered on the water, until she wondered if he meant to ignore her. Only when she was close enough to touch did he turn.

His face was full of the unspoken: the memory or anticipation of pain. "I'm sorry," she said, though she hadn't meant to be so direct. "Please come back."

After a while, when his face showed nothing but calm, he nodded. "I'll come to you tonight," he said. "Do you want me to stay?"

"If you like." She didn't want to dismay him by seeming too eager. But at once she saw the shadow in her room. "Please. Please stay," she said.

He gazed; she thought he wasn't sure whether she wanted him. He mustn't wonder about that. She would tell him all about Alastair. "I'll tell you some things I haven't told you," she said. "I'll tell you tonight. Then you'll understand me better."

He smiled slightly. "I've something to tell you, too." He moved away alongside the lake. "Until tonight," he said.

She ran home smiling. At last she dared think they might have more than half of a relationship. She would cook him meals instead of paying discreetly in restaurants. She could work without slowing to wonder whether she would see him today. She would be safe. Her smile carried her across the park.

She tidied her flat. God, what a mess she'd let accumulate! A poster mapping seventeenth-century Brichester, half-read books by Capote and D. H. Lawrence astray from the bookcases, notes for her own book tangled as the contents of a wastebasket: she'd be able to handle those soon. And all these letters she must answer. One from her publisher: the paperback edition was reprinting. One from the GPO about the delay in providing a telephone: it annoyed her not to be able to phone her friends in Camside—to invite them to meet James, she thought. One from a driving school, offering a free introductory lesson. If she learned to drive it would be worth her visiting friends in Camside: she wouldn't be restricted by the absurdly early last bus back.

When she'd finished she felt exhausted. Her loss of sleep was gaining on her. She checked that the door and windows were locked, smiling: she wouldn't need to do that in future. She'd make sure James stayed with her. She lay down on the couch, to rest.

She woke. The room was dark. But the darkness was shrinking. It had limbs and a head; it was walking on the wall, growing smaller yet closer to her. The ceiling thrust the head down at an angle that would have broken a man's neck. The shadow slipped from the ceiling, yet the head stayed impossibly canted. As she realised that, the shadow was extinguished. At once she felt the man lying beside her. She had to struggle to look; her body felt somehow hampered. But he waited for her. When she turned the face rolled toward her above the emaciated body, like a derisive thick-tongued mask that was almost falling loose: Alastair's face.

She woke gasping. The shadow filled the room; it had pressed against her eyes. She ran blindly to the door and snatched at the light switch. The room was empty, there was nobody outside the window. Night had fallen hours ago; it was past eleven o' clock. James might have come and gone unheard.

Surely he would come back. Wouldn't he? Mightn't he have thought she'd reconsidered, that he'd been right to hear doubt in her voice when she had asked him to come to stay? Might he have taken this as the final rebuff?

She gazed into the mirror, distracted. She must wait outside, then he would know she wanted him. If he came back he mightn't come as far as the door. She tugged at her hair with the brush, viciously. In the reflection of the room, a shadow passed.

She turned violently. There had been a dark movement in the mirror. She felt vulnerable, disoriented by the stealthy fall of night, trapped in unreality. The shadow passed again, dragging its stretched head across the ceiling. Betty ran to the window, but the street was empty. The streetlamp glowed in its lantern.

She couldn't go out there—not until she saw who was casting the shadow. She gazed at the bare pavement, the flat stagnant pool of light. She was still gazing when something dark moved behind her, in the room.

She whipped about, gasping. The shadow was stepping off the edge of the wall, into invisibility. Soon it returned, smaller now, more rapid. Whenever she turned the street was deserted. The shadow re-passed, restless,

impatient. Each time it was smaller, more intense; its outline hardly vibrated now. Betty kept turning frantically. She heard her body sobbing, felt its dizziness. The shadow was only a little larger than a man; soon he would reach for her. It vanished from the wall, moving purposefully. Her doorbell shrilled, rattling.

Her cry was shrill too. For a moment she couldn't move, then she ran into the hall. It must be James, or someone: not the shadow. The hall rumbled underfoot; the stairs loomed above her, swollen with darkness. She reached the front door and grabbed the light switch. The hall sprang back, bare, isolating her; a shadow stood on the front-door pane, irregular with frosting. She reached for the latch. She wished there were a chain. She opened the door a crack, wedging her toe beneath it, and saw James.

"Oh thank God. Come in, quickly." Behind him the street was empty. She pulled him in and slammed the door.

It wasn't until she had locked them into her flat that she noticed he was carrying no luggage: only a large handbag. "You're going to stay, aren't you?" she pleaded.

Did she sound too eager? His face was calm, expressionless. "I suppose so," he said at last. "For a while."

Not only for a while! she pleaded. She glanced anxiously at the blank wall. Would he see the shadow if it returned, or had it been the drug? "I've got to tell you something," she said. "I want you to know."

"Not now." He had opened the handbag; he took out four lengths of glossy cord. "Get undressed and lie on the bed," he said.

His calm felt cold. She didn't want to be tied up, she would feel like a victim, she wouldn't feel close to him. She was frightened of being tied, when the shadow was so near. But James would protect her from that. And if she rebuffed him again he might leave her for good. She stripped unwillingly and lay down.

At least the cords weren't rough. But he tied her tightly, spread-eagled. She felt nervous, unsafe. But she didn't dare protest; if he left the shadow would come back. She closed her eyes, to try to soothe herself. He undressed and stooped to her.

His smooth cheeks slid along her thighs. His tongue probed into her, strong as a finger. It was rough; it darted deep, opening her. He mounted her; his

penis thrust fiercely. Her hands clutched beyond their nooses, struggling vainly to reach for his back. She felt impaled and helpless. Above her his face gazed at the window, calm, mask-like. Behind his head the blank wall hung.

Her body twitched with the strain of her bondage, humiliated, frustrated. His thrusts tugged at her; she glimpsed herself as he must see her, at the mercy of his penis. Suddenly, by a translation she couldn't understand, her genitals began to twitch toward orgasm. It was all right, after all. She could enjoy it too. She closed her eyes again, beginning to enjoy the straining of her limbs against their bonds. Outside she could hear people walking home, from a club or somewhere; the sound was reassuring, it drove the shadow away. Her limbs strained. She was nearly there, nearly—and then he had left her. He was standing beside the bed, reaching into the handbag.

"Oh, what's wrong?" He was gazing at the darkest corner of the room, beyond the window. She saw something move, but not there: on the wall opposite the window—a shadow dwindling, darkening, advancing rapidly. Her hands struggled against their leashes to point. "James!" she screamed.

He turned swiftly. His hand emerged from the bag. Before she could react, his other hand raised her head deftly. He thrust the gag into her mouth and tied it behind her head. At once she felt his calm lift; his eagerness struck her like an explosion, leaving her limp and trembling. His voice rose, rose impossibly. "Not James," it said gleefully. "Mrs. James."

When Betty lay trembling, unable to look, the face stooped for her to see. It was Alastair's mother, smiling triumphantly. She passed a hand over her face. As though that reversed each aspect of it she was James again; his long face replaced her square one, her small plump nose was all at once slim and straight. She passed her hand upward and was herself, as if she'd changed a mask. The mask smiled.

Beneath the smile and the flat-chested body the penis was still erect. Mrs. James pulled at it. Betty shuddered back as far as she could, but the woman wasn't masturbating; she'd detached the organ and dropped it on the floor. Betty heard rubber strike wood. "Yes, that was all it was," Mrs. James said brightly. "Now you know how it feels to have your body used. You're beginning to know how my son felt."

Choked screams stuck in Betty's throat like bile. The wall was full of shadows now: the twelfth shrank into place, completing the wall's unbroken

frieze of dark blank faces. Betty strained back on the bed; her eyes heaved at their sockets, the gag suffocated her screams.

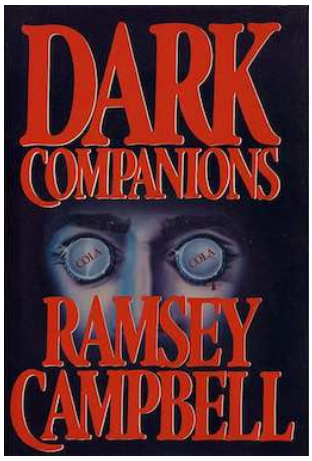
Mrs. James brought her a mirror to show her who was at the window. Betty saw one of the folk group, and the barman; the oldest man from the commune; the art teacher, two of the British Supremacists, the antique dealer; others to whom she had been introduced. Their eyes were bright and eager. Mrs. James smiled at them. Softly, like an articulate breeze at the window, they began chanting.

"You could get the better of my son," Mrs. James told Betty. "He was a novice. But now you'll see what I can do."

She joined in the chanting. The whispering insinuated itself into the room, slow as insidious fumes. Betty lay shivering, her cheek against the pillow. The nooses held her easily, the gag rested in her mouth. The twelve shadows gazed, whispering. Beyond Mrs. James, in the darkest corner, there was something more than a shadow: the suggestion of a figure, thin and pale as smoke. From the corner came sounds of a crawling among bones.

Mrs. James beckoned. The shape ventured timidly forward, its head dangling. It was surrounded by an inert chill, which fastened on Betty. As Mrs. James turned to the bed, still beckoning, Betty saw her smile. There was more than righteousness in that smile; there was pride.

The Invocation



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He opened the gate stealthily; perhaps she wouldn't see him. But he had hardly touched the path when she unbent from the garden. "There you are, Ted," she said, waving a fistful of weeds at him in vague reproof. "A young man was asking for you."

That would have been Ken, about their holiday. "Thank you, Mrs Dame," he said and made to hurry up the path.

"Call me Cecily." She'd taken to saying that every time she saw him. "I've asked Mr Mellor if I can plant some flowers. I like to see a bit of colour. If you want something done there's no use waiting for someone else to do it," she said, kicking the calf-high grass.

"Oh, right." He had no chance now of hurrying away; the cats from the ground-floor flat were drawing themselves about his legs, like eager fur stoles.

She added the weeds to a heap and mopped her forehead. "Isn't it hot. You'd think they could give us a breeze. Still, it won't be long before we're complaining about the cold. We're never satisfied, are we?"

I would be, Ted thought, if you'd shut up for just a few minutes. I must be going, he opened his mouth to say as cats surged around his feet.

"Well, I'd better let you go. You'll be wanting to get on with your studies." But her gaze halted him. "I've said it before and I'll say it again," she said, "you remind me of my son."

Oh no, he thought. God, not this anecdote again. Her wiry body had straightened, her hands were clasped behind her back as if she were a child reciting to an audience. "He was always in his books, never ready for his dinner," she said. "Him and his father, sitting all over the place with their

feet up, in their books. It was always just let me finish this chapter. And after his father died he got worse."

Cats streamed softly over Ted's feet, birds rose clapping from trees along the dual carriageway as she went on. "He was sitting there reading that *Finian's Wake*, and I happened to know it hadn't any chapters. I don't know how anyone can waste their time with such stuff. Just let me finish this chapter, he said, while his dinner went cold. I was so furious I picked up a cream puff and threw it at him. I didn't mean it to go on his book, but he said I did and used that as an excuse to leave me."

Last time the cream puff had been a plate of baked beans on toast. "Yeah, well," Ted muttered, shaking a kitten from his ankle. "I'm keeping you from your work."

As he stamped upstairs, the wood amplified his peevishness. Right, sure, she was lonely, she wanted someone to talk to. But he had work to do. And really, there was no wonder she was lonely. Few people would be prepared to suffer her for long.

In his flat his essay was waiting, but he didn't feel like writing now. He cursed: on the way home he had made himself ready to sit down and write. He tried to phone Ken, but the party line was occupied by two women, busy surpassing each other's ailments.

He opened the window. The flowers in the decanter on the sill had withered, and he threw them towards the pile of weeds two stories below. Mrs Dame was nowhere in sight. After a while he heard her climbing the stairs, wheezing a little. For a moment he feared she might knock for a chat. But the wheezing faded upwards, and soon he heard her footsteps overhead.

His essay lay on the table, surrounded by texts. *Butcher's Films; a Structuralist History. Les Films* "Z +" *de BUTCHERS et ses amis. The Conventions of the British B-Feature and the Signature of Montgomery Tully: a Problem in Decipherment.* When he'd chosen cinema as a subject he had expected to enjoy himself. Well, at least there was Hitchcock to look forward to next term.

The last line he'd written waited patiently. "The local-rep conventions of the British B-feature—" How on earth had he meant to continue? He liked the phrase too much to delete it. He stared emptily at the page. At last he

stood up. Perhaps when he'd found out what Ken wanted he would be able to write.

As soon as he picked up the phone he heard Mrs Dame's voice. "He said I distracted him from his reading. He sat there with his feet up and said that."

God, no! He would never get through now. She saved up her phone calls for the evenings, when they were cheaper; then she would chatter for hours. Before he could utter the sound he was tempted to make, he slammed the receiver into its cradle. Her voice—muttering through the ceiling, drifting down into the open window—faltered for a moment, then went on. The occasional word or phrase came clear, plucking at his attention, tempting his ears to strain.

He couldn't write unless he carried everything to the library, and that was a mile away. Surely he could read. He gazed at *Les Films* "Z + ", translating mentally from the point at which he'd stopped reading. "Within the most severe restrictions of the budget, these gleams of imagination are like triumphant buds. One feels the delight of the naturalist who discovers a lone flower among apparently barren rocks." But the room was growing darker as the sky filled with cloud. As he peered more closely at the text, Mrs Dame's voice insinuated words into his translation. "Consider too the moment (one of the most beautiful in the entire British cinema) in *Master Spy* where June Thorburn discovers that her suspicions of Stephen Murray are, after all, unfounded. The direction and acting are simply the invisible frame of the script. Such simplicity and directness are a cream puff."

"God!" He shoved his chair back violently; it clawed the floorboards. Her muttering seeped into the room, her words formed and dissolved. The heat made him feel limp and cumbersome, the heavy dimness strained his eyes. He went to the window to breathe, to find calm.

As he reached the window her voice ceased. Perhaps her listener had interrupted. Silence touched him softly through the window, like a breeze. The thickening sky changed slowly, almost indiscernibly. The traffic had gone home to dinner. The trees along the carriageway held their poses, hardly trembling. The hole that had been advancing along the roadway was empty and silent now, surrounded by dormant warning lights. Ted leaned his elbows on the sill.

But the silence wasn't soothing. It was unnatural, the product of too many coincidences; it couldn't last for long. His nerves were edgily alert for its

breaking. Overhead a ragged black mass was descending, blotting out half the sky. It seemed to compress the silence. No doubt because he was unwillingly alert, Ted felt as though he was being watched too. Surely the silence, in its brittleness and tension, must be like the silence of a forest when a predator was near.

He started. Mrs Dame's voice had recommenced, an insistent bumbling, It nagged violently at him. Even if he shut the window, trapping himself with the heat, there was nowhere in his flat he could escape her voice. He began to curse loudly: "Jesus God almighty…" He combined everything sexual, religious, or scatological he could think of, and found that he knew a good many words.

When at last he was silent he heard Mrs Dame's voice, wandering unchecked. His chest felt tight, perhaps holding back a scream of rage. His surroundings seemed to have altered subtly, for the worse. Beyond the trees that divided the carriageway, the houses brooded, gloomily luminous, beneath the slumped dark sky. Dull red blobs hung around the hole in the road; the sullenly glowing foliage looked paralysed. The ominous mumbling of the city, faint yet huge, surrounded him. He felt more strongly as though he was being watched. He blamed everything he felt on her voice. "I wish something would shut you up for a while," he said as loudly as he could, and began to turn away.

Something halted him. The silence was closer, more oppressive; it seemed actually to have muffled Mrs Dame's voice. Everything shone luridly. A dark hugeness stooped towards him. The mass of black cloud had altered; it was an enormous slowly smouldering head. Its eyes, sooty unequal blotches, shifted lethargically; jagged teeth lengthened and dissolved in the tattered smile. As the mass spread almost imperceptibly across the grey, its smile widening, it seemed to lean towards him. It pressed darkness into the room.

He flinched back, and saw that the decanter was toppling from the sill. He must have knocked it over. It was odd he hadn't felt the impact. He caught the decanter and replaced it on the sill. No wonder he hadn't felt it, no wonder his imagination was getting in his way: Mrs Dame's muttering had won.

When he switched on the light it looked dim, cloaked by smoke. Darkness still made its presence felt in the room; so did the sense of watching. He'd

had enough. There was no point in trying to work. Another evening wasted. He clumped downstairs angrily, tensely determined to relax. Overhead the clouds were moving on, still keeping their rain to themselves.

Ken wasn't in any of the pubs: not the Philharmonic, nor O'Connor's, nor the Grapes, nor the Augustus John. Ted became increasingly frustrated and depressed. He must make sure of this holiday. He was going away with Ken for a long weekend in three days, if they were going at all. Just a few days' break from Mrs Dame would let him work, he was sure. He managed to chat, and to play bar billiards. More and more students crowded in, the ceiling of smoke thickened and sank. His tankards huddled together on the table.

When at last he rambled home from an impromptu party, Mrs Dame's light was out. The sight heartened him. Perhaps now he could write. And perhaps not, he thought, laughing at his beery clumsiness as he fumbled with his sandals.

The decanter caught his attention. A small dark object was visible inside it, at the bottom. He raised the sash in the hope of a breeze, then he examined the decanter. The facets of cut glass distorted the object; so did the beer. He couldn't make it out. A lump of soot, a shifting pool of muddy fluid, a dead insect? No doubt it would be clearer in the morning. His sandals flopped underfoot on the floorboards, like loose tongues. He extricated his feet at last and slid into bed.

Pounding woke him. He rose carefully and took two aspirins. After a while some of the pounding went away; the rest stayed outside, in the road. He gazed from the window, palms over his ears. A pneumatic drill was inching the hole along the roadway towards him.

He squinted painfully at the decanter. Something had lodged in it, but what? The cut glass confused his view. As he turned the decanter in his hands the object seemed to swell, to move of its own accord; there was a suggestion of long feelers or legs. Yet when he peered down the glass throat the decanter looked empty, and when he shook it upside down nothing rattled or fell out. Perhaps when he'd knocked over the decanter it had cracked, perhaps he was seeing a flaw. He hoped not; he'd found the decanter black with grime in a junk shop nearby, he had been proud of his find once he'd cleaned it. Maybe one day, he thought, I'll have something to decant. That woman upstairs will make me into a wino.

He hurried to class and blinked at the film. Monochrome figures posed, reading their lines. He might just as well have his eyes closed. He listened to the heroine's description of the plot so far. She'd missed out a scene—no, his mind had; he'd blacked out for a moment. He blinked at a talking tableau, then his eyes sank closed again; just let him rest them a moment longer. Music woke him: THE END. Afterwards, fellow students applauded his honest response.

At least he managed to contact Ken, who had retrieved his tent and sleeping bags from a borrower. He would call for Ted in his van. Ted relaxed. Now nothing could disturb him in his flat, not even Mrs Dame.

When he heard her as he neared the house he smiled wryly. She didn't bother him so much now. She had a friend to tea; he heard spoons rattling demurely in china. The evening grew cold, and he closed the window. Voices penetrated the ceiling; occasionally he heard Mrs Dame's friend chattering shrilly in an attempt to outdistance Mrs Dame, who headed her off easily and began another anecdote. Rather her than me, Ted thought, laughing. He turned to his essay and quickly wrote several pages.

Later he became less tolerant. He couldn't be expected to endure her waking him up. When he went to bed the night seemed oppressively tense, as though clouds were hanging low and electric, although the sky was clear. He felt restless and irritable, but eventually slept—only to be awakened by Mrs Dame. He could tell by the cadence of her voice that she was talking, almost shouting, in her sleep. Perhaps the tension of the night was affecting her. Can't she even shut up when she's asleep? he thought, glaring at the dark.

As he lay on his side he could see a faint distorted ghost of the decanter, projected by the streetlamps onto the fitted wardrobe. It was moving. No, a darker shadow was squeezing out of the watery outline of the neck. He turned his head sharply. Some kind of insect, or a spider, was emerging; he saw long legs twitching on the glass lip. He hoped it would go out through the gap he'd left beneath the sash. If only it were a genie emerging from the bottle it could go and silence Mrs Dame. He closed his eyes, reaching for slumber before he woke entirely, and tried to lull the crick in his neck to sleep.

A cry woke him. Was it one of the ground-floor cats? He lay in his own warmth and tried not to care, but his heart kept him awake. A bell tolled two

o’clock. The next cry was louder. His heart leapt, racing, though he realised now that it was Mrs Dame crying out in her sleep. Couldn’t she even have a nightmare quietly? He might just as well be in bed with her, God forbid. She was moaning now; muffled as it was, it sounded rather like a singer’s doodling. After a while it soothed him to sleep.

Good God, what now? He kept his eyes determinedly shut. It must be dawn, for light was filtering through his eyelids. Soon he heard the sound again: a faint squeaking of claws on glass. It would be one of the cats—they often appeared on the sill, furry ghosts mopping at the window. He sighed. All we need now is a brass band, to play me a lullaby. He dragged more of the blanket over his ear.

The decanter was rocking. Something was struggling to squeeze back into the glass mouth. The legs scrabbled, squeaking on the glass, trying to force the swollen body down. But the body was larger than the mouth of the decanter. The decanter tipped over, fell, smashed. Ted woke gasping and leapt out of bed.

The decanter lay in fragments. His head felt as if it had been cracked open too. He sat on the bed and made himself calm down. The glimpse of the insect, the sound of the cat’s claws, the fall of the decanter: these were the sources of his dream, which must have lasted only the second before he woke. Yesterday he must have replaced the decanter unstably. His head throbbed jaggedly, his heart jerked. Glaring upwards made him feel a little better. It was all that woman’s fault.

The day’s lectures examined the theme of misunderstanding in Butcher’s films. Ted’s eyes burned. The lecturer swam forward, hot and bright, droning. Misunderstanding. Here again we see the theme. Once more the theme of misunderstanding. When Ted walked home at last his mind was dull, featureless. Tonight he’d have an early night.

If that woman let him sleep. Well, tonight he’d wake her if he had to. She had no right to keep other people awake with her restlessness. He couldn’t hear her as he approached the house; that was encouraging. An old woman was hobbling up the front path, stopping to rest her shopping bag. “I’ll carry that for you,” he said, and she turned. It was Mrs Dame.

He managed to disguise his gasp as a cough. Once before he’d seen her ill, white- faced, when she had tripped on the stairs. But now, for the first time, she looked old. She was stooped, her skin hung slumped on her; she

massaged her ankles, which were clearly painful. “Thank you,” she said when he picked up the shopping bag. She seemed hardly to recognise him.

“Can I get you anything?” he said, dismayed.

She smiled weakly at him. Her face looked like wax, a little melted. “No, thank you. I’m all right now.”

He could hardly believe that he wished she were more talkative. “Have you been to the doctor?”

“I don’t need him,” she said with a hint of her old vitality. “He’s got enough old crocks to see to without me wasting his time. I’ll be all right when my legs have had a bit of a rest.”

He left the bag outside her door. He felt vaguely guilty: now he’d have some peace—but good God, it wasn’t he who’d made her ill, was it? Nevertheless he felt embarrassed when, going down, he met her on his landing. “Thank you,” she said as she began to clamber up the last flight of stairs. He smiled nervously, blushing for no reason he understood, and fled into his flat.

Later he brought home his dinner. As he ate the curry from its plastic container, he felt uneasy. The city wound down quietly into evening; a few boys shouted around a football, occasional cars swished past, but they weren’t what he was straining to hear. He was waiting irritably, anxiously, for Mrs Dame’s voice.

She would be all right. She had been when she’d fallen on the stairs. Or perhaps she wouldn’t be; after all, she was getting old. In any case, there was nothing he could do. He washed up his fork and turned to his essay. His eyes felt as though they were smouldering.

The interchangeable personalities of many British B-feature performers, he wrote. The white page glared; his eyes twitched. Around him the room wavered in sympathy, and something scuttled across the wardrobe. When he glanced round, there was only the noise of a car emerging from the side street opposite. It must have been that: the car’s headlights hurrying the shadow of branches over the wardrobe, like a bunch of long rapid legs.

He finished his sentence somehow. Some performances actually imitate the performances of stars, he went on, which sometimes has the effect The silence distracted him, as if someone was watching, mutely reproving; his eyes felt hot and huge. What effect? Reproving him for what? He sighed,

and capped his pen. At least he was going away tomorrow. There was no point in forcing himself to write now, when he was so aware of waiting to hear Mrs Dame's voice.

Later he heard her, when he went upstairs to the toilet; there was none on his floor. Beneath the unshaded bulb the bare dusty stairs looked old and cheerless. As he climbed them he heard a sound like the song of a wind in a cranny. Not until he reached the top landing did he realise that the sound was composed of words—that it was her voice.

"Leave my legs," she was pleading feebly. "Leave them now." Her voice sounded slurred, as if she was drunk. She was only talking in her sleep, that was why she sounded so odd. He heard a violent snore, then silence. After a while her voice recommenced. What was she saying now? He tiptoed across the landing and stooped carefully towards her door.

As his ear touched the panel he heard a sound beyond. Had she fallen out of bed? Certainly something large and soft had fallen, and it seemed to be surrounded by a pattering on the carpet. The time switch clicked out, blinding him with darkness. In a moment he heard her voice. "Leave them now," she moaned, "leave them." She was all right, she must have pushed something off the bed: probably the bedspread. If he knocked he would only wake her. He fumbled in the dark for the time switch. Behind him her voice slurred, moaning.

When he returned to his flat he found that now he'd heard her voice, he could still hear it: an almost inaudible blurred sound, rising and falling. It reminded him unpleasantly of the sound a fly's wings make, struggling as a spider feasts. The night seemed very cold. He closed the window and filled a hot water bottle. Her voice buzzed, trapped.

It must have been that unpleasant resemblance that led, when sleep overtook him at last, to the dream. Something was tapping on the window, softly, insistently. He turned his head reluctantly. Dawn coated everything like smoke, but he could see a large dark shape dangling beyond the pane, spinning slowly, swaying lightly towards the glass, bumping against it. It was a package with a withered face: Mrs Dame's face, which had grown a thick grey beard. No, the beard was web, filling her slack mouth as though it were a yawning crevice. Her face bobbed up in the window frame; she was being reeled in from above. He tried to wake, but sleep dragged him down, grey and vague as the dawn.

Eventually the pneumatic drill woke him. He lay sweating, tangled in the blankets. Sunlight filled the room, which was very hot. Gradually, too gradually, the dream faded. He lay welcoming the light. At last he fished out the hot water bottle, which flopped under the bed. He was enormously glad to get up—and about time; he had overslept. Ken would be here soon.

He opened the windows and ate breakfast hastily. The flat overhead was silent, so far as he could hear over the chattering of the drill. Should he go up and knock? But then he mightn't be able to escape her conversation when he ought to be getting ready for the weekend. Her friends would look after her if she needed help. He might go up, if he had time before Ken arrived.

He hurried about, checking that plugs were unplugged, sockets switched off. The space between the fitted wardrobe and the ceiling distracted him. The gap was dim, but at the back, against the wall, he could see a large dark mass. He must clean up the flat. A horn was shouting a tune below, in the road. It was Ken's van.

He closed the window and grabbed his bulging rucksack. The road repairers were directly outside now; as he slammed the door of the flat and shoved it to make sure, it sounded as though the drill was in his room. The sound like scuttling on the floorboards must be a vibration from the drill.

Ken drove through the Saturday morning traffic. The van plunged into the Mersey Tunnel and out to North Wales. Neither Ken nor Ted had any lectures until Tuesday. They walked and climbed in the sharp air; they drank, and drove singing back to their tent. Above them mountains and stars glittered, distant and cold.

When they returned to Liverpool on Monday night they were famished. They ate at the Kebab House. O'Connor's was just down the block; friends cheered as they entered. Several hours later the barman got rid of them at last. "If you're driving I'm walking," Ted told Ken, trying to hold a shop-front still.

He walked home, from side to side of the back streets. Moonlight glinted on the smooth red sandstone of the Anglican cathedral, at the top of its tremendous steps; nearby he heard a smash of glass, shouts, screams. Fragments of streets led down towards the river. Along Princes Road, trees and lamp standards stood unmoving; Ted tried to compete with them, but couldn't manage it. His leaning pushed him forward, almost at a run, to the

house. He couldn't remember when he'd been so drunk; he ought to have had more than one meal today. Mrs Dame's window was dark and silent. She must be asleep.

His flat was full of a block of silence. The silence seemed lifeless, his flat unwelcoming—bare floorboards, the previous tenant's paint on the walls. Surely he wasn't yearning to hear that woman's voice. Something rustled as he entered the main room: a page among the books on the table. Some performances actually imitate the performances of stars, it said, which sometimes has the effect What effect? Never mind. He'd finish that tomorrow.

He gazed at the tousled bed. What a mess to come home to. But the way he felt at the moment, he could sleep on anything. The tangled tunnel of blankets looked warmer than the chill flat. Some performances actually imitate The sentence nagged him like a tune whose conclusion he couldn't remember. Forget it. Brush teeth, wash face, fall into bed.

He pushed the kitchen door farther open, and heard something move away from it, rustling faintly. They were still rustling when he found the light switch: a couple of moths, several large flies, all withered. Well, it was the spider season, but he wished the spiders would clear up after themselves.

He stooped to pick up the dustpan, and frowned. Beneath the window lay a scattering of small bones, of a mouse or a bird. Of course, he'd forgotten to close the kitchen window before leaving. One of the cats from downstairs must have slipped in; it was probably responsible for the insects too.

Water clanked and squeaked in the pipes. The tap choked on knots as he splashed icy water on his face, gasping. As he dabbed water from his eyes, a shadow scuttled over the fitted wardrobe. The wardrobe door rattled, and then the floorboards in the main room. Only headlights through branches, only vibrations from the road. Some performances actually

He padded across the cold boards and switched off the lights, then he slid into the tangle of blankets. God, they weren't so warm; his toes squirmed. And he'd forgotten to take out last week's hot water bottle, damn it. He could feel it dragging at the bedclothes; it was hanging down beyond the mattress in a sack of loose blanket. He tried to hook it with his toes but couldn't reach it. At least it wouldn't chill his feet.

The bed drifted gently on a sea of beer. Some performances have the Oh come on, he thought angrily. He glared at the room to tire his eyes. It glowed faintly with moonlight, as though steeped in luminous paint. He glared at the glimmering wardrobe, at the dark gap above. What was that, at the back? It must be the accumulation of dust which he had to clean out, but it was pale as the moonlight, of which its appearance must be an effect. It looked like a tiny body, its head in the shadows, its limbs drawn up into a withered tangle. God, it looked like a colourless baby; he could even see one of its hands, could count the shrivelled fingers. What on earth was it? But the wardrobe was sailing sideways on his beer. He closed his eyes and drifted down, down into sleep.

A figure lay on a bed. Its face was dim, as was the dark shape crouched at the foot of the bed. Limbs—many of them, it seemed—reached for the sleeper, inching it down the bed. The figure writhed helplessly, its hands fluttered feebly as the wings of an ensnared fly. It moaned.

Ted woke. His eyes opened, fleeing the dream; the room sprang up around him, glowing dimly. He lay on his back while his heart thudded like a huge soft drum. The luminous room looked hardly more reassuring than the dream. God, he would almost have preferred Mrs Dame's muttering to this.

And now he wouldn't be able to sleep, because he was painfully cold. He couldn't feel his legs, they were so numb. He reached down to massage them. His hands seemed retarded and clumsy; they touched his legs and found them stiff, but his legs couldn't feel his fingers at all. Had he been lying awry, or was it the cold? He rubbed his thighs and cursed his awkwardness.

He couldn't move his feet. Though he strained, the dim hump in the blankets at the far end of the bed stood absolutely still. Panic was gathering. He lifted the blankets and pushed them back. His blood felt slow and thick; so did he.

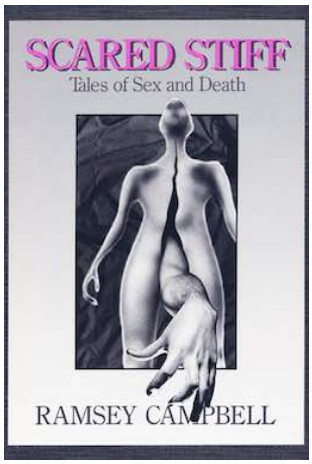
Before he had uncovered his legs, the hump in the blankets collapsed, although he hadn't felt his feet move. Something dragged at the bedclothes, and he heard it thump the floor softly, in the sack of blankets beyond the mattress. Only the hot water bottle. At once he remembered that he had fished the bottle out of bed last week.

He managed to sit up, and threw the blankets away violently. Panic filled him, overwhelming but vague. He was swaying; he had to punch the

mattress in order to prop himself up. His shadow dimmed the bed, he could hardly see his legs. They looked short, perhaps because of the dimness, and oddly featureless, like smooth glistening sticks. He couldn't move them at all.

As he stared down, struggling feebly and frantically to clear his mind, the dim hump came groping hungrily out of the tangle of blankets.

Stages



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As Ray emerged onto the pavement he heard someone approaching. Before he could retreat to the house, a shadow spilled from the side road. Its figure followed: a large man, stumping rapidly. As his shadow unrolled before him, shrank beneath him and unrolled again, it seemed that the shadow was carrying him. He bore down heavily on Ray, who dwindled within himself, withered by fear. The man knew he was tripping.

The man came abreast of the gate and glanced suspiciously at him. Beneath the streetlamp the man looked unnaturally pink, like a boiled baby; his cheeks trembled a little, gelatinously, as he walked. He was a quaking mass of flesh, contained only by a thin bag of skin. He frowned disapprovingly at Ray and was past, drawing his tail of shadow into him.

He hadn't really known Ray was tripping. That was just paranoia; Ray had had the same experience on acid. Nevertheless Ray almost ran across the bare roadway. If a fuzz should stop him, ask him why he was walking at this hour—He was sure his speech would betray him. The glare of the streetlights faded behind him, like a negative shadow.

At the park he slowed. Behind his shoulder a tower block loomed. The sky was fat with clouds; a sharp-edged full moon cut swiftly through them. An avenue of trees stretched dimming into the vague depths of the park. On either side lawns gleamed, black. He walked forward, beneath the trees.

Their shadows closed over him like shutters, regular as the mechanism of a sleepy camera. Again and again he emerged into the clear pure moonlight. The September morning was warm. His trip seemed to be fading; it moved windless trees a little for him, unfurling their foliage into subtle patterns. He strolled, calm.

He emerged into a stone glade. Paths led from the space, flowing slowly away from him, like streams of luminous mercury. On the central island stood a statue of Peter Pan. Ray caressed the smooth limbs, which felt chill and clean. Around him, in the frosty light, the world seemed perfect.

He strolled toward the widening of the lake. The sky was clearer, scattered with clouds like frozen quiffs of foam, like long many-bellied trumpets of glowing white porcelain. If the clouds moved, they did so imperceptibly. Everything was still; the moon hung, a bright flawless circle, razor-keen. Ray moved amid his own stillness, so quietly he couldn't hear his footsteps.

Where the lake widened, a bat hunted. He could see each beat of its wings as it circled, a dodging tattered scrap of darkness. Ducks bobbed together at the edge of the lake; a solitary duck, startled by his approach, ploughed out into the water. Its ripples shattered the reflections of light and clouds.

He stared at the scribbling of light on the ripples. The light formed lines of symbols, changing constantly. He could almost interpret them. As he gazed, trying to open his mind to their sense, they steadied and were reflected light and clouds.

That was their meaning: but what did it mean? This new peak of the trip had taken him unawares. Was it about to lead him again into the undreamed? He waited edgily. Over the bright still lake he heard a sound like breathing. It came from a shelter on the far bank.

He gazed across the lake. Somehow the sound promised the resolution to which the whole trip had been leading. The ground and the water held still, frozen by moonlight. He walked back to a path of stepping stones and crossed the lake.

The door and the panes of the shelter were missing. Rags of paint shone white on the moon-blackened wood: the surface looked like a dead tree patched with mould. He could hear now that the sound was a woman's voice, gasping. He reached the dark gap of a window, and peered in.

In the path of moonlight from the doorway, on a coat spread over the floorboards, a woman lay. Her knees rose, her legs strained wide. Beside her, his back to Ray, knelt a man, naked from the waist down. His hand caressed her beneath her long skirt, his mouth moved over her breasts in the frame of her unbuttoned blouse. Clothes were tangled nearby in the shadows.

Ray gazed. The couple's clothes were black in the moonlight, their bodies gleamed white. It seemed that they were performing an act for him, on the stage of light. As their limbs began to move faster, palely luminous, they seemed like animated statues: almost as if his own sculptures had come to life.

The woman's gasps were faster; her tongue ranged about her lips, thrusting them wider. Her trailing ash-blond hair swayed slightly, like moonlight on the lake. Her knees rose high, her black skirt fell softly away like a shadow, unveiling her legs. They opened, shining white; her curly mat glinted darkly. The man knelt above her; the marble club of his penis plunged into shadow.

As Ray watched the man's first slow lingering thrusts, all the woman's limbs embracing him, the path and the lake receded. There was nothing but the play on the stage of moonlight. He could feel the sensations of the players. It was more than imagination. All sense of his separateness from them had receded with the world.

He could feel the soft sheath clenching, squeezing, urging him on. But simultaneously he felt the urgent thrusts of the penis, throbbing snugly within him, stroking warmth to a blaze. Somehow this wasn't disturbing. He accepted it, let the quickening rhythms work together, leading him toward a resolution, a kind of unity. When it came it was an explosion of light beyond light, a prolonged shout of sensation. It had no form he could perceive, and that was its meaning.

Very slowly his old senses drifted back. In time he would know who and where he was. But something was troubling him. It wasn't worth noticing, it would spoil the perfection—but it snagged his perceptions. It was a dimly gleaming face, peering through a gap in the wood. It was his own face, watching him.

He flooded back into himself with a rush that left him gasping. He was at the window. The couple stared up at him; the man was making to rise to his feet. Ray flinched back, then saw that the man could hardly rise. Was he weakened by the experience too? Ray pushed himself away from the shelter, on which his semen glistened. Light and stillness filled the park; there was no sound of pursuit.

He lay on his bed, content to let the trip fade. He was glad he hadn't taken it with Jane. Dawn gathered. As the trip subsided, he began to wonder what

exactly had happened in the park.

Perhaps there had been no couple. Later on Sunday, after he'd slept, that seemed possible; it had been a powerful trip. He hoped Dave had synthesised a large batch, whatever the stuff was. The trip had been the most profound experience of his life. Next day, on his way to the College of Art, he made a detour to the science block.

Dave was working at a bench. His sidelong grin of greeting was unusually wary. There was nobody else in earshot. "Hey, about that stuff," Ray said.

Dave smiled hastily. "Right. I'm sorry about that. You haven't taken any, have you?"

"Yeah, on Saturday. It was amazing."

"You're kidding. We took some over the weekend. It was worse than a bad trip, we were nearly screaming before we found the tranquillizers."

"Yeah? Maybe it's best to take it by yourself. Listen, I can handle it. You haven't promised it to anyone, have you?"

"I was going to push it onto Norman, the guy who gave us that bad acid."

"Hey, don't waste it. I'd really like to try some more." Couldn't Dave see how eager he was? "I'll score it tonight, okay?"

Dave turned back to the bench where he'd synthesised the drug. "You can have it for nothing," he said, shrugging.

Ray crossed the university precinct. A group of students passed, bright and loud. A girl whose drawings he knew greeted him; he grinned vaguely. Most of the students had left for the holidays: perhaps these few had stayed to work—selling their work, like Ray, to eke out their grants. He walked along concrete paths between the white chopped-off planes of buildings. The precinct seemed swept clean of all but a few thin saplings. It interested him that Dave and his friends had had a bad trip. It convinced Ray again that there was no use tripping with others in order to get closer to them.

He'd tried. He had felt he ought to get closer to people. But acid had made his friends swollen, knobbly, oily, sometimes dwarfish or malformed; their faces had looked stupid, spiteful, empty. They'd gazed at him, reading his irrepressible thoughts; the faces had hated him for threatening their good trip, for his contempt; they'd excluded him. Some of his friends he hadn't dared speak to again.

Surely he could trip with Jane. After all, they were living together. But the summer night had closed in, squeezing out sweat, oppressing his thoughts. As he lay encased in sweat, beside Jane's hot rubbery flesh, his mind had boiled muddily with childhood guilts, the furtive sadism of his early adolescence, the failures of young adulthood. He'd glimpsed how Jane must see him: cold, dried-up, wound into himself, a premature crone. She'd turned then to gaze into his eyes, and he had watched her smile die. She had talked; she'd wept, but he couldn't respond. Dawn had drifted toward the window, like thick mist, discolouring the end of the trip. To try to escape the depression, to act, he'd said indifferently "We'd better split up." That had been a month ago; he hadn't seen her since.

Perhaps acid wasn't right for him. But now there was Dave's invention. On Saturday, for the first time while tripping, Ray had been hardly conscious of himself: that was worth having. He hurried into the College of Art, happy to continue his work.

The sculpture was a large white translucent plastic egg; the tapering end suggested a breast with a smooth hollow instead of a nipple. He worked quickly, anxious to catch Dave before he could change his mind, and finished by mid-afternoon. He turned the egg-breast in his hands. He enjoyed it: it was simple, pure, beautiful. He packed it carefully in a carton, and bore it away. The collector who had admired and bought a similar piece of his might like it. "Arp," the collector had said: he'd been comparing Ray's work with that of a French sculptor, not burping.

Dave's flat overlooked a police station. Pastel blue police cars lurked in the alleys. Ray's feet slashed through the grass which matted the path. Dave opened the front door, frowning. "I was coming to see you later," he said; scoring at his flat made him paranoid.

His wife Chris was breast-feeding their baby; Ray smiled nervously and glanced at Dave. "Is that some of your work?" Chris said.

Ray unpacked the egg. "That's really nice," Chris said. "Yeah, that's pretty good," Dave said. "I'll get you that stuff."

"What stuff? You're not giving him that."

"It's all right, Chris. It gave me a good trip."

"But it's awful shit. Really. Dave wanted to get back at Norman with it. I told him he ought to flush it. He still ought to." Her large moist eyes gazed

anxiously at Ray; her breast drooped unnoticed into the baby's toothless mouth. He struggled not to look at her. He packed the tinfoil package in the carton, next to the egg, and hurried away.

Back home he bought a take-away curry. No wonder they'd had a bad trip if they'd taken it opposite the police station, with the baby screaming. The plastic egg's curve gleamed; its completion made him feel peaceful, content. Should he take a trip while he felt so?

Yes—and go and visit friends. Sue and Nick had a balcony overlooking the park: a good place to trip. If they weren't tripping, his trip might help him respond to them. And it might help his work develop. His sculptures resembled fragments of bodies, cleaned and perfected; perhaps this trip would humanise his work. Most of all, he wanted to recapture the intensity of Saturday's experience.

He fished the tinfoil out of a disemboweled fountain pen. Unfolding the package, he gazed at the ten bright green microdots, ready to be magnified by his mind and decoded. He swallowed one and returned the package to its lair. A bitter slightly metallic taste faded from his tongue.

Washing up, he remembered Saturday's trip. Music had become a physical force, a flow of intense energy: its intensity had been its meaning. After an hour he'd gone to the window, to watch the passers-by four stories below. His vision was spectacularly intensified; he could see their faces clearly. Gradually thoughts began to drift through his mind—strange thoughts, often more like memories. Hurrying thoughts, lonely thoughts, emotions trailing images: not his thoughts at all. At last he had begun to locate expressions on the tiny passing faces that matched the passing thoughts. He'd stood there for hours, reading the crowd, feeling closer to people than ever before. When the street became deserted his mind felt clear, surrounded by the unselfconscious being of the view.

He washed and shaved; the cold keen blade slid over his throat. Should he take the egg-breast with him, to look at while tripping? No: Sue and Nick might think he was seeking praise. He hurried himself out, empty-handed.

His hand was on the gate when the world began to shake. Convulsive shudders passed through houses and walls, which undulated like submarine plants. Rapid incessant lightning filled the sky. Passers-by stared at him: his gasp had been almost a shout. Their faces brightened, blazing, about to be transformed into pure energy. He fled into the house.

He climbed the growing staircase, panting. He'd thought he had at least half an hour. Jesus. The stairwell rushed away beneath him, yawning. His door key had become fumbling rubber. He turned it at last and slammed himself into the flat, shouting "Jesus!"

He was safe now. The bright stylised flowers of his wallpaper swayed in a gale, but that was familiar enough. After a while he carried a chair to the window. The sky was a delicate blue, puffed up here and there with clouds. No, not clouds: they were fat cartoonish letters, spelling STRONGER THAN ACID! DEEPER THAN STP! He lay helpless in his chair, giggling.

He watched the sky clearing gradually of cloud, a great steady purification. Slowly it was purified even of light. Below him in the dark hung the backs of the heads of the streetlights, silhouetted snake-heads casting their glare at the roadway.

Faint yellow light lapped over the road. In a moment the car emerged from the side street and parked outside the house opposite Ray's. He heard doors slam. Two figures went into the house; he watched lights climb the stairs. Lights sprang into the window of a flat, opposite and a little lower than his. Two figures appeared between borders of open curtains; it was as though they had made a stage entrance.

His heightened vision closed on them. The man switched on the television and sat on a couch; the girl left the stage, limping slightly, to return with a trolleyload of supper. Ray watched as they shared their coffee. Their minuteness gave each gesture and expression an intense significance. Before long he saw they were moving toward sex.

He studied their mating ritual. They glanced secretly at each other, admiring, tender. The man gestured a splash of coffee into his face, the girl gazed at him with amused resigned affection. When their eyes met, they needed only a slight smile to exchange their private language.

They drew together on the couch and watched a film. A mouth screamed silently in a shower; a knife hacked. A man fell backwards down a staircase, his face bloodily cloven. Light stirred in empty dusty eyes, a skull bloomed from a face. The window seemed like a cinema screen now, framing a tinier monochrome screen. The girl flinched, the man put his arm about her shoulders; she nestled her head on his chest. Ray found this part of the ritual frustrating.

As the film ended the girl rose and limped quickly away. The next room lit up orange. Beneath an orange Chinese paper lantern Ray saw a bed. The girl limped to the window. She mustn't draw the curtains! She grasped them; Ray's held breath throbbed in his ears; she pulled the curtains together. But she left a crack, which framed half the distant bed.

The man extinguished the living room. After a while he appeared naked in the distance of the gap, and sat on the bed. She took his hand, as if for a dance. The touch seemed to speak between them. She sat on his lap; he cradled her shoulders. In the orange light their bodies glowed like perfected flesh. Now they were puppets, playing for Ray.

The man's lips moved tenderly over her nipples. Her head strained back, eyes closed, mouth wide. His arm supported her, his free hand stroked her genitals. For a while their faces clung together violently. She looked down; the man's penis was flaccid. She knelt between his legs, her long black hair trailing its shine over his thighs. Her mouth lifted his penis, her head nodded. All at once the man levered himself back on the bed, grasping handfuls of blankets. She followed and mounted him. Ray felt the gasp of her body as she took him into her.

He felt the man's slow heavy rhythm. He felt the mouthing—partly controlled, partly helpless—of the girl's genitals. As their rhythms quickened, his sensations flickered from the girl to the man and back again. He felt the widening waves of the girl's pleasure, the slowly growing throb of the man's: his mind seemed to dart wherever sensation was most intense, back and forth, faster than their quickening.

Too fast! He tried to slow them. Suddenly, by what was perhaps a misperception, he seemed to do so; he held the man back, retarded his furious movements a little. He seemed to will the girl to clench her thighs more tightly about his back. Perhaps his perceptions were lagging, dislocated, and he was failing to realise that he'd already seen the couple's actions before apparently willing them. He had no chance to wonder. He was shuttling from sensation to sensation, faster than the strobe of acid: the orange puppets rocked together wildly, waves of sensation overwhelmed him, pounding, flickering. The vibration of the flickering became pure energy that flooded him, blazing, blinding, timeless.

The orange room went out. Gradually the street faded back. He could only go to bed and lie gazing at the dark as it filled with memories, increasingly

elaborate, of what had happened.

All the next day he wondered whether he had controlled them.

Had he really slowed the man, made the girl's legs move? Or could the couple themselves have been a hallucination? His surroundings simplified themselves, as his trip ceased to elaborate them. Gazing from the window, he watched the couple emerge from the house. So they were real. He wiped the stain of his semen from the pane.

That evening he rang the collector. Yes, he was certainly interested in anything Ray had to show. He'd view it tomorrow, if that was convenient. Had Ray any new work in mind? Ray emerged from the long box of stale tobacco-smoke and walked home, musing.

The following day, while waiting for the collector, he made some preliminary sketches. One appealed to him: a kind of idealised penis without orifices, its shaft embedded snugly in fat rings. Should the shaft be curved? Should the whole convey a movement of the rings, or ought they to seem one with the shaft? He lost interest and stood at the window, pondering. But the flat opposite was deserted.

The collector viewed the egg. Yes; yes, he liked it. Strong and clean, yet delicate. Ray showed him the sketches. Interesting; he'd like to see the work when it was completed.

Ray made more sketches. His intuition was clear to itself, but his pencil got in the way. His latest sketch looked like a banana stuffed through doughnuts. Still, there was no hurry, no point in forcing it. The collector had paid him well; that freed him of the need to work for a while. He felt content. He read *Rolling Stone*, listened to Tangerine Dream. He watched the couple opposite.

They read, ate meals at a shiny pine table, watched television. They came on stage from the landing or the kitchen. He wasn't controlling them now, that was certain; he felt as though they were perversely refusing to have sex. As the week passed he became increasingly irritable. He had to know whether he could still make the imaginative leap, to share their experience.

On the fourth night they went into the bedroom. The gap between the curtains was narrower, like a slitted eye standing on its corner. Nevertheless he could see them on the bed, their tiny bodies stained orange. As they

coupled he felt only mild stimulation. Without his heightened eyesight he found them blurred, distant, uninvolving. He turned away, depressed.

He had to know. One more trip would tell. He mustn't keep taking it, he had to work. But the collector would wait. Just one more, to make sure; then he'd save the experience for whenever it meant most to him. He drew a group of rapid sketches. The last, in which the phallic shaft lay cradled in muscular swellings, might well be worth sculpting.

For two nights the couple went into the bedroom to sleep. God, Ray thought. They wouldn't get much work in the blue movies. Come on, man, get it up. The third night he watched them emerge from the toy car. The man held the gate open, the girl hurried to the front door with her key. To Ray their actions were annoyingly banal. Come on, come on.

Lights stepped up the house. The couple appeared in the living room. The girl limped away, but to the kitchen. Her trolley nosed into the room, bearing coffee. Ray felt he'd seen it all before. He left the window to roll a joint; perhaps he'd listen to some electronics. Licking the cigarette-papers sealed, he glanced toward the window. The orange room was lit.

Jesus! He ran to peer around the sash. The girl was pulling the bedspread smooth. She called to the man, who replied without looking up from his newspaper. She shrugged—a little disappointed or rebuffed—and sat waiting on the bed. Ray had time. He snatched the tinfoil out of the pen, and almost spilled the microdots. He lifted one with his wet fingertip, and swallowed the drug hastily. He switched out the light and sat at the window.

He waited. The girl waited. The man turned pages leisurely. Come on, Ray urged the chemical. His previous trip had been unexpectedly swift; he hoped this one would be still quicker. The girl was stretching her legs, tapping her foot impatiently. She massaged her unsteady leg.

She called again. The man let go of the newspaper lingeringly, and prepared to stand up. Not yet! The girl was coming toward the window. She was reaching for the curtains. Ray strained his mind, groping for the trip; his tongue felt rough and dry. The last of the dim light in the sky began to jerk rapidly. Don't close the curtains! His head throbbed. Her face seemed to approach him, clearing, as though he had focused a microscope. The curtains closed. Then her hands faltered, and she turned away beyond the gap, looking puzzled and preoccupied. Ray relaxed; but his forehead was thick with sweat.

The couple undressed. Around them the frame of the world shook incessantly. The man sat on the bed. The girl knelt and stroked the insides of his thighs; her mouth fastened softly on his hanging penis. Something had gone wrong.

It was only the strain of preventing her from drawing the curtains. Once Ray recovered from that, he'd be fine. But there was more: a growing dissatisfaction and frustration. The man lifted the girl gently, holding her hands; he clasped her shoulders with one arm and caressed her breasts as she moved luxuriously on his lap. Ray watched, bored. Didn't they ever try anything else?

More than that was frustrating him. He felt excluded from their tenderness. All he could see were two tiny dolls, squirming slowly over each other. God, wouldn't they ever get on? He was surrounded by his own clammy flesh. His mind groped to catch hold of what the dolls felt. He felt dull, empty, grimy, alone: a sticky dusty figure at a window, spying. He sat trembling, paralysed by the strain of his impotent will. Get on with it! he screamed. You limping cocksucker, you useless dangler, get fucking!

Without warning he felt his will catch hold of them.

Yet still he couldn't experience their tenderness. He felt the excitement dormant in their separate genitals. He felt their bodies moving slowly, cradled in each other's affection. They were deliberately frustrating him. He reached out a hand and, grasping his penis, began to rub the glans against the girl's thigh. On the screen across the road he watched this acted out.

The girl's eyes opened sharply. She smiled, puzzled, shaking her head; she made to kneel. But Ray dug his fingers into her shoulder. The penis was erect now. He shoved her back hastily. She reached to begin caressing him, but he thrust two fingers impatiently deep, opening her for his penis before the thing went down again.

Her frown was of pain now; she began to struggle. He forced his penis deeper, knocking her thighs wider with his pelvis. Sensations were throbbing; light and pleasure merged. Beyond this lurked a shadow of disquiet as his body worked, apparently independent of him yet undeniably giving him pleasure. But the throbbing blotted that out. In a few moments the frantic vibrations were a dazzling uninterrupted flood.

When the tiny room settled back onto his vision, Ray saw the man sitting on the bed, stunned, mouth open. The girl was limping heavily about the room, collecting her clothes, weeping. Perhaps she was exaggerating her limp. The man seemed to think so; he pointed at her leg and said something, cold-faced. The girl curled upon the living room couch, weeping. Ray gazed at the window where dark and the man sat; he stared at the girl's shaking body.

Eventually he leapt up and hurried to the park. Flowers glowed luridly in the ponderous night; his trip shifted them sluggishly. At last two fragments of the moon appeared, floating calmly in the sky and in the lake.

In the morning he gazed from his window. The girl limped out, carrying suitcases. The man hurried after her, trying to take the cases, to persuade her toward his car. But she stood at the bus-stop, gripping the cases tight, turning her back whenever he approached. After a while he went back into the house. Ray gazed indifferently; the scene was distant, uninvolving. Soon a bus bore the girl away.

He craned from the window. Yes, it was. "Dave!" he shouted, in case Dave were headed elsewhere, and hurried downstairs. He opened the front door, grinning broadly. "I was going to come and see you," he said.

"Yeah?" Dave didn't seem anxious to know why. "How's your work going?" he said.

"Pretty good," Ray panted, climbing. "I sold that piece you saw."

"Listen, I can't stay long."

"You've got time for a coffee."

"All right." Dave sounded reluctant. He gazed about the flat. Ray knew the place was a mess: so what? He waited to say so what, but Dave said "Did you sell that piece quickly? Good, great. What have you done since?"

"Oh, I've got something in mind." He waited for Dave to follow him into the kitchen. "Hey, what I wanted to ask you," he said, spooning coffee. "Have you got any more of that stuff?"

"You had it all. You can work without that, can't you?"

"Sure, if I have to," Ray said indignantly. "But I've got something working now that's going to be really good, if I can get it right. You're not turning

straight, are you? What was that you said about the first trip you gave me—science helping art?"

"Yeah, but that was acid."

"So? This stuff is better. Listen, can you make me some more?"

"No chance. I threw away the formula."

"Jesus Christ." Ray stared dully; his mind slumped. "Jesus Christ. Why?"

"If you had the trip Chris and I had you'd know why. Anyway, I only discovered the formula by accident. We don't know what the side effects might have been. That was evil shit, I'm sure it was. Listen, if you've got any left throw it away. I'll make you some good acid."

He kept talking, though Ray's back was unreadable. Ray thrust a mug of coffee at him, then turned away. "Chris says Jane was asking for you," Dave said. "She hasn't been with anyone since you split up. Chris says she seems lonely." But Ray seemed uninterested. Dave gulped his coffee, and left.

Ray stared from the kitchen window. Narrow alleys separated cramped yards, which looked to him like stalls in a slaughterhouse. He made himself walk into the living room, and flicked idly through the clutter of sketches. He stared at the shaft and the rings. It depressed him now; its failure did. *In Praise of Quoits*, he'd named it on his last trip.

He unfolded the tinfoil from its wrinkles. Somewhere in the four remaining microdots was what he sought. But his last four trips had been confused, disturbing. At best they'd contained reminiscences of the flood of transcendent energy he had experienced. He had seen something profound and absolute, and now he'd forgotten it; he was left with imperfect glimpses. If only he could see it once more, he would create a masterpiece.

But how? Not on his recent trips. He'd taken to watching the houses opposite, waiting for bedroom curtains to close. He'd found that if he let his mind reach out steadily, his will could penetrate curtains. It wasn't just imagination; in some rooms he found only featureless sleep, or pale floating dreams. Elsewhere he encountered plunging bodies, acceleration of sensation. He became aware of sensation first, only gradually of the participants; this was disturbing, and sometimes exciting. But even here he was a spectator, a passive participant, surrounded by his flickering.

His last trip had been worse than frustrating. In the month since he'd begun to use the drug, tolerance had overtaken him; the drug's effects were weaker. He'd felt like a feeble ghost, fluttering helplessly between his own moist cumbersome flesh and dark half-seen acts in alien rooms. His sight had seemed to retreat from him; he saw, but it meant nothing. He had drifted helplessly for hours, unable to distinguish where he was, from scene to scene: dim movements of flesh in dark rooms, sluggish gropings, clamminess. Often he couldn't make out the sex or sexes of the participants. Some scenes of pain or humiliation he struggled to escape, but that only trapped him more securely, holding him down in his suffocating disgust. Perhaps these scenes were objectively real, perhaps hallucinations and hence part of him: which would be worse? At last the dawn and his stumbling bumping heart slowly recalled him. He had sat panting, staring, hollow.

He gazed at the four microdots. It hadn't been the drug's fault. The setting had been to blame; that, and the underdose. And he had been wrong to leave himself so much at the mercy of his imagination. He needed to see his performers before him, not imagine them. He needed to see them tonight.

Tonight would be perfect. The moon would be full, whitewashing the world. White had always been the colour of his best trips. He'd go to the park. There might well be couples there, and if not, it was surrounded by flats; his heightened sight would bring them close. And tomorrow he'd begin his new work; his mind would grasp it this time. Perhaps he'd even sketch while tripping. He felt elated, eager for the night.

He went down to the Wampo Egg and took away a curry. He ate and washed up. He sorted through his latest sketches; some might not be so bad, after all. The city calmed; below, on the road, the slow bullying of traffic moved on, leaving only the occasional rapid car. Banks of cloud parted like curtains on the night sky; the full moon floated leisurely over the roofs. A clock tolled midnight. Smiling at its solemnity, Ray opened the tinfoil.

Not many trips left, and no possibility of more. He must make sure this was a good one. He swallowed a microdot; then, impulsively, another. Apprehension flooded him. He slid the tinfoil into the pen. It was all right. The setting was perfect, he wasn't taking a risk.

He strode toward the park. Sharp white edges of cloud framed the black sky; the lines of trees leading into the park stood thinly, glinting. At the end

of the avenue Peter Pan glowed palely. Ray walked along the edge of the lake and lay on the grass overlooking the shelter where he'd seen the couple. He wasn't visible from the path. He felt someone might use the shelter tonight.

His trip began. The moon parted into segments; its reflection opened like a shining anemone. Threads of light vibrated in the lake; soon the water shone white in the frame of absolute dark. Beyond the park, when he looked, windows darted about their buildings like swarms of rectangular fireflies. He watched, engrossed. The world became insubstantial; he was alone with the open universe.

Hours passed. The night grew cold; he was angry with himself for shivering. The shelter stood deserted. Soon he would have passed the peak of his trip. He stared across the park. Windows were lit, but their curtains were drawn tight. Had he wasted this trip? He felt the insidious creeping of depression. He lay on the chilly grass, unable to think what to do.

A light caught his attention. A car had halted on the road beyond the lake. Its headlights went out; he heard doors slam. He held his breath. Please, please. Footsteps. Approaching. Turning aside, fading. No, they'd returned to the main path. He saw the couple catch sight of the shelter. The man's boots crunched on the path, the girl's long skirt billowed gently. Ray watched them enter the shelter. He heard their murmur of approval; their footsteps turned hollow, echoing.

He inched down the slope, over the slippery grass. He dug his fingers into the earth. Suppose he slithered and fell against the shelter! But he was nearly there. The couple were out of sight beneath the windows; his ears were full of the faint brushing of clothes pulled over flesh. He grasped the earth, inching down.

He had nearly reached the shelter when a light sprang on him, trapping him. He gasped; his heart felt pierced. The eye of light hung above the path, behind it a shadow loomed. "Now just what are you up to?" the shadow said.

It was a policeman. Ray felt his throat clench tight. If he spoke he would only scream. The light held his face; the shadow moved closer. In a moment it would see his trip in his eyes, it would take hold of him, engulf him.

Ray lowered his head to escape the probing of the light and pretended to cough, hacking at his throat to clear it of terror, to give himself time. Now he could speak. He could. Speak. "I was just walking," he stammered. "I heard something in there. In the shelter. Something going on."

The light glared at him. At last the shadow went to a window, to peer in. "Oh, that's the way, is it?" it said happily.

Ray backed away, along the path. The shadow stood poking its light into the shelter. Suddenly it turned. "Hey, you!" it shouted. "I didn't say you could go!" But Ray was running, past the shaking blinding lake, past the pale stone boy, into the striped dark avenue. When at last he halted, only silence was following him. He stood sucking at the air. Then his fingers clawed. Christ, no. He clenched his body, but it was no use. Beneath the moon, amid the whispering of the trees, his bowels betrayed him.

He lay. As dawn approached, a cold light settled into the room, like mud. A thought gathered, as slowly and inexorably. Would he ever be able to have sex again, other than alone?

His future stifled him: an endless version of this moment. He would be alone with his own emptiness, with nothing to sustain him: certainly not his work. He was a helpless speck in a void, without even the will to suicide. Reaching down into himself, he found nothing. There was nothing to reach out for.

Except—

At noon he was waiting outside the English department. Amid the long white frontage, glass doors displayed planes of sunlight. The glass swung, the light slipped; faces emerged, singly or in bobbing bunches. Some, which he knew, greeted him. Sometimes he remembered to smile.

Jane was one of the last to emerge. She strode alone through the sliding light. She shook back her blond hair, presenting her face to the sunlight. He knew that gesture, it was Jane: it looked defiant, self-possessed, but in fact it was a gesture against her own vulnerability. A shiver passed through Ray. Jane glanced at him, and saw him.

She hesitated. Quick masks of emotion passed over her face: exaggerated surprise, aloofness, nonchalance; then she gave a slight neutral smile. She made to walk unhurriedly away, but he'd already reached her, almost running. "Hello, Jane," he said.

"Hello," she said as if he were someone she knew slightly. "What a coincidence."

He couldn't tell if she meant that ironically. "Right. I was just passing," he said. "Shall we go for a drink?"

She shrugged. "If you like."

The campus pub was scattered with students; billiards clicked in an alcove. "Do you want your usual?" Ray said.

"Yes please," but she spoke curtly, as if she resented his sharing her memory.

He drank beer. The last of the trip made it taste metallic, but he could feel that it was helping to bring him down. They chatted awkwardly. Jane was reading Hardy. Laurel too? Her smile at that was genuinely pained; once it wouldn't have been. Did she like the books? He must read some. Which did she recommend? She was finishing her drink. "Listen," he said hurriedly.

She glanced warily at him. "I'm sorry," he stumbled. "For what I said to you that time. I was having a bad trip, that's all. It wasn't our fault, it was the setting. I mean, it was so hot. I was nearly suffocating."

She gazed, waiting patiently for him to finish. "Do you see what I mean?" he demanded.

"Yes, all right," she agreed indifferently. She picked up her handbag. "Thank you for the drink. I must go to class."

He felt his hand trembling beneath the table, writhing. He couldn't reach her, she was alien now. Suddenly the last of the trip impelled him to say "I wasn't really passing. I waited for you. I'm lonely."

She stood looking down at him. She allowed no expression to reach her face, but her eyes were moist. He thought she was trying to pull away. "I'm lonely without you," he said. "Come back with me. Please."

After a pause she sat down. "Oh Ray." She sounded helpless.

He chattered on. "I'm really sorry. Look, I do—" (he glanced at the nearby students, felt embarrassment rising in him like bile; he could say it, he must, it was true) "I do love you, you know."

"Do you?" She shook her head sadly; its blond curtains swayed. "I don't know."

"Please let me talk to you tonight," he said desperately. "Come and talk to me. I'll meet you from your class."

"No, don't meet me. All right, I'll come. I haven't forgotten where you live." She stood up before he could reply, and was gone.

She was only asserting her independence. Refusing to be met left her free to choose to come to him; she valued that freedom. But she wouldn't break her word. Nevertheless he suffered nervously throughout the afternoon. Mightn't she decide she had promised too hastily, just to escape him? Might she send a friend to say she'd changed her mind? He stared from his window; cars rattled by, glinting like dusty tin; solitary figures wandered, clutching dilapidated bags and groping in litter-bins. He started to tidy the flat desultorily, but gave up the attempt. Let Jane see how he'd become.

Clouds grew on the sky. Like white mold, he thought. Cars multiplied on the road, hindering each other; people squeezed through the maze of metal. Jane's class must be over by now. She wasn't coming. She hadn't even bothered to let him know. Dull light hung beneath the ceiling of cloud; girls passed below, their colours sullen. There was a blonde. Another. Another. The crowd was full of blond heads, floating sluggishly, infuriatingly. There was Jane.

He had to crane out to make certain. She saw him, but didn't wave until he did; then she raised one hand briefly. He couldn't read her face, his vision seemed frustratingly limited now. He ran downstairs.

"Hello," she said tonelessly. He wasn't sure whether she had come only because she couldn't tell him she had reconsidered. He let her precede him up the stairs. Her hips swung, sketching her buttocks on her long skirt. He remembered her body.

She entered the flat, and balked. She stared at the tangled bed-clothes, the jumble of sketches, the clogged dustpan lurking under a chair, a recumbent mug dribbling cold coffee on the floorboards. He could feel her struggling to select a reaction. All at once she sighed loudly. "Oh, Ray. I can't leave you for five minutes, can I?"

He gasped silently behind her. She'd taken him back. He turned her by the shoulders, to hold her, but she pushed her hands against his chest. "Never mind that. Just you help me to clear up this mess."

He saw the flat as she must see it: abandoned, squalid. He hurried about, ashamed. Still, it was only because he had been alone that he'd let the squalor accumulate; it showed he needed Jane. Together they smoothed out the bed, as they'd often used to. All at once Jane hugged him violently. "I thought you hated me," she said. "Don't ever look at me again like you did, or I really will leave you."

She gazed at him, then she kissed him. But before he could enter her mouth she had slipped away and was leafing through his sketches. "How's your work?"

"All right."

She frowned at his tonelessness. "'All right', or just 'all right'?"

Abruptly he remembered how it had been between them. Sometimes her concern had stifled him: her anxious questions, her still more anxious silences. If he told her to leave him alone he hurt her, if he didn't respond he was cold, and hurt her; he used to squirm inwardly, helplessly, as she tried to come oppressively close to him. Now he could only shake his head and reply "Just all right."

She put her arms around him, her stiffness softened. "Never mind," she said. "You'll be able to work now."

Slowly her smile opened. She accepted him again, completely. As he gazed down at her, his penis stirred. He pushed her gently backwards onto the bed. He began to push her T-shirt up over her bare breasts, but her fingers light on his wrist halted him. She drew the curtains and undressed herself; then she pushed him back and stripped him.

She wanted them both to be aware that she was giving herself freely. She mounted his body, moving violently over him. He thought her violence was meant to tell him she had had nobody else. He caressed her, his tongue impaled her mouth. But all he could feel was the limpness of his penis.

Had his trips fixated him? Couldn't he respond to Jane now? He closed his eyes, straining inwardly, twitching the muscles around his genitals. But that was simply frustrating. Temporary impotence had always wound him tight within himself.

Jane kissed his clenched eyes. Her warmth moved along his body; her mouth surrounded his glans. He stared down. His penis reminded him of raw sausage, served between his thighs; Jane's mouth hung on it, like a

leech. Her head nodded mechanically. He was aware of nothing but his absurd flesh. The rubbing of her mouth, her heavy warmth between his legs, annoyed him. He felt in danger of being engulfed by her dutiful ministering. There was one way he might break through his oppression—He moved his legs restlessly. "Just let me go for a pee," he said.

As he hurried by the table, he palmed the hollow pen. He'd thought he might share the last trip with Jane. In a way that was what he would be doing: perhaps the best way. He emptied both microdots down his throat.

He drummed his fingers on the bath. It shouldn't take long. He padded about the cramped carpet; his hanging glans bumped his thigh, feebly as an infant's fist. He stared at his face in the mirror. Wasn't it beginning to transform—or were his tired eyes betraying him? "What are you doing?" Jane called.

He stared guiltily. "Just coming," he said, and his face grinned savagely under glass, at the cruel inadvertent pun. He knew how she felt: he seemed to have been in the bathroom for hours. He couldn't delay longer, she would feel rebuffed. He unbolted the door and went out.

She lay patiently, legs ajar. She looked a little slighted. Her eyebrows rose, her lips moved: she was going to ask whether he didn't want her. He did, he did! Shrinking from the threat of a discussion, he knelt to kiss her genitals.

As he did so, the world shivered. He glanced up, kneeling. Jane's body was foreshortened; her head, her breasts and her vagina were in conjunction—it was as though she had become a symbol of herself. All at once he felt a surge of calm profound affection.

Her cunt glowed. It was an archway of luminous flesh. Around it shone a dark pubic aura. He touched the archway and it opened, revealing the deep hall of glowing flesh. Jane watched his awe, and he felt her yearning for him. His penis rose at once; its inner light brightened slowly, in the rhythm of its throbbing.

He entered Jane. At once a sense of her spilled over him, overwhelming. She was energies: warmth, compassion, devotion, practicality, sexuality; they flooded him. She offered them, if he should want them. Their flood was dazzling yet calm; it couldn't harm him. Compared to this, his previous trips were dim.

Each of his movements, however tiny, intensified the flood. His eyes were open, yet he was somewhere in a shimmering region beyond sight; his senses had merged. Another movement, and he felt his orgasm rushing closer, closer, until it overtook him. His spasms seemed enormous, violent, prolonged: explosions of energy so intense they were separated by gaps of blinded darkness. Someone was gasping. His heart throbbed more furiously than his penis.

All of him went limp. He was somewhere, content to return to himself in time. He was aware that Jane's orgasm had begun. It was more violent than his own had been. It was a whirlpool of sensation, engulfing him.

No more! Too much! But the intensity of her sensations sucked him in, more inexorably than anything he had witnessed before. Her orgasm assaulted all his senses; he had no chance to be aware of anything else.

They lay exhausted. Gingerly he reached for his senses. Nothing: vacancy. Where was he? Senses drifted like dreams, uncontrollably. What could he feel, weighing him down? What was wrong?

Eyes opened. Stared. Someone gasped, then cried out. A face stared at him with extinguished eyes: his own face.

His own body lay lifeless on him, weighing him down. Hands reached upward, thrusting frantically at his body's shoulders, hands with slim fingers and long nails: Jane's hands. He heard her sobbing, but he couldn't see her face. Yes: he could see her eyes, blurred as they were. Her rapid eyelids tried to snatch tears from them. He was looking out through them.

He mustn't panic. He'd been out of his body before, on all these trips. On the first he'd seen his own face, peering into the shelter. He could get back. His body had only passed out for a moment, stunned by its orgasm. But Jane's cries were losing their hold on words now. She was punching the shoulders of the body, struggling to free herself.

Don't! Jesus! He must reach her, reassure her. But he was being carried away by terror, by the sight of his own lifeless face gaping at him, his own flopping body cut off completely from him, a dead mindless weight. Her terror was swelling uncontrollably. It burst and flooded him, crushing him, sweeping away his control, his identity. As Jane lay screaming and heaving at his body, he dwindled to a thin helpless shriek, lost in hers.

The Faces At Pine Dunes

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I

When his parents began arguing Michael went outside. He could still hear them through the thin wall of the trailer. 'We needn't stop yet,' his mother was pleading.

'We're stopping,' his father said. 'It's time to stop wandering.'

But why should she want to leave here? Michael gazed about the trailer park—the Pine Dunes Caravanserai. The metal village of trailers surrounded him, cold and bright in the November afternoon. Beyond the dunes ahead he heard the dozing of the sea. On the three remaining sides a forest stood: remnants of autumn, ghosts of colour, were scattered over the trees; distant branches displayed a last golden mist of leaves. He inhaled the calm. Already he felt at home.

His mother was persisting. 'You're still young,' she told his father.

She's kidding! Michael thought. Perhaps she was trying flattery. 'There are places we haven't seen,' she said wistfully.

'We don't need to. We need to be here.'

The slowness of the argument, the voices muffled by the metal wall, frustrated Michael; he wanted to be sure that he was staying here. He hurried into the trailer. 'I want to stay here. Why do we have to keep moving all the time?'

'Don't come in here talking to your mother like that,' his father shouted.

He should have stayed out. The argument seemed to cramp the already crowded space within the trailer; it made his father's presence yet more overwhelming. The man's enormous wheezing body sat plumped on the couch, which sagged beneath his weight; his small frail wife was perched

on what little of the couch was unoccupied, as though she'd been squeezed tiny to fit. Gazing at them, Michael felt suffocated. 'I'm going out,' he said.

'Don't go out,' his mother said anxiously; he couldn't see why. 'We won't argue any more. You stay in and do something. Study.'

'Let him be. The sooner he meets people here, the better.'

Michael resented the implication that by going out he was obeying his father. 'I'm just going out for a walk,' he said. The reassurance might help her; he knew how it felt to be overborne by the man.

At the door he glanced back. His mother had opened her mouth, but his father said 'We're staying. I've made my decision.' And he'd lie in it, Michael thought, still resentful. All the man could do was lie there, he thought spitefully; that was all he was fat for. He went out, sniggering. The way his father had gained weight during the past year, his coming to rest in this trailer park reminded Michael of an elephant's arrival at its graveyard.

It was colder now. Michael turned up the hood of his anorak. Curtains were closing and glowing. Trees stood, intricately precise, against a sky like translucent papery jade. He began to climb the dunes towards the sea. But over there the sky was blackened; a sea dark as mud tossed nervously and flopped across the bleak beach. He turned towards the forest. Behind him sand hissed through grass.

The forest shifted in the wind. Shoals of leaves swam in the air, at the tips of webs of twigs. He followed a path which led from the Caravanserai's approach road. Shortly the diversity of trees gave way to thousands of pines. Pine cones lay like wattled eggs on beds of fallen needles. The spread of needles glowed deep orange in the early evening, an orange tapestry displaying rank upon rank of slender pines, dwindling into twilight.

The path led him on. The pines were shouldered out by stouter trees, which reached overhead, tangling. Beyond the tangle the blue of the sky grew deeper; a crescent moon slid from branch to branch. Bushes massed among the trunks; they grew higher and closer as he pushed through. The curve of the path would take him back towards the road.

The ground was turning softer underfoot. It sucked his feet in the dark. The shrubs had closed over him now; he could hardly see. He struggled between them, pursuing the curve. Leaves rubbed together rustling at his ear, like

desiccated lips; their dry dead tongues rattled. All at once the roof of the wooden tunnel dropped sharply. To go further he would have to crawl.

He turned with difficulty. On both sides thorns caught his sleeves; his dark was hemmed in by two ranks of dim captors. It was as though midnight had already fallen here, beneath the tangled arches; but the dark was solid and clawed. Overhead, netted fragments of night sky illuminated the tunnel hardly at all.

He managed to extricate himself, and hurried back. But he had taken only a few steps when his way was blocked by hulking spiky darkness. He dodged to the left of the shrub, then to the right, trying irritably to calm his heart. But there was no path. He had lost his way in the dark. Around him dimness rustled, chattering.

He began to curse himself. What had possessed him to come in here? Why on earth had he chosen to explore so late in the day? How could the woods be so interminable? He groped for openings between masses of thorns. Sometimes he found them, though often they would not admit his body. The darkness was a maze of false paths.

Eventually he had to return to the mouth of the tunnel and crawl. Unseen moisture welled up from the ground, between his fingers. Shrubs leaned closer as he advanced, poking him with thorns. His skin felt fragile, and nervously unstable; he burned but his heat often seemed to break, flooding him with the chill of the night.

There was something even less pleasant. As he crawled, the leaning darkness—or part of it—seemed to move beside him. It was as though someone were pacing him, perhaps on all fours, outside the tunnel. When he halted, so did the pacing. It would reach the end of the tunnel just as he did.

Nothing but imagination, helped by the closely looming treetrunks beyond the shrubs. Apart from the creaking of wood and the rattling sway of leaves, there was no sound beyond the tunnel—certainly none of pacing. He crawled. The cumbersome moist sounds that accompanied the pacing were those of his own progress. But he crawled more slowly, and the darkness imitated him. Wasn't the thorny runnel dwindling ahead? It would trap him. Suddenly panicking, he began to scrabble backwards.

The thorns hardly hindered his retreat. He must have broken them down. He emerged gasping, glad of the tiny gain in light. Around him shrubs pressed close as ever. He stamped his way back along what he'd thought was his original path. When he reached the hindrance he smashed his way between the shrubs, struggling and snarling, savage with panic, determined not to yield. His hands were torn; he heard cloth rip. Well, the thorns could have that.

When at last he reached an open space his panic sighed loudly out of him. He began to walk as rapidly as seemed safe, towards where he remembered the road to be. Overhead black nets of branches turned, momentarily catching stars. Once, amid the enormous threshing of the woods, he thought he heard a heavy body shoving through the nearby bushes. Good luck to whoever it was. Ahead, in the barred dark, hung little lighted windows. He had found the trailer park, but only by losing his way.

He was home. He hurried into the light, smiling. In the metal alleys pegged shirts hung neck down, dripping; they flapped desperately on the wind. The trailer was dark. In the main room, lying on the couch like someone's abandoned reading, was a note: OUT, BACK LATER. His mother had added DON'T GO TO BED TOO LATE.

He'd been looking forward to companionship. Now the trailer seemed too brightly lit, and false: a furnished tin can. He made himself coffee, leafed desultorily through his floppy paperbacks, opened and closed a pocket chess set. He poked through his box of souvenirs: shells, smooth stones; a minute Bible; a globe of synthetic snow within which a huge vague figure, presumably meant to be a snowman, loomed outside a house; a dead flashlight fitted with a set of clip-on Halloween faces; a dull grey ring whose metal swelled into a bulge over which colours crawled slowly, changing. The cardboard box was full of memories: the Severn valley, the Welsh hills, the garishly glittering mile of Blackpool: he couldn't remember where the ring had come from. But the memories were dim tonight, uninvolving.

He wandered into his parents' room. It looked to him like a second-hand store for clothes and toiletries. He found his father's large metal box, but it was locked as usual. Well, Michael didn't want to read his old books anyway. He searched for contraceptives, but as he'd expected, there were none. If he wasn't mistaken, his parents had no need for them. Poor buggers.

He'd never been able to imagine how, out of proportion as they seemed to be, they had begot him.

Eventually he went out. The incessant rocking of the trailer, its hollow booming in the wind, had begun to infuriate him. He hurried along the road between the pines; wind sifted through needles. On the main road buses ran to Liverpool. But he'd already been there several times. He caught a bus to the opposite terminus.

The bus was almost empty. A few passengers rattled in their lighted pod over the bumpy country roads. Darkness streamed by, sometimes becoming dim hedges. The scoop of the headlamps set light to moths, and once to a squirrel. Ahead the sky glowed, as if with a localised dawn. Lights began to emerge from behind silhouetted houses; streets opened, brightening.

The bus halted in a square, beside a village cross. The passengers hurried away, snuggling into their collars. Almost at once the street was deserted, the bus extinguished. Folded awnings clattered, tugged by the wind. Perhaps after all he should have gone into the city. He was stranded here for —he read the timetable: God, two hours until the last bus.

He wandered among the grey stone houses. Streetlamps glared silver; the light coated shop windows, behind whose flowering of frost he could see faint ghosts of merchandise. Curtains shone warmly, chimneys smoked. His heels clanked mechanically on the cobbles. Streets, streets, empty streets. Then the streets became crowded, with gleaming parked cars. Ahead, on the wall of a building, was a plaque of coloured light. FOUR IN THE MORNING. A club.

He hesitated, then he descended the steps. Maybe he wouldn't fit in with the brand-new sports car set, but anything was better than wandering the icy streets. At the bottom of the stone flight, a desk stood beside a door to coloured dimness. A broken-nosed man wearing evening dress sat behind the desk. 'Are you a member, sir?' he said in an accent that was almost as convincing as his suit.

Inside was worse than Michael had feared. On a dancefloor couples turned lethargically, glittering and changing colour like toy dancers. Clumps of people stood shouting at each other in county accents, swaying and laughing; some stared at him as they laughed. He heard their talk: motorboats, bloody bolshies, someone's third abortion. He didn't mind

meeting new people—he'd had to learn not to mind—but he could tell these people preferred, now they'd stared, to ignore him.

His three pounds' membership fee included a free drink. I should think so too, he thought. He ordered a beer, to the barman's faint contempt. As he carried the tankard to one of the low bare tables he was conscious of his boots, tramping the floorboards. There was nothing wrong with them, he'd wiped them. He sipped, making the drink last, and gazed into the beer's dim glow.

When someone else sat at the table he didn't look at her. He had to glance up at last, because she was staring. What was the matter with her, was he on show? Often in groups he felt alien, but he'd never felt more of a freak than here. His large-boned arms huddled protectively around him, his gawky legs drew up.

But she was smiling. Her stare was wide-eyed, innocent, if somehow odd. 'I haven't seen you before,' she said. 'What's your name?'

'Michael.' It sounded like phlegm; he cleared his throat. 'Michael. What's yours?'

'June.' She made a face as though it tasted like medicine.

'Nothing wrong with that.' Her hint of dissatisfaction with herself had emboldened him.

'You haven't moved here, have you? Are you visiting?'

There was something strange about her: about her eyes, about the way she seemed to search for questions. 'My parents have a caravan,' he said. 'We're in the Pine Dunes Caravanserai. We docked just last week.'

'Yeah.' She drew the word out like a sigh. 'Like a ship. That must be fantastic. I wish I had that. Just to be able to see new things all the time, new places. The only way you can see new things here is taking acid. I'm tripping now.'

His eyebrows lifted slightly; his faint smile shrugged.

'That's what I mean,' she said, smiling. 'These people here would be really shocked. They're so provincial. You aren't.'

In fact he hadn't been sure how to react. The pupils of her eyes were expanding and contracting rapidly, independently of each other. But her small face was attractive, her small body had large firm breasts.

'I saw the moon dancing before,' she said. 'I'm beginning to come down now. I thought I'd like to look at people. You wouldn't know I was tripping, would you? I can control it when I want to.'

She wasn't really talking to him, he thought; she just wanted an audience to trip to. He'd heard things about LSD. 'Aren't you afraid of starting to trip when you don't mean to?'

'Flashbacks, you mean. I never have them. I shouldn't like that.' She gazed at his scepticism. 'There's no need to be afraid of drugs,' she said. 'All sorts of people used to trip. Witches used to. Look, it tells you about it in here.'

She fumbled a book out of her handbag; she seemed to have difficulty in wielding her fingers. *Witchcraft in England*. 'You can have that,' she said. 'Have you got a job?'

It took him a moment to realise that she'd changed the subject. 'No,' he said. 'I haven't left school long. I had to have extra school because of all the moving. I'm twenty. I expect I'll get a job soon. I think we're staying here.'

'That could be a good job,' she said, pointing at a notice behind the bar: TRAINEE BARMAN REQUIRED. 'I think they want to get rid of that guy there. People don't like him. I know a lot of people would come here if they got someone friendly like you.'

Was it just her trip talking? Two girls said goodbye to a group, and came over. 'We're going now, June. See you shortly.'

'Right. Hey, this is Michael.'

'Nice to meet you, Michael.'

'Hope we'll see you again.'

Perhaps they might. These people didn't seem so bad after all. He drank his beer and bought another, wincing at the price and gazing at the job notice. June refused a drink: 'It's a downer.' They talked about his travels, her dissatisfactions and her lack of cash to pay for moving. When he had to leave she said, 'I'm glad I met you. I like you.' And she called after him, 'If you got that job I'd come here.'

II

Darkness blinded him. It was heavy on him, and moved. It was more than darkness: it was flesh. Beneath him and around him and above him,

somnolent bodies crawled blindly. They were huge; so was he. As they shifted incessantly he heard sounds of mud or flesh.

He was shifting too. It was more than restlessness. His whole body felt unstable; he couldn't make out his own form—whenever he seemed to perceive it, it changed. And his mind; it felt too full, of alien chunks that ground harshly together. Memories or fantasies floated vaguely through him. Stone circles. Honeycombed mountains; glimmering faces like a cluster of bubbles in a cave mouth. Enormous dreaming eyes beneath stone and sea. A labyrinth of thorns. His own face. But why was his own face only a memory?

He woke. Dawn suffocated him like grey gas; he lay panting. It was all right. It hadn't been his own face that he'd seemed to remember in the dream. His body hadn't grown huge. His large bones were still lanky. But there was a huge figure, nonetheless. It loomed above him at the window, its spread of face staring down at him.

He woke, and had to grab the dark before he could find the light switch. He twisted himself to sit on the edge of the couch, legs tangled in the blankets, so as not to fall asleep again. Around him the trailer was flat and bright, and empty. Beyond the ajar door of his parents' room he could see that their bed was smooth and deserted.

He was sure he'd had that dream before—the figure at the window. Somehow he associated it with a windmill, a childhood memory he couldn't locate. Had he been staying with his grandparents? The dream was fading in the light. He glanced at his clock: two in the morning. He didn't want to sleep again until the dream had gone.

He stood outside the trailer. A wind was rising; a loud whisper passed through the forest, unlit trailers rocked and creaked a little at their moorings; behind everything, vast and constant, the sea rushed vaguely. Scraps of cloud slid over the filling moon; light caught at them, but they slipped away. His parents hadn't taken the car. Where had they gone? Irrationally, he felt he knew, if only he could remember. Why did they go out at night so much?

A sound interrupted his musing. The wind carried it to him only to snatch it away. It seemed distant, and therefore must be loud. Did it contain words? Was someone being violently ill, and trying to shout? The moon's light flapped between a procession of dark clouds. A drunk, no doubt, shouting

incoherently. Michael gazed at the edge of the forest and wondered about his parents. Light and wind shifted the foliage. Then he shrugged. He ought to be used to his parents' nocturnal behaviour by now.

He slammed the door. His dream was still clinging to him. There had been something odd about the head at the window, besides its size. Something about it had reminded him unpleasantly of a bubble. Hadn't that happened the first time he'd had the dream? But he was grinning at himself: never mind dreams, or his parents. Think of June.

She had been in the club almost every evening since he'd taken the job, a month ago. He had dithered for a week, then he'd returned and asked about the notice. Frowning, the barman had called the manager—to throw Michael out? But June had told them her parents knew Michael well. 'All right. We'll give you six weeks and see how you do.' The barman had trained him, always faintly snooty and quick to criticise. But the customers had begun to prefer Michael to serve them. They accepted him, and he found he could be friendly. He'd never felt less like an outsider.

So long as the manager didn't question June's parents. June had invited Michael to the cottage a couple of times. Her parents had been polite, cold, fascinated, contemptuous. He'd tried to fit his lanky legs beneath his chair, so that the flares of his trousers would cover up his boots—and all the while he'd felt superior to these people in some way, if only he could think of it. 'They aren't my kind of people either,' June had told him, walking to the club. 'When can we go to your caravan?'

He didn't know. He hadn't yet told his parents about her; the reaction to the news of his job hadn't been what he'd hoped. His mother had gazed at him sadly, and he'd felt she was holding more of her feelings hidden, as they all had to in the cramped trailer. 'Why don't you go to the city? They'll have better jobs there.'

'But I feel at home here.'

'That's right,' his father had said. 'That's right.' He'd stared at Michael strangely, with a kind of uneasy joy. Michael had felt oppressed, engulfed by the stare. Of course there was nothing wrong, his father had become uneasy on hearing of his son's first job, his first step in the world, that was all.

'Can I borrow the car to get to the club?'

His father had become dogmatic at once; his shell had snapped tight. 'Not yet. You'll get the key soon enough.'

It hadn't seemed worth arguing. Though his parents rarely used the car at night, Michael was never given the key. Where *did* they go at night? 'When you're older' had never seemed much of an explanation. But surely their nocturnal excursions were more frequent now they'd docked at Pine Dunes? And why was his mother so anxious to persuade him to leave?

It didn't matter. Sometimes he was glad that they went out; it gave him a chance to be alone, the trailer seemed less cramped, he could breathe freely. He could relax, safe from the threat of his father's overwhelming presence. And if they hadn't gone out that night he would never have met June.

Because of the wanderings of the trailer he had never had time for close friendships. He had felt more attached to this latest berth than to any person —until he'd met June. She was the first girl to arouse him. Her small slim body, her bright quick eyes, her handfuls of breast—he felt his body stirring as he thought of her.

For years he'd feared he was impotent. Once, in a village school, a boy had shown him an erotic novel. He'd read about the gasps of pleasure, the creaking of the bed. Gradually he'd realised why that troubled him. The walls of the trailer were thin; he could always hear his father snoring or wheezing, like a huge fish stranded on the shore of a dream. But he had never heard his parents copulating.

Their sexual impulse must have faded quickly, soon after he was born—as soon, he thought, as it had served its purpose. Would his own be as feeble? Would it work at all. Yes, he'd gasped over June, the first night his parents were out. 'I think it'd be good to make love on acid,' she'd said as they lay embraced. 'That way you really become one, united together.' But he thought he would be terrified to take LSD, even though what she'd said appealed deeply to him.

He wished she were here now. The trailer rocked; his parents' door swung creaking, imitated by the bathroom door, which often sprang open. He slammed them irritably. The dream of the bubbling head at the window—if that had been what was wrong with it—was drifting away. Soon he'd sleep. He picked up *Witchcraft in England*. It looked dull enough to help him sleep. And it was June's.

Naked witches danced about on the cover, and on many of the pages. They danced obscenely. They danced lewdly. They chanted obscenely. And so on. They used poisonous drugs, such as belladonna. No doubt that had interested June. He leafed idly onward; his gaze flickered impatiently.

Suddenly he halted, at a name: Severnford. Now that was interesting. We can imagine, the book insisted, the witches rowing out to the island in the middle of the dark river, and committing unspeakable acts before the pallid stone in the moonlight; but Michael couldn't imagine anything of the kind, nor did he intend to try. Witches are still reputed to visit the island, the book told him before he interrupted it and riffled on. But a few pages later his gaze was caught again.

He stared at his new name. Then reluctantly he turned to the index. At once words stood out from the columns, eager to be seen. They slipped into his mind as if their slots had been ready for years. Exham. Whitminster. The Old Horns. Holihaven. Dilham. Severnford. His father had halted the trailer at all of them, and his parents had gone out at night.

He was still staring numbly at the list when the door snapped open. His father glanced sharply at him, then went into the bedroom. 'Come on,' he told Michael's mother, and sat heavily on the bed, which squealed. To Michael's bewildered mind his father's body seemed to spread as he sat down, like a dropped jelly. His mother sat obediently; her gaze dodged timidly, she looked pale and shrunken—by fear, Michael knew at once. 'Go to bed,' his father told him, raising one foot effortfully to kick the door shut. Almost until dawn Michael lay in the creaking unstable dark, thinking.

III

'You must have seen all sorts of places,' June said.

'We've seen a few,' said Michael's mother. Her eyes moved uneasily. She seemed nervously resentful, perhaps at being reminded of something she wanted desperately to forget. At last, as if she'd struggled and found courage, she managed to say 'We may see a few more.'

'Oh no we won't,' her husband said. He sat slumped on the couch, as though his body were a burden he'd had to drop there. Now that there were four people in the trailer he seemed to take up even more room; his presence overwhelmed all the spaces between them.

Michael refused to be overwhelmed. He stared at his father. 'What made you choose the places we've lived?' he demanded.

'I had my reasons.'

'What reasons?'

'I'll tell you sometime. Not now, son. You don't want us arguing in front of your girlfriend, do you?'

Into the embarrassed silence June said, 'I really envy you, being able to go everywhere.'

'You'd like to, would you?' Michael's mother said.

'Oh yes. I'd love to see the world.'

His mother turned from the stove. 'You ought to. You're the right age for it. It wouldn't do Michael any harm, either.'

For a moment her eyes were less dull. Michael was glad: he'd thought she would approve of June's wanderlust—that was one reason why he'd given in to June's pleas to meet his parents. Then his father was speaking, and his mother dulled again.

'Best to stay where you're born,' his father told June. 'You won't find a better place than here. I know what I'm talking about.'

'You should try living where I do. It'd kill your head in no time.'

'Mike feels at home here. That's right, isn't it, son? You tell her.'

'I like it here,' Michael said. Words blocked his throat. 'I mean, I met you,' he hawked at June.

His mother chopped vegetables: chop, chop, chop—the sound was harsh, trapped within the metal walls. 'Can I do anything?' June said.

'No thank you. It's all right,' she said indifferently. She hadn't accepted June yet, after all.

'If you're so keen on seeing the world,' his father demanded, 'what's stopping you?'

'I can't afford it, not yet. I work in a boutique, I'm saving the money I'd have spent on clothes. And then I can't drive. I'd need to go with someone who can.'

'Good luck to you. But I don't see Mikey going with you.'

Well, ask *me*! Michael shouted at her, gagged (by unsureness: she mightn't have had him in mind at all). But she only said 'When I travel I'm going to have things from everywhere.'

'I've got some,' he said. 'I've kept some things.' He carried the cardboard box to her, and displayed his souvenirs. 'You can have them if you like,' he said impulsively; if she accepted he would be more sure of her. 'The flashlight only needs batteries.'

But she pushed the plastic faces aside, and picked up the ring. 'I'd like that,' she said, turning it so that its colours spilled slowly over one another, merging and separating. She whispered. 'It's like tripping.'

"There you are. I'm giving it to you.'

His father stared at the ring, then a smile spread his mouth. 'Yes, you give her that. It's as good as an engagement, that ring.'

Michael slid the ring on to her finger before she could change her mind; she had begun to look embarrassed. 'It's lovely,' she said. 'Have we time for Mike to take me for a walk before dinner?'

'You can stay out for an hour if you like,' his mother said, then anxiously: 'Go down to the beach. You might get lost in the woods, in the fog.'

The fog was ambiguous: perhaps thinning, perhaps gathering again. Inside a caravan a radio sang Christmas carols. A sharp-edged bronze sun hung close to the sea. Sea and fog had merged, and might be advancing over the beach. June took Michael's hand as they climbed the slithering dunes. 'I just wanted to come out to talk,' she explained.

So had he. He wanted to tell her what he'd discovered. That was his main reason for inviting her: he needed her support in confronting his parents, he would be too disturbed to confront them alone—he'd needed it earlier when he'd tried to interrogate his father. But what could he tell her? I've found out my parents are witches? You know that book you lent me—

'No, I didn't really want to talk,' she said. 'There were just too many bad vibes in there. I'll be all right, we'll go back soon. But they're strange, your parents, aren't they? I didn't realise your father was so heavy.'

'He used to be like me. He's been getting fatter for the last few months.' After a pause he voiced his worst secret fear: 'I hope I never get like him.'

'You'll have to get lots of exercise. Let's walk as far as the point.'

Ahead along the beach, the grey that stretched on the sea was land, not fog. They trudged towards it. Sand splashed from his boots; June slid, and gripped his hand. He strained to tell her what he'd found out, but each phrase he prepared sounded more absurd: his voice echoed hollowly, closed into his mind. He'd tell her—but not today. He relaxed, and felt enormously relieved; he enjoyed her hand small in his. 'I like fog,' she said. 'There are always surprises in it.'

The bronze sun paced them, sinking. The sea shifted restlessly, muffled. To their left, above the dunes, trees were a flat mass of prickly fog. They were nearly at the point now. It pulled free of the grey, darkening and sharpening. It looked safe enough for them to climb the path.

But when they reached the top it seemed hardly worth the effort. A drab patch of beach and dunes, an indistinct fragment of sea scattered with glitterings of dull brass, surrounded them in a soft unstable frame of fog. Otherwise the view was featureless, except for a tree growing beside the far dunes. Was it a tree? Its branches seemed too straight, its trunk too thick. Suddenly troubled, Michael picked his way over the point as far as he dared. The fog withdrew a little. It wasn't a tree. It was a windmill.

A windmill by the sea! 'My grandparents lived here,' he blurted.

'Oh, did they?'

'You don't understand. They lived near that windmill. It's the same one, I know it is.'

He still wasn't sure whether she felt his confusion. Memories rushed him, as if all at once afloat: he'd been lying on the couch in his grandparents' decrepit trailer, the huge head had loomed at the window, vague with dawn. It must have been a dream then too.

He followed June down the path. Chill fog trailed them, lapping the point. His thoughts drifted, swirling. What did his discovery mean? He couldn't remember his grandparents at all, not even what they'd looked like. They had been his father's parents—why had the man never mentioned them? Why hadn't he remarked that they'd lived here? The sun slid along the rim of the sea, swollen as though with glowing blood. Had his grandparents also been witches?

'Did Mike's grandparents live here, then?' June said.

His mother stared at her. The spoon and saucepan she was holding chattered like nervous teeth, he was sure she was going to scream and throw everything away—the utensils, her self control, the mask behind which she'd hidden to protect him: for how long? For the whole of his childhood? But she stammered 'How did you know that?'

'Mike told me. The windmill just reminded him.'

'Is dinner ready?' Michael interrupted. He wanted to think everything out before questioning his father. But June was opening her mouth to continue. The trailer was crowded, suffocating. Shut up! he screamed at her. Get out! 'Were they born here, then?' June said.

'No, I don't think so.' His mother had turned away and was washing vegetables. June went to hold the dishes. 'So why did they come here?' she said.

His mother frowned, turning back; with her frown she was searching. 'To retire,' she said abruptly.

His father nodded and smiled to himself, squeezing forward his ruff of chins. 'You could retire from the human race here,' June said sourly, and he wheezed like a punctured balloon.

As the four ate dinner, their constraint grew. Michael and June made most of the conversation; his parents replied shortly when at all, and watched. His mother observed June uneasily; he read dislike in her eyes, or pity. He felt irritably resentful, her uneasiness made his skin nervous. Night edged closer to the windows, blank-faced.

His father leaned back as if his weight had toppled the chair, which creaked loudly. He patted his quaking stomach. 'Just storing it up for the winter,' he said, winking at June.

His arms flopped around her shoulders and Michael's. 'You two go well together. Don't they, eh?'

But his wife said only 'I'm going to bed now. I'm very tired. Perhaps we'll see you again,' which sounded like dutiful politeness.

'I hope so,' June said.

'I know we will,' Michael's father said expansively.

Michael walked June to the bus-stop. 'I'll see you at the club,' she said through a kiss. Smouldering cones of yellow light led the bus away, and

were engulfed. As he walked back, twisted shapes of fog bulked between the trees. Nearby in the dark, something shifted moistly.

He halted. What had it been? Blurred trees creaked with a deadened sound, thin trails of fog reached out for him from branches. He'd heard a shifting, deep in the dark. A vague memory plucked at him. He shivered as if to shake it free, into the chill clinging night. A restless moist shifting. He felt as though the depths of the forest were reaching for his mind with ambiguous tatters of grey. He strode rapidly towards the invisible light. Again he heard the slow moist shifting. Only the sea, he told himself. Only the sea.

IV

As he emerged into the open, the clouds parted and the moon rolled free. The enormous shape in the open space glistened with moonlight. The unstable head turned its crawling face towards him.

The dream trailed him to Liverpool, to the central library, although the space and the head had faded before he could make them out—if indeed he had wanted to. A rush of rain, and the bright lights of the library, washed the dream away. He hurried up the wide green stairs to the Religion and Philosophy section.

He pulled books from the shelves. *Lancashire Witches*. *North-West Hauntings*. *Ghostly Lancashire*. The banality of their covers was reassuring; it seemed absurd that his parents could be mixed up in such things. Yet he couldn't quite laugh. Even if they were, what could he do? He slammed the books angrily on the table, startling echoes.

As he read he began to feel safer. Pine Dunes wasn't indexed in *North-West Hauntings*. His attention strayed fascinated into irrelevances. The hanged man's ghost in Everton Library. The poltergeist of the Palace Hotel, Birkdale. Jokey ghost stories in Lancashire dialect, ee lad. Rain and wind shook the windows, fluorescent light lay flat on the tables. Beyond a glass partition people sat studying, library staff clattered up and down open staircases, carrying scraps of paper. Reassured, he turned to *Lancashire Witches*. Pine Dunes. It was there, on three pages.

When he made himself search the pages they didn't say much. Over the centuries, witches had been rumoured to gather in the Pine Dunes forest.

Was that surprising? Wouldn't they naturally have done so, for concealment? Besides, these were only rumours; few people would have bothered struggling through the undergrowth. He opened *Ghostly Lancashire*, expecting irrelevances. But the index showed that Pine Dunes covered several pages.

The author had interviewed a group the other books ignored: the travellers. Their stories were unreliable, he warned, but fascinating. Few travellers would walk the Pine Dunes road after dark; they kept their children out of the woods even by day. A superstitious people, the author pointed out. The book had been written thirty years ago, Michael reminded himself. And the travellers gave no reason for their nervousness except vague tales of something unpleasantly large glimpsed moving beyond the most distant trees. Surely distance must have formed the trees into a solid wall; how could anyone have seen beyond?

One traveller, senile and often incoherent, told a story. A long time ago he, or someone else—the author couldn't tell—had wandered back to the travellers' camp, very drunk. The author didn't believe the story, but included it because it was vivid and unusual. Straying from the road, the man had become lost in the forest. Blinded by angry panic, he'd fought his way towards an open space. But it wasn't the camp, as he'd thought. He had lost his footing on the slippery earth and had gone skidding into a pit.

Had it been a pit, or the mouth of a tunnel? As he'd scrabbled, bruised but otherwise unhurt, for a foothold on the mud at the bottom, he'd seen an opening that led deeper into darkness. The darkness had begun moving slowly and enormously towards him, with a sound like that of a huge shifting beneath mud—darkness which had parted loudly, resolving itself into several sluggish forms that glistened dimly as they advanced to surround him. Terror had hurled him in a leap halfway up the pit; his hands had clamped on rock, and he'd wrenched himself up the rest of the way. He'd run blindly. In the morning he'd found himself full of thorns on a sprung bed of undergrowth.

So what did all that prove? Michael argued with himself on the bus to Pine Dunes. The man had been drunk. All right, so there were other tales about Pine Dunes, but nothing very evil. Why shouldn't his parents go out at night? Maybe they were ghost-hunters, witch-hunters. Maybe they were going to write a book about their observations. How else could such books

be written? His mind was becoming desperate as he kept remembering his mother's masked fear.

His parents were asleep. His father lay beached on the bed, snoring flabbily; beyond his stomach his wife could hardly be seen. Michael was glad, for he hadn't known what to say to them. He wheeled out the bicycle he'd bought from his first month's wages.

He cycled to the Four in the Morning. His knees protruded on either side of him, jerking up and down. Hedges sailed by slowly; their colours faded and dimmed into twilight. The whirr of his dynamo caught among the leaves. He struggled uphill, standing on the pedals. Dim countryside opened below him, the sea glinted dully. As he poised on the edge of the downhill rush he knew how he could unburden himself, or begin to. Tonight he would tell June everything.

But she didn't come to the club. People crowded in; the lights painted them carelessly monochrome. Discotheque records snarled and thumped, swirls of tobacco smoke glared red, pink, purple. Michael hurried about, serving. Dim wet discoloured faces jostled to reach him, shouting 'Mike! Mike!' Faces rose obsessively to the surface of the jostling: June's, who wasn't there; his mother's, her eyes trying to dodge fear. He was suffocating. His frustration gathered within him; he felt swollen, encumbered. He stared at the luridly pink smoke while voices called. 'I've got to go home,' he told the barman.

'Had enough, have you?'

'My parents aren't well. I'm worried.'

'Strange you didn't say so when you came in. Well, I've managed by myself before.' He turned away, dismissing Michael. 'You'll have to make do with me tonight,' he told the shouting.

The last of the lit streets faded behind Michael. The moon was full, but blurred by unkempt fields of cloud; it showed him only a faint windy swaying that surrounded him for miles. When he confronted his father, what would his mother do? Would she break down? If she admitted to witchcraft and said it was time Michael knew, the scene would be easier—if she did. The moon struggled among plump clouds, and was engulfed.

He cycled fast up the Pine Dunes road. Get there, don't delay to reconsider. Gravel ground together squeaking beneath his wheels; his yellow light

wobbled, plucking at trees. The depths of the forest creaked, distant tree trunks were pushed apart to let a huge unstable face peer through. He was overtired—of course there was nothing among the far trees but dark. He sped into the Caravanserai; random patches of unlit trailers bobbed up and faded by. His trailer was unlit too.

Perhaps his parents weren't there. He realised furiously that he felt relieved. They were in there all right; they'd be asleep. He would wake his father; the man might betray himself while still half-asleep. He'd dazzle his father awake, like an interrogator. But his parents' bed was empty.

He punched the wall, which rang flatly. His father had outwitted him again. He stared around the room, enraged. His father's huge suits dangled emptily, like sloughed skin; his mother's clothes hid in drawers. His father's metal box of books sat on top of the wardrobe. Michael glanced resentfully at it, then stared. It was unlocked.

He lifted it down and made to sit on his parents' bed. That made him feel uneasy; he carried the box into the main room. Let his father come in and find him reading. Michael hoped he would. He tugged at the lid, which resisted then sprang open with a loud clang.

He remembered that sound. He'd heard it when he was quite young, and his mother's voice, pleading: 'Let him at least have a normal childhood.' After a moment he'd heard the box closed again. 'All right. He'll find out when it's time,' he'd heard his father say.

The box contained no printed books, but several notebooks. They had been written in by numerous people: the inks in the oldest notebook, whose spine had given way, were brown as old bloodstains. Some of the writing in the latest book was his mother's. Odd pages showed rough maps: The Old Horns, Exham, Whitminster, though none of Pine Dunes. These he recognised; but he couldn't understand a word of the text.

Most of it was in English, but might as well not have been. It consisted largely of quotations copied from books; sometimes the source was indicated—*Necro*, *Revelations Glaaki*, *Garimiaz*, *Vermis*, *Theobald*, whatever they were. The whole thing reminded him of pamphlets issued by cranky cults—like the people who gave all their worldly goods to a man in America, or the others who'd once lured Michael into a seedy hotel for a personality profile, which they'd lied would be fun. He read, baffled.

After a while he gave up. Even the entries his mother had written made no sense. Some of the words he couldn't even pronounce. Kuthullhoo? Kuthoolhew? And what was supposed to be so Great about it, whatever it was?

He shrugged, sniggering a little. He didn't feel so worried now. If this was all his parents were involved in, it seemed silly and harmless. The fact that they'd concealed it from him so successfully for so long seemed to prove as much. They were so convincingly normal, it couldn't be anything very bad. After all, many businessmen belonged to secret societies with jargon nobody else could understand. Maybe his father had been initiated into this society as part of one of the jobs he'd taken in his wanderings!

One thing still troubled Michael: his mother's fear. He couldn't see what there was to fear in the blurred language of the notebooks. He made a last effort, and let the books fall open where they would—at the pages that had been read most frequently.

What a waste of time! He strained his mind, but the pages became more bewildering still; he began to laugh. What on earth was 'the millennial gestation'? Something to do with 'the fosterling of the Great Old Ones'? 'The hereditary rebirth'? 'Each of Its rebirths comes closer to incarnation'? 'When the mind opens to all the dimensions will come the incarnation. Upon the incarnation all minds will become one.' Ah, that explains it! Michael sniggered wildly. But there was more: 'the ingestion,' 'the mating beyond marriage,' 'the melting and merging'—

He threw the book angrily into the box. The skin of his eyes crawled hotly; he could hardly keep them open, yet he was wasting his time reading this. The trailer rocked as something huge tugged at it: the wind. The oldest, spineless, notebook began to disintegrate. As he knocked it square, an envelope slipped out.

It was addressed in his father's large handwriting; the last word had had to be cramped. TO MICHAEL: NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL AFTER I AM GONE. He turned it over and began to tear, but his hand faltered. He'd been unreasonable enough to his father for one day. After a moment he put the envelope unopened in his pocket, feeling sly and ashamed. He replaced the box, then he prepared to sleep. In the dark he tried to arrange his limbs on the sagging couch. Rocking, the trailer sounded like a rusty cradle.

He slept. He wasn't sure whether he was asleep when he heard his mother's low voice. He must be awake, for he could feel her breath on his face. 'Don't stay here.' Her voice trembled. 'Your girlfriend's got the right idea. Go away with her if that's what you want. Just get away from here.'

His father's voice reached for her out of the dark. 'That's enough. He's asleep. You come to bed.'

Silence and darkness settled down for the night. But in the night, or in Michael's dream, there were noises: the stealthy departure of a car from the park; heavy footsteps trying not to disturb the trailer; the gingerly closing of his parents' door. Sleep seemed more important.

His father's voice woke him, shouting into the bedroom. 'Wake up. The car's gone. It's been stolen.'

Daylight blazed through Michael's eyelids. He was sure at once what had happened. His father had hidden the car, so that nobody could get away. Michael lay paralysed, waiting for his mother's cry of panic. Her silence held time immobile. He squeezed his eyelids tighter, filling his eyes with red.

'Oh,' his mother said at last, dully. 'Oh dear.'

There was more in her voice than resignation: she sounded lethargic, indifferent. Suddenly Michael remembered what he'd read in June's book. Witches used drugs. His eyes sprang wide. He was sure that his father was drugging his mother.

V

It didn't take the police long to find the car, abandoned and burnt out, near the windmill. 'Kids, probably,' one of the policemen said. 'We may be in touch with you again.' Michael's father shook his head sadly, and they left.

'I must have dropped the car keys while we were out.' Michael thought his father hardly bothered to sound convincing. Why couldn't he tell the man so, confront him? Because he wasn't sure; he might have dreamed the sounds last night—He raged at his own cowardice, staring at his mother. If only he could be certain of her support! She wandered desultorily, determinedly cleaning the trailer, as though she were ill but expecting company.

When his gagged rage found words at last it weakened immediately. 'Are you all right?' he demanded of her, but then could only stammer 'Do you think you'd better see a doctor?'

Neither of his parents responded. His unsureness grew, and fed his frustration. He felt lethargic, unable to act, engulfed by his father's presence. Surely June would be at the club tonight. He had to talk to someone, to hear another interpretation; perhaps she would prove that he'd imagined everything.

He washed and shaved. He was glad to retreat, even into the cramped bathroom; he and his parents had been edging uneasily around one another all day—the trailer made him think unpleasantly of a tin can full of squirming. As he shaved, the bathroom door sprang open, as it often did. His father appeared behind him in the mirror, staring at him.

Steam coated the mirror again. Beneath the steam, his father's face seemed to writhe like a plastic mask on fire. Michael reached to clear the mirror, but already his father and the man's emotions were upon him. Before Michael could turn his father was hugging him violently, his flesh quivering as though it would burst. Michael held himself stiff, refusing to be engulfed. What are you doing? Get away! In a moment his father turned clumsily and plodded out. The trailer rumbled, shaking.

Michael sighed loudly. God, he was glad that was over. He finished shaving and hurried out. Neither of his parents looked at him; his father pretended to read a book, and whistled tunelessly; his mother turned vaguely as he passed. He cycled to the club.

'Parents all right?' the barman said indifferently.

'I'm not sure.'

'Good of you to come.' Perhaps that was sarcasm. 'There's some things for you to wash.'

Michael could still feel his father's clinging embrace; he kept trying to wriggle it away. He welcomed the press of bodies at the bar, shouting 'Mike!'—even though June wasn't among them. He welcomed the companionship of ordinary people. He strode expertly about, serving, as the crowd grew, as smoke gathered. He could still feel swollen flesh pressed

hotly against his back. He won't do that to me again, he thought furiously. He'll never—A tankard dropped from his hand, beneath a beertap. 'Oh my God,' he said.

'What's up with you now?' the barman demanded.

When his father had embraced him, Michael had thought of nothing but escape. Now at last he realised how final his father's gesture had been. 'My parents,' he said. 'They're, they're worse.'

'Just sent you a message, did they? Off home again now, I suppose? You'd better see the manager, or I will—Will you watch that bloody beer you're spilling!'

Michael slammed shut the tap and struggled through the crowd. People grimaced sympathetically at him, or stared. It didn't matter, his job didn't matter. He must hurry back to head off whatever was going to happen. Someone bumped into him in the doorway, and hindered him when he tried to push them aside. 'What's the matter with you?' he shouted. 'Get out of the way!' It was June.

'I'm really sorry I didn't come last night,' she said. 'My parents dragged me out to dinner.'

'All right. Okay. Don't worry.'

'You're angry. I really am sorry, I wanted to see you—You're not going, are you?'

'Yes, I've got to. Look, my parents aren't well.'

'I'll come back with you. We can talk on the way. I'll help you look after them.' She caught at his shoulder as he tried to run upstairs. 'Please, Mike. I'll feel bad if you just leave me. We can catch the last bus in five minutes if we run. It'll be quicker than your bike.'

God! She was worse than his father! 'Listen,' he snarled, having clambered to street level. 'It isn't ill, they aren't ill,' he said, letting words tumble wildly as he tried to flee. 'I've found out what they do at night. They're witches.'

'Oh no!' She sounded shocked but delighted.

'My mother's terrified. My father's been drugging her.' Now that he was able to say so, his urgency diminished a little; he wanted to release all he knew. 'Something's going to happen tonight,' he said.

'Are you going to try and stop it? Let me come too. I know about it. I showed you my book.' When he looked doubtful she said: 'They'll have to stop when they see me.'

Perhaps she could look after his mother while he confronted his father. They ran to the bus, which sat unlit in the square for minutes, then dawdled along the country roads, hoping for passengers who never appeared. Michael's frustration coiled tighter again. He explained to June what he'd discovered: 'Yeah,' she kept saying, excited and fascinated. Once she began giggling uncontrollably. 'Wouldn't it be weird if we saw your father dancing naked?' He stared at her until she said 'Sorry.' Her pupils were expanding and contracting slightly, randomly.

As they ran along the Pine Dunes road the trees leaned closer, creaking and nodding. Suppose his parents hadn't left the trailer yet? What could he say? He'd be tongue-tied again by his unsureness, and June would probably make things worse. He gasped with relief when he saw that the windows were dark, but went inside to make sure. 'I know where they've gone,' he told June.

Moonlight and unbroken cloud spread the sky with dim milk; dark smoky breaths drifted across the glow. He heard the incessant restlessness of the sea. Bare black silhouettes crowded beside the road, thinly intricate against the sky. He hurried June towards the path.

Why should his parents have gone that way? Something told him they had —perhaps the maze he remembered, the tunnel of undergrowth: that was a secret place. The path wound deeper into the woods, glinting faintly; trees rapidly shuttered the glow of the moon. 'Isn't this fantastic,' June said, hurrying behind him.

The pines gave out, but other trees meshed thickly overhead. The glimpses of flat whitish sky, smouldering with darker cloud, dwindled. In the forest everything was black or blanched, and looked chill, although the night was unseasonably mild. Webs of shadow lay on the path, tangling Michael's feet; tough grass seized him. Bushes massed around him, towering, choking the gaps between trees. The glimpses of sky were fewer and smaller. 'What's that?' June said uneasily.

For a moment he thought it was the sound of someone's foot, unplugging itself from the soft ground: it sounded like a loud slow gulp of mud. But no, it wasn't that. Someone coughing? It didn't sound much like a human cough.

Moreover, it sounded as though it were straining to produce a sound, a single sound; and he felt inexplicably that he ought to know what that was.

The bushes stirred, rattling. The muddy sound faded, somewhere ahead. There was no point in telling June his vague thoughts. 'It'll be an animal,' he said. 'Probably something's caught it.'

Soon they reached the tunnel. He knelt at once and began to crawl. Twigs scraped beside his ears, a clawed dry chorus. He found the experience less disturbing now, less oppressive; the tunnel seemed wider, as though someone stout had recently pushed his way through. But behind him June was breathing heavily, and her voice fluttered in the dark. 'There's something following us outside the tunnel,' she said tightly, nervously.

He crawled quickly to the end and stood up. "There's nothing here now. It must have been an animal.'

He felt odd: calm, safe, yet slyly and elusively excited. His eyes had grown equal to the dark. The trees were stouter, and even closer; they squeezed out masses of shrub between them. Overhead, a few pale scraps of sky were caught in branches. The ground squelched underfoot, and he heard another sound ahead: similar, but not the same.

June emerged panting. 'I thought I'd finished tripping. Where are we going?' she said unevenly. 'I can't see.'

'This way.' He headed at once for a low opening in the tangled growth. As he'd somehow expected, the passage twisted several times, closing almost impenetrably, then widened. Perhaps he'd noticed that someone before him had thrust the bushes apart.

'Don't go so fast,' June said in the dark, almost weeping. 'Wait for me.'

Her slowness annoyed him. His indefinable excitement seemed to affect his skin, which crawled with nervousness like interference on the surface of a bubble. Yet he felt strangely powerful, ready for anything. Wait until he saw his father! He stood impatiently, stamping the mushy ground, while June caught up with him. She gripped his arm. 'There it is again,' she gasped.

'What?' The sound? It was only his feet, squelching. But there was another sound, ahead in the tangled creaking dark. It was the gurgling of mud, perhaps of a muddy stream gargling ceaselessly into the earth. No: it was growing louder, more violent, as though the mud were straining to spew out

an obstruction. The sound was repeated, again and again, becoming gradually clearer: a single syllable. All at once he knew what it was. Somewhere ahead in the close dark maze, a thick muddy voice was struggling to shout his name.

June had recognised the sound too, and was tugging at his arm. 'Let's go back,' she pleaded. 'I don't like it. Please.'

'God,' he scoffed. 'I thought you were going to help me.' The muddy sounds blurred into a mumble, and were gone. Twigs shook in the oppressive dark, squeaking hollowly together. Suddenly, ahead of him, he heard his father's voice; then, after a long silence, his mother's. Both were oddly strained and muffled. As though this were a game of hide and seek, each had called his name.

'There,' he said to June. 'I haven't got time to take you back now.' His excitement was mounting, his nervous skin felt light as a dream. 'Don't you want to look after my mother?' he blurted.

He shouldered onward. After a while he heard June following him timidly. A wind blundered through the forest, dragging at the bushes. Thorns struggled overhead, clawing at the air; the ground gulped his feet, sounding to his strained ears almost like words. Twice the walls of the passage tried to close, but someone had broken them apart. Ahead the passage broadened. He was approaching an open space.

He began to run. Bushes applauded like joyful bones. The thick smoky sky rushed on, fighting the moonlight. The vociferous ground was slippery; he stumbled as he ran, and almost tripped over a dark huddle. It was his parents' clothes. Some of them, as he glanced back impatiently, looked torn. He heard June fall slithering against bushes. 'Don't!' she cried. But he had reached the space.

It was enclosed by trees. Ivy thickened the trunks, and had climbed to mat the tangle overhead; bushes crowded the cramped gaps between the trees. In the interstices of the tangle, dark sky smouldered.

Slowly his eyes found the meagre light; outlines gathered in the clearing, dimmer than mist. Bared wooden limbs groped into the space, creaking. The dimness sketched them. He could see now that the clearing was about thirty feet wide, and roughly circular. Dimness crawled on it, as though it

were an infested pond. At the far side, a dark bulk stood between him and the trees.

He squinted painfully, but its shape persisted in eluding him. Was it very large, or was the dark lying? Across the clearing mud coughed and gurgled thickly, or something did. Dimness massed on the glistening shape. Suddenly he saw that the shape was moving lethargically, and alive.

June had hung back; now she ran forward, only to slip at the edge of the clearing. She clutched his arm to steady herself, then she gazed beyond him, trembling. 'What is it?' she cried.

'Shut up,' he said savagely.

Apart from her interruption, he felt more calm than he had ever felt before. He knew he was gazing at the source of his dreams. The dreams returned peacefully to his mind and waited to be understood. For a moment he wondered whether this was like June's LSD. Something had been added to his mind, which seemed to be expanding awesomely. Memories floated free, as though they had been coded deep in him: wombs of stone and submarine depths; hovering in a medium that wasn't space, somehow linked to a stone circle on a hill; being drawn closer to the circle, towards terrified faces that stared up through the night; a pregnant woman held writhing at the centre of the circle, screaming as he hovered closer and reached for her. He felt primed with centuries of memories. Inherited memories, or shared; but whose?

He waited. All was about to be clarified. The huge bulk shifted, glistening. Its voice, uncontrollably loud and uneven, struggled muddily to speak. The trees creaked ponderously, the squashed bushes writhed, the sky fled incessantly. Suddenly, touched by an instinct he couldn't define, Michael realised how he and June must look from the far side of the clearing. He took her arm, though she struggled briefly, and they stood waiting: bride and bridegroom of the dark.

After a long muddy convulsion in the dimness, words coughed free. The voice seemed unable to speak more than a phrase at a time; then it would blur, gurgling. Sometimes his father's voice, and occasionally his mother's —high-pitched, trembling—seemed to help. Yet the effect was disturbing, for it sounded as though the muddy voice were attempting muffled imitations of his parents. He held himself calm, trusting that this too would be clarified in due course.

The Great Old Ones still lived, the halting voice gurgled loudly. Their dreams could reach out. When the human race was young and strayed near the Old Ones the dreams could reach into the womb and make the unborn in their image. Something like his mother's voice spoke the last words, wavering fearfully. June struggled, but he gripped her arm.

Though the words were veiled and allusive, he understood instinctively what was being said. His new memories were ready to explain. When he read the notebooks again he would understand consciously. He listened and gazed, fascinated. He was in awe of the size of the speaking bulk. And what was strange about the head? Something moved there, rapid as the whirl of colours on a bubble. In the dark the face seemed to strain epileptically, perhaps to form words.

The Old Ones could wait, the voice or voices told him. The stars would come right. The people the Old Ones touched before birth did not take on their image all at once but gradually, down the centuries. Instead of dying, they took on the form that the Old Ones had placed in the womb of an ancestor. Each generation came closer to the perfect image.

The bulk glistened as though flayed; in the dimness it looked pale pink, and oddly unstable. Michael stared uneasily at the head. Swift clouds dragged darknesses over the clearing and snatched them away. The face looked so huge, and seemed to spread. Wasn't it like his father's face? But the eyes were swimming apart, the features slid uncontrollably across the head. All this was nothing but the antics of shadows. A tear in the clouds crept towards the dimmed moon. June was trying to pull away. 'Keep still,' he snarled, tightening his grip.

They would serve the Old Ones, the voice shouted thickly, faltering. That was why they had been made: to be ready when the time came. They shared the memories of the Old Ones and at the change their bodies were transformed into the stuff of the Old Ones. They mated with ordinary people in the human way, and later in the way the Old Ones had decreed. That way was—

June screamed. The tear in the clouds had unveiled the moon. Her cry seemed harsh enough to tear her throat. He turned furiously to silence her; but she dragged herself free, eyes gaping, and fled down the path. The shadow of a cloud rushed towards the clearing. About to pursue June, he turned to see what the moon had revealed.

The shadow reached the clearing as he turned. For a moment he saw the huge head, a swollen bulb which, though blanched by moonlight, reminded him of a mass dug from within a body. The glistening lumpy forehead was almost bare, except for a few strands that groped restlessly over it—strands of hair, surely, though they looked like strings of livid flesh.

On the head, seeming even smaller amid the width of flesh, he saw his mother's face. It was appallingly dwarfed, and terrified. The strands flickered over it, faster, faster. Her mouth strained wordlessly, gurgling.

Before he could see the rest of the figure, a vague gigantic squatting sack, the shadow flooded the clearing. As it did so, he thought he saw his mother's face sucked into the head, as though by a whirlpool of flesh. Did her features float up again, newly arranged? Were there other, plumper, features jostling among them? He could be sure of nothing in the dark.

June cried out. She'd stumbled; he heard her fall, and the thud of her head against something: then silence. The figure was lumbering towards him, its bulk quaking. For a moment he was sure that it intended to embrace him. But it had reached a pit, almost concealed by undergrowth. It slid into the earth, like slow jelly. The undergrowth sprang back rustling.

He stood gazing at June, who was still unconscious. He knew what he would tell her: she had had a bad LSD experience, that had been what she'd seen. LSD reminded him of something. Slowly he began to smile.

He went to the pit and peered down. Faint sluggish muddy sounds retreated deep into the earth. He knew he wouldn't see his parents for a long time. He touched his pocket, where the envelope waited. That would contain his father's explanation of their disappearance, which he could show to people, to June.

Moonlight and shadows raced nervously over the pit. As he stared at the dark mouth he felt full of awe, yet calm. Now he must wait until it was time to come back here, to go into the earth and join the others. He remembered that now; he had always known, deep in himself, that this was home. One day he and June would return. He gazed at her unconscious body, smiling. Perhaps she had been right; they might take LSD together, when it was time. It might help them to become one.

1976

The Trick

"...it isn't a story I would write now. Jim Herbert told me recently that since he became a father he has tried to steer clear of the theme of children as victims. For my part, parenthood seems to keep sending me back to the theme of the vulnerability of children—*Night of the Claw*, *Incarnate*, *The Influence*—but what bothers me about *The Trick* is its cold-bloodedness. Still, people whose opinions I respect have found the story frightening [...]. I think it also contrasts well with *Eye Of Childhood*, written two years later."—Ramsey Campbell, introduction to *Waking Nightmares*. *The Trick* was originally published as *Trick Or Treat* in *Weird Tales #2*

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As October waned Debbie forgot about the old witch; she didn't associate her with Halloween. Halloween wasn't frightening. After the long depression following the summer holidays, it was the first night of the winter excitements: not as good as Guy Fawkes' Night or Christmas, but still capable of excluding less pleasant things from Debbie's mind—the sarcastic teacher, the gangs of boys who leaned against the shops, the old witch.

Debbie wasn't really frightened of her, not at her age. Even years ago, when Debbie was a little kid, she hadn't found her terrifying. Not like some things: not like her feverish night when the dark in her bedroom had grown like mould on the furniture, making the familiar chair and wardrobe soft and huge. Nor like the face that had looked in her bedroom window once, when she was ill: a face like a wrinkled monkey's, whose jaw drooped as if melting, lower and lower; a face that had spoken to her in a voice that sagged as the face did—a voice that must have been a car's engine struggling to start.

The witch had never seized Debbie with panic, as those moments had. Perhaps she was only an old woman, after all. She lived in a terraced house, in the row opposite Debbie's home. People owned their houses in that row, but Debbie's parents only rented the top half of a similar building. They didn't like the old woman; nobody did.

Whenever the children played outside her house she would come out to them. "Can't you make your row somewhere else? Haven't you got a home

to go to?"

"We're playing outside our own house," someone might say. "You don't own the street." Then she would stand and stare at them, with eyes like grey marbles. The fixed lifeless gaze always made them uneasy; they would dawdle away, jeering.

Parents were never sympathetic. "Play somewhere else, then," Debbie's father would say. Her parents were more frightened of the witch than she was. "Isn't her garden awful," she'd once heard her mother saying. "It makes the whole street look like a slum. But we mustn't say anything, we're only tenants." Debbie thought that was just an excuse.

Why were they frightened? The woman was small, hardly taller than Debbie. Boys didn't like to play near her house in case they had to rescue a football, to grope through the slimy nets, tall as a child, of weeds and grass full of crawlers. But that was only nasty, not frightening. Debbie wasn't even sure why the woman was supposed to be a witch.

Perhaps it was her house. "Keep away from my house," she told nearby children when she went out, as though they would want to go near the drab unpainted crumbling house that was sinking into its own jungle. The windows were cracked and thick with grime; when the woman's face peered out it looked like something pale stirring in a dirty jar. Sometimes children stood outside shouting and screaming to make the face loom. Boys often dared each other to peer in, but rarely did. Perhaps that was it, then: her house looked like a witch's house. Sometimes black smoke that looked solid as oil dragged its long swollen body from the chimney.

There were other things. Animals disliked her almost as much as she disliked them. Older brothers said that she went out after midnight, hurrying through the mercury-vapour glare towards the derelict streets across the main road; but older brothers often made up stories. When Debbie tried to question her father he only told her not to be stupid. "Who's been wasting your time with that?"

The uncertainty annoyed her. If the woman were a witch she must be in retirement; she didn't do anything. Much of the time—at least, during the day—she stayed in her house: rarely answering the door, and then only to peer through a crack and send the intruder away. What did she do, alone in the dark house? Sometimes people odder than herself would visit her: a tall thin woman with glittering wrists and eyes, who dressed in clothes like

tapestries of lurid flame; two fat men, Tweedledum and Tweedledee draped in lethargically flapping black cloaks. They might be witches too.

"Maybe she doesn't want anyone to know she's a witch," suggested Debbie's friend Sandra. Debbie didn't really care. The old woman only annoyed her, as bossy adults did. Besides, Halloween was coming. Then, on Halloween morning—just when Debbie had managed to forget her completely—the woman did the most annoying thing of all.

Debbie and Sandra had wheeled their prams to the supermarket, feeling grown-up. On the way they'd met Lucy, who never acted her age. When Lucy had asked, "Where are you taking your dolls?" Sandra had replied loftily, "We aren't taking our dolls anywhere." She'd done the shopping each Saturday morning since she was nine, so that her mother could work. Often she shopped in the evenings, because her mother was tired after work, and then Debbie would accompany her, so that she felt less uneasy in the crowds beneath the white glare. This Saturday morning Debbie was shopping too.

The main road was full of crowds trying to beat the crowds. Boys sat like a row of shouting ornaments on the railing above the underpass; women queued a block for cauliflowers, babies struggled screaming in prams. The crowds flapped as a wind fumbled along the road. Debbie and Sandra manoeuvred their prams to the supermarket. A little girl was racing a trolley through the aisles, jumping on the back for a ride. How childish, Debbie thought.

When they emerged Sandra said, "Let's walk to the tunnel and back."

She couldn't be anxious to hurry home to vacuum the flat. They wheeled their laden prams towards the tunnel, which fascinated them. A railway cutting divided the streets a few hundred yards beyond the supermarket, in the derelict area. Houses crowded both its banks, their windows and doorways blinded and gagged with boards. From the cutting, disused railway lines probed into a tunnel beneath the main road—and never reappeared, so far as Debbie could see.

The girls pushed their prams down an alley, to the near edge of the cutting. Beside them the remains of back yards were cluttered with fragments of brick. The cutting was rather frightening, in a delicious way. Rusty metal skeletons sat tangled unidentifiably among the lines, soggy cartons flapped

sluggishly, a door lay as though it led to something in the soil. Green sprouted minutely between scatterings of rubble.

Debbie stared down at the tunnel, at the way it burrowed into the dark beneath the earth. Within the mouth was only a shallow rim, surrounding thick darkness. No: now she strained her eyes she made out a further arch of dimmer brick, cut short by the dark. As she peered another formed, composed as much of darkness as of brick. Beyond it she thought something pale moved. The surrounding daylight flickered with Debbie's peering; she felt as though she were being drawn slowly into the tunnel. What was it, the pale feeble stirring? She held on to a broken wall, so as to lean out to peer; but a voice startled her away.

"Go on. Keep away from there." It was the old witch, shouting from the main road, just as if they were little kids. To Debbie she looked silly: her head poked over the wall above the tunnel, as if someone had put a turnip there to grimace at them.

"We're all right," Sandra called impatiently. "We know what we're doing." They wouldn't have gone too near the cutting; years ago a little boy had run into the tunnel and had never been seen again.

"Just do as you're told. Get away." The head hung above the wall, staring hatefully at them, looking even more like a turnip.

"Oh, let's go home," Debbie said. "I don't want to stay here now, anyway."

They wheeled their prams around the chunks that littered the street. At the main road the witch was waiting for them. Her face frowned, glaring from its perch above the small black tent of her coat. Little more of her was visible; scuffed black snouts poked from beneath the coat, hands lurked in her drooping sleeves; one finger was hooked around the cane of a tattered umbrella. "And keep away from there in future," she said harshly.

"Why, is that your house?" Debbie muttered.

"That's where she keeps her bats' eyes."

"What's that?" The woman's grey eyebrows writhed up, threatening. Her head looked like an old apple, Debbie thought, with mould for eyebrows and tufts of dead grass stuck on top. "What did you just say?" the woman shouted.

She was repeating herself into a fury when she was interrupted. Debbie tried not to laugh. Sandra's dog Mop was the interruption; he must have jumped out of Sandra's back yard. He was something like a stumpy-legged terrier, black and white and spiky. Debbie liked him, even though he'd once run away with her old teddy bear, her favourite, and had returned empty-mouthed. Now he ran around Sandra, bouncing up at her; he ran towards the cutting and back again, barking.

The witch didn't like him, nor did he care for her. Once he had run into her grass only to emerge with his tail between his legs, while she watched through the grime, smiling like a skull. "Keep that insect away from here, as well," she shouted.

She shook her umbrella at him; it fluttered dangling like a sad broomstick. At once Mop pounced at it, barking. The girls tried to gag themselves with their knuckles, but vainly. Their laughter boiled up; they stood snorting helplessly, weeping with mirth.

The woman drew herself up rigidly; bony hands crept from her sleeves. The wizened apple turned slowly to Sandra, then to Debbie. The mouth was a thin bloodless slit full of teeth; the eyes seemed to have congealed around hatred. "Well, you shouldn't have called him an insect," Debbie said defensively.

Cars rushed by, two abreast. Shoppers hurried past, glancing at the woman and the two girls. Debbie could seize none of these distractions; she could only see the face. It wasn't a fruit or a vegetable now, it was a mask that had once been a face, drained of humanity. Its hatred was cold as a shark's gaze. Even the smallness of the face wasn't reassuring; it concentrated its power.

Mop bounced up and poked at the girls. At last they could turn; they ran. Their prams yawed. At the supermarket they looked back. The witch hadn't moved; the wizened mask stared above the immobile black coat. They stuck out their tongues, then they stalked home, nudging each other into nonchalance. "She's only an old fart," Debbie dared to say. In the street they stood and made faces at her house for minutes.

It wasn't long before Sandra came to ask Debbie to play. She couldn't have vacuumed so quickly, but perhaps she felt uneasy alone in the house. They

played rounders in the street, with Lucy and her younger brother. Passing cars took sides.

When Debbie saw the witch approaching, a seed of fear grew in her stomach. But she was almost outside her own house; she needn't be afraid, even if the witch made faces at her again. Sandra must have thought similarly, for she ran across the pavement almost in front of the witch.

The woman didn't react; she seemed hardly to move. Only the black coat stirred a little as she passed, carrying her mask of hatred as though bearing it carefully somewhere, for a purpose. Debbie shouted for the ball; her voice clattered back from the houses, sounding false as her bravado.

As the witch reached her gate Miss Bake from the flats hurried over, blue hair glinting, hands fluttering. "Oh, have they put the fire out?"

The witch peered suspiciously at her. "I really couldn't tell you."

"Haven't you heard?" This indifference made her more nervous; her voice leapt and shook. "Some boys got into the houses by the supermarket and started a fire. That's what they told me at the corner. They must have put it out. Isn't it wicked, Miss Trodden. They never used to do these things. You can't feel safe these days, can you?"

"Oh yes, I think I can."

"You can't mean that, Miss Trodden. Nobody's safe, not with all these children. If they're bored, why doesn't someone give them something to do? The churches should. They could find them something worth doing. Someone's got to make the country safe for the old folk."

"Which churches are those?" She was smirking faintly.

Miss Bake drew back a little. "All the churches," she said, trying to placate her. "All the Christians. They should work together, form a coalition."

"Oh, them. They've had their chance." She smirked broadly. "Don't you worry. Someone will take control. I must be going."

Miss Bake hurried away, frowning and tutting; her door slammed. Shortly the witch's face appeared behind the grimy panes, glimmering as though twilight came earlier to her house. Her expression lurked in the dimness, unreadable.

When Debbie's father called her in, she could tell that her parents had had an argument; the flat was heavy with dissatisfaction. "When are you going trick-or-treating?" her mother demanded.

"Tonight. After tea."

"Well, you're not. You've got to go before it's dark."

The argument was poised to pounce on Debbie. "Oh, all right," she said grumpily.

After lunch she washed up. Her father dabbed at the plates, then sat watching football. He fiddled irritably with the controls, but the flesh of the players grew orange. Her mother kept swearing at food as she prepared it. Debbie read her love comics, and tried to make herself invisible with silence. Through the wall she could hear the song of the vacuum droning about the flat in the next house.

Eventually it faded, and Sandra came knocking. "You'd better go now," Debbie's mother said.

"We're not going until tonight."

"I'm sorry, Sandra, Debbie has to go before it's dark. And you aren't to go to anyone we don't know."

"Oh, why not?" Sandra protested. Challenging strangers was part of the excitement. "We won't go in," Debbie said.

"Because you're not to, that's why."

"Because some people have been putting things in sweets," Debbie's father said wearily, hunching forward towards the television. "Drugs and things. It was on the news."

"You go with them," her mother told him, worried again. "Make sure they're all right."

"What's stopping you?"

"You'll cook the tea, will you?"

"My mother might go," Sandra said. "But I think she's too tired."

"Oh God, all right, I'll go. When the match is finished." He slumped back in his armchair; the mock leather sighed. "Never any bloody rest," he muttered.

By the time they began it was dark, after all. But the streets weren't deserted and dimly exciting; they were full of people hurrying home from the match, shouting to each other, singing. Her father's impatience tugged at Debbie like a leash.

Some of the people they visited were preparing meals, and barely tolerant. Too many seemed anxious to trick them; perhaps they couldn't afford treats. At a teacher's house they had to attempt impossible plastic mazes which even Debbie's father decided irritably that he couldn't solve—though the teacher's wife sneaked them an apple each anyway. Elsewhere, several boys with glowing skulls for faces flung open a front door then slammed it, laughing. Mop appeared from an alley and joined the girls, to bounce at anyone who opened a door. He cheered Debbie, and she had pocketfuls of fruit and sweets. But it was an unsatisfying Halloween.

They were nearly home when Mop began to growl. He balked as they came abreast of the witch's garden. Unwillingly Debbie stared towards the house. The white mercury-vapour glare sharpened the tangled grass; a ragged spiky frieze of shadow lay low on the walls. The house seemed smoky and dim, drained of colour. But she could see the gaping doorway, the coat like a tent of darker shadow, the dim perched face, a hand beckoning. "Come here," the voice said. "I've got something for you."

"Go on, be quick," hissed Debbie's father.

The girls hesitated. "Go on, she won't bite you," he said, pushing Debbie. "Take it while she's offering."

He wanted peace, he wanted her to make friends with the old witch. If she said she was frightened he would only tell her not to be stupid. Now he had made her more frightened to refuse. She dragged her feet up the cracked path, towards the door to shadow. Dangling grasses plucked at her socks, scraping dryly. The house stretched her shadow into its mouth.

Fists like knotted clubs crept from sleeves and deposited something in Debbie's palm, then in Sandra's: wrapped boiled sweets. "There you are," said the shrunken mouth, smiling dimly.

"Thank you very much." Debbie almost screamed: she hadn't heard her father follow her, to thank the woman. His finger was trying to prod her to gratitude.

"Let's see if you like them," the witch said.

Debbie's fingers picked stiffly at the wrapping. The paper rustled like the dead grass, loud and somehow vicious. She raised the bared sweet towards her mouth, wondering whether she could drop it. She held her mouth still around the sweet. But when she could no longer fend off the taste, it was pleasant: raspberry, clear and sharp. "It's nice," she said. "Thank you."

"Yes, it is," Sandra said.

Hearing her voice Mop, who had halted snarling at the far end of the path, came racing between the clattering grasses. "We mustn't forget the dog, must we," the voice said. Mop overshot his sweet and bounced back to catch it. Sandra made to run to him, but he'd crunched and swallowed the sweet. They turned back to the house. The closed front door faced them in the dimness.

"I'm going home now," Sandra said and ran into her house, followed by Mop. Debbie found an odd taste in her mouth: a thick bitter trail, as if something had crawled down her throat. Just the liquid centre of the sweet: it wasn't worth telling her father, he would only be impatient. "Did you enjoy yourself?" he said, tousling her hair, and she nodded.

During the meal her tongue searched for the taste. It was never there, nor could she find it in her memory; perhaps it hadn't been there at all. She watched comedies on television; she was understanding more of the jokes that made her parents laugh. She tricked some little girls who came to the door, but they looked so forlorn that she gave them sweets. The street was bare, deserted, frosted by the light: the ghost of its daytime self. She was glad to close it out. She watched the screen. Colours bobbed up, laughter exploded; gaps interrupted, for she was falling asleep. "Do you want to go to bed?" She strained to prove she didn't but at last admitted to herself that she did. In bed she fell asleep at once.

She slept uneasily. Something kept waking her: a sound, a taste? Straining drowsily to remember, she drifted into sleep. Once she glimpsed a figure staring at her from the doorway—her father. Only seconds later—or so it seemed at first—she woke again. A face had peered in the window. She turned violently, tethered by the blankets. There was nothing but the lighted gap which she always left between the curtains, to keep her company in the dark. The house was silent, asleep.

Her mind streamed with thoughts. The mask on the wizened apple, the skull-faced boys, the street flattened by the glare, her father's finger

prodding her ribs. The face that had peered in her window had been hanging wide, too wide. It was the melting monkey from when she was little. Placing it didn't reassure her. The house surrounded her, huge and unfamiliar, darkly threatening.

She tried to think of Mop. He ran barking into the tunnel—no, he chased cheekily around the witch. Debbie remembered the day he had run into the witch's garden. Scared to pursue him, they had watched him vanish amid the grass. They'd heard digging, then a silence: what sounded like a pattering explosion of earth, a threshing of grass, and Mop had run out with his tail between his legs. The dim face had watched, grinning.

That wasn't reassuring either. She tried to think of something she loved, but could think of nothing but her old bear that Mop had stolen. Her mind became a maze, leading always back to the face at her window. She'd seen it only once, but she had often felt it peering in. Its jaw had sagged like wax, pulling open a yawning pink throat. She had been ill, she must have been frightened by a monkey making a face on television. But as the mouth had drooped and then drawn up again, she'd heard a voice speaking to her through the glass: a slow deep dragging voice that sagged like the face, stretching out each separate word. She'd lain paralysed as the voice blurred in the glass, but hadn't been able to make out a word. She opened her eyes to dislodge the memory. A shadow sprang away from the window.

Only a car's light, plucking at the curtains. She lay, trying to be calm around her heart. But she felt uneasy, and kept almost tasting the centre of the burst sweet. The room seemed oppressive; she felt imprisoned. The window imprisoned her, for something could peer in.

She crawled out of bed. The floor felt unpleasantly soft underfoot, as if mouldering in the dark. The street stretched below, deserted and glittering; the witch's windows were black, as though the grime had filled the house. The taste was almost in Debbie's mouth.

Had the witch put something in the sweets? Suddenly Debbie had to know whether Sandra had tasted it too. She had to shake off the oppressively padded darkness. She dressed, fumbling quietly in the dark. Squirming into her anorak, she crept into the hall.

She couldn't leave the front door open, the wind would slam it. She tiptoed into the living room and groped in her mother's handbag. Her face burned;

it skulked dimly in the mirror. She clutched the key in her fist and inched open the door to the stairs.

On the stairs she realised she was behaving stupidly. How could she waken Sandra without disturbing her mother? Sandra's bedroom window faced the back yard, too far from the alley to pelt. Yet her thoughts seemed only a commentary, for she was still descending. She opened the front door, and started. Sandra was waiting beneath the streetlamp.

She was wearing her anorak too. She looked anxious. "Mop's run off," she said.

"Oh no. Shall we look for him?"

"Come on, I know where he is." They muffled their footsteps, which sounded like a dream. The bleached street stood frozen around them, fossilised by the glare; trees cast nets over the houses, cars squatted, closed and dim. The ghost of the street made Debbie dislike to ask, but she had to know. "Do you think she put something funny in those sweets? Did you taste something?"

"Yes, I can now." At once Debbie could too: a brief hint of the indefinable taste. She hadn't wanted so definite an answer: she bit her lip.

At the main road Sandra turned towards the supermarket. Shops displayed bare slabs of glazed light, plastic cups scuttled in the underpass. How could Sandra be so sure where Mop had gone? Why did Debbie feel she knew as well? Sandra ran past the supermarket. Surely they weren't going to—But Sandra was already running into an alley, towards the cutting.

She gazed down, waiting for Debbie. White lamps glared into the artificial valley; shadows of the broken walls crumbled over scattered bricks. "He won't have gone down there," Debbie said, wanting to believe it.

"He has," Sandra cried. "Listen."

The wind wandered groping among the clutter on the tracks, it hooted feebly in the stone throat. Another sound was floated up to Debbie by the wind, then snatched away: a whining?

"He's in the tunnel," Sandra said. "Come on."

She slipped down a few feet; her face stared over the edge at Debbie. "If you don't come you aren't my friend," she said.

Debbie watched her reach the floor of the cutting and stare up challengingly; then reluctantly she followed.

A bitter taste rose momentarily in her throat. She slithered down all too swiftly. The dark deep tunnel grew tall.

Why didn't Sandra call? "Mop! Mop!" Debbie shouted. But her shouts dropped into the cutting like pats of mud. There might have been an answering whine; the wind threw the sound away. "Come on," Sandra said impatiently.

She strode into the tunnel. The shadow hanging from the arch chopped her in half, then wiped her out entirely. Debbie remembered the little boy who had vanished. Suppose he were in there now—what would he be like? Around her the glistening cartons shifted restlessly; their gaping tops nodded. Twisted skeletons rattled, jangling.

Some of the squealing of metal might be an animal's faint cry; perhaps the metal was what they'd heard. "All right," Sandra said from the dark, "you're not my friend."

Debbie glanced about hopelessly. A taste touched her mouth. Above her, ruins gleamed jaggedly against the sky; cartons dipped their mouths towards her, torn lips working. Among piled bricks at the edge of the cutting, a punctured football or a crumpled rag peered down at her. Unwillingly she walked forward.

Darkness fell on her, filling her eyes. "Wait until your eyes get used to it," Sandra said, but Debbie disliked to keep them closed for long. At last bricks began to solidify from the dark. Darkness arched over her, outlines of bricks glinted faintly. The rails were thin dull lines, shortly erased by the dark.

Sandra groped forward. "Go slowly, then we won't fall over anything," she said.

They walked slowly as a dream, halting every few feet to wait for the light to catch up. Debbie's eyes were full of shifting fog which fastened very gradually on her surroundings, sketching them: the dwindling arch of the tunnel, the fading rails. Her progress was like a ritual in a nightmare.

The first stretch of the tunnel was cluttered with missiles: broken bottles crunched underfoot, tin cans toppled loudly. After that the way was clear, except for odd lurking bricks. But the dark was oppressively full of the sounds the girls made—hasty breathing, shuffling, the chafing of rust

against their feet—and Debbie could never be sure whether, amid the close sounds and the invisibility, there was a whining.

They shuffled onward. Cold encircled them, dripping. The tunnel smelled dank and dusty; it seemed to insinuate a bitter taste into Debbie's mouth. She felt the weight of earth huge around the stone tube. The dimness flickered forward again, beckoning them on. It was almost as though someone were coaxing them into the tunnel with a feeble lamp. Beneath her feet bricks scraped and clattered.

The twilight flickered, then leapt ahead. The roundness of the tunnel glistened faintly; Debbie could make out random edges of brick, a dull hint of rails. The taste grew in her mouth. Again she felt that they were being led. She didn't dare ask Sandra whether the light was really moving. It must be her eyes. A shadow loomed on the arch overhead: the bearer of the light—behind her. She turned gasping. At once the dimness went out. The distant mouth of the tunnel was small as a fingernail.

Its light couldn't have reached so far. Something else had illuminated their way. The taste filled her mouth, like suffocation; dark dripped all around her; the distant entrance flickered, dancing. If she made for the entrance Sandra would have to follow. She could move now, she'd only to move one foot, just one, just a little. Sandra screamed.

When Debbie turned—furious with Sandra: there was nothing to be scared of, they could go now, escape—shadows reached for her. The light had leapt ahead again, still dim but brighter. The shadows were attached to vague objects, of which the nearest seemed familiar. Light gathered on it, crawling, glimmering. It had large ragged ears. It was her old lost teddy bear.

It was moving. In the subterranean twilight its fur stirred as if drowned. No, it wasn't the fur. Debbie's bear was covered with a swarm that crawled. The swarm was emerging sluggishly from within the bear, piling more thickly on its body, crawling.

It was a lost toy, not hers at all. Nothing covered it but moisture and unstable light. "It's all right," she muttered weakly. "It's only someone's old bear." But Sandra was staring beyond it, sobbing with horror.

Farther in, where dimness and dark flickered together, there was a hole in the floor of the tunnel, surrounded by bricks and earth and something that

squatted. It squatted at the edge; its hands dangled into the hole, its dim face gaped pinkly. Its eyes gleamed like bubbles of mud.

"Oh, oh," Sandra sobbed. "It's the monkey."

Perhaps that was the worst—that Sandra knew the gaping face too. But Debbie's horror was blurred and numbing, because she could see so much. She could see what lay beside the hole, struggling feebly as if drugged, and whining: Mop.

Sandra staggered towards him as if she had lost her balance. Debbie stumbled after her, unable to think, feeling only her feet dragging her over the jagged floor. Then part of the darkness shifted and advanced on them, growing paler. A toy—a large clockwork toy, jerking rustily: the figure of a little boy, its body and ragged sodden clothes covered with dust and cobwebs. It plodded jerkily between them and the hole, and halted. Parts of it shone white, as if patched with flaking paint: particularly the face.

Debbie tried to look away, to turn, to run. But the taste burned in her mouth; it seemed to thread her with a rigid frame, holding her helpless. The dim stone tube was hemmed in by darkness; the twilight fluttered. Dust crawled in her throat. The toy bear glistened restlessly. The figure of the little boy swayed; its face glimmered, pale, featureless, blotchy. The monkey moved.

Its long hands closed around Mop and pulled him into the hole, then they scooped bricks and earth on top of him. The earth struggled in the hole, the whining became a muffled coughing and choking. Eventually the earth was still. The squat floppy body capered on the grave. Thick deep laughter, very slow, dropped from the gaping face. Each time the jaw drooped lower, almost touching the floor.

Another part of the dark moved. "That'll teach you. You won't forget that," a voice said.

It was the witch. She was lurking in the darkness, out of sight. Her voice was as lifeless now as her face had been. Debbie was able to see that the woman needed to hide in the dark to be herself. But she was trapped too efficiently for the thought to be at all reassuring.

"You'd better behave yourselves in future. I'll be watching," the voice said. "Go on now. Go away."

As Debbie found she was able to turn, though very lethargically, the little boy moved. She heard a crack; then he seemed to shrink jerkily, and topple towards her. But she was turning, and saw no more. The taste was heavy in her. She couldn't run; she could only plod through the close treacherous darkness towards the tiny light.

The light refused to grow. She plodded, she plodded, but the light held itself back. Then at last it seemed nearer, and much later it reached into the dark. She plodded out, exhausted and hollow. She clambered numbly up the bank, dragged her feet through the deserted streets; she was just aware of Sandra near her. She climbed the stairs, slipped the key into the handbag, went into her room, still trudging. Her numb trudge became the plodding of her heart, her slow suffocated gasps. She woke.

So it had been a dream, after all. Her mouth tasted bitter. What had awakened her? She lay uneasily, eyelids tight, trying to retreat into sleep; if she awoke completely she'd be alone with the dark. But light flapped on her eyelids. Something was wrong. The room was too bright, and flickering. Things cracked loudly, popping; a voice cried her name. Reluctantly she groped to the window, towards the blazing light.

The witch's house was on fire. Flames gushed from the windows, painting smoke red. Sandra stood outside, crying "Debbie!" As Debbie watched, bewildered, a screaming blaze appeared at an upstairs window, jerking like a puppet; then it writhed and fell back into the flames. Sandra seemed to be dancing, outlined by reflected fire, and weeping.

People were unlocking doors. Sandra's mother hurried out, and Debbie's father. Sandra's mother fluttered about, trying to drag the girl home, but Sandra was crying "Debbie!" Debbie gripped the sill, afraid to let go.

More houses were switched on. Debbie's mother ran out. There was a hasty discussion among the parents, then Debbie's father came hurrying back with Sandra. Debbie dodged into bed as they came upstairs; the witch's house roared, splintering.

"Here's Sandra, Debbie. She's frightened. She's going to sleep with you tonight." Shadows rushed into the room with him. When Sandra took off her dressing-gown and stood holding it, confused, he threw it impatiently on the chair. "Into bed now, quickly. And just you stay there."

They heard him hurrying downstairs, Sandra's mother saying, "Oh God, oh my God," Debbie's mother trying to calm her down. The girls lay silent in the shaking twilit room. Sandra was trembling.

"What happened?" Debbie whispered. "Did you see?"

After a while Sandra sobbed. "My little dog," she said indistinctly.

Was that an answer? Debbie's thoughts were blurred; the room quaked, Sandra's dressing-gown was slipping off the chair, distracting her. "What about Mop?" she whispered. "Where is he?"

Sandra seemed to be choking. The dressing-gown fell in a heap on the floor. Debbie felt nervous. What had happened to Mop? She'd dreamed—Surely Sandra couldn't have dreamed that too. The rest of the contents of the chair were following the dressing-gown.

"I dreamed," Debbie began uneasily, and bitterness filled her mouth like a gag. When she'd finished choking, she had forgotten what she'd meant to say. The room and furniture were unsteady with dimming light. Far away and fading, she heard her parents' voices.

Sandra was trying to speak. "Debbie," she said, "Debbie." Her body shook violently, with effort or with fear. "I burned the witch," she said. "Because of what she did."

Debbie stared in front of her, aghast. She couldn't take in Sandra's words. Too much had happened too quickly: the dream, the fire, her own bitter-tasting dumbness, Sandra's revelation, the distracting object that drooped from the chair—But until Sandra's dressing-gown was thrown there, that chair had been empty. She heard Sandra's almost breathless cry. Something dim squatted forward on the chair. Its pink yawning drooped towards the floor. Very slowly, relishing each separate word, it began to speak.

Missed Connection

Written in: 1976
First published in *Night Visions 3*, October 1986
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Outside the train the night rocked like a sea. Distant lights bobbed up and sailed away, waves of earth surged up violently and sank. The hurtling train swayed wildly. In the aisle crowds collided; people grabbed one another, clutching for support; their noise was deafening. But Ted had reached the door, and was wrenching it open.

"Oh no you don't," a voice said.

He woke. Was he home at last, and in bed? But already the jumble of sound had rushed into his ears: the harsh clicking repetitions of the tracks, the ebb and flow of tangled voices. He was still on the train.

He opened his eyes to glance at his watch. God, time seemed to have waited for him while he'd slept. Across the aisle the compulsive talker never faltered. "They're not what they used to be," he was saying. "Nothing is these days." Hadn't he said that before? No, Ted silenced himself: no déjà vu, thank you. He'd had enough philosophy of time this term to last him the rest of his life.

The train hadn't even left the city yet. Perhaps it had halted while Ted was asleep. He shifted so that he could look out of the window, trying to be stealthy: whenever he moved, the fat woman next to him encroached further. Specks of a new rain glittered on the windows. Beneath streetlamps, gleams of orange light drifted across the mirrors of streets, drawn by the movement of the train. At the end of a street, another train passed.

No, it couldn't have been. What, then? Momentarily he'd seen windows passing beyond a street, a glimpse of moving frames like a strip of film pulled through a gate. An unlit bus, probably. It had seemed to pace the train, but the far ends of streets were deserted now. Someone trod on his toe.

Jesus, it was the whining child. He'd stood up to rummage another toy out of the suitcase. "Watch the man's feet," his mother shouted. "Just you sit

down and shut up or I'll belt you one." "Aw, I wanna get something else," the child whined. "I wanna play." God, Ted hoped they weren't going to keep up their double act for the rest of the journey. How much longer? He bared his watch. It had stopped.

Well, that was great. Just fantastic. Now he couldn't tell how long he had still to suffer; he hadn't been home by this route before. All he needed now was for the train to stall. Anything might happen on the railway; the train wouldn't have been so crowded if there hadn't been some foul-up elsewhere; the public address system had mumbled an explanation. How long would he have to be stifled by this crowd?

He glanced warily at them. The child toyed with a gadget; his face grew petulant, preparing to whine. The mother ignored him ostentatiously and pored over a love story. The fat woman settled herself again; her lapful of carriers crackled and rustled. The sounds were close, flattened; all sounds were—a perpetual coughing, the stream of logorrhoea across the aisle, the loud underlying tangle of conversations, mixed blurrily with the rush of the train. People spilled from the corridors into the aisle, swaying expressionlessly as wax. Stale smoke drifted in, to hang in the trapped June heat. Ted pressed himself closer to the window, trying to make even the tiniest gap between himself and the fat woman. He couldn't stand much more of this.

He must be overtired; he felt on edge, somehow vulnerable. The university term had been taxing. Still, he needn't be neurotic. The journey wouldn't last forever. He turned to the window, drawing into himself, itching with sweat.

The city was petering out. Jagged icicles of streetlamps hung beneath shades, houses gaped. A distant train crossed a vague street. Again? It had seemed to pass through a derelict alley. Perhaps a terrace walling off the end of a street had looked like a carriage. Or perhaps it had been the train on which he was trapped, reflected somehow. The night was seeping into the city; it swept away the last walls, and filled the windows of the train.

It made them into mirrors. The reflected carriage closed him in. The fat woman sat forward; her lap rustled loudly. Her reflection appeared, multiplied by the double glazing: her two noses overlapped, her four lips opened moistly. All the faces became explosions of flesh, far too much of it, surrounding him wherever he looked, hot and oily and luxuriantly featured.

His own face had exploded too. He must distract himself. He dragged Robbe-Grillet from his pocket.

The child whined, the man talked, talked; the tracks chattered rapidly. Ted read the same words over and over, but they became increasingly meaningless; Ted read the same words over and over, but they became increasingly meaningless. He found himself hoping to find they had changed. He stared glumly through the window, which was thickly veined with rain. Then he peered closer. This time there certainly was a train out there.

It was perhaps two hundred yards away, and racing neck and neck with his own train. It squirmed a little, distorted by the watery veins. He strained to see more clearly. There was something odd about the train. The dimness of its windows could be an effect of the downpour. But why were the windows flickering, appearing and vanishing, like an incompetently projected film? Of course—the train was passing through a forest.

He gazed fascinated. The image seemed hypnotic; it drew him. He grew unaware of the stifling carriage, the rush of noise. The dim rectangular will-o'-the-wisps swayed jerkily between the glistening pillars of the trees. The forest was thinning. As a child might, he looked forward to the sight of the unobscured train. The trees fell back, giving way to a field. But nothing at all emerged.

He gasped, and craned back to peer at the swiftly dwindling forest, as though the train might be lurking in there like an animal. But there was only the long edge of the forest, fleeing backwards. The bare fields spread around him, soaked and glittering.

He wished he could ask someone whether they had seen it too. But when he'd gasped, the mother and child had gaped only at him. Again he felt nervously vulnerable: as though his skin were drawn too tight, and thinning. Around him they coughed, whined, shouted, chattered incessantly; tracks clattered. Now he felt more than stifled by the crowd, he felt alienated. Hadn't he felt so earlier, before he'd had the dream? He couldn't talk to anyone; he was trapped in his own mind. The crowd was a huge muddled entity, hemming him in with flesh and noise.

He wanted a sandwich. He wanted to use the toilet. In fact he simply wanted to prove somehow that he wasn't helpless: even lean out of a window for a while. "Will you keep my seat?" he asked the fat woman, but

she was asleep, jaw dangling. "Will you keep my seat?" he asked the mother, but she only murmured vaguely, shrugging. The child gaped at him. When Ted stood up anyway, the nearest of the standing passengers gazed speculatively at his place. He sat down again, muttering.

The fat woman snorted deep in her throat, as though choking rhythmically; she rolled against him. God! He shoved her away, but she rolled closer. He thrust his shoulder against hers and braced his feet. The mother and child stared at him. He gazed from the window, to ignore them.

The rain was thinning. Beside the train the ground soared abruptly; an embankment glistened with dim grass and flowers, skimming by. It pressed reflections closer to him; the faces overgrown with flesh became more solid. Surely he must be nearly home. Shouldn't the train reach a station soon? The embankment sank, wind cleared rain from the glass. The ground flattened and became fields, and a train matched the speed of his own.

It wasn't the same train, not the one from the trees. Its lights were dim, but why not? Of course, he thought gladly: it was being shunted into a siding. No doubt they shunted many trains at night, that was why the other train had vanished. But this train was closer, hardly a hundred yards away; and it was not empty. Dim faces rode in the dim carriages, bobbing slightly.

Perhaps the train was a reflection, on rain or mist. On bare fields? Sweat crept over him, making his skin uneasy; he felt a vague panic. It couldn't be a reflection, for the seat opposite him on the other train was empty. There was something wrong with the faces. Ahead the ground swooped up, carrying a road over a bridge. He heard his own train plunge into a short tunnel. But there wasn't a bridge for the other train, it was heading straight for—

The bridge swept over him, shouting; then fields sailed by. They were deserted. There was no second train.

Oh God, he was hallucinating. He hadn't taken many drugs in his time, surely too few to cause a flashback. Was he having a breakdown? For a moment he was unsure which train he was riding. Sweat stifled him; the noise of the carriage enclosed him, impalpable and roaring.

Oh come on, one needn't be mad to hallucinate. He'd decided earlier that he was overtired. Didn't tiredness sometimes force dreams into one's waking life? In any case, the train need not have been a hallucination. Its track must

have curved beside the road, the bridge had prevented him from seeing where it had gone. The explanations soothed him, but still unease was planted deep in him. A thought lurked, something that had happened before, that he'd forgotten. It didn't matter. He must be near the end of the journey.

The crowd shifted restlessly, rocking; voices jumbled. Drifts of smoke sank through the ponderous heat, the cougher persisted harshly. The child banged his feet repetitively beneath his seat, the mother stared emptily away, the talker rattled on. Soon be home now, soon.

Outside the ground was rising. The luxuriant faces stared back from the window with their overlapping eyes. It's all right, nothing's wrong. But as the ground walled off the landscape, Ted felt panic growing. The embankment rushed by. He was waiting for it to sink, so that he could see what lay beyond. There was nothing, nothing lying in wait; why should there be? The embankment began to descend. Wind tugged the last lines of rain from the window. The embankment sped away behind, into the dark. At once its place was taken by a train.

It was much closer: less than fifty yards away. And it looked disturbingly similar to the last train. Though the dim carriages were crowded, their aisles clogged with people, the seat opposite Ted's was empty.

Panic threaded him like wire; his body felt unstable. There was something very odd about that train. Dim and vague though they were, the faces of its passengers looked even more abnormal than his own train's exploded reflections. Some were very pale, others looked vividly stained. The shapes of all of them were wrong.

His panic blazed up. He hardly knew where he was. He swayed, borne helplessly over clattering tracks; he was on one of the trains. He saw faces, flesh exploding beyond glass; they might be reflections, or—

The fat woman sagged against him, snatching him back to himself for a moment. He was trapped in the hot suffocating carriage. A train, dim and flickering as though full of candlelight, was keeping pace with him. Within its windows, all the vague deformed faces were staring straight at him.

He struggled to rise. He had to get away. Where? If he found a guard, perhaps—He must get away from the window, from the staring vaguenesses. He fought to thrust back the fat woman; she was pinning him

to the seat. Sweat clothed him. He was still struggling to free himself when he saw that the two trains were converging. They were going to collide.

"Ay, well," the talkative man said. "Not long now. We're nearly there."

He'd said that before: just before Ted had fallen asleep. Everything was wrong; there was no reality to hold the nightmare back. "Christ!" Ted screamed. One or two people stared at him, someone laughed; their eyes had gone dead.

He wrenched himself free. The fat woman toppled toward the window, snoring convulsively. He staggered down the aisle, hurled against seats and people by the swaying of the carriage. He glanced fearfully toward the window, and his mind grew numb. Perhaps it already was, for he thought that the ground had fallen away, leaving the other train still racing alongside, and closing.

He shouldered wildly through the crowd. People muttered resentfully. They moved aside sluggishly; some stood in his path, staring at him. The trains were almost touching now. A maze of hot moist flesh hindered him, choking the aisle, swaying repeatedly into his path. He clawed through. Behind him the muttering grew resentful, furious; a hand grabbed him. But he'd reached the end of the carriage.

Outside the door a dim distorted face lolled toward him, staring. He hurled himself toward the far door, against the swaying. He must throw himself clear. Any injury would be preferable to meeting his vague mounting dread. He wrenched at the handle.

"Oh no you don't," a voice said, and the trains collided.

There was no sound, and immediately no light. The trains seemed less to collide than to merge. In the absolute darkness, an image lit up in Ted's mind: a wrecked train lying beside a track, and himself crawling away from an open door. At once the image began to dwindle. He tried to hold onto it, but he was being borne away into the darkness. He wasn't the lone survivor, after all. They had come back to take him with them, they resented his escape. The image fled, was a point of light, went out.

He was lying back in his seat. He felt the carriage swaying, amid total silence. He kept his eyes closed as long as he could. When he opened them at last he tried to scream; but as he saw more, he tried to stay absolutely quiet, still, invisible. Perhaps that would make it all go away.

But the fat woman slumped against him. Without looking, he could make out that she had lost part of her face. The aisles were still crowded; objects swayed there. Outside the windows was nothing but darkness. Opposite him the mother's jaw hung far too wide. But despite their appearance his companions were moving, though slowly as clockwork on the point of running down, in the dim unsteady light. The child's body moved jerkily, and in the object dangling on its neck, a mouth began to whine.

The Change

Written in: 1976
First published in *Shayol #4*, 1980
Also published in: *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

As soon as he reached the flat Don started writing. Walking home, he'd shaped the chapter in his mind. What transformations does the werewolf undergo? he wrote. The new streetlamp by the bus-stop snapped alight as the October evening dimmed. Does he literally change into another creature, or is it simply a regression?

"How's it coming?" Margaret asked when she came in.

"Pretty well." It was, though she'd distracted him. He stared out at the bluish lamp and searched for the end of his sentence.

After dinner, during which his mind had been constructing paragraphs, he hurried back to his desk. The bluish light washed out the lines of ink; the rest of the page looked arctically indifferent, far too wide to fill. His prepared paragraphs grew feeble. When he closed the curtains and wrote a little, his sentences seemed dull. Tomorrow was Saturday. He'd begin early.

He had forgotten the queues at the bus-stop. He went unshaven to his desk, but already shoppers were chattering about the crowds they would avoid. They were less than three yards from him, and the glass seemed very thin. He was sure the noise grew worse each week. Still, he could ignore it, use the silences.

Aren't we all still primitive? he wrote. Hasn't civilisation—Children whined, tugging at their mothers. Hasn't civilisation—Now the women were shaking the children, cuffing them, shouting. Hasn't bloody civilisation—A bus bore the queue away, but as many people missed the bus and began complaining loudly, repetitively.

"Yes, it's going all right," he told Margaret, and pretended to turn back to check a reference. He wasn't lying. Just a temporary block.

Hasn't civilisation simply trapped and repressed our primitive instincts? he managed to stutter at last. But the more strongly—Scarved crowds were

massing outside, chanting football slogans. There's tribal behaviour for you. But the more strongly—Youths stared in at him, shouting inanities. If only there was room in the bedroom for his desk, if only they had erected the bus-stop just a few houses away—He forced himself to keep his head down. But the more strongly primitive instincts are repressed the more savage their occasional outburst will be, whether in mass murder or actual lycanthropy. God, that was enough. Sunday would be better.

Sunday was full of children, playing itinerant games. He abandoned writing, and researched in library books while Margaret wrote her case reports. He was glad he'd taken time off to read the books. Now he had new insights, which would mean a stronger chapter.

Monday was hectic. The most complicated tax assessments were being calculated, now that all the information had arrived. Taxpayers phoned, demanding why they were waiting; the office rang incessantly. "Inland Revenue," Don and his colleagues kept saying. "Inland Revenue." Still, he managed to calculate three labyrinthine assessments.

He felt more confident on the way home. He was already on the third chapter, and his publisher had said that this book should be more commercial than his first. Perhaps it would pay for a house, then Margaret could give up social work and have her baby; perhaps he could even write full time. He strode home, determined to improve the book. Dissolving bars of gold floated in the deep blue sky, beyond the tower blocks.

He was surprised how well the opening chapters read. He substituted phrases here and there. The words grew pale as bluish light invaded his desk-lamp's. When the text gave out, his mind went on. His nib scratched faintly. At the end of the second paragraph he gazed out, frowning.

The street had the unnatural stillness of a snowscape. Street and houses stretched away in both directions, gleaming faintly blue. The cross-street on his right was lit similarly; the corner house had no shadow. The pavement seemed oppressively close with no garden intervening. Everything looked unreal, glary with lightning.

He was so aware of the silence now that it distracted him. He must get an idea moving before the silence gave way, before someone came to stare. Write, for God's sake write. Repression, regression, lycanthropy. It sounded like a ditty in his mind.

Animal traits of primitive man. Distrust of the unfamiliar produces a savage response. He scribbled, but there seemed to be no continuity; his thoughts were flowing faster than his ink. Someone crossed at the intersection, walking oddly. He glared at the shadowless corner, but it was deserted. At the edge of his vision the figure had looked as odd as the light. He scribbled, crossing out and muttering to deafen himself to the silence. As he wrote the end of a paragraph, a face peered at him, inches from his. Margaret had tiptoed up to smile. He crumpled the book as he slammed it shut, but managed to smile as she came in.

Later he thought an idea was stirring, a paragraph assembling. Margaret began to tell him about her latest case.

"Right, yes, all right," he muttered and sat at the window, his back to her. The blank page blotted thought from his mind. The bluish light tainted the page and the desk, like a sour indefinable taste.

The light bothered him. It changed his view of the quiet street which he'd used to enjoy while working. This new staged street was unpleasantly compelling. Passers-by looked discoloured, almost artificial. If he drew the curtains, footsteps conjured up caricatures which strolled across his mind. If he sat at the dining-table he could still hear any footsteps, and was nearer Margaret, the rustling of her case reports, her laughter as she read a book.

His head was beginning to feel like the approach of a storm; he wasn't sure how long it had felt that way. The first sign of violence was almost a relief. It was Thursday night, and he was straining at a constipated paragraph. When someone arrived at the bus-stop, Don forced himself not to look. He gazed at the blot which had gathered at the end of his last word, where he'd rested his pen. The blot had started to look like an obstacle he would never be able to pass. The bluish light appeared to be making it grow, and there was another blot on the edge of his vision—another man at the bus-stop. If he looked he would never be able to write, he knew. At last he glanced up, to get it over with, and then he stared. Something was wrong.

They looked almost like two strangers at a bus-stop, their backs to each other. One shrugged his shoulders loosely, as though he was feeling the cold; the other stretched, baring huge calloused hands. Their faces were neutral as masks. All at once Don saw that was just a pretence. Each man was waiting for the other to make a move. They were wary as animals in a cage.

Now he could see how whenever one shifted the other turned towards him, almost imperceptibly. The light had changed their faces into plastic, bluish plastic masks that might at any moment slip awry. Suddenly Don's mouth tasted sour, for he'd realised that the men were turning their backs on the roadway; before they came face to face, they would see him. He was protected by the window, and anyway he could retreat to Margaret. But the sound of her rustling pages seemed very far away. Now the masks were almost facing him, and a roar was growing—the sound of a bus. He managed to gulp back a sigh of relief before Margaret could notice that anything was wrong. How could he explain to her when he didn't understand it himself?

When the men had boarded the bus, making way stiffly for each other, he closed the curtains hastily. His fingers were trembling, and he had to go into the kitchen to splash cold water on his face. Trying to appear nonchalant as he passed Margaret, he felt as false as the masks in the street.

A face came towards the window, grinning. It was discoloured, shiny, plastic; its eyes shone, unnaturally blue. As it reached the window it cracked like an egg from forehead to chin, and its contents leapt at him, smashing the glass and his dream. Beside him Margaret was sound asleep. He lay in his own dark and wondered what was true about the dream.

The next night he pretended to write, and watched. His suspicion was absurd, but fascinating. As he gazed unblinking at the people by the bus-stop they looked increasingly deformed; their heads were out of proportion, or their faces lopsided; their dangling hands looked swollen and clumsy. Christ, nobody was perfect; the clinical light simply emphasised imperfections, or his eyes were tired. Yet the people looked self-conscious, pretending to be normal. That light would make anyone feel awkward. He would be glad of Saturday and daylight.

He'd forgotten the crowds again. Once they would have set him scribbling his impressions in his notebook; now their mannerisms looked studied and ugly, their behaviour uncivilised. The women were mannequins, in hideous taste: hives of artificially senile hair squatted on their heads, their eyes looked enlarged with blue paint. The men were louder and more brutal, hardly bothering to pretend at all.

Margaret returned, laden with shopping. "I saw your book in the supermarket. I improved their display."

"Good, fine," he snarled, and tried to reconstruct the sentence she had ruined. He was gripping his pen so hard it almost cracked.

On Sunday afternoon he managed a page, as late sunlight turned the street amber. In one case, he wrote, a man interested in transmogrification took LSD and 'became' a tiger, even to seeing a tiger in the mirror. Doesn't this show how fragile human personality is? Too many bloody rhetorical questions in this book. Very little pressure is needed to break the shell of civilisation, of all that we call human—five minutes more of that bloody radio upstairs was about all it would take. There was no silence anywhere, except the strained unnerving quiet of the street at night.

Next week Margaret was on call. After being surrounded by the office phones all day, he was even more on edge for the shrilling of the phone. Yet when she was called out he was surprised to find that he felt relieved. The flat was genuinely silent, for the people overhead were out too. Though he was tired from persuading irate callers that they owed tax, he uncapped his pen and sat at the window.

Why is the full moon important to lycanthropy? Does moonlight relate to a racial memory, a primitive fear? Its connotations might stir up the primitive elements of the personality, most violently where they were most repressed, or possibly where they were closest to the surface. Come to think, it must be rather like the light outside his window.

There was his suspicion again, and yet he had no evidence. He'd seen how the light caricatured people, and perhaps its spotlighting made them uneasy. But how could a streetlight make anyone more savage—for example, the gang of youths he could hear approaching loudly? It was absurd. Nevertheless his palms were growing slick with apprehension, and he could hardly keep hold of his pen.

When they came abreast of the window they halted and began to jeer at him, at his pose behind the desk. Teeth gleamed metallically in the discoloured faces, their eyes glittered like glass. For a moment he was helpless with panic, then he realised that the glass protected him. He held that thought steady, though his head was thumping. Let them try to break through, he'd rip their throats out on the glass, drag their faces over the splinters. He sat grinning at the plastic puppets while they jeered and gestured jerkily. At last they dawdled away, shouting threats.

He sat coated with the light, and felt rather sick. He seemed unable to clear his mind of a jumble of images: glass, flesh, blood, screams. He got up to find a book, any distraction at all, and then he saw his bluish shadow. Its long hands dangled, its distorted head poked forward. As he stooped to peer closer he felt as if it was dragging him down, stretching his hands down to meet its own. All at once he darted to the light switch. He clawed the curtains shut and left the light burning, then he went into the bedroom and sat for a long time on the bed. He held his face as though it was a mask that was slipping.

On Thursday the bus home was delayed by a car crash. While the other passengers stared at blood and deformed metal, Don was uneasily watching the night seep across the sky. When he reached home the house looked worse than he'd feared: thin, cardboardy, bricks blackened by the light—not much of a refuge at all.

He was overworked, that was why he felt nervous. He must find time to relax. He'd be all right once he was inside with the curtains drawn, away from the dead light that seemed to have soaked into everything, even his fingers as they fumbled with the key. He glanced up to see who was watching him from the upstairs flat, then he looked away hastily. Maybe someone up there was really as deformed as that; he never met the tenants, they had a separate entrance. No, surely the figure must have looked like that because of a flaw in the glass.

In his flat he listened to the footsteps overhead, and couldn't tell if anything was wrong with them. Eventually he cooked the dinner Margaret had left him when she was called away. He tried to write, but the fragility of the silence made him too nervous. When he held his breath, he could hear the jungle of sound beyond the curtains: snarls of cars, the low thunder of planes, shouts, things falling, shrieks of metal, cries. The bluish flat stood emptily behind him.

The last singers were spilling out of pubs. Surely Margaret would be home soon. Wasn't that Margaret now? No, the hurrying footsteps were too uneven and too numerous: a man and a woman. He could hear the man shouting incoherently, almost wordlessly. Now the woman was running, and the man was stumbling heavily after her. When he caught her outside the window she began to scream.

Don squirmed in his chair. She was screaming abuse, not with fear. He could stand it, surely it wouldn't last long, her screeching voice that seemed to be in the room with him, scraping his nerves. All at once a body thumped the window; the frame shook. They were fighting, snarling. Christ! He struggled to his feet and forced himself to reach towards the curtains.

Then he saw the shadows, and barely managed not to cry out himself. Though the curtains blurred them, they were all too clear to him. As they clawed at each other, he was sure their arms were lengthening. Surely their heads were swelling like balloons and changing shape; perhaps that was why they sounded as though they never could have formed words. The window juddered and he flinched back, terrified they might sense him beyond the glass. For a moment he saw their mouths lunging at each other's faces, tearing.

All at once there was silence. Footsteps stumbled away, he couldn't tell whose. It took him a long time to part the curtains, and much longer to open the front door. But the street was deserted, and he might have doubted everything he'd seen but for a smear of blood on the window. He ran for tissues and wiped it away, shuddering. The lamp stood behind him, bright and ruthless; its dead eye gazed from the pane. He was surrounded. He could only take refuge in bed and try to keep his eyes closed.

The next day he rang the Engineering Department (Mechanical & Lighting) from the office, and told them where he lived. "What exactly have you put in those lights?"

The girl was probably just a clerk. "No, they're not mercury vapour," he said. "You might think they were, but not if you had to live with them, I can tell you. Will you connect me with someone who knows?"

Perhaps she felt insulted, or perhaps his tone disturbed her. "Never mind why I want to know. You don't want me to know, do you? Well, I know there's something else in them, let me tell you, and I'll be in touch with someone who can do something about it."

As he slammed the receiver down, he saw that his colleagues were staring at him. What was wrong with them? Had the politeness which the job demanded possessed them completely? Were they scared of a bit of honest rage?

On the way home he wandered until he found a derelict area, though the start of winter time had made him more nervous. Already the sky was black, an hour earlier than yesterday, and he was dismayed to find he dreaded going home. Outside his flat the lamp stood waiting, in a street that looked alien as the moon. Nobody was in sight. He unlocked the front door, then he lifted the brick he was carrying and hurled it at the lamp. As the bulb shattered, he closed the door quickly. He spent the evening pretending to write, and stared out at the dark.

Saturday brought back the crowds. Their faces were pink putty, all too malleable. He cursed himself for wasting last night's dark. If he went to the library for quiet he would have walked two miles for nothing: there would be crowds there too. If only he could afford to move! But it was only the cheap rent here that was allowing him and Margaret to save.

She emerged from the mass of putty faces and dumped shopping on the table. "Isn't it going well?"

"What do you mean, isn't it going well? It won't go better for questions like that, will it? Yes, of course it's going well!" There was no point in telling her the truth; he had enough to bear without her anxiety. That evening he wrote a few paragraphs, but they were cumbersome and clumsy.

On Sunday he tried to relax, but whenever Margaret spoke he felt there was an idea at the edge of his mind, waiting to be glimpsed and written. "Yes, later, later," he muttered, trying vainly to recapture the idea. That night she turned restlessly in bed for hours. He lay beside her and wondered uneasily what had gone wrong with the dark.

His lack of sleep nagged him on Monday. His skull felt tight and fragile. Whenever he tried to add up a column of figures a telephone rang, his colleagues laughed inanely, a fragment of conversation came into focus. People wandered from desk to desk. His surroundings were constantly restless, distracting.

One of his taxpayers called and refused to believe he owed four hundred pounds. Don sensed how the man's hands were clenching, seeking a victim, reaching for him. There was no need to panic, not with the length of the telephone cable between them. He couldn't be bothered to conceal his feelings. "You owe the money. There's nothing I can do."

"You bastards," the man was screaming, "you f—" as Don put down the receiver.

Some of his colleagues were staring at him. Maybe they could have done better, except that they probably wouldn't even have realised they were threatened. Did they honestly believe that words and printed forms were answers to the violence? Couldn't they see how false it all was? Only his triumph over the streetlamp helped him through the day.

He walked most of the way home, enjoying the darkness where lamps were smashed. As he neared his street the bluish light closed in. It didn't matter, it couldn't reach his home now. When he began to run, anxious to take refuge, his footsteps sounded flat and false as the light. He turned the corner into his street. Outside his flat the lamp was lit.

It craned its bony concrete neck, a tall thin ghost, its face blazing. It had defeated him. However many times he destroyed it, it would return. He locked himself in and grabbed blindly for the light switch.

After dinner he sat at his desk and read his chapters, in case Margaret suspected he had failed. The words on the bluish pages seemed meaningless; even his handwriting looked unfamiliar. His hot eyes felt unfamiliar too.

And now it was Margaret's noises. They sounded forced, unnervingly artificial, sound effects. When he frowned at her she muted them, which only made them more infuriating. Her eyes were red, but he couldn't help it if she was distressed while he felt as he did, besieged deep in himself. "I'm going to bed," she said eventually, like a rebuke. When he couldn't bear sitting alone any longer, she was still awake. He lay with his back to her in order to discourage conversation, which would distract him. Something was certainly wrong with the dark.

In the morning, when she'd gone to work, he saw what he must do. Since he had no chance of writing at weekends or in the evenings, he must give up his daytime job, which was false anyway. His book was more important, it would say things that needed saying—they would be clear when the time came to write them. In the shaving mirror his grin looked weaker than he felt.

He grinned more widely as he phoned to report himself sick. That falseness was enjoyable. He sat grinning at his desk, waiting for words. But he

couldn't reach back to the self who had written the chapters; however deep in his mind he groped, there was nothing but a dialogue. Isn't it going well? No, it isn't going well. No, it isn't, no, it isn't, no, it isn't going well. Repression, regression, lycanthropy. Putty faces bobbed past the window. Now here was the bluish light, moulding them into caricatures or worse. Repression, regression, lycanthropy.

"You're home early," Margaret said. He stared at her, probing for the implication, until she looked away.

After dinner she watched television in the bedroom, with the sound turned to a whisper. He followed her, to place more distance between himself and the tinged curtains. As soon as he switched off the light, the living room was a dead bluish box. When he clawed at the switch, the bluish tinge seemed to have invaded the light of the room.

"You've left the light on."

"Leave it on!" He couldn't tell her why. He was trapped in himself, and his shell felt brittle. In a way it was a relief to be cut off from her that way; at least he needn't struggle to explain. She stared at the screen, she swallowed aspirin, she glanced at him and flinched from his indifferent gaze. Shrunken figures jerked about as though they were trying to escape the box of the television, and they felt as real as he did. After a while Margaret slipped into bed and hid her face. He supposed she was crying.

He lay beside her. Voices crowded his mind, shouting. Repression, regression, lycanthropy. Margaret's hand crept around his waist, but he couldn't bear to be touched; he shook her off. Perhaps she was asleep. Around him the room was faintly luminous. He gazed at it suspiciously until his eyelids drooped.

When he woke, he seemed hardly to have slept. Perhaps the revelation had woken him, for he knew at last what was wrong with the dark. It had developed a faint bluish tinge. How could the light penetrate the closed door? Was it reaching beneath the door for him? Or had the colour settled on his eyeballs, seeped into them?

It hadn't trapped him yet. He sneaked into his clothes. Margaret was a vague draped huddle, dimly bluish. He tiptoed to the front door and let himself out, then he began to run.

At the tower blocks he slowed. Concrete, honeycombed with curtained rectangles, massed above him. Orange sodium mushrooms glared along the paths, blackening the grass. The light outside his flat was worse than that; it was worse than moonlight, because it infected everyone, not just the few. That was why he'd felt so strange lately. It had been transforming him.

He must go back for Margaret. They must leave now, this minute. Tomorrow they'd find somewhere else to live, draw on their savings; they could come back in daylight for their possessions. He must go back, he'd left her alone with the light. He ran, closing his eyes against the light as far as he could.

As he reached the street he heard someone padding towards him—padding like an animal. He dodged into an alley almost opposite the flat, but the padding turned aside somewhere. He grinned at the dark; he could outwit the light now that he knew its secret. But as soon as he emerged into the street he sensed that he was being watched.

He saw the face almost at once. It was staring at him between curtains, beside a reflection of the lamp. The face was a luminous dead mask, full of the light. He could see the animal staring out through the eyes. The mask was inside his flat, staring out at him.

He made himself go forward, or perhaps the light was forcing him. Certainly it had won. His head felt cold and hollow, cut off from his trudging. The eyes widened in the mask; the creature was ready to fly at him. The mask writhed, changing.

Suddenly he caught sight of his shadow. The light was urging it towards the window. Its claws were dangling, its head swelled forward eagerly, and this time there was nothing familiar to hold him back, no light he could switch on to change the dead street and the shadow. There was only the enemy in his home. He was the shadow, one hand dangling near the gutter. He snatched up the brick and smashing the window, struggled in through the splintering frame.

The creature backed away, into a corner. For a moment it seemed to be beaten. But when he leapt, hurling the curtains aside, it fought him with its claws. He struggled with it, breaking it, biting, tearing. At last it was still. He staggered blindly into the bedroom, mopping blood from his eyes with the rags of his sleeve.

He switched on the light, but couldn't tell what colour it was. He felt like a hollow shell. When at last he noticed that the bed was empty, it took him a very long time to force himself to look in the living room. As he looked, he became less and less sure of what he was seeing. As to who was seeing it, he had no idea at all.

A New Life

"In 1974 there seemed to be a new market for horror—a bunch of Marvel comics which would include prose tales modelled on the E. C. comics of the fifties. I wrote quite a few that year, appreciating the discipline of having to be terse, even when it transpired that Marvel had decided not to use prose stories after all. [...] *A New Life* was one of the last of my E. C. pieces. It was written in 1976."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to anthology *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

Written in: 1976
First published in *Winter Chills #1*, 1987
Also published in: *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

Already he was blind again. But he was sure that someone had been peering at him. The glimpse was vague as the memory of a dream: the bright quivering outline of a head, which had had darkness for a face. Perhaps it had been a dream, which had wakened him.

Darkness lay on his eyes, thick as soil, heavy as sleep. It seemed eager to soothe his mind into drifting. He fought the shapeless flowing of his thoughts. He was near to panic, for he had no idea where he was.

He tried to calm himself. He must analyse his sensations, surely that would help him understand. But he found he could scarcely think. In the darkness, whose depth he had no means of gauging, his mind seemed to dissolve. He felt as though its edges were crumbling, as though nothingness were eating toward its core. He cried out wordlessly.

At least he had a body, then. He hadn't been able to feel it, and had dreaded that—The echo of his cry was hollow, but quickly muffled by walls quite close to him. The cry hadn't sounded at all like his voice.

If it wasn't his voice, then whose—He quashed that thought. His self-control was firmer now that some sense of his body had returned. He could feel his limbs, though faintly. They felt very weak; he couldn't move them. Clearly he hadn't yet recovered from his ordeal.

Yes, his ordeal. He was beginning to remember: being swept away and sucked down by the river, which had closed over his face with a hectic roar; the enormous weight of water that had thrust him down, into depths where his breath had burst out with a muffled agonised gurgling. After that,

darkness—perhaps the darkness that surrounded him now. Had the river carried him here?

That was absurd. Someone must have rescued him and brought him here. But what place was it? Why would a rescuer leave him alone in total darkness, even when he cried out?

He controlled his gathering panic. He must be philosophical—after all, that was his vocation. Ah, he remembered that too; it comforted him. Perhaps, as he lay waiting for his strength, he could reflect on his beliefs. They would sustain him. But a twinge of fear convinced him that it might be wise to avoid such thoughts here. He subsided nervously, feeling as though the core of him were exposed and vulnerable. Chill sweat pricked his forehead in the close dark. He must resign himself to his situation, until he knew more. He must be still, and await his strength. Sensation trickled slowly into his limbs. They seemed to form gradually about him: as though he were being reborn into a body. His mind flinched from that thought. For a moment, panic was very near.

He concentrated on sensation. His limbs felt enlarged, and cold as stone. As yet he couldn't tell whether these feelings were distorted by sickness. The threat of distortion troubled him; it meant he could be sure of nothing. It oppressed him, like the blinding darkness. He felt as though his brain and his nerves were drifting exposed in a void. Was he really blind?

How could near-drowning have blinded him? But while he scoffed at the idea, the darkness pressed close as a mask. What dark in the world could be so total? He remembered the face he had seemed to glimpse. That proved he could see—except that it was dim as a ghost of the mind, and perhaps had never been more than that.

The idea of being blind as well as enfeebled, in this unknown place, terrified him. With lips that seemed gigantically swollen, he cried out again, to bring the watcher back—if there had been one.

He heard his echoes blunder, dull and misshapen, against stone. Suddenly he was awash with panic. He struggled within his unresponsive body, as though he could snatch back the cry. He shouldn't have drawn attention to himself, he shouldn't have let the watcher know he was alive and helpless. All the fears which he had been trying to avoid insisted that his mind knew where he was.

For a while he could hear only the rapid unsteady labouring of his heart. It seemed to become confused with its own echo, to imprison him with a clutter of muffled thudding. Then he realised that some of the uneven sounds were approaching. Very slowly, someone was shuffling irregularly toward him through the dark.

He squeezed his eyelids tight, and tried to keep absolutely still. He had lain so in his childhood, when the night had surrounded him with demons come to carry him to Hell. That memory appalled him. As he tried to ignore it, it clung to his mind. But he had no time to ponder it, for the footsteps had dragged to a halt close to him.

Something scraped harshly, and light splashed over him. The light was orange; it flickered, plucking at his eyelids. He felt as though the torch, whose sputtering he could hear, were thrust close to his eyes; he could almost feel its heat snatching eagerly at him. He shrank within himself, bathed in fear. He tried to hold his eyes still amid the flickering. At last the light withdrew a little, and metal scraped the dark into place again. The watcher shuffled away, dwindling.

Blinded once more, he lay in his cell. From the echoing stone, and the scrape of the spy-hole, he knew that was where he was. How could he have been imprisoned for trying to save a girl from drowning? Or had the authorities taken the chance to arrest him for his unchristian beliefs, which the University's theologians and his old parish priest had condemned? He tried to outshout his thoughts: no, his situation here had nothing to do with his beliefs, nothing at all.

His mind wasn't hushed so easily. It was as though fragments of thought that had remained from before his ordeal were settling together, clarifying themselves. Soon he would remember everything: far too much. Because he could almost remember it now, he realised that he didn't know his name. His panic seemed to sweep him deeper into darkness, where there was no sound, and no time. It felt like the beginning of eternity.

Perhaps it was. Before he could understand that thought, and give way entirely to terror, he made himself try to move. He must at least escape his helplessness. It might be possible to overpower the watcher. Surely it might be.

He strained. His limbs felt too large, and separate from him—as though bloated and stiffened by drowning. Of course that wasn't why they felt

unfamiliar. The reason was—He struggled to reach his body with his mind, more to distract himself than in any real hope. His thoughts waited patiently for recognition.

At last, with a sigh that shuddered out of him as though he were relinquishing his life, he slumped helpless. At once his thoughts rushed forward. His body was beyond his control because he was dead.

The thought was terrible because it explained so much. It crushed him, as though the darkness had become stone. His blindness had robbed his mind of all defences. If he tried to think, his philosophy led him straight to his fears. He was a child alone in the dark.

The image of the river was too vivid to be false. He'd been walking by the Danube when the girl had fallen in. He and another man had plunged in, to rescue her. The other man had reached her. But nobody had saved him; a hidden current had dragged him away and down, down, far too deep to have survived. The memory dragged him down now, into the relentless darkness.

As he walked, he'd been preparing the next day's lecture. Pythagoras, Plato, Kant. Could that have anything to do with his plight? No, he told himself. Of course not. Nothing. But he dreaded finding out where he was.

That was contemptible. He would know sooner or later, he couldn't change that; he must resign himself. If only he didn't feel so helpless! Perhaps, if he began very gradually, he could gain control of his body; if he could move just one limb—

He made himself aware of his limbs. They felt swollen, but not painful. A chill had gathered on them, from the surrounding stone. His back felt like a slab; his mind must be confusing it with the stone on which he lay.

He concentrated on his right arm. It felt distant, cut off from him by enormous darkness. He grew aware of the fingers. He tried to feel their separateness, but they were pressed together like a single lump of flesh, in a kind of mitten. They were bound, as was his entire body. Panicking, he strained to raise his hand. But it lay inert as meat on a butcher's slab.

Again he was a child in the dark, but more alone: even time had deserted him. He remembered lying in the darkness of his childhood, praying never to lose his beliefs, because if you died unbelieving you were doomed to eternal torment. His worst and vaguest terror had always been that the torment would be appropriate to the victim.

He fought against the current of his terror. How could he give up without trying all his limbs? His mind groped about, as though in a cluttered dark room; he was surrounded by jumbled dead flesh, his own. At last his awareness grasped his left arm.

It lay parcelled in its bindings, resting lifeless on the stone. That was how a mummy's arm must feel. Somewhere in there were nerves and muscles, buried in the meat: dead and unresponsive. He forced his mind to reach out. He was panting. His teeth scraped together, with a creak of bone that filled his skull.

He must reach out, just a little further. He could do it. Just one finger. But his mind was diffused by the darkness; it felt as though it were floating shapelessly in the meat. His thought of ancient history had stimulated it into babbling Pythagoras, Plato, Kant, von Herder, Goethe. All of them had believed—His mind writhed, trying to dislodge the thoughts. His violent frustration clenched his fist within its bindings.

For a moment he thought he'd imagined it. But his fingers were still moving, eager to be free of their mitten. He managed to subdue his gasp of triumph before it could reach the walls. He rested, then he raised his arm. It groped upward in the dark, brushing the chill wall beside him. Soon he would unwrap himself, and then—His arm rose a few inches, then shuddered and fell, jarring all its nerves.

He was still weak, he mustn't expect too much, must give it time. It took several tries to convince him that he couldn't raise his arm higher, nor move any other part of his body. His arm refused to bend, to reach his bindings; it refused to recognise him. His mind was a stagnant pool in a lump of unrecognisable flesh. He could no longer doubt that he knew where he was.

They had devised their torments well: allowing him the illusion of triumph, the better to destroy all hope. Now came the torment of waiting helplessly, like a condemned man—except that the sufferings to which he was condemned would be eternal.

His childhood fears had told the truth. He should never have thought beyond them. For questioning his childhood faith, for believing that he would be reincarnated—the belief to which he had clung at the moment of his death, in the river—he had been condemned appropriately. To be reborn in an unfamiliar body, for unending torture: this was his hell.

They might keep him waiting for an eternity: that would be only a fraction of the time he had to suffer. They wanted his mind to fill with the tortures they were preparing, so that he could suffer them more fully. It did so. His helpless flesh could not even writhe. But he was sure they would make it feel.

His head throbbed with his pulse, as though all its flesh were pumping. Blood deafened his ears, like a close sea. Again it was a while before he could be sure that there were other sounds. The shuffling had returned, together with another set of footsteps, lighter and more purposeful. They were coming for him.

He sucked in his breath. He must stay absolutely still; they were waiting for him to betray himself. His teeth clenched, his lips trembled. Beyond the door, blurred sounds muttered. Though they resembled human voices, he was sure not all the distortions could be caused by the door. They must be discussing him. He tried to calm his face.

Metal slid, scraping. The torch peered in. Light danced on his eyelids, challenging him not to twitch. His breath swelled, harsh as stone in his lungs. At last a voice muttered, and the metal cut off the light. At once his breath roared out, appallingly loud.

Surely they couldn't have heard him, surely the sound of the spy-hole had muffled—But keys were scrabbling at the lock. His eyelids shook, his face worked uncontrollably; his treacherous mouth drooled. The door squealed open, and figures were standing silently close to him.

He must keep still. Eventually they would go away. He'd rest then, and try to free himself. But his face felt like a huge unfamiliar mask. It grimaced independent of his will. As it did so, one of the watchers hissed in triumph.

He had betrayed himself. There was no longer any reason to pretend, and his imaginings were worse than anything he might see. But when his eyes twitched open he groaned in terror. Beside the flames a stooped figure was peering down at him. One of its heads was covered with cloth.

The second figure must be a demon too, although it looked human: a thin young man with troubled eyes. His face stooped close, relentlessly staring. Then he stood up, shaking his head sadly.

That was surely not a demon's reaction. As the young man gestured the light closer, the man on the slab saw that the torch-bearer had only one head

after all, and a hunched back. The light showed that the bindings of his limbs were bandages.

They had rescued him, after all! His fears and his paralysis were only symptoms of his sickness! He raised his arm, until it fell back feebly. The young man glanced at it, but continued to test the other limbs, shaking his head. The man on the slab tried to speak to him. But the sound that poured from his lips contained no syllables, no shape at all.

"Useless. Stupid. A failure," the young man muttered, almost to himself. "To think that I had that mind in my hands. How could I have reduced it to this?"

The shuffling man asked him what should be done. The young man told him indifferently, dismally, not even glancing at the victim he condemned. They went out, locking the darkness behind them.

Long after their footsteps had faded the man lay on the slab, straining to move his arm an extra inch, trying to pronounce three syllables, to prove his intelligence when someone returned. Just three syllables, the name he had heard the hunched man call his master: Frank-en-stein.

The Changer Of Names

"The second of Campbell's four tales of Ryre the warrior."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1976
First published in *Swords Against Darkness II*, 1987
Also published in: *Far Away And Never*

Already Ryre disliked the port of Lipe. The wharf had been crowded with women who gazed at the disembarking men, expertly and hungrily. They hadn't been whores, simply women of the town. The men of Lipe would be even less fond of mercenaries than was generally the case with townsmen. Ignoring the women, Ryre had shouldered his way from the wharf. He'd had enough of battle for one year. The holes in his flesh had not been closed for long.

For the same reason, he'd sought out this obscure tavern. None of the few drinkers seemed likely to start a fight. They were old men, probably the tavern's faithful customers; they sat alone or in pairs, scattered about the long wooden box of a room. Goblets of flame perched in brackets on the walls, drawing light like a feeble net over the trestle tables. The men muttered, whether or not they were alone. They seemed pinned to the benches by a lifetime of burdens.

The taverner was a squat large-boned man, who must have been strong in battle; something had cost him his right arm. His eyes were underscored by suffering, his ragged hair was thin as grass on a windswept dune, and grey. By the standards of Lipe he had been hospitable; he had even served Ryre ale in a clean mug, while other taverners had scarcely bothered to conceal their hostility beneath a grudging mercantile tolerance. But his words had not been welcoming. He'd pointed out that the town was losing trade to the nearby port of Amuan, and that the young men of Lipe, dissatisfied, were moving on; he'd asked Ryre where he was bound, not whether he wanted a room.

"I warn you, be careful while you're here," he said, bringing Ryre his replenished mug. "Swordsmen seem to be unlucky in Lipe. They've found two in the lanes this summer, dead and mutilated. Swordsmen, mind, not weaklings. They say it's dangerous to be a swordsman here at night." As he

gazed at Ryre, something saddened him; it might have been within his own eyes.

Ryre stared at the table. The man's talk wearied and depressed him, the whole place did. He refused to ask who might have killed the swordsmen; the tale was probably a lie. The table was darkened by stains of old ale, like ghosts of islands. He wished he were travelling.

Perhaps he'd leave tonight and forego his rest, though his limbs ached from sleeping on the ship's deck. There were stables nearby, and he should be able to talk the trader's prices down; like the town, the man would prefer to be rid of him. Tomorrow he could be in Amuan. He couldn't bear much more of this, of the hunched senile figures muttering over their ale, the lonely footsteps of the taverner gathering hollow echoes beneath the rafters, his own frustrating lethargy beneath the night's sultry heat.

As though in response to his musings, the tavern door crashed open.

Far from interrupting the apathy of the tavern, the intrusion managed only to annoy Ryre. Determined to ignore the intruder, he gazed at the vague clouds unfurling in his ale. But the expectant silence of the tavern, and the taverner's wary stillness, forced him to glance up at last.

In the doorway stood an unkempt young man. His grimy hair sprouted wild above his lopsided face. He took one step and stamped on the tavern floor. Fresh blood glistened on the sword in his hand.

Ryre gazed into the driftings of his ale. Though the man was an apology for a swordsman, he was clearly eager for a fight. His pugnaciousness wearied Ryre, who had no intention of responding. His own sword was hidden by the table from the intruder, and hence no challenge.

He was still gazing, letting his emotions drift easily as the clouds in the ale, when the man shouted "I am Ryre!"

Ryre's teeth clenched within his tight lips. Had he offended the Globes of Hakkthu, had they cast the net of fate over him? He had never felt less willing to be challenged to a name-fight. In his youth, like most men, he'd roamed seeking others whom fate and their parents had given his name, to challenge them to fight for it. But now he and his name were one, secure in the deeds they'd shared; he had no need to defend it. Though his instincts were angered, he continued gazing into the cramped clouds.

But the man hadn't finished. "I am Ryre the hero, whose friend was Glode," he shouted. "I am Ryre who slew the parasite of Hoak, who slew Ghagya the pirate on the Sea of Shouting Islands—"

There was more, but Ryre had risen snarling; his bench toppled, resounding. The young man's name was no trick of fate; he had stolen Ryre's name and his deeds! Already Ryre's spirit felt enfeebled, as though the man's words were draining him. "I am Ryre!" he roared.

As he unsheathed his sword the man rushed screaming down the room at him. Everything about him unnerved Ryre: not so much his wordless scream of challenge as his scrawny frame and the limp that nodded his body sideways at each step. Was he a madman, rather than a swordsman? Ryre had no time to judge, for the bloody sword was scything through the air toward his face.

He sidestepped deftly. The man rushed harmlessly by. Ryre could have struck him down, but the pointlessness of the fight had begun to dismay him. He'd glimpsed the bulging of the man's eyes, their fanatical gleam. Why couldn't the men of Lipe restrain their madman, gag him to prevent his stealing names, instead of sitting hunched at their tables, gazing and muttering? They were the ones Ryre felt like slaying.

His hesitation almost doomed him. The man had managed to halt, and pivoted on his good leg. His sword-point came whistling thinly and viciously toward Ryre's stomach. Ryre stepped back. Off balance, the man fell against a table; but the table struck Ryre's thighs.

The young man recovered first. He thrust himself away from the table, which thumped Ryre again, and hurled himself forward, aiming the sword-point and all his weight at Ryre's throat. He was too dangerous, both because he was unpredictable and because he believed himself invulnerable. As Ryre sidestepped and parried the sword aside, his instincts moved his own blade in a slash that slit the man's throat.

There was silence except for Ryre's panting and the gurgling on the floor. Eventually, when the gurgling had ceased, the old men carried out the body. They gazed at Ryre in impotent hatred; their eyes gleamed a curse at him from the doorway. "Hakkthu!" he swore at the taverner. "Are they blaming me for their berserker? Is this a town of madmen?"

"They weren't always so," the taverner said, rather ambiguously. He was pouring sawdust on the bloodstains; since the fight he had looked gloomily resigned. "This town is decaying," he said. "The women despise our young men and take bedmates from the wharf. Young men who'd have cared nothing for a woman's glance measure themselves by it now, and go journeying to prove themselves. Younger and younger they go, and fewer return. And that's the least of the threats to them. My own son—" His mutter became private with bitterness or grief.

Ryre waved aside this introspection. "Where did that man find my name?" he demanded.

"Lith the name-changer gave it to him."

Ryre's contempt bordered on fury. Certainly the town was decaying: putrescent would be a better word. He'd heard of name-changers, who by hypnotism or drugs would take a man's name and the whole of his life, then rename him. The practice disgusted Ryre: how could anyone be so disloyal to himself as to give up his name, whatever he might have done? It was the ultimate weakness. But this hardly explained what had happened tonight. "Changers sell names of their own invention. That man had my name. He had stolen my name!"

"That is what Lith does," the taverner admitted sadly. "He sells the names of heroes."

Nothing was more precious to Ryre than his name; it was everything he was, everything he had done. Now someone was selling it, stealthily weakening him. Perhaps that was why he felt weary. One day he might awaken hollow, emptied of deeds, unable to remember who he was. "Where is this Lith?" he demanded thickly. "Tomorrow his name will be free, if anyone wants it."

"He works in the squares." As Ryre strode toward the door, the man raised his lone arm to detain him. "You won't find him after dark. And remember, the alleys are dangerous at night for swordsmen."

He seemed genuinely anxious; perhaps his story earlier had been an honest warning. "Who killed them?" Ryre said, halting. "Thieves?"

"Our thieves are vengeful. But they are not madmen." Remembered horror gathered in the taverner's eyes. Ryre wondered just what mutilations the swordsmen had suffered. Then the taverner's expression changed; there

seemed to be a glint of hope. "Were those deeds the man claimed really yours?"

Ryre drew himself up; his fingers rested on his sword-hilt. "I am Ryre," he said simply.

"I have a vacant room. I would be honoured if you would stay the night." Suddenly the man seemed less resigned. "Tomorrow I will show you Lith," he said.

The nearer Ryre came to Lith, the less he understood the man. It was noon; the tops of the three-story warrens blazed like molten rock. Draughts twirled dust incessantly in the narrow alleys. Underfoot the earth, which the sun rarely touched, was uncomfortably warm; the noon heat weighed down its warmth. Within the warrens, the plaster of the walls was cracked like parched mud. This was the poorest section of the town; what could Lith gain here?

But this was where Thaze the taverner had directed Ryre. Thaze had walked with him part of the way. When the man had faltered, puffing, Ryre proposed to go on alone; the man would be slow-moving in a fight, and in any case he lacked his sword-arm. Thaze's gratitude had let suppressed dread show through. He'd pointed toward the alleys through which Ryre was striding now.

People stopped to stare, at the predator's mane that broadened down to his shoulders from his shaved head, at his coppery skin, his wiry frame, six and a half feet tall. The people were pale and scrawny; many had eruptions of the skin, some were crippled. Perhaps they needed Lith, but what could they give him?

They stared silently at Ryre's sword and the dull leaves of his armour. Even the children were hushed and still; their eyes were wide, though almost empty. He could feel the people's hatred of him, thick and shapeless as the heat. But at least their silence allowed him to hear what he sought.

It was a hubbub, ahead and to the left: a crowd. He turned several corners, more and more warily, before he saw the square, the first he had seen in this impoverished maze. The square was full of people and harsh sunlight, almost a mass of a single colour: clothes had been burned pale by the sun, white dust clung to flesh and the flat undistinguished buildings.

If anything, the man who must be Lith was even less impressive. He stood at the far side of the square, flanked by two burly, rather worn, swordsman. The crowd had hushed now, gazing at him. His face was small, bland, seedy, the face of a dishonest servile clerk, anxiously humble but sly; his clothes were the colour of dust. His belly swelled from his meagre body. When he stepped forward his gait was oddly flinching, as though his joints were loose; he moved more like an underwater creature than a man. Ryre spat.

"Come," Lith said in a thin voice, almost a whine, and beckoned forth a man from the crowd.

Two alleys crossed between Ryre and the square. He needed to manoeuvre as close to Lith as possible without being seen, and attack from behind. On his way he would listen to make sure this was Lith; his disgust with an ordinary name-changer was not worth slaying for. But he could see the man's wide hypnotic eyes, full of artificial belief in, and secret contempt for, his victim. This man was dangerous. Ryre dodged through the alleys, through dust and sharp hot shadows. The murmur of the nearby sea mocked his thirst.

Soon he had reached the far alleys, and padded stealthily toward his prey. Had they looked, the crowd would have seen him; but they were intent on the ceremony. So were two hooded men who stood hidden by the corner of a cross-alley, spying on the name-changer from behind. What men wore hoods in sunlight? Ryre dodged into the communal doorway of a warren behind them, and listened.

A draught carried their whispers to him. "He's a clever man, this Lith," one said. "He's made his fortune, now he pretends to care for the poor, without a thought of gain. But he's outwitted himself."

"Only a rich man can afford to be so charitable," the second thief agreed.

"And only a rich man keeps his home so secret. But this time he'll lead us there."

Ryre shook his head wryly: Lith would do no leading, and precious little living. The changer had cupped his victim's face in his pallid hands, before the tense crowd. The victim's eyes were blank as ice. Lith raised the man to his full height, as though stretching his undernourished frame to heroic

stature. "You are Lagarro, hero of Amuan," he said. His voice piped thinly in the breathless square: humbled, awestruck, idolising his victim.

As Ryre watched the blank eyes in the victim's thin pimply face, the mouth slack with absolute trust, his rage overcame him. He was skulking like the thieves, letting a man's name be stolen. Roaring his anger, he snatched out his sword and rushed down the alley.

Lith turned, startled. Fear seemed to compress his face; his rodent's eyes flickered glittering above his shrunken mouth. He darted sideways, out of Ryre's view. Again his movements seemed inhuman: crablike.

Ryre's rush had started the thieves from hiding. One ran through the cross-alley, parallel with Lith's flight. The other wavered in Ryre's path, too flustered to decide which way to go.

Ryre cuffed him aside. In the square, the man who was now called Lagarro blocked the way of one of Lith's bodyguards. The man's eyes had not yet cleared; his hand was groping convulsively for the sword he imagined he carried.

"I am La—" he began, before the bodyguard's sword hacked him down. Both bodyguards ran from the square.

The crowd milled, bewildered and angry. Men stared in growing disillusionment at the body on the ground. Ryre forced his way through, brandishing his sword, in search of Lith. He ran through the maze, between pinched windows. But too many things had hindered him; nothing fled him except dust. At last he had to return through the square, where men grimly watched the corpse as it drained, soaking the dust.

"You'll never find him." When Ryre protested, Thaze said mildly "What did he look like?"

Though he vividly remembered the scene in the square, Ryre found that Lith's face now looked like a dozen others, two dozen, every face. In his memory, Lith seemed less a presence than an absence. Ryre's eyes bulged with frustration.

"Yes, he can do that," Thaze said. "He may hide in his lair or he may wander the alleys all day: nobody would know. But you have one hope," he said hastily as he sensed Ryre's fury. "His guards are men, whatever he is. He keeps them hidden most of the time, but they can't satisfy each other. I

hear—this is only a rumour, mind, and told me by a man too scared to tell anyone else—that they have been seen in the brothel. There is only one."

It was a squat budding with few windows, near the wide streets of the merchants' district. For three days Ryre watched it, from an empty house on the far bank of the canal. Many of the glum-faced men who visited the brothel were very young, or slow and old. When at last the lights went out he returned to the tavern and slept until mid-morning. Each day his bench in the empty house was pale with dust again.

The second day, Thaze told him the rumour that Lagarro the swordsman had come from Amuan, seeking his name, and had been found dead and abominably mutilated. That news lurked behind Ryre in the alleys at night, crept shapeless about the empty house, rustling dustily. But whenever he grew uneasy he remembered the slack trustful face of Lith's victim. Was he himself being subtly weakened as his name was leached from him? His frustrated rage bullied away his fears.

It was the third night. The brothel squatted dully. Around Ryre, draughts sifted dust in the empty rooms, in the dim canal a foetus floated by. The paths along both banks were deserted. Ryre nodded, dozing; frustration and insomnia stoked his eyes.

A scream jarred him wide awake. He'd heard screams in the alleys: cries of drunken rage, of protest, of fear. But this was different, and frightful. Though it was a man's voice, the intensity of its honour forced it higher than any woman's. It tore at the night.

By the time he ran out of the house it had ceased. Far down the canal, on the opposite bank, he saw limbs writhing in feeble desperation beneath a dark stooped mass. He ran toward the bridge near the struggle, dragging out his sword. The thick canal and its burden of refuse and aborted flesh accompanied him sluggishly, smacking its lips of water and stone.

He had almost reached the bridge when he saw a movement in the water. Something like a swollen hump floated rapidly toward him, rowing itself with sinuous limbs. He flinched away, then realised he'd seen the reflection of whatever had run away from its victim: a hump, hanging bloated between four wobbling limbs as they scuttled away. Surely it had not looked like that, the canal must have distorted it.

In any case, it had vanished into the dark alleys.

He forced himself to cross the bridge. The man on the bank had been crushed and torn; much of his flesh was missing. Enough of his face remained for Ryre to recognise the thief who had blocked his way to Lith.

As Ryre stared, sickened and fearful, along the canal, listening for movement among the alleys, a man reached the bridge nearest the brothel. It was one of Lith's bodyguards, the man who had killed in the square. He crossed to the brothel and went in.

At the sight of the man, Ryre's fury surged up. He strode toward the brothel. His fury included the building: it must be full of cowards, none of whom had dared emerge to see what the screams meant. He slipped his blade into its sheath of leaves and pounded on the door.

Behind a small thick grille a wooden lid opened, and an eye peered through at him. Then the door was elaborately unbolted by a hefty muscular woman with almost no forehead between her dwarf eyes and spiky hair. "A wanderer, eh?" she growled, grinning at her own perceptiveness. "We'll sell you things here you've never seen on your travels."

Behind her a passage, lit dimly by a few multicoloured lanterns, led between two ranks of cramped cubicles; through their thin walls Ryre heard sounds of rhythmic labouring. The place smelled of dust and sweat. Lith's bodyguard was halfway down the passage, glancing at the sullen or simpering women who leaned in the doorways of silent cubicles. He turned to see who had come in, and frowned. Recognition struggled to reach his eyes.

"Save your merchandise," Ryre said savagely. "He's what I want tonight."

Recognition filled the man's eyes, then immediately fear. When the woman saw this she lunged at Ryre, her thick fingers clutching for his sword-arm. The hilt of his unsheathed sword struck her hard beneath the chin. As she fell, Ryre rushed down the passage toward the man.

"I am Thagana," the man cried. But the dead mercenary's name helped him not at all. He had hardly drawn his sword when Ryre's struck it from his hand. Ryre dragged him by the throat to the space inside the entrance, out of reach of any intervention from the cubicles.

"I am Thagana," the man repeated dismally, straining his neck away from the point of Ryre's sword.

"Thagana is dead. He died of the pox, and other things. For weeks he couldn't move his limbs, because they were swollen twice their size. After the first week—"

Ryre spoke slowly, relishing his words, and at great length. All of it was true, which showed in his eyes. The man's face struggled wildly, terrified; it seemed almost to transform like a foetus. At last something seemed to free him. "I am Hoggé," he whimpered. "Lith took me from my town of Mallath. He said he would make me a hero."

"Then he was a liar." Ryre traced the man's jugular vein with his sword-point, to chase away his fear of Lith. "Why does he change men's names?" he demanded. "What does he gain from it?"

"We don't know. He tells us nothing." The man's eyes glanced frantically, as though in the hope that the other bodyguard would miraculously intervene. "He used to change the names of rich men," he muttered, almost inaudibly. "But since we've come to Lipe he will change anyone. We think his power is using him."

Perhaps perversity was in Lith's blood. "Where does he come from?"

The man shivered, as much as he dared at the sword-point. "From Agomobe," he mumbled.

"A cannibal!" Ryre exclaimed, though it seemed to explain nothing.

"No. But his ancestors were." The man's voice tried to hide in his throat. "He knows the name of their god, that must not be spoken," he whispered.

Ryre shook his head, baffled. Was there something about cannibalism he should remember? The man shrank back further from the blade. Ryre stared grimly at him. "You helped a liar cheat men of their names."

"We had to," the man pleaded. "He said our names would fade if we left him."

Stripped of his stolen name, Hoggé was hardly worth slaying. Besides, he could be useful. "Where is he hiding?" Ryre demanded; then, remembering the greater mystery: "What does he look like?"

"He never looks the same." A strange expression glimmered deep in the man's eyes: trapped, incredulous, uneasy. Ryre's question seemed to have made him aware of something. "He never looks the same," he repeated, as though trying to reach past the words, "after—"

"After what?" Ryre said impatiently.

The man's mouth gaped: wider, wider, as though to make way for something. But nothing emerged except a dry choking. His hands jerked up. Ryre raised his sword in warning, but the man's hands were wrenching at his own throat, as though they would tear an entrance for breath. When he fell, no words had escaped from his throat, and none would.

Lith's hypnotism had killed him: not fear, Ryre told himself. Nevertheless he felt uneasy, staring at the lockjawed suffocated mouth. He left the body beside the unconscious snoring woman, and hurried away as mutterings broke the tense silence of the cubicles. Inverted buildings melted vaguely in the depths of the canal, reflections shifted indefinably. He was glad to leave behind its dark thick slopping.

"There's more in this than the power of a man's eyes," Thaze said. "It's blacker magic than any I've known." He gazed sadly at Ryre. At last he said "You ought to go before it traps you."

"And leave my name for him to play with?" Ryre stared around the tavern, which was empty save for a shabby man drooping over his tankard. "Who will rid you of him then? Will your men?" he shouted beerily at the shabby man.

The man glanced up, smiling hastily to placate him. "Oh no, not them. It needs a hero."

"There speaks a truth-teller. A man you can trust." Ryre began to tell Thaze what he intended to do; the shabby man nodded hurriedly whenever Ryre looked at him. When Ryre had finished speaking he went out to enact his words.

He let it be known in the poorer sections of Lipe that he was seeking Lith, to slay him. He spoke to some of the men he recalled from the square where the man had been killed. Even they were dour, taciturn, unhelpful. At least they were unlikely to warn Lith.

If Lith came looking for him, unrecognisable though the man might be, he would hardly attack without his bodyguard. That would betray him, and Ryre was determined he would not escape this time.

Thaze had been unwilling to have Ryre wait in his tavern for news. Perhaps he had advised Ryre to leave town because he was afraid. Ryre made his vigil in a poorer tavern. The benches and tables were rough with splinters,

their wooden legs hobbled unsteadily. He sat by a window, through which sunlight hung like a scoop full of whirling dust.

Throughout the day men wandered in. None of them gave Ryre more than a sharp glance. They moped alone, or played call-and-cast, or completed furtive transactions in the darkest corners. The scoop of light shrank, the dust faded. Night shuttered the window.

The tavern was crowded with men, heat, and dust. Some men were fumbling with the words of a song, others were trying to hit each other. Dust swarmed around the cheap lanterns dangling from the rafters. To Ryre, despite its uproar of activity, the place seemed lifeless and stupefying. He sipped at his mug, which he had not replenished all day; the taverner glared at him. He felt on edge, eager yet powerless to act.

A thin man hurried in. He looked bonily famished. He glanced about quickly: for food? Spying Ryre, he hurried to him. His loose robe rustled, its hem swept up dust.

"Thaze the taverner wants you," he whispered panting. "He has news."

His eyes were wide with hope and admiration. Ryre stared warily at him. Was he the shabby man who had been at Thaze's? He couldn't be sure. Was he Lith? On the middle finger of his left hand he wore a heavy ring. Surely Lith would wear nothing so recognisable. "Take me to him," Ryre ordered, unsure of the shortest route through the alleys.

As they emerged, he glimpsed a hooded figure darting into an alley opposite: probably a thief. His guide flinched back and gestured Ryre to wait. His caution seemed to confirm his trustworthiness. The hooded figure had vanished on its nocturnal business.

If anything, the man's caution seemed excessive. As he led Ryre he sidled along the alley walls, glancing back constantly to see that Ryre was following. No doubt this was the safest way to travel the alleys at night, but it made Ryre irritably nervous.

The alleys seemed more of a maze than ever, and alive with faint sounds: the trembling of shutters, the incessant restlessness of canals—not the scurrying of spidery legs, not the bumping of a hump against the walls. Lanterns hung high on buildings, too high to be damaged or to afford much illumination; light leaked around shutters.

Walls loomed close and dark, giving way only to more walls that cramped the alleys. Sometimes at crossings Ryre saw the distant glint of a canal; once he thought he glimpsed a darting figure. The alleys led deeper into darkness. Shutters hung askew exposing deserted rooms. There was breathless silence except for the enclosed sounds, that seemed flattened and shrunken, of Ryre and his guide.

Gradually Ryre suspected he was being tricked. Surely there weren't so many derelict buildings near Thaze's tavern. As though to hurry him faster than his thoughts could keep up, his guide's pace quickened. The man was almost running, sidling crabwise along the wall, glancing eagerly back at Ryre.

Lith had moved crabwise too. And by Hakkthu, hadn't the man in Thaze's worn a ring? Ryre lunged and grabbing his guide's hand, unbent that finger. Beneath the feeble glow that hung swaying from a lantern, he could just make out the letters etched on the ring, that had been hidden within the man's hand: LITH.

He'd expected nothing so definite. His start of surprise allowed Lith to wrench free. The man fled into the dark. But the walls trapped his sounds; they had no echoes among which to lose themselves. Ryre followed the enclosed scurrying, unsheathing his sword as he strode.

He had almost overtaken Lith when the man dodged into a courtyard. If he thought the shadows had concealed his ruse he'd reckoned without Ryre's keen sight. Ryre strode into the refuge and bore down on him. Stables surrounded the yard, but their doors were blocked by debris; there was no exit save that behind Ryre. Nearby ruined walls allowed a glow to seep into the court from lanterns above a canal. The glow showed Lith's face, pinched even scrawnier by apparent fear. "Ryre!" he screamed.

"You'll give me my name, will you?" Ryre demanded. "It was never yours to take." Lith was grinning viciously; he hadn't been speaking to him.

Many footsteps began in the alley. A man strode into the court, his sword ready. "I am Ryre," he declared proudly. A second man followed at once, and took up his position on the other's left. "I am Ryre," he threatened.

These weren't poor men of Lipe. Nor were they unskilled swordsman: their poise and the way they bore their swords showed that. Lith must have

enticed them into his power on the wharf, as they disembarked. There were six of them.

They glared at Ryre, and closed in, forcing him to retreat into the court. Somehow Lith's power prevented them from quarrelling over the name: they had been given a common enemy. In their eyes, conviction and purpose gleamed harshly as their blades. He could never fight all of them.

The stable wall halted his shoulders. The men advanced.

Whichever one he parried, the others would cut him down at once. They were expert: all of them were Ryre.

An idea that seemed insane struggled in his mind. Yet it was his only chance. His beliefs held him back: he couldn't do it, it was more shameful than acquiescing to a name-changer. The men closed in. His name was his own, he shouted at himself, to use as he pleased. And he was more than his name, otherwise the six would already have drained him. His throat squirmed dryly; his choked words tasted like bile. "Ryre," he said at last, thickly.

None of the men faltered, but each thought Ryre was addressing him. His fury at that blotted out his doubts. "Ryre is a cripple," he roared. "Ryre limps, because he has a swollen groin. Ryre wets his leg before he fights."

All this, and the rest of his speech, made him feel dreadfully uncomfortable. Worse, it seemed to have no effect on the men, although his discomfort crowded any trace of falsehood from his eyes. "Ryre is terrified to strike the first blow, because he always misses," he roared. "All his saga is a lie."

One man stepped forward to defend the name of Ryre. In the midst of his unease, Ryre's instincts took control; they were deaf to his words. He knocked aside the lunge of the sword, and twisted his own blade deep in the man's guts.

That wasted seconds; his rage had delayed him. The others had the advantage now. But one was limping, one was trembling; the rest faltered, trapped bewildered between names. A sweep of Ryre's blade cut the throats of three of them. The fifth man limped rapidly backward, but before he could flee Ryre cut him down. The sixth tried to fight; his sword quivered nervously. Ryre felt his sword impale the man's heart. When he wrenched the blade free, it was as though he had tapped a barrel of blood.

He turned on Lith. The man had perched on the debris in the stable entrance, to watch. He cringed there, glancing desperately about. His lips writhed and parted. Was he going to call himself Ryre? The swordsman waited, grimly amused. Then he saw that Lith could convince his victims of their new names, but never himself.

Nevertheless the man's lips were struggling. His tongue thrust them uneasily apart. In his eyes lurked feelings Ryre could see were not false: a shrinking horror mixed with fearful delight, an uncontrollable compulsion. His mouth gaped, and made a sound like choking, like famished gulping. Yet Ryre knew it was a name. He remembered that Lith knew the name of the god of cannibals.

The man collapsed within his robe. Hidden by the robe, he squirmed as though in agony. Had he called death to himself? Ryre watched the dim writhing suspiciously, then clambered over the debris, sword alert. Something emerged, as though the robe were a cocoon. He fell back gasping as the shape scuttled heavily out.

It was half his height: a lumpy bulge of flesh, almost featureless, that dangled belly-like between four spidery legs. Its colours and texture were those of entrails. It glistened. As it scuttled down the rattling debris Ryre saw the great mouth gaping in its underside, drooling eagerly over numerous sharp teeth. He remembered the dark shape he'd glimpsed squatting on the thief's body.

As the thing scuttled at him he brought his sword scything down on the hump. It felt as though he'd struck enormously thick leather, but the flesh was more resilient still; the edge of his sword bounced from the unmarked skin. Only his leap backward saved him, for the hump scuttled at him as though he were unarmed. The dangling mouth worked, drooling.

He cut at its legs. It dodged swiftly, crabwise, and blocked his route to the alley. It moved back and forth rapidly, restlessly, on its elaborately jointed legs; it scurried over the corpses that hindered him, like a malformed child playing mountains. Whenever he rushed it, aiming for the legs, it dodged, or nodded forward so that the hump took the blow. Each time it scuttled immediately at him, giving him no time to manoeuvre, forcing him back into the court.

His sword-arm felt swollen with aching. The thing knew that it was tiring him. When he stumbled it came closer; the near edge of the hump tilted up,

the mouth rose toward him, parting lips like thick intestines. He tried to slash the mouth, but it clamped shut. The hump pranced back. He hurled fallen swords at it, to break the legs or at least unbalance it, but it dodged easily.

Someone was staggering in the alley. He sounded drunk. He would be no active help, but he might be a distraction, unless he fled at once. "Help!" Ryre shouted. "In Hakkthu's name!" Even his shout endangered him, used up a little more breath. As he sucked in air, the hump clattered forward; one of its legs whipped out, almost dragging him off his feet. If he once fell, the mouth would be on him.

A figure swayed into the courtyard: a young swordsman, who was very drunk. Ryre glanced at him, and at once the horror's limb grasped Ryre's ankle bonily, twitching him off balance. He saved himself by leaning on his sword, but the hump took the chance to rear up, biting at his leg. Only a desperate cut with his sword made the teeth miss, and the thing retreated only a few paces.

The young man seemed hardly able to see. Perhaps he had hung back to drink fearlessness, perhaps he had lost his way in the alleys. Certainly he had been meant to take part in Lith's ambush, for he announced thickly "I am Ryre."

The thing rushed at him. He peered blurrily at it, then shrank back retching. As he turned to run, it leapt on his back and wrapped its limbs tight around his body. Screaming, he ran about the courtyard like a decapitated fowl, while the mouth devoured him.

Ryre crept toward the alley. The young man was beyond help; what remained of him was sinking to its knees. Suddenly Ryre noticed the ring that bore Lith's name. Dreadfully incongruous, it gleamed dully behind the first knobby joint of a limb. It must be the only way Lith could bring himself back to his name and his body. Impulsively Ryre lopped off that joint. The ring roiled into the shadows.

As though that were a magical summons, the court was all at once crowded. But the hooded figures were merely sneaking in from the alley, swiftly and purposefully. The hump had fallen on its back and was squirming in pain; the lopped limb writhed. The hooded figures drove pointed poles into its mouth and carried the impaled horror out of the court. As one man saluted Ryre curtly, he glimpsed the face of the thief who had

followed Lith from the square. In a minute the courtyard was emptied, and silent again.

Ryre leaned weakly against the entrance to the court, letting the alley's draught snatch away the smell of blood. The thieves had used him as bait. Perhaps the horror had used Lith as bait for its food: him, and his victims, to bring men of power in search of their stolen names, walking into its maw. Ryre remembered at last that cannibals said they ate the power of their victims when they devoured their flesh.

Had Lith always been possessed so? Or had the god's name been the only one that would give him power, a name that had grown stronger in him than his own? Far down the alley Ryre saw a dark bulge carried high on poles, writhing convulsively. He preferred to forget, and quickly. He needed Thaze's tavern, and much ale. But as he hurried toward the lights he felt uneasy. His name was safe, and strong again, since all who had heard him defame it were dead—unless the thieves had been listening.

The Brood

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He'd had an almost unbearable day. As he walked home his self-control still oppressed him, like rusty armour. Climbing the stairs, he tore open his mail: a glossy pamphlet from a binoculars firm, a humbler folder from the Wild Life Preservation Society. Irritably he threw them on the bed and sat by the window, to relax.

It was autumn. Night had begun to cramp the days. Beneath golden trees, a procession of cars advanced along Princes Avenue, as though to a funeral; crowds hurried home. The incessant anonymous parade, dwarfed by three storeys, depressed him. Faces like these vague twilit miniatures—selfishly ingrown, convinced that nothing was their fault—brought their pets to his office.

But where were all the local characters? He enjoyed watching them, they fascinated him. Where was the man who ran about the avenue, chasing butterflies of litter and stuffing them into his satchel? Or the man who strode violently, head down in no gale, shouting at the air? Or the Rainbow Man, who appeared on the hottest days obese with sweaters, each of a different garish colour? Blackband hadn't seen any of these people for weeks.

The crowds thinned; cars straggled. Groups of streetlamps lit, tinting leaves sodium, unnaturally gold. Often that lighting had meant—Why, there she was, emerging from the side street almost on cue: the Lady of the Lamp.

Her gait was elderly. Her face was withered as an old blanched apple; the rest of her head was wrapped in a tattered grey scarf. Her voluminous ankle-length coat, patched with remnants of colour, swayed as she walked. She reached the central reservation of the avenue, and stood beneath a lamp.

Though there was a pedestrian crossing beside her, people deliberately crossed elsewhere. They would, Blackband thought sourly: just as they ignored the packs of stray dogs that were always someone else's responsibility—ignored them, or hoped someone would put them to sleep. Perhaps they felt the human strays should be put to sleep, perhaps that was where the Rainbow Man and the rest had gone! The woman was pacing restlessly. She circled the lamp, as though the blurred disc of light at its foot were a stage. Her shadow resembled the elaborate hand of a clock.

Surely she was too old to be a prostitute. Might she have been one, who was now compelled to enact her memories? His binoculars drew her face closer: intent as a sleepwalker's, introverted as a foetus. Her head bobbed against gravel, foreshortened by the false perspective of the lenses. She moved offscreen.

Three months ago, when he'd moved to this flat, there had been two old women. One night he had seen them, circling adjacent lamps. The other woman had been slower, more sleepy. At last the Lady of the Lamp had led her home; they'd moved slowly as exhausted sleepers. For days he'd thought of the two women in their long faded coats, trudging around the lamps in the deserted avenue, as though afraid to go home in the growing dark.

The sight of the lone woman still unnerved him, a little. Darkness was crowding his flat. He drew the curtains, which the lamps stained orange. Watching had relaxed him somewhat. Time to make a salad.

The kitchen overlooked the old women's house. See the World from the Attics of Princes Avenue. All Human Life Is Here. Backyards penned in rubble and crumbling toilet sheds; on the far side of the back street, houses were lidless boxes of smoke. The house directly beneath his window was dark, as always. How could the two women—if both were still alive—survive in there? But at least they could look after themselves, or call for aid; they were human, after all. It was their pets that bothered him.

He had never seen the torpid woman again. Since she had vanished, her companion had begun to take animals home; he'd seen her coaxing them towards the house. No doubt they were company for her friend; but what life could animals enjoy in the lightless probably condemnable house? And why so many? Did they escape to their homes, or stray again? He shook his head: the women's loneliness was no excuse. They cared as little for their pets as did those owners who came, whining like their dogs, to his office.

Perhaps the woman was waiting beneath the lamps for cats to drop from the trees, like fruit. He meant the thought as a joke. But when he'd finished preparing dinner, the idea troubled him sufficiently that he switched off the light in the main room and peered through the curtains.

The bright gravel was bare. Parting the curtains, he saw the woman hurrying unsteadily towards her street. She was carrying a kitten: her head bowed over the fur cradled in her arms; her whole body seemed to enfold it. As he emerged from the kitchen again, carrying plates, he heard her door creak open and shut. Another one, he thought uneasily.

By the end of the week she'd taken in a stray dog, and Blackband was wondering what should be done.

The women would have to move eventually. The houses adjoining theirs were empty, the windows shattered targets. But how could they take their menagerie with them? They'd set them loose to roam or, weeping, take them to be put to sleep.

Something ought to be done, but not by him. He came home to rest. He was used to removing chicken bones from throats; it was suffering the excuses that exhausted him—Fido always had his bit of chicken, it had never happened before, they couldn't understand. He would nod curtly, with a slight pained smile. "Oh yes?" he would repeat tonelessly. "Oh yes?"

Not that that would work with the Lady of the Lamp. But then, he didn't intend to confront her: what on earth could he have said? That he'd take all the animals off her hands? Hardly. Besides, the thought of confronting her made him uncomfortable.

She was growing more eccentric. Each day she appeared a little earlier. Often she would move away into the dark, then hurry back into the flat bright pool. It was as though light were her drug.

People stared at her, and fled. They disliked her because she was odd. All she had to do to please them, Blackband thought, was be normal: overfeed her pets until their stomachs scraped the ground, lock them in cars to suffocate in the heat, leave them alone in the house all day then beat them for chewing. Compared to most of the owners he met, she was Saint Francis.

He watched television. Insects were courting and mating. Their ritual dances engrossed and moved him: the play of colours, the elaborate racial

patterns of the life-force which they instinctively decoded and enacted. Microphotography presented them to him. If only people were as beautiful and fascinating!

Even his fascination with the Lady of the Lamp was no longer unalloyed; he resented that. Was she falling ill? She walked painfully slowly, stooped over, and looked shrunken. Nevertheless, each night she kept her vigil, wandering sluggishly in the pools of light like a sleepwalker.

How could she cope with her animals now? How might she be treating them? Surely there were social workers in some of the cars nosing home, someone must notice how much she needed help. Once he made for the door to the stairs, but already his throat was parched of words. The thought of speaking to her wound him tight inside. It wasn't his job; he had enough to confront. The spring in his guts coiled tighter, until he moved away from the door.

One night an early policeman appeared. Usually the police emerged near midnight, disarming people of knives and broken glass, forcing them into the vans. Blackband watched eagerly. Surely the man must escort her home, see what the house hid. Blackband glanced back to the splash of light beneath the lamp. It was deserted.

How could she have moved so fast? He stared, baffled. A dim shape lurked at the corner of his eyes. Glancing nervously, he saw the woman standing on the bright disc several lamps away, considerably further from the policeman than he'd thought. Why should he have been so mistaken?

Before he could ponder, a sound distracted him: a loud fluttering, as though a bird were trapped and frantic in the kitchen. But the room was empty. Any bird must have escaped through the open window. Was that a flicker of movement below, in the dark house? Perhaps the bird had flown in there.

The policeman had moved on. The woman was trudging her island of light; her coat's hem dragged over the gravel. For a while Blackband watched, musing uneasily, trying to think what the fluttering had resembled more than the sound of a bird's wings.

Perhaps that was why, in the early hours, he saw a man stumbling through the derelict back streets. Jagged hurdles of rubble blocked the way; the man clambered, panting dryly, gulping dust as well as breath. He seemed only exhausted and uneasy, but Blackband could see what was pursuing him: a

great wide shadow-coloured stain, creeping vaguely over the rooftops. The stain was alive, for its face mouthed—though at first, from its colour and texture, he thought the head was the moon. Its eyes gleamed hungrily. As the fluttering made the man turn and scream, the face sailed down on its stain towards him.

Next day was unusually trying: a dog with a broken leg and a suffering owner, you'll hurt his leg, can't you be more gentle, oh come here, baby, what did the nasty man do to you; a senile cat and its protector, isn't the usual vet here today, he never used to do that, are you sure you know what you're doing. But later, as he watched the woman's obsessive trudging, the dream of the stain returned to him. Suddenly he realised he had never seen her during daylight.

So that was it! he thought, sniggering. She'd been a vampire all the time! A difficult job to keep when you hadn't a tooth in your head. He reeled in her face with the focusing-screw. Yes, she was toothless. Perhaps she used false fangs, or sucked through her gums. But he couldn't sustain his joke for long. Her faced peered out of the frame of her grey scarf, as though from a web. As she circled she was muttering incessantly. Her tongue worked as though her mouth were too small for it. Her eyes were fixed as the heads of grey nails impaling her skull.

He laid the binoculars aside, and was glad that she'd become more distant. But even the sight of her trudging in miniature troubled him. In her eyes he had seen that she didn't want to do what she was doing.

She was crossing the roadway, advancing towards his gate. For a moment, unreasonably and with a sour uprush of dread, he was sure she intended to come in. But she was staring at the hedge. Her hands fluttered, warding off a fear; her eyes and her mouth were stretched wide. She stood quivering, then she stumbled towards her street, almost running.

He made himself go down. Each leaf of the hedge held an orange sodium glow, like wet paint. But there was nothing among the leaves, and nothing could have struggled out, for the twigs were intricately bound by spiderwebs, gleaming like gold wire.

The next day was Sunday. He rode a train beneath the Mersey and went tramping the Wirral Way nature trail. Red-faced men, and women who had paralysed their hair with spray, stared as though he'd invaded their garden. A few butterflies perched on flowers; their wings settled together delicately,

then they flickered away above the banks of the abandoned railway cutting. They were too quick for him to enjoy, even with his binoculars; he kept remembering how near death their species were. His moping had slowed him, he felt barred from his surroundings by his inability to confront the old woman. He couldn't speak to her, there were no words he could use, but meanwhile her animals might be suffering. He dreaded going home to another night of helpless watching.

Could he look into the house while she was wandering? She might leave the door unlocked. At some time he had become intuitively sure that her companion was dead. Twilight gained on him, urging him back to Liverpool.

He gazed nervously down at the lamps. Anything was preferable to his impotence. But his feelings had trapped him into committing himself before he was ready. Could he really go down when she emerged? Suppose the other woman was still alive, and screamed? Good God, he needn't go in if he didn't want to. On the gravel, light lay bare as a row of plates on a shelf. He found himself thinking, with a secret eagerness, that she might already have had her wander. As he made dinner, he kept hurrying irritably to the front window. Television failed to engross him; he watched the avenue instead. Discs of light dwindled away, impaled by their lamps. Below the kitchen window stood a block of night and silence. Eventually he went to bed, but heard fluttering—flights of litter in the derelict streets, no doubt. His dreams gave the litter a human face.

Throughout Monday he was on edge, anxious to hurry home and be done; he was distracted. Oh, poor Chubbles, is the man hurting you! He managed to leave early. Day was trailing down the sky as he reached the avenue. Swiftly he brewed coffee and sat sipping, watching.

The caravan of cars faltered, interrupted by gaps. The last homecomers hurried away, clearing the stage. But the woman failed to take her cue. His cooking of dinner was fragmented; he hurried repeatedly back to the window. Where was the bloody woman, was she on strike? Not until the following night, when she had still not appeared, did he begin to suspect he'd seen the last of her.

His intense relief was short-lived. If she had died of whatever had been shrinking her, what would happen to her animals? Should he find out what was wrong? But there was no reason to think she'd died. Probably she, and

her friend before her, had gone to stay with relatives. No doubt the animals had escaped long before—he'd never seen or heard any of them since she had taken them in. Darkness stood hushed and bulky beneath his kitchen window.

For several days the back streets were quiet, except for the flapping of litter or birds. It became easier to glance at the dark house. Soon they'd demolish it; already children had shattered all the windows. Now, when he lay awaiting sleep, the thought of the vague house soothed him, weighed his mind down gently.

That night he awoke twice. He'd left the kitchen window ajar, hoping to lose some of the unseasonable heat. Drifting through the window came a man's low moaning. Was he trying to form words? His voice was muffled, blurred as a dying radio. He must be drunk; perhaps he had fallen, for there was a faint scrape of rubble. Blackband hid within his eyelids, courting sleep. At last the shapeless moaning faded. There was silence, except for the feeble stony scraping. Blackband lay and grumbled, until sleep led him to a face that crept over heaps of rubble.

Some hours later he woke again. The lifelessness of four o'clock surrounded him, the dim air seemed sluggish and ponderous. Had he dreamed the new sound? It returned, and made him flinch: a chorus of thin piteous wailing, reaching weakly upwards towards the kitchen. For a moment, on the edge of dream, it sounded like babies. How could babies be crying in an abandoned house? The voices were too thin. They were kittens.

He lay in the heavy dark, hemmed in by shapes that the night deformed. He willed the sounds to cease, and eventually they did. When he awoke again, belatedly, he had time only to hurry to work.

In the evening the house was silent as a draped cage. Someone must have rescued the kittens. But in the early hours the crying woke him: fretful, bewildered, famished. He couldn't go down now, he had no light. The crying was muffled, as though beneath stone. Again it kept him awake, again he was late for work.

His loss of sleep nagged him. His smile sagged impatiently, his nods were contemptuous twitches. "Yes," he agreed with a woman who said she'd been careless to slam her dog's paw in a door, and when she raised her eyebrows haughtily "Yes, I can see that." He could see her deciding to find another vet. Let her; let someone else suffer her. He had problems of his own.

He borrowed the office flashlight, to placate his anxiety. Surely he wouldn't need to enter the house; surely someone else—He walked home, towards the darker sky. Night thickened like soot on the buildings.

He prepared dinner quickly. No need to dawdle in the kitchen; no point in staring down. He was hurrying; he dropped a spoon, which reverberated shrilly in his mind, nerve-racking. Slow down, slow down. A breeze piped incessantly outside, in the rubble. No, not a breeze. When he made himself raise the sash he heard the crying, thin as wind in crevices.

It seemed weaker now, dismal and desperate: intolerable. Could nobody else hear it, did nobody care? He gripped the windowsill; a breeze tried feebly to tug at his fingers. Suddenly, compelled by vague anger, he grabbed the flashlight and trudged reluctantly downstairs.

A pigeon hobbled on the avenue, dangling the stump of one leg, twitching clogged wings; cars brisked by. The back street was scattered with debris, as though a herd had moved on, leaving its refuse to manure the paving stones. His flashlight groped over the heaped pavement, trying to determine which house had been troubling him.

Only by standing back to align his own window with the house could he decide, and even then he was unsure. How could the old woman have clambered over the jagged pile that blocked the doorway? The front door sprawled splintered in the hall, on a heap of the fallen ceiling, amid peelings of wallpaper. He must be mistaken. But as his flashlight dodged about the hall, picking up debris then letting it drop back into the dark, he heard the crying, faint and muffled. It was somewhere within. He ventured forward, treading carefully. He had to drag the door into the street before he could proceed. Beyond the door the floorboards were cobbled with rubble. Plaster swayed about him, glistening. His light wobbled ahead of him, then led him towards a gaping doorway on the right. The light spread into the room, dimming.

A door lay on its back. Boards poked like exposed ribs through the plaster of the ceiling; torn paper dangled. There was no carton full of starving kittens; in fact, the room was bare. Moist stains engulfed the walls.

He groped along the hall, to the kitchen. The stove was fat with grime. The wallpaper had collapsed entirely, draping indistinguishable shapes that stirred as the flashlight glanced at them. Through the furred window he

made out the light in his own kitchen, orange-shaded, blurred. How could two women have survived here?

At once he regretted that thought. The old woman's face loomed behind him: eyes still as metal, skin the colour of pale bone. He turned nervously; the light capered. Of course there was only the quivering mouth of the hall. But the face was present now, peering from behind the draped shapes around him.

He was about to give up—he was already full of the gasp of relief he would give when he reached the avenue—when he heard the crying. It was almost breathless, as though close to death: a shrill feeble wheezing. He couldn't bear it. He hurried into the hall.

Might the creatures be upstairs? His light showed splintered holes in most of the stairs; through them he glimpsed a huge symmetrical stain on the wall. Surely the woman could never have climbed up there—but that left only the cellar.

The door was beside him. The flashlight, followed by his hand, groped for the knob. The face was near him in the shadows; its fixed eyes gleamed. He dreaded finding her fallen on the cellar steps. But the crying pleaded. He dragged the door open; it scraped over rubble. He thrust the flashlight into the dank opening. He stood gaping, bewildered.

Beneath him lay a low stone room. Its walls glistened darkly. The place was full of debris: bricks, planks, broken lengths of wood. Draping the debris, or tangled beneath it, were numerous old clothes. Threads of a white substance were tethered to everything, and drifted feebly now the door was opened.

In one corner loomed a large pale bulk. His light twitched towards it. It was a white bag of some material, not cloth. It had been torn open; except for a sifting of rubble, and a tangle of what might have been fragments of dully painted cardboard, it was empty. The crying wailed, somewhere beneath the planks. Several sweeps of the light showed that the cellar was otherwise deserted. Though the face mouthed behind him, he ventured down. For God's sake, get it over with; he knew he would never dare return. A swathe had been cleared through the dust on the steps, as though something had dragged itself out of the cellar, or had been dragged in.

His movements disturbed the tethered threads; they rose like feelers, fluttering delicately. The white bag stirred, its torn mouth worked. Without knowing why, he stayed as far from that corner as he could.

The crying had come from the far end of the cellar. As he picked his way hurriedly over the rubble he caught sight of a group of clothes. They were violently coloured sweaters, which the Rainbow Man had worn. They slumped over planks; they nestled inside one another, as though the man had withered or had been sucked out.

Staring uneasily about, Blackband saw that all the clothes were stained. There was blood on all of them, though not a great deal on any. The ceiling hung close to him, oppressive and vague. Darkness had blotted out the steps and the door. He caught at them with the light, and stumbled towards them.

The crying made him falter. Surely there were fewer voices, and they seemed to sob. He was nearer the voices than the steps. If he could find the creatures at once, snatch them up and flee—He clambered over the treacherous debris, towards a gap in the rubble. The bag mouthed emptily; threads plucked at him, almost impalpably. As he thrust the flashlight's beam into the gap, darkness rushed to surround him.

Beneath the debris a pit had been dug. Parts of its earth walls had collapsed, but protruding from the fallen soil he could see bones. They looked too large for an animal's. In the centre of the pit, sprinkled with earth, lay a cat. Little of it remained, except for its skin and bones; its skin was covered with deep pockmarks. But its eyes seemed to move feebly.

Appalled, he stooped. He had no idea what to do. He never knew, for the walls of the pit were shifting. Soil trickled scattering as a face the size of his fist emerged. There were several; their limbless bodies squirmed from the earth all around the pit. From toothless mouths, their sharp tongues flickered out towards the cat. As he fled they began wailing dreadfully.

He chased the light towards the steps. He fell, cutting his knees. He thought the face with its gleaming eyes would meet him in the hall. He ran from the cellar, flailing his flashlight at the air. As he stumbled down the street he could still see the faces that had crawled from the soil: rudimentary beneath translucent skin, but beginning to be human. He leaned against his gatepost in the lamplight, retching. Images and memories tumbled disordered through his mind. The face crawling over the roofs. Only seen at

night. Vampire. The fluttering at the window. Her terror at the hedge full of spiders. Calyptra, what was it, Calyptra eustrigata. Vampire moth.

Vague though they were, the implications terrified him. He fled into his building, but halted fearfully on the stairs. The things must be destroyed: to delay would be insane. Suppose their hunger brought them crawling out of the cellar tonight, towards his flat—Absurd though it must be, he couldn't forget that they might have seen his face.

He stood giggling, dismayed. Whom did you call in these circumstances? The police, an exterminator? Nothing would relieve his horror until he saw the brood destroyed, and the only way to see that was to do the job himself. Burn. Petrol. He dawdled on the stairs, delaying, thinking he knew none of the other tenants from whom to borrow the fuel.

He ran to the nearby garage. "Have you got any petrol?"

The man glared at him, suspecting a joke. "You'd be surprised. How much do you want?"

How much indeed! He restrained his giggling. Perhaps he should ask the man's advice! Excuse me, how much petrol do you need for—"A gallon," he stammered.

As soon as he reached the back street he switched on his flashlight. Crowds of rubble lined the pavements. Far above the dark house he saw his orange light. He stepped over the debris into the hall. The swaying light brought the face forward to meet him. Of course the hall was empty.

He forced himself forward. Plucked by the flashlight, the cellar door flapped soundlessly. Couldn't he just set fire to the house? But that might leave the brood untouched. Don't think, go down quickly. Above the stairs the stain loomed.

In the cellar nothing had changed. The bag gaped, the clothes lay emptied. Struggling to unscrew the cap of the petrol can, he almost dropped the flashlight. He kicked wood into the pit and began to pour the petrol. At once he heard the wailing beneath him. "Shut up!" he screamed, to drown out the sound. "Shut up! Shut up!"

The can took its time in gulping itself empty; the petrol seemed thick as oil. He hurled the can clattering away, and ran to the steps. He fumbled with matches, gripping the flashlight between his knees. As he threw them, the lit matches went out. Not until he ventured back to the pit, clutching a ball of

paper from his pocket, did he succeed in making a flame that reached his goal. There was a whoof of fire, and a chorus of interminable feeble shrieking.

As he clambered sickened towards the hall, he heard a fluttering above him. Wallpaper, stirring in a wind: it sounded moist. But there was no wind, for the air clung clammily to him. He slithered over the rubble into the hall, darting his light about. Something white bulked at the top of the stairs.

It was another torn bag. He hadn't been able to see it before. It slumped emptily. Beside it the stain spread over the wall. That stain was too symmetrical; it resembled an inverted coat. Momentarily he thought the paper was drooping, tugged perhaps by his unsteady light, for the stain had begun to creep down towards him. Eyes glared at him from its dangling face. Though the face was upside-down he knew it at once. From its gargoyle mouth a tongue reached for him.

He whirled to flee. But the darkness that filled the front door was more than night, for it was advancing audibly. He stumbled, panicking, and rubble slipped from beneath his feet. He fell from the cellar steps, onto piled stone. Though he felt almost no pain, he heard his spine break.

His mind writhed helplessly. His body refused to heed it in any way, and lay on the rubble, trapping him. He could hear cars on the avenue, radio sets and the sounds of cutlery in flats, distant and indifferent. The cries were petering out now. He tried to scream, but only his eyes could move. As they struggled, he glimpsed through a slit in the cellar wall the orange light in his kitchen.

His flashlight lay on the steps, dimmed by its fall. Before long a rustling darkness came slowly down the steps, blotting out the light. He heard sounds in the dark, and something that was not flesh nestled against him. His throat managed a choked shriek that was almost inaudible, even to him. Eventually the face crawled away towards the hall, and the light returned. From the corner of his eye he could see what surrounded him. They were round, still, practically featureless: as yet, hardly even alive.

Illustration by Alex McVey, taken from the 25th anniversary edition of Dark Forces, 2006.

The Little Voice

"*The Little Voice* was apparently to be called *The Playmate* when I made notes for it in early April 1976. I set about writing it on the 30th and finished it on 9th May. Where did it come from? I have no idea—perhaps just a train of thought that made me scribble notes. [...] Charlie Grant bought *The Little Voice* for his *Shadows* anthology series but suggested I should prune it a little. I believe I rid it of about two thousand words, and that's the published version."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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When Edith Locketty went downstairs the old man was already staring. She couldn't draw the curtains; during the night her curtain rail had collapsed again. On the wall that divided the yards, weeds nodded helplessly beneath rain. Beyond them, through his window that was the twin of hers, the old man stared at her.

He was smiling. She pursed her lips, frowning at his baggy face and veined dome, patched with grey hair and discoloured skin as if abandoned to dust and spiders. His eyes were wide, but were they innocent? His smile looked sleepy, sated, reminiscent; reminiscent of...

She remembered her dream. Her face became a cold disgusted mask. Filthy old creature, it was written on his face what he was. But he couldn't know what she had dreamed. No doubt his smile referred to something equally disgusting. She cracked her egg viciously, as though it were a tiny cranium.

He turned away. Good of him to let her eat in peace! Bars of rain struggled down the window; beyond them, at the edge of her vision, he was a dim feeble shifting that felt like an irritation in her eye. The downpour hissed in the back yard and the alley beyond, prattled in the gutters. Gradually, through the liquid clamour, she made out another sound. In the old man's house the child was chattering.

She glanced reluctantly across. She knew neither its sex nor its age. Again she wondered whether he kept the child out of sight deliberately because he knew she was a teacher. Did it ever go to school? If it wasn't old enough, what possessed him to keep it awake at all hours?

Perhaps the child was beyond his control, and kept him awake. His smile might have been weary rather than sleepy, and meant for the child rather than for her. He sat at the dim bare table, gazing into the underwater room, at the muffled childish piping.

She dropped the crushed shell into the pedal bin, glad to be ready to leave. There was something nasty about him, she'd seen it skulking in his eyes. And he couldn't be helping the child to develop. She'd never heard the thin incessant voice pronounce a recognisable word.

The pavements glittered, bejewelled with rain and snatches of sun. The clouds had almost drained, the last shafts of rain hurried away on the wind; puddles puckered vanishing mouths. To think of leaving a child alone with him! If she had ever had a child—She halted her thoughts firmly. That was long past.

Nearing the school, she became her role: Miss Locketty the teacher. The children knew where they were with her, as they needed to. But the old man was troubling her: his stare, his sly pleasure, her recurring dream of his dry piebald flesh groping over her in bed.

She shook off the memory, squirming. How could anyone allow him near? His housekeeper might have, if that was what she was; perhaps the child was theirs. To think of his flesh jerking spasmodically like an old machine! One man had been enough to disgust her for life. She strode furiously into the schoolyard.

Mr Prince was on yard duty. His hair was longer than most of the girls'. It was his last day at this school, and he seemed not to care what the children did—although, in her opinion, he never had cared. Children sat on their wet raincoats. 'Hang those up, please,' she said, and they did so at once. Others were kicking puddles at each other, but ceased when she said, 'You're too old for that.' Already she felt calmer, more sure.

After assembly she led her class to their room. 'You may play games quietly.' They fought pen-and-paper battles, but noise came blundering through the wall from Mr Prince's class. On the other side, the murmur of Sue Thackeray's children was hardly audible. At least it was Prince's last day.

Drat it, she'd forgotten to bring the Enid Blyton book to read to her class, their end-of-term treat. At lunchtime she made for the gates. A woman was

reaching through the railings, as though the street were a cage. Her hand was bones gloved in skin, groping for the children, beckoning. In her pocket a bottle dribbled wine around its rakish stopper. 'Come away from there, please,' the teacher told the children. Poor woman; probably beyond help. As she turned away, the woman's eyes puckered wistfully.

The teacher strode home. More rain loomed overhead; the glum sky doled out light. The book lay on the kitchen table, where she'd left it to remind her. The old man sat at his table, reaching for, and talking to, the obscure gloom. His hands were playing some complicated game.

When he turned to stare at her, his smile looked gloating. Somewhere near him the voice clamoured thinly for attention. 'Yes, I can see you, you dirty old swine,' she said loudly without thinking. 'Just you watch yourself.' She hurried away, for she thought he'd begun to tremble—though surely he couldn't have heard her words. His staring face looked frail as shadow.

She read her book to her class, and watched their faces dull. Ranks of uniformed waxworks stared at her, drooping a little. Did they think they were too old for the story, or that she was out of date? She saw the old man trembling. Noise from next door floundered about her room, like a clumsy intruder. If she didn't act she would lose control of herself. 'Talk quietly until I come back,' she said.

When Mr Prince deigned to answer his door, she said, 'Will you control your class, please? You're making it impossible for me to read.'

Sandwiched in her book, her finger pointed at him. He glanced at the cover with a motion like spitting. His mouth quirked, meaning: Jesus, that's just what you'd expect of her. 'Never mind what you think of it,' she blurted. 'Just do as you're told. I could teach you a few of the basics of teaching.'

He stared incredulously at her. 'Oh piss off and leave us alone.'

The head listened to her tale, sucking his pipe loudly; she could tell he'd been looking forward to a quiet smoke. 'I'd have smacked a child for saying it,' she said.

'I hope you'd do nothing of the kind.' As she stared, feeling betrayed, he added more gently, 'Besides, it's his last day. No point in unpleasantness.

We all need a rest,' he said, as though to excuse her. 'It's time we all went home.'

From her window she watched her class crossing the schoolyard, eager for freedom. 'Have a good Easter,' one had said, but had that been sarcasm? She could feel only the burning knot of anger in her guts. And she was faced with two weeks of the old man's stare.

But the house next to hers was silent. Only the dark, uncurtained window gaped at her, vaguely framed by twilit brick. She immersed herself in peace. Her anger dulled and went out, or at least became a vague shadow in her mind.

She served herself dinner on the Wedgwood service, which her parents had kept for best. The window opposite reminded her of an empty aquarium, grimy with neglect; it made her kitchen feel more comfortable. Tomorrow she'd put up the curtain rail. She read Georgette Heyer until exhaustion began to disintegrate the phrases.

She was sitting at a table, gazing across it at darkness. Very gradually a shape began to accumulate twilight, scarcely more distinct than the dark: a developing foetus? It must be too dark for her eyes to function properly, for surely no foetus ever took that shape, or moved so swiftly around a table. When she woke, the silence seemed chill and very large, alive with memories. She had to urge herself to climb the stairs to bed.

Someone was knocking, but not at her door; she turned comfortably within her own warmth, and slept again. It was the sounds of the crowd, of footsteps booming muffled through the house, that woke her.

They were next door, she realised, as she blinked herself aware of the midday sunshine. She peered between the curtains, annoyed that she felt guiltily furtive. A policeman was emerging from the old man's house; a police car squatted outside.

At last she let go of the curtains. She rushed herself to the bathroom and slapped her face with water, scrubbed her armpits. What she'd said had served the old man right. Surely he hadn't—in the mirror her face deplored her faltering. She must find out what had happened.

Her body fumbled as though to hinder her dressing. As she strode down the path, trailing grasses clung to her ankles. Her stomach clenched—but she

couldn't retreat, for the housekeeper had seen her. 'What's wrong?' the teacher called, and felt forced to hold her breath.

The woman dragged her coat tighter, shivering in the April wind that fought for the parcel in her hands. 'Mr Wajda has died,' she said.

He'd been a foreigner? Questions struggled half formed behind the teacher's lips: how did he? Why did he? It seemed safest to ask, 'Who found him?'

"The postman. He was trying to deliver this.' The woman held out the parcel; her small eyes looked careful, limited, determined not to speculate. 'He saw Mr Wajda at the bottom of the stairs.'

'He fell downstairs?' The teacher tried not to sound as hopeful as she felt.

"They think there was a loose stair rod. Of course, he couldn't see it.'

She managed to keep her relief from her face. But 'Of course?' she repeated, puzzled.

'Yes, of course. He was blind.'

'I see,' she lied, and retreated mumbling, 'If there's anything I can do.' The housekeeper looked as bewildered as the teacher felt, and was staring at the opened parcel, which contained a skipping rope.

So the old man had been staring only at her sounds. His wide eyes hadn't meant to pretend innocence. No doubt his hearing had been acute; he must have heard her words. Still, blindness didn't make him innocent; indeed, it explained the way he had fumbled over her in her dreams. Enough of that. His death had been nothing to do with her, he would have fallen anyway, of course he would. She could forget him.

But she could not. He must be lying still in the dark house. His gloomy window looked ominous, as though threatening to stage an unpleasant surprise. It unnerved her from climbing up to replace her curtain rail. Instead she cleaned her house before it annoyed her further. Somewhere a child was either sobbing or laughing.

Next day the hearse arrived. Quick work: perhaps he'd had friends in the business. Now the house next door felt simply empty. She smiled at the flat blank window. No hurry now to put up the rail.

A child sang tunelessly: *la, la, la*. The teacher went shopping beneath a thick grey sky, and told children to leave the old man's garden. The news

must have spread that his house was no-man's-land. Returning, she had to chase the children again. 'Do you want the police?' she demanded, and watched while they fled.

La, la la. She unpacked her purchases. *La, la, la*. The sound was above her. In the adjoining house. The childless black couple must have a visitor, and she wished they'd keep it quiet. Just a fortnight without children, that was all she wanted.

In her bedroom it was closer. *La, la, la*. She pressed her ear to the wall; a faint blurred thudding of reggae filtered through. Jungle drums, she thought automatically, and then her thoughts froze. The child's voice was beyond the far wall, in the old man's house.

It sounded alone and preoccupied. Perhaps it had been with the children she'd chased. If it had heard her threat of the police it mightn't dare to venture out. Suppose the stair rod were still loose?

The sky was sinking beneath its burden of unshed rain. Thick fringes of grass flopped over the old man's path. Her own garden was untidy as the blind man's; she must take it in hand. His windows were curtained with grime. The actual curtains, drooping within, looked like fat ropes of dust.

About to knock, she halted. A stair rod wedged the front door, too timidly ajar to be noticeable from the pavement. Perhaps this was the lethal stair rod—but it meant the child was a meddler, dangerous to itself. She pushed the door wide.

A dim staircase rose from the hall, which might have been a mirror's version of her own—except that she hoped that hers was infinitely cleaner. The woman could have done nothing but his shopping. Above the stairs, festoons of dust transformed a lampshade into a chandelier.

'Come here, please. Before you hurt yourself.' Muffled as dust, the house dulled her voice, as though she were shouting into blankets. No answer came. Perhaps the child was downstairs now. She strode towards the kitchen, unwilling to climb towards the box of secret darkness.

The house smelled of dank wallpaper. The sky's lid allowed scant light into the kitchen. When she switched on the bulb, as grey as an old pear, the light felt thick as oil. The room was empty—perhaps too empty: there was no chair opposite the old man's at the table. Nothing else in the long cluttered room seemed worth noting, except a spillage of cans of baby food

surrounding a bin beneath the sink. Beyond the window, her own kitchen looked darkly unfamiliar, hardly hers at all.

Enough dawdling. She hurried back towards the stairs; her echoes seemed indefinably wrong. She halted. Had there been a high sound, perhaps an inadvertent snatch of song, among her last echoes? 'Come down here, please. I'm not going to hurt you.'

The dark above her swallowed her call, and kept its secret. It stood blocking the top of the stairs. Good God, was she going to let her nervousness in an empty house prevent her from saving a child? She tramped upstairs. 'Come here to me,' she called.

At once there was movement in the dark. Someone came running towards her, down what sounded like an impossibly long hall. Above her the dark seemed crowded with sound, and about to hurl the source of that sound at her. The child was going to play a trick, to leap at her as she stood vulnerable on the stairs.

Her loss of dignity angered her, but she ran. Once she reached the hall she'd give the child a piece of her mind. The noise raced towards her, sounding thin, hollow, dry, and far too large—deformed by dust and echoes, of course. It was close behind her. Her clutching hand scraped a wad of dust from the banister.

The noise had halted. She gripped the banister tight as a weapon as she turned, for fear of an unbalancing prank. But the stairs were deserted.

Outside, the muddy sky gave her less light than she'd hoped. Of course, all the sounds must have come from the house beyond the old man's. The threat of rain filled her mind, like fog. She had almost reached her front door when it slammed in her face. She fumbled irritably for her key. Enough tricks for today.

La, la, la. Determined to ignore the sound, which seemed to have moved above her, she dined at the nearby Chinese restaurant. Mellowed by Riesling, she ambled home through streets polished by rain. Shops displayed beds, bright and deserted. Her house displayed darkness. As she climbed the stairs her echoes sounded more numerous than she thought they should, as though someone were imitating her. Of course, that was what had sounded wrong in the old man's house. She smiled vaguely and went to bed.

Pale quick movement woke her. For a moment it hovered; it had opened the ceiling to peer down at her. She was still trying to prop her eyes open when it slid away, gliding down the wall to the floor. It must have been the stray light of a car.

Her eyelids settled shut. Then her brow taughtened. She must be half engulfed in a dream, for she thought she remembered the pale oval crossing the floor and hiding beneath her bed. No car's beam could have reached so far. Determinedly, she relaxed. Her brow was beginning to squeeze forth a headache.

She dozed amid distractions. The tick of her clock was shouting, like an ignored child; a drip in the kitchen seemed eager to remind her how largely empty the house was. Something—a fly, it must have been—kept touching her face lightly, silently. Grumbling, she withdrew beneath the blankets. Somewhere in a dream she could still feel the timid touch.

She must have dreamed that it managed to pluck the blankets away and crawl in beside her face. Daylight showed her a deserted room. Perhaps the fly had fallen under the bed to die; she wasn't looking. She ate breakfast and stared at the weeds on the yard wall; lingering raindrops made their leaves crystalline. The weeds wept on her fingers as she uprooted them triumphantly. She'd left them growing to avoid arguments with the old man—and of course he wouldn't have noticed.

She read the Heyer. The street sounded like a schoolyard; footballs beat like irregular hearts. Later, the library was quiet, until children came in for a chase. She couldn't escape them at all, it seemed. She smiled wryly at the harassed librarian.

La, la, la. Couldn't they teach the child a few more notes, or at least to stay firmly on the one? She added her coat to the load on the hall stand, straining her ears to determine the location of the sound. It was above her, on the old man's side. It moved slowly to the other side. But it couldn't do that unless it was in her house.

She ran upstairs. Her footsteps filled the house, but there was no need for stealth; the child was in her bedroom, trapped. It sang on, indifferent to her. She'd smack its bottom for that as well. She flung open the bedroom door.

The bed was spread with sunlight, the room blazed. The singing persisted ahead of her, tantalisingly, as she forced her eyes not to blink; then it moved

through the wall into the spare bedroom. Just an acoustic trick. She was disconcertingly unsure what she felt now she'd been robbed of the naughty child. The house walls were too thin, that was for sure. She sat downstairs, riffling through her new books. When the singing recommenced she pursed her lips. She'd been tricked once.

She woke. She was sitting in the chair; an open book roofed her knee. For a moment she forgot that it was the next day, that she'd been to bed meanwhile. Some perversity of her metabolism always exhausted her after the end of term.

No doubt the tapping of rain had wakened her; the panes looked cracked by water, the room crowded with dim giant amoebae. But the movement, or the version of it that her sleep had admitted, had sounded heavier. Though she quashed the memory at once, she thought of the departed footsteps of her parents. The sound came again, rumbling in the cupboard in the corner of the room.

Reluctantly she tiptoed closer. Dry waves of rain flooded down the cupboard door. With one hand she switched on the standard lamp, with the other she snatched open the door. The gas meter peered up at her, twitching its indicator. There was nothing else, not even a mouse hole. It must have been the black couple, being far too noisy.

In the kitchen all the cupboards were open. Their interiors looked very dark, and more full than they should have, especially where they were darkest. Wake up! She slapped her face, none too gently. What was her mind playing, hide and seek? She slammed the doors, refusing to peer within.

Her mind tried slyly to persuade her to dine out. Nonsense, she couldn't afford that every night. After dinner she wrote to Sue, suggesting a restaurant, then tried to read. Didn't they ever put that child to bed? It was such a dismal sound, it made her house seem so empty.

Next day she lost patience. Never mind sitting about, moping. Who was going to put up the curtain rail, her father? This time she'd do it properly. She replenished the sockets in the plaster with filler. Replacing the screws was more tiring than she'd thought; halfway through she was prickly with sweat. 'Shut up with your la, la, la,' she snarled. She'd complain, if she only knew where. Gasping triumphantly, she tightened the last screw and stood gazing at her handiwork, ignoring the blisters on her palms.

The singing insinuated itself among the words of her books, it began to pick apart her thoughts. What annoyed her most was its stupidity. It sounded mindless as a dripping tap.

On Good Friday she rode a bus into unexpected sunshine, but there seemed to be an indefinable thin barrier between her and her enjoyment. Among the children who crowded the fields and the woods a tuneless song kept appearing. She returned home before she'd planned to, towards slabs of cloud.

She lay listening furiously. *La, la, la*. It was hours past midnight, hours since she'd tried to sleep. Tomorrow she would track down the child's parents—except that deep in her mind she dreaded that nobody would know what she was talking about. She knew none of her neighbours well enough for a calculated chat.

On Easter Sunday she went to church, in search of peace, though she hadn't been for years. Above the altar Christ rose up, pure, perfected. She gazed in admiration, surprised how much she'd forgotten. There was a real man, probably the only one. She'd never met one like him.

The choir sang. Boyish trebles pierced the hymn: *la, la, la*, one sang tunelessly. Her shoulders writhed and shuddered, but she managed to stay kneeling. She'd had hallucinations with insomnia before: bushes that smiled, trees that raised their heads from grazing. The choir was in tune now. She sat back gratefully. But when the sermon mentioned spirits—ghosts—she found she was trying not to hear.

She strode into her home. Now, no more nonsense. She hooked her coat onto the stand, and at once heard it fall behind her. The fall sounded far too heavy for a coat. On the floor, whose shadows seemed thickened rather than diluted by the light that leaked beneath the door, all the coats lay in a mound—her parents' too, which she kept meaning to give away. The mound looked as if a lumpy shape were hiding underneath.

They were coats. Nothing but coats. Good God, it wasn't as if they were moving. But if the lurker were holding itself still, waiting to be uncovered ... She stumbled forward and snatched away the coats. She stood glaring defiantly at the bare floor. The coats didn't seem bulky enough to have composed so large a mound.

She felt strange, handling her parents' clothes so roughly. Had she left them on the stand because she hadn't known how to touch them? That afternoon she took them to the presbytery for the jumble sale.

Her house seemed very empty; the restless prattling made it more so. All she needed was sleep. After midnight she slept fitfully, when the voice allowed her. Surely she wouldn't need a doctor. Sometimes, when her self-control was barely equal to her job, she'd dreaded that. *La, la, la*.

On Monday Sue Thackeray came visiting. They returned from the Chinese restaurant companioned by a bottle of gin. Edith was glad of Sue, whose throaty laugh gave the echoes no chance to sound hollow.

Sue's armchair wheezed as she sat back bulging, tenderly cradling her refilled glass. Her arms were almost as thick as the stuffed chair's. Memories of her parents, whom she had recently lost, floated up on the gin. 'At least you lived here with yours,' she said. 'I didn't see mine for months.'

'But the house seems so empty now.'

'Well, it will. I thought you looked a bit peaky, love.' She stared hard and blearily at Edith. 'You want to get away.'

'I'm going to Minorca this summer. I can't afford to go anywhere else as well.'

They fell silent. The silence rustled with the approach of rain. 'Anyway,' Sue said, slapping her knee, beginning to grin. Edith hushed her. 'Can you hear that?' she blurted.

La, la, la. 'Rain,' Sue said.

'No, I don't mean that.' It was so difficult to force the words past her confusion that surely the effort must be worthwhile. 'Can't you hear the child?' she demanded, almost pleading.

Sue gazed at her rather sadly before saying, 'No.' She thought it was Edith's imagination, did she? She thought Edith had wished a child into her mind, did she?

'Did you ever want to adopt a child?'

'No,' Edith declared angrily, 'I never did, and I don't want one now. I have enough of them at school. I like my freedom, thank you.' Why was she shouting, with only Sue to hear?

'All right, all right,' Sue said grumpily. 'I didn't mean—'

The crash turned her next word into a gape. Edith was already running to the door. But it had warped somehow, and refused to budge. She mustn't lose her temper, things were like children sometimes. But she must get out to see what had happened! At the third wrench the door set her free.

The fallen rail lay tangled in its curtains, scattered with plaster. Above it, her filled sockets had been gouged. 'Look at that,' she said incredulously. 'It's been torn down.'

'Don't be silly,' Sue rebuked her. 'It's just fallen.'

When Sue left, hurrying bowed beneath rain, Edith stood staring at the dull street. The air was latticed with transparent slashes. Just fallen, indeed! How could the woman be so smug about her blindness? At least her smugness had convinced Edith that the child must exist objectively outside her own mind, however unnaturally. The gin allowed her thoughts to be comfortably vague. Whatever it was, it wouldn't drive her out of her own house. 'You'll go first,' she shouted to her echoes.

A child was laughing. The sound seemed peaceful. Perhaps she might enjoy having a child in the house. She woke to the touch of cold rubber on her feet; the hot-water bottle felt dead. No, she didn't want a child. The hard hot poking that preceded it had been bad enough: that, and the doctor's groping to get rid of it, and the sight of it—it hadn't looked at all human, it had never had the chance. She had had it murdered. She could never have had a child after that, even if she had wanted to.

'I want no child,' she snarled at the dark. Then she froze, remembering what she'd felt as she had awakened.

Of course it had been a dream: the face nuzzling hers eagerly, the hand reaching playfully to touch her feet and the bottle. Only in dreams was such a reach possible. But she lay stiffly, trying to hush her breath, willing the bed to be empty, willing the dark not to nuzzle her face. Perhaps she lay thus for hours before, inadvertently, she fell asleep.

In the kitchen, a dim face was staring at her from the empty house. Has it gone back? she thought, immediately anxious not to understand what she meant. But it was the housekeeper, who hadn't kept house. Impulsively Edith ran to the yard wall. 'Excuse me,' she called. 'Excuse me.'

Eventually the door opened to let out the reluctant face. Edith felt drained of words, tricked by her own impulse. 'When Mr Er died,' she said, still

unwilling to think what she meant. 'Was the child there?'

The woman's eyes narrowed, though they hadn't much scope to do so. 'What child?'

"The one who lived with him.' Perhaps she could shock the woman into truth. 'It was your child, wasn't it?'

'It certainly was not,' the woman said, turning away.

'But he had a child,' Edith pleaded.

'I don't know who's been talking. He never had one that lived,' the woman muttered resentfully. 'It killed my aunt before she could bear it.'

Perhaps her aunt had been married to him. Or perhaps not. Dirty old man. Irrelevant, Edith thought impatiently. She pointed behind the woman. 'Surely there must have been a child. What about all that baby food?'

'He had no teeth,' the woman said smugly. Her eyes reminded Edith of a pig's: small, dull, penned in. She was closing the door. 'But the skipping rope,' Edith protested.

'Listen,' the woman said, 'whatever he may have done, he's dead now. I won't discuss it. And you better hadn't, either.'

The door snapped shut, like disapproving lips. Perhaps he'd lured children to his house for sexual purposes; no doubt most men would, given the chance; but that wasn't the point. That wasn't what the woman, too stupid to realise she had done so, had confirmed. Her very stupidity, her refusal to think, had confirmed it. There *had* been a child in that house, but nobody had seen it—because it couldn't be seen.

Now it had come into Edith's house. Today she found the thought of its objective existence less comforting. But at least it meant there was nothing wrong with her. 'Yes, la, la, la,' she said loudly; it was distant and muffled. 'Go on, keep it up as long as you like.'

Sometimes she managed to switch off her awareness, as she often did with her class. Whenever she heard the sound again she laughed pityingly. It was no worse than the cries of children outside, though they had become aggressively distracting. She tried to doze. The library might be more restful, but she wouldn't be driven out of her own house. When the song became more insistent, frustrated by being ignored, she laughed louder.

A bath might relax her. She turned on the taps, and the steam expurgated her reflection, diluted her colours, softened her swollen curves; she no longer looked heavily fleshy—almost attractive, she thought. Steam surrounded her reflected face with a vignette's oval that shrank like an iris in an old film.

She sank into the water, wallowing, yet she couldn't relax. As her muscles loosened they seemed to liquefy, and her mind felt helplessly afloat and vulnerable. The walls looked insubstantial, as though infiltrated by fog that muffled the room, deafening her to anything that might be approaching the door.

She felt she was being watched. She washed quickly and rose sloshing. She rubbed herself roughly with the towel. Was something playfully touching her? She whirled, and glimpsed a face.

It had been spying on her from the mirror, through the peeling steam. Her own face, of course, and she wiped the mirror clear. But as the steam reformed she seemed to glimpse beyond it a dim movement, with eyes. Instinctively, infuriatingly, she covered herself with the towel. She wrenched at the door, which had warped shut. She closed her eyes, trapping her cry behind her lips, and tugged until the door pulled free.

As she dressed she grew coldly furious. It wouldn't get the better of her again. She read, determined not to hear the tuneless babbling. She slept a little, despite the almost insubstantial groping at her face in the dark.

A pile of cans was waiting to fall on her when she opened a cupboard door. How stupid and infantile. She pushed them back and checked the other cupboards, which were innocent. She smiled grimly—oh no, it wouldn't play that trick on her—and climbed the stairs slowly, examining the stair rods. All of its tricks were moronic, and some were disgusting, but none was worth her notice. Amid the clamour in the street a voice prattled, distant or muffled. She refused to hear its words. It might be only her lack of sleep that made it rush towards her.

She dreamed that she had died and that the house was full of laughter. The dream shifted: something was kissing or licking her cheek. When she struggled awake it was there on her pillow—a fat encrusted earthworm. Stupid, disgusting. She hurried downstairs to throw it out, but not too fast to check the stair rods.

Hadn't she read this page before, more than once? The window cleaner gazed at her, making her feel caged, on show. His sluggish progress round the house, his dull dabbing at the panes, unnerved her. Nor did he seem to have lightened the rooms. She had never realised how many dark corners the house contained. Many of them had begun to acquire objects, some of which moved, none of which was there when she strode close.

Once, when the cries of the children outside seemed especially violent and threatening, she heard an object being dragged upstairs. She ran into the hall, and seemed to glimpse a dim movement as it climbed onto the landing. It seemed dreadfully large, or shaped like a nightmare, or both.

Whatever it was, she wasn't having it in her house. She climbed, scrutinising the stair rods. She heard her bedroom door open, and the fall of something moist and fat within. Had it been dragging a burden that it had now dropped? Was that why it had looked so grotesque? Her hand clenched on the doorknob when she heard the giggling within; it took her minutes to open the door. But the room was mockingly bare. She went downstairs white-faced... checking the rods.

She had to sit down, to calm her heart. Her tormentor had almost reached her. To have let such stupidity touch her! She wouldn't again. She found herself looking forward to next term: school would make her sure of herself again. Only three more days. In the corners, objects kept her company. She slept, when she managed to sleep, with the light on. Only two days. *La, la, la*. Only one.

The sight of the fallen rail depressed her. If she replaced the rail it would only be torn down again. No point in moping. Less than one more day. To cheer herself up, she ate dinner using the Wedgwood service.

She must go to bed early and try to sleep, but not just yet. She could read, except that her books didn't interest her. But what in God's name stopped her going to the library to change them? She wouldn't be trapped any more than she would be driven out. She washed up swiftly and left the plates on the table.

A few children ran among the tables, for a last chase. 'We'll be glad to give them back to you,' the librarian said wryly. There were no books that appealed to Edith, except ones she'd read. Impulsively she chose some new children's books, to find out what they read these days. Maybe she'd read them to her children.

It had begun to rain. Buds of water grew on the hedges, gleaming orange with sodium light. The lampposts were rooted in shallow, glaring pools. Rain pecked at her; houses streamed, their windows tight and snug.

Her own house looked bedraggled; its windows drooled. The unkempt lawn struggled to stand beneath the rain. Water snatched at her as she slammed the door behind her. The slam resounded through the house, as though all the doors were mocking her.

The darkness became still, preparing its next trick. She wouldn't give it the chance. Clutching her books, she switched on the hall light. The hall stand appeared beside her, its head swollen with coats. With the adjacent switch she drove back the dark on the landing, then she hurried into the front room. The house hemmed her in with echoes. Only echoes.

The window was frosted with rain; watery shapes crawled about the room. Would her groping hand meet the light switch, or something soft and tongued? Of course it was the switch, and the light destroyed the shapes. She drew the curtains, trying to make the room cosier.

As she did so, what had been hiding behind a chair rose up, to scare her. She refused to look, although the grinning object seemed too large, and grotesquely lacking. She couldn't have glimpsed so much from the corner of her eye, but hadn't the object been held up by a hand rather than a neck, even though it had rolled its eyes? Rubbish. She clashed the curtains together as if cutting off a play, and turned to confront the empty room.

She stalked to the kitchen, ignoring the crowd of her sounds. The Wedgwood was arrayed on the table. The sight of the empty window deformed by rain troubled her; as she moved, the window twitched like a nervous blind eye. She gazed out at the hectic night. Tomorrow she'd put up the rail. This time she'd make sure it stayed up.

Something in her room was very wrong.

She stood trapped, trying to recall what she'd seen, afraid to turn until she knew. The night was vicious with glittering. Suddenly she turned: of course, she'd used only part of the Wedgwood, yet the entire service was laid out. How stupid—hardly even a trick.

She reached for a plate. But her hand faltered and hung slackly as she moaned, unable to accept what she was seeing. She had to pick miserably at

a plate before she was convinced. Although they had been reassembled with terrible minuteness, every item of the service was shattered into fragments.

Her panic threw her stumbling towards the hall. The hollow desertion of the house overwhelmed her. But she was not entirely alone, for although the switch stayed on, something was clapped over the light, trapping her in darkness.

The room whirled as she did. The blind window gazed across, streaming grimily. She wrenched at the door, which had warped shut more stubbornly than the others. She stumbled across the flowing room towards the door to the yard, groping feverishly for her keys.

She halted, squeezing her eyes tight in terror and rage. Whatever it did, she was determined not to see it. She could hear it running towards her, large and unbalanced, as though crippled. It was about to leap on her. Let it do its worst.

The light blazed again, through her eyelids. Her tormentor was standing before her, waiting to be seen. Her forehead felt as though her skull were shrinking, squeezing out needles of sweat. She clenched her eyelids desperately.

It touched her. Its large, loose face crawled moistly over hers. Its hands plucked at her. They felt unformed, and terribly far apart. Its face returned and clung to hers, snuffling. Nothing could have forced her to open her eyes.

Her whole body squirmed with a convulsion beyond nausea. She was terrified to move: what might she touch blindly? Suddenly, in utter desperation, her mouth opened. Words came uncontrollably as retching, but slowly, deliberately: 'Get away from me, you filthy thing.'

She felt it leave her, and stood frozen. Was the stillness a trick? At last she had to open her eyes, for the aching void made her giddy. The room felt as empty as it looked, and she sat down before she could fall. Eventually she swept the Wedgwood into the bin. She switched on all the lights, then opened the front-room curtains and sat with her back to the window. Before her, her faint outline trembled incessantly with rain.

Dawn seeped into the room. Her eyes felt hot and bloated. When she switched off the lights the room turned ashen. She sipped boiling tea, trying

to taste it; her stomach writhed. The colours of the house struggled with the grey.

She trudged through the soaked streets. She'd forgotten to bring the library books. No time now. She wouldn't have been reading them today, she must make herself sure of her children again. They needed to be sure of one another, she and the children. She felt uneasy, unwilling to face them. As she trudged she grew tense. Her legs were aching, and her mind.

Through the bars she could see some of her class. Thank God, they weren't looking at her; she hadn't decided how to approach them. Their cries sounded alarmingly jagged, menacing. She was still trying to decide as her automatic trudging took her into the schoolyard.

At once the crying began.

How could the other children ignore it, that inconsolable, atrociously miserable cry? But she knew what it was. She strode glaring towards the school. Once she was inside and away from the sound she'd be all right.

But the cry wrenched at her. It was so thin and feeble, yet so penetrating; so helpless and desolate, beyond any hope of being comforted. She couldn't bear it. As she strode towards the children she could hear it coming closer. They gaped at her as she hurried among them, pulling them aside to peer for the abandoned wailing.

She faltered, and gazed at them. The plight of the crying victim could be no worse than theirs, with their home lives, their stupidity, their inability to find themselves. Wasn't there a plea deep in their dull eyes? She couldn't reach the crying, but at least she could touch these children; that must be worth something.

Her eyes spilled her grief. 'I'm sorry,' she said to the gaping children. 'It's all right,' she said, reaching out, trying to embrace them as they began to back away. 'Come here, I won't hurt you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' Surely her cries must drain some of the enormous guilt that bowed her down.

At last, when the schoolyard was empty of children, and Sue and her colleagues had ceased trying to coax her into the school, she stumbled away. The crying accompanied her home, and everywhere she went. Sometimes, as they emerged from school, her children saw her. They fled, leaving her pleading with the air, trying to embrace it. Surely the crying

must stop eventually, surely the voice must grow happy again. 'La, la, la,' she pleaded. 'La, la, la.'

Loveman's Comeback

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Surely she was dreaming. She lay in bed, but the blankets felt like damp moss. Her eyes were white and blind. She suffered a muffled twinge of nightmare before she realised that what filled her eyes was moonlight and not cataract. Sitting up hastily, she saw the moon beyond the grubby pane. Against it stood a nearby chimney, a square black horned head.

The light must have awakened her, if she was awake. The moonlit blankets and their shadows retained a faint tousled outline of her. As she gazed at the vague form she felt hardly more present herself. She was standing up, she found, and at some point had dressed herself ready for walking.

Why did she want to go out? Frost glittered on the window, as though the grime were flowering translucently. Still, perhaps even the cold might be preferable to the empty house, which sounded drained of life, rattling with her echoes. It hadn't sounded so when her parents—No point in dwelling on that subject. Walk, instead.

No need to hurry so. Surely she had time to switch on the light above the stairs. Her compulsion disagreed: moonlight reached across the landing from her open bedroom door and lay like an askew fragment of carpet over the highest stairs; that was illumination enough. Her shadow jerked downstairs jaggedly ahead of her. Her echoes ran about the house like an insubstantial stumbling crowd, to remind her how alone she was. To escape them, she hurried blindly down the unclothed stairs, along the thundering hall, and out.

The street was not reassuring. But then so late at night streets seldom were: they reminded her of wandering. Or was that a dream too? Hadn't she wandered streets at night, the more deserted the better, alongside others—friends, no doubt—sharing fat multicoloured hand-rolled cigarettes, or locked into the depths of themselves by some chemical? Hadn't houses shrunk as though gnomes were staging illusions, hadn't bricks melted and

run together like wax? But she couldn't be sure that she was remembering; even her parents resembled a dream. The urge to walk was more real.

Well, she could walk no faster. Underfoot, the roadway felt cracked: on the pavements dead streetlamps help up their broken heads. At one end of the street she'd glimpsed a street soaked in moonlight; it seemed to her like the luminous skeleton of something unimaginable. But her impulse tugged her the other way, between unbroken ranks of houses whose only garden was the pavement. Moonlight covered the slated roofs with overlapping scales of white ice. As she passed, the dim dull windows appeared to ripple.

She was so numb that she felt only the compulsion to walk. It was a nervousness that must be obeyed, a vague nagging like a threat of pain. Was it like the onset of withdrawal symptoms? She couldn't recall—indeed, wasn't sure whether she had experienced them. Had she gone so far with the needle?

Litter scuttled on the chill wind; something broken scraped a lamp's glass fangs. Terraced houses enclosed her like solid walls. In the darkness, their windows looked opaque as brick; surely nobody could live within. Could she not meet just one person, to convince her that the city hadn't died in the night?

The dimness of her memories had begun to dismay her. Her mind seemed dark and empty. But the streets were brightening. Orange light glared between walls, searing her eyes. A coppery glow hovered overhead, on gathering clouds. When she heard the brisk whirr of a vehicle she knew she was approaching the main road.

Bleak though it was, it heartened her. At least she would be able to see; groping and stumbling along the side streets had reminded her of her worst secret fear. She could walk beside the dual carriageway. Even the drivers, riding in their tins as though on a conveyor belt, would be company. Perhaps one might give her a ride. Sometimes they had.

But she wasn't allowed to walk there. Before she had time even to narrow her eyes against the glare, her impulse plunged her into the underpass, where graffiti were tangled in barbaric patterns. Long thin lights fluttered and buzzed like trapped insects. A car rumbled dully overhead. The middle of the underpass was a muddy pool that drowned the clogged drains. Though she had to walk through it she couldn't feel the water. Didn't that prove she was dreaming?

Perhaps. But as she emerged onto the far pavement she grew uneasy. She knew where she was going—but her mind refused to be more explicit. She was compelled forward, between two hefty gateposts without gates, beneath trees.

Memories were stirring. They peered out, but withdrew before she could tell why she was unnerved. Her compulsion hurried her along the private road, as though to outdistance the memories. But there were things she'd seen before: great white houses standing aloof beyond their gardens, square self-satisfied brick faces cracked by the shadows of branches; families of cars like sleeping beasts among the trees; lamp-standards or ships' steering wheels outside front doors; boats beached far from any sea. When had she been here, and why? In her unwilling haste she slipped and fell on wet dead leaves.

Gradually, with increasing unpleasantness, her mind became strained. Opposing impulses struggled there. She wanted to know why this place was familiar, yet dreaded to do so. Part of her yearned to wake, but what if she found she was not asleep? Oblivious of her confusion, her feet trudged rapidly onward.

Suddenly they turned. She had to fight her way out from her thoughts to see where she was going. No, not here! It wasn't only that a faint threatening memory had wakened; she was walking towards someone's home. She'd be arrested! Christ, what was she planning to do? But her feet ignored her, and her body carried her squirming inwardly towards its goal.

Hedges pressed close to her; leafy fists poked at her face. She slithered on the grassy path that led her away from the road; she saved herself from falling, but the hedge snapped and threshed. Someone would hear her and call the police! But that fear was almost comforting—for it distracted her from the realisation that the place towards which she was heading was very much unlike anybody's home.

At a gap in the hedge she halted. Surely she wasn't going—But she forced her way through the creaking gap, into a wider space. Trees stooped over her, chattering their leaves; infrequent shards of moonlight floated on the clouds. She stumbled along what might be a path. After a while she left it and picked her way blindly over mounds, past vertical slabs that scraped her legs; once she knocked over what seemed to be a stone vase, which toppled heavily onto earth.

Dark blocks loomed ahead. One of them was an unlit house; she must be returning towards the road. Was there a window dim as the clouds, and a head peering out at her? This glimpse prevented her from noticing the nearer block until she was almost there. It was a shed that smelled of old damp wood, and her hand was groping for the doorknob.

No. No, she wasn't going in there. Not when the tics of moonlight showed her the unkempt mounds, some of them gaping—But her body was an automaton; she was tiny and helpless within it. Her hand dragged open the scaly door, her feet carried her within. At least please leave the door open, please—But except for trembling, her hand ignored her. It reached behind her and shut her in the dark of the graveyard shed.

It must be a dream. No shed could contain such featureless dark. She couldn't move to explore, even if she had dared; her body was stopped, switched off, waiting. Wasn't that nightmarish enough to be a dream? Couldn't the same be said of the slow footsteps that came stumbling across the violated graveyard, towards the shed?

She must turn; she must see what had opened the door and was standing there silently. But fear or compulsion held her still as a doll. Timid moonlight outlined a low table before her, over which most of the shadow of a head and shoulders was folded, deformed. Then the dark slammed closed around her.

Three paces had taken her into the shed; no more than three would find her. She heard the shuffling feet advance: one pace, two—and fingers clumsy as claws dragged at her hair. They reached for her shoulders. Deep in her a tiny shriek was choking. The hands, which were very cold, lifted her arms. As she stood like a shivering cross in the dark, the hands clutched her breasts.

When they fumbled to unbutton her dress her mind refused to believe; it backed away and hid in a corner, muttering: a dream, a dream. Her breasts were naked beneath the dress. The fingers, cold as the soil through which she'd stumbled, rolled her nipples roughly, as though to rub them to dust. Her mind, eager to distract her, was reminded of crumbling cannabis onto tobacco. When at last her nipples came erect they seemed distant, no part of her at all.

The hands pushed her back against the table. They pulled her own hands down to grip the table's edge, and spread her legs. She might have been a

sex doll: she felt she was merely an audience to the antics of her puppet body. When the hands bared her genitals the sensation was less convincing than a dream.

She felt the penis enter her. It seemed unnaturally slippery, and quite large. Her observations were wholly disinterested, even when the fingers teased out her clitoris. The thrusting of the penis meant as little to her as the pounding of a distant drum. The grotesqueness of her situation had allowed her to retreat into a lonely bleak untroubled place in her mind.

She felt the rhythm quicken, and the eventual spurting, without having experienced even the hint of an orgasm; but then, she rarely did. The familiar dissatisfaction was oddly reassuring. Only the nervous gasping of her partner, a gulping as though he'd been robbed of breath, was new.

As soon as he'd finished he withdrew. He shoved her away, discarded. Her hands sprang up to ward off the clammy planks of the walls, but touched nothing. Of course she mightn't, in a dream. She teetered giddily, unprepared to have regained control of her body, and glimpsed the abruptly open doorway, a bow-legged figure stumbling out; its vague face looked fat and hirsute as mouldy food. It snatched the door closed as it went.

Perhaps she was imprisoned. But her mind could accept no more; if she were trapped, there was nothing it could do. She dressed blindly, mechanically; the buttons felt swollen, pebble-thick. The door was not locked. Yes, she was surrounded by a graveyard. Her numbed mind let her walk: no reason why she shouldn't go home. She trudged back to the deserted main road, through the flooded underpass. The moon had passed over; the side streets were dark valleys. Perhaps once she reached her bed her dream would merge with blank sleep. When she slumped fully clothed on the blankets, oblivion took her at once.

When she woke she knew at once where she had been.

In her dream, of course. Understandably, the dream had troubled her sleep; on waking she found that she'd slept all day, exhausted. She would have preferred her deserted house not to have been so dark. The sky grew pale with indirect moonlight; against it, roofs blackened. In the emptiness, the creak of her bed was feverishly loud. At least she was sure that she had been dreaming, for Loveman was dead.

But why should she dream about him now? She searched among the dim unwieldy thoughts in her dusty mind. Her parents' death must be the reason. Of all her activities that would have shocked and distressed them had they known, they would have hated Loveman most. After their death she'd kept thinking that now she was free to do everything, without the threat of discovery—but that freedom had seemed meaningless. The thought must have lain dormant in her mind and borne the dream.

Remembering her parents hollowed out the house. She'd felt so small and abandoned during her first nights with the emptiness; she hadn't realised how much she'd relied on their presence. For the first time she'd taken drugs other than for pleasure, in a desperate search for sleep. No doubt that explained why she slept so irregularly now.

She hurried out, not bothering to switch on the lights; she knew the house too well. It wasn't haunted: just dead, cold, a tomb. She fled its dereliction, towards the main road. The light and spaciousness might be welcoming.

Terraces passed, so familiar as to be invisible. Thoughts of Loveman blinded her; she walked automatically. God, if her parents had found out she'd been mixed up in black magic! Not that her involvement had been very profound. She'd heard that he called his women to him, whether or not they were willing, by molding dolls of them. The women must have been unbalanced and cowed by the power of his undeniably hypnotic eyes. But he hadn't needed to overpower her in order to have her—nobody had. He'd satisfied her no more than any other man. So much for black magic!

Then—so she'd gathered from friends—his black magic had been terminated by a black joke. He had been knocked down on the main road, by a car whose driver was a nurse and a devout Christian, no less. Even for God, that seemed a mysterious way to move. Had that happened before her parents' death or after? Her memories were loose and imprecise. Her jagged sleep must have blurred them.

And the rest of her dream—just a nightmare, just exaggeration. Yes, he had lived in that private road and yes, there had been a graveyard behind his house. No doubt he was buried there; her dream appeared to think so. Why should he be troubled? But she was, and was recalling the night when she'd gone to Loveman's house only to meet him emerging from the graveyard. As he'd glanced sidelong at her he had looked shamefaced, aggressively

self-righteous, secretly ecstatic. She hadn't wanted to know what he had been doing; even less did she want to know now.

Here was the main road. Its lights ought to sear away her dream. But it remained, looming at the back of her mind, a presence she was never quick enough to glimpse. Cars sang by; the curtains of the detached houses shone. There was one way she might rid herself of the dream. She could take a stroll along Loveman's road and oust the dream with reality.

But she could not. She reached the mouth of the underpass and found herself unable to move. The tiled entrance gaped, scribbled with several paints, like the doorway of a violated tomb. A compulsion planted too deep in her to be perceived or understood forbade her to advance a step nearer Loveman's road.

Something had power over her. Details of her dream, and memories of Loveman, crowded ominously about her. Suppose the graveyard, which she'd never entered, were precisely as she'd dreamed it? A stray thought of sleepwalking made her flinch away from the cold tiled passage, the muddy pool which flickered with ghosts of the dying lights.

All of a sudden, with vindictively dramatic timing, the road was bare of cars. The lit windows of the houses served only to exclude her. Abruptly she felt cold, perhaps more emotionally than physically, and shuddered. Across the carriageway, ranks of trees that sprouted from both pavements of the private road swayed together overhead, mocking prayer.

She was afraid to be alone. She could no more have returned to the empty house than she would have climbed into a coffin. Driveways confronted her, blocked by watchdog cars. Beyond the smug houses stood a library. She had been in there only once, to score some acid; books had never held her attention for long. But she fled to the building now, like a believer towards a church.

Indeed, there were churchy elements. Women paced quietly, handling romances as though they were missals, tutting at anyone who made a noise. Still, there were tables strewn with jumbled newspapers, old men covertly filling the crosswords, young girls giggling behind the shelves and sharing a surreptitious cigarette. She could take refuge in here without being noticed, she could grow calm—except that as she entered, a shelf of books was waiting for her. *Black Magic*. *Grimoire*. *Truth About Witchcraft*. She flinched awkwardly aside.

People moved away from her, frowning. She was used to that; usually they'd glimpsed needle tracks on her arms. She pulled her sleeves down over her hands. Nobody could stop her sitting down—but there was no space: old men sat at all the tables, doodling, growling at the newspapers and at each other.

No: there was one almost uninhabited table, screened from the librarian's view by bookcases. A scrawny young man sat there, dwarfed by his thick shabby overcoat; a wool cap covered his hair. He was reading a science fiction novel. He fingered the pages, rather as though picking at a dull meal.

When she sat down he glanced up, but with no more interest than he would have shown had someone dumped an old coat on her chair. His limp hands riffled the pages, and she caught sight of the needle tracks on his forearm. So that was why this table was avoided. Perhaps he was holding stuff, but she didn't want any; she felt no craving, only vague depression at being thus reminded of the days when she had been on the needle.

But the marks held her gaze, and he glanced more sharply. "All right?" he said, in a voice so bored that the words slumped into each other, blurring.

"Yes thanks." Perhaps she didn't sound so convincing; her fears hovered just behind her. "Yes, I think so," she said, trying to clarify the truth: his stare lay heavily on her, and she felt questioned, though no doubt he simply couldn't be bothered to look away. "I've just been walking. I wanted to sit down," she said, unable to admit more.

"Right." His fingers obsessively rubbed the corner of a page, which grew tattered and grubby. She must be annoying him. "I'm sorry," she said, feeling rebuffed and lonely. "You want to read."

The librarian came and stood near them, disapproving. Eventually, when he could find nothing of which to accuse them, he stalked away to harangue an old man who was finishing a crossword. "What's this, eh, what's this? You can't do that here, you know."

"I'm not reading," the young man said. He might have been, but was perversely determined now to antagonise the librarian. "Go on. You were walking. Alone, were you?"

Was there muffled concern in his voice? Her sudden loneliness was keener than the dully aching emptiness she had been able to ignore. "Yes," she muttered.

"Don't you live with anyone?"

He was growing interested; he'd begun to enunciate his words. Was he concerned for her, or was his anxiety more selfish? "No," she said warily.

"Whereabouts do you live?"

His self-interest was unconcealed now; impatience had given him an addict's shamelessness. "Where do *you* live?" she countered loudly, triumphantly.

"Oh," he said evasively, "I'm moving." His nervous eyes flickered, for her triumph had brought the librarian bearing down on them; the man's red face hovered over the table. "I must ask you to be quieter," the librarian said.

"All right. Fuck off. We're going." The interruption had shattered his control; his words were as jagged as his nerves. "Sorry," he said plaintively at once. "I didn't mean that. We'll be good. We won't disturb you. Let us stay. Please."

She and the librarian stared at him, acutely embarrassed. At last the librarian said "Just behave yourself" and dawdled away, shaking his head. By then she had realised why the young man was anxious not to be ejected: he was waiting to score dope.

"I'll be going in a minute," she whispered. "I'm all right now. I've been having strange dreams, that's all," she added, to explain why she hadn't been all right before. Only dreams, of course that was all, just dreams.

"Yeah," he said, and his tone shared with her what dreams meant to him: he'd seen the marks on her arms. "You don't have to go," he whispered quickly; perhaps she'd reminded him of what he craved, and of the loneliness of his addiction. "You can get a book."

Something about him—the familiar needle tracks, or his concern, however selfish—made her feel less alone. The feeling had already helped her shrug off her dream; it could do her no harm to stay with him for a while. She selected books, though none seemed more attractive than any other. She flicked rapidly through them, lingering over the sexual scenes, none of which reached her; they were unreal, posturings of type and paper. Opposite her his fingertips poked at the novel, letting the pages turn when they would.

The librarian called "Five minutes, please." The clock's hands clicked into place on the hour. Only when the librarian came frowning to speak to him did the young man stand up reluctantly. Nobody else had visited the table. He hurried to the shelves and slammed a book home—but she saw that he'd feinted; with a conjuror's skill, he had vanished the science fiction novel beneath his coat.

Outside the library he said "Do you want to go somewhere?"

She supposed he meant to score. The proposal was less tempting than depressing. Besides, she suspected that if she accompanied him, she wouldn't be able to conceal from him where she lived. She didn't want him to know; she'd lost control of situations too often, most recently in the dream. She didn't need him now—she was rid of the dream. "I've got to go home," she said hastily, and fled.

Glancing back, she saw him standing inert on the library steps. His pale young withered face was artificially ruddy beneath the sodium lamps; his thin frame shivered within the long stained overcoat. She was glad she wasn't like that any more. She dodged into the nearest side street, lest he follow. It had begun to rain; drops rattled on metal among the streets. The moon floated as though in muddy water, and was incessantly wreathed by black drifting clouds. Though it soaked her dress, the onrush of rain felt clean on her face; it must be cold, but not sufficiently so to bother her. She was cleansed of the dream.

But she was not, for on the far side of a blankness that must have been sleep she found herself rising from her bed. Outside the window, against the moon, the chimney glittered, acrawl with rain. She had time only for that glimpse, for the impulse compelled her downstairs, blinking in the dark, and into the street.

How could she dream so vividly? Everything seemed piercingly real: the multitude of raindrops pecking at her, the thin waves that the wind cast in her face, the clatter of pelted metal. Her ears must be conveying all this to her sleep—but how could she feel the sloshing of cold pools in the uneven pavement, and see the glimmer of the streaming roadway?

Some of the lights in the underpass had died. The deeper pool slopped around her ankles; the chill seized her legs. She hadn't felt that last night. Was her dream accumulating detail, or was her growing terror refusing to allow her to be so unaware?

The private trees dripped. Raindrops, glaring with sodium light, swarmed down trunks and branches. The soft vague hiss of the downpour surrounded her. She could be hearing that in bed—but why should her dream bother to provide a car outside Loveman's house? There was a sign in the window of the car. Before she could make it out she was compelled aside, between the hedges.

All the leaves glistened, and wept chill on her. Her sodden hair slumped down her neck. When she pushed, or was pushed, through the gap, the hedge drenched her loudly. She was too excessively wet for the sensation to be real, this was a dream of drenching—But she was staggering through the dark, among the stones, the unseen holes which tried to gulp her. What had there been in that opened earth? Please let it be a dream. But the cold doorknob, its scales of rust loosened by the rain and adhering to her hands, was no dream.

Though she struggled to prevent it, her hand twitched the door shut behind her. She stumbled forward until her thighs collided with the edge of the table. It must be the rain that filled the darkness with a cloying smell of earth, but the explanation lulled her terror not at all. Worse still, the clouds had left the moon alone. A faint glow diluted the dark of the shed. She would be able to see.

The first sound of footsteps was heavy and squelching; the feet had to be dragged out of the earth. She writhed deep in her doll of a body, silently shrieking. The footsteps plodded unevenly to the door, which creaked, slow and gloating. Hands fumbled the door wide. Perhaps their owner was blind—incomplete, she thought, appalled.

Moonlight was dashed over her. She saw her shadow, which was unable even to tremble, hurled into the depths of the shed. The darkness slammed; the footsteps advanced, dripping mud. Wet claws that felt gnarled and soaked as the hedges seized her shoulders. They meant to turn her to face her tormentor.

With an effort that momentarily blinded her, she battled not to turn. At least let her body stay paralysed, please let her not see, please! In a moment the claws ceased to drag at her. Then, with a shock that startled a cry almost to her lips—the incongruity and degradation—she was shoved face down over the table and beaten. He bared her, and went on. Suddenly she knew that he could have compelled her to turn, had he wanted; he was beating her for

pleasure. She felt little pain, but intense humiliation, which was perhaps what had been intended.

All at once he forced her legs urgently wide and entered her from behind. He slithered in, bulging her. She became aware only of her genitals, which felt chilled. The dark grew less absolute: weren't there vague distorted shadows ahead of her, miming copulation? She was not dreaming. Only a sense that she was not entirely awake permitted her to cling to that hope. A dream, a dream, she repeated, borrowing the rhythm of the penis to pound her mind into stupidity. When his orgasm flooded her it felt icy as the rain.

He levered himself away from her, and her sodden dress fell like a wash of ointment over her stinging buttocks. The shed lit up before the slam. The squelching footsteps merged with the hiss of mud and rain. When she buttoned herself up, her dress clung to her like a shroud.

The compulsion urged her home. She stumbled over the gaping earth. Stone angels drooled. She was sobbing, but had to make do with rain for tears. In a pitiful attempt to preserve her hope, she tried to touch as few objects as possible, for everything felt dreadfully real. But the pool in the underpass drowned her shoes while she waited shivering, unable to move until a car had passed.

Rain trickled from her on to the blankets, which felt like a marsh. She lay shuddering uncontrollably, trying to calm herself: it was over now, over for tonight. She needed to sleep, in order to be ready—for she had a plan. As she'd trudged sobbing home it had grown like an ember in her mind, faint but definite. Tomorrow she would move in with one of her friends, any one. She must never be alone again. She was still trying to subdue herself to rest when sleep collapsed over her, black as earth.

She was a doll in a box. Around her other dolls lay, blind and immobile and mindless, in their containers. Her outrage burned through her—like a tonic, or like poison? She wasn't a doll, for she had a mind. She must escape her box, before someone came and bought her. She thrust at the lid that blinded her. Slowly, steadily. Yes, it was moving. It slid away, and the enormous fall of earth suffocated her.

She woke coughing and struggling to scream. The earth was only darkness; she was lying on her back on top of her bed. *Only* darkness? Despite her resolve she had overslept. All right, never mind, she hushed her panic. Some of her friends would surely be at home. She lay massaging pliability

into her stiff chill limbs. Whom would she try first, who was kindest, who had room for her? Her limbs were shaking; the damp bed sounded like a sponge. Just one friend would do, just one good friend—But her whole body was shuddering with panic which she struggled not to put into words. She could remember not a single name or address of a friend.

No longer could she pretend she was dreaming. She had been robbed of every memory that could help her. Perhaps the thing which had power over her made her sleep during the day; perhaps his power was greater at night. Her empty house was a box in which she was kept until she was wanted.

Then she must not stay there. That was the one clear thought her panic allowed her. She ran from the house, hunted by her echoes. The moon skulked behind the roofs. The houses faced her blindly; not a window was lit. Even if there had been—even if she battered at the doors and woke the streets with the scream that threatened to cut her open, like a knife of fear—nobody would believe her. How could they?

She fled along the streets. Deprived of the moon, the sky was so dark that she might have been stumbling along an enclosed passage. Far ahead, the main road blazed with unnatural fire; the sullen clouds glowed orange. Suppose he weren't in the library, the young man? Indeed, suppose he were? He couldn't be much help—in his addiction, he was as helpless as she. She didn't even know his name. But he might be the only living person in the world whom she could recognise.

She struggled with the double doors, which seemed determined to shoulder her out. People turned to stare as she flung the doors wide with a crash and ran into the library. The librarian frowned, and made to stalk her. For a terrified moment she thought he meant to tell her to leave. She outdistanced him, and ran to the concealed table. Nothing would rob her of the vague reassurance of the bright lights. They'd never get her to leave. She'd fight, she'd scream.

The young man was toying with a different book. He glanced up, but she wasn't the visitor he'd hoped for; his gaze slumped to the pages. "Back again," he said apathetically.

The librarian pretended to arrange books on a nearby shelf. Neither he, nor the young man's indifference, could deter her. She sat down and stared at a scattered newspaper. An item caught her eye, something about violated graves—but an old man hurried to snatch the newspaper, grumbling.

She could only gaze at the young man. He looked less tense; smiles flickered over his lips—he must have obtained something to take him up. Could the same thing help her fight her compulsions? If she were honest, she knew it could not. But she was prepared to do anything in order to stay with him and whatever friends he had. "Are you going somewhere later?" she whispered.

He didn't look up. "Yeah, maybe." He wasn't interested in the book: just less interested in her.

She mustn't risk making him impatient. Read. She went to the shelf next to the spying librarian. He needn't think she was scared of him; she was scared of—Panic welled up like abrupt nausea. She grabbed the nearest book and sat down.

Perhaps she'd outfaced the librarian, for he retreated to his desk. She heard him noisily tidying. She smirked; he had to make a noise to work off his frustration. But at once she knew that was not the point, for he shouted "Five minutes, please."

Oh Christ, how could it be so late? In five minutes the young man would go, she'd be alone! He was preparing to leave, for he'd slipped the book into hiding. When she followed him towards the exit he ignored her. The librarian glared suspiciously at him. Oh God, he would be arrested, taken from her. But though she was streaming and shivering with panic, they escaped unmolested.

She clung gasping to a stone pillar at the foot of the steps. The young man didn't wait for her; he trudged away. God, no! "Are you going somewhere, then?" she called in as friendly a voice as she could manage, trying not to let it shatter into panic.

"Dunno." He halted, but evidently the question annoyed him.

She stumbled after him, and glimpsed herself in the dark mirror of the library window: pale and thin as a bone, a wild scarecrow—the nightmares in the shed must have done that to her. Her hair had used to shine. How could she expect to appeal to him? But she said "I was only thinking that maybe I could come with you."

"Yeah, well. I'm moving," he muttered, gazing away from her.

She mustn't plead; having lost almost all her self-respect in the shed, she must cling to the scraps that remained. "I could help you," she said.

"Yeah. Maybe moving isn't quite the word." She could tell that he bitterly resented having to explain. "I haven't got anywhere to live at the moment. I was staying with some people. They threw me out."

Nor must she allow her pride to trick her. The sodium glow filled the road with fire, but it was very cold. "You can come home with me if you like," she blurted.

He stared at her. After a pause he said indifferently "Yeah, okay."

She mustn't expect too much of him. All that mattered was that she mustn't be alone. She took his clammy hand and led him towards her street. Without warning he said "I never met anyone like you." It sounded less like a compliment than a statement of confusion.

They groped along the dark streets, their eyes blinded by lingering orange. "Is this where you live?" he said, almost contemptuously. Where did he expect? The dreadful private road? The thought convulsed her, made her grip his lank hand.

Thin carpets of moonlight lay over the crossroads, but her road brimmed with darkness. It didn't matter, for she could feel him beside her; she wouldn't let go. "You're so cold," he remarked, speaking a stray thought.

Since she had no drugs, there was only one method by which she might bind him to her. "In some ways I'm not cold at all," she dared to say. If he understood, he didn't respond. He held her hand as though it were something fragile that had been thrust upon him, that he had no idea how to handle.

Though he didn't comment when they reached her house, she sensed his feelings: disappointment, depression. All right, she knew it was a bit dismal: the scaly front door, the windows fattened with dusty grime, the ghosts of dust that rose up as she opened the door. She'd had no enthusiasm for keeping the place clean, nor indeed for anything else, since her parents had died. Now she'd enticed him so far, her fear was lightening slightly; she was able to think that he ought to be grateful, she was giving him a place to stay although she didn't even know his name.

She led him straight to her bedroom. Since her parents' death she had been unable to face the other deserted rooms. Moonlight leaked down the stairs from her door. As she climbed the vague treads she could feel him holding

back. Suppose he decided not to stay, suppose he fled! "Nearly there now," she blurted, and became nervously still until she heard him clambering.

She pushed the door wide. Moonlight soaked the bed; a trace of her shape lay on the luminous sheets, a spectre of virginity. Dust came to meet her. "Here we are," she said, treading on the board which always creaked—now she wasn't alone, she could enjoy such familiar aspects of the room.

He hesitated, a dark scrawny bulk in the doorway. It disturbed her not to be able to see his face. "Isn't there a light?" he muttered.

"Yes, of course." She was surprised both that he should ask and that it hadn't occurred to her to turn it on. But the switch clicked lifelessly; there was no bulb. When had it been removed? "Anyway, it's quite light in here," she said uneasily. "We can see."

He didn't advance, but demanded "What for?"

He wanted to know why she'd brought him here; he expected her to offer him dope. She must persuade him not to leave, but could she? A worse fear invaded her. Even if he stayed, might not the power of the thing in the graveyard drag her away from him?

"No, we don't need to see." She was talking rapidly, to make sure of him before her trembling shook her words to pieces. "I only offered you somewhere to stay." No time for self-respect now; her panic jerked out her words. "Come to bed with me."

Oh Christ, she'd scared him off! But no, he hadn't shifted; only his hands squirmed like embarrassed children. "Please," she said. "I'm lonely."

If only he knew how alone! She felt the great raw gap where her memory had been. She could go to nobody except the thing in the graveyard shed. Her panic made her say "If you don't, you can't stay."

At last he moved. He was heading for the stairs. Her gasp of horror filled her mouth with dust. All at once she saw what his trouble might be. Heroin might have rendered him impotent. "Please," she wailed, clutching his arm. "I'll help you. You'll be all right with me."

Eventually he let her lead him to the bed. But he stared at it, then leaned one hand on the blankets. Disgusted, he flinched back from the squelching. She hadn't realised it was still so damp. "We'll spread your coat on top," she promised. "You haven't got anywhere better to go, have you?"

She unbuttoned his coat. His jeans were the colours of various stains; his drab sweater was spotted with flesh-tinted holes. She undressed him swiftly —naked, he couldn't escape. In the moonlight his penis dangled like the limp tail of a pale animal.

She managed to smile at him, though his ribs ridged his chest with shadows and his limbs were spindly. She didn't need a dream lover, only a companion. But he was stooping to his shoes, perhaps to cover up the inadequacy of his penis.

She hoped he might open her dress. She stood awaiting him. At least she could see his reaction, unlike the face in the shed. But there was no reaction to see. Undressing him had been like stripping a dummy, and it might have been a dummy that confronted her, its face slumped, its hands and penis dangling.

She removed her dress. It was dry; she spread it over his coat. She slid off her panties and dropped them on the small heap of clothes, all friends together. Both of them were shivering, she more from panic than with chill. They must be quick. If the thing reached out of the dark for her she would have to go—but sex with the young man might anchor her here. It would. It must.

She persuaded him on to the bed, though he shuddered as his leg brushed the damp blankets. He lay on his coat and her dress, like a victim of concussion. Then irritability seemed to enliven him. He pushed her back and knelt over her, kissing her nipples, trying to find her clitoris with both hands. She felt her nipples harden, but no pleasure. He fell back abruptly, defeated by his lack of desire. His limp penis struck his thigh as though he were whipping himself.

God, he mustn't fail her! The creaking of the bed was thin and lonely in the deserted house. She was surrounded by empty rooms, dark streets, and—far too close—the shed. What would the thing's call be like? Would she feel her body carrying her away towards the shed before she knew it? She gazed trembling at the young man. "Please try," she pleaded.

He glared at her with something like hatred. She'd succeeded only in reminding him of his failure. She must help him. Her mouth moved down his body, which was very cold. Her head burrowed between his thighs, like a frightened animal; his penis flopped between her lips. She tried every method she could summon to raise it, but it was unresponsive as a corpse.

Please, oh please! The call from the dark was about to seize her, she could feel it lurking near, it would drag her helpless to the shed—The nodding of her head became more frenzied; in panic, her teeth closed on his penis. Then she faltered, for she thought his penis had stirred.

The dark blotch of his face jerked up gasping. It *had* stirred, and he was as surprised as she. She redoubled her efforts, nipping his penis lightly. Come on, oh please! At last—though not before she felt swarming with icy sweat—she had erected him. Terrified lest he dwindle, she mounted his body at once and worked herself around him.

In the moonlight his face lay beneath her, white and gasping as a dead fish. Despite her sense of imminent terror she was almost angry. She'd liven him, she'd make him respond to her. She moved slowly at first, drawing his penis deeper, awakening it gradually. When the room was loud with his quickened breathing she drove faster. Make him grateful to her, make him stay! His penis jerked within her, lively now. She encouraged its throbbing, until all at once the throbbing cascaded. His gasp was nearly a scream; he clung to her with all his limbs. Though she experienced no pleasure, she was gratified that he had achieved his orgasm. Of this situation at least she was in control.

She lay on him. His cold cheek nuzzled hers. "I didn't think I could," he muttered, amazed and shyly boastful. She stroked his face tenderly, to make sure that he would stay with her. She had embraced his shoulders, hoping that she could sleep in his arms, when the summons came.

She couldn't tell which sense perceived it. Perhaps its appeal was deeper than any sense. She had no time to know what was happening, for her body had risen on all fours, like an instinctively obedient pet. Her consciousness was merely an observer, and could not even voice its scream.

No, it could do more. For the first time she was awake when summoned. Her panic blazed, jagged as lightning, through her nerves. It convulsed her, and made her nails clutch her partner's shoulders. He gasped; then his limbs seized her. He thought she was eager for sex again.

All at once her body sagged. Incredibly, she seemed free. The summons had withdrawn, balked. She slumped on the young man, who embraced her more closely. She'd won! But she was nervous with a thought, urgent yet blurred: the summons might not be the only power with which her tormentor could seize her. She glared wildly about. The horned black head

of the chimney loomed against the moon. She was still trying to imagine what might come to her when she felt it: disgust, that spread through her like poison.

At once the young man was intolerable. His gasping fish-lips, his flesh cold and pale as something long drowned, his limbs clutching at her, bony and spider-like, his dull eyes white with moonlight, his moist flabby penis —She tried to struggle free, but he clung to her, unwilling to let her go.

Then she was flooded by another sort of power. It had seized her once before: a slow and steady physical strength, enormous and ruthless. Appalled, she thought of her dream of the boxes. She tore herself free of the young man—but the strength made her go on, though she tried to close her eyes, to shut out the sight of what she was doing. Somewhere she'd read of people being torn limb from limb, but she had thought that was just a turn of phrase. She had never been able to visualise how it could be done—nor that it could be so deafening and messy.

By the time she had finished, her consciousness had almost managed to hide. But she felt the summons marching her downstairs. Rooms resounded with her helplessly regular footsteps. As she heard the emptiness, she remembered how utterly lonely she had felt after her parents' death. One night she had emptied a bottle of sleeping tablets into her hand.

The call dragged her from the house. Moonlight spilled into the street, and she saw that all the houses were derelict, windowed with corrugated tin. She was allowed that glimpse, then she was marching: but not towards the main road—towards the church.

Her mind knew why, and dreaded remembering. But she must prepare herself for whatever was to come. She struggled in her trudging body. The only memory she could grasp seemed at first irrelevant. The words that she'd glimpsed in the window of the car outside Loveman's house had been DISTRICT NURSE.

Loveman wasn't dead. At once she knew that. The rumour of his death had been nothing more. Perhaps he had spread the rumour himself, for his own purposes. He must have married the Christian nurse; no doubt she had nursed him back to health. But married or not, he would have been unable to forgo his surreptitious visits to the graveyard. He still preferred the dead to the living.

She knew what that meant. Oh Christ, she knew! She didn't need to be shown! But the power forced her past the massive bland church and into the graveyard. She was rushed forward, stumbling and sobbing inwardly, past funereal dildos of stone. If she could move her hand just a little, to grab one, to hold herself back—But she'd staggered to a halt, and was forced to gaze down at a fallen headstone surrounded by an upheaval of earth.

Still he must have felt that she was insufficiently convinced. She was forced to burrow deep into her grave, and to lie there blindly. It was a long time before he allowed her to scrabble her way out and to trudge, convulsively shaking herself clean of earth, towards the shed.

Hawk Of Basti

A fragment of this story by Robert E. Howard originally appeared in *Red Shadows*, 1979. The story was completed by Ramsey Campbell and published in the Solomon Kane book *Hills Of The Dead* in 1979. The following is only the unfinished fragment, ending at Howard's final sentence: Then calling to a man who had the appearance of a chief, he ordered him to walk between himself and Kane.

Written in: 1976
First published in *Solomon Kane 2: The Hills Of The Dead*, 1979

"Solomon Kane!"

The interlapping branches of the great trees rose in mighty arches, hundreds of feet above the moss-carpeted earth, making a Gothic twilight among the giant trunks. Was this witchcraft? Who, in this heathen forgotten land of shadowy mysteries, broke the brooding silence to shout the name of a strange wanderer?

Kane's cold eyes roved among the trees; one lean iron hand hardened on the carved sharp-pointed stave he carried, the other hovered near one of the flintlock pistols he wore.

Then from among the shadows stepped a bizarre figure. Kane's eyes widened slightly. A white man it was, strangely clad. A silken loincloth was all of his garments, and he wore curious sandals on his feet. Armlets of gold and a heavy golden chain about his neck increased the barbarity of his appearance, as well as the hoop-like rings in his ears. But while the other ornaments were of curious and unfamiliar workmanship, the earrings were such as Kane had seen hundreds of times in the ears of European seamen.

The man was scratched and bruised as if he had been racing through thick woods recklessly, and there were shallow gashes on his limbs and body that no thorn or bramble could have made. In his right hand he held a short curved sword, dyed a sinister red.

"Solomon Kane, by the howling hounds of Hell!" exclaimed this man, glaring in amazement, as he approached the staring Englishman. "Keelhaul me from Satan's craft, but you gave me a start! I thought to be the only white man for a thousand miles!"

"I had thought the same of myself," answered Kane. "But I know you not."

The other laughed harshly.

"I wonder not thereat," quoth he. "Belike I'd scarce know myself should I meet myself suddenly. Well, Solomon, my sober cutthroat, it's been many a year since I gazed on that sombre face of yours, but I'd know it in Hades. Come—have you forgotten the brave old days when we harried the Dons from the Azores to Darien and back again? Cutlass and carronade! By the bones of the saints, ours was a red trade! You've not forgotten Jeremy Hawk!"

Recognition glimmered in Kane's cold eyes as a shadow passes across the surface of a frozen lake.

"I remember; we did not sail on the same ship, though. I was with Sir Richard Grenville. You sailed with John Bellefonte."

"Aye!" cried Hawk with an oath. "I'd give the crown I've lost to live those days again! But Sir Richard's at the bottom of the sea, and Bellefonte's in Hell, and many of the bold brethren are swinging in chains or feeding the fishes with good English flesh. Tell me, my melancholy murderer, does good Queen Bess still rule old England?"

"It's been many moons since I left our native shores," answered Kane. "She sat firmly on her throne when I sailed."

He spoke shortly and Hawk stared at him curiously. "You never loved the Tudors, eh, Solomon?"

"Her sister harried my people like beasts of prey," answered Kane harshly. "She herself has lied to and betrayed the folk of my faith—but that's neither here nor there. What do you here?"

Hawk, Kane noticed, from time to time turned his head and stared back in the direction from which he had come, in an attitude of close listening, as if he expected pursuit.

"It's a long story," he answered. "I'll tell it briefly—you know there were high words between Bellefonte and others of the English captains—"

"I've heard he became no better than a common pirate," Kane said bluntly.

Hawk grinned wickedly. "Why, so they said. At any rate, away to the Main we sailed, and by Satan's eyes, we lived like kings among the isles, preying on the plate ships and treasure galleons. Then came a Spanish war-ship and

harried us sore. A bursting cannon shot sent Bellefonte to his master, the Devil, and I, as first mate, became captain. There was a French rogue named La Costa who opposed me—well, I hanged La Costa to the main-yards and squared sails for the south. We gave the war-ship the slip at last, and made for the Slave Coast for a cargo of black ivory. But our luck went with Bellefonte. We piled on a reef in a heavy fog and when the mist cleared a hundred war-canoes full of naked howling devils were swarming about us.

"We fought for half a day and when we had beaten them off, we found ourselves nearly out of powder, half our men dead and the ship ready to slip off the reef where she hung and sink under our feet. There were but two things to do—take to sea in open boats or come ashore. And there was but one boat the bombards of the war-ship had left unshattered. Some of the crew piled into it and the last we saw of them, they were rowing westward. The rest of us got ashore on rafts.

"By the black gods of Hades! It was madness—but what else was there for us to do? The jungles swarmed with blood-lusting Blacks. We marched northward hoping to come upon a barracoon where slavers came, but they cut us off and we turned due eastward perforce. We fought every step of the way; our band melted like mist before the sun. Spears and savage beasts and venomous serpents took their fearful toll. At last I alone faced the jungle that had swallowed all my men. I eluded the Blacks. For months I travelled alone and all but unarmed in this hostile land. At last I came out upon the shores of a great lake and saw the walls and towers of an island kingdom rising before me."

Hawk laughed fiercely. "By the bones of the saints! It sounds like a tale of Sir John Mandeville! I found a strange people upon the islands—black folk and a curious and ungodly race who ruled over them. They had never seen a white man before. In my youth I wandered about with a band of thieves who masked their real characters by tumbling and juggling. By virtue of my skill at sleight o' hand, I impressed the people. They looked on me as a god—all except old Agara, their priest—and he could not explain away my white skin.

"They made a fetish of me and old Agara secretly offered to make me a high priest. I appeared to acquiesce and learned many of his secrets. I feared

the old vulture at first for he could make magic that made my sleight o' hand seem childish—but the black people were strongly drawn to me.

"The lake is called Nyayna; the isles thereon are named the Isles of Ra and the main island is called Basti; the brown masters call themselves Khabasti and the black slaves are named Masutos.

"The life of these black people is wretched indeed. They have no will of their own save the desires of their cruel masters. They are more brutally treated than the Indians of Darien are treated by the Spanish. I have seen black women flogged to death and black men crucified for the slightest of faults. The cult of the Khabasti is a dark and bloody one, which they brought with them from whatever foul land they came from. On the black altar in the temple of the Moon, each week a howling victim dies beneath old Agara's dagger—always a black sacrifice, a strong young lad or a virgin. Nor is that the worst—before the dagger brings relief from suffering, the victim is mutilated in ways too hideous to mention—the Holy Inquisition pales before the tortures inflicted by Basti's priests—yet so hellish is their art that the gibbering, mowing, blind and skinless creature lives until the final thrust of the dagger speeds him or her beyond the reach of the brown-skinned devils."

Hawk's covert glance showed him that deep volcanic fires were beginning to smoulder coldly in Kane's strange eyes. His expression became more darkly brooding than ever, as he motioned the buccaneer to continue.

"No Englishman could look on the daily agonies of the poor wretches without pity. I became their champion as soon as I learned the language and I took the part of the black people. Then old Agara would have slain me, but the black folk rose and slew the fiend who held the throne. Then they begged me to remain and rule them. I did so. Under my rule Basti prospered, both the brown folk and the black. But old Agara, who had slunk away to some secret hiding place, was working in the shadows. He plotted against me and finally even turned many of the black people against their deliverer. The poor fools! Yesterday he came out in the open and in a pitched battle, the streets of Basti ran red. But old Agara prevailed with his evil magic, and most of my adherents were cut down. We retreated in canoes to one of the lesser islands and there they came upon us, and again we lost the fight. All of my henchmen were slain or taken—and God help those taken alive!—only I escaped. They have hunted me like wolves since.

Even now they are hard on my track. They will not rest until they slay me, if they have to first follow me across the continent."

"Then we should waste no time in talk," said Kane, swiftly, but Hawk smiled coldly.

"Nay—the moment I glimpsed you through the trees and realised that by some strange whim of Fate I had met a man of my own race, I saw that again I should wear the golden gem-set circlet that is the crown of Basti. Let them come—we will go and meet them!

"Harkee, my bold Puritan, what I did before, I did unarmed, by sheer craft o' head. Had I a firearm, I had been ruler in Basti at this hour. They never heard of powder. You have two pistols—enough to make us kings a dozen times over—but would you had a musket."

Kane shrugged his shoulders. Needless to tell Hawk of the fiendish battle in which his musket had been splintered; even now he wondered if that ghastly episode had not been a vision of delirium.

"I have weapons enough," said he, "though my supply of powder and shot be limited."

"Three shots will put us on the throne of Basti," quoth Hawk. "How, my brave broadbrim, wilt chance it with an old comrade?"

"I will aid you in all that it be my power," answered Kane sombrely. "But I wish no earthly throne of pride and vanity. If we bring peace to a suffering race and punish evil men for their cruelty, it is enough for me."

They made a strange contrast, those two, standing there in the twilight of that great tropic forest. Jeremy Hawk was as tall as Solomon Kane and like him was rangy and powerful—steel springs and whalebone. But where Solomon was dark, Jeremy Hawk was blond. Now he was burned to light bronze by the sun, and his tangled yellow locks fell over his high narrow forehead. His jaw, masked by a yellow stubble, was lean and aggressive, and his thin gash of a mouth was cruel. His grey eyes were gleaming and restless, full of wild glitterings and shifting lights. His nose was thin and aquiline and his whole face was that of a bird of prey. He stood, leaning slightly forward in his usual attitude of fierce eagerness, nearly naked, gripping his reddened sword.

Facing him stood Solomon Kane, likewise tall and powerful, in his worn boots, tattered garments and featherless slouch hat, girt with pistols, rapier

and dagger, with his powder-and-shot pouch slung to his belt. There was no hint of likeness between the wild, reckless hawk's face of the buccaneer and the sombre features of the Puritan, whose dark pallor rendered his face almost corpse-like. Yet in the tigerish litheness of the pirate, in the wolfish appearance of Kane the same quality was apparent. Both of these men were born rovers and killers, curst with a paranoid driving urge that burned them like a quenchless fire and never gave them rest.

"Give me one of your pistols," exclaimed Hawk, "and half your powder and shot. They will soon be upon us—by Judas, we won't await them! We'll go to meet them! Leave it all to me—one shot and they will fall down and worship us. Come! And as we go, tell me how you come to be here."

"I have wandered for many moons," said Kane, half reluctantly. "Why I am here I know not—but the jungle called me across many leagues of blue sea and I came. Doubtless the same Providence which hath guided my steps all my years has led me hither for some purpose which my weak eyes have not yet seen."

"You carry a strange stick," said Hawk as they moved with long swinging stride beneath the huge arches.

Kane's eyes drifted to the stave in his right hand. It was as long as a sword, hard as iron and sharpened at the smaller end. The other end was carved in the shape of a cat's head, and all up and down the stave were strange wavering lines and curious carvings.

"I doubt not but that it is a thing of black magic and sorcery," said Kane sombrely. "But in time past it hath prevailed mightily against beings of darkness and it is a goodly weapon. It was given me by a strange creature—one N'Longa, a fetish man of the Slave Coast, whom I have seen perform nameless and ungodly feats. Yet beneath his black and wrinkled hide beats the heart of a true man, I doubt not."

"Hark!" Hawk halted, stiffening suddenly. From ahead of them sounded the tramp of many sandalled feet—faint as a wind in the tree-tops, yet, keen-eared as hunting hounds, both he and his companion heard and translated it.

"There's a glade just ahead," grinned Hawk fiercely. "We'll await them there—"

And so Kane and the ex-king of Basti stood in plain view at one side of the glade when a hundred men burst from the other side, like a pack of wolves

on a hot trail. They stopped in amazement, struck speechless at the sight of he who had been fleeing for his life and who now faced them with a cruel, mocking smile—and at the sight of his silent companion.

As for Kane, he gazed at them in wonder. Half of them were Negroes, stocky burly fellows, with the barrel chests and short legs of men who spend much of their time in canoes. They were naked and armed with heavy spears. It was the others who arrested the Englishman's attention. These were tall, well-formed men whose regular features and straight black hair showed scant trace of Negroid blood. Their color was a coppery brown, ranging from a light reddish tan to a deep bronze. Their faces were open and not unpleasing. Their garments consisted only of sandals and silken loin-cloths. On their heads many wore a sort of helmet made of bronze, and each bore on his left arm a small round buckler of wood, reinforced with hardened hide and braced with copper nails. Their arms were curved swords similar to that borne by Hawk, polished wooden maces and light battle-axes. Some carried heavy bows of evident power and quivers of long barbed arrows.

And it came forcibly to Solomon Kane that somewhere he had seen men much like these, or pictures of men like them. But where he could not say. They halted in the midst of the glade, to gaze uncertainly at the two white men.

"Well," said Hawk, mockingly, "you have found your king—have you forgotten your duty to your ruler?—down on your knees, dogs!"

A well-built young warrior at the head of the men spoke passionately and Kane started as he realised that he understood the language. It was much akin to the numerous Bantu dialects, many of which Kane had picked up in his travels, though some of the words were unintelligible to him and had a tang of peculiar antiquity.

"Red-handed murderer!" exclaimed the youth, his dark cheeks flushing in anger. "You dare to mock us? I know not who this man is but our quarrel is not with him; it is your head that we will take back to Agara with us—seize him—"

His own hand went back with the javelin he carried and in that instant Hawk aimed deliberately and fired. The heavy-bored pistol crashed deafeningly and in the smoke Kane saw the young warrior drop like a log. The effect on the rest was just as Kane had seen it be on savages in many

other lands. Their weapons slipped from nerveless hands and they stood frozen, gaping like frightened children. Some of the black men cried out and dropped to their knees or flat on their faces.

The distended eyes of all were drawn as by a magnet to the silent corpse. At the close range the heavy ball had literally shattered the youth's skull—had blasted out his brains. And while his comrades stood like sheep, Hawk struck while the iron was hot.

"Down, dogs!" he cried sharply, striding forward and striking a warrior to his knees with a blow of his open hand. "Shall I loose the thunders of death upon you all, or will you receive me again as your rightful king?"

Dazed, brains numbed, the brown men sank to their knees. The black men wriggled prostrate on their bellies and whimpered. Hawk placed his heel on the neck of the nearest warrior and grinned savagely and triumphantly at Kane.

"Arise," said he, with a contemptuous kick. "But none forget I am king! Will ye return to Basti and fight for me, or will ye all die here?"

"We will fight for you, master," came the answering chorus. Hawk grinned again.

"Retaking the throne is easier than even I thought," said he. "Rise now—leave that carrion where it has fallen. I am your king and this is Solomon Kane, my comrade. He is a terrible magician and even if you should slay me—who am immortal!—he will blast you all out of existence."

Men are sheep, thought Solomon, as he saw the warriors, brown and black, meekly forming themselves according to Hawk's orders. They formed short ranks, three abreast, and in the centre walked Kane and Hawk.

"No fear of a spear in the back," said the buccaneer to Kane. "They are cowed—see the dazed look in their eyes? Yet be on guard."

Then calling to a man who had the appearance of a chief, he ordered him to walk between himself and Kane.

The Castle Of The Devil

Another Solomon Kane story continued from an 850-word fragment by Robert E. Howard. The story was completed by Ramsey Campbell and published in the Solomon Kane book *Skulls In The Stars* in 1978. The final Howard sentence is: "Your speech is wild and Godless," said Kane, "But I begin to like you."

Written in: 1976
First published in *Solomon Kane 1: Skulls In The Stars*, 1978

A rider was singing down the forest trail in the growing twilight, keeping time to his horse's easy jog. He was a tall rangy man, broad of shoulder and deep of chest, with keen restless eyes which seemed at once to challenge and mock.

"Hola!" He drew his horse to a sudden stop and looked down curiously at the man who rose from his seat on a stone beside the road. This man was even taller than the rider—a lean sombre man clad in plain dark garments, his features a dark pallor.

"An Englishman? And a Puritan by the cut o' that garb," commented the man on the horse. "I am glad to see a countryman in this outlandish domain, even such a melancholy fellow as you seem. My name is John Silent and I am bound for Genoa."

"I am Solomon Kane," the other answered in a deep measured voice. "I am a wanderer on the face of the earth and have no destination."

John Silent frowned down at the Puritan in puzzlement. The deep cold eyes gazed back at him, unswerving.

"Name of the Devil, man, know you not whither you are bound at the present?"

"Wherever the spirit moves me to go," answered Kane. "Just now I find myself in this wild and desolate country through which I journey, doubtless drawn hither for some purpose yet unknown to me."

Silent sighed and shook his head.

"Mount behind me, man, and we will at least seek some tavern in which to spend the night."

"I would not overtax your steed, good sir, but if you will permit, I will walk along by your side and converse with you, for it is many a month since I have heard good English speech."

As they went slowly down the trail, John Silent still gazed down at the man, noting the stride that was long and cat-like in spite of Kane's lank build, and the long rapier which hung at his hip. Silent's hand instinctively touched the long curved hanger in his own belt.

"Do you mean to tell me that you journey through the countries of the world with no goal in view, caring not where you may be?"

"Sir, what matters it where a man be if he is carrying out God's plan for him?"

"By Jove," swore John Silent, "you are even more wayward than I, for though I rove the world also, I always have some goal in mind. As now I come from the command of a troop of soldiery and am going to Genoa to go on board a ship which sails against the Turkish corsairs. Come with me, friend, and learn to sail the seas."

"I have sailed them and found them to be little to my liking. Many who call themselves honest merchantmen be naught but bloody pirates."

John Silent hid his grin and changed the subject.

"Then, since the spirit has moved you to traverse this land, 'tis like you have found something to your liking herein?"

"No, good sir, I find little here but starving peasants, cruel lords and lawless men. Yet 'tis like that I have done somewhat of good, for only a few hours ago I came upon a wretch who hung on a gallows and cut him down ere his breath had passed from him."

John Silent nearly fell out of his saddle.

"What! You cut down a man from Baron Von Staler's gibbet? Name of the Devil, you will have both our necks in a noose!"

"You should not curse so hotly," Kane reproved mildly. "I know not this Baron Von Staler, but methinks he had hanged a man unjustly. The victim was only a boy and he had a good face."

"And forsooth," said John Silent angrily, "you must risk our lives by saving his worthless one which was already doomed."

"What else was there to do?" asked Kane with a touch of impatience. "I beg you, vex me no more on the subject but tell me whose castle it is that I see rising above the trees."

"One which you may come to know much more thoroughly if we make not haste," Silent answered grimly. "That is the keep of Baron Von Staler, whose gibbet you robbed, and who is the most powerful lord in the Black Forest. There goes the path which leads up the steep to his door; here is the road we take—the one that leads us quickest and furtherest out of the good Baron's reach."

"Methinks that is the castle which the peasants have spoken to me of," mused Kane. "They call it an unsavoury name—the Castle of the Devil. Come, let us look into the matter."

"You mean go up to the castle?" cried Silent, staring.

"Aye, sir. The Baron will scarce refuse two wayfarers a lodging. More, we can ascertain what sort of a man he is. I would like to see this lord who hangs children."

"And if you like him not?" asked Silent sarcastically.

Kane sighed. "It has fallen upon me, now and again in my sojourns through the world, to ease various evil men of their lives. I have a feeling that it will prove thus with the Baron."

"Name of two devils!" swore Silent in amazement. "You speak as if you were a judge on a bench and Baron Von Staler bound helpless before you, instead of being as it is—you but one blade and the Baron surrounded by lusty men-at-arms."

"The right is on my side," said Kane sombrely. "And right is mightier than a thousand men-at-arms. But why all this talk? I have not yet seen the Baron, and who am I to pass judgement unseen. Mayhap the Baron is a righteous man."

Silent shook his head in wonder.

"You are either an inspired maniac, a fool, or the most courageous man in the world!" he laughed suddenly. "Lead on! 'Tis a wild venture that's likely to end in death, but its insanity appeals to me and no man can say that John Silent fails to follow where another man leads!"

"Your speech is wild and Godless," said Kane, "but I begin to like you."

Kane rode along the track that rose between the fir trees, toward the castle. Silent followed on his horse, its hooves clattering on shards of granite. When it threatened to stumble, he dismounted and led the beast.

The path doubled back constantly. Huge ferns made the depths of the forest seem dismal and primeval. Again and again the Puritan thought they had reached the approach to the castle, but always the building mounted higher above the trees, as though striving to rise above the world. The innumerable firs threshed and groaned softly, like a gathering of mourners. Otherwise the track was heavy with silence, which made their harsh footfalls violent and unnerving.

At last, when even Kane's easy stride was faltering a little, they came in sight of the castle. Their climb had kept pace with the light; here on the granite height it was still not entirely dark. The castle looked one with the rock on which it stood. Granite towers and battlements massed against the gloomily luminous sky.

But Kane was not concerned at that moment with the building. Among the firs beside the track a horse waited silently. Even in the twilight he sensed that there was something wrong with it. Silent made to follow him, but his steed balked, and he had to tether it to a tree.

"Methinks this castle is aptly named the abode of a devil," Kane muttered furiously, gazing at the still horse. It was long dead, and decayed; chains held it standing. But decay could not account for the fact that it had been crudely blinded.

Silent gripped Kane's arm fiercely in his anger. "By the bones of the saints!" he swore. "What kind of monster wounds a poor beast so?"

His violence distracted Kane momentarily. In that moment Kane knew that they were not alone among the trees. Before he could act, several men surrounded them, silent as ghosts. But the men were solid enough, for their sword-points pricked the Englishmen's throats, while one of the swordsmen disarmed them.

The oldest swordsman confronted them. Like the rest, he was tall as Kane. He wore no armour, but was dressed in grey rather drab clothes. He carried only a sword. Beneath his thick grey hair his broad wizened face looked weathered as the granite. His expression seemed less menacing than sadly

resigned. "What business have you on the lands of Baron Von Staler?" he demanded in a deep cracked voice.

"Why," Silent replied before Kane could voice his wrath, "we are Englishmen abroad in the Black Forest. Seeing the Baron's castle from afar, we thought he would not refuse two weary travellers hospitality."

The old man scrutinised his eyes, as if he might be using the twilight to obscure the truth. "Perhaps that is so," he said at last. "You must tell your tale to my master."

The men—a dozen of them, Kane counted—sheathed their swords almost noiselessly, but did not return the Englishmen's weapons. They paced their captives stealthily. "Bring the Englishman's horse," the old man told the youngest, a lithe but broad-shouldered youth. "You need not fear," he told Silent, glimpsing his expression. "No harm will befall your steed."

As they reached the courtyard, Kane saw that the castle was overgrown and, in places, crumbling. It seemed on the edge of ruin, as though relinquishing its shape in order to merge again with the rock. He shivered, not only from the chill of granite that enclosed him. The castle felt to him as though it had lost its soul.

They entered the castle. He observed that the great door was almost soundless. "Please remove your shoes," the old man said.

An Oriental practice, thought Kane. But the man explained, "My master requires quiet. Never raise your voice here, for you would be risking your life."

He led the way into dimness. Kane had never seen an inhabited building so dark. On the walls, a few torches struggled with the shadows. The granite smelled damp as a cave. He sensed that the passage was high, but dank blackness hovered lower than the ceiling. Beside him Silent glanced rapidly about, wary as a trapped beast.

At last they emerged into the main hall. There was more light here, for a great log fire blazed in an immense hearth. On the walls, weapons flickered in a parody of combat, bathed in the glow as though in blood. Among them were the heads of many animals. Firelight panted in their mouths and glared from their dead eyes.

Beside the hearth stood a man dressed in black. He was large-boned, and taller than Kane. He turned to the men as they entered, stooping toward

them as though burdened like Atlas. He was bald; his face seemed pared down to skin and massive bone. "There are two strangers with you, Kurt," he said, almost whispering.

"Two Englishmen, Herr Baron," the old man said.

"Englishmen." He lingered over the word as though it were a rare delicacy. "And what is your name, Englishman who moves like a great cat?"

He was staring at Kane; flames filled his eyes. Something about him disturbed Kane; he had dignity and quiet power, yet these qualities seemed spoiled, perhaps turned into cruelty. And there was something else—"My name is Solomon Kane," the Puritan said, remembering to restrain his voice.

"You name yourself with pride, as a man should. And what is your name, strider?"

"John Silent," he said, speaking low.

"Indeed! Well, if you are aptly named, you will be welcome here. But what mission—Hark!"

He had frozen, extending one hand to command silence. Kane could hear nothing except the crepitant song of the fire. The men-at-arms were intent as their master, and hardly breathing. "She is calling, Kurt," the Baron said.

The old man hurried away, up a wide staircase in the further reaches of the hall. The Baron straightened up a little; he looked like a leaning tree whose roots were losing their grip on the earth. The men-at-arms relaxed, but remained silently watching the Englishmen.

"You were speaking of your mission here," the Baron said to Kane, as though it had been the Puritan who had interrupted.

"I have but one mission, wherever Providence may choose to take me," Kane said, in a low voice more intense than any shout. "To seek evil and relieve the world of it."

The Baron stared at him, and Kane was sure that there was something odd about his eyes. "I have not heard a man speak so frankly here for years," he said. "You sound to be a man of honour, Englishman. And has your search of my lands been rewarded?"

Silent made a surreptitious gesture to Kane to take care. Without looking at him, the Baron said, "Control yourself, my silent friend. I believe your

companion cannot lie."

He had the measure of Kane, who said, "I found a boy choking on a gibbet in the forest. He was too young to hang so, and I cut him down."

"Indeed? Well, no matter," said the Baron indifferently.

His nonchalance angered Kane. "If his survival is of so little consequence," he demanded, "why was the poor wretch treated so at all?"

"These are my lands. Do not question my laws here!" The Baron's whisper was vicious as a snake's hiss. "And do not think that my laws are so easily flouted," he said ominously.

He turned to the shadows beyond the tide of firelight. "Ah, Kurt." Kane had not heard the old man return, nor any sound that might have hinted at the nature of his task. "Tonight I will dine with my guests," the Baron said.

Then, with a leap of theme that made Kane suspect madness, he demanded of the Puritan: "So you came in search of evil, eh? No other reason? None at all?" His voice sounded both menacing and disturbingly wistful.

"None," Kane said quietly.

"I suppose I must believe you. You will lodge tonight in the Castle Von Staler," he said in a tone that made it unwise to refuse.

Kurt ushered the Englishmen upstairs. Two passages led from the wide landing. One, which was wholly dark, he avoided, and guided them down the second, infrequently lit corridor. He lit torches in brackets outside rooms facing across the corridor, and withdrew.

Though Kane's apartment was crowded with furniture, it was so large as to seem bare. The curtains of the great four-poster were damp and, in places, stained. The tapestries that cloaked the walls were ashen and blurred with dust. Some of the heavy furniture smelled of pine, and seemed in danger of decaying. Two of the men-at-arms entered, bearing logs, and built a fire in the deep hearth. Even the generous flames could not rid the apartment of the sense of decay that pervaded the castle.

Silent appeared, shivering perhaps from the chill of the passage. "By the holy saints, Kane," he muttered, "there's deviltry here. D'ye think as I do, that he has a wench locked up?"

"Aye, mayhap. Or mayhap she has a sickness, and keeps to her rooms."

Silent shook his head and made to speak; then he swore savagely. "Blast the man, he's got me afraid to speak my mind! I feel he can hear me through yon stout wood door!"

They were staring morosely at the fire, and Kane was musing on their ill-defined dilemma, when Kurt announced the Baron's summons. In the hall, the mountainous fire flung shadows behind the long laden table and heavy carved chairs. Counting quickly, Kane saw that places had been set for the Baron, his guests, and the men-at-arms—but for nobody else.

The Baron motioned his guests to sit on either side of him. His eyes were bright, nervous with firelight. At a word, Kurt ushered in the men-at-arms, bearing an entire cooked wild boar. Their stealth made Kane uneasy; apart from Kurt, they seemed to have less presence than spectres.

The Baron sampled the meat approvingly. "Well done, Kurt." To his guests he explained: "We have no servants here. They are too loud and too inquisitive."

Kurt filled a plate with choice portions of food and carried it upstairs. "My friends, you are agog to have this mystery solved," the Baron said smiling. "It shall be done. Kurt has taken the plate to the Baroness, who keeps to her rooms."

"Is she unwell?" Kane asked.

"By no means. She is perfect. But none may look upon her."

The bald head turned to Kane, then to Silent. "Those who venture near this castle do so to look upon her perfection," the Baron muttered. "Still, I believe that such is not your mission. It would be ill if it were so, for those who dare must perish. So the youth whom you found on the gibbet learned, as you saw."

Kane was silent, brooding on this unfamiliar evil. His companion said, "But why do you hoard such perfection, Baron, for your eyes alone?"

"Not for these eyes, my friend." Smiling bitterly, the Baron touched his eyes, out of which flames glanced. "They see nothing at all."

For the rest of the meal Kane could hardly bear to look at the bright empty eyes; they seemed soulless as the castle. The Baron chatted throughout the meal, and afterward told them of his hunting exploits, though in a bitter

tone. But Kane was constantly aware that he was listening to sounds elsewhere in the castle.

At last he bade Kurt show the Englishmen to their apartments. He stood before the hearth, hands stretched out to the fire, as though the fierce heat might conjure back the sight of the flames. Kurt led the men to their doors, and hesitated. "Do not judge my master too harshly," he said in a whisper they had to strain to hear.

He seemed willing to say more. Kane gestured him into his room, and closed the door carefully. The room was chill, despite the fire; he thrust logs into the flames. "Then tell us what possesses him," he demanded low.

"He was not always as you see him. Once he was a great huntsman. Then one day, chasing a boar, his favourite steed threw him. The fall damaged his brain—it robbed him of his sight. That changed him utterly. You saw what he did to his steed."

Kane remembered the blinded horse, and his face grew hot with fury. "But he has never mistreated us," Kurt said hastily. "Before his ill luck, he was the noblest lord of the Black Forest. While others persecuted the peasants for their beliefs, my master offered them sanctuary on his lands, whatever their creeds, and was willing to protect that sanctuary. We who are loyal to him are some of those men, or their sons. The peasants admire him, or fear him. They know nothing of his blindness."

"And what of the woman who cannot be seen?" Silent demanded. "Is she here from choice, as you are?"

Momentarily the faith in the old man's eyes flickered. "She will come to no harm," he said curtly. Before he could be questioned further, he withdrew.

"Name of the Devil, Kane," Silent mouthed, "there's a prisoner in this castle to be set free, and I'll not sleep until it's done." The parting of his lips made more sound than his whisper. "Are you game to help me?"

"Aye," Kane replied. "But we must be stealthy as shadows."

"I've tracked savages through jungle without their hearing me," his companion said, with a silent laugh.

They eased open the door of the room and crept to the top of the stairs. The Baron sat before the sinking fire, apparently asleep. Otherwise the hall was deserted.

Silent lifted a torch and explored the lightless passage, while Kane returned to the passage from which their apartments opened, to search its depths. Kane's unshod feet had grown almost used to the bare stone. But the dank chill of the reaches of the passage seized him. The doors of the further apartments seemed to have rotted away; the doorways gaped. Within, framed paintings on the walls were black as mud; furniture was overgrown with dust and fungus. The sense of death was claustrophobic here, and he was glad to retreat to his room, having found nothing.

Silent was standing by the fire, as close to the warmth as he could manage. His face looked pale and drawn; his eyes gleamed uneasily. "By God, I heard her," he whispered. "She's there, in a room at the end of that dark corridor. She was singing to herself. I've never heard anything so beautiful, or so lonely."

Kane could see that the incident had disturbed him. But Silent rallied now that his companion had returned. "Pray God her door is not locked," he whispered. "I did not dare to try it, lest the blind one awake. D'ye think we can smuggle her out of this place without wakening him?"

"I think not," the Baron said beyond the door.

His whisper reached into the room like the chill drifting mist. Kane snarled, and leaped for the door. But he fell back, for ten of the Baron's men waited there, swords drawn.

The Baron stood among his men. His vicious smile made one side of his face look palsied; his eyes were dead. "You have taught me a lesson, Solomon Kane," he said softly. "My ears can deceive me. I thought you were a man of honour, not a common thief who preys on men's hospitality." Kane started, ready to match wits with the man if he could. The swords drove him back. "Pray go to your window," the Baron whispered smiling. "I have prepared a spectacle for you."

Beneath the window was an inner courtyard. Dismayed, Kane saw that from the opposite wall dangled a hangman's noose. The Baron appeared in the courtyard. Smiling crookedly, he gestured like a conjurer. At once two men-at-arms dragged a youth into view. It was the boy whom Kane had saved from the gibbet.

"Did I not say that my laws would not be flouted?" The Baron sneered at Kane's gasp of rage. "Why, this fellow was brought back to me before you

arrived here."

He gestured the men to begin. They obeyed at once, efficiently. Though the boy struggled and cried out, the noose was quickly about his neck. They hauled on the rope, and he jerked in midair, choking.

"See how he entertains his lord. He sings for me, and dances." The Baron cupped one hand at his ear, the better to hear the choking. "But your crime is greater," he hissed, pointing straight at the Englishmen. "I think you will lose your eyes before you hang. First we must make sure that no gallant knight comes to rescue this criminal," he said, and dragged at the legs of the hanged boy until he died.

When the Baron turned purposely and entered the castle, Kane knew they had no time to plan. "Quickly," he hissed at Silent. Seizing the unburned end of a blazing log from the fire, he rushed at the men in the doorway.

They crowded forward, swords bristling. But the narrowness of the doorway aided him. No more than two men could enter abreast. The first man fell back, clutching his seared face; the second retreated screaming, his hair ablaze.

Both had dropped their swords. Silent seized one weapon, Kane the other —though Kane had to dodge the whistling slash of a blade, which nonetheless chopped flesh from his shoulder. But it was not his sword-arm, and as he rose his sword ripped open the man's torso. The man slumped against the wall, trying to press the wound together as it poured away his life.

Kane had battled his way into the passage. Two blades hacked toward him, and he saved himself only by falling. But his sword bit deep into one man's sword-arm, and while the other was raising his sword to chop Kane down, Kane impaled him through the groin. He caught up the man's fallen sword with his free hand, which still functioned, though painfully.

Silent had reached the corridor now. One of his adversaries tottered back, trying to gasp through his slashed throat. With a two-handed blow he opened the skull of another. "Kane!" he shouted, alerting the Puritan to the rush of the man behind him, his sword poised spearlike. Kane dodged aside, and his sword hacked deep into the man's neck, like an axe into a tree.

Kane dropped his second sword, for his injured arm was exhausted. The floor was slippery with blood, which soaked through to his feet. The feeling

maddened him, and made him frantic to be done with the fight. He was disturbed too by the fanatical silence of the men. Except for the youth who had screamed, they uttered no sound. The walls resounded with the clash of swords; he would never hear the Baron if the blind man crept behind him.

He whirled. But the man behind him was Kurt, hurrying away down the passage—no doubt to protect his master. The last of the ten was chopping at Silent's blade, trying to break through his guard. Silent knocked the blade aside and thrust his sword into the youth's heart.

"Now to our mission," he said grimly to Kane.

They strode to the top of the stairs. Kurt had not hastened to protect the Baron after all, Kane saw; he was guarding the second corridor that led to the Baroness' room. The Puritan advanced on him, hoping he would yield; it would grieve him to harm the old man, whose only error was an excess of loyalty.

But the Baron's whisper came hissing upstairs. "Even such indomitable heroes as you will not be able to break down her door. I have the only key."

He stood beside the great hearth. Firelight trembled on the key which he drew into sight by a chain around his neck. No longer was he stooping; he towered like a heroic statue, dwarfing the hearth. A sneer twisted his lips, but his eyes were empty. He had taken a sabre from the wall, and brandished it before him.

"If you will not yield up the key willingly," Kane said, "I must take it from you."

The rise of the sabre-point was the Baron's only reply. Kane began to descend the stairs. At once the two remaining men-at-arms appeared and rushed at him. But Silent ran his gory blade through one while Kane dispatched the other, who reeled backward down the stairs, practically decapitated.

The Baron's sword-point moved as though questing like a snake. Kane felt uneasy, almost dishonourable, for challenging a blind man. Perhaps he could disarm the Baron at once. He stole forward, sword poised—and had to leap back, for the sabre had whipped down, cutting flesh from his sword-arm.

He had thought the Baron might hear his approach, but never that his perception could be so accurate. He had no time to marvel, for the blind

man came noiselessly at him, and the sabre clanged against his sword with a shock that jarred his arm painfully. Before he could recover, the sabre sprang toward his neck. He almost fell as he recoiled, and even so, blood gushed from a new slash in his neck.

He tried to hold his ground and to attack, but could do no more than parry. Feinting helped him not at all, for the Baron ignored such ruses as though he was unaware of them. More disturbingly, he seemed able to anticipate Kane's moves with unnerving accuracy. In his blindness he had developed a sixth sense.

Kane's arm ached from parrying. Again he was forced to retreat, as the sabre nicked flesh from his side; had he not fallen back, it would have opened his heart. He observed, as best he might as sweat burned his eyes, that the Baron appeared to be suffering. Though Kane's sword had not touched him, the blind face was clenched and twisted. Yet the violence of his blows did not abate.

But Kane had some purpose in retreating. Beside the staircase, out of sight of Kurt above, Silent waited, sword poised. Kane's retreat would take the Baron within reach. Kane cared little for the ruse—but he had no time for scruples, for the Baron was forcing him back. The blind man's sword-point hissed past his eyes, an inch away. Silent raised his sword, his face purple from holding his breath lest it alert their adversary—and the sabre clanged against his blade, slamming it against his jaw and hurling him backward onto the stairs, unconscious.

The Baron's face winced as though he had swallowed poison. But the sabre swept viciously at Kane. Taken off guard, the Englishman stumbled against the stairs, and fell. The impact of the fall jarred his sword from his hand. The Baron reared above him and lifted the sabre to chop the life from him, wincing again at the clatter of the fallen sword.

At once Kane saw where he was vulnerable. As the Puritan twisted aside beneath the sabre, he drew a deep breath and uttered a prolonged savage roar such as might have emerged from the throat of an enormous beast.

The Baron covered his ears with his hands, moaning. He staggered backward, and a chair tripped him. His forehead crashed against the table. Kane seized the fallen sabre and advanced on the stunned man. Flickering firelight made the Baron's eyes seem to follow the movements of the blade.

At the top of the stairs Kurt cried, "No, in God's name!"

Despite the anguish in the man's voice, and the throbbing of his own sword-arm, Kane hesitated only for a few moments. But in that time the Baron struggled to his feet and stood gazing foolishly about the hall. What his mishap while hunting had done, this fall had undone. His sight had returned, after a fashion.

He stumbled toward the stairs, clumsily as a drunkard or an infant, ignoring both Kane and the fallen weapons. Uncertain now, Kane let him go, and stooped to examine Silent, who was stunned but whole.

He heard Kurt gasp at the spectacle of the sighted Baron. Then there came sounds of struggle. "No, master," the old man was pleading. "You should rest now. You must grow used to your sight again."

"Stand aside, fool!" Kurt was hurled to the floor. Kane gathered that for some reason, the old man was anxious to prevent his master from seeing the Baroness. He heard the Baron's footsteps floundering down the passage, then the sound of a key fumbling in a lock.

There was a breathless silence. Then the Baron's voice resounded down the passage, cracked and wailing. "Traitors! You have stolen her!"

Kane heard a woman's scream, cut off immediately. Kurt tottered to his feet, sobbing dryly. He was unarmed; the Baron had taken his sword. Before Kane could arm himself and seek upstairs, Kurt had stumbled into the dark passage—but almost at once he emerged, with the sword-point at his throat.

The Baron loomed over him, eyes glaring like ice. "You at least I thought would not betray me," he whispered. "But you took her for yourself and put that thing in her place."

Kurt shook his head helplessly but made no sound, not even when the sword thrust between his ribs and sprouted from his back. His hands clutched the Baron's shoulders in what might have been an attack or an embrace. The two men struggled at the edge of the stairs. Still embraced, they crashed the length of the stairs to the hall, and lay unmoving.

Kane seized a torch and went in search of the woman who had screamed. At the end of the dark passage a door stood open. Soft light flickered within. He dodged into the room, and halted aghast.

It was a woman's apartment. Delicately embroidered tapestries softened the walls; elaborately woven lace was spread over the furniture. But dust paled everything. In a great four-poster, whose hangings were delicately sewn, a woman lay. A widening stain of blood from a sword-thrust covered her breast, like an opening flower.

She was pale, and enormously swollen as a termite queen. Even in life she would hardly have been able to move. Her face was aged, its features scarcely distinguishable amid collapsed fat. A key on a chain was almost hidden between her massive breasts. But at the end of arms like pipes, her hands were small and delicate.

The sense of death, or of suffocating inertia, was most powerful in this room. Kane hurried back to the hall, glad to be free of the lightless passage. The Baron was dead, his spine broken; but Kurt still had breath in him, though his eyes were dimming.

"What else could I do?" the old man faltered. "She was my sister; she had not long been a widow. When the Baron fell blind I brought her here to nurse him. He became obsessed with her voice and her touch. For him she became the most beautiful of all women. When he grew well, he insisted that she stay. Of course it was an honour; but he confined her to her apartment, and she became as you saw. Her mind and her body grew dull. But how could I have told him? What else could I do?"

He seemed to be pleading for reassurance. Kane shook his head sadly, which appeared to satisfy the old man. And so he died.

Silent regained consciousness snarling, and grabbed for his sword. Kane told him what had happened; but he must see for himself. Shortly he returned, his face ashen. They left the castle and its smell of blood, to search for the stables where they found Silent's horse and a steed for Kane. The other horses they set free.

As dawn reached between the firs, illuminating tracks of mist, they rode away. Above them trees closed about the castle, which grew blurred, as though decay were progressing more swiftly now that all life was gone. They were glad to reach the forest trail. They would ride together for a while, until Silent headed for the wide sea, while Kane went wandering again until evil drew him.

The Children Of Asshur

A fragment of this story by Robert E. Howard originally appeared in *Red Shadows*, 1979. The story was completed by Ramsey Campbell and published in the Solomon Kane book *Hills Of The Dead* in 1979. The following is only parts 1, 2 and 3, all written by Howard.

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1.

Solomon Kane started up in the darkness, snatching at the weapons which lay on the pile of skins that served him as a crude pallet. It was not the mad drum of the tropic rain on the leaves of the hut-roof which had wakened him, nor the bellowing of the thunder. It was the screams of human agony, the clash of steel that cut through the din of the tropical storm. Some sort of a conflict was taking place in the native village in which he had sought refuge from the storm, and it sounded much like a raid in force. As Solomon groped for his sword, he wondered what bushmen would raid a village in the night and in such a storm as this. His pistols lay beside his sword but he did not take them up, knowing that they would be useless in such a torrent of rain, which would wet their priming instantly.

He had laid down fully clad, save for his slouch hat and cloak, and without stopping for them, he ran to the door of the hut. A ragged streak of lightning which seemed to rip the sky open showed him a chaotic glimpse of struggling figures in the spaces between the huts, dazzlingly glinting back from flashing steel. Above the storm he heard the shrieks of the black people and deep-toned shouts in a language unfamiliar to him. Springing from the hut he sensed the presence of one in front of him, and even then another thunderous burst of fire ripped across the sky, limning all in a weird blue light. In that flashing instant Solomon thrust savagely, felt the blade bend double in his hand and saw a heavy sword swinging for his head. A burst of sparks, brighter than the lightning, exploded before his eyes, then blackness darker than the jungle night engulfed him.

Dawn was spreading pallidly over the dripping jungle reaches when Solomon Kane stirred and sat up in the ooze before the hut. Blood had

caked on his scalp and his head ached slightly. Shaking off a slight grogginess, he rose. The rain had long ceased, the skies were clear. Silence lay over the village, and Kane saw that it was in truth a village of the dead. Corpses of men, women and children lay strewn everywhere—in the streets, in the doorways of the huts, inside the huts, some of which had been literally ripped to pieces, either in search of cowering victims, or in sheer wantonness of destruction. They had not taken many prisoners, Solomon decided, whoever the unknown raiders might be. Nor had they taken the spears, axes, cooking pots and plumed head-pieces of their victims, this fact seeming to argue a raid by a race superior in culture and artisanship to the crude villagers. But they had taken all the ivory they could find, and they had taken, Kane discovered, his rapier, and his dirk, pistols and powder-and-shot pouches. And they had taken his staff, the sharp-pointed strangely carved, cat-headed stave, which his friend, N'Longa, the West Coast witch-man, had given him, as well as his hat and cloak.

Kane stood in the centre of the desolated village, brooding over the matter, strange speculations running at random through his mind. His conversation with the natives of the village, into which he had made his way the night before out of the storm-beaten jungle, gave him no clue as to the nature of the raiders. The natives themselves had known little about the land into which they had but recently come, driven over a long trek by a rival, more powerful tribe. They had been a simple, good-natured people, who had welcomed him into their huts and given him freely of their humble goods. Kane's heart was hot with wrath against their unknown destroyers, but even deeper than that burned his unquenchable curiosity, the curse of the white man.

For Kane had looked on mystery in the night and the storm. That vivid flame of lightning had showed him, etched momentarily in its glare, a fierce, black-bearded face—the face of a white man. Yet according to sanity there could be no white men, not even Arab raiders, within hundreds and hundreds of miles. Kane had had no time to observe the man's dress, but he had a vague impression that the figure was clad strangely and bizarrely. And that sword which, striking glancingly and flat, had struck him down, surely that had been no crude native weapon.

Kane glanced at the crude mud wall which surrounded the village, at the bamboo gates which now lay in ruins, hewn to pieces by the raiders. The

storm had apparently greatly abated when the raiders marched forth, for he made out a broad trampled track leading out of the broken gate and into the jungle.

Kane picked up a crude native axe that lay nearby. If any of the unknown slayers had fallen in the battle, their bodies had been carried away by their companions. Leaves pieced together made him a makeshift hat to protect his head from the force of the sun. Then Solomon Kane went through the broken gate and into the dripping jungle, following the spoor of the unknown.

Under the giant trees the tracks became clearer, and Kane made out that most of them were of sandals—a type of sandal, likewise, that was strange to him. The rest were of bare feet, showing that some prisoners had been taken. They must have had a long start of him, for though he travelled without pause, swinging along tirelessly on his rangy legs, he never sighted the column that day.

He ate of the food he had brought from the ruined village, and pressed on without halting, consumed by anger and by desire to solve the mystery of that lightning-limned face—more, the raiders had taken his weapons, and in that dark land, a man's weapons were his life. The day wore on. As the sun sank, the jungle gave way to forest-land, and at twilight Kane came out on a rolling, grass-grown, tree-dotted plain, and saw, far across it, what appeared to be a low-lying range of hills. The tracks led straight out across the plain, and Kane believed the raiders' goal was those low, even hills.

He hesitated; across the grass-lands came the thunderous roaring of lions, echoed and re-echoed from a score of different points. The great cats were beginning to stalk their prey, and it would be suicide to venture across that vast open space, armed with only an axe. Kane found a giant tree and, clambering into it, settled himself in a crotch as comfortably as he might. Far out across the plain he saw a point of light twinkling among the hills. Then on the plain, approaching the hills, he saw other lights, a twinkling fire-set serpentine that moved toward the hills, now scarcely visible against the stars along the horizons. It was the column of raiders and their slaves, he realised, bearing torches and travelling swiftly. The torches were no doubt to keep off the lions, and Kane decided that their goal must be very near at hand if they risked a night march on those carnivora-haunted grass-

lands. As he watched, he saw the twinkling fire-points move upward, and for awhile they glittered among the hills, then he saw them no more.

Speculating on the mystery of it all, Kane slept, while the night winds whispered dark secrets of ancient Africa among the leaves, and lions roared beneath his tree, lashing their tufted tails as they gazed upward with hungry fire-lit eyes.

Again dawn lighted the land with rose and gold, and Solomon descended from his perch and took up his journey. He ate the last of the food he had brought, drank from a stream that looked fairly pure, and speculated on the chance of finding food among the hills. If he did not find it, he might be in a precarious position, but Kane had been hungry before—aye, and starving, and freezing and weary. His rangy, broad-shouldered frame was hard as iron, pliant as steel.

So he swung boldly out across the savannas, watching warily for lurking lions, but slackening not his pace. The sun climbed to the zenith and dipped westward. As he approached the low range, it began to grow in distinctness. He saw that instead of rugged hills, he was approaching a low plateau that rose abruptly from the surrounding plain and appeared to be level. He saw trees and tall grass on the edges, but the cliffs seemed barren and rough. However, they were at no point more than seventy or eighty feet in height, as far as he could see, and he anticipated no great difficulty in surmounting them.

As he came up to them he saw that they were almost solid rock, though overlaid by a fairly thick stratum of soil. Boulders had tumbled down in many places and he saw that an active man could scale the cliffs in many places. But he saw something else—a broad road which wound up the steep pitch of the precipice, and up which led the spoors he was following.

He went up, and noted the excellent workmanship of the road, which was no mere animal path, or even a native trail, but had been cut into the cliff with consummate skill, and was paved and balustraded with smoothly cut blocks of stone.

Wary as a wolf, he avoided the road, and further on found a less steep slope, up which he went. It was unstable footing, and boulders that seemed to poise on the slope threatened to roll down upon him, but he accomplished the task without undue hazard and came out over the edge of the cliff.

He stood on a rugged, boulder-strewn slope, which pitched off rather steeply onto a flat expanse. From where he stood, he saw the broad plateau spread out beneath his feet, carpeted with green lush grass. And in the midst —he blinked his eyes and shook his head, thinking he looked on some mirage or hallucination. No! It was still there! A massive walled city, rearing in the midst of the grassy plain!

He saw the battlements, the towers beyond, and small figures moving about on the battlements. On the other side of the city he saw a small lake, on the shores of which stretched luxuriant gardens and fields, and meadow-like expanses filled with grazing cattle.

Amazement at the sight held him frozen for an instant, then the clink of an iron heel on a stone brought him quickly about to face the man who had come from among the boulders. This man was broad-built and powerful, almost as tall as Kane, and heavier. His bare arms bulged with muscles and his legs were like knotted iron pillars. His face was a duplicate of that Kane had seen in the lightning flash—fierce, black-bearded, the face of a white man, with arrogant intolerant eyes and a predatory hooked nose. From his bull-throat to his knees he was clad in a corselet of iron scales, and on his head was an iron helmet. A metal-braced shield of hardwood and leather was on his left arm, a dagger in his girdle, a short heavy iron mace in his hand.

All this Kane saw in a glance as the man roared and leaped. The Englishman realised in that instant that there was to be no such thing as a parley. It was to be a battle to the death. As a tiger leaps, he sprang to meet the warrior, launching his axe with all the power of his rangy frame. The warrior caught the blow on his shield, the axe-edge turned, the haft splintered in Kane's hand, and the buckler shattered. Carried by the momentum of his savage lunge, Kane's body crashed against his foe, who dropped the useless shield and, staggering, grappled with the Englishman. Straining and gasping they reeled on hard-braced feet, and Kane snarled like a wolf as he felt the full power of his foe's strength. The armour hampered the Englishman, and the warrior had shortened his grasp on the iron mace and was ferociously striving to crash it on Kane's bare head.

The Englishman was striving to pinion the warrior's arm, but his clutching fingers missed, and the mace crashed sickeningly against his bare head; again it fell, as a fire-shot mist clouded Kane's vision, but his instinctive

wrench avoided it, though it half-numbed his shoulder, ripping the skin so that the blood started in streams.

Maddened, Kane lunged fiercely against the stalwart body of the mace-wielder, and one blindly grasping hand closed on the dagger-hilt at the warrior's girdle—ripped it forth and stabbed blindly and savagely.

Close-locked, the fighters staggered backward, the one stabbing in venomous silence, the other striving to tear his arm free so that he might crash home one destroying blow. The warrior's short half-hindered blows glanced from Kane's head and shoulders, ripping the skin and bringing blood in streams, sending red lances of agony across the Englishman's clouding brain. And still the dagger in his lunging hand glanced from the iron scales that guarded his foe's body.

Blinded, dazed, fighting on instinct alone as a wounded wolf fights, Kane's teeth snapped fang-like into the great bull's throat of his foe, tearing the flesh horrifyingly, and bringing a burst of flooding blood and an agonised roar from his victim. The lashing mace faltered as the warrior flinched back, and then they reeled on the edge of a low precipice and pitched, rolling headlong close-clinched. At the foot of the slope they brought up, Kane uppermost. The dagger in his hand glittered high above his head and flashed downward, sinking hilt-deep in the warrior's throat, and Kane's body pitched forward with the blow and he lay senseless above his slain enemy.

They lay in a widening pool of blood, and in the sky specks appeared, black against the blue, wheeling and circling and dropping lower.

Then from among the defiles appeared men similar in apparel and appearance to he who lay dead beneath Kane's senseless body. They had been attracted by the sound of the battle, and now they stood about discussing the matter in harsh guttural tones. Their black servants stood about silent.

They dragged the forms apart and discovered that one was dead, one probably dying. Then after some discussion, they made a litter of their spears and sword-slings, made their Blacks lift the bodies and carry them. Then all set out toward the city which gleamed in the midst of the grassy plain.

Again consciousness returned to Solomon Kane. He was lying on a couch covered with finely dressed skins and furs, in a large chamber, whose floor, walls and ceiling were of stone. There was one window, heavily barred, and one doorway, outside which Kane saw standing a stalwart warrior much like the man he had slain. Then Kane discovered another thing; golden chains were on his wrists, neck and ankles. These were linked together in an intricate pattern, and were made fast to a ring set in the wall, with a strong silver lock.

Kane found that his wounds had been bandaged, and as he pondered over his situation, a black man entered with food and a kind of purple wine. Kane made no attempt at conversation, but ate the food offered and drank deeply. Then he slept, and the wine must have been drugged, for when he wakened, hours later, he found that the bandages had been changed, and there was a different guard outside the door—a man of the same type as the former soldier, however—muscular, black-bearded and clad in armour.

This time, when he awakened, he felt strong and refreshed, and decided that when the Black entered again, he would seek to learn something of the curious environs into which he had fallen. The scruff of leather sandals on the tilings announced the approach of someone, and Kane sat up on his couch as a group of figures entered the chamber.

There were a clump of men with robes, inscrutable, shaven faces and shaven heads in the background, behind them the rangy Black who had brought the food; these stayed in the background. Before them stood a figure which dominated the whole scene—a tall man whose garments were of silk, bound by a golden-scaled girdle. His blue-black hair and beard were curiously curled, his hawk-nosed face cruel and predatory; the arrogance of the eyes, which Kane had noticed as characteristic of the unknown race, was in this man much more strongly evident than in the others. On his head was a curiously carved circlet of gold, in his hand a golden wand. The attitude of the rest toward him was one of cringing servility, and Kane believed that he looked upon either the king or the high priest of the city.

Beside this personage stood a shorter, fatter man, with shaven face and head, clad in robes much like those worn by the lesser persons in the background, but much more costly. In his hand he bore a scourge composed of six thongs made fast to a jewel-set handle. The thongs ended in triangular shaped bits of metal, and the whole represented as savage an implement of

punishment as Kane had ever looked upon. The man who bore this had small shifty, crafty eyes, and his whole attitude was a mixture of fawning servility toward the man with the sceptre, and intolerant despotism toward lesser beings.

Kane gave back their stare, trying to place an elusive sense of familiarity. There was something in the features of these people which vaguely suggested the Arab, yet they were strangely unlike any Arabs he had ever seen. They spoke together, and their language, at times, had a fantastically familiar sound. But he could not define these faint stirrings of half-memory.

At last the tall man with the sceptre turned and strode majestically forth, followed by his slavish companions, and Kane was left alone. After a time the fat shaven man returned with half a dozen soldiers and acolytes. Among these was the young black man who brought Kane's food, and a tall sombre figure, naked but for a loin cloth, who bore a great key at his girdle. The soldiers ringed Kane, javelins ready, while this man unlocked the chains from the ring in the wall. Then they surrounded him and, holding to his chains, indicated that he was to march with them. Surrounded by his captors, Kane emerged from the chamber into what appeared to be a series of wide galleries winding about the interior of the vast structure. Tier by tier they mounted, and turned at last into a chamber much like that he left, and similarly furnished. Kane's chains were made fast to a ring in the stone wall near the single window. He could stand upright or lie or sit on the skin-piled couch, but he could not move half a dozen steps in any direction. Wine and food were placed at his disposal, then they left him, and Kane noticed that neither was the door bolted nor a guard placed before it. He decided that they considered his chains sufficient to keep him safe, and after testing them, he realised that they were right. Yet there was another reason for their apparent carelessness, as he was to learn.

Kane looked out the window, which was larger than the other had been, and not so thickly barred. He was looking out over the city from a considerable height. He looked down on narrow streets, broad avenues flanked by what seemed to be columns and carven stone lions, and on wide expanses of flat-roofed houses, on many of which canopies seemed to argue that people basked under their shade. Much of the buildings seemed to be of stone, much of sun-dried bricks. There was a massiveness about their

architecture that was vaguely repellent—a sombre heavy motif that seemed to suggest a sullen and slightly inhuman character of the builders.

He saw that the wall which surrounded the city was tall, thick and upheld towers spaced at regular intervals. He saw armoured figures moving sentinel-like along the wall, and meditated upon the war-like aspect of this people. The streets and market-places below him offered a colourful maze as the richly clad people moved in an ever-shifting panorama. As for the building which was his prison, Kane naturally could make out but little of its nature. Yet below him he saw a series of massive tiers descending like giant stair-steps. It must be, he decided, with a rather unpleasant sensation, built much like the fabled Tower of Babel, one tier above another.

He turned his attention back to his chamber. The walls were rich in mural decorations, carvings painted in various colours, well-tinted and blended. Indeed the art was of as high standard as any Kane had ever seen in Asia or Europe. Most of the scenes were of war or the hunt—powerful men with black beards, often curled, in armour, slaying lions and driving other warriors before them. Some of these other warriors were naked black men, others somewhat like their conquerors. The human figures were not as well depicted as those of the beasts, seemingly conventionalised to a point that often lent them a somewhat wooden aspect. But the lions were portrayed with vivid realism. Some of the scenes showed the black-bearded slayers in chariots, drawn by fire-breathing steeds, and Kane felt again that strange sense of familiarity, as if he had seen these scenes, or similar scenes, before. These chariots and horses, he noted, were inferior in life-likeness to the lions; the fault was not in conventionalising but in the artist's ignorance of his subject, Kane decided, noting mistakes that seemed extremely incongruous, considering the skill with which they were portrayed.

Time passed swiftly as he pored over the carvings, and presently the silent black man entered with food and wine.

As he set down the viands, Kane spoke to him in a dialect of the bush-tribes, to one of the divisions of which he believed the man belonged, noting the tribal scars on his features. The dull face lighted slightly and the man answered in a tongue similar enough for Kane to understand him.

"What city is this?"

"Ninn, bwana."

"Who are these people?"

The dull black shook his head in doubt.

"They be very old people, bwana. They have dwelt here very long time."

"Was that their king who came to my chamber with his men?"

"Yes, bwana, that be King Asshur-ras-arab."

"And the man with the lash?"

"Yamen, the priest, bwana Persian."

"Why do you call me that?" asked Kane, nonplussed.

"So the masters name you, bwana—" The Black shrank back and his black skin turned ashy as the shadow of a tall figure fell across the doorway. The shaven-headed half-naked giant Shem entered and the black man fell to his knees, wailing his terror. Shem's mighty fingers closed about the black throat and Kane saw the wretched Black's eyes protruding, his tongue thrust from his gaping mouth. His body writhed and threshed unavailingly, his hands clawed weakly and more weakly at the iron wrists. Then he went limp in his slayer's hands and as Shem released him, his corpse slumped loosely to the floor. Shem smote his hands together and a pair of giant Blacks entered. Their faces turned ashy at the sight of their companion's corpse, but at a gesture from Shem, they callously laid hold of the dead man's feet and dragged him forth.

Shem turned at the door and his opaque implacable eyes met Kane's gaze, as if in warning. Hate drummed in Kane's temples, and it was the grim eyes of the murderer which fell before the cold fury in the Englishman's glare. Shem went noiselessly forth, leaving Kane to his meditations.

When food was next brought to Kane, it was brought by a rangy young Black of genial and intelligent appearance. Kane made no effort to speak to him; apparently the masters did not wish for their slave to learn anything about them, for some reason or another.

How many days Kane remained in the high-flung chamber, he did not know; each day was exactly like the last and he lost count of time. Sometimes Yamen the priest came and looked upon him with a satisfied air that made Kane's eyes turn red with the killer's lust; sometimes Shem noiselessly appeared and as noiselessly disappeared. Kane's eyes were riveted to the key that swung from the silent giant's girdle. Could he but

once get within reach of the fellow—but Shem was careful to stay out of his reach unless Kane was surrounded by warriors with ready javelins.

Then one night to his chamber came Yamen the priest with Shem and some fifty acolytes and soldiers. Shem unlocked Kane's chains from the wall, and between two columns of soldiers and priests the Englishman was escorted along the winding galleries, lighted by flaring torches set in the niches along the walls, and borne in the hands of the priests.

By the light Kane observed again the carven figures marching everlastingly around the massive walls of the galleries. Many were life-size, some dimmed and somewhat defaced as with age. Most of these, Kane noted, portrayed men in chariots drawn by horses, and he decided that the later, imperfect figures of steeds and chariots had been copied from these older carvings. Apparently there were no horses or chariots in the city now. Various racial distinctions were evident in the human figures—the hooked noses and curled black beards of the dominant race were plainly distinguished. Their opponents were sometimes black men, sometimes men somewhat like themselves, and occasionally tall rangy men with unmistakable Arab features. Kane was startled to note, too, that in some of the older scenes, men were depicted whose apparel and features were entirely different from those of their enemies. They always appeared in battle with the other race, and not always in retreat as in the case of the others. These frequently seemed to be having the best of the fight, and it was significant, Kane thought, that nowhere were these men portrayed as slaves. But what interested him was the familiarity about their features. No vague misplaced feeling about that familiarity! Those carven features were like the countenance of a friend in a strange land to the wanderer. But for their strange, barbaric arms and apparel they might have been Englishmen, with their Aryan features and yellow locks. They rode horses and rode like the wind.

Somewhere, in the long, long ago, Kane knew, the ancestors of the men of Ninn had warred with men kin to his own ancestors—but in what age and what land, he could not know. Certainly the scenes were not laid in the country that was now the home-land of the Ninnites, for these scenes showed wide fertile plains, grassy hills and wide rivers that wound through fertile plains. Aye, and great cities, like Ninn, but strangely unlike. And suddenly Kane remembered where he had seen similar carvings, wherein

kings with black curled beards slew lions from chariots—on crumbling pieces of masonry that marked the site of a long forgotten city in Mesopotamia he had seen them, and men had told him those ruins were all that remained of Nineveh the Bloody, the accursed of God.

Now the Englishman and his captors had reached the ground-tier of the great temple, and they passed between huge squat columns, carven as were the walls, until they came to a vast circular space between the massive wall and the flanking pillars. Apparently cut from the stone of the mighty wall sat a colossal idol, whose carven features were as devoid of human weakness and kindness as the face of a Stone Age monster.

Facing the idol, on a stone throne in the shadow of the pillars, sat the King Asshur-ras-arab, the firelight flickering on his strongly chiseled face so that at first Kane thought that it was an idol that sat on that throne.

Before the god, facing the king's throne, there was another, smaller throne, before which stood a brazier on a golden tripod; coals glowed in the brazier and smoke curled languorously upward.

A flowing robe of shimmering green silk was put upon Kane, hiding his tattered, worn and stained garments and the golden chains. He was motioned to sit in the throne before the brazier, and he did so. Then his ankles and wrists were locked cunningly to the throne, hidden by the folds of the silken robe. Then the lesser priests and the soldiers melted away, leaving only Kane, the priest Yamen, and the king upon his throne. Back in the shadows among the tree-like columns Kane occasionally glimpsed a glint of metal, like fireflies in the dark. The soldiers still lurked there, out of sight. He sensed that some sort of a stage had been set; somehow he got a suggestion of charlatanry in the whole procedure.

Now Asshur-ras-arab lifted the golden wand and struck once upon a gong that hung near his throne, and a full mellow note like a distant chime echoed among the dim reaches of the shadowy temple. Along the dusky avenue between the columns came a group of men whom Kane realised must be the nobles of that fantastic city. They were tall men, black-bearded and haughty of bearing, clad in shimmering silk and gleaming gold. And among them walked one in golden chains, a youth whose attitude seemed a mixture of apprehension and defiance.

All knelt before the king, bowing their heads to the floor, and at a word from him, rose and faced the god and the Englishman before the god. Now

Yamen, with the firelight glinting on his shaven head and evil eyes, so that he looked like a paunchy demon, cried out a sort of weird chant and flung a handful of powder into the brazier. Instantly a greenish smoke billowed upward, half-veiling Kane's face. The Englishman gagged; the smell and taste were unpleasant in the extreme. He felt groggy, drugged. His brain reeled like a drunken man's and he tore savagely at his chains. Only half conscious of what he said, unaccustomed oaths ripped from his lips.

He was dimly aware that Yamen cried out fiercely at his curses, and leaned forward in an attitude of listening. Then the powder burned out, the smoke waned away, and Kane sat groggily and bewilderedly on the throne. Yamen turned toward the king and bending low, straightened again and with his arms outstretched, spoke in a sonorous tone. The king solemnly repeated his words, and Kane saw the face of the noble prisoner go white. Then his companions seized his arms, and the band marched slowly away, their footfalls coming back eerily through the shadowy vastness.

Like silent ghosts the soldiers came from the shadows and unchained him. Again they grouped themselves about Kane and led him up and up through the shadowy galleries to his chamber, where again Shem locked his chains to the wall. Kane sat on his couch, chin on his fist, striving to find some motive in all the fantastic actions he had witnessed. And presently he realised that there was undue stir in the streets below.

He looked out the window. Great fires blazed in the marketplace and the figures of men, curiously foreshortened, came and went. They seemed to be busying themselves about a figure in the centre of the market-place, but they clustered about it so thickly he could make nothing of it. A circle of soldiers ringed the group; the firelight glanced on their armour. About them clamoured a disorderly mob, yelling and shouting. Suddenly a scream of frightful agony cut through the din, and the shouting died away for an instant, to be renewed with more force than before. Most of the clamour sounded like protest, Kane thought, though mingled with it was the sound of jeers, taunting howls and devilish laughter. And all through the babble rang those ghastly, intolerable shrieks.

A swift pad of naked feet sounded on the tiles and the young Black, Sula, rushed in and thrust his head into the window, panting with excitement. The firelight from without shone on his ebon face and white rolling eyeballs.

"The people strive with the spearmen," he exclaimed, forgetting, in his excitement, the order not to converse with the strange captive. "Many of the people loved well the young prince Bel-lardath—oh, bwana, there was no evil in him! Why did you bid the King have him flayed alive?"

"I!" exclaimed Kane, taken aback and dumbfounded. "I said naught! I do not even know this prince! I have never seen him."

Sula turned his head and looked full into Kane's face.

"Now I know what I have secretly thought, bwana," he said in the Bantu tongue Kane understood. "You are no god, nor mouthpiece of a god, but a man, such as I have seen before the men of Ninn took me captive. Once before, when I was small, I saw men cast in your mold, who came with their black servants and slew our warriors with weapons which spoke with fire and thunder."

"Truly I am but a man," answered Kane, dazedly, "but what—I do not understand. What is it they do in yonder market-place?"

"They are skinning prince Bel-lardath alive," answered Sula. "It has been talked freely among the market-places that the king and Yamen hated the prince, who is of the blood of Abdulai. But he had many followers among the people, especially among the Arbii, and not even the king dared sentence him to death. But when you were brought into the temple, secretly, none in the city knowing of it, Yamen said you were the mouthpiece of the gods. And he said Baal had revealed to him that prince Bel-lardath had roused the wrath of the gods. So they brought him before the oracle of the gods—"

Kane swore sickly. How incredible—how ghastly—to think that his lusty English oaths had doomed a man to a horrible death. Aye—crafty Yamen had translated his random words in his own way. And so the prince, whom Kane had never seen before, writhed beneath the skinning knives of his executioners in the market-place below, where the crowd shrieked or jeered.

"Sula," he said, "what do these people call themselves?" "Assyrians, bwana," answered the black absently, staring in horrified fascination at the grisly scene below.

In the days that followed Sula found opportunities from time to time to talk with Kane. Little he could tell the Englishman of the origin of the men of Ninn. He only knew that they had come out of the east in the long, long ago, and had built their massive city on the plateau. Only the dim legends of his tribe spoke of them. His people lived in the rolling plains far to the south and had warred with the people of the city for untold ages. His people were called Sulas, and they were strong and war-like, he said. From time to time they made raids on the Ninnites, and occasionally the Ninnites returned the raid—in such a raid Sula was captured—but not often did they venture far from the plateau. Though of late, Sula said, they had been forced to range further afield in search of slaves, as the black people shunned the grim plateau and generation by generation moved further back into the wilderness.

The life of a slave of Ninn was hard, Sula said, and Kane believed him, seeing the marks of lash, rack and brand on the young Black's body. The drifting ages had not softened the spirit of the Assyrians, nor modified their fierceness, a byword in the ancient East.

Kane wondered much at the presence of this ancient people in this unknown land, but Sula could tell him nothing. They came from the east, long, long ago—that was all Sula knew. Kane knew now why their features and language had seemed remotely familiar. Their features were the original Semitic features, now modified in the modern inhabitants of Mesopotamia, and many of their words had an unmistakable likeness to certain Hebraic words and phrases.

Kane learned from Sula that not all of the inhabitants were of one blood; they did not mix with their black slaves, or if they did, the offspring of such a union was instantly put to death, but there was more than one strain in the race. The dominant strain, Sula learned, was Assyrian; but there were some of the people, both common people and nobles, whom Sula said were "Arbii," much like the Assyrians, yet differing somewhat. Then there were "Kaldii," who were magicians and soothsayers, but they were held in no great esteem by the true Assyrians. Shem, Sula said, and his kind were Elamites, and Kane started at the biblical term. There were not many of these, Sula said, and they were the tools of the priests—slayers and doers of strange and unnatural deeds. Sula had suffered at the hands of Shem, he said, and so had every other slave of the temple.

And it was this same Shem on whom Kane kept hungry eyes riveted. At his girdle hung the golden key that meant liberty. But, as if he read the meaning in the Englishman's cold eyes, Shem walked with care, a dark sombre giant with a grim carven face, and came not within reach of the captive's long steely arms, unless accompanied by armed guards.

Never a day passed but Kane heard the crack of the scourge, the screams of agonised slaves beneath the brand, the lash, or the skinning knife. Ninn was a veritable Hell, he reflected, ruled by the demoniac Asshur-ras-arab and his crafty and lustful satellite, Yamen the priest. The king was high priest as well, as had been his royal ancestors in ancient Nineveh. And Kane realised why they called him a Persian, seeing in him a resemblance to those wild old Aryan tribesmen who had ridden down from their mountains to sweep the Assyrian empire off the earth. Surely it was fleeing those yellow-haired conquerors that the people of Ninn had come into Africa.

And so the days passed and Kane abode as a captive in the city of Ninn. But he went no more to the temple as an oracle. Then one day there was confusion in the city. Kane heard the trumpets blaring upon the wall, and the roll of kettle-drums. Steel clanged in the streets and the sound of men marching rose to his eyrie. Looking out, over the wall, across the plateau, he saw a horde of naked black men approaching the city in loose formation. Their spears flashed in the sun, their head-pieces of ostrich-plumes floated in the breeze, and their yells came faintly to him.

Sula rushed in, his eyes blazing.

"My people!" he exclaimed. "They come against the men of Ninn! My people are warriors! Bogaga is war-chief—Katayo is king. The war-chiefs of the Sulas hold their honours by the might of their hands, for any man who is strong enough to slay him with his naked hands, becomes war-chief in his place! So Bogaga won the chieftainship, but it will be many a day before any slays him, for he is the mightiest chieftain of them all!"

Kane's window afforded a better view over the wall than any other, for his chamber was in the top-most tier of Baal's temple. To his chamber came Yamen, with his grim guards, Shem and another sombre Elamite. They stood out of Kane's reach, looking through one of the windows.

The mighty gates swung wide; the Assyrians were marching out to meet their enemies. Kane reckoned that there were fifteen hundred armed warriors; that left three hundred still in the city, the bodyguard of the king,

the sentries, and house-troops of the various noblemen. The host, Kane noted, was divided into four divisions; the centre was in the advance, consisting of six hundred men, while each flank or wing was composed of three hundred. The remaining three hundred marched in compact formation behind the centre, between the wings, so the whole presented an appearance of this figure:

[Illustration not yet available]

The warriors were armed with javelins, swords, maces and short heavy bows. On their backs were quivers bristling with shafts.

They marched out on the plain in perfect order, and took up their position, apparently awaiting the attack. It was not slow in coming. Kane estimated that the Blacks numbered at least three thousand warriors, and even at that distance he could appreciate their splendid stature and courage. But they had no system or order of warfare. In one great ragged disorderly horde they rushed onward, to be met by a withering blast of arrows that ripped through their bull-hide shields as though they had been made of paper.

The Assyrians had slung their shields about their necks and were drawing and loosing methodically, not in regular volleys as the archers of Crécy and Agincourt had loosed, but steadily and without pause, nevertheless. With reckless courage the black men hurled themselves forward, into the teeth of the fearful hail; Kane saw whole lines melt away, and the plain became carpeted with the dead, but the Blacks hurled themselves forward, wasting their lives like water. Kane marvelled at the perfect discipline of the Semitic soldiers, who went through their motions as coolly as if they were on the drill-ground. The wings had moved forward, their foremost tips connecting with the ends of the centre, presenting an unbroken front. The men in the company between the wings maintained their place, unmoving, not yet having taken any part in the battle.

The black horde was broken, staggering back under the deadly fire, against which flesh and blood could not stand. The great ragged crescent had broken to bits, and from the fire of the right flank and the centre, the black men were falling back disorderly, hounded by the ranging shafts of the white warriors. But on the left flank, a frothing mob of perhaps four hundred warriors had burst through the fearful barrage and, yelling like fiends, they shocked against the Assyrian wing. But before the spears

clashed, Kane saw the company in reserve between the wings wheel and march in double quick time to support the threatened wing. Against that double wall of six hundred mailed war-men, the onslaught staggered, broke and reeled backward.

Swords flashed among the spears and Kane saw the naked black men falling like grain before the reaper as the javelins and swords of the Assyrians mowed them down. Not all the corpses on the bloody ground were those of black men, but where one Assyrian lay dead or wounded, ten Sulas had died.

Now the black men were in full flight across the plain, and the iron ranks moved forward in quick but orderly pace, loosing at every step, hunting the vanquished across the plateau, plying the dagger on the wounded. They took no prisoners. Sulas did not make good slaves, as Solomon was instantly to see.

In Kane's chamber, the watchers were crowded at the windows, eyes glued in fascination on the wild and gory scene. Sula's chest heaved with passion; his eyes blazed with the blood-lust of the savage, as the shouts and the slaughter and the spears of his tribesmen fired all the slumbering ferocity in his savage soul.

With the yell of a blood-mad panther, he sprang on the backs of his masters. Before any could lift a hand, he snatched the dagger from Shem's girdle and plunged it to the hilt between Yamen's shoulders. The priest shrieked like a wounded woman and went to his knees, blood spurting, and the Elamites closed with the raging slave. Shem sought to seize his wrist, but the other Elamite and Sula whirled into a deadly embrace, plying their knives which were in an instant red to the hilt. Eyes glaring, froth on their lips, they rolled and tumbled, slashing and stabbing. Shem, seeking to catch Sula's wrist, was struck by the hurtling bodies and knocked violently aside. He lost his footing and sprawled against Kane's couch.

And before he could move, the chained Englishman was on him like a great cat. At last the moment he had waited for had come! Shem was within his reach! Even as Shem sought to rise, Kane's knee smote him in the breast, breaking his ribs, and Kane's iron fingers locked in his throat. Kane scarcely was aware of the terrible, wild-beast struggles of the Elamite as he sought in vain to break that grasp. A red mist veiled the Englishman's sight and through it he saw horror growing in Shem's inhuman eyes—saw them

distend and turn blood-shot—saw the mouth gape and the tongue protrude as the shaven head was bent back at a horrible angle—then Shem's neck snapped like a heavy branch and the straining body went limp in Kane's hands.

The Englishman snatched at the key in the dead man's girdle, and an instant later stood up free, feeling a wild surge of exultation sweep over him as he flexed his unhampered limbs. He glanced about the chamber; Yamen was gurgling out his life on the tiles, and Sula and the other Elamite lay dead, locked in each others' iron arms, literally slashed to pieces.

Kane ran swiftly from the chamber. He had no plan, except to escape from the temple he had grown to hate as a man hates Hell. He ran down the winding galleries, meeting no one. Evidently the servants of the temple had been massed on the walls, watching the battle. But on the lower tier, he came face to face with one of the temple guards. The man gaped at him stupidly—and Kane's fist crashed against his black-bearded jowl, stretching him senseless. Kane snatched up his heavy javelin. A thought had come to him that perhaps the streets were practically deserted as the people watched the battle, and he could make his way across the city and scale the wall on the side next the lake.

He ran through the pillar-forested temple and out the mighty portal. He saw a scattering of people who shrieked and fled at the sight of the strange figure emerging from the grim temple. Kane hurried down the street in the direction of the opposite gate. He saw few people. Then as he turned down a side street, thinking to take a short cut, he heard a thunderous roar.

Ahead of him he saw four black slaves bearing a richly ornamented litter, such as nobles rode in. The occupant was a young girl, whose jewel-bedecked garments showed her importance and wealth. And now around the corner came roaring a great tawny shape. A lion, loose in the city streets!

The blacks dropped the litter and fled, shrieking, while the people on the housetops screamed. The girl cried out once, scrambling up in the very path of the charging monster. She stood facing it, frozen with terror.

Kane, at the first roar of the beast, had experienced a fierce satisfaction. So hateful had Ninn become to him that the thought of a wild beast raging through its streets and devouring its cruel inhabitants had given the Puritan an indisputable satisfaction. But now, as he saw the pitiful figure of the girl facing the man-eater, he felt a pang of pity for her, and acted.

As the lion launched himself through the air, Kane hurled the javelin with all the power of his iron frame. Just behind the mighty shoulder it struck, transfixing the tawny body. A deafening roar burst from the beast which spun sidewise in mid-air, as though it had encountered a solid wall, and instead of the rending claws, it was the heavy shaggy shoulder that smote the frail figure of its victim, hurling her aside as the great beast crashed to the earth.

Kane, forgetful of his own position, sprang forward and lifted the girl, to ascertain if she were injured. This was easy, as her garments, like the garments of most of the Assyrian noble-women, were so scanty as to consist more of ornaments than covering. Kane assured himself that she was only bruised and badly frightened.

He helped her to her feet, and then was aware that a throng of curious people had surrounded him. He turned to press through them, and they made no effort to stop him, when suddenly a priest appeared and yelled something, pointing at him. The people instantly fell back, but half a dozen armoured soldiers came forward, javelins ready. Kane faced them, red fury seething in his soul, ready to leap among them and do what damage he could with his naked hands before he died, when down the stones of the street sounded the tramp of marching men, and a company of soldiers swung into view, their spears red from the recent strife.

The girl cried out and ran forward to fling her arms about the stalwart neck of the young officer in command and there followed a rapid fire of conversation which Kane naturally could not understand. Then the officer spoke curtly to the guards, who drew back, and advanced toward Kane, his empty hands outstretched, a smile on his lips. His manner was friendly in the extreme and the Englishman realised that he was trying to express his gratitude for his rescue of the girl, who was no doubt either his sister or his sweetheart. The priest frothed and cursed, but the young noble answered him shortly, and made motions for Kane to accompany him. Then as the Englishman hesitated, suspicious, he drew his own sword and extended it to Kane, hilt foremost. Kane took the weapon; it might have been the form of courtesy to have refused it, but Kane was unwilling to take chances, and he felt much more secure with a weapon in his hand.

1977

The Gap

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Tate was fitting a bird into the sky when he heard the car. He hurried to the window. Sunlit cars blazed, a double-stranded necklace on the distant main road; clouds transformed above the hills, assembling the sky. Yes, it was the Dewhursts: he could see them, packed into the front seat of their Fiat as it ventured into the drive. On his table, scraps of cloud were scattered around the jigsaw. The Dewhursts weren't due for an hour. He glanced at the displaced fragments and then, resigned, went to the stairs.

By the time he'd strolled downstairs and opened the front door, they were just emerging from the car. David's coat buttons displayed various colours of thread. Next came his wife Dottie: her real name was Carla, but they felt that Dave and Dottie looked a more attractive combination on book covers —a notion with which millions of readers seemed to agree. She looked like a cartoonist's American tourist: trousers bulging like sausages, carefully silvered hair. Sometimes Tate wished that his writer's eye could be less oppressively alert to telling details.

Dewhurst gestured at his car like a conjuror unveiling an astonishment. "And here are our friends that we promised you."

Had it been a promise? It had seemed more a side effect of inviting the Dewhursts. And when had their friend turned plural? Still, Tate was unable to feel much resentment; he was too full of having completed his witchcraft novel.

The young man's aggressive bony face was topped with hair short as turf; the girl's face was almost the colour and texture of chalk. "This is Don Skelton," Dewhurst said. "Don, Lionel Tate. You two should have plenty to talk about, you're in the same field. And this is Don's friend, er—" Skelton stared at the large old villa as if he couldn't believe he was meant to be impressed.

He let the girl drag his case upstairs; she refused to yield it to Tate when he protested. "This is your room," he told Skelton, and felt like a disapproving landlady. "I had no idea you wouldn't be alone."

"Don't worry, there'll be room for her."

If the girl had been more attractive, if her tangled hair had been less inert and her face less hungry, mightn't he have envied Skelton? "There'll be cocktails before dinner, if that's your scene," he said to the closed door.

The jigsaw helped him relax. Evening eased into the house, shadows deepened within the large windows. The table glowed darkly through the last gap, then he snapped the piece home. Was that an echo of the snap behind him? He turned, but nobody was watching him.

As he shaved in one of the bathrooms he heard someone go downstairs. Good Lord, he wasn't a very efficient host. He hurried down, achieving the bow of his tie just as he reached the lounge, but idling within were only Skelton and the girl. At least she now wore something like an evening dress; the top of her pale chest was spattered with freckles. "We generally change before going out to dinner," Tate said.

Skelton shrugged his crumpled shoulders. "Go ahead."

Alcohol made Skelton more talkative. "I'll have somewhere like this," he said, glancing at the Victorian carved mahogany suite. After a calculated pause he added "But better."

Tate made a last effort to reach him. "I'm afraid I haven't read anything of yours."

"There won't be many people who'll be able to say that." It sounded oddly threatening. He reached in his briefcase for a book. "I'll give you something to keep."

Tate glimpsed carved boxes, a camera, a small round gleam that twinged him with indefinable apprehension before the case snapped shut. Silver letters shone on the paperback, which was glossy as coal: The Black Road.

A virgin was being mutilated, gloated over by the elegant prose. Tate searched for a question that wouldn't sound insulting. At last he managed "What are your themes?"

"Autobiography." Perhaps Skelton was one of those writers of the macabre who needed to joke defensively about their work, for the Dewhursts were

laughing.

Dinner at the inn was nerve-racking. Candlelight made food hop restlessly on plates, waiters loomed beneath the low beams and flung their vague shadows over the tables. The Dewhursts grew merry, but couldn't draw the girl into the conversation. When a waiter gave Skelton's clothes a withering glance he demanded of Tate "Do you believe in witchcraft?"

"Well, I had to do a lot of research for my book. Some of the things I read made me think."

"No" Skelton said impatiently. "Do you believe in it—as a way of life?"

"Good heavens no. Certainly not."

"Then why waste your time writing about it?" He was still watching the disapproving waiter. Was it the candlelight that twitched his lips? "He's going to drop that," he said.

The waiter's shadow seemed to lose its balance before he did. His trayful of food crashed onto a table. Candles broke, flaring; light swayed the oak beams. Flaming wax spilled over the waiter's jacket, hot food leapt into his face.

"You're a writer," Skelton said, ignoring the commotion, "yet you've no idea of the power of words. There aren't many of us left who have." He smiled as waiters guided the injured man away. "Mind you, words are only part of it. Science hasn't robbed us of power, it's given us more tools. Telephones, cameras—so many ways to announce power."

Obviously he was drunk. The Dewhursts gazed at him as if he were a favourite, if somewhat irrepressible, child. Tate was glad to head home. Lights shone through his windows, charms against burglary; the girl hurried towards them, ahead of the rest of the party. Skelton dawdled, happy with the dark.

After his guests had gone to bed, Tate carried Skelton's book upstairs with him. Skelton's contempt had fastened on the doubts he always felt on having completed a new book. He'd see what sort of performance Skelton had to offer, since he thought so much of himself.

Less than halfway through he flung the book across the room. The narrator had sought perversions, taken all the drugs available, sampled most crimes in pursuit of his power; his favourite pastime was theft. Most of the scenes

were pornographic. So this was autobiography, was it? Certainly drugs would explain the state of the speechless girl.

Tate's eyes were raw with nights of revision and typing. As he read The Black Road, the walls had seemed to waver and advance; the furniture had flexed its legs. He needed sleep, not Skelton's trash.

Dawn woke him. Oh God, he knew what he'd seen gleaming in Skelton's case—an eye. Surely that was a dream, born of a particularly disgusting image in the book. He tried to turn his back on the image, but he couldn't sleep. Unpleasant glimpses jerked him awake: his own novel with an oily black cover, friends snubbing him, his incredulous disgust on rereading his own book. Could his book be accused of Skelton's sins? Never before had he been so unsure about his work.

There was only one way to reassure himself, or otherwise. Tying himself into his dressing-gown, he tiptoed past the closed doors to his study. Could he reread his entire novel before breakfast? Long morning shadows drew imperceptibly into themselves. A woman's protruded from his open study.

Why was his housekeeper early? In a moment he saw that he had been as absurdly trusting as the Dewhursts. The silent girl stood just within the doorway. As a guard she was a failure, for Tate had time to glimpse Skelton at his desk, gathering pages from the typescript of his novel.

The girl began to shriek, an uneven wailing sound that seemed not to need to catch breath. Though it was distracting as a police car's siren, he kept his gaze on Skelton. "Get out," he said.

A suspicion seized him. "No, on second thoughts—stay where you are." Skelton stood, looking pained like the victim of an inefficient store detective, while Tate made sure that all the pages were still on his desk. Those which Skelton had selected were the best researched. In an intolerable way it was a tribute.

The Dewhursts appeared, blinking as they wrapped themselves in dressing gowns. "What on earth's the matter?" Carla demanded.

"Your friend is a thief."

"Oh, dear me," Dewhurst protested. "Just because of what he said about his book? Don't believe everything he says."

"I'd advise you to choose your friends more carefully."

"I think we're perfectly good judges of people. What else do you think could have made our books so successful?"

Tate was too angry to restrain himself. "Technical competence, fourth form wit, naive faith in people, and a promise of life after death. You sell your readers what they want—anything but the truth."

He watched them trudge out. The girl was still making a sound, somewhere between panting and wailing, as she bumped the case downstairs. He didn't help her. As they squeezed into the car, only Skelton glanced back at him. His smile seemed almost warm, certainly content. Tate found it insufferable, and looked away.

When they'd gone, petrol fumes and all, he read through his novel. It seemed intelligent and unsensational—up to his standard. He hoped his publishers thought so. How would it read in print? Nothing of his ever satisfied him—but he was his least important reader.

Should he have called the police? It seemed trivial now. Pity about the Dewhursts—but if they were so stupid, he was well rid of them. The police would catch up with Skelton if he did much of what his book boasted.

After lunch Tate strolled towards the hills. Slopes blazed green; countless flames of grass swayed gently. The horizon was dusty with clouds. He lay enjoying the pace of the sky. At twilight the large emptiness of the house was soothing. He strolled back from the inn after a meal, refusing to glance at the nodding shapes that creaked and rustled beside him.

He slept well. Why should that surprise him when he woke? The mail waited at the end of his bed, placed there quietly by his housekeeper. The envelope with the blue-and-red fringe was from his New York agent—a new American paperback sale, hurrah. What else? A bill peering through its cellophane window, yet another circular, and a rattling carton wrapped in brown paper.

His address was anonymously typed on the carton; there was no return address. The contents shifted dryly, waves of shards. At last he stripped off the wrapping. When he opened the blank carton, its contents spilled out at him and were what he'd thought they must be: a jigsaw.

Was it a peace offering from the Dewhursts? Perhaps they'd chosen one without a cover picture because they thought he might enjoy the difficulty.

And so he would. He broke up the sky and woodland on the table, and scooped them into their box. Beyond the window, trees and clouds wavered.

He began to sort out the edge of the jigsaw. Ah, there was the fourth corner. A warm breeze fluttered in the curtains. Behind him the door inched open on the emptiness of the house.

Noon had withdrawn most shadows from the room by the time he had assembled the edge. Most of the jumbled fragments were glossily brown, like furniture; but there was a human figure—no, two. He assembled them partially—one dressed in a suit, one in denim—then went downstairs to the salad his housekeeper had left him.

The jigsaw had freed his mind to compose. A story of rivalry between authors—a murder story? Two collaborators, one of whom became resentful, jealous, determined to achieve fame by himself? But he couldn't imagine anyone collaborating with Skelton. He consigned the idea to the bin at the back of his mind.

He strolled upstairs. What was his housekeeper doing? Had she knocked the jigsaw off the table? No, of course not; she had gone home hours ago—it was only the shadow of a tree fumbling about the floor.

The incomplete figures waited. The eye of a fragment gazed up at him. He shouldn't do all the easy sections first. Surely there must be points at which he could build inwards from the edge. Yes, there was one: the leg of an item of furniture. At once he saw three more pieces. It was an Empire cabinet. The shadow of a cloud groped towards him.

Connections grew clear. He'd reached the stage where his subconscious directed his attention to the appropriate pieces. The room was fitting together: a walnut canterbury, a mahogany table, a whatnot. When the shape leaned towards him he started, scattering fragments, but it must have been a tree outside the window. It didn't take much to make him nervous now. He had recognised the room in the jigsaw.

Should he break it up unfinished? That would be admitting that it had disturbed him: absurd. He fitted the suited figure into place at the assembled table. Before he had put together the face, with its single eye in profile, he could see that the figure was himself.

He stood finishing a jigsaw, and was turning to glance behind him. When had the photograph been taken? When had the figure in denim crept behind

him, unheard? Irritably resisting an urge to glance over his shoulder, he thumped the figure into place and snapped home the last pieces.

Perhaps it was Skelton: its denims were frayed and stained enough. But all the pieces which would have composed the face were missing. Reflected sunlight on the table within the gap gave the figure a flat pale gleam for a face.

"Damned nonsense!" He whirled, but there was only the unsteady door edging its shadow over the carpet. Skelton must have superimposed the figure; no doubt he had enjoyed making it look menacing—stepping eagerly forward, its hands outstretched. Had he meant there to be a hole where its face should be, to obscure its intentions?

Tate held the box like a waste-bin, and swept in the disintegrating jigsaw. The sound behind him was nothing but an echo of its fall; he refused to turn. He left the box on the table. Should he show it to the Dewhursts? No doubt they would shrug it off as a joke—and really, it was ridiculous to take it even so seriously.

He strode to the inn. He must have his housekeeper prepare dinner more often. He was early—because he was hungry, that was all; why should he want to be home before dark? On the path, part of an insect writhed.

The inn was serving a large party. He had to wait, at a table hardly bigger than a stool. Waiters and diners, their faces obscured, surrounded him. He found himself glancing compulsively each time candlelight leapt onto a face. When eventually he hurried home, his mind was muttering at the restless shapes on both sides of the path: go away, go away. A distant car blinked and was gone. His house's were the only lights to be seen. They seemed less heartening than lost in the night. No, his housekeeper hadn't let herself in. He was damned if he'd search all the rooms to make sure. The presence he sensed was only the heat, squatting in the house. When he tired of trying to read, the heat went to bed with him.

Eventually it woke him. Dawn made the room into a charcoal drawing. He sat up in panic. Nothing was watching him over the foot of the bed, which was somehow the trouble: beyond the bed, an absence hovered in the air. When it rose, he saw that it was perched on shoulders. The dim figure groped rapidly around the bed. As it bore down on him its hands lifted, alert and eager as a dowser's.

He screamed, and the light was dashed from his eyes. He lay trembling in absolute darkness. Was he still asleep? Had he been seized by his worst nightmare, of blindness? Very gradually a sketch of the room gathered about him, as though developing from fog. Only then did he dare switch on the light. He waited for the dawn before he slept again.

When he heard footsteps downstairs, he rose. It was idiotic that he'd lain brooding for hours over a dream. Before he did anything else he would throw away the obnoxious jigsaw. He hurried to its room, and faltered. Flat sunlight occupied the table.

He called his housekeeper. "Have you moved a box from here?"

"No, Mr Tate." When he frowned, dissatisfied, she said haughtily "Certainly not."

She seemed nervous—because of his distrust, or because she was lying? She must have thrown away the box by mistake and was afraid to own up. Questioning her further would only cause unpleasantness.

He avoided her throughout the morning, though her sounds in other rooms disturbed him, as did occasional glimpses of her shadow. Why was he tempted to ask her to stay? It was absurd. When she'd left, he was glad to be able to listen to the emptiness of the house.

Gradually his pleasure faded. The warmly sunlit house seemed too bright, expectantly so, like a stage awaiting a first act. He was still listening, but less to absorb the silence than to penetrate it: in search of what? He wandered desultorily. His compulsion to glance about infuriated him. He had never realised how many shadows each room contained.

After lunch he struggled to begin to organise his ideas for his next book, at least roughly. It was too soon after the last one. His mind felt empty as the house. In which of them was there a sense of intrusion, of patient distant lurking? No, of course his housekeeper hadn't returned. Sunlight drained from the house, leaving a congealed residue of heat. Shadows crept imperceptibly.

He needed an engrossing film—the Bergman at the Academy. He'd go now, and eat in London. Impulsively he stuffed The Black Road into his pocket, to get the thing out of the house. The slam of the front door echoed through the deserted rooms. From trees and walls and bushes, shadows spread; their

outlines were restless with grass. A bird dodged about to pull struggling entrails out of the ground.

Was the railway station unattended? Eventually a shuffling, hollow with wood, responded to his knocks at the ticket window. As he paid, Tate realised that he'd let himself be driven from his house by nothing more than doubts. There were drawbacks to writing fantastic fiction, it seemed.

His realisation made him feel vulnerable. He paced the short platform. Flowers in a bed spelt the station's name; lamp posts thrust forward their dull heads. He was alone but for a man seated in the waiting-room on the opposite platform. The window was dusty, and bright reflected clouds were caught in the glass; he couldn't distinguish the man's face. Why should he want to?

The train came dawdling. It carried few passengers, like the last exhibits of a run-down waxworks. Stations passed, displaying empty platforms. Fields stretched away towards the sinking light.

At each station the train halted, hoping for passengers but always disappointed—until, just before London, Tate saw a man striding in pursuit. On which platform? He could see only the man's reflection: bluish clothes, blurred face. The empty carriage creaked around him; metal scuttled beneath his feet. Though the train was gathering speed, the man kept pace with it. Still he was only striding; he seemed to feel no need to run. Good Lord, how long were his legs? A sudden explosion of foliage filled the window. When it fell away, the strider had gone.

Charing Cross Station was still busy. A giant's voice blundered among its rafters. As Tate hurried out, avoiding a miniature train of trolleys, silver gleamed at him from the bookstall. The Black Road, and there again, at another spot on the display: The Black Road. If someone stole them, that would be a fair irony. Of the people around him, several wore denim.

He ate curry in the Wampo Egg on the Charing Cross Road. He knew better restaurants nearby, but they were on side streets; he preferred to stay on the main road—never mind why. Denimed figures peered at the menu in the window. The menu obscured his view of their faces.

He bypassed Leicester Square Underground. He didn't care to go down into that dark, where trains burrowed, clanking. Besides, he had time to stroll; it was a pleasant evening. The colours of the bookshops cooled.

He glimpsed books of his in a couple of shops, which was heartening. But Skelton's title glared from Booksmith's window. Was that a gap beside it in the display? No, it was a reflected alley, for here came a figure striding down it. Tate turned and located the alley, but the figure must have stepped aside.

He made for Oxford Street. Skelton's book was there too, in Claude Gill's. Beyond it, on the ghost of the opposite pavement, a denimed figure watched. Tate whirled, but a bus idled past, blocking his view. Certainly there were a good many strollers wearing denim.

When he reached the Academy Cinema he had glimpsed a figure several times, both walking through window displays and, most frustratingly, pacing him on the opposite pavement, at the edge of his vision. He walked past the cinema, thinking how many faces he would be unable to see in its dark.

Instinctively drawn towards the brightest lights, he headed down Poland Street. Twilight had reached the narrow streets of Soho, awakening the neon. Sex shop, sex aids, Scandinavian films. The shops cramped one another, a shoulder-to-shoulder row of touts. In one window framed by livery neon, between Spanking Letters and Rubber News, he saw Skelton's book.

Pedestrians and cars crowded the streets. Whenever Tate glanced across, he glimpsed a figure in denim on the other pavement. Of course it needn't be the same one each time—it was impossible to tell, for he could never catch sight of the face. He had never realised how many faces you couldn't see in crowds. He'd made for these streets precisely in order to be among people.

Really, this was absurd. He'd allowed himself to be driven among the seedy bookshops in search of company, like a fugitive from Edgar Allan Poe—and by what? An idiotic conversation, an equally asinine jigsaw, a few stray glimpses? It proved that curses could work on the imagination—but good heavens, that was no reason for him to feel apprehensive. Yet he did, for behind the walkers painted with neon a figure was moving like a hunter, close to the wall. Tate's fear tasted of curry.

Very well, his pursuer existed. That could be readily explained: it was Skelton, skulking. How snugly those two words fitted together! Skelton must have seen him gazing at The Black Road in the window. It would be

just like Skelton to stroll about admiring his own work in displays. He must have decided to chase Tate, to unnerve him.

He must glimpse Skelton's face, then pounce. Abruptly he crossed the street, through a break in the sequence of cars. Neon, entangled with neon afterimages, danced on his eyelids. Where was the skulker? Had he dodged into a shop? In a moment Tate saw him, on the pavement he'd just vacated. By the time Tate's vision struggled clear of afterimages, the face was obscured by the crowd.

Tate dashed across the street again, with the same result. So Skelton was going to play at manoeuvring, was he? Well, Tate could play too. He dodged into a shop. Amplified panting pounded rhythmically beyond an inner doorway. "Hardcore film now showing, sir," said the Indian behind the counter. Men, some wearing denim, stood at racks of magazines. All kept their faces averted from Tate.

He was behaving ridiculously—which frightened him: he'd let his defences be penetrated. How long did he mean to indulge in this absurd chase? How was he to put a stop to it?

He peered out of the shop. Passers-by glanced at him as though he was touting. Pavements twitched, restless with neon. The battle of lights jerked the shadows of the crowd. Faces shone green, burned red.

If he could just spot Skelton... What would he do? Next to Tate's doorway was an alley, empty save for darkness. At the far end, another street glared. He could dodge through the alley and lose his pursuer. Perhaps he would find a policeman; that would teach Skelton—he'd had enough of this poor excuse for a joke.

There was Skelton, lurking in a dark doorway almost opposite. Tate made as if to chase him, and at once the figure sneaked away behind a group of strollers. Tate darted into the alley.

His footsteps clanged back from the walls. Beyond the scrawny exit, figures passed like a peepshow. A wall grazed his shoulder; a burden knocked repetitively against his thigh. It was The Black Road, still crumpled in his pocket. He flung it away. It caught at his feet in the dark until he trampled on it; he heard its spine break. Good riddance.

He was halfway down the alley, where its darkness was strongest. He looked back to confirm that nobody had followed him. Stumbling a little, he

faced forward again, and the hands of the figure before him grabbed his shoulders.

He recoiled gasping. The wall struck his shoulder-blades. Darkness stood in front of him, but he felt the body clasp him close, so as to thrust its unseen face into his. His face felt seized by ice; he couldn't distinguish the shape of what touched it. Then the clasp had gone, and there was silence.

He stood shivering. His hands groped at his sides, as though afraid to move. He understood why he could see nothing—there was no light so deep in the alley—but why couldn't he hear? Even the taste of curry had vanished. His head felt anaesthetised, and somehow insubstantial. He found that he didn't dare turn to look at either lighted street. Slowly, reluctantly, his hands groped upwards towards his face.

The Proxy

"*The Proxy* started life as *The Bed beyond the Window* on 28 April 1977 but adopted the present title on the first of May, and was finished one day later. I hope it doesn't show senility is creeping up on me because I've absolutely no idea where the idea for the story came from. David Lloyd adapted it with style for the A1 comic."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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When her spade struck the obstacle she thought it was another stone. Among the sunlit lumps of earth that bristled with uprooted grass, soil trickled down her balked spade. She tried to dig around the object, to dislodge it. It and her spade ground as if they were subterranean teeth. It was longer than she'd thought: inches—no, feet. She scraped away its covering of earth. It was composed not of stone but of bricks.

The remains of a wall? She glanced at the neighbouring houses. Within their small front gardens they stood close to the pavement, in pairs. Only hers hung back within its larger garden, as though the others had stepped forward to meet the rank of trees along the avenue. Hers was newer; it didn't know the drill.

The disinterred bricks looked charred, as had some of the earth she'd turned. She was still pondering when she saw Paul's car. He had to halt abruptly as another driver, impatient with the lethargic traffic lights, swung across his path, into the side road. As Paul drove by to lock up their car he waved to her. His wave looked feeble, preoccupied.

When he returned she said "How was your day?"

"Oh," he groaned. "Not bad," he added quickly, smiling—but the groan had been the truth. He wouldn't be able to tell her more: she didn't even know the exact nature of his job—something to do with the Ministry of Defence.

He mixed drinks and brought them outside. They sat sipping on the bench he'd made, and gazed at the upheaved earth. The shadow of an adjacent house boxed in the garden. Eclipsed by roofs, the sunlight still flooded the sky with lemon.

When they had been silent for a while she said "Did you see what I unearthed?"

"A bit of wall."

"Don't you think it could be an old foundation? See—if there were a house just there, it would be in line with all the others."

"It would if it were, but what makes you think it was?"

"I think it burnt down. Come and see."

He was rubbing his forehead, trying to smooth it. "I'll look later." His words tripped loosely over one another.

Perhaps it was only a wall. It wasn't important now; what mattered was that Paul was on edge. She wiped specks of earth from her glasses, then she turned on the pressure cooker and uncorked the wine. When she went to call him, he was gazing at his empty glass. The rectangular shadow had engulfed the garden. As the afterglow faded from her dazzled eyes, it looked as though an entire foundation had sprouted, dark and vague, from the earth.

He chattered and joked throughout dinner. Whenever he had problems at work he always laughed more, to pretend he had none. She'd grown used to the fact that part of him was marked Government Property—a part she would never know. She was used to telling people that she didn't know her husband's job. But when he was worried, as now, she couldn't help feeling cut off from him.

Boxy shadows stretched into the house. She drew the curtains to make the rooms cosier. The radiators twanged as hot water expanded their veins. Beyond the curtains in the front bedroom a blurred light shone: a car, turning.

They played backgammon. The circular men tapped around the board, knocking one another onto the central bar, leaping back into the fray. When Paul had drunk enough to be able to sleep, she preceded him upstairs. Was that the same light beyond the curtains? It seemed to be flickering slowly—perhaps a child was playing with a flashlight in the house opposite. It held her attention, so that she failed to hear Paul entering the room.

He was staring expectantly at her. "Sorry, what was that?" she said.

"I said, what were you looking at?"

"That light."

"Light?" He sounded confused, a little irritable.

"That one." She parted the curtains, but there was only the tree before the streetlamp, an intricate cut-out flattened by the sodium light. Had the child hidden on glimpsing her shadow? She lay beside Paul, and felt him twitch repeatedly back from the edge of sleep. His restlessness made her want to raise her head and peer towards the window. She lay, eyes closed, trying to share her sleepiness with him.

* * *

The bricks refused to shift. Very well, she'd build a rockery over them. In the afternoon she walked down to the beach. The sea leapt up the rocks and shouted in her ears. The high wind nuzzled her face violently, deafening her. As she tramped home with an armful of rocks, sand stung her eyes and swarmed on her glasses.

Though her eyes were watering, she piled her collection on top of the bricks. The arrangement looked sparse; she would need at least one more forage before it looked impressive. Still, it hid the bricks.

She had to keep dabbing her eyes while she prepared dinner. The gas sounded jerky—but that was only her hearing, trying to return to her. After dinner, when she drew the curtains, she could hardly see out of the bedroom window or hear the murmur of the town. Was the child playing tricks again? Certainly a light was flickering. She groped her way to the bathroom to mop her eyes.

All evening Paul told jokes, some of which she hadn't heard before. "Have another drink," he kept insisting, as though that would make her a more appreciative audience. Oh, what was worrying him? Could it be the very nature of his job? No, he'd come to terms with that long ago. Though she had never seen him so much as threaten violence, he felt no such reticence over national defence.

She followed him upstairs. He was swaying a little beneath the burden of alcohol; she hoped it would drag him down into sleep. When he went into the bathroom she could still feel his tension, entangled with her nerves. She'd neglected to draw the bedroom curtains when her eyes had been smarting. She strode to the window and halted, coughing with shock.

Perhaps the streetlamp had failed, robbing her of the silhouetted tree. For a moment, alcohol hindered her thoughts sufficiently for her to think so. But how could that explain the dark vague bulk, so close that it must be in her garden? What was this silence that clung to her as though she were in the grip of a trance?

As she stared, unable to look away, a pale patch grew clearer within the bulk. It was a window, at about the same level as hers. Within it dim light moved slowly as the glow of embers. By its size, the window must belong to a back bedroom. She was gazing at the back of a house, where no house could be.

She forced herself to turn away, to recapture some sense of her bedroom, her house, light, familiarity. A figure was lying in the bed. She hadn't heard him enter. "Oh God," she cried inadvertently, starting.

He jerked nervously. "What? What's wrong?"

"That is. That! Can't you see?"

Now she was frightened in a new way, for she realised he could not. "What?" he demanded, staring straight at the dim unsteady rectangle. "What are you talking about?"

The threat of a night's insomnia edged his voice. Was she going to add to his worries? She swallowed; her fear sank into her guts. "Nothing. It's gone now," she lied.

"Come to bed then, for heaven's sake."

She closed her eyes before dragging the curtains shut. "I think I'll just have a nightcap first."

In fact she downed two more drinks before she felt able to peer out of the living room. The tree stood beyond the hedge; the branches sprinkled with buds and the privet leaves were lurid with sodium light. The longer she stared, trying to fix the view in her mind, the less familiar and more unreal it seemed.

Paul lay on his back, his lips trembling with snores. She slipped in beside him. At last, when she'd stared at the sodium glow through the curtains for minutes, she took off her glasses. Her stomach felt calmer. Alcohol was melting the icy lump of fear.

She lay teeming with thoughts. Had Paul's tension infected her? Was it making her imagine things? She preferred the alternative: that she'd seen a house that was no longer there. Why should she feel menaced? Good Lord, what could a house that no longer existed do? Her eyes grew heavy, but still she reopened them, to check that the light wasn't flickering. Around her, unsharpened by her glasses, the room was very vague.

* * *

She stared at the place where the bricks were hidden. Rocks gleamed, polished by the sea. It seemed impossible that there was no trace of what she'd seen—but she was stubbornly convinced that she'd seen it: there could be nothing wrong with her mind. Perhaps more rocks would help bury what was there, if there was anything. Besides, a walk to the beach would take her away from the house. Her gladness dismayed her.

Today the sea was calm. The sun made a shoal of glittering fish that swam in all the rock pools. Over the beach crept the incessant mouthless whispering of waves. She selected rocks, and wished she felt closer to the stillness.

She set down the rocks. The growth of the cairn was satisfying, but would it be enough? Would the pile act as a gravestone, or something of the kind? Though she knew she had dug it herself, the earth looked as it would have if it had been upheaved from beneath.

She was being stupid. All right, she had seen the house that used to stand here. Was that so terrible? The length of the garden separated the previous house from hers. Surely that was reassuring. After all, houses couldn't move.

If only she could tell Paul! Well, in time she would be able to. At least that hope was heartening. Perhaps, she thought as he opened the gate, she could tell him soon, for he looked somehow relieved.

"I've got to go away," he said at once.

She felt her hope being squeezed to death in her stomach. "When?" Her voice sounded dwindled, as she felt.

"Tomorrow." He was staring at her. "Oh, come on, Elaine," he said, all at once nervously irritable. "I've got enough problems."

"I'm sorry." She let her anxiety sound.

"I'll be back tomorrow night."

Presumably he'd meant to stay away overnight, but now was trying to reassure her. "Take care," she said, suddenly anxious in another way.

After dinner he helped clear up and dried the dishes. She washed slowly, too meticulously. When they'd finished she said "Make me another drink." She was afraid to go upstairs.

The longer she dawdled, the more afraid she would be. Why, it wasn't even dark; the lower reaches of the sky glowed rustily. Drawn curtains ought to make her feel safe in her house—not that there was anything to fear. When she forced herself to hurry upstairs her footsteps sounded like an eager child's clambering. She strode into the bedroom and grabbed the curtains—but her hands clenched spasmodically.

The dark house loomed over her. She could see no streetlamp, nor the glowing sky. It was as though the house had choked all light with smoke. Only the dim window was lit. Although it was very grubby or veiled with smoke, she could see into its room.

The room looked cramped, though it was difficult to be sure; the unquiet glow brought the walls billowing sluggishly forward. Apart from a long prone shape, the room looked bare. What was the shape? It emerged lethargically from the dimness, as from mud. As she stared, unaware that her nails were piercing her palms through the curtains, the silence held her fast, like amber. The shape was only a bed. But was there a form lying beneath its grey blankets?

All at once she clashed the curtains together, restoring sounds to herself. She was ready to clatter downstairs in panic—but she made herself wait with her back to the window until she could walk down. The very fact that she could turn her back proved she was still in control.

Nevertheless she tried to stay downstairs as long as possible. She mixed drinks and proposed new games. But Paul refused to stay up late; he wanted to leave early next morning. "The sooner I go the sooner I'll be back."

She retreated into bed without going to the window. A dim vague light crept back and forth on the curtains, as though seeking entry. There was nothing to fear except the strangeness. The glimpses had developed slowly as a primitive photograph; the process was too sluggish for anything to

happen before Paul returned home. Should she tell him then? She clung to him, but he was busy snoring.

* * *

When she woke Paul had gone. He mustn't have wanted to disturb her. She lay hanging on to sleep, unwilling to open her eyes. Abruptly she struggled out of bed and fumbled back the curtains to gaze at the tree.

Later, while she was shopping, she met an old lady who lived nearby. Beneath the severe purple-rinsed coiffure the eyes blinked once; the pale lips doled out "Good day." It was almost a reproof. But Elaine was determined not to miss her opportunity. "Could I ask you something?" she said, her friendly tone disguising her tension.

After a pause the other admitted "You may."

"Where I live now—was there ever a fire?"

"In your house, do you mean?"

Beneath the deftness there seemed to be resentment, perhaps contempt. "No," Elaine said, restraining her impatience. "Before my house was built."

"I believe there was something of the kind."

The old lady's shopping trolley turned, ready to move on. "Who started the fire?" Elaine said, too eagerly. "How was it started?"

"Oh, I really couldn't tell you. There was quite a family living there. One of the children was retarded. Now I must be about my tasks." She was almost at the end of the aisle of tins when she called back "Of course it was during the war. I should think it would have been a bomb."

Her words confused Elaine. They refused to fit together logically. Perhaps they couldn't; perhaps that had been the woman's intention. As Elaine unpacked the shopping they faded, leaving her mind open to more immediate and disturbing speculations.

She wished she could go out visiting—but she wouldn't know when Paul had returned. She didn't like to leave him alone in the house until she had told him what she had seen. Should she continue to build the rockery? Suppose the rockery was aggravating what was happening?

Eventually she walked down to the beach. Often the sea helped her grow calm. But today the sky was walled off by slate; the beach was trapped in its own brooding glow. At least the prospect slowed down her thoughts. When sunset began smouldering beneath the enormous grey wall, she made herself walk home.

Each street she traversed was darker. Sudden light threaded the lines of streetlamps. If the dark house was standing inside her gate, what would she do? Absurdly, she found herself wondering obsessively what it might look like from the front. But the garden was bare except for the lumpy heap of rocks above the churned earth. The sight was faintly reassuring.

She prepared dinner, then she made herself a snack. She'd eat dinner with Paul, if he wasn't home too late. Surely he wouldn't be. The sound of her chewing filled her ears and seemed to occupy the house, which was hollow with silence.

It was dark now. She should have drawn the curtains earlier—but then she wouldn't know what was beyond them. Nothing was outside the living room but the rockery, the tree, the lamp. She reached into the hall and into rooms, switching on all the lights. At last she ventured into the bedroom. Apprehension stirred deep in her. She averted her face as she stepped forward to the curtains. But the silence seized her, and she had to look.

The house was there, of course. She couldn't pretend that it was easier to live with now that it had grown familiar; her fists crumpled the curtains. Within the smoky window, muffled light crawled somnolently. Something lay on the vague bed.

Very gradually—so gradually that she lost all sense of time—she began to distinguish its shape. It was a figure, supine and still, though the uneasy light made the blankets seem to squirm like a cocoon. It was wholly covered. Was it a corpse?

Her mind was struggling to regain control of her limbs, to drag her away. Her fascination held her; the figure seemed too shapeless for a corpse, it reminded her of—

When she managed to think, fear clutched her stomach. The shape beneath the blankets was exactly like a dummy made of pillows, the sort of dummy children left to represent them while they sneaked away.

Momentarily her terror, not yet quite defined, weakened her fascination, and she became aware of a nagging sense that she ought to be hearing a sound. What sound? Her nervous frustration made her hands shake. All of a sudden they banged together, nearly wrenching the curtains from their rail.

It was the call of the telephone. She ran downstairs, almost falling headlong. Oh, please don't let the caller ring off! Her footsteps resounded in the deserted living room as she snatched the receiver from the hall table. "Yes?" she gasped. "Hello? Yes?"

"I've just stopped off to tell you I'm on my way," Paul said. "Are you all right? You sound—I don't know."

"Yes, I'm all right." She sounded unconvincing, but the truth would take too long. "You'll be quick, won't you? Please be quick."

As she set down the buzzing receiver she noticed the crack between the living room curtains. It ought to be orange with sodium light, but instead it was blocked by a dark bulk. High in the bulk, light flickered lethargically.

She was retreating, unable to think, towards the back door when her earlier terror came clear and froze her. If the thing in the bed was pretending to be someone, where was that someone now? Who was abroad in the night, and to what purpose?

Her panic sent her stumbling upstairs. She left the bedroom door open so as to hear any sound in the house. She sat trembling on the bed and stared at the tight curtains. Only the restless light troubled the darkness beyond them.

Where had Paul called from? Oh, please let him have been nearly home! He wouldn't be long now—not long, please not long. She wished she had a drink to quiet her, but that would have meant going downstairs, closer to whatever was roaming the night.

If anything was. Mightn't her imagination, made hectic by all the strangeness, have got the better of her? Surely the figure in the bed could be a corpse. In the circumstances that would be reassuring. However disturbing, a corpse was hardly a threat.

Minutes later she reached the window. Her reluctance made the carpet feel hindering as a marsh. At the curtains, her will seemed unequal to the struggle with her hands. But her hands sneaked past her fear, to the curtains, and opened a crack for her to peer through.

Silence closed around her. It drew her head forward and parted her hands to widen the gap between the curtains. Dim light wavered over the grey window, which appeared to hover in a block of night. With a painful slowness that released her breath in infrequent gasps, she made out what was beyond.

The blankets were rolled back from the bed; they slumped against the footboard. On the exposed mattress lay an old stained bolster. The whitish patches that protruded from it here and there must be lumps of stuffing. Over it the stifled light crawled.

She was staring dully, aching with fear, when something in the room moved. A shadow faltered on the blurred wall. Was someone unseen making for the window? Dry fear clutched her throat. Perhaps it was only the unsteady light, perhaps there was no shadow—for the light was making the bolster appear to shift.

Then, as her lungs agonised for breath, she saw that the object on the bed was indeed moving. It was struggling to raise itself. The lumps of stuffing might be, or might be trying to be, limbs. The swellings and discolourations at the top of the bolster could have been the beginnings of a travesty of a face.

Her mind fought to open her claws of hands, to thrust her away from the window. Was her fascination causing the nightmare to be played out before her? She was still striving to turn when the shadow fled across the wall, and its source appeared beyond the grey window. His face was wrenched out of shape by terror, so that it took her moments to be sure it was Paul. He had gone into the wrong house.

Her sobbing cry released her. She fell on the stairs, but dragged herself erect with her bruised hands. A notion was trying to declare itself—that there had been a sound she ought to have heard. She hurled open the front door. The rockery glowed sodium, tangled in shadows of branches.

As she stood trying to control her mind, to fit together what might have happened, she glimpsed the flashing at the intersection. How could traffic lights be blue? When she realised that it was an ambulance, she began to trudge towards it like a sleepwalker. Already she could see that one of the cars was Paul's. She hardly needed the sight of the draped body the men in white were bearing away from his car to suggest how he'd been able to enter a house that no longer existed.

She stood on the pavement and began to shake. Could she enter that house too? But when she glanced back, her garden was bare beneath the orange glow. Only the rockery stood there like a cairn over a grave.

The Next Sideshow

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As Gray passed the locked kiosk, it began to rain. Water came pattering through the layers of autumn leaves still clinging to the trees; the dark lake plopped. Beyond the park, the auras of the tower blocks sparkled.

There was no use hurrying home. His key was locked in, and his wife wouldn't be home for at least half an hour; that was why he'd decided to stroll in the park. The kiosk rumbled like a drum. Its scrawny arch offered no refuge. Perhaps if the rain became too heavy he could shelter beneath the trees.

At least the hectic glistening made the paths more visible. The rest of the park was black and smudged as a soaked drawing. Clouds massed overhead, darkening the night; they looked close and thick as foliage. Once he glimpsed the lights of the park road he would have his bearings.

Underfoot the path felt less like concrete than mud. Had the gardeners been moving earth, or had he missed his way? He stumbled onward, blinking; rain poured down his forehead into his eyes. Was that a shelter ahead, among the streaming trees? But there was no such building on his route home. Then he heard rain scuttling on metal. The dark shape was a caravan.

There were several, huddled like beasts beneath the trees. Raindrops traced veins through the dirt on their dim windows. Had the caravans any right to be there? They were robbing him of shelter. As he trudged past they rattled like maracas.

One pair of curtains was untidily parted. Beneath it, light slumped on the drowned twitching grass, and illuminated a section of a notice. Gray made out a few words: MAZE, FREAK SHOW, WELCOME. The letters squirmed under trickles of rain. Had the notice been laid there for passersby to read? It looked more as though it had fallen into the mud.

If the sideshows were open, perhaps he should take refuge there—but he'd never seen a freak show, and didn't intend to start now. He knew deformity

existed; that was no reason to become involved in its exploitation.

As he picked his way along the squelching path, he started. Why? It had only been a glimpse of a face peering between curtains. He hadn't had time to distinguish it properly. It must have been his thoughts of freaks that had made the impression seem so unnatural.

The curtains had drooped shut now. Next to their caravan stood a low construction without wheels. Was it the freak show? No, he could just make out the sign that dangled slightly askew in the entrance: MIRROR MAZE.

The entrance was unlit. Within it, to the left, the cramped barred aperture of the paybox yawned, a cowl full of darkness. Sagging tendrils of his hair trained rain down his neck; his clothes and his eyebrows were sodden. He heard a new onslaught of rain rushing across the lake. Shivering, he dodged into the entrance.

Beside him a voice said, "Nowhere to go?"

He recoiled. He'd noticed a dim oval within the paybox, but had assumed it was painted on, or adhering to, the back wall. "I'm just sheltering," he admitted, faintly embarrassed.

The lower portion of the oval gaped. The voice was soft as the downpour, and almost as vague. "Why stand out here? Go in and take a look."

'It isn't really my kind of thing." No need to sound apologetic. "I don't think much of freak shows," he said more aggressively.

"Isn't that for you?" Gray couldn't decide if the tone was wistful or mocking. "Try the maze then, if you've half an hour to spare," the voice said softly as a hypnotist's. "That's something you won't forget."

Gray stared into the night. The park might as well have been miles underwater, for all that he could distinguish of it. "How much?" he said eventually.

"Any coin." Was that meant as a gesture of goodwill? Gray found the choice embarrassing. Eventually he dredged up silver from amid the crowd of copper in his pocket. A hand reached beneath the grille. Why was it wearing a discoloured rubber glove so oversized that the rubber fingers splayed awry? But it wasn't wearing a glove. Gray couldn't help gasping.

The hand lay palm upward on the narrow counter—challenging his gasp, or demanding more money? Abruptly the fingers closed over the silver, like

a plant trapping its prey. One finger pointed, as best it could, toward a door which was now outlined by a razor-edge of light. "It's ready for you," the voice said.

As soon as Gray pushed open the door the oppressive heat seized him. His clothes felt humid and clinging; his coat began to steam. Sweat mixed prickling with the rain that coated his forehead. He stepped forward, and the door clicked shut behind him.

The first mirrors were dusty; his advancing reflection was vague. The ceiling loured perhaps a foot above him. Overhead a fight jerked, buzzing; he could hear a swarm of them deeper in the maze. He was glad he hadn't paid more. Glancing back, he saw himself floating in a grubby mirror on the inside of the door, as though beneath mud.

He ventured along the narrow passage. If the building were as small as it had looked from outside, he would soon be through. Ranks of himself, stretching toward infinity on both sides, paced him.

He barred his way dimly. He could turn either right or left. Toss a coin? Responding to a memory of something he'd read—he couldn't recall where or in what context—about a left-hand path, he advanced that way. At once he had to turn several times amid a crowd of his own antics. Shouldn't this trick him back where he'd started? But he must have miscounted his turns, for he emerged into a different narrow passage.

How was it different? A light hovered, buzzing intermittently. He squinted at the blurred mirrors. Sweat salted his eyes; he dabbed at them, and pulled off his coat. Why did his reflected movements look unnatural? Suddenly he realised that all the mirrors were distorted.

Well, it was a gimmick. On one side of the passage he was inflated, a parody of pregnancy; on the other he was an hourglass with a face. Behind these reflections others gathered, far more bizarre. Had the proprietor tried to make up in oddity what the maze lacked in size?

Gray consulted his watch. He still had to find his way out. He strode forward. Swollen lumpy flesh uncoiled toward him, like a sluggish tenant of an aquarium. Which way at this mirror? Left again: at least he would know which direction not to take if he had to backtrack.

His dusty face came nodding forward at him. It was almost as tall as he was, and squashed his body to ankle-height. This was fascinating. If the

mirrors had been cleaner—if the huge bobbing face had been less blurred—he wouldn't have felt uneasy at all.

The only exit from this passage was to the left. He must be near the end now; there couldn't be much more of the maze packed into the building. Again he had to turn several times, always left. His skin felt hot, and grubby as the mirrors. The closeness of distorted flesh oppressed him.

Ah, here was a longer passage. Dim flesh squirmed at the far end; perhaps that mirror concealed the exit. He hurried toward it, glancing aside at the riot of distortions that filled the walls. When he peered ahead again, the glass at the end of the passage was blank.

The mirror must reflect only beyond a certain distance. Perhaps it was a final attempt to confuse victims of the maze. He strode at the mirror, ready to push it aside. Then he faltered. Dusty though it was, there was no doubt that it was a sheet of plain glass.

What had he seen beyond it, peering through? Nobody could look like that. Of course, there must be mirrors beyond; he'd seen a distant reflection of himself. Where was the exit? Irritably mopping his forehead, he turned left.

"You've never been in a maze like this."

He whirled. Flesh unfurled fatly around him. The voice was behind one or other of the mirrors; somehow the proprietor, or whoever had been in the paybox, had crept close to him. Gray kept his lips tight, though a pulse was leaping in his throat. He refused to admit he'd been startled.

"Not quite what you expected, is it? It's the same in all the sideshows. Never judge too hastily."

The tone of the soft voice seemed clearer now: oily, gloating. Was the proprietor trying to distract him, make him lose his bearings—because of what he'd said about freaks? All right, so the sight of deformity made him more uncomfortable than he'd admitted to himself: so what? He glared at his watch. He was damned if he'd ask the way out. He could bear ten more minutes.

He dodged through alcoves of mirrors: left, always left. Eyes peered at him from separated blobs of flesh; a tangle of disfigurements writhed around him. The buzzing of the unsteady lights seemed louder, as though a hive had burst. The relentless distortions made him dizzy. He had to halt and close his smarting eyes.

Surely he'd walked through the whole of the building by now. Was the proprietor sneaking mirrors into new positions, for revenge? Five minutes, then Gray would ask the way out—and by God, if the man didn't tell him he'd smash his way through.

As Gray opened his eyes, he saw movement at the end of the passage. Good God, what had it been? Himself, of course: he must have shifted inadvertently. Surely that was a parody of himself beneath the grime on the glass. Beyond the passage, to the left, he heard a click.

"These are the last of the mirrors,' the voice said.

That must mean that he was nearly free. Gray headed for the voice, almost running. Overhead the buzzing jerked close; light twitched in the mirrors. He avoided glancing at the glass at the end of the passage. On the left a mirror had swung back. Shaking his head to clear it of dizziness, buzzing, oppression, he stepped through the gap.

The room within was smaller than a cell. An even dimmer light crawled feebly in a tube, stuttering. He peered at the rectangles of glass on the walls. Surely they weren't mirrors. Were they paintings?

"These are what I started with." The voice was beyond the mirror at the far end—the exit, presumably. "A payment for services, that's what they were supposed to be. You meet strange folk on the road."

Gray faced one panel. No, it wasn't a painting; it was too luminous. Yet he could see the sun setting behind mountains. On one slope a small town bristled with turrets. How could the town glow more profoundly than the sky, as though with an inner light?

The image was receding. Momentarily he felt that he was watching it not through dusty glass but through a veil of mist. He stepped forward in pursuit and the glass turned muddily opaque at once. Some kind of optical trick, nothing more—but he turned quickly to the other panels, into which images were retreating. Before he could reach any surface, all the glass was grey and dull.

"One more," said the voice.

One sheet of glass was not opaque: the one at the far end of the cell. He advanced, thrusting out his hand to shove it aside. His hand bulged in the mirror, pumped up like a balloon whose neck was his wrist. The glass made stumpy pillars of his legs, and dragged his head like soft wax halfway down

his arm. His face—He couldn't take any more distortions; he felt giddy and nauseous. His eyelids fell shut.

When he heard the click, his eyes opened. The mirror had moved, exposing dimness. He stumbled quickly forward. He hadn't realised how dizzy he was; he could hardly walk or focus his eyes. But he must get out while he had the chance. Why? What was he escaping?

As soon as he was through, the mirror clicked shut. But it didn't feel like earth or concrete underfoot—more like a patchy carpet. He blinked his eyes toward focus. Good God, he was in a caravan! He opened his mouth to protest; he struggled to regain control of his lips.

"That mirror made me what I am," the voice said.

Gray staggered about, trying to keep his balance, to raise his head. Suddenly he realised that it wasn't only dizziness that troubled him; the caravan was moving. It was crowded; he heard squirming in corners and on bunks. As his eyes slowly focused, he saw something like a hand holding a hand-mirror toward him. In its oval, the reflection of the caravan's interior was undistorted. By God, they'd better let him out; they wouldn't distract him with any more nonsense. But as he glimpsed the hand that he was thrusting out to ward off the mirror, he began to moan.

The Voice Of The Beach

"Campbell's Cthulhu Mythos masterpiece seems as indebted to Blackwood's *The Willows* as any of Lovecraft's fiction."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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I

I met Neal at the station.

Of course I can describe it, I have only to go up the road and look, but there is no need. That isn't what I have to get out of me. It isn't me, it's out there, it can be described. I need all my energy for that, all my concentration, but perhaps it will help if I can remember before that, when everything looked manageable, expressible, familiar enough—when I could bear to look out of the window.

Neal was standing alone on the small platform, and now I see that I dare not go up the road after all, or out of the house. It doesn't matter, my memories are clear, they will help me hold on. Neal must have rebuffed the station-master, who was happy to chat to anyone. He was gazing at the bare tracks, sharpened by June light, as they cut their way through the forest—gazing at them as a suicide might gaze at a razor. He saw me and swept his hair back from his face, over his shoulders. Suffering had pared his face down, stretched the skin tighter and paler over the skull. I can remember exactly how he looked before.

"I thought I'd missed the station," he said, though surely the station's name was visible enough, despite the flowers that scaled the board. If only he had! "I had to make so many changes. Never mind. Christ, it's good to see you. You look marvellous. I expect you can thank the sea for that." His eyes had brightened, and he sounded so full of life that it was spilling out of him in a tumble of words, but his handshake felt like cold bone.

I hurried him along the road that led home and to the—He was beginning to screw up his eyes at the sunlight, and I thought I should get him inside; presumably headaches were among his symptoms. At first the road is

gravel, fragments of which always succeed in working their way into your shoes. Where the trees fade out as though stifled by sand, a concrete path turns aside. Sand sifts over the gravel; you can hear the gritty conflict underfoot, and the musing of the sea. Beyond the path stands this crescent of bungalows. Surely all this is still true. But I remember now that the bungalows looked unreal against the burning blue sky and the dunes like embryo hills; they looked like a dream set down in the piercing light of June.

"You must be doing well to afford this." Neal sounded listless, envious only because he felt it was expected. If only he had stayed that way! But once inside the bungalow he seemed pleased by everything—the view, my books on show in the living room bookcase, my typewriter displaying a token page that bore a token phrase, the Breughel prints that used to remind me of humanity. Abruptly, with a moody eagerness that I hardly remarked at the time, he said "Shall we have a look at the beach?"

There, I've written the word. I can describe the beach, I must describe it, it is all that's in my head. I have my notebook which I took with me that day. Neal led the way along the gravel path. Beyond the concrete turn-off to the bungalows the gravel was engulfed almost at once by sand, despite the thick ranks of low bushes that had been planted to keep back the sand. We squeezed between the bushes, which were determined to close their ranks across the gravel.

Once through, we felt the breeze whose waves passed through the marram grass that spiked the dunes. Neal's hair streamed back, pale as the grass. The trudged dunes were slowing him down, eager as he was. We slithered down to the beach, and the sound of the unfurling sea leapt closer, as though we'd awakened it from dreaming. The wind fluttered trapped in my ears, leafed through my notebook as I scribbled the image of wakening and thought with an appalling innocence: perhaps I can use that image. Now we were walled off from the rest of the world by the dunes, faceless mounds with unkempt green wigs, mounds almost as white as the sun.

Even then I felt that the beach was somehow separate from its surroundings: introverted, I remember thinking. I put it down to the shifting haze which hovered above the sea, the haze which I could never focus, whose distance I could never quite judge. From the self-contained stage of the beach the bungalows looked absurdly intrusive, anachronisms rejected

by the geomorphological time of sand and sea. Even the skeletal car and the other debris, half engulfed by the beach near the coast road, looked less alien. These are my memories, the most stable things left to me, and I must go on. I found today that I cannot go back any further.

Neal was staring, eyes narrowed against the glare, along the waste of beach that stretched in the opposite direction from the coast road and curved out of sight. "Doesn't anyone come down here? There's no pollution, is there?"

"It depends on who you believe." Often the beach seemed to give me a headache, even when there was no glare—and then there was the way the beach looked at night. "Still, I think most folk go up the coast to the resorts. That's the only reason I can think of."

We were walking. Beside us the edge of the glittering sea moved in several directions simultaneously. Moist sand, sleek as satin, displayed shells which appeared to flash patterns, faster than my mind could grasp. Pinpoint mirrors of sand gleamed, rapid as Morse. My notes say this is how it seemed.

"Don't your neighbours ever come down?"

Neal's voice made me start. I had been engrossed in the designs of shell and sand. Momentarily I was unable to judge the width of the beach: a few paces or miles? I grasped my sense of perspective, but a headache was starting, a dull impalpable grip that encircled my cranium. Now I know what all this meant, but I want to remember how I felt before I knew.

"Very seldom," I said. "Some of them think there's quicksand." One old lady, sitting in her garden to glare at the dunes like Canute versus sand, had told me that warning notices kept sinking. I'd never encountered quicksand, but I always brought my stick to help me trudge.

"So I'll have the beach to myself."

I took that to be a hint. At least he would leave me alone if I wanted to work. "The bungalow people are mostly retired," I said. "Those who aren't in wheelchairs go driving. I imagine they've had enough of sand, even if they aren't past walking on it." Once, further up the beach, I'd encountered nudists censoring themselves with towels or straw hats as they ventured down to the sea, but Neal could find out about them for himself. I wonder now if I ever saw them at all, or simply felt that I should.

Was he listening? His head was cocked, but not towards me. He'd slowed, and was staring at the ridges and furrows of the beach, at which the sea was lapping. All at once the ridges reminded me of convolutions of the brain, and I took out my notebook as the grip on my skull tightened. The beach as a subconscious, my notes say: the horizon as the imagination—sunlight set a ship ablaze on the edge of the world, an image that impressed me as vividly yet indefinably symbolic—the debris as memories, half-buried, half-comprehensible. But then what were the bungalows, perched above the dunes like boxes carved of dazzling bone? I glanced up. A cloud had leaned towards me. No, it had been more as though the cloud were rushing at the beach from the horizon, dauntingly fast. Had it been a cloud? It had seemed more massive than a ship. The sky was empty now, and I told myself that it had been an effect of the haze—the magnified shadow of a gull, perhaps.

My start had enlivened Neal, who began to chatter like a television wakened by a kick. "It'll be good for me to be alone here, to get used to being alone. Mary and the children found themselves another home, you see. He earns more money than I'll ever see, if that's what they want. He's the head-of-the-house type, if that's what they want. I couldn't be that now if I tried, not with the way my nerves are now." I can still hear everything he said, and I suppose that I knew what had been wrong with him. Now they are just words.

"That's why I'm talking so much," he said, and picked up a spiral shell, I thought to quiet himself.

"That's much too small. You'll never hear anything in that."

Minutes passed before he took it away from his ear and handed it to me. "No?" he said.

I put it to my ear and wasn't sure what I was hearing. No, I didn't throw the shell away, I didn't crush it underfoot; in any case, how could I have done that to the rest of the beach? I was straining to hear, straining to make out how the sound differed from the usual whisper of a shell. Was it that it seemed to have a rhythm I couldn't define, or that it sounded shrunken by distance rather than cramped by the shell? I felt expectant, entranced—precisely the feeling I'd tried so often to communicate in my fiction, I believe. Something stooped towards me from the horizon. I jerked, and dropped the shell.

There was nothing but the dazzle of sunlight that leapt at me from the waves. The haze above the sea had darkened, staining the light, and I told myself that was what I'd seen. But when Neal picked up another shell I felt uneasy. The grip on my skull was very tight now. As I regarded the vistas of empty sea and sky and beach my expectancy grew oppressive, too imminent, no longer enjoyable.

"I think I'll head back now. Maybe you should as well," I said, rummaging for an uncontrived reason, "just in case there is quicksand."

"All right. It's in all of them," he said, displaying an even smaller shell to which he'd just listened. I remember thinking that his observation was so self-evident as to be meaningless.

As I turned towards the bungalows the glitter of the sea clung to my eyes. Afterimages crowded among the debris. They were moving; I strained to make out their shape. What did they resemble? Symbols—hieroglyphs? Limbs writhing rapidly, as if in a ritual dance? They made the debris appear to shift, to crumble. The herd of faceless dunes seemed to edge forward; an image leaned towards me out of the sky. I closed my eyes, to calm their antics, and wondered if I should take the warnings of pollution more seriously.

We walked towards the confusion of footprints that climbed the dunes. Neal glanced about at the sparkling sand. Never before had the beach so impressed me as a complex of patterns, and perhaps that means it was already too late. Spotlighted by the sun, it looked so artificial that I came close to doubting how it felt underfoot.

The bungalows looked unconvincing too. Still, when we'd slumped in our chairs for a while, letting the relative dimness soothe our eyes while our bodies guzzled every hint of coolness, I forgot about the beach. We shared two litres of wine and talked about my work, about his lack of any since graduating.

Later I prepared melon, salads, water ices. Neal watched, obviously embarrassed that he couldn't help. He seemed lost without Mary. One more reason not to marry, I thought, congratulating myself.

As we ate he kept staring out at the beach. A ship was caught in the amber sunset: a dream of escape. I felt the image less deeply than I'd experienced

the metaphors of the beach; it was less oppressive. The band around my head had faded.

When it grew dark Neal pressed close to the pane. "What's that?" he demanded.

I switched out the light so that he could see. Beyond the dim humps of the dunes the beach was glowing, a dull pallor like moonlight stifled by fog. Do all beaches glow at night? "That's what makes people say there's pollution," I said.

"Not the light," he said impatiently. "The other things. What's moving?"

I squinted through the pane. For minutes I could see nothing but the muffled glow. At last, when my eyes were smarting, I began to see forms thin and stiff as scarecrows jerking into various contorted poses. Gazing for so long was bound to produce something of the kind, and I took them to be afterimages of the tangle, barely visible, of bushes.

"I think I'll go and see."

"I shouldn't go down there at night," I said, having realised that I'd never gone to the beach at night and that I felt a definite, though irrational, aversion to doing so. Eventually he went to bed. Despite all his travelling, he'd needed to drink to make himself sleepy. I heard him open his bedroom window, which overlooked the beach. There is so much still to write, so much to struggle through, and what good can it do me now?

II

I had taken the bungalow, one of the few entries in my diary says, to give myself the chance to write without being distracted by city life—the cries of the telephone, the tolling of the doorbell, the omnipresent clamour—only to discover, once I'd left it behind, that city life was my theme. But I was a compulsive writer: if I failed to write for more than a few days I became depressed. Writing was the way I overcame the depression of not writing. Now writing seems to be my only way of hanging on to what remains of myself, of delaying the end.

The day after Neal arrived, I typed a few lines of a sample chapter. It wasn't a technique I enjoyed—tearing a chapter out of the context of a novel that didn't yet exist. In any case, I was distracted by the beach, compelled to scribble notes about it, trying to define the images it suggested. I hoped

these notes might build into a story. I was picking at the notes in search of their story when Neal said "Maybe I can lose myself for a bit in the countryside."

"Mm," I said curtly, not looking up.

"Didn't you say there was a deserted village?"

By the time I directed him I would have lost the thread of my thoughts. The thread had been frayed and tangled, anyway. As long as I was compelled to think about the beach I might just as well be down there. I can still write as if I don't know the end, it helps me not to think of—"I'll come with you," I said.

The weather was nervous. Archipelagos of cloud floated low on the hazy sky, above the sea; great Rorschach blots rose from behind the slate hills, like dissolved stone. As we squeezed through the bushes, a shadow came hunching over the dunes to meet us. When my foot touched the beach a moist shadowy chill seized me, as though the sand disguised a lurking marsh. Then sunlight spilled over the beach, which leapt into clarity.

I strode, though Neal appeared to want to dawdle. I wasn't anxious to linger: after all, I told myself, it might rain. Glinting mosaics of grains of sand changed restlessly around me, never quite achieving a pattern. Patches of sand, flat shapeless elongated ghosts, glided over the beach and faltered, waiting for another breeze. Neal kept peering at them as though to make out their shapes.

Half a mile along the beach the dunes began to sag, to level out. The slate hills were closing in. Were they the source of the insidious chill? Perhaps I was feeling the damp; a penumbra of moisture welled up around each of my footprints. The large wet shapes seemed quite unrelated to my prints, an effect which I found unnerving. When I glanced back, it looked as though something enormous was imitating my walk.

The humidity was almost suffocating. My head felt clamped by tension. Wind blundered booming in my ears, even when I could feel no breeze. Its jerky rhythm was distracting because indefinable. Grey cloud had flooded the sky; together with the hills and the thickening haze above the sea, it caged the beach. At the edge of my eye the convolutions of the beach seemed to writhe, to struggle to form patterns. The insistent sparkling nagged at my mind.

I'd begun to wonder whether I had been blaming imagined pollution for the effects of heat and humidity—I was debating whether to turn back before I grew dizzy or nauseous—when Neal said "Is that it?"

I peered ahead, trying to squint the dazzle of waves from my eyes. A quarter of a mile away the hills ousted the dunes completely. Beneath the spiky slate a few uprights of rock protruded from the beach like standing stones. They glowed sullenly as copper through the haze; they were encrusted with sand. Surely that wasn't the village.

"Yes, that's it," Neal said, and strode forward.

I followed him, because the village must be further on. The veil of haze drew back, the vertical rocks gleamed unobscured, and I halted bewildered. The rocks weren't encrusted at all; they were slate, grey as the table of rock on which they stood above the beach. Though the slate was jagged, some of its gaps were regular: windows, doorways. Here and there walls still formed corners. How could the haze have distorted my view so spectacularly?

Neal was climbing rough steps carved out of the slate table. Without warning, as I stood confused by my misperception, I felt utterly alone. A bowl of dull haze trapped me on the bare sand. Slate, or something more massive and vague, loomed over me. The kaleidoscope of shells was about to shift; the beach was ready to squirm, to reveal its pattern, shake off its artificiality. The massive looming would reach down, and my start felt like a convulsive awakening. The table was deserted except for the fragments of buildings. I could hear only the wind, baying as though its mouth was vast and uncontrollable. "Neal," I called. Dismayed by the smallness of my voice, I shouted "Neal."

I heard what sounded like scales of armour chafing together—slate, of course. The grey walls shone lifelessly, cavitied as skulls; gaping windows displayed an absence of faces, of rooms. Then Neal's head poked out of half a wall. "Yes, come on," he said. "It's strange."

As I climbed the steps, sand gritted underfoot like sugar. Low drifts of sand were piled against the walls; patches glinted on the small plateau. Could that sand have made the whole place look encrusted and half-buried? I told myself that it had been an effect of the heat.

Broken walls surrounded me. They glared like storm clouds in lightning. They formed a maze whose centre was desertion. That image stirred

another, too deep in my mind to be definable. The place was—not a maze, but a puzzle whose solution would clarify a pattern, a larger mystery. I realised that then; why couldn't I have fled?

I suppose I was held by the enigma of the village. I knew there were quarries in the hills above, but I'd never learned why the village had been abandoned. Perhaps its meagreness had killed it—I saw traces of less than a dozen buildings. It seemed further dwarfed by the beach; the sole visible trace of humanity, it dwindled beneath the gnawing of sand and the elements. I found it enervating, its lifelessness infectious. Should I stay with Neal, or risk leaving him there? Before I could decide, I heard him say amid a rattle of slate "This is interesting."

In what way? He was clambering about an exposed cellar, among shards of slate. Whatever the building had been, it had stood furthest from the sea. "I don't mean the cellar," Neal said. "I mean that."

Reluctantly I peered where he was pointing. In the cellar wall furthest from the beach, a rough alcove had been chipped out of the slate. It was perhaps a yard deep, but barely high enough to accommodate a huddled man. Neal was already crawling in. I heard slate crack beneath him; his feet protruded from the darkness. Of course they weren't about to jerk convulsively—but my nervousness made me back away when his muffled voice said "What's this?"

He backed out like a terrier with his prize. It was an old notebook, its pages stuck together in a moist wad. "Someone covered it up with slate," he said, as though that should tempt my interest.

Before I could prevent him he was sitting at the edge of the beach and peeling the pages gingerly apart. Not that I was worried that he might be destroying a fragment of history—I simply wasn't sure that I wanted to read whatever had been hidden in the cellar. Why couldn't I have followed my instincts?

He disengaged the first page carefully, then frowned. "This begins in the middle of something. There must be another book."

Handing me the notebook, he stalked away to scrabble in the cellar. I sat on the edge of the slate table and glanced at the page. It is before me now on my desk. The pages have crumbled since then—the yellowing paper looks more and more like sand—but the large writing is still legible, unsteady

capitals in a hand that might once have been literate before it grew senile. No punctuation separates the words, though blotches sometimes do. Beneath the relentless light at the deserted village, the faded ink looked unreal, scarcely present at all.

> FROM THE BEACH EVERYONES GONE NOW BUT ME ITS NOT SO BAD IN DAYTIME EXCEPT I CANT GO BUT AT NIGHT I CAN HEAR IT REACHING FOR (a blot of fungus had consumed a word here) AND THE VOICES ITS VOICE AND THE GLOWING AT LEAST IT HELPS ME SEE DOWN HERE WHEN IT COMES

I left it at that; my suddenly unsteady fingers might have torn the page. I wish to God they had. I was on edge with the struggle between humidity and the chill of slate and beach; I felt feverish. As I stared at the words they touched impressions, half-memories. If I looked up, would the beach have changed?

I heard Neal slithering on slate, turning over fragments. In my experience stones were best not turned over. Eventually he returned. I was dully fascinated by the shimmering of the beach; my fingers pinched the notebook shut.

"I can't find anything," he said. "I'll have to come back." He took the notebook from me and began to read, muttering "What? Jesus!" Gently he separated the next page from the wad. "This gets stranger," he murmured. "What kind of guy was this? Imagine what it must have been like to live inside his head."

How did he know it had been a man? I stared at the pages to prevent Neal from reading them aloud. At least it saved me from having to watch the antics of the beach, which moved like slow flames, but the introverted meandering words made me nervous.

> IT CANT REACH DOWN HERE NOT YET BUT OUTSIDE IS CHANGING OUTSIDES PART OF THE PATTERN I READ THE PATTERN THATS WHY I CANT GO SAW THEM DANCING THE PATTERN WANTS ME TO DANCE ITS ALIVE BUT ITS ONLY THE IMAGE BEING PUT TOGETHER

Neal was wide-eyed, fascinated. Feverish disorientation gripped my skull; I felt too unwell to move. The heat haze must be closing in; at the edge of

my vision, everything was shifting.

> WHEN THE PATTERNS DONE IT CAN COME BACK AND GROW ITS HUNGRY TO BE EVERYTHING I KNOW HOW IT WORKS THE SAND MOVES AT NIGHT AND SUCKS YOU DOWN OR MAKES YOU GO WHERE IT WANTS TO MAKE [a blotch had eaten several words] WHEN THEY BUILT LEWIS THERE WERE OLD STONES THAT THEY MOVED MAYBE THE STONES KEPT IT SMALL NOW ITS THE BEACH AT LEAST

On the next page the letters are much larger and more wavery. Had the light begun to fail, or had the writer been retreating from the light—from the entrance to the cellar? I didn't know which alternative I disliked more.

> GOT TO WRITE HANDS SHAKY FROM CHIPPING TUNNEL AND NO FOOD THEYRE SINGING NOW HELPING IT REACH CHANTING WITH NO MOUTHS THEY SING AND DANCE THE PATTERN FOR IT TO REACH THROUGH

Now there are very few words to the page. The letters are jagged, as though the writer's hand kept twitching violently.

> GLOW COMING ITS OUT THERE NOW ITS LOOKING IN AT ME IT CANT GET HOLD IF I KEEP WRITING THEY WANT ME TO DANCE SO ITLL GROW WANT ME TO BE

There it ends. "Ah, the influence of Joyce," I commented sourly. The remaining pages are blank except for fungus. I managed to stand up; my head felt like a balloon pumped full of gas. "I'd like to go back now. I think I've a touch of sunstroke."

A hundred yards away, I glanced back at the remnants of the village—Lewis, I assumed it had been called. The stone remains wavered as though striving to achieve a new shape; the haze made them look coppery, fat with a crust of sand. I was desperate to get out of the heat.

Closer to the sea I felt slightly less oppressed—but the whispering of sand, the liquid murmur of waves, the bumbling of the wind, all chanted together insistently. Everywhere on the beach were patterns, demanding to be read.

Neal clutched the notebook under his arm. "What do you make of it?" he said eagerly.

His indifference to my health annoyed me, and hence so did the question. "He was mad," I said. "Living here—is it any wonder? Maybe he moved there after the place was abandoned. The beach must glow there too. That must have finished him. You saw how he tried to dig himself a refuge. That's all there is to it."

"Do you think so? I wonder," Neal said, and picked up a shell.

As he held the shell to his ear, his expression became so withdrawn and unreadable that I felt a pang of dismay. Was I seeing a symptom of his nervous trouble? He stood like a fragment of the village—as though the shell was holding him, rather than the reverse.

Eventually he mumbled "That's it, that's what he meant. Chanting with no mouths."

I took the shell only very reluctantly; my head was pounding. I pressed the shell to my ear, though I was deafened by the storm of my blood. If the shell was muttering, I couldn't bear the jaggedness of its rhythm. I seemed less to hear it than to feel it deep in my skull.

"Nothing like it," I said, almost snarling, and thrust the shell at him.

Now that I'd had to strain to hear it, I couldn't rid myself of the muttering; it seemed to underlie the sounds of wind and sea. I trudged onward, eyes half-shut. Moisture sprang up around my feet; the glistening shapes around my prints looked larger and more definite. I had to cling to my sense of my own size and shape.

When we neared home I couldn't see the bungalows. There appeared to be only the beach, grown huge and blinding. At last Neal heard a car leaving the crescent, and led me up the path of collapsed footprints.

In the bungalow I lay willing the lights and patterns to fade from my closed eyes. Neal's presence didn't soothe me, even though he was only poring over the notebook. He'd brought a handful of shells indoors. Occasionally he held one to his ear, muttering "It's still there, you know. It does sound like chanting." At least, I thought peevishly, *I* knew when something was a symptom of illness—but the trouble was that in my delirium I was tempted to agree with him. I felt I had almost heard what the sound was trying to be.

III

Next day Neal returned to the deserted village. He was gone for so long that even amid the clamour of my disordered senses, I grew anxious. I couldn't watch for him; whenever I tried, the white-hot beach began to judder, to quake, and set me shivering.

At last he returned, having failed to find another notebook. I hoped that would be the end of it, but his failure had simply frustrated him. His irritability chafed against mine. He managed to prepare a bedraggled salad, of which I ate little. As the tide of twilight rolled in from the horizon he sat by the window, gazing alternately at the beach and at the notebook.

Without warning he said "I'm going for a stroll. Can I borrow your stick?"

I guessed that he meant to go to the beach. Should he be trapped by darkness and sea, I was in no condition to go to his aid. "I'd rather you didn't," I said feebly.

"Don't worry, I won't lose it."

My lassitude suffocated my arguments. I lolled in my chair and through the open window heard him padding away, his footsteps muffled by sand. Soon there was only the vague slack rumble of the sea, blundering back and forth, and the faint hiss of sand in the bushes.

After half an hour I made myself stand up, though the ache in my head surged and surged, and gaze out at the whitish beach. The whole expanse appeared to flicker like hints of lightning. I strained my eyes. The beach looked crowded with debris, all of which danced to the flickering. I had to peer at every movement, but there was no sign of Neal.

I went out and stood between the bushes. The closer I approached the beach, the more crowded with obscure activity it seemed to be—but I suspected that much, if not all, of this could be blamed on my condition, for within five minutes my head felt so tight and unbalanced that I had to retreat indoors, away from the heat.

Though I'd meant to stay awake, I was dozing when Neal returned. I woke to find him gazing from the window. As I opened my eyes the beach lurched forward, shining. It didn't look crowded now, presumably because my eyes had had a rest. What could Neal see to preoccupy him so? "Enjoy your stroll?" I said sleepily.

He turned, and I felt a twinge of disquiet. His face looked stiff with doubt; his eyes were uneasy, a frown dug its ruts in his forehead. "It doesn't glow,"

he said. Assuming I knew what he was talking about, I could only wonder how badly his nerves were affecting his perceptions. If anything, the beach looked brighter. "How do you mean?"

"The beach down by the village—it doesn't glow. Not any more."

"Oh, I see."

He looked offended, almost contemptuous, though I couldn't understand why he'd expected me to be less indifferent. He withdrew into a scrutiny of the notebook. He might have been trying to solve an urgent problem.

Perhaps if I hadn't been ill I would have been able to divert Neal from his obsession, but I could hardly venture outside without growing dizzy; I could only wait in the bungalow for my state to improve. Neither Neal nor I had had sunstroke before, but he seemed to know how to treat it. "Keep drinking water. Cover yourself if you start shivering." He didn't mind my staying in—he seemed almost too eager to go out alone. Did that matter? Next day he was bound only for the library.

My state was crippling my thoughts, yet even if I'd been healthy I couldn't have imagined how he would look when he returned: excited, conspiratorial, smug. "I've got a story for you," he said at once.

Most such offers proved to be prolonged and dull. "Oh yes?" I said warily.

He sat forward as though to infect me with suspense. "That village we went to—it isn't called Lewis. It's called Strand."

Was he pausing to give me a chance to gasp or applaud? "Oh yes," I said without enthusiasm.

"Lewis was another village, further up the coast. It's deserted too."

That seemed to be his punch line. The antics of patterns within my eyelids had made me irritable. "It doesn't seem much of a story," I complained.

"Well, that's only the beginning." When his pause had forced me to open my eyes, he said "I read a book about your local unexplained mysteries."

"Why?"

"Look, if you don't want to hear—"

"Go on, go on, now you've started." Not to know might be even more nerve-racking.

"There wasn't much about Lewis," he said eventually, perhaps to give himself more time to improvise.

"Was there much at all?"

"Yes, certainly. It may not sound like much. Nobody knows why Lewis was abandoned, but then nobody knows that about Strand either." My impatience must have showed, for he added hastily "What I mean is, the people who left Strand wouldn't say why."

"Someone asked them?"

"The woman who wrote the book. She managed to track some of them down. They'd moved as far inland as they could, that was one thing she noticed. And they always had some kind of nervous disorder. Talking about Strand always made them more nervous, as though they felt that talking might make something happen, or something might hear."

"That's what the author said."

"Right."

"What was her name?"

Could he hear my suspicion? "Jesus *Christ*," he snarled, "I don't know. What does it matter?"

In fact it didn't, not to me. His story had made me feel worse. The noose had tightened round my skull, the twilit beach was swarming and vibrating. I closed my eyes. Shut up, I roared at him. Go away.

"There was one thing," he persisted. "One man said that kids kept going on the beach at night. Their parents tried all ways to stop them. Some of them questioned their kids, but it was as though the kids couldn't stop themselves. Why was that, do you think?" When I refused to answer he said irrelevantly "All this was in the 1930s."

I couldn't stand hearing children called kids. The recurring word had made me squirm: drips of slang, like water torture. And I'd never heard such a feeble punch line. His clumsiness as a storyteller enraged me; he couldn't even organise his material. I was sure he hadn't read any such book.

After a while I peered out from beneath my eyelids, hoping he'd decide that I was asleep. He was poring over the notebook again, and looked rapt. I only wished that people and reviewers would read my books as carefully. He kept rubbing his forehead, as though to enliven his brain.

I dozed. When I opened my eyes he was waiting for me. He shoved the notebook at me to demonstrate something. "Look, I'm sorry," I said without much effort to sound so. "I'm not in the mood."

He stalked into his room, emerging without the book but with my stick. "I'm going for a walk," he announced sulkily, like a spouse after a quarrel.

I dozed gratefully, for I felt more delirious; my head felt packed with grains of sand that gritted together. In fact, the whole of me was made of sand. Of course it was true that I was composed of particles, and I thought my delirium had found a metaphor for that. But the grains that floated through my inner vision were neither sand nor atoms. A member, dark and vague, was reaching for them. I struggled to awaken; I didn't want to distinguish its shape, and still less did I want to learn what it meant to do with the grains—for as the member sucked them into itself, engulfing them in a way that I refused to perceive, I saw that the grains were worlds and stars.

I woke shivering. My body felt uncontrollable and unfamiliar. I let it shake itself to rest—not that I had a choice, but I was concentrating on the problem of why I'd woken head raised, like a watchdog. What had I heard?

Perhaps only wind and sea: both seemed louder, more intense. My thoughts became entangled in their rhythm. I felt there had been another sound. The bushes threshed, sounding parched with sand. Had I heard Neal returning? I stumbled into his room. It was empty.

As I stood by his open window, straining my ears, I thought I heard his voice, blurred by the dull tumult of waves. I peered out. Beyond the low heads of the bushes, the glow of the beach shuddered towards me. I had to close my eyes, for I couldn't tell whether the restless scrawny shapes were crowding my eyeballs or the beach; it felt, somehow, like both. When I looked again, I seemed to see Neal.

Or was it Neal? The unsteady stifled glow aggravated the distortions of my vision. Was the object just a new piece of debris? I found its shape bewildering; my mind kept apprehending it as a symbol printed on the whitish expanse. The luminosity made it seem to shift, tentatively and jerkily, as though it were learning to pose. The light, or my eyes, surrounded it with dancing.

Had my sense of perspective left me? I was misjudging size, either of the beach or of the figure. Yes, it was a figure, however large it seemed. It was moving its arms like a limp puppet. And it was half-buried in the sand.

I staggered outside, shouting to Neal, and then I recoiled. The sky must be thick with a storm cloud; it felt suffocatingly massive, solid as rock, and close enough to crush me. I forced myself towards the bushes, though my head was pounding, squeezed into a lump of pain.

Almost at once I heard plodding on the dunes. My blood half deafened me; the footsteps sounded vague and immense. I peered along the dim path. At the edge of my vision the beach flickered repetitively. Immense darkness hovered over me. Unnervingly close to me, swollen by the glow, a head rose into view. For a moment my tension seemed likely to crack my skull. Then Neal spoke. His words were incomprehensible amid the wind, but it was his voice.

As we trudged back towards the lights the threat of a storm seemed to withdraw, and I blamed it on my tension. "Of course I'm all right," he muttered irritably. "I fell and that made me shout, that's all." Once we were inside I saw the evidence of his fall; his trousers were covered with sand up to the knees.

IV

Next day he hardly spoke to me. He went down early to the beach, and stayed there. I didn't know if he was obsessed or displaying pique. Perhaps he couldn't bear to be near me; invalids can find each other unbearable.

Often I glimpsed him, wandering beyond the dunes. He walked as though in an elaborate maze and scrutinised the beach. Was he searching for the key to the notebook? Was he looking for pollution? By the time he found it, I thought sourly, it would have infected him.

I felt too enervated to intervene. As I watched, Neal appeared to vanish intermittently; if I looked away, I couldn't locate him again for minutes. The beach blazed like bone, and was never still. I couldn't blame the aberrations of my vision solely on heat and haze.

When Neal returned, late that afternoon, I asked him to phone for a doctor. He looked taken aback, but eventually said "There's a box by the station, isn't there?"

"One of the neighbours would let you phone."

"No, I'll walk down. They're probably all wondering why you've let some long-haired freak squat in your house, as it is."

He went out, rubbing his forehead gingerly. He often did that now. That, and his preoccupation with the demented notebook, were additional reasons why I wanted a doctor: I felt Neal needed examining too.

By the time he returned, it was dusk. On the horizon, embers dulled in the sea. The glow of the beach was already stirring; it seemed to have intensified during the last few days. I told myself I had grown hypersensitive.

"Dr Lewis. He's coming tomorrow." Neal hesitated, then went on: "I think I'll just have a stroll on the beach. Want to come?"

"Good God no. I'm ill, can't you see?"

"I know that." His impatience was barely controlled. "A stroll might do you good. There isn't any sunlight now."

"I'll stay in until I've seen the doctor."

He looked disposed to argue, but his restlessness overcame him. As he left, his bearing seemed to curse me. Was his illness making him intolerant of mine, or did he feel that I'd rebuffed a gesture of reconciliation?

I felt too ill to watch him from the window. When I looked I could seldom distinguish him or make out which movements were his. He appeared to be walking slowly, poking at the beach with my stick. I wondered if he'd found quicksand. Again his path made me think of a maze. I dozed, far longer than I'd intended. The doctor loomed over me. Peering into my eyes, he reached down. I began to struggle, as best I could: I'd glimpsed the depths of his eye-sockets, empty and dry as interstellar space. I didn't need his treatment, I would be fine if he left me alone, just let me go. But he had reached deep into me. As though I was a bladder that had burst, I felt myself flood into him; I felt vast emptiness absorb my substance and my self. Dimly I understood that it was nothing like emptiness—that my mind refused to perceive what it was, so alien and frightful was its teeming.

It was dawn. The muffled light teemed. The beach glowed fitfully. I gasped: someone was down on the beach, so huddled that he looked

shapeless. He rose, levering himself up with my stick, and began to pace haphazardly. I knew at once that he'd spent the night on the beach.

After that I stayed awake. I couldn't imagine the state of his mind, and I was a little afraid of being asleep when he returned. But when, hours later, he came in to raid the kitchen for a piece of cheese, he seemed hardly to see me. He was muttering repetitively under his breath. His eyes looked dazzled by the beach, sunk in his obsession.

"When did the doctor say he was coming?"

"Later," he mumbled, and hurried down to the beach.

I hoped he would stay there until the doctor came. Occasionally I glimpsed him at his intricate pacing. Ripples of heat deformed him; his blurred flesh looked unstable. Whenever I glanced at the beach it leapt forward, dauntingly vivid. Cracks of light appeared in the sea. Clumps of grass seemed to rise twitching, as though the dunes were craning to watch Neal. Five minutes' vigil at the window was as much as I could bear.

The afternoon consumed time. It felt as lethargic and enervating as four in the morning. There was no sign of the doctor. I kept gazing from the front door. Nothing moved on the crescent except wind-borne hints of the beach.

Eventually I tried to phone. Though I could feel the heat of the pavement through the soles of my shoes, the day seemed bearable; only threats of pain plucked at my skull. But nobody was at home. The bungalows stood smugly in the evening light. When I attempted to walk to the phone box, the noose closed on my skull at once.

In my hall I halted startled, for Neal had thrown open the living room door as I entered the house. He looked flushed and angry. "Where were you?" he demanded.

"I'm not a hospital case yet, you know. I was trying to phone the doctor."

Unfathomably, he looked relieved. "I'll go down now and call him."

While he was away I watched the beach sink into twilight. At the moment, this seemed to be the only time of day I could endure watching—the time at which shapes become obscure, most capable of metamorphosis. Perhaps this made the antics of the shore acceptable, more apparently natural. Now the beach resembled clouds in front of the moon; it drifted slowly and

variously. If I gazed for long it looked nervous with lightning. The immense bulk of the night edged up from the horizon.

I didn't hear Neal return; I must have been fascinated by the view. I turned to find him watching me. Again he looked relieved—because I was still here? "He's coming soon," he said.

"Tonight, do you mean?"

"Yes, tonight. Why not?"

I didn't know many doctors who would come out at night to treat what was, however unpleasant for me, a relatively minor illness. Perhaps attitudes were different here in the country. Neal was heading for the back door, for the beach. "Do you think you could wait until he comes?" I said, groping for an excuse to detain him. "Just in case I feel worse."

"Yes, you're right." His gaze was opaque. "I'd better stay with you."

We waited. The dark mass closed over beach and bungalows. The nocturnal glow fluttered at the edge of my vision. When I glanced at the beach, the dim shapes were hectic. I seemed to be paying for my earlier fascination, for now the walls of the room looked active with faint patterns.

Where was the doctor? Neal seemed impatient too. The only sounds were the repetitive ticking of his footsteps and the irregular chant of the sea. He kept staring at me as if he wanted to speak; occasionally his mouth twitched. He resembled a child both eager to confess and afraid to do so.

Though he made me uneasy I tried to look encouraging, interested in whatever he might have to say. His pacing took him closer and closer to the beach door. Yes, I nodded, tell me, talk to me.

His eyes narrowed. Behind his eyelids he was pondering. Abruptly he sat opposite me. A kind of smile, tweaked awry, plucked at his lips. "I've got another story for you," he said.

"Really?" I sounded as intrigued as I could.

He picked up the notebook. "I worked it out from this."

So we'd returned to his obsession. As he twitched pages over, his face shifted constantly. His lips moved as though whispering the text. I heard the vast mumbling of the sea.

"Suppose this," he said all at once. "I only said suppose, mind you. This guy was living all alone in Strand. It must have affected his mind, you said

that yourself—having to watch the beach every night. But just suppose it didn't send him mad? Suppose it affected his mind so that he saw things more clearly?"

I hid my impatience. "What things?"

"The beach." His tone reminded me of something—a particular kind of simplicity I couldn't quite place. "Of course we're only supposing. But from things you've read, don't you feel there are places that are closer to another sort of reality, another plane or dimension or whatever?"

"You mean the beach at Strand was like that?" I suggested, to encourage him.

"That's right. Did you feel it too?"

His eagerness startled me. "I felt ill, that's all. I still do."

"Sure. Yes, of course. I mean, we were only supposing. But look at what he says." He seemed glad to retreat into the notebook. "It started at Lewis where the old stones were, then it moved on up the coast to Strand. Doesn't that prove that what he was talking about is unlike anything we know?"

His mouth hung open, awaiting my agreement; it looked empty, robbed of sense. I glanced away, distracted by the fluttering glow beyond him. "I don't know what you mean."

"That's because you haven't read this properly." His impatience had turned harsh. "Look here," he demanded, poking his finger at a group of words as if they were a Bible's oracle.

WHEN THE PATTERNS READY IT CAN COME BACK.

"So what is that supposed to mean?"

"I'll tell you what I think it means—what he meant." His low voice seemed to stumble among the rhythms of the beach. "You see how he keeps mentioning patterns. Suppose this other reality was once all there was? Then ours came into being and occupied some of its space. We didn't destroy it—it can't be destroyed. Maybe it withdrew a little, to bide its time. But it left a kind of imprint of itself, a kind of coded image of itself in our reality. And yet that image is itself in embryo, growing. You see, he says it's alive but it's only the image being put together. Things become part of its image, and that's how it grows. I'm sure that's what he meant."

I felt mentally exhausted and dismayed by all this. How much in need of a doctor was he? I couldn't help sounding a little derisive. "I don't see how you could have put all that together from that book."

"Who says I did?"

His vehemence was shocking. I had to break the tension, for the glare in his eyes looked as unnatural and nervous as the glow of the beach. I went to gaze from the front window, but there was no sign of the doctor. "Don't worry," Neal said. "He's coming."

I stood staring out at the lightless road until he said fretfully "Don't you want to hear the rest?"

He waited until I sat down. His tension was oppressive as the hovering sky. He gazed at me for what seemed minutes; the noose dug into my skull. At last he said "Does this beach feel like anywhere else to you?"

"It feels like a beach."

He shrugged that aside. "You see, he worked out that whatever came from the old stones kept moving towards the inhabited areas. That's how it added to itself. That's why it moved on from Lewis and then Strand."

"All nonsense, of course. Ravings."

"No. It isn't." There was no mistaking the fury that lurked, barely restrained, beneath his low voice. That fury seemed loose in the roaring night, in the wind and violent sea and looming sky. The beach trembled wakefully. "The next place it would move to would be here," he muttered. "It has to be."

"If you accepted the idea in the first place."

A hint of a grimace twitched his cheek; my comment might have been an annoying fly—certainly as trivial. "You can read the pattern out there if you try," he mumbled. "It takes all day. You begin to get a sense of what might be there. It's alive, though nothing like life as we recognise it."

I could only say whatever came into my head, to detain him until the doctor arrived. "Then how do you?"

He avoided the question, but only to betray the depths of his obsession. "Would an insect recognise us as a kind of life?"

Suddenly I realised that he intoned "the beach" as a priest might name his god. We must get away from the beach. Never mind the doctor now. "Look,

Neal, I think we'd better—"

He interrupted me, eyes glaring spasmodically. "It's strongest at night. I think it soaks up energy during the day. Remember, he said that the quicksands only come out at night. They move, you know—they make you follow the pattern. And the sea is different at night. Things come out of it. They're like symbols and yet they're alive. I think the sea creates them. They help make the pattern live."

Appalled, I could only return to the front window and search for the lights of the doctor's car—for any lights at all.

"Yes, yes," Neal said, sounding less impatient than soothing. "He's coming." But as he spoke I glimpsed, reflected in the window, his secret triumphant grin. Eventually I managed to say to his reflection "You didn't call a doctor, did you?"

"No." A smile made his lips tremble like quicksand. "But he's coming."

My stomach had begun to churn slowly; so had my head, and the room. Now I was afraid to stand with my back to Neal, but when I turned I was more afraid to ask the question. "Who?"

For a moment I thought he disdained to answer; he turned his back on me and gazed towards the beach—but I can't write any longer as if I have doubts, as if I don't know the end. The beach was his answer, its awesome transformation was, even if I wasn't sure what I was seeing. Was the beach swollen, puffed up as if by the irregular gasping of the sea? Was it swarming with indistinct shapes, parasites that scuttled dancing over it, sank into it, floated writhing to its surface? Did it quiver along the whole of its length like luminous gelatin? I tried to believe that all this was an effect of the brooding dark—but the dark had closed down so thickly that there might have been no light in the world outside except the fitful glow.

He craned his head back over his shoulder. The gleam in his eyes looked very like the glimmering outside. A web of saliva stretched between his bared teeth. He grinned with a frightful generosity; he'd decided to answer my question more directly. His lips moved as they had when he was reading. At last I heard what I'd tried not to suspect. He was making the sound that I'd tried not to hear in the shells.

Was it meant to be an invocation, or the name I'd asked for? I knew only that the sound, so liquid and inhuman that I could almost think it was

shapeless, nauseated me, so much so that I couldn't separate it from the huge loose voices of wind and sea. It seemed to fill the room. The pounding of my skull tried to imitate its rhythm, which I found impossible to grasp, unbearable. I began to sidle along the wall towards the front door.

His body turned jerkily, as if dangling from his neck. His head laughed, if a sound like struggles in mud is laughter. "You're not going to try to get away?" he cried. "It was getting hold of you before I came, he was. You haven't a chance now, not since we brought him into the house," and he picked up a shell.

As he levelled the mouth of the shell at me my dizziness flooded my skull, hurling me forward. The walls seemed to glare and shake and break out in swarms; I thought that a dark bulk loomed at the window, filling it. Neal's mouth was working, but the nauseating sound might have been roaring deep in a cavern, or a shell. It sounded distant and huge, but coming closer and growing more definite—the voice of something vast and liquid that was gradually taking shape. Perhaps that was because I was listening, but I had no choice.

All at once Neal's free hand clamped his forehead. It looked like a pincer desperate to tear something out of his skull. "It's growing," he cried, somewhere between sobbing and ecstasy. As he spoke, the liquid chant seemed to abate not at all. Before I knew what he meant to do, he'd wrenched open the back door and was gone. In a nightmarish way, his nervous elaborate movements resembled dancing.

As the door crashed open, the roar of the night rushed in. Its leap in volume sounded eager, voracious. I stood paralysed, listening, and couldn't tell how like his chant it sounded. I heard his footsteps, soft and loose, running unevenly over the dunes. Minutes later I thought I heard a faint cry, which sounded immediately engulfed.

I slumped against a chair. I felt relieved, drained, uncaring. The sounds had returned to the beach, where they ought to be; the room looked stable now. Then I grew disgusted with myself. Suppose Neal was injured, or caught in quicksand? I'd allowed his hysteria to gain a temporary hold on my sick perceptions, I told myself—was I going to use that as an excuse not to try to save him?

At last I forced myself outside. All the bungalows were dark. The beach was glimmering, but not violently. I could see nothing wrong with the sky.

Only my dizziness, and the throbbing of my head, threatened to distort my perceptions.

I made myself edge between the bushes, which hissed like snakes, mouths full of sand. The tangle of footprints made me stumble frequently. Sand rattled the spikes of marram grass. At the edge of the dunes, the path felt ready to slide me down to the beach.

The beach was crowded. I had to squint at many of the vague pieces of debris. My eyes grew used to the dimness, but I could see no sign of Neal. Then I peered closer. Was that a pair of sandals, half-buried? Before my giddiness could hurl me to the beach, I slithered down.

Yes, they were Neal's, and a path of bare footprints led away towards the crowd of debris. I poked gingerly at the sandals, and wished I had my stick to test for quicksand—but the sand in which they were partially engulfed was quite solid. Why had he tried to bury them?

I followed his prints, my eyes still adjusting. I refused to imitate his path, for it looped back on itself in intricate patterns which made me dizzy and wouldn't fade from my mind. His paces were irregular, a cripple's dance. He must be a puppet of his nerves, I thought. I was a little afraid to confront him, but I felt a duty to try. His twistings led me among the debris. Low obscure shapes surrounded me: a jagged stump bristling with metal tendrils that groped in the air as I came near; half a car so rusty and misshapen that it looked like a child's fuzzy sketch; the hood of a pram within which glimmered a bald lump of sand. I was glad to emerge from that maze, for the dim objects seemed to shift; I'd even thought the bald lump was opening a crumbling mouth.

But on the open beach there were other distractions. The ripples and patterns of sand were clearer, and appeared to vibrate restlessly. I kept glancing towards the sea, not because its chant was troubling me—though, with its insistent loose rhythm, it was—but because I had a persistent impression that the waves were slowing, sluggish as treacle.

I stumbled, and had to turn back to see what had tripped me. The glow of the beach showed me Neal's shirt, the little of it that was left unburied. There was no mistaking it; I recognised its pattern. The glow made the nylon seem luminous, lit from within.

His prints danced back among the debris. Even then, God help me, I wondered if he was playing a sick joke—if he was waiting somewhere to leap out, to scare me into admitting I'd been impressed. I trudged angrily into the midst of the debris, and wished at once that I hadn't. All the objects were luminous, without shadows.

There was no question now: the glow of the beach was increasing. It made Neal's tracks look larger; their outlines shifted as I squinted at them. I stumbled hastily towards the deserted stretch of beach, and brushed against the half-engulfed car.

That was the moment at which the nightmare became real. I might have told myself that rust had eaten away the car until it was thin as a shell, but I was past deluding myself. All at once I knew that nothing on this beach was as it seemed, for as my hand collided with the car roof, which should have been painfully solid, I felt the roof crumble—and the entire structure flopped on the sand, from which it was at once indistinguishable.

I fled towards the open beach. But there was no relief, for the entire beach was glowing luridly, like mud struggling to suffocate a moon. Among the debris I glimpsed the rest of Neal's clothes, half absorbed by the beach. As I staggered into the open, I saw his tracks ahead—saw how they appeared to grow, to alter until they became unrecognisable, and then to peter out at a large dark shapeless patch on the sand.

I glared about, terrified. I couldn't see the bungalows. After minutes I succeeded in glimpsing the path, the mess of footprints cluttering the dune. I began to pace towards it, very slowly and quietly, so as not to be noticed by the beach and the looming sky.

But the dunes were receding. I think I began to scream then, scream almost in a whisper, for the faster I hurried, the further the dunes withdrew. The nightmare had overtaken perspective. Now I was running wildly, though I felt I was standing still. I'd run only a few steps when I had to recoil from sand that seized my feet so eagerly I almost heard it smack its lips. Minutes ago there had been no quicksand, for I could see my earlier prints embedded in that patch. I stood trapped, shivering uncontrollably, as the glow intensified and the lightless sky seemed to descend—and I felt the beach change.

Simultaneously I experienced something which, in a sense, was worse: I felt myself change. My dizziness whirled out of me. I felt light-headed but

stable. At last I realised that I had never had sunstroke. Perhaps it had been my inner conflict—being forced to stay yet at the same time not daring to venture onto the beach, because of what my subconscious knew would happen.

And now it was happening. The beach had won. Perhaps Neal had given it the strength. Though I dared not look, I knew that the sea had stopped. Stranded objects, elaborate symbols composed of something like flesh, writhed on its paralysed margin. The clamour which surrounded me, chanting and gurgling, was not that of the sea: it was far too articulate, however repetitive. It was underfoot too—the voice of the beach, a whisper pronounced by so many sources that it was deafening.

I felt ridges of sand squirm beneath me. They were firm enough to bear my weight, but they felt nothing like sand. They were forcing me to shift my balance. In a moment I would have to dance, to imitate the jerking shapes that had ceased to pretend they were only debris, to join in the ritual of the objects that swarmed up from the congealed sea. Everything glistened in the quivering glow. I thought my flesh had begun to glow too.

Then, with a lurch of vertigo worse than any I'd experienced, I found myself momentarily detached from the nightmare. I seemed to be observing myself, a figure tiny and trivial as an insect, making a timid hysterical attempt to join in the dance of the teeming beach. The moment was brief, yet felt like eternity. Then I was back in my clumsy flesh, struggling to prance on the beach.

At once I was cold with terror. I shook like a victim of electricity, for I knew what viewpoint I'd shared. It was still watching me, indifferent as outer space—and it filled the sky. If I looked up I would see its eyes, or eye, if it had anything that I would recognise as such. My neck shivered as I held my head down. But I would have to look up in a moment, for I could feel the face, or whatever was up there, leaning closer—reaching down for me. If I hadn't broken through my suffocating panic I would have been crushed to nothing. But my teeth tore my lip, and allowed me to scream. Released, I ran desperately, heedless of quicksand. The dunes crept back from me, the squirming beach glowed, the light flickered in the rhythm of the chanting. I was spared being engulfed—but when at last I reached the dunes, or was allowed to reach them, the dark massive presence still hovered overhead.

I clambered scrabbling up the path. My sobbing gasps filled my mouth with sand. My wild flight was from nothing that I'd seen. I was fleeing the knowledge, deep-rooted and undeniable, that what I perceived blotting out the sky was nothing but an acceptable metaphor. Appalling though the presence was, it was only my mind's version of what was there—a way of letting me glimpse it without going mad at once.

V

I have not seen Neal since—at least, not in a form that anyone else would recognise.

Next day, after a night during which I drank all the liquor I could find to douse my appalled thoughts and insights, I discovered that I couldn't leave. I pretended to myself that I was going to the beach to search for Neal. But the movements began at once; the patterns stirred. As I gazed, dully entranced, I felt something grow less dormant in my head, as though my skull had turned into a shell.

Perhaps I stood engrossed by the beach for hours. Movement distracted me: the skimming of a windblown patch of sand. As I glanced at it I saw that it resembled a giant mask, its features ragged and crumbling. Though its eyes and mouth couldn't keep their shape, it kept trying to resemble Neal's face. As it slithered whispering towards me I fled towards the path, moaning.

That night he came into the bungalow. I hadn't dared go to bed; I dozed in a chair, and frequently woke trembling. Was I awake when I saw his huge face squirming and transforming as it crawled out of the wall? Certainly I could hear his words, though his voice was the inhuman chorus I'd experienced on the beach. Worse, when I opened my eyes to glimpse what might have been only a shadow, not a large unstable form fading back into the substance of the wall, for a few seconds I could still hear that voice.

Each night, once the face had sunk back into the wall as into quicksand, the voice remained longer—and each night, struggling to break loose from the prison of my chair, I understood more of its revelations. I tried to believe all this was my imagination, and so, in a sense, it was. The glimpses of Neal were nothing more than acceptable metaphors for what Neal had become, and what I was becoming. My mind refused to perceive the truth more

directly, yet I was possessed by a temptation, vertiginous and sickening, to learn what that truth might be.

For a while I struggled. I couldn't leave, but perhaps I could write. When I found that however bitterly I fought I could think of nothing but the beach, I wrote this. I hoped that writing about it might release me, but of course the more one thinks of the beach, the stronger its hold becomes.

Now I spend most of my time on the beach. It has taken me months to write this. Sometimes I see people staring at me from the bungalows. Do they wonder what I'm doing? They will find out when their time comes—everyone will. Neal must have satisfied it for a while; for the moment it is slower. But that means little. Its time is not like ours.

Each day the pattern is clearer. My pacing helps. Once you have glimpsed the pattern you must go back to read it, over and over. I can feel it growing in my mind. The sense of expectancy is overwhelming. Of course that sense was never mine. It was the hunger of the beach.

My time is near. The large moist prints that surround mine are more pronounced—the prints of what I am becoming. Its substance is everywhere, stealthy and insidious. Today, as I looked at the bungalows, I saw them change; they grew like fossils of themselves. They looked like dreams of the beach, and that is what they will become.

The voice is always with me now. Sometimes the congealing haze seems to mouth at me. At twilight the dunes edge forward to guard the beach. When the beach is dimmest I see other figures pacing out the pattern. Only those whom the beach has touched would see them; their outlines are unstable—some look more like coral than flesh. The quicksands make us trace the pattern, and he stoops from the depths beyond the sky to watch. The sea feeds me. Often now I have what may be a dream. I glimpse what Neal has become, and how that is merely a fragment of the imprint which it will use to return to our world. Each time I come closer to recalling the insight when I wake. As my mind changes, it tries to prepare me for the end. Soon I shall be what Neal is. I tremble uncontrollably, I feel deathly sick, my mind struggles desperately not to know. Yet in a way I am resigned. After all, even if I managed to flee the beach, I could never escape the growth. I have understood enough to know that it would absorb me in time, when it becomes the world.

Drawing In

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No wonder the rent was so low. There were cracks everywhere; new ones had broken out during the night—one passed above the foot of his bed, through the elaborate moulding, then trailed towards the parquet floor. Still, the house didn't matter; Thorpe hadn't come here for the house.

He parted the curtains. Act one, scene three. Mist lingered; the lake was overlapped by a ghost of itself. Growing sunlight renewed colours from the mist: the green fur of the hills, the green spikes of pines. All this was free. He'd little reason to complain.

As always when he emerged from his room, the height of the ceiling made him glance up. Above the stairs, another new crack had etched the plaster. Suppose the house fell on him while he was asleep? Hardly likely—the place looked far too solid.

He hesitated, staring at the ajar door. Should he give in to curiosity? It wasn't as simple as that: he'd come here to recuperate, he could scarcely do so if curiosity kept him awake. Last night he'd lain awake for hours wondering. Feeling rather like a small boy who'd crept into this deserted house for a dare, he pushed open the door.

The room was smaller than his, and darker—though perhaps all that was because of the cabinets, high as the ceiling and black as drowned timber, that occupied all the walls. The cabinets were padlocked shut, save one whose broken padlock dangled from the half-open door. Beyond the door was darkness, dimly crowded. Speculations on the nature of that crowding had troubled his sleep.

He ventured forward. Again, as the cabinet loured over him, he felt like a small boy. Ignoring doubts, he tugged the door wide. The padlock fell, loud in the echoing room—and from high in the cabinet, dislodged objects toppled. Some opened as they fell, and their contents scuttled over him.

The containers rattled on the parquet as he flinched back. They resembled pillboxes of transparent plastic. They were inscribed in a spidery handwriting, which seemed entirely appropriate, for each had contained a spider. A couple of dark furry blotches clung with long legs to his sleeve. He picked them off, shuddering. He couldn't rid himself of an insidious suspicion that some of the creatures were not quite dead.

He peered reluctantly at them. Bright pinheads of eyes peered back, dead as metal; beside them, palpi bristled. The lifeless fur felt unpleasantly cold on his palm. Eventually he'd filled all the containers, God only knew how correctly. If he were an audience watching himself, this would be an enjoyable farce. As he replaced the boxes on the high shelf, he noticed a padlocked container, large as a hatbox, lurking at the back of the cabinet. Let it stay there. He'd had enough surprises for one day.

Besides, he must report the cracks. Eventually the bus arrived, laden with climbers. Some of their rucksacks occupied almost as much space as they did. Camps smoked below the hills.

Outside the estate agent's office cows plodded to market. The agent listened to the tale of the cracks. 'You surprise me. I'll look in tomorrow.' His fingertips brushed his grey hair gently, abstractedly. He glanced up as Thorpe hesitated. 'Something else?'

'The owner of the house—what line is he in?'

'Anarach—narach—' The agent shook his head irritably to clear it of the blockage. 'An arachnologist,' he pronounced at last.

'I thought it must be something of the kind. I looked in one of the cabinets—the one with the broken lock.'

'Ah yes, his bloodsuckers. That's what he likes to call them. All these writers are eccentric in some way, I suppose. 'I should have asked you not to touch anything,' he said reprovingly.

Thorpe had been glad to confess, but felt embarrassed now. 'Well, perhaps no harm's done,' the agent said. 'He went to Eastern Europe six months ago, in search of some rarity—having fixed the amount of the rent.'

Was that comment a kind of reproof? It sounded wistful. But the agent stood up smiling. 'Anyway, you look better for the country,' he said. 'You've much more colour now.'

And indeed Thorpe felt better. He was at his ease in the narrow streets; he was able to make his way between cars without flinching—without feeling jagged metal bite into him, the windscreen shatter into his face. The scars of his stitches no longer plucked at his cheeks. He walked part of the way back to the house, until weakness overtook him.

He sat gazing into the lake. Fragmented reflections of pines wavered delicately. When mist began to descend the hills he headed back, in time to glimpse a group of hikers admiring the house. Pleased, he scanned it himself. Mist had settled on the chimney-stacks. The five squat horned blurs looked as though they were playing a secret game, trying to hide behind one another. One, the odd man out, lacked horns.

After dinner Thorpe strolled through the house, sipping malt whisky. Rooms resounded around him. They sounded like an empty stage, where he was playing owner of the house. He strode up the wide stairs, beneath the long straight crack, and halted outside the door next to his.

He wouldn't be able to sleep unless he looked. Besides, he had found the agent's disapproval faintly annoying. If Thorpe wasn't meant to look in the cabinets, why hadn't he been told? Why had one been left ajar?

He strode in, among the crowd of dark high doors. This time, as he opened the cabinet he made sure the padlock didn't slip from its hold. Piled shelves loomed above him as he stooped into the dimness, to peer at the hatbox or whatever it was.

It wasn't locked. It had been, but its fastening was split: a broken padlock lay on top. On the lid, wisps of handwriting spelled Carps: Trans: C. D. The obscure inscription was dated three months ago.

Thorpe frowned. Then, standing back, he poked gingerly at the lid with his foot. As he did so, he heard a shifting. It was the padlock, which landed with a thud on the bottom of the cabinet. Unburdened, the lid sprang up at once. Within was nothing but a crack in the metal of the container. He closed the cabinet and then the room, wondering why the metal box appeared to have been forced open.

And why was the date on the lid so recent? Was the man so eccentric that he could make such a mistake? Thorpe lay pondering that and the inscription. Half-dozing, he heard movement in one of the rooms: a trapped

bird scrabbling in a chimney? It troubled him almost enough to make him search. But the whisky crept up on him, and he drifted with his thoughts.

How did the arachnologist bring his prizes home—in his pocket, or stowed away with the rest of the livestock on the voyage? Thorpe stood on a dock side, awaiting a package which was being lowered on a rope. Or was it a rope? No, for as it swung close the package unclenched and grabbed him. As its jaws closed on his face he awoke gasping.

In the morning he searched the house, but the bird seemed to have managed to fly. The cracks had multiplied; there was at least one in every room, and two now above the stairs. The scattering of plaster on the staircase looked oddly like earth.

When he heard the agent's car he buttoned his jacket and gave his hair a rapid severe brushing. Damn it, the bird was still trapped; he heard it stir behind him, though there was no hint of it in the mirror. It must be in the chimney, for it sounded far too large to be otherwise invisible.

The agent scrutinised the rooms. Was he looking only for cracks, or for evidence that Thorpe had been peeking? 'This is most unexpected,' he said as though Thorpe might be responsible. 'I don't see how it can be subsidence. I'll have it looked at, though I don't think it's anything serious.'

He was dawdling in Thorpe's room, perhaps to reassure himself that Thorpe had done it no injury. 'Ah, here he is,' he said without warning, and stooped to grope beneath the bed. Who had been skulking there while Thorpe was asleep? The owner of the house, it seemed—or at least a photograph of him, which the agent propped curtly on the bedside table, to supervise the room.

When the agent had left, Thorpe peered up the chimneys. Their furred throats looked empty, but were very dark. The flickering beam of the electric torch he'd found groped upward. A soft dark mass plummeted towards him. It missed him, and proved to be a fall of soot, but was discouraging enough. In any case, if the bird was still up there, it was silent now.

He confronted the photograph. So that was what an arachnologist looked like: a clump of hair, a glazed expression, an attempt at a beard—the man seemed hypnotised, but no doubt was preoccupied. Thorpe found his dusty presence disconcerting.

Why stand here challenging the photograph? He felt healthy enough to make a circuit of the lake. As he strolled, the inverted landscape drifted with him. He could feel his strength returning, as though he was absorbing it from the hills. For the first time since he'd left the hospital, his hands looked enlivened by blood.

From the far end of the lake he admired the house. Its inverted chimneys swayed, rooted deep in the water. Suddenly he frowned, and squinted. It must be an effect of the distance, that was all—but he kept glancing at the house as he returned along the lakeside. Once he was past the lake he had no chance to doubt. There were only four chimney-stacks.

It must have been yesterday's mist that had produced the appearance of a fifth stack, lurking. Nevertheless it was odd. Doubts clung to his mind as he climbed the stairs, until his start of surprise demolished his thoughts. The glass of the photograph was cracked from top to bottom.

He refused to be blamed for that. The agent ought to have left it alone. He laid it carefully on its back on the bedside table. Its crack had made him obsessively aware of the others; some, he was sure, were new—including one in a downstairs window, a crack which, curiously, failed to pass right through the thickness of the pane. The staircase was sprinkled again; the scattering not only looked like, but seemed to smell like, earth. That night, as he lay in bed, he thought he heard dust whispering down from the cracks.

Though he ridiculed thoughts that the house was unsafe, he felt vulnerable. The shifting shadow of a branch looked like a new crack, digging into the wall. In turn, that made the entire room appear to shift. Whenever he woke from fitful dozing, he seemed to glimpse a stealthy movement of the substance of the room. It must be an optical effect, but it reminded him of the way a quivering of ornaments might betray the presence of an intruder.

Once he awoke, shocked by an image of a tufted face that peered upside-down through the window. It infuriated him to have to sit up to make sure the window was blank. Its shutter of night was not reassuring. His subconscious must have borrowed the image of inversion from the lake, that was all. But the room seemed to be trembling, as he was.

Next day he waited impatiently for the surveyor, or whoever the agent was sending. He rapidly grew irritable. Though it could be nothing but a hangover from his insomnia, to stay in the house made him nervous. Whenever he glanced in a mirror, he felt he was being invisibly watched.

The dark fireplaces looked ominous, proscenia awaiting a cue. At intervals he heard a pattering in other rooms: not of tiny feet, but of the fall of debris from new cracks.

Why was he waiting? He hadn't felt so nervously aimless since the infancy of his career, when he'd loitered, clinging to a single line, in the wings of a provincial theatre. The agent should have given his man a key to let himself in; if he hadn't, that was his problem. Thorpe strode over the slopes that surrounded the lake. He enjoyed the intricately true reflections in the still water, and felt a great deal healthier.

Had the man let himself in? Thorpe seemed to glimpse a face, groping into view at a twilit upper window. But the only sound in the house was a feeble scraping, which he was unable to locate. The face must have been a fragment of his dream, tangled in his lingering insomnia. His imagination, robbed of sleep, was everywhere now. As he climbed the stairs, he thought a face was spying on him from a dark corner of the ceiling.

When he descended, fallen debris crunched underfoot. During his meal he drank a bottle of wine, as much for distraction as for pleasure. Afterwards he surveyed the house. Yes, the cracks were more numerous; there was one in every surface now, except the floors. Had the older cracks deepened? Somehow he was most disturbed by the dust beneath the cracked windows. It looked like earth, not like pulverised glass at all.

He wished he'd gone into town to stay the night. It was too late now—indeed, the last bus had gone by the time he'd returned to the house. He was too tired to walk. He certainly couldn't sit outside all night with the mists. It was absurd to think of any other course than going to bed, to try and sleep. But he drained the bottle of whisky before doing so.

He lay listening. Yes, the trapped bird was still there. It sounded feebler now; it must be dying. If he searched for it he would lose his chance of sleep. Besides, he knew already that he couldn't locate it. Its sounds were so weak that they seemed to shift impossibly, to be fumbling within the fabric of the walls.

He was determined to keep his eyes closed, for the dim room appeared to be jerking. Perhaps this was a delayed effect of his accident. He let his mind drift him out of the room, into memories: the wavering of trees and their reflections, the comedy sketch of his encounter with the piled cabinet, Carps, Trans.

Darkness gathered like soot on his eyes. A dark mass sank towards him, or he was sinking into dark. He was underground. Around him, unlit corridors dripped sharply. The beam of his torch explored the figure that lay before him on dank stone. The figure was pale as a spider's cocoon. As the light fastened on it, it scuttled apart.

When he awoke, he was crying out not at the dream but at his stealthy realisation. He'd solved the inscription in his sleep, at least in part. Eastern Europe was the key. Carps meant Carpathians, Trans was Transylvania. But C. D.—no, what he was thinking was just a bad joke. He refused to take it seriously.

Nevertheless it had settled heavily on his mind. Good God, he'd once had to keep a straight face throughout a version of the play, squashed into a provincial stage: the walls of Castle Dracula had quaked whenever anyone had opened a door, the rubber bat had plummeted into the stalls. C. D. could mean anything—anything except that. Wouldn't it be hilarious if that was what the bemused old spider-man had meant? But in the dark it seemed less than hilarious, for near him in the room, something was stirring.

He groped for the cord of the bedside lamp. It was long and furry, and seemed unexpectedly fat. When he pulled it the light went on, and he saw at once that the cracks were deeper; he had been hearing the fall of debris. Whether the walls had begun to jerk rhythmically, or whether that was a delayed symptom of his accident, he had no time to judge. He must get out while he had the chance. He swung his feet to the floor, and knocked the photograph from the table.

Too bad, never mind, come on! But the shock of its fall delayed him. He glanced at the photograph, which had fallen upside down. The inverted tufted face stared up at him.

All right, it was the face he had dreamed in the window; why shouldn't it be? Just let him drag clothes over his pyjamas—he'd spend the night outside if need be. Quickly, quickly—he thought he could hear the room twitching. The twitches reminded him not of the stirring of ornaments, but of something else: something of which he was terrified to think.

As he stamped his way into his trousers, refusing to think, he saw that now there were cracks in the floor. Perhaps worse, all the cracks in the room had joined together. He froze, appalled, and heard the scuttling.

What frightened him most was not how large it sounded, but the fact that it seemed not to be approaching over floors. Somehow he had the impression that it hardly inhabited the space of the house. Around him the cracks stood out from their surfaces. They looked too solid for cracks.

The room shook repetitively. The smell of earth was growing. He could hardly keep his balance in the unsteady room; the lines that weren't cracks at all were jerking him towards the door. If he could grab the bed, drag himself along it to the window—His mind was struggling to withdraw into itself, to deny what was happening. He was fighting not only to reach the window but to forget the image which had seized his mind: a spider perched at the centre of its web, tugging in its prey.

The Pit Of Wings

"Campbell's third sword and sorcery tale of Ryre the warrior."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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Since before dawn Ryre had been riding through the forest. Except that he disliked sleeping on the move, he would have trusted himself to his steed. Instead he sought calm at the centre of himself, as he'd begun to learn to do. But the oppression of the forest clung to him. Time had drowned in the green depths.

Great leaves sailed by above him. Each was shaped like an inverted ribbed umbrella spiked on a massive trunk, and each was broader than the stretch of his body from toes to fingertips. As the trunk mounted, so the leaves dwindled; the highest would be no wider than Ryre's head. But he could see none of this. Beneath the unbroken canopy of the lowest leaves, even the dawn had been no more than a greening of the dimness.

The forest road was a tunnel formed by cutting leaves; once cut, they never grew again. They rustled, withered, beneath his steed's pads. The constant sound distracted him as he listened for a hint of the sea, a breeze to stir the stagnant air.

Sometimes, especially before dawn, he'd heard a flapping high above him. It must be the gliders—the highest leaves which, having shed scales of themselves, drifted away bearing seeds. But could those leaves make such a large lethargic sound?

Now he was caged by a lingering clamour of rain. He'd heard the storm coming, high and distant at first, advancing and descending through the forest. He could only shelter close to a trunk while the deafening rain poured down the trees, turning the leaves into basins of fountains. Above him the great leaf had shivered repeatedly beneath the onslaught; he'd feared drowning. Drips seeped through the foliage to water the roots, to tap

Ryre on the shoulder, to stream down his face, to coat and choke him with humidity.

He shook his head, snarling like a trapped beast—like the beast whose emblem was the V-shaped mane which widened from his shaved crown to his shoulders. He felt helplessly frustrated by the eternity of forest, the suffocating luxuriance that seemed triumphant as a mocking conqueror, the sounds whose sources he could never glimpse. He yearned for an adversary to fight.

Suddenly he put his hands over his mount's eyes. The creature halted obediently. Ryre strained his ears; impatience gripped his brow. Yes, he had heard the sound. Amid the creaking of leaves, the soft plop of rain on the decayed forest floor, the chorus of descending splashes as high leaves drooped beneath the weight of rain, there was a distant jaggedly rhythmic thudding: axes cutting trees.

So he was nearly free of the forest. Yet the sound was not altogether heartening. As he rode forward he began to hear the dragging of chains, the cut of a whip. The oppression was lifting with the leaves, but now it was anger that shortened his breath.

Where the road dipped, he saw them. Young men whose arms looked massive as the trunks they chopped, older men whose skin was more scarred, a few brawny women, all naked except for a strip of hide protecting the genitals: there must have been a hundred of them, toiling in small groups at the edge of the forest. From their fetters, long chains trailed toward the town which Ryre glimpsed beyond the trees. Beyond the town the sea burned calmly as sunlight trailed over the horizon.

Men, dressed like the slaves but bearing whips and swords, stalked about or squatted in shade. Most looked bored, and flicked their victims as they might lazily have fingered an itch. One stood over a fallen slave. A fresh weal glistened rawly on the victim's back; his ankles were bruised by a tangle of chain. He looked old, exhausted, further aged by suffering.

Ryre hated slavery as only a man who has been enslaved can. Fury parched his throat. Yet he could not fight a town, or its customs, however deplorable. He made to ride by, past the corpse of one of the immense almost brainless crawlers of the forest, which must have wormed too close to the swordsman. Chunks of its flesh had been stripped from the bone; its

eye gazed emptily at Ryre from the centre of the lolling head. The slaves must have eaten the flesh raw.

The standing man grew tired of kicking his victim. He said loudly "I'm wasting my strength. You're past your usefulness. Tonight you'll ride above the trees."

The effect of his words was immediate and dismaying. His victim soiled himself in terror. The other slaves glanced upward, and shuddered; Ryre heard a distant flapping. All at once unable to bear his inability to intervene, he urged his steed to canter.

But the slave-driver had seen his glare of contempt. "Yes, ride on, unless you're seeking honest toil. We've a place for you, and chains to fit." His slow voice was viciously caressing as a whip. As he gazed up at Ryre, he licked his lips.

Ryre's grin was leisurely and mirthless. Though he could not battle slavery, he would enjoy responding to this challenge. He stared at the man as though peering beneath a stone. "Ridding the world of vermin? Yes, I'd call that honest."

The man's tongue flickered like a snake's. His smile twitched, as did his hand: nervous, or beckoning for reinforcements? "What kind of swordsman is it who lets his words fight for him?" he demanded harshly.

"No man fights with vermin. He crushes them."

Swordsmen were advancing stealthily. "Perhaps his words are a sheath to keep his sword from rusting," one said.

Let them think Ryre's awareness was held by the duel of words. He would cut down his challenger when he was ready, together with anyone else who dared attack him. Unhurriedly he withdrew his sword from its sheath.

A third man spoke, drawing Ryre's attention to the far tip of the advancing crescent of men. "He'll wear our bracelet well."

His steed's uneasy movement warned Ryre. He glanced back in time to see why they were trying to distract him: a man was creeping carefully over the decayed leaves, ready to drag Ryre down and club him with a sword-hilt.

Discovered, the man leapt back—but not swiftly enough. The quick slash of Ryre's blade failed to cleave his skull; instead, the sword bit lower. The man staggered away moaning, trying to hold his cheek to his face.

The others rushed at Ryre. When the original challenger flinched back from the whooping arc of the sword, however, they retreated too. The man seemed wary not only of Ryre but also of the darkening sky. "Let him go," he snarled, trying to sound undaunted. "We've no time to waste on him—not now."

The drivers tugged the chains. It was clearly a signal, for the chains drew loudly taut and dragged their victims into the town like strings of struggling fish. Ryre saw the old man stumbling to keep up. The slaves were pulled staggering into a large wooden barn, which resounded with an uproar of metal links. The great doors thudded shut.

The sight infuriated Ryre. He was scarcely heartened by the agony of the slave-driver, clutching his face as companions aided him into a structure like a barracks next to the barn. Shrugging beneath the weight of his frustration, Ryre rode into the port of Gaxanoi.

In the streets men were lighting lamps. Flames fluttered in vases of thick glass which dangled from poles sprouting next to the central gutters. The entire small town was built of wood; the dim narrow streets reminded him of the forest. But at least a chill salt wind blew through the town, which creaked like an enormous ship. Above the forest the flapping was louder.

Like the streets, the dockside was almost deserted. Ryre's mounted shadow accompanied him, jerking hugely over logs that formed walls. Seamen were entering taverns beside the wharf. On the dock, next to a lone ship, timber lay waiting to be loaded in trade for, among other commodities, chains. He grinned sourly. Gaxanoi had summed itself up.

Eventually he found the harbour-master's house, overlooking the wharf. The man proved reluctant to open the door, and taciturn when he did so. At last he admitted grudgingly that there might be ships tomorrow on which Ryre could work his passage. "Stay near the wharf," he advised, already closing the door.

Ryre did so, in a tavern, once he had stabled his steed nearby. The streets resembled decks of a ship of the dead. The only sounds of life were the clatter and panting of a boy who ran from tavern to tavern, apparently bearing a message. As Ryre entered the tavern the boy ran out, flinching wild-eyed from him.

A few sailors sat on benches, drinking morosely. Each stared into the steady flame in the glass vase before him. Frequently one or other of them would glance up like a wary beast. They seemed to resent having to spend a night in Gaxanoi—or, Ryre suspected, this particular night. He wished he knew more about the town than its name.

Was it their resentment that made the seamen dangerous? One demanded of the taverner why the door was unlocked. When his companions tried to restrain him he fought savagely; the floorboards made it sound that giants were wrestling. The fight spilled out of the tavern, and Ryre observed that the sailors quickly stunned the drunken man and dragged him hastily inside.

"What is out there?" Ryre asked one—but the man glared, seeming almost to blame him for the fracas. When Ryre asked the question of the taverner, he shook his head nervously. "Nothing that I care to speak of."

Ryre had his wooden tankard refilled, and sat by a window. Let whatever was abroad in the night stay out there. He wasn't about to blind himself with drink and glassed flame: if a threat was approaching, he meant to see it before it came too near.

Still, there seemed to be little to see. Beside the ship, vases flickered on their poles. Waves lapped sleepily at the dock; light snaked in the water. A thin chill wind swung the vases. Shadows of poles danced, advancing, retreating. The ship rocked; it creaked, muffled and monotonous. Ryre shook himself free of its wooden lullaby—for suddenly there was something to watch.

At first he could hardly make out the swimming shapes below the far end of the wharf: a pack of white rats, advancing through black water? Then the vases swayed, and showed him the figures whose cowled heads he'd glimpsed reflected in the sea.

Their robes were pale as fungus. They emerged two by two from a wide dark street at the edge of the dock. The slow pallid emergence reminded Ryre of worms dropping from a gap. There seemed no end to the procession; surely it would fill the wharf.

Despite its size, the procession was unnervingly silent. A distant flapping could be heard. There was violence amid the ceremony: figures struggling desperately but mutely, which seemed to hover in the air among their robed captors. Ryre distinguished that the victims were bound and gagged, and

kept aloft by taut ropes held by robed men. The sight made him think of insects in a web.

As the vanguard came abreast of the window, Ryre saw that the first victim was the slave he had seen struck down. The old man looked too exhausted to struggle; he hung slack in the air—but his eyes were lurid with terror. The procession halted as though to display him. A seaman muttered nervously "What do they want?"

At once Ryre knew, and sprang to his feet, cursing. He drew his sword as the tavern door crashed open. Six hooded men came in, swift and silent as predators. Only their robes whispered and glimmered like marshlight in the dimness. One man pointed at Ryre, and his companions imitated him. The foremost and tallest intoned "He is to fly."

His voice was low, yet seemed as massive as the creaking that had caged Ryre in the forest. No doubt his ritual words terrified slaves, and perhaps the whole of Gaxanoi. But to Ryre the six were only men who had to hide their faces in cowls—and one of them, the man who had pointed him out and whose cowl now sagged back treacherously, was the slave-driver who had challenged him.

The high priest—presumably the tall man called himself something of the kind—stood aside. Three men stepped forward; swords sneaked from beneath their robes. The slave-driver and another man hung back, ready with ropes to bind their victim.

One swordsman advanced, while his companions began to circle their prey. They meant to trap Ryre in the cramped maze of tables and benches, which were fastened securely to the floor. But the furniture helped Ryre. He leapt backward onto a bench; then, as his adversary lunged at him, sprang onto the bench behind the man. Before the swordsman could react, a blow of Ryre's sword had split his skull. He sprawled over a table, his head spilling like an overturned tankard of blood.

Ryre leapt from table to table, heading for the door. Wood thundered around him. As he reached the door, the priest retreated hastily along the wall. One stroke of the blade severed the web of ropes—but four men came running from the procession, swords gleaming eagerly.

Could Ryre hold the priest hostage? Perhaps—but as he made to seize the man, a blade came hissing toward Ryre's neck. Only a desperate leap

sideways saved him from the blow, which bit deep into a log of the wall. He whirled; his movement added force to his blade's sweep. The second swordsman crumpled, bowing his half-severed head.

Ryre had been driven back into the tavern. He stared about wildly. The seamen had withdrawn into the shadows, and clearly wanted no part of the fight; the same appeared true of the taverner. Beyond the vats of wine, Ryre glimpsed a rough staircase. If he reached an upper window, he could escape through the alley—if it was unguarded.

He dodged backward between the tables. His scything blade cleared a space around hurt. By the time the swordsmen saw his plan and rushed towards the stairs, Ryre was nearly at the vats. As he reached them, the taverner grabbed a heavy wooden scoop from beside one. Before Ryre could turn, the taverner had clubbed him down.

The swordsmen were on Ryre at once. One knocked the sword from his hand, another inserted the point of his blade beneath Ryre's chin to lever him to his feet. "Come," he said with cruel tenderness, "they are hungry. Can't you hear them?"

Ryre heard only the taverner's fearful muttering. "Take him out. I got him for you. Take him out and let me lock the doors."

Belatedly Ryre understood why the boy had been running from tavern to tavern. He turned on the taverner, snarling—but at once four sword-points pricked his neck. The points, a lethal collar, urged him out onto the wharf.

The procession and the bared swords closed around him. His captors unbelted their robes, which they had gathered up in order to pursue him. The gliding robes helped muffle the advance of the procession. Ryre was silent too: not from awe, but because all his being was alert for a chance to make his escape.

If he so much as moved his head to ease his cramped neck, a sword-point drew his blood. At least they had been unable to remove his armour, whose leaves would simply tighten about him unless he first relaxed. He trudged onward, a puppet strung by its neck. Vases swung their lights, and made the town sway. Houses floated by, rocking with shadow, locking up fear. The flapping was closer, and sounded impatient.

Soon they entered the forest. At the edge of the town, robed men had seized vases; the light groped amid the gigantic leaves, or wandered away

vaguely into the reaches of the forest. This was not the road Ryre had followed, and which he had assumed to be the sole track. Where did this road lead, and to what evil purpose?

The multitude of trees rose above him. They glistened like pillars of a submerged temple, secret and threatening. Smells of warm luxuriance and decay oppressed him. Huge dim leaves twitched as stored rain fell; the dark dripping avenues sounded like an infinity of moist caves. Somewhere was a leathery fluttering, sluggish and restless. Once he had heard such a clamour deep in a cave that stank of beasts and blood.

Far down the leafy tunnel the dimness was shifting. It fluttered pallidly. Ahead the leathery restlessness grew louder, peremptory. Sword-points bit into Ryre's neck. Were his captors ensuring that he could not escape, or making him the scapegoat of their own fears?

They prodded him forward into the open. As he stumbled from beneath the trees, he saw that the pale stirring was only of moonlight and shade. The moon had risen above distant forested mountains, and showed him a wide glade, bare except for unstable shadows. Above the trees hovered a host of dry eager flapping.

Ryre felt a sword reach for his jugular vein. He tensed: if he was to die here, he'd leave a few agonising memories among his captors. But the sword relaxed as the slave-driver said gloating "Save him for last. Let him watch."

The trussed victims were carried into the glade. Ryre saw how hastily they were dropped, and how the robed men scurried out of the glade, glancing fearfully at the sky. Despite the size of the procession, there were only four victims. One did not struggle—because he was already dead, Ryre saw; he looked days dead. Presumably this rite served as funeral in Gaxanoi.

All at once the flapping was violent above the glade. Ryre could not lift his head to see, but he glimpsed nightmare shadows roaming over the ground. "Now," the slave-driver hissed.

As swords rose to tap his veins, Ryre sprang. He had slumped a little, bending his knees, as though crushed by despair. Now he leapt to his full height, a head taller than any of them, and launched himself at the slave-driver. Sword-points ripped tracks down his neck—but his shoulders knocked two blades aside, while the others thudded against his armour,

bruising his torso. Before the man's exultant grin had time to collapse into panic, Ryre had smashed his fist into the slave-driver's face.

The man staggered backward into the glade, flailing the air with his sword, and fell. The shock failed to jar the hilt from his grasp. Ryre rushed at him to grapple for the weapon. The sword sprang up. Had Ryre not dodged aside, he would have been emasculated.

The hooded men hung back, daunted by the flapping. How much time had Ryre to gain himself a weapon? The sound of great dry wings descended; shadows swallowed the glade. As he circled the prone man, staying just out of reach of the sweeps of the sword while he tried to dizzy his victim, Ryre glanced up—and gasped, appalled.

Flapping down from the pale sky, in a flock which stank of caverns and worse, came wings. Their span was greater than the spread of his arms. They were the blotchy white of decay; between their bony fingers, skin fluttered lethargically as drowned sails. All this was frightful—but there was no body to speak of between each pair of wings, only a whitish rope of flesh thin as a child's arm. Yet as a pair of wings sailed down near him, Ryre saw a mouth gape along the whole length of the scrawny object. Its lips resembled a split in fungus, and it was crammed with teeth.

The slave-driver scrabbled backward toward the trees, mumbling in terror. One pair of wings settled on a bound victim, like a carelessly flung shroud; then they rose, lifting their prey toward the moon. Ryre's spirit sickened, for the mouth was embedded in the length of the man's chest. The lips worked, sucking.

Enraged and dismayed, Ryre forced his adversary away from the trees. But neither could Ryre flee that way, for the shade bristled with swords. The man twisted on the ground, moaning—then made a vicious lunge with his sword. It was too violent. It hurled the sword from his grip, to impale the ground beside Ryre.

Ryre seized the hilt. Now he could defend himself as best he might, though the weapon was less well-balanced than his own, and heavier. He heard the thud of another sword, thrown to his adversary. The watchers barred the way into the forest. They intended the man to finish Ryre, rather than risk combat themselves.

Somewhere behind him, far too numerous and close, Ryre heard wings. They would be enough to contend with when he tried to cross the glade. Before the slave-driver could reach the thrown sword, a slash of Ryre's blade hamstrung him.

Ryre was turning, ready to dash for the far side of the glade, when a shadow engulfed the earth around him. He had no time to react before he was flung to the ground. Once, on board ship, he had been crushed by a fallen sail. He was as helpless now—but this burden felt as though it had been dragged from a swamp. A stench as of something dead and disinterred filled his nostrils. Though he had clung to the sword, his sword-arm was pinned down, useless. He could only snarl and writhe impotently as teeth bit through his armour and fastened in his back, beside his spine.

He felt the lips tear his armour like paper, widening the gap. He lay in wait, and forced himself to suffer the sucking of the mouth embedded in his flesh. As soon as the wings lifted him, he began to chop at the nearest. But they were tougher than his armour. The sword hardly marked them.

He was being lifted, as he might have caught up an infant. The glade whirled away below him; the forest was a moonlit whirlpool, dizzying. He felt himself dangling from teeth clenched deep in his flesh. He hacked at the wings, haphazardly and frenziedly—until he felt the sword grow heavier. The feaster was draining his strength with his blood.

The shrieks of the slave-driver afforded Ryre grim satisfaction. He saw the man borne upward struggling by avid wings. Then the sight dwindled; Ryre's wings were carrying him above the trees. He hurled himself about, trying to force the wings toward the leaves, to entangle them. But he could not control their flight; he was merely wasting his strength.

The forest plummeted below him. Deafening winds grabbed his breath. A chill seized him—because of the giddy height, or the leathery fans of wings, or the ebbing of his vitality? The swaying moon steadied; it seemed unnaturally close, perhaps because the wings crowded the sky with its colour.

Beneath him, the world consisted of nothing but trees. The shrunken forest drifted by, a dense mosaic formed by countless concentric patterns of leaves. It looked unreal; his sense of perspective was floating away, into something like a dream. Among the flock of wings, a few seed-bearing leaves glided by.

Was the mouth poisoning him. as well as drinking his blood? Perhaps, for as his wings swooped higher he was possessed by a kind of insidious delirium. He felt he had sprouted wings which obeyed his dreams. They had transformed him. No longer was he doomed to earthbound plodding. He was a creature of the air, with only the approaching moon, the gliding leaves, the rest of his flock for companions.

A glimpse of that flock pierced his delirium. Around him airborne mouths gaped, hungry for the leavings. His wings lifted him greedily. They were gaining height thanks to his blood, and because he was growing lighter. The other feeding pairs of wings rose exultantly. As their victims turned moon-pale, the gorged wings glowed blotchily pink. Like remains in a web, the victims hardly struggled now.

All at once Ryre saw his chance. The moon swayed like a spider's cocoon shaken by the gusts of the wings; the dwarfed forest looked insubstantial as the blanched sky. Sly waves of vertiginous ecstasy crept over him, blurring his vision further. He had seen a broad leaf gliding toward him. If it drifted sufficiently close...

It did, and at once was impaled by an upward thrust of his sword. The additional burden had no effect on his headlong flight, but that was not his plan. Instead, Ryre thrust the leaf among the fingertips of one wing, to hinder them. The wing struggled; off balance, the feaster dipped toward the trees—and the leaf ripped, almost wrenching the sword from his grasp. He had to cling to the hilt with both hands to prevent the weapon from falling with the torn leaf.

He grew frenzied. Ramming the sword into his belt, he seized the bony arms of the wings, either to break them or to wrench the mouth out of his flesh. Why had he waited so long? Though his muscles trembled with his gathered strength, the wings brushed his hands aside. In any case he would achieve only a fall to his death; yet he preferred a clean death to suffering the hunger of the wings.

Ahead, he could see their lair, a blotch of darkness, roughly circular and perhaps a hundred yards wide, among the trees. Wings circled above its rim, like witches dancing a delirious ritual. Was it another glade? As the foremost pair of burdened wings dropped its victim—the bound corpse—into the circle, Ryre saw that the lair was a pit.

His own wings bore him helplessly closer. He glimpsed the depths, and nausea giddied him. He clutched the sword-hilt. Rather than fall conscious into that pit, he would take his own life. Even that ultimate hopelessness was preferable to what waited below.

The rocky sides of the pit were dry. The place resembled the socket of a skull, a desiccated cavity amid the profusion of forest. Its floor was invisible, for the pit was piled with skeletons, tangled indistinguishably. Some of the bones were awesomely gigantic. Atop the pile lay the dropped corpse, as though on a mockery of a pyre.

As Ryre watched aghast, the enormous bony heap stirred. The corpse toppled down its slope. Had the surrounding fecundity possessed the jumble of skeletons, united them into a monstrous parody of life? Ryre's brain whirled, bereft of sense. Then he saw what was crawling out from beneath the bones.

Very slowly and feebly, old wings emerged. They were discoloured as corpses, and looked as though they should have died long ago. A stench of decay welled upward. Dust, no doubt from skeletons, clung to the wings. Their groping reminded him of worms in meat.

They clambered on their fingertips over the bones toward the corpse. They resembled pairs of senile hands, skeletal and webbed. Their lips sagged open, exposing teeth and stumps of teeth. The wings fumbled blindly up the shifting heap; they slid back and clambered again. One by one they reached the corpse and fastened on it. Soon it was entirely covered by a heaving of wings, which divided their victim raggedly and crawled away with their prizes.

Ryre dragged his sword free. The burdened wings hovered above the rim. He knew they were draining their victims before dropping the remnants into the pit. He saw the slave-driver fall, clenched and empty.

The sword felt leaden. Ryre clutched the hilt with his other hand, in case it fell from his enfeebled fingers. Then, snarling at his vindictive fate, he turned the point toward his belly. He meant to drive the blade upwards. Mouths hovered close to him, baring their teeth. He hoped he was weakened enough to die quickly.

Then—though perhaps it would serve only to make his death more ironic—he glimpsed his chance. Was it worth trying? Might he not use up his

strength, and be unable even to die cleanly? But he refused to die while he yet had a chance to fight. Without warning he lunged with the sword at the nearest pair of empty wings, and stabbed at the mouth.

He felt the sword pierce flesh within the lips. Yes, the flesh was vulnerable there! He dug the blade deeper, embedding it—and the hilt was almost torn from his hands as the wings flapped convulsively. He managed to keep hold, though his agonised fingers were audibly straining. The hilt was his last hold on life.

Then, as he had prayed inarticulately might happen, the wounded wings became entangled with his own. The leathery struggle caged him; he choked on gusts of decay. He was falling amid the tangle of wings. But as he glimpsed the landscape he roared, enraged by the taunts of his fate. He was falling straight into the pit.

His rage twisted the sword deep in the flesh of the mouth. He heard and felt teeth grind on the blade; he clung grimly to the flailing hilt. The uninjured mouth writhed in his own flesh. For a moment the struggling wings disengaged. He was borne upward, over the rim of the pit.

A few trees sailed by, close enough to grab, though they were withered, and might break. In any case, he dared not let go of the sword. He soared away from the pit, above the denser forest. His strength was still dwindling; the hilt shifted dangerously in his hands. He had no time to choose his moment. Closer to the pit than he would have wished, he dragged the blade toward him with all his remaining force, and entangled the wings.

Convulsed by their struggles, the hilt smashed against his fingers, bruising them. He felt his back tear as the embedded teeth gnashed. But the wings had ensnared one another, and were falling toward the trees.

They crashed through leaves. Cupped rain inundated them. Ryre was deafened by the battle of wings and the ripping of leaves. The trunks grew close here, as though to wall off the aridity of the pit. The wings smashed through another flooded layer, and were caught between trunks. Ryre snarled with gasping mirth as he heard the struggling fingers break.

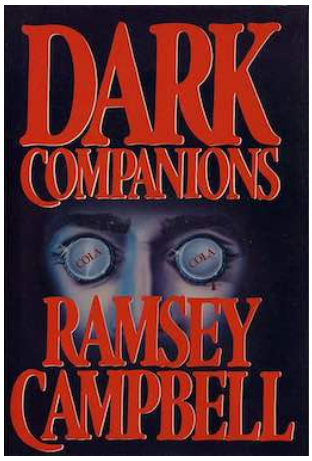
Still the canopy of leaves gave way. The twitching wings continued to fall. Ryre let go of the sword and embracing a trunk, swung his body with all the violence he could summon. He felt skeletal fingers break. Even then the mouth refused to let go of his flesh. Not until he and the wings had crashed

through the lowest leaves to the ground did the teeth part, jarred open by the shock of the fall.

Half-stunned and giddy with the draining, Ryre nonetheless forced himself to his feet. The pairs of wings were hobbling away in the direction of the unseen pit. He wrenched his sword out of the injured mouth and pursued them, stabbing and hacking. The wings would not die. Though he chopped at the joints of the fingers, and thrust the blade again and again into the mouths, the wings still dragged themselves unevenly toward their lair. Long after he had exhausted the last of his strength and was sitting propped against a tree, with the sword dug into the ground before him to prevent his toppling forward, he heard a ragged flapping and saw pale things crawling lopsidedly away from him, into the dark.

He pressed his back against a drooping leaf, which was cool as balm. His back felt raw, and withered as a mummy's, but seemed to be losing little blood. He dozed, waiting for the dawn and for a hint of his strength to return to him. Nearby there might be leaves whose healing power was greater. He could hear the serpentine denizens of the forest worming their way through the dark arcades. Surely one would be stupid enough to come within reach of his blade. When he could, he would walk—and if his wanderings took him toward Gaxanoi, a few buildings might blaze and a few chains break.

Out Of Copyright



"In early July 1977 we had a contingent from Carolina to stay in our little house in Tuebrook [...] I had "Out of Copyright" in mind and asked [David Drake] for a likely Latin phrase, which I used in the tale. When he got back to Chapel Hill he airmailed me his revised thoughts, but too late—I'd written *Out of Copyright* in three days, starting on 10th July. His off-the-cuff response still seems fine to me, but don't blame Dave for my use of it."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

Written in: 1977
First published in *Dark Companions*, 1982
Also published in: *Dark Feasts*, *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

The widow gazed wistfully at the pile of books. "I thought they might be worth something."

"Oh, some are," Tharne said. "That one, for instance, will fetch a few pence. But I'm afraid that your husband collected books indiscriminately. Much of this stuff isn't worth the paper it's printed on. Look, I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll take the whole lot off your hands and give you the best price I can."

When he'd counted out the notes, the wad over his heart was scarcely reduced. He carried the bulging cartons of books to his van, down three gloomy flights of stairs, along the stone path which hid beneath lolling grass, between gateposts whose stone globes grew continents of moss. By the third descent he was panting. Nevertheless he grinned as he kicked grass aside; the visit had been worthwhile, certainly.

He drove out of the cracked and overgrown streets, past rusty cars laid open for surgery, old men propped on front steps to wither in the sun, prams left outside houses as though in the hope that a thief might adopt the baby. Sunlight leaping from windows and broken glass lanced his eyes. Heat made the streets and his perceptions waver. Glimpsed in the mirror or sensed looming at his back, the cartons resembled someone crouching behind him. They smelled more dusty than the streets.

Soon he reached the crescent. The tall Georgian houses shone white. Beneath them the van looked cheap, a tin toy littering the street. Still, it wasn't advisable to seem too wealthy when buying books.

He dumped the cartons in his hall, beside the elegant curve of the staircase. His secretary came to the door of her office. "Any luck?"

"Yes indeed. Some first editions and a lot of rare material. The man knew what he was collecting."

"Your mail came," she said in a tone which might have announced the police. This annoyed him: he prided himself on his legal knowledge, he observed the law scrupulously. "Well, well," he demanded, "who's saying what?"

"It's that American agent again. He says you have a moral obligation to pay Lewis's widow for those three stories. Otherwise, he says—let's see—'I shall have to seriously consider recommending my clients to boycott your anthologies.'"

"He says that, does he? The bastard. They'd be better off boycotting him." Tharne's face grew hot and swollen; he could hardly control his grin. "He's better at splitting infinitives than he is at looking after his people's affairs. He never renewed the copyright on those stories. We don't owe anyone a penny. And by God, you show me an author who needs the money. Rolling in it, all of them. Living off their royalties." A final injustice struck him; he smote his forehead. "Anyway, what the devil's it got to do with the widow? She didn't write the stories."

To burn up some of his rage, he struggled down to the cellar with the cartons. His blood drummed wildly. As he unpacked the cartons, dust smoked up to the light-bulbs. The cellar, already dim with its crowd of bookshelves, grew dimmer.

He piled the books neatly, sometimes shifting a book from one pile to another, as though playing Patience. When he reached the ace, he stopped. *Tales Beyond Life*, by Damien Damon. It was practically a legend; the book had never been reprinted in its entirety. The find could hardly have been more opportune. The book contained "The Dunning of Diavolo"—exactly what he needed to complete the new Tharne anthology, *Justice From Beyond the Grave*. He knocked lumps of dust from the top of the book, and turned to the story.

> Even in death he would be recompensed. Might the resurrectionists have his corpse for a toy? Of a certainty—but only once those organs had been removed which his spirit would need, and the Rituals performed. This stipulation he had willed on his deathbed to his son. Unless his corpse was pacified, his curse would rise.
>
> Undeed, had the father's estate been more readily available to clear the son's debts, this might have been an edifying tale of filial piety. Still, on a night when the moon gleamed like a sepulture, the father was plucked tuber-pallid from the earth.
>
> Rather than sow superstitious scruples in the resurrectionists, the son had told them naught. Even so, the burrowers felt that they had mined an uncommon seam. Voiceless it might be, but the corpse had its forms of protest. Only by seizing its wrists could the corpseminers elude the cold touch of its hands. Could they have closed its stiff lids, they might have borne its grin. On the contrary, neither would touch the gelatinous pebbles which bulged from its face...

Tharne knew how the tale continued: Diavolo, the father, was dissected, but his limbs went snaking round the town in search of those who had betrayed him, and crawled down the throats of the victims to drag out the twins of those organs of which the corpse had been robbed. All good Gothic stuff—gory and satisfying, but not to be taken too seriously. They couldn't write like that nowadays; they'd lost the knack of proper Gothic writing. And yet they whined that they weren't paid enough!

Only one thing about the tale annoyed him: the misprint "undeed" for "indeed." Amusingly, it resembled "undead"—but that was no excuse for perpetrating it. The one reprint of the tale, in the twenties, had swarmed with literals. Well, this time the text would be perfect. Nothing appeared in a Tharne anthology until it satisfied him.

He checked the remaining text, then gave it to his secretary to retype. His timing was exact: a minute later the doorbell announced the book collector, who was as punctual as Tharne. They spent a mutually beneficial half-hour. "These I bought only this morning," Tharne said proudly. "They're yours for twenty pounds apiece."

The day seemed satisfactory until the phone rang. He heard the girl's startled squeak. She rang through to his office, sounding flustered. "Ronald Main wants to speak to you."

"Oh God. Tell him to write, if he still knows how. I've no time to waste in chatting, even if he has." But her cry had disturbed him; it sounded like a threat of inefficiency. Let Main see that someone round here wasn't to be shaken! "No, wait—put him on."

Main's orotund voice came rolling down the wire. "It has come to my notice that you have anthologised a story of mine without informing me."

Trust a writer to use as many words as he could! "There was no need to get in touch with you," Tharne said. "The story's out of copyright."

"That is hardly the issue. Aside from the matter of payment, which we shall certainly discuss, I want to take up with you the question of the text itself. Are you aware that whole sentences have been rewritten?"

"Yes, of course. That's part of my job. I am the editor, you know." Irritably Tharne restrained a sneeze; the smell of dust was very strong. "After all, it's an early story of yours. Objectively, don't you think I've improved it?" He oughtn't to sound as if he was weakening. "Anyway, I'm afraid that legally you've no rights." Did that render Main speechless, or was he preparing a stronger attack? It scarcely mattered, for Tharne put down the phone. Then he strode down the hall to check his secretary's work. Was her typing as flustered as her voice had been?

Her office was hazy with floating dust. No wonder she was peering closely at the book—though she looked engrossed, almost entranced. As his shadow fell on the page she started; the typewriter carriage sprang to its limit, ringing. She demanded "Was that you before?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Don't let it bother you." She seemed nervously annoyed—whether with him or with herself he couldn't tell.

At least her typing was accurate, though he could see where letters had had to be retyped. He might as well write the introduction to the story. He went down to fetch *Who's Who in Horror and Fantasy Fiction*. Dust teemed around the cellar lights and chafed his throat.

Here was Damien Damon, real name Sidney Drew: b. Chelsea, 30 April 1876; d.? 1911? "His life was even more bizarre and outrageous than his fiction. Some critics say that that is the only reason for his fame..."

A small dry sound made Tharne glance up. Somewhere among the shelved books, a face peered at him through a gap. Of course it could be nothing of the sort, but it took him a while to locate a cover which had fallen open in a gap, and which must have resembled a face.

Upstairs he wrote the introduction "...Without the help of an agent, and with no desire to make money from his writing, Damon became one of the most discussed in whispers writers of his day. Critics claim that it was scandals that he practised magic which gained him fame. But his posthumously published Tales Beyond Life shows that he was probably the last really first class writer in the tradition of Poe..." Glancing up, Tharne caught sight of himself, pen in hand, at the desk in the mirror. So much for any nonsense that he didn't understand writers' problems! Why, he was a writer himself!

Only when he'd finished writing did he notice how quiet the house had become. It had the strained unnatural silence of a library. As he padded down the hall to deliver the text to his secretary his sounds felt muffled, detached from him.

His secretary was poring over the typescript of Damon's tale. She looked less efficient than anxious—searching for something she would rather not find? Dust hung about her in the amber light, and made her resemble a waxwork or a faded painting. Her arms dangled, forgotten. Her gaze was fixed on the page. Before he could speak, the phone rang. That startled her so badly that he thought his presence might dismay her more. He retreated into the hall, and a dark shape stepped back behind him—his shadow, of course. He entered her office once more, making sure he was audible.

"It's Mr Main again," she said, almost wailing.

"Tell him to put it in writing."

"Mr Tharne says would you please send him a letter." Her training allowed her to regain control, yet she seemed unable to put down the phone until instructed. Tharne enjoyed the abrupt cessation of the outraged squeaking. "Now I think you'd better go home and get some rest," he said.

When she'd left he sat at her desk and read the typescripts. Yes, she had corrected the original; "undeed" was righted. The text seemed perfect, ready for the printer. Why then did he feel that something was wrong? Had she omitted a passage or otherwise changed the wording?

He'd compare the texts in his office, where he was more comfortable. As he rose, he noticed a few faint dusty marks on the carpet. They approached behind his secretary's chair, then veered away. He must have tracked dust from the cellar, which clearly needed sweeping. What did his housekeeper think she was paid for?

Again his footsteps sounded muted. Perhaps his ears were clogged with dust; there was certainly enough of it about. He had never noticed how strongly the house smelled of old books, nor how unpleasant the smell could be. His skin felt dry, itchy.

In his office he poured himself a large Scotch. It was late enough, he needn't feel guilty—indeed, twilight seemed unusually swift tonight, unless it was an effect of the swarms of dust. He didn't spend all day drinking, unlike some writers he could name.

He knocked clumps of dust from the book; it seemed almost to grow there, like grey fungus. Airborne dust whirled away from him and drifted back. He compared the texts, line by line. Surely they were identical, except for her single correction. Yet he felt there was some aspect of the typescript which he needed urgently to decipher. This frustration, and its irrationality, unnerved him.

He was still frowning at the pages, having refilled his glass to loosen up his thoughts, when the phone rang once. He grabbed it irritably, but the earpiece was as hushed as the house. Or was there, amid the electric hissing vague as a cascade of dust, a whisper? It was beyond the grasp of his hearing, except for a syllable or two which sounded like Latin—if it was there at all.

He jerked to his feet and hurried down the hall. Now that he thought about it, perhaps he'd heard his secretary's extension lifted as his phone had rung. Yes, her receiver was off the hook. It must have fallen off. As he replaced it, dust sifted out of the mouthpiece.

Was a piece of paper rustling in the hall? No, the hall was bare. Perhaps it was the typescript, stirred on his desk by a draught. He closed the door

behind him, to exclude any draught—as well as the odour of something very old and dusty.

But the smell was stronger in his room. He sniffed gingerly at *Tales Beyond Life*. Why, there it was: the book reeked of dust. He shoved open the French windows, then he sat and stared at the typescript. He was beginning to regard it with positive dislike. He felt as though he had been given a code to crack; it was nerve-racking as an examination. Why was it only the typescript that bothered him, and not the original?

He flapped the typed pages, for they looked thinly coated with grey. Perhaps it was only the twilight, which seemed composed of dust. Even his Scotch tasted clogged. Just let him see what was wrong with this damned story, then he'd leave the room to its dust—and have a few well-chosen words for his housekeeper tomorrow.

There was only one difference between the texts: the capital I. Or had he missed another letter? Compulsively and irritably, refusing to glance at the grey lump which hovered at the edge of his vision, he checked the first few capitals. E, M, O, R, T... Suddenly he stopped, parched mouth open. Seizing his pen, he began to transcribe the capitals alone.

E mortuis revoco.

From the dead I summon thee.

Oh, it must be a joke, a mistake, a coincidence. But the next few capitals dashed his doubts. From the dead I summon thee, from the dust I recreate thee... The entire story concealed a Latin invocation. It had been Damien Damon's last story and also, apparently, his last attempt at magic.

And it was Tharne's discovery. He must rewrite his introduction. Publicised correctly, the secret of the tale could help the book's sales a great deal. Why then was he unwilling to look up? Why was he tense as a trapped animal, ears straining painfully? Because of the thick smell of dust, the stealthy dry noises that his choked ears were unable to locate, the grey mass that hovered in front of him?

When at last he managed to look up, the jerk of his head twinged his neck. But his gasp was of relief. The grey blotch was only a chunk of dust, clinging to the mirror. Admittedly it was unpleasant; it resembled a face masked with dust, which also spilled from the face's dismayingly numerous

openings. Really, he could live without it, much as he resented having to do his housekeeper's job for her.

When he rose, it took him a moment to realise that his reflection had partly blotted out the grey mass. In the further moment before he understood, two more reflected grey lumps rose beside it, behind him. Were they hands or wads of dust? Perhaps they were composed of both. It was impossible to tell, even when they closed over his face.

Above the World

"*Above the World* owes much to LSD, especially once the tale climbs to the heights—specifically, the last acid trip I ever took (in July 1976, up Bleaberry Fell near Keswick) before a nightmare flashback some months later put me off the drug. The following June I researched Knox's ascent to the Bishop of Barf, and the story was written in three days, starting on 18th July."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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Also published in: *Dark Companions*, *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

Nobody was at Reception when Knox came downstairs. The dinner-gong hung mute in its frame; napkin pyramids guarded dining-tables; in the lounge, chairs sat emptily. Nothing moved, except fish in the aquarium, fluorescent gleams amid water that bubbled like lemonade. The visitors' book lay open on the counter. He riffled the pages idly, seeking his previous visit. A Manchester address caught his attention: but the name wasn't his—not any longer. The names were those of his wife and the man.

It took him a moment to realise. They must have been married by then. So the man's name had been Tooley, had it? Knox hadn't cared to know. He was pleased to find that he felt nothing but curiosity. Why had she returned here—for a kind of second honeymoon, to exorcise her memories of him?

When he emerged, it was raining. That ought to wash the fells clean of all but the dedicated walkers; he might be alone up there—no perambulatory radios, no families marking their path with trailing children. Above the hotel mist wandered among the pines, which grew pale and blurred, a spiky frieze of grey, then solidified, regaining their green. High on the scree slope, the Bishop of Barf protruded like a single deformed tooth.

The sight seemed to halt time, to turn it back. He had never left the Swan Hotel. In a moment Wendy would run out, having had to go back for her camera or her rucksack or something. "I wasn't long, was I? The bus hasn't gone, has it? Oh dear, I'm sorry." Of course these impressions were nonsense: he'd moved on, developed since his marriage, defined himself more clearly—but it cheered him that his memories were cool, disinterested. Life advanced relentlessly, powered by change. The Bishop

shone white only because climbers painted the pinnacle each year, climbing the steep scree with buckets of whitewash from the Swan.

Here came the bus. It would be stuffed with wet campers slow as turtles, their backs burdened with tubular scaffolding and enormous rucksacks. Only once had he suffered such a ride. Had nothing changed? Not the Swan, the local food, the unobtrusive service, the long white seventeenth-century building which had so charmed Wendy. He had a table to himself; if you wanted to be left alone, nobody would bother you. Tonight there would be venison, which he hadn't tasted since his honeymoon. He'd returned determined to enjoy the Swan and the walks, determined not to let memories deny him those pleasures—and he'd found his qualms were groundless.

He strode down the Keswick road. Rain rushed over Bassenthwaite Lake and tapped on the hood of his cagoule. Why did the stone wall ahead seem significant? Had Wendy halted there once, because the wall was singing? "Oh look, aren't they beautiful." As he stooped towards the crevice, a cluster of hungry beaks had sprung out of the darkness, gaping. The glimpse had unnerved him: the inexorable growth of life, sprouting everywhere, even in stone. Moss choked the silent crevice now.

Somehow that image set him wondering where Wendy and the man had died. Mist had caught them, high on one or other of the fells; they'd died of exposure. That much he had heard from a friend of Wendy's, who had grown aloof from him and who had seemed to blame him for entrusting Wendy to an inexperienced climber—as if Knox should have taken care of her even after the marriage! He hadn't asked for details. He'd felt relieved when Wendy had announced that she'd found someone else. Habit, familiarity, and introversion had screened them from each other well before they'd separated.

He was passing a camp in a field. He hadn't slept in a tent since early in his marriage, and then only under protest. Rain slithered down bright canvas. The muffled voices of a man and a woman paced him from tent to tent. Irrationally, he peered between the tents to glimpse them—but it must be a radio programme. Though the voices sounded intensely engrossed in discussion, he could distinguish not a word. The camp looked deserted. Everyone must be under canvas, or walking.

By the time he reached Braithwaite village, the rain had stopped. Clouds paraded the sky; infrequent gaps let out June sunlight, which touched the heights of the surrounding fells. He made for the café at the foot of the Whinlatter Pass—not because Wendy had loved the little house, its homemade cakes and its shelves of books, but for something to read: he would let chance choose his reading. But the shop was closed. Beside it Coledale Beck pursued its wordless watery monologue.

Should he climb Grisedale Pike? He remembered the view from the summit, of Braithwaite and Keswick the colours of pigeons, white and grey amid the palette of fields. But climbers were toiling upwards towards the intermittent sun. Sometimes the spectacle of plodding walkers, fell boots creaking, sticks shoving at the ground, red faces puffing like trains in distress, made his climb seem a mechanical compulsion, absurd and mindless. Suppose the height was occupied by a class of children, heading like lemmings for the edge?

He'd go back to Barf: that would be lonely—unless one had Mr. Wainwright's guidebook, Barf appeared unclimbable. Returning through the village, he passed Braithwaite post office. That had delighted Wendy—a house just like the other small white houses in the row, except for the counter and grille in the front hall, beside the stairs. A postcard came fluttering down the garden path. Was that a stamp on its corner, or a patch of moss? Momentarily he thought he recognised the handwriting—but whose did it resemble? A breeze turned the card like a page. Where a picture might have been there was a covering of moss, which looked vaguely like a blurred view of two figures huddled together. The card slid by him, into the gutter, and lodged trembling in a grid, brandishing its message. Impulsively he made a grab for it—but before he could read the writing, the card fell between the bars.

He returned to the road to Thornthwaite. A sheen of sunlight clung to the macadam brows; hedges dripped dazzling silver. The voices still wandered about the deserted campsite, though now they sounded distant and echoing. Though their words remained inaudible, they seemed to be calling a name through the tents.

At Thornthwaite, only the hotel outshone the Bishop. As Knox glanced towards the coaching inn, Wendy appeared in his bedroom window. Of course it was a chambermaid—but the shock reverberated through him, for

all at once he realised that he was staying in the room which he had shared with Wendy. Surely the proprietress of the Swan couldn't have intended this; it must be coincidence. Memories surged, disconcertingly vivid—collapsing happily on the bed after a day's walking, making love, not having to wake alone in the early hours. Just now, trudging along the road, he'd thought of going upstairs to rest. Abruptly he decided to spend the afternoon in walking.

Neither the hard road nor the soggy margin of Bassenthwaite Lake tempted him. He'd climb Barf, as he had intended. He didn't need Mr. Wainwright's book; he knew the way. Wendy had loved those handwritten guidebooks; she'd loved searching through them for the self-portrait of Mr Wainwright which was always hidden among the hand-drawn views—there he was, in Harris tweed, overlooking Lanthwaite Wood. No, Knox didn't need those books today.

The beginning of the path through Beckstones larch plantation was easy. Soon he was climbing beside Beckstones Gill, his ears full of its intricate liquid clamour as the stream tumbled helplessly downhill, confined in its rocky groove. But the path grew steep. Surely it must have been elsewhere that Wendy had run ahead, mocking his slowness, while he puffed and cursed. By now most of his memories resembled anecdotes he'd overheard or had been told—blurred, lacking important details, sometimes contradictory.

He rested. Around him larches swayed numerous limbs, engrossed in their tethered dance. His breath eased; he ceased to be uncomfortably aware of his pulse. He stumped upwards, over the path of scattered slate. On both sides of him, ferns protruded from decay. Their highest leaves were wound into a ball, like green caterpillars on stalks.

A small rock-face blocked the path. He had to scramble across to the continuation. Lichen made the roots of trees indistinguishable from the rock. His foot slipped; he slithered, banging his elbow, clutching for handholds. Good Lord, the slope was short, at worst he would turn his ankle, he could still grab hold of rock, in any case someone was coming, he could hear voices vague as the stream's rush that obscured them. At last he was sure he was safe, though at the cost of a bruised hip. He sat and cursed his pounding heart. He didn't care who heard him—but perhaps nobody did, for the owners of the voices never appeared.

He struggled upwards. The larches gave way to spruce firs. Fallen trunks, splintered like bone, hindered his progress. How far had he still to climb? He must have laboured half a mile by now; it felt like more. The forest had grown oppressive. Elaborate lichens swelled brittle branches; everywhere he looked, life burgeoned parasitically, consuming the earth and the forest, a constant and ruthless renewal. He was sweating, and the clammy chill of the place failed to cool him.

Silence seized him. He could hear only the restless creaking of trees. For a long time he had been unable to glimpse the Swan; the sky was invisible, too, except in fragments caged by branches. All at once, as he climbed between close banks of mossy earth and rock, he yearned to reach the open. He felt suffocated, as though the omnipresent lichen were thick fog. He forced himself onward, panting harshly.

Pain halted him—pain that transfixed his heart and paralysed his limbs with shock. His head felt swollen, burning, deafened by blood. Beyond that uproar, were there voices? Could he cry for help? But he felt that he might never draw another breath.

As suddenly as it had attacked him, the pain was gone, though he felt as if it had burned a hollow where his heart had been. He slumped against rock. His ears rang as though metal had been clapped over them. Oh God, the doctor had been right; he must take things easy. But if he had to forgo rambling, he would have nothing left that was worthwhile. At last he groped upwards out of the dank trough of earth, though he was still light-headed and unsure of his footing. The path felt distant and vague.

He reached the edge of the forest without further mishap. Beyond it, Beckstones Gill rushed over broken stones. The sky was layered with grey clouds. Across the stream, on the rise to the summit, bracken shone amid heather.

He crossed the stream and climbed the path. Below him the heathery slope plunged towards the small valley. A few crumbs of boats floated on Bassenthwaite. A constant quivering ran downhill through the heather; the wind dragged at his cagoule, whose fluttering deafened him. He felt unnervingly vulnerable, at the mercy of the gusts. His face had turned cold as bone. Sheep dodged away from him. Their swiftness made his battle with the air seem ridiculous, frustrating. He had lost all sense of time before he

reached the summit—where he halted, entranced. At last his toil had meaning.

The world seemed laid out for him. Light and shadow drifted stately over the fells, which reached towards clouds no vaster than they. Across Bassenthwaite, fells higher than his own were only steps on the ascent to Skiddaw, on whose deceptively gentle outline gleamed patches of snow. A few dots, too distant to have limbs, crept along that ridge. The fells glowed with all the colours of foliage, grass, heather, bracken, except where vast tracts of rock broke through. Drifts of shadow half absorbed the colours; occasional sunlight renewed them.

The landscape was melting; he had to blink. Was he weeping, or had the wind stung his eyes? He couldn't tell; the vastness had charmed away his sense of himself. He felt calm, absolutely unselfconscious. He watched light advancing through Beckstones Plantation, possessing each successive rank of foliage. When he gazed across the lake again, that sight had transfigured the landscape.

Which lake was that on the horizon? He had never before noticed it. It lay like a fragment of slate, framed by two fells dark as storms—but above it, clouds were opening. Blue sky shone through the tangle of grey; veils of light descended from the ragged gap. The lake began to glow from within, intensely calm. Beyond it fields and trees grew clear, minute and luminous. Yes, he was weeping.

After a while he sat on a rock. Its coldness was indistinguishable from his own stony chill. He must go down shortly. He gazed out for a last view. The fells looked smooth, alluringly gentle; valleys were trickles of rock. He held up his finger for a red bug to crawl along. Closer to him, red dots were scurrying: ladybirds, condemned to explore the maze of grass-blades, to change course at each intersection. Their mindless urgency dismayed him.

They drew his gaze to the heather. He gazed deep into a tangled clump, at the breathtaking variety of colours, the intricacies of growth. As many must be hidden in each patch of heather: depths empty of meaning, and intended for no eye. All around him plants reproduced shapes endlessly: striving for perfection, or compelled to repeat themselves without end? If his gaze had been microscopic, he would have seen the repetitions of atomic particles, mindlessly clinging and building, possessed by the compulsion of matter to form patterns.

Suddenly it frightened him—he couldn't tell why. He felt unsafe. Perhaps it was the mass of cloud which had closed overhead like a stone lid. The colours of the summit had turned lurid, threatening. He headed back towards the wood. The faces of sheep gleamed like bone—he had never noticed before how they resembled munching skulls. A group of heads, chewing mechanically, glared white against the sky and kept their gaze on him.

He was glad to cross the stream, though he couldn't feel the water. He must hurry down before he grew colder. The hush of the woods embraced him. Had a sheep followed him? No, it was only the cry of a decaying trunk. He slipped quickly down the path, which his feet seemed hardly to touch.

The movement of silver-green lattices caged him. Branches and shadows swayed everywhere, entangled. The tips of some of the firs were luminously new. Winds stalked the depths of the forest, great vague forms on creaking stilts. Scents of growth and decay accompanied him. When he grabbed a branch to make sure of his footing, it broke, scattering flakes of lichen.

Again the forest grew too vivid; the trees seemed victims of the processes of growth, sucked dry by the lichen which at the same time lent them an elaborate patina of life. Wherever he looked, the forest seemed unbearably intricate. How, among all that, could he glimpse initials? Somehow they had seized his attention before he knew what they were. They were carved on a cracked and wrinkled tree: Wendy's initials, and the man's.

Or were they? Perhaps they were only cracks in the bark. Of course she and the man might well have climbed up here—but the more Knox squinted, the less clear the letters seemed. He couldn't recapture the angle of vision at which they had looked unmistakable.

He was still pacing back and forth before the trunk, as though trapped in a ritual, when stealthy movement made him turn. Was it the shifting of grey trees beneath the lowering largely unseen sky? No—it was a cloud or mist, descending swiftly from the summit, through the woods.

He glanced ahead for the path—and, with a shock that seemed to leave him hollow, realised that it was not there. Nor was it visible behind him as far back as the wall of mist. His reluctant fascination with the forest had lured him astray.

He strode back towards the mist, hushing his doubts. Surely the path couldn't be far. But the mist felt thick as icy water, and blinded him. He found himself slithering on decay towards a fall which, though invisible, threatened to be steep. A grab at a crumbling trunk saved him; but when he'd struggled onto safer ground, he could only retreat towards the tree which he had thought was inscribed.

He must press on, outdistancing the mist, and try to head downwards. Wasn't there a forest road below, quite close? But whenever he found an easy slope, it would become abruptly dangerous, often blocked by treacherous splintered logs. He was approaching panic. As much as anything, the hollow at the centre of himself dismayed him. He had tended to welcome it when it had grown there, in his marriage and afterwards; it had seemed safe, invulnerable. Now he found he had few inner resources with which to sustain himself.

The mist was only yards away. It had swallowed all the faint sounds of the wood. If he could only hear the stream, or better still a human voice, a vehicle on the forest road—if only he had gone back to the hotel for his whistle and compass—But there was a sound. Something was blundering towards him. Why was he indefinably distressed, rather than heartened?

Perhaps because the mist obscured it as it scuttled down the slope towards him; perhaps because it sounded too small for an adult human being, too swift, too lopsided. He thought of a child stumbling blindly down the decayed slope. But what child would be so voiceless? As it tumbled limping through the mist, Knox suppressed an urge to flee. He saw the object stagger against a misty root, and collapse there. Before he had ventured forward he saw that it was only a rucksack.

Yet he couldn't quite feel relieved. The rucksack was old, discoloured and patched with decay; mist drained it of colour. Where had it come from? Who had abandoned it, and why? It still moved feebly, as though inhabited. Of course there was a wind: the mist was billowing. Nevertheless he preferred not to go closer. The blurred tentative movements of the overgrown sack were unpleasant, somehow. Still, perhaps the incident was opportune. It had made him glance upwards for an explanation. He found none—but he caught sight of a summit against the clouds. It wasn't Barf, for between the confusion of trees he could just distinguish two cairns, set close together. If he could reach them, he ought to be able to see his way more

clearly. Was he hearing muffled voices up there? He hoped so, but hadn't time to listen.

He wasn't safe yet. The mist had slowed, but was still pursuing him. The slope above him was too steep to climb. He retreated between the trees, avoiding slippery roots which glistened dull silver, glancing upwards constantly for signs of the path. For a while he lost sight of the unknown summit. Only a glimpse of the cairns against the darkening sky mitigated his panic. Were they cairns, or figures sitting together? No, they were the wrong colour for people.

Above him the slope grew steeper. Worse, twilight was settling like mist into the woods. He glared downhill, but the fall was dim and precipitous; there was no sign of a road, only the grey web of innumerable branches. He groped onward, careless of his footing, desperate to glimpse a way. Surely a path must lead to the cairns. But would he reach it before dark? Could he heave himself up the slope now, using trees for handholds? Wait: wasn't that a path ahead, trailing down between the firs? He stumbled forward, afraid to run in case he slipped. He reached out to grab a tree, to lever himself past its trap of roots. But his fingers recoiled—the encrusted glimmering bark looked unnervingly like a face.

He refused to be reminded of anyone. He clung to the hollow within himself and fought off memories. Yet, as he passed close to the next tree, he seemed to glimpse the hint of a face composed of cracks in the bark, and of twilight. His imagination was conspiring with the dimness, that was all—but why, as he grasped a trunk to thrust himself onward, did each patch of lichen seem to suggest a face? The more closely he peered, enraged by his fears, the smaller and more numerous the swarming faces seemed. Were there many different faces, or many versions of a couple? Their expressions, though vague, seemed numerous and disturbing.

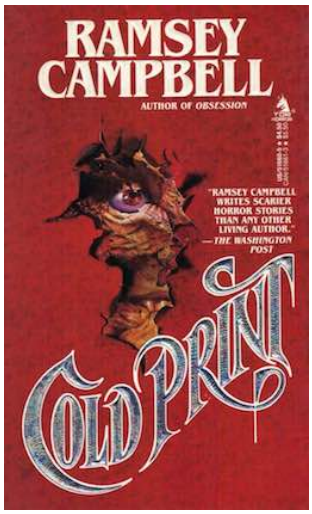
For a moment he was sure that he couldn't back away—that he must watch until the light was entirely gone, must glimpse faces yet smaller and clearer and more numerous. Panic hurled him away from the lichen, and sent him scrabbling upwards. His fingers dug into decay; ferns writhed and snapped when he grabbed them; the surrounding dimness teemed with faces. He kicked himself footholds, gouged the earth with his heels. He clutched at roots, which flaked, moist and chill. More than once he slithered back into the massing darkness. But his panic refused to be defeated. At last, as

twilight merged the forest into an indistinguishable crowd of dimness, he scrambled up a slope that had commenced to be gentle, to the edge of the trees.

As soon as he had done so, his triumph collapsed beneath dismay. Even if he glimpsed a path from the summit, night would engulf it before he could make his way down. The sky was blackening. Against it loomed two hunched forms, heads turned to him. Suddenly joy seized him. He could hear voices—surely the sound was more than the muttering of wind. The two forms were human. They must know their way down, and he could join them.

He scrambled upwards. Beyond the trees, the slope grew steep again; but the heather provided easy holds, though his clambering felt almost vertical. The voices had ceased; perhaps they had heard him. But when he glanced up, the figures hadn't moved. A foot higher, and he saw that the faces turned to him were patches of moss; the figures were cairns, after all. It didn't matter: companionship waited at the summit; he'd heard voices, he was sure that he'd heard them, please let him have done so. And indeed, as he struggled up the last yards of the slope, the two grey figures rose with a squeaking and rattling of slate, and advanced heavily towards him.

Blacked Out



Written in: 1977
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Once out of the Munich traffic, Lamb drove leisurely. Painted giants, elaborate and luminous as frescoes, adorned the walls of houses, which looked as though you had only to lift their roofs to make them chime. Flowers blazed on a multitude of balconies. Between village cows wandered, gently jangling with bells, in fields near barns. August sunlight glided over chalky lakes. Here and there he glimpsed crucifixes in wayside shrines like wooden alcoves on stalks.

He'd neglected to buy a road map. He ought to buy one before dark, at the latest. But he was enchanted with Bavaria. Occasionally, outside houses, he saw tree stumps or even entire trunks carved with grotesque faces. Sometimes they bunched together like a knot of gnarled and incomplete old men, grimacing at him. He drove by, smiling.

While the landscape around Munich had been absolutely flat, mountains were rising now. They bristled with pines. Gazing ahead, he distinguished layer on layer of peaks, which grew paler with mist and distance. Were the furthest shapes mountains or clouds? In squinting to be certain, he passed the signpost. When he failed to make it out by craning he had to creep irritably back to it in reverse.

Yes, something was odd. The direction in which he had been heading was erased by a slash of black paint. A warning, or vandalism? The pointer to the side road indicated Munich. He didn't want to backtrack if it could be avoided. Besides, there was a church ahead: he could see the tip of its spire, a pointed onion which glinted green, beyond a rise. Surely the road was safe.

As he neared the church, the priest came out to meet him. At least, that was how it looked; certainly the man appeared to be gesturing to him—though Lamb found it difficult to be sure, for the light of late afternoon which

barred the road with the shadow of the spire also submerged the porch in dimness. The approach of twilight had taken Lamb unawares; it seemed at least an hour earlier than in England. British Summer Time must be the explanation—and of course the days were dwindling. Was the priest beckoning, or gesturing him away?

Before Lamb could tell, the priest was engulfed by his congregation. Movements in the dim porch developed into people, who emerged and stood outside the church: a man like a barrel for the beer that rouged his face, which drooped as though melting in the sullen heat; a thin man whose hands clambered incessantly over each other, spider-like; a young buxom blonde. Of the gazes which fastened on Lamb, and which multiplied as more of the worshippers emerged, only hers was timid. Lamb felt absurd; the priest had withdrawn into the church; the dawdling car panted fumes at the watchers. He drove on.

As it occurred to him that the congregation must come from somewhere nearby, he glimpsed the village. Its lights—or, considering the time of day, more likely reflections of sunlight on windows—gleamed through trees at the foot of the hill. Perhaps he could stay in the village, and gain experience of making himself understood.

Outside the village, horned heads stared over a gate at him. Their eyes were stagnant, but their jaws shifted, chewing. Why did the eyes look ringed by mascara? He wound down the window in order to lean out; then, faintly dismayed, he accelerated into the village. The eye-sockets were crawling with flies.

He had in fact glimpsed lights. All along the narrow clean street they hovered, pale but steady, in their globes. Perhaps a fault refused to let them be extinguished. They were dazzled not only by the daylight but by flowers which crowded the verges of lawns and swanned on tiers of wooden balconies. Scents roamed the streets.

The village felt oddly artificial, dream-like: an exhibit constructed for tourists. Only when he had halted the car and was searching his phrasebook for aid—'Helfen Sie mir, bitte' meant 'Help me, please,' which seemed an excessively melodramatic way to ask for directions—did he realise what was odd: the street was deserted. Every window was brightly blank; flowers alone leaned out from the balconies. Nothing moved, for even the lawns were weighed down by the hot still air.

All at once the stillness was unnerving. Light clung to the village as though paralysed by the heat. The place seemed too perfect, its cleanliness oppressive. The rustling of pages was close and nerve-racking—besides being pointless: it looked as though he wouldn't need phrases. He stowed the book beneath the dashboard and drove on.

The Gasthaus sign halted him. He understood that word without referring to the book. He couldn't afford to drive past the chance of a meal and a room. Ahead there might be only ski resorts, their hotels full. With its balconies that made it resemble a chest of ajar drawers, the building seemed too attractive to pass.

But it was empty. Heat lent the emptiness a presence which swallowed the ring of the bell on the counter, like fog. The low beams troubled him; he felt caged by dark wood. The bright lights only made them more solid and heavy. He couldn't bring himself to call 'Anyone here?'—even assuming he might be understood. He hurried back to the car.

Houses sailed by. The sense of unreality intensified; had he allowed his concentration to falter, he might have imagined himself to be coasting through a dream of a model village grown man-size. Still, he had almost reached the end. The road curved, to reveal a house whose windows were crowded with large unlit candles. Presumably it was a candle-maker's, though there was no sign. Beyond it, at the limit of the village, stood a small church.

What kind of church might belong to so silent a village? Though his curiosity was not altogether enjoyable, he left the car. On some of the graves which surrounded the church, candles flickered within glass, in the Bavarian tradition. He climbed the path, which was uneven and pitted as a bad road, and pushed open the door beneath the pointed arch. There he halted, taken aback.

Once, to judge by the onion spire, this had been a typical Bavarian church. What remained of the frescoes—a spotless feathered wing here, there the tatters of a face and its halo—suggested that it had been worth admiring. But only these fragments clung to the scaling walls, and most of the roof was gone. Pews leaned against one another for support; they looked merged by their crust of fallen plaster. The inner door lay within the porch, splintered into several pieces.

That door looked more recent than the building. What had broken it outward? A stray, perhaps dormant, bomb? Momentarily Lamb suffered a twinge of vague historical guilt. Systematic desecration could not have ruined the church more thoroughly, nor have made it feel less like a church.

Late afternoon light seeped through the grimy windows. Once that light must have ignited a gilded altar. Now it groped over flakes and wounds of raw plaster. As clouds chased across the sun, the tattered discoloured patch of wall appeared to writhe stealthily, to crawl.

Where the altar had stood was a jagged hole in stone. If what Lamb could hear was plaster sifting over the edge, disturbed presumably by his entering the church, then the hole sounded deep as a pit. He didn't intend to check. The floor might well be unsafe, and the church must certainly be damp, for its chill had reached him; he suppressed a shiver. There was a stench of mould—of something growing, anyway.

He ought to be moving on, to make sure of accommodation before dark. Or should he head back a few miles, to that hotel overlooking the lake? He was still hesitating within the porch when he heard footsteps behind him.

For a moment, as he turned, the waking dream of the village toppled into nightmare. He knew all the several faces in the street; yet equally he knew he had met none of them. Then everything fitted together. He'd seen them emerging from the previous church. That was why the village had been deserted. Even the superfluous lighting of the streets seemed explained, just as you might leave lights burning while you went out of the house for a few minutes, to show you would return shortly. Of course that was nonsense, but its absurdity expressed his surge of relief. And mightn't there be someone in the Gasthaus now? As he hurried past the nervous flames to his car, he saw the thin man with the restless hands entering the candle-maker's. Perhaps those hands were calmed by making candles.

What else could the barrel-shaped man have been except the innkeeper? Yes, he could give Lamb ein Zimmer for the night. His spaniel jowls drooped beneath the dark beams; the lights made his face vivid as an elaborately melted candle. He seemed morosely preoccupied, and hardly interested in Lamb. Was he distracted by the heat? But as Lamb hefted his suitcase upstairs, he caught the man gazing sidelong at him. Perhaps he was too proud to welcome Lamb openly. To judge by the silence of the Gasthaus, Lamb might be the only guest.

In that case he ought to refuse the room. When he arrived, having panted up three flights of steep dark wood, he found that it was cramped beneath the eaves. At least the window in the slanting wall was low enough for him to look down on the street. He wondered where the shapely blonde might be.

In a fit of resentful frustration, he took from his case the magazines he'd bought in Munich. Weren't they the next best thing? But the explicit photographs seemed clinical rather than erotic. They succeeded only in making him feel alone at the top of the house. Abruptly he strode downstairs to demand another room.

He couldn't make himself understood. The phrasebook allowed him to say 'No, I don't like it'—but not to name his dislike. 'Es ist zu—' Cold/hot/dark/small/noisy? He couldn't find the words for 'lonely' or 'misshapen' or 'depressing', even assuming that he could have made himself say such things. The small dim preoccupied eyes watched him from beneath the dark beams with a spaniel's glum patience. At last Lamb desisted, feeling stupid and inept, and turned aside into the restaurant.

The waitress seemed aloof, almost loath to serve him. If only she had been the blonde! Was he expected to buy a meal to justify his beer? Too bad; he didn't intend to eat dinner too early—he would have little else to use up his evening, except a stroll afterwards. He emptied his stein quickly, for the restaurant was too bright, hostile to the vague gloomy haze of beer he craved. Hardly a corner was left alone with its shadows.

Perhaps his room was preferable, at least for a while. He could lock himself in with the magazines—though however he restrained himself, they would occupy too little time. His shadow humped like a segmented larva over the stairs before him; it looked alone amid the brightness. The upper reaches of the building sounded hollow. But as he reached the top landing, the door of his room opened. As he faltered, one foot dangling, the blonde emerged.

His emotions collided and almost overbalanced him: delight, embarrassment, disbelief, suspicion. He pretended that his gasp had been a prelude to a cough. What had she been doing in his room? Her sidelong glance at him seemed less timid than slyly enticing, for she smiled.

Whether or not that was meant to attract him, it allowed him to stride forward. As she stood aside in the narrow passage, the strong light rendered

all of her intensely vivid: her large firm breasts, her wide blue eyes, her skin that looked both sculpted and tanned, her gradual shy smile. What were her eyes telling him? Before he could judge, she was heading for the stairs. Was she swaying her round bottom beneath the tight black uniform just for him?

Of course, she was a chambermaid. Anything beyond that was a fantasy. He saw that as soon as he glimpsed the towel draped over the end of his bed. But he had hardly stepped into the room when he and his thoughts froze. His magazines, which he had left closed on the floor, lay side by side on the bed, and open.

How dare she pry! What he read was his business! By God, if he caught her he would—Suddenly he realised how carefully the magazines were arranged on the bed, open to the most explicit pages. At once he realised what her smile and her gaze had meant to tell him.

By the time he'd hurried out on to the landing, the staircase was empty, even of shadows. Nor could he hear her. He must be meant to wait. He lay on his bed and dreamed of her—or tried to, but the harsh light kept interrupting. Where on earth was the switch? Not in the room, apparently. He could unscrew the light, except that the junction of bulb and socket was bandaged with insulating tape. Perhaps it was unsafe. No doubt the girl would know how to switch out the light—supposing that he had any time for sleep.

He lay with her on the bed. Darkness and their warmth cradled them. It took her footsteps in the street to start him from his dream of her. He stumbled to the window. The sky was muddy with clouds; the street, perhaps by contrast, looked even brighter. Yes, it was the blonde whose footsteps he'd heard. She was talking to the thin man with the scrambling hands.

Lamb tried to open the window stealthily, in the hope of hearing words which he could understand. But the window rattled in its frame, and the man looked up. His face seemed to pinch into an expression of puritanical contempt, though at that distance Lamb could well have been mistaken. He turned curtly to the girl, and Lamb heard their discussion, incomprehensible save for one reassuring word: she called the man 'father'. All seemed well, and could hardly have been better, for as she hurried after her father the girl glanced up at Lamb and, unmistakably, smiled.

So there was to be a plot between her and Lamb. If she was going home to cook her father's dinner, then Lamb had best eat now. Yet this strategy was so rooted in the banal that it made him hesitate. Could all this really be happening? Was he making a fool of himself? At the same time, the day's adventures seemed to promise further surprises. He felt as though not knowing where he was, not even the name of the town, freed him to explore new possibilities.

Still, in the restaurant the unreality grew threatening. Beneath the multitude of lights, faces surrounded him, clinically detailed. He recognised every one, but understood not a word of their chatter. Under the circumstances, it seemed just as well that nobody sat at his table or spoke to him. But that left him alone with a mounting paranoia: how many of them knew about him and the girl? Some of them kept glancing at him as they talked; most of them seemed nervously restless, no doubt because of the heat.

Of course he must simply be imposing his own doubts on them. He ate dinner, a rich unfamiliar spiced meat. It was surely not what he had ordered, but it gave him no other cause to complain. He would have liked to savour it, but felt that he ought not to dawdle here; the girl was unlikely to come to him except in his room.

He was glad to retreat upstairs, even to the dwarf room. Above the naked bulb a blazing patch hovered on the canted ceiling, which looked prepared to descend on him. He wished he had complained that the room was too small—but he mustn't change his room now.

He lay waiting. Night gathered in the window; the brightness of the village made it look more like fog. How long had he been waiting? It was impossible to tell; his watch had stopped—it must have done so during the meal. Had the girl's father forbidden her to meet him? Surely she couldn't have discussed the plan, surely that hadn't been the reason for the man's hostile glare, the glances of the diners. Lamb's loneliness was talking nonsense. Just relax, don't nag at the dream, just let things happen. He drifted through clumps of grimacing faces; their eyes were unequal knotholes. Before he could reach the church beyond their branches, darkness swallowed him. He woke, and saw that the door of his room was open.

Had she visited him and been afraid to wake him? He stumbled to the window. The street was theatrically bright, and quite empty. His mouth

tasted sour with awakening and with disappointment. Had he been tricked, or had he tricked himself? As much to waken himself thoroughly as in any hope, he trudged on to the landing. Movement made him peer down, and the girl turned at the foot of the staircase to smile timidly at him.

At once she slipped out of sight. She must be leaving the inn. Fumbling in his pocket to make sure he had the key, Lamb slammed the door and hurried down. Dark wood thundered beneath him. Good God, he sounded like a stampede all by himself. She could hardly want to attract attention.

Had his noise scared her off? The street looked clean as bone, cleared even of shadows. It looked like a dream of perfection, in which his car outside the Gasthaus provided incongruity. Had her face at the foot of the stairs been the remnant of a dream? No, for he glimpsed her black dress vanishing beyond the curve of the street.

He strode in pursuit, not yet wondering where she meant to lead him. The heat and the lingering numbness of sleep closed him into himself, dulled his thoughts; he felt feverish. She seemed to have chosen her time well, for the street remained deserted, though here and there another window lit up. Of course she would know when the villagers would be occupied in their houses or in the Gasthaus.

The street was too short to give him time for many doubts. But the silence, the isolation of his steps and hers, seemed dauntingly unreal, as though he had been lured into miming a sexual chase. Scents wafted at him, enticing him onward. He quickened his pace, frustrated that the curve blocked his view of her. He heard her pace increase too. She was nearly at her father's house.

Was her father away from home—or was he expecting them both? Lamb wasn't about to perform for an audience. Adventure was one thing, perversion which he didn't enjoy quite another. But as he rounded the curve he saw her clearly. Passing the house without a glance, she marched stiffly towards the church.

Apparently she meant to lead him into the fields. That had a certain primitive appeal, but was hardly alluring. He had no time to reflect, for the church had seized his attention. Was the building on fire?

Venturing forward, he saw the flames. He had the impression that they numbered thousands; their glass jars stood not only on the graves but on the

paths between. The entire churchyard blazed with a multitude of candles.

The restless light made the church appear to stir on its foundations. Had someone propped a tree trunk in the porch? The glimpse must be a trick of the light, for momentarily he thought that the object was carved with a writhing face as long and thin as the doorway. When he squinted, his eyes only grew more dazzled, unable to make out the interior of the porch.

Nor could he distinguish the girl at first. As he peered into the dark beyond the village, a stench came welling up from somewhere. Was it fertiliser, or over-ripe crops? Good Lord, how long did they leave things to rot? If the girl had gone into that dark, he was no longer so anxious to follow her.

Then he saw her. She was stealing along the outer edge of the churchyard. Only the fluttering oval of her face was visible above the dance of the railings; her clothes merged with the dark. Still, there was enough light on her path to make him feel safe.

When he trod on the path, it stirred sluggishly beneath its pelt of grass. He spent time gingerly ensuring that it was firm enough. Along the railings he heard the clash of a metal gate, and a quick rattling. The girl was out of sight now. Good Lord, what was he dawdling for? He ran past the dazzling graveyard, to the end of the railing. There was the gate, and beyond it a narrow path between hedges—but the gate was chained and padlocked.

So she was a teaser, was she? Before his anger could gather momentum it subsided, cowed. Something more was wrong than sexual trickery, though he couldn't yet tell how he knew. What was troubling him? The sharp points on the railings and on the gate, which imprisoned him in the dark? The bright street locked into itself? The desertion? By the church, something moved.

His hand clenched convulsively on a railing. Then he relaxed a little. The movement had only been a leap of darkness: a few adjacent candles, closest to the porch, had gone out. But before he had time to look away, the next flames were engulfed.

That was the only word. It was as though a shadow had fallen on them, a shadow composed of mud: he saw the flames sputter, shrink, die. Above them, at the edge of his dazzled vision, a shape tall as the doorway seemed to lean out of the porch. The stench of growth or decay flooded over Lamb, choking him. He remembered the smell of the church. A clammy chill, like

the cold he had felt in the church, reached for him and set his body trembling.

When the third rank of candles was doused, he ran. Before he reached the churchyard gate, the stain of darkness had spread across half the graves. Was a shape advancing beyond the dazzle? He moaned, though air had to struggle through his constricted throat to his shaking lips, and ran.

All seemed inevitable as a nightmare. Everything was planned. He was hardly surprised to see, as he ran stumbling into the village, that every window was lit. The blaze showed him the girl in the act of retreating into her father's house.

Perhaps she had been forced to entice him. Might she shelter him now? Please, for God's sake, let her help—for behind him the entire graveyard was dark. He might not have time to reach his car, if the lights of the village failed to protect him. The stench rushed at him, the chill embraced him. The silence of the graveyard seemed altogether dreadful. He staggered towards her. 'Help me,' he cried.

She turned in the doorway. Her face was unreadable, though certainly not timid. 'Helfen Sie mir,' he managed to pronounce. It sounded absolutely unconvincing, and absurd. 'Bitte!' he cried. 'Bitte!' The sound chattered in his mouth, and would have seemed comic if its unimpressiveness had not been terrifying.

All at once Lamb saw that behind the girl stood her father. Avoiding Lamb's gaze, she reached back and grabbed—Lamb flinched away, but it wasn't a weapon, only a wide pan and a wooden spoon. At once she began to clatter them together. Still unable to look at Lamb, she kicked the door shut in his face. As though her noise had been a signal—which no doubt it was—the locked houses came alive with an uproar of utensils.

The row was deafening. It tumbled his thoughts in disarray. He couldn't plan, only run wildly as he realised that the street had dimmed behind him. The first lamps had been swallowed. The violent clamour must be meant to keep the pursuit away from the houses, in the middle of the street—Lamb and the other.

He ran, moaning desperately to himself. His chest felt raw, unable to grasp breath. His ankles gave way, pierced with pain, and tried to throw him

headlong. How short the street had appeared before! The metal uproar drove him onward, mindlessly terrified.

When he came in sight of the Gasthaus and saw that his car was gone, he cried out inarticulately. He stumbled to the Gasthaus door, though he knew it would be locked, and pounded on it, sobbing. From the edge of his eye he glimpsed darkness flooding the street. The clattering urged it towards him.

As his fist thumped the door, no longer in the hope of entry but because the whole of his arm was shivering, he saw a glow ahead, beyond the village. It was pale, and looked gnawed. He limped in that direction, for there was nowhere else to go. Then he realised that it was moonlight rising over mountains. The gnawing was silhouettes of pines.

Surely nothing could douse that light. He forced himself to run, rasping air into his lungs. But at the edge of the village he faltered. There were several hundred yards to run through darkness before he reached the crest of the road, where the glow might be waiting for him. But—he squinted from the edge of the light of the village, not daring yet to risk the dark—the crest was not deserted. A car was parked there, which must be his.

Perhaps he had a chance. He sucked air into his lungs until they throbbed—then, with a gasp of pure panic, he drove himself forward, into the dark. Behind him the village dimmed to an ember, and went out.

There was only the distant toothed glow. But almost at once the village sprang alight, and the metal clamour dwindled jaggedly into silence. At once he knew that whatever had emerged from the broken church was out here in the dark with him, barring him from the village.

In any case, the insidious chill and the advancing stench would have told him so. Why had the villagers pushed his car to the hill? In case he managed to reach the Gasthaus or in order to lure him onward? He wished that the silence had not allowed these thoughts to form. He ran, trying to stumble faster and to deafen himself and his thoughts with his panting—for behind him in the dark he could hear a leisurely creaking which could be both the sound of limbs and, worse, a kind of laughter.

Mackintosh Willy

"Many [...] stories grew out of their settings; the setting of *Mackintosh Willy* is real, and so is the graffito that gave me the idea for the story. [The story] tied with Elizabeth Lynn's *Woman Who Loved the Moon* for the World Fantasy Award in 1980."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Dark Companions*

"As for the story behind the story, there isn't much to tell. For several years Jenny and I did indeed live across West Derby Road from Newsham Park, where I often took a hashish-eater's stroll. One day I misread the graffiti in a shelter as the narrator does, and noticed footprints set in new concrete around the nearby pond. This was all my imagination needed."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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To start with, he wasn't called Mackintosh Willy. I never knew who gave him that name. Was it one of those nicknames that seem to proceed from a group subconscious, names recognised by every member of the group yet apparently originated by none? One has to call one's fears something, if only to gain the illusion of control. Still, sometimes I wonder how much of his monstrousness we created. Wondering helps me not to ponder my responsibility for what happened at the end.

When I was ten I thought his name was written inside the shelter in the park. I saw it only from a distance; I wasn't one of those who made a game of braving the shelter. At ten I wasn't afraid to be timid—that came later, with adolescence.

Yet if you had walked past Newsham Park you might have wondered what there was to fear: why were children advancing, bold but wary, on the redbrick shelter by the twilit pool? Surely there could be no danger in the shallow shed, which might have held a couple of dozen bicycles. By now the fishermen and the model boats would have left the pool alone and still; lamps on the park road would have begun to dangle luminous tails in the water. The only sounds would be the whispering of children, the murmur of trees around the pool, perhaps a savage incomprehensible muttering whose source you would be unable to locate. Only a game, you might reassure yourself.

And of course it was: a game to conquer fear. If you had waited long enough you might have heard shapeless movement in the shelter, and a snarling. You might have glimpsed him as he came scuttling lopsidedly out of the shelter, like an injured spider from its lair. In the gathering darkness, how much of your glimpse would you believe? The unnerving swiftness of the obese limping shape? The head which seemed to belong to another, far smaller, body, and which was almost invisible within a grey Balaclava cap, except for the small eyes which glared through the loose hole?

All of that made us hate him. We were too young for tolerance—and besides, he was intolerant of us. Ever since we could remember he had been there, guarding his territory and his bottle of red biddy. If anyone ventured too close he would start muttering. Sometimes you could hear some of the words: "Damn bastard prying interfering snooper... thieving bastard layabout... think you're clever, eh?... I'll give you something clever..."

We never saw him until it was growing dark: that was what made him into a monster. Perhaps during the day he joined his cronies elsewhere—on the steps of ruined churches in the centre of Liverpool, or lying on the grass in St John's Gardens, or crowding the benches opposite Edge Hill Public Library, whose stopped clock no doubt helped their draining of time. But if anything of this occurred to us, we dismissed it as irrelevant. He was a creature of the dark.

Shouldn't this have meant that the first time I saw him in daylight was the end? In fact, it was only the beginning.

It was a blazing day at the height of summer, my tenth. It was too hot to think of games to while away my school holidays. All I could do was walk errands for my parents, grumbling a little.

They owned a small newsagent's on West Derby Road. That day they were expecting promised copies of the *Tuebrook Bugle*. Even when he disagreed with them, my father always supported the independent papers—the *Bugle*, the *Liverpool Free Press*: at least they hadn't been swallowed or destroyed by a monopoly. The lateness of the *Bugle* worried him; had the paper given in? He sent me to find out.

I ran across West Derby Road just as the traffic lights at the top of the hill released a flood of cars. Only girls used the pedestrian subway so far as I was concerned; besides, it was flooded again. I strolled past the concrete

police station into the park, to take the long way round. It was too hot to go anywhere quickly or even directly.

The park was crowded with games of football, parked prams, sunbathers draped over the greens. Patients sat outside the hospital on Orphan Drive beside the park. Around the lake, fishermen sat by transistor radios and whipped the air with hooks. Beyond the lake, model boats snarled across the shallow circular pool. I stopped to watch their patterns on the water, and caught sight of an object in the shelter.

At first I thought it was an old grey sack that someone had dumped on the bench. Perhaps it held rubbish—sticks which gave parts of it an angular look. Then I saw that the sack was an indeterminate stained garment, which might have been a mackintosh or raincoat of some kind. What I had vaguely assumed to be an ancient shopping bag, resting next to the sack, displayed a ragged patch of flesh and the dull gleam of an eye. Exposed to daylight, he looked even more dismaying: so huge and still, less stupefied than dormant. The presence of the boatmen with their remote-control boxes reassured me. I ambled past the allotments to Pringle Street, where a terraced house was the editorial office of the *Bugle*.

Our copies were on the way, said Chrissie Maher the editor, and insisted on making me a cup of tea. She seemed a little upset when, having gulped the tea, I hurried out into the rain. Perhaps it was rude of me not to wait until the rain had stopped—but on this parched day I wanted to make the most of it, to bathe my face and my bare arms in the onslaught, gasping almost hysterically.

By the time I had passed the allotments, where cabbages rattled like toy machine-guns, the downpour was too heavy even for me. The park provided little cover; the trees let fall their own belated storms, miniature but drenching. The nearest shelter was by the pool, which had been abandoned to its web of ripples. I ran down the slippery tarmac hill, splashing through puddles, trying to blink away rain, hoping there would be room in the shelter.

There was plenty of room, both because the rain reached easily into the depths of the brick shed and because the shelter was not entirely empty. He lay as I had seen him, face upturned within the sodden Balaclava. Had the boatmen avoided looking closely at him? Raindrops struck his unblinking eyes and trickled over the patch of flesh.

I hadn't seen death before. I stood shivering and fascinated in the rain. I needn't be scared of him now. He'd stuffed himself into the grey coat until it split in several places; through the rents I glimpsed what might have been dark cloth or discoloured hairy flesh. Above him, on the shelter, were graffiti which at last I saw were not his name at all, but the names of three boys: MACK TOSH WILLY. They were partly erased, which no doubt was why one's mind tended to fill the gap.

I had to keep glancing at him. He grew more and more difficult to ignore; his presence was intensifying. His shapelessness, the rents in his coat, made me think of an old bag of washing, decayed and mouldy. His hand lurked in his sleeve; beside it, amid a scattering of Coca-Cola caps, lay fragments of the bottle whose contents had perhaps killed him. Rain roared on the dull green roof of the shelter; his staring eyes glistened and dripped. Suddenly I was frightened. I ran blindly home.

"There's someone dead in the park," I gasped. "The man who chases everyone."

"Look at you!" my mother cried. "Do you want pneumonia? Just you get out of those wet things this instant!" Eventually I had a chance to repeat my news. By this time the rain had stopped. "Well, don't be telling us," my father said. "Tell the police. They're just across the road."

Did he think I had exaggerated a drunk into a corpse? He looked surprised when I hurried to the police station. But I couldn't miss the chance to venture in there—I believed that elder brothers of some of my schoolmates had been taken into the station and hadn't come out for years.

Beside a window which might have belonged to a ticket office was a bell which you rang to make the window's partition slide back and display a policeman. He frowned down at me. What was my name? What had I been doing in the park? Who had I been with? When a second head appeared beside him he said reluctantly "He thinks someone's passed out in the park."

A blue-and-white Mini called for me at the police station, like a taxi; on the roof a red sign said POLICE. People glanced in at me as though I were on my way to prison. Perhaps I was: suppose Mackintosh Willy had woken up and gone? How long a sentence did you get for lying? False diamonds sparkled on the grass and in the trees. I wished I'd persuaded my father to tell the police.

As the car halted, I saw the grey bulk in the shelter. The driver strode, stiff with dignity, to peer at it. "My God," I heard him say in disgust.

Did he know Mackintosh Willy? Perhaps, but that wasn't the point. "Look at this," he said to his colleague. "Ever see a corpse with pennies on the eyes? Just look at this, then. See what someone thought was a joke."

He looked shocked, sickened. He was blocking my view as he demanded "Did you do this?"

His white-faced anger, and my incomprehension, made me speechless. But his colleague said "It wouldn't be him. He wouldn't come and tell us afterwards, would he?"

As I tried to peer past them he said "Go on home, now. Go on." His gentleness seemed threatening. Suddenly frightened, I ran home through the park.

For a while I avoided the shelter. I had no reason to go near, except on the way home from school. Sometimes I'd used to see schoolmates tormenting Mackintosh Willy; sometimes, at a distance, I had joined them. Now the shelter yawned emptily, baring its dim bench. The dark pool stirred, disturbing the green beards of the stone margin. My main reason for avoiding the park was that there was nobody with whom to go.

Living on the main road was the trouble. I belonged to none of the side streets, where they played football among parked cars or chased through the back alleys. I was never invited to street parties. I felt like an outsider, particularly when I had to pass the groups of teenagers who sat on the railing above the pedestrian subway, lazily swinging their legs, waiting to pounce. I stayed at home, in the flat above the newsagent's, when I could, and read everything in the shop. But I grew frustrated: I did enough reading at school. All this was why I welcomed Mark. He could save me from my isolation.

Not that we became friends immediately. He was my parents' latest paperboy. For several days we examined each other warily. He was taller than me, which was intimidating, but seemed unsure how to arrange his lankiness. Eventually he said "What're you reading?"

He sounded as though reading was a waste of time. "A book," I retorted.

At last, when I'd let him see that it was Mickey Spillane, he said "Can I read it after you?"

"It isn't mine. It's the shop's."

"All right, so I'll buy it." He did so at once, paying my father. He was certainly wealthier than me. When my resentment of his gesture had cooled somewhat, I realised that he was letting me finish what was now his book. I dawdled over it to make him complain, but he never did. Perhaps he might be worth knowing.

My instinct was accurate: he proved to be generous—not only with money, though his father made plenty of that in home improvements, but also in introducing me to his friends. Quite soon I had my place in the tribe at the top of the pedestrian subway, though secretly I was glad that we never exchanged more than ritual insults with the other gangs. Perhaps the police station, looming in the background, restrained hostilities.

Mark was generous too with his ideas. Although Ben, a burly lad, was nominal leader of the gang, it was Mark who suggested most of our activities. Had he taken to delivering papers to save himself from boredom—or, as I wondered afterwards, to distract himself from his thoughts? It was Mark who brought his skates so that we could brave the slope of the pedestrian subway, who let us ride his bicycle around the side streets, who found ways into derelict houses, who brought his transistor radio so that we could hear the first Beatles records as the traffic passed unheeding on West Derby Road. But was all this a means of distracting us from the park?

No doubt it was inevitable that Ben resented his supremacy. Perhaps he deduced, in his slow and stolid way, that Mark disliked the park. Certainly he hit upon the ideal method to challenge him.

It was a hot summer evening. By then I was thirteen. Dust and fumes drifted in the wakes of cars; wagons clattered repetitively across the railway bridge. We lolled about the pavement, kicking Coca-Cola caps. Suddenly Ben said "I know something we can do."

We trooped after him, dodging an aggressive gang of taxis, towards the police station. He might have meant us to play some trick there; when he swaggered past, I'm sure everyone was relieved—everyone except Mark, for Ben was leading us onto Orphan Drive.

Heat shivered above the tarmac. Beside us in the park, twilight gathered beneath the trees, which stirred stealthily. The island in the lake creaked with ducks; swollen litter drifted sluggishly, or tried to climb the bank. I

could sense Mark's nervousness. He had turned his radio louder; a misshapen Elvis Presley blundered out of the static, then sank back into incoherence as a neighbourhood waveband seeped into his voice. Why was Mark on edge? I could see only the dimming sky, trees on the far side of the lake diluted by haze, the gleam of bottle caps like eyes atop a floating mound of litter, the glittering of broken bottles in the lawns.

We passed the locked ice-cream kiosk. Ben was heading for the circular pool, whose margin was surrounded by a fluorescent orange tape tied between iron poles, a makeshift fence. I felt Mark's hesitation, as though he were a scared dog dragged by a lead. The lead was pride: he couldn't show fear, especially when none of us knew Ben's plan.

A new concrete path had been laid around the pool. "We'll write our names in that," Ben said.

The dark pool swayed, as though trying to douse reflected lights. Black clouds spread over the sky and loomed in the pool; the threat of a storm lurked behind us. The brick shelter was very dim, and looked cavernous. I strode to the orange fence, not wanting to be last, and poked the concrete with my toe. "We can't," I said; for some reason, I felt relieved. "It's set."

Someone had been there before us, before the concrete had hardened. Footprints led from the dark shelter towards us. As they advanced, they faded, no doubt because the concrete had been setting. They looked as though the man had suffered from a limp.

When I pointed them out, Mark flinched, for we heard the radio swing wide of comprehensibility. "What's up with you?" Ben demanded.

"Nothing."

"It's getting dark," I said, not as an answer but to coax everyone back towards the main road. But my remark inspired Ben; contempt grew in his eyes. "I know what it is," he said, gesturing at Mark. "This is where he used to be scared."

"Who was scared? I wasn't bloody scared."

"Not much you weren't. You didn't look it," Ben scoffed, and told us "Old Willy used to chase him all round the pool. He used to hate him, did old Willy. Mark used to run away from him. I never. I wasn't scared."

"You watch who you're calling scared. If you'd seen what I did to that old bastard—"

Perhaps the movements around us silenced him. Our surroundings were crowded with dark shifting: the sky unfurled darkness, muddy shapes rushed at us in the pool, a shadow huddled restlessly in one corner of the shelter. But Ben wasn't impressed by the drooping boast. "Go on," he sneered. "You're scared now. Bet you wouldn't dare go in his shelter."

"Who wouldn't? You watch it, you!"

"Go on, then. Let's see you do it."

We must all have been aware of Mark's fear. His whole body was stiff as a puppet's. I was ready to intervene—to say, lying, that the police were near—when he gave a shrug of despair and stepped forward. Climbing gingerly over the tape as though it were electrified, he advanced onto the concrete.

He strode towards the shelter. He had turned the radio full on; I could hear nothing else, only watch the shifting of dim shapes deep in the reflected sky, watch Mark stepping in the footprints for bravado. They swallowed his feet. He was nearly at the shelter when I saw him glance at the radio.

The song had slipped awry again; another waveband seeped in, a blurred muttering. I thought it must be Mark's infectious nervousness which made me hear it forming into words. "Come on, son. Let's have a look at you." But why shouldn't the words have been real, fragments of a radio play?

Mark was still walking, his gaze held by the radio. He seemed almost hypnotised; otherwise he would surely have flinched back from the huddled shadow which surged forward from the corner by the bench, even though it must have been the shadow of a cloud.

As his foot touched the shelter I called nervously "Come on, Mark. Let's go and skate." I felt as though I'd saved him. But when he came hurrying back, he refused to look at me or at anyone else.

For the next few days he hardly spoke to me. Perhaps he thought of avoiding my parents' shop. Certainly he stayed away from the gang—which turned out to be all to the good, for Ben, robbed of Mark's ideas, could think only of shoplifting. They were soon caught, for they weren't very skilful. After that my father had doubts about Mark, but Mark had always been scrupulously honest in deliveries; after some reflection, my father kept him on. Eventually Mark began to talk to me again, though not about the park.

That was frustrating: I wanted to tell him how the shelter looked now. I still passed it on my way home, though from a different school. Someone had been scrawling on the shelter. That was hardly unusual—graffiti filled the pedestrian subway, and even claimed the ends of streets—but the words were odd, to say the least: like scribbles on the walls of a psychotic's cell, or the gibberish of an invocation. DO THE BASTARD. BOTTLE UP HIS EYES. HOOK THEM OUT. PUSH HIS HEAD IN. Tangled amid them, like chewed bones, gleamed the eroded slashes of MACK TOSH WILLY.

I wasn't as frustrated by the conversational taboo as I might have been, for I'd met my first girlfriend. Kim was her name; she lived in a flat on my block, and because of her parents' trade, seemed always to smell of fish and chips. She obviously looked up to me—for one thing, I'd begun to read for pleasure again, which few of her friends could be bothered attempting. She told me her secrets, which was a new experience for me, strange and rather exciting—as was being seen on West Derby Road with a girl on my arm, any girl. I was happy to ignore the jeers of Ben and cronies.

She loved the park. Often we strolled through, scattering charitable crumbs to ducks. Most of all she loved to watch the model yachts, when the snarling model motorboats left them alone to glide over the pool. I enjoyed watching too, while holding her warm, if rather clammy, hand. The breeze carried away her culinary scent. But I couldn't help noticing that the shelter now displayed screaming faces with red bursts for eyes. I have never seen drawings of violence on walls elsewhere.

My relationship with Kim was short-lived. Like most such teenage experiences, our parting was not romantic and poignant, if partings ever are, but harsh and hysterical. It happened one evening as we made our way to the fair which visited Newsham Park each summer.

Across the lake we could hear shrieks that mingled panic and delight as cars on metal poles swung girls into the air, and the blurred roaring of an ancient pop song, like the voice of an enormous radio. On the Ferris wheel, coloured lights sailed up, painting airborne faces. The twilight shone like a Christmas tree; the lights swam in the pool. That was why Kim said "Let's sit and look first."

The only bench was in the shelter. Tangles of letters dripped tails of dried paint, like blood; mutilated faces shrieked soundlessly. Still, I thought I could bear the shelter. Sitting with Kim gave me the chance to touch her

breasts, such as they were, through the collapsing deceptively large cups of her bra. Tonight she smelled of newspapers, as though she had been wrapped in them for me to take out; she must have been serving at the counter. Nevertheless I kissed her, and ignored the fact that one corner of the shelter was dark as a spider's crevice.

But she had noticed; I felt her shrink away from the corner. Had she noticed more than I? Or was it her infectious wariness which made the dark beside us look more solid, about to shuffle towards us along the bench? I was uneasy, but the din and the lights of the fairground were reassuring. I determined to make the most of Kim's need for protection, but she pushed my hand away. "Don't," she said irritably, and made to stand up.

At that moment I heard a blurred voice. "Popeye," it muttered as if to itself; it sounded gleeful. "Popeye." Was it part of the fair? It might have been a stallholder's voice, distorted by the uproar, for it said "I've got something for you."

The struggles of Kim's hand in mine excited me. "Let me go," she was wailing. Because I managed not to be afraid, I was more pleased than dismayed by her fear—and I was eager to let my imagination flourish, for it was better than reading a ghost story. I peered into the dark corner to see what horrors I could imagine.

Then Kim wrenched herself free and ran around the pool. Disappointed and angry, I pursued her. "Go away," she cried. "You're horrible. I never want to speak to you again." For a while I chased her along the dim paths, but once I began to plead I grew furious with myself. She wasn't worth the embarrassment. I let her go, and returned to the fair, to wander desultorily for a while. When I'd stayed long enough to prevent my parents from wondering why I was home early, I walked home.

I meant to sit in the shelter for a while, to see if anything happened, but someone was already there. I couldn't make out much about him, and didn't like to go closer. He must have been wearing spectacles, for his eyes seemed perfectly circular and gleamed like metal, not like eyes at all.

I quickly forgot that glimpse, for I discovered Kim hadn't been exaggerating: she refused to speak to me. I stalked off to buy fish and chips elsewhere, and decided that I hadn't liked her anyway. My one lingering disappointment, I found glumly, was that I had nobody with whom to go to

the fairground. Eventually, when the fair and the school holidays were approaching their end, I said to Mark "Shall we go to the fair tonight?"

He hesitated, but didn't seem especially wary. "All right," he said with the indifference we were beginning to affect about everything.

At sunset the horizon looked like a furnace, and that was how the park felt. Couples rambled sluggishly along the paths; panting dogs splashed in the lake. Between the trees the lights of the fairground shimmered and twinkled, cheap multicoloured stars. As we passed the pool, I noticed that the air was quivering above the footprints in the concrete, and looked darkened, perhaps by dust. Impulsively I said "What did you do to old Willy?"

"Shut up." I'd never heard Mark so savage or withdrawn. "I wish I hadn't done it."

I might have retorted to his rudeness, but instead I let myself be captured by the fairground, by the glade of light amid the balding rutted green. Couples and gangs roamed, harangued a shade half-heartedly by stallholders. Young children hid their faces in pink candy floss. A siren thin as a Christmas party hooter set the dodgems running. Mark and I rode a tilting bucket above the fuzzy clamour of music, the splashes of glaring light, the cramped crowd. Secretly I felt a little sick, but the ride seemed to help Mark regain his confidence. Shortly, as we were playing a pinball machine with senile flippers, he said "Look, there's Lorna and what's-her-name."

It took me a while to be sure where he was pointing: at a tall bosomy girl, who probably looked several years older than she was, and a girl of about my height and age, her small bright face sketched with makeup. By this time I was following him eagerly.

The tall girl was Lorna; her friend's name was Carol. We strolled for a while, picking our way over power cables, and Carol and I began to like each other; her scent was sweet, if rather overpowering. As the fair began to close, Mark easily won trinkets at a shooting gallery and presented them to the girls, which helped us to persuade them to meet us on Saturday night. By now Mark never looked towards the shelter—I think not from wariness but because it had ceased to worry him, at least for the moment. I glanced across, and could just distinguish someone pacing unevenly round the pool, as if impatient for a delayed meeting.

If Mark had noticed, would it have made any difference? Not in the long run, I try to believe. But however I rationalise, I know that some of the blame was mine.

We were to meet Lorna and Carol on our side of the park in order to take them to the Carlton cinema, nearby. We arrived late, having taken our time over sprucing ourselves; we didn't want to seem too eager to meet them. Beside the police station, at the entrance to the park, a triangular island of pavement, large enough to contain a spinney of trees, divided the road. The girls were meant to be waiting at the nearest point of the triangle. But the island was deserted except for the caged darkness beneath the trees.

We waited. Shop windows on West Derby Road glared fluorescent green. Behind us trees whispered, creaking. We kept glancing into the park, but the only figure we could see on the dark paths was alone. Eventually, for something to do, we strolled desultorily around the island.

It was I who saw the message first, large letters scrawled on the corner nearest the park. Was it Lorna's or Carol's handwriting? It rather shocked me, for it looked semiliterate. But she must have had to use a stone as a pencil, which couldn't have helped; indeed, some letters had had to be dug out of the moss which coated stretches of the pavement, MARK SEE YOU AT THE SHELTER, the message said.

I felt him withdraw a little. "Which shelter?" he muttered.

"I expect they mean the one near the kiosk," I said, to reassure him.

We hurried along Orphan Drive. Above the lamps, patches of foliage shone harshly. Before we reached the pool we crossed the bridge, from which in daylight manna rained down to the ducks, and entered the park. The fair had gone into hibernation; the paths, and the mazes of tree trunks, were silent and very dark. Occasional dim movements made me think that we were passing the girls, but the figure that was wandering a nearby path looked far too bulky.

The shelter was at the edge of the main green, near the football pitch. Beyond the green, tower blocks loomed in glaring auras. Each of the four sides of the shelter was an alcove housing a bench. As we peered into each, jeers or curses challenged us.

"I know where they'll be," Mark said. "In the one by the bowling green. That's near where they live."

But we were closer to the shelter by the pool. Nevertheless I followed him onto the park road. As we turned towards the bowling green I glanced towards the pool, but the streetlamps dazzled me. I followed him along a narrow path between hedges to the green, and almost tripped over his ankles as he stopped short. The shelter was empty, alone with its view of the decaying Georgian houses on the far side of the bowling green.

To my surprise and annoyance, he still didn't head for the pool. Instead, we made for the disused bandstand hidden in a ring of bushes. Its only tune now was the clink of broken bricks. I was sure the girls wouldn't have called it a shelter, and of course it was deserted. Obese dim bushes hemmed us in. "Come on," I said, "or we'll miss them. They must be by the pool."

"They won't be there," he said—stupidly, I thought.

Did I realise how nervous he suddenly was? Perhaps, but it only annoyed me. After all, how else could I meet Carol again? I didn't know her address. "Oh, all right," I scoffed, "if you want us to miss them."

I saw him stiffen. Perhaps my contempt hurt him more than Ben's had; for one thing, he was older. Before I knew what he intended he was striding towards the pool, so rapidly that I would have had to run to keep up with him—which, given the hostility that had flared between us, I refused to do. I strolled after him rather disdainfully. That was how I came to glimpse movement in one of the islands of dimness between the lamps of the park road. I glanced towards it and saw, several hundred yards away, the girls.

After a pause they responded to my waving—somewhat timidly, I thought. "There they are," I called to Mark. He must have been at the pool by now, but I had difficulty in glimpsing him beyond the glare of the lamps. I was beckoning the girls to hurry when I heard his radio blur into speech.

At first I was reminded of a sailor's parrot. "Aye aye," it was croaking. The distorted voice sounded cracked, uneven, almost too old to speak. "You know what I mean, son?" it grated triumphantly. "Aye aye." I was growing uneasy, for my mind had begun to interpret the words as "Eye eye"—when suddenly, dreadfully, I realised Mark hadn't brought his radio.

There might be someone in the shelter with a radio. But I was terrified, I wasn't sure why. I ran towards the pool calling "Come on, Mark, they're here!" The lamps dazzled me; everything swayed with my running—which was why I couldn't be sure what I saw.

I know I saw Mark at the shelter. He stood just within, confronting darkness. Before I could discern whether anyone else was there, Mark staggered out blindly, hands covering his face, and collapsed into the pool.

Did he drag something with him? Certainly by the time I reached the margin of the light he appeared to be tangled in something, and to be struggling feebly. He was drifting, or being dragged, towards the centre of the pool by a half-submerged heap of litter. At the end of the heap nearest Mark's face was a pale ragged patch in which gleamed two round objects—bottle caps? I could see all this because I was standing helpless, screaming at the girls "Quick, for Christ's sake! He's drowning!" He was drowning, and I couldn't swim.

"Don't be stupid," I heard Lorna say. That enraged me so much that I turned from the pool. "What do you mean?" I cried. "What do you mean, you stupid bitch?"

"Oh, be like that," she said haughtily, and refused to say more. But Carol took pity on my hysteria, and explained "It's only three feet deep. He'll never drown in there."

I wasn't sure that she knew what she was talking about, but that was no excuse for me not to try to rescue him. When I turned to the pool I gasped miserably, for he had vanished—sunk. I could only wade into the muddy water, which engulfed my legs and closed around my waist like ice, ponderously hindering me.

The floor of the pool was fattened with slimy litter. I slithered, terrified of losing my balance. Intuition urged me to head for the centre of the pool. And it was there I found him, as my sluggish kick collided with his ribs.

When I tried to raise him, I discovered that he was pinned down. I had to grope blindly over him in the chill water, feeling how still he was. Something like a swollen cloth bag, very large, lay over his face. I couldn't bear to touch it again, for its contents felt soft and fat. Instead I seized Mark's ankles and managed at last to drag him free. Then I struggled towards the edge of the pool, heaving him by his shoulders, lifting his head above water. His weight was dismaying. Eventually the girls waded out to help me.

But we were too late. When we dumped him on the concrete, his face stayed agape with horror; water lay stagnant in his mouth. I could see

nothing wrong with his eyes. Carol grew hysterical, and it was Lorna who ran to the hospital, perhaps in order to get away from the sight of him. I only made Carol worse by demanding why they hadn't waited for us at the shelter; I wanted to feel they were to blame. But she denied they had written the message, and grew more hysterical when I asked why they hadn't waited at the island. The question, or the memory, seemed to frighten her.

I never saw her again. The few newspapers that bothered to report Mark's death gave the verdict "by misadventure." The police took a dislike to me after I insisted that there might be somebody else in the pool, for the draining revealed nobody. At least, I thought, whatever was there had gone away. Perhaps I could take some credit for that at least.

But perhaps I was too eager for reassurance. The last time I ventured near the shelter was years ago, one winter night on the way home from school. I had caught sight of a gleam in the depths of the shelter. As I went close, nervously watching both the shelter and the pool, I saw two discs glaring at me from the darkness beside the bench. They were Coca-Cola caps, not eyes at all, and it must have been the wind that set the pool slopping and sent the caps scuttling towards me. What frightened me most as I fled through the dark was that I wouldn't be able to see where I was running if, as I desperately wanted to, I put up my hands to protect my eyes.

To Wake The Dead

"The following piece is actually the prologue to Campbell's latest novel. Complete in itself, the story was first published in *Dark Horizons*, the journal of the British Fantasy Society. Campbell's novel, *To Wake the Dead*, has been published this spring by Millington in England, and will be published this autumn by Macmillan in the United States under the title *The Parasite*—and with a different ending. After reading *To Wake the Dead* here, horror fans are certain to seek out Campbell's new novel regardless of its title."—Karl Edward Wagner, Introduction to the story in *The Year's Best Horror Stories 8*, July 1980

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"Did you hear me?" her mother called. "I said Wendy's here." And all at once it was too late; the night had crept up on her and she didn't want to go.

There was nothing in her room to help her. Sandwiched in its case, her tennis racket leaned against one wall. Posters froze wild birds in flight. Elvis Presley sneered above her bed, his hair shining like oil. Spines of encyclopedias offered her fragments of words, none of which inspired an excuse.

She retrieved her coat from the wardrobe, where she'd hidden it after laying it out, in the hope that she might wish Wendy away. As she buttoned the coat, her fingers felt hot and swollen, prickly with nerves.

From the top of the stairs she heard her mother saying, "Look after her, Wendy, won't you. Don't let her get too excited."

The Magic Flute was playing. Her father hung back in the living room doorway, afraid to lose the opera. "What is this film, did you say? *Rock Around The Clock?"* He knew perfectly well, but meant to imply that it wasn't worth knowing. "I'm surprised that it interests you. Well, you must find out for yourself."

Couldn't he tell that it was a lie? Just because the girl thought Elvis was sexy didn't mean that she wanted to watch fat Bill Haley sing three notes. Her moist hands squirmed, suffocated by her pockets. Resentment gagged her more than nervousness. How dare her mother suggest she was less mature than Wendy! Couldn't she both prove her maturity and save herself

by admitting the lie? But her parents were waving, the door was closing, and she was outside in the icy night.

Beneath the streetlamps Wendy's eyes looked bruised with makeup. Scent crept from beneath her pink coat. By comparison, the younger girl was dressed childishly, which made her feel irritable and vulnerable. Already her knees were burning with the cold.

At least she wasn't going up the hill, where the water tower no longer resembled the maze of tall arches among which she used to play hide and seek with her friends. Now it was a looming crowd of legs, its body hovering above a scrawny glimpse of daylight as a spider stands over a wrapped fly. The night changed everything.

Even the main road was changed. Beneath the lamps the terraces glared as though trapped in the stasis before a storm. Two nurses marched like nuns toward the hospital, once a workhouse. Suppose they asked where the girls were going? But they vanished laughing into the hospital, leaving her alone with Wendy's footsteps and her own, with the repetitive brushing of Wendy's knees against her calf-length skirt, with her fears.

A young couple hurried by, their breath and their parcels of fish and chips steaming. Queues of cars passed each other on the narrow road; their scoops of light caught dust, gasoline fumes, a moth. Soon they were gone, and the tarmac gleamed bleakly. "What do you think we're going to do?" she said uneasily.

"Oh, just sit around a table, I expect, like they did in that story." Wendy sounded glad to talk. "Or maybe Richard will sit there with a pencil and see if it writes anything. I expect it'll write something stupid, if he has anything to do with it. You know what Richard's like."

They were approaching the town. Houses and gardens were dwindling, sometimes into terraces of cottages. Glimpses of bright rooms—warm, impregnable, aloof from her—reminded the girl of home. One last secret charm reassured her a little: as long as she stayed on this pavement, on the far side of the road from the house, she might be saved.

Saved from what? She had seen death, her grandmother more soundly asleep than whispers could penetrate, her fretted lips gaping in a silent snore. Richard liked to scare people, but she was too old to be scared. Why,

only last year he'd told everyone that the girl who had been dug up outside town had just been murdered, when in fact she was fifty years dead.

They passed the pale, squat, unlit hall, the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. Next to it, behind the Windmill pub, hens clucked sleepily. It was a comfortable sound, but by no means encouraging, for it meant that they had reached the terrace which contained the house.

But it was only a house where someone had died, months ago. Nobody but Richard insisted that he had been crying for help; nobody but Richard said that the house had an unpleasant reputation—at least, nobody else had said so to the girls. Or were there rumours which had given Richard the idea for his latest horror fib?

Beyond the terrace, people sat morosely on a bench outside the bus station. Disraeli stood on a pedestal, ignoring the traffic lights beneath him, which were stepping down to green. There was safety: far too distant. Wendy had already crossed to the opposite pavement, had braved the short path beside the lit bay window and was ringing the bell.

Seated figures glided by in slabs of light like amber. Glowing splashes trailed over the pavement, over the shiny blunt toecaps of the girl's shoes. Then the bus was past, and Richard was frowning at her. "Well, what's she waiting for? Does she want crossing over?"

She drew a breath so fierce it bruised her chest. She wasn't a baby, she was ten years old. Wendy might be older, but she was more mature than Wendy. She strode across the deserted roadway, past the dark uncurtained bay, into the bright house.

The living room seemed crowded with people, sitting on a plump, though somewhat faded, suite. In fact there were only five people, but all of them were staring at her as though she had no right to be there. A boy whose chin sprouted a few unequal hairs complained, "She's rather young for this, isn't she?"

"Oh, she's all right. Leave her alone." Wendy sounded both annoyed by the reflection on her judgement and a little embarrassed; perhaps, deep down, she agreed.

Richard stood between chairs in the bay, peering out through a crack in the curtains. A boy with hair like Elvis and a reasonably even moustache said, "Is that everyone?"

"No, there's Ken. He has to come from near the Comrades of the Great War Club."

Glancing at the moustached boy, Wendy brightened. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Who, me? I wouldn't have missed it for anything." He patted the arm of his chair, as though to make a dog jump. "Besides, you might need looking after."

The younger girl thought him pompous and conceited, and a very bad substitute for Elvis. After a token protest at the way he summoned her, Wendy sat beside him. She had withdrawn into the adolescent world, where people seemed to do things which they didn't want to do and which, when they did them, they didn't enjoy. The girl felt excluded, barely tolerated by the group. She sat on the couch, beside two girls who ignored her. She wished she hadn't come.

Did Richard want to scare her? He was looking at her as he said, "I heard something else today."

"What?" one of the girls demanded nervously.

"I don't know. It sounded like—" Was he pausing for effect, or choosing his words? "It sounded like someone ill trying to get hold of things, groping about next door, trying to pick something up."

He leaned against the chipped mantelpiece and gazed at his listeners. He was obviously enjoying himself, but was he lying? He must have heard mice, the young girl told herself. But she was struggling to gain sufficient courage to say that she'd decided not to go into the house.

The doorbell rang. Everyone started, then pretended that they hadn't, or giggled uneasily. "Stupid," one girl snarled—it wasn't clear to whom. Had Richard's parents returned unexpectedly? Oh, please let it be— But he returned from the front door to announce, "All right, it's time. Ken's here."

He led them out of the house. Between it and its neighbour was an arched tunnel, narrower than the stretch of the young girl's arms. The edge of headlights on the road withdrew from the passage, which was at once very dark. The girl's footsteps rang shrilly between the walls, mocking her nervousness.

At the end of the passage were the doors to two back yards. Richard pushed one, which tottered open, scraping over stone. Beyond it the kitchen of the deserted house protruded into the yard, toward a large coal-shed. There was room for little else except darkness thick as mud and, in one corner of the yard, an anonymous shrub, starved and restless.

As they crept into the yard eyes gleamed at them from the coal, which scattered rattling as the awakened sleeper leapt on the wall and fled, mewing. "Shut up," Richard hissed at giggles. He was fiddling with the back door of the house. He must be copying a film, he couldn't know how to do it properly. There came a snap of metal; he must have broken his knife. The girl relaxed, only just suppressing an audible sigh—then saw that the door was open.

Richard's flashlight reached into the darkness. It spread over the flags of the kitchen floor, dimming. Wooden legs with knobby ankles stood in the shadows; deep in the darkness, something gurgled moistly. "Well, keep up," he said irritably to the others as he stepped within.

The young girl tried to keep up with Wendy, who was clinging to the moustached boy. As the flashlight swung to make sure everyone had followed, a nervous drip glinted on the lip of a tap. The drip was trembling, ready to fall. It must have been the tap which had gurgled.

"Shut the door," Richard ordered.

Beyond the kitchen was a larger room. The patch of light crawled over the floor, picking at the pattern of the carpet, leaving it incomplete. Why couldn't Richard raise the light beam? Nobody could see so far into the house from the road. In the unlit room draped chairs loomed, squatting fatly beneath their shrouds. The air smelled of hovering dust.

As they ventured into the hall, a thin silhouette sprang up to meet them. A sharp hook of panic snagged the girl's heart. Everyone halted, gasping or swearing, except Richard. In a moment they were scoffing and jostling, for it had only been the cross that separated the front-door panes, outlined by headlights. But the girl had felt caged by their panic. As they'd surrounded her, instinctively huddling together, they had seemed capable of crushing her among them. They and their indifference dwarfed her. Her fear was bigger than she was.

"Keep it quiet," Richard muttered, and padded upstairs. His light doled out a couple of stairs at a time. Shadows tugged at the banisters, which shifted creaking beneath her hand. Nervousness and dusty breaths parched her throat; underfoot, the unseen carpet felt like a thick wad of dust. She was trapped in the midst of the uneasy procession. She could only stumble upstairs.

All the doors on the landing were ajar. As the light wavered into the rooms, they looked impossibly large with darkness, which seemed less still than it ought to be. Carpet muffled the creaks of the landing. How could the answering creaks—surely they must be echoes—sound clearer in the rooms? This seemed not to trouble Richard, who strode stealthily into the front bedroom.

He switched off the flashlight. A streetlamp lit the room, though only through two cramped windows. An indeterminate pattern swarmed on the wallpaper. As the others pushed her through the doorway she saw a large table which seemed not to belong to the room, surrounded by a dim bed, a dressing table, a couple of chairs; rough squares of paper laid around the table's edge spelled out the alphabet.

"Don't shut that door!" Richard hissed urgently.

He tugged a drawer out of the dressing table and propped the door open. "No handle on the inside," he explained, amused by their muffled dismay or suspicion. "Come on then, before my parents get back."

The girl advanced, because there was nothing else to do.

"Go on," said the boy with the wispy chin, shoving her. Was he annoyed with his own nervousness? Before she knew it she was sitting on the bed, hemmed in by the wispy boy and, nearest the door, Wendy.

"Right," Richard said triumphantly. "Now." From beside the dressing table he produced an object like a homemade wooden roller skate, whose wheels were capable of veering. His gesture expected a reaction, and received one: strangled laughter, nudging, giggling. "He's going to write with his feet," someone sniggered. The girl joined in the almost hysterical mirth, though she felt the shrillness of her laughter excluded her from the group.

"Shut up!" Richard said savagely. "Do you want someone to hear us and call the police?"

They subsided gradually into silence. There was an interlude of subdued jostling as they each placed one hand on the skate in the centre of the table.

"Now what?" demanded the wispy boy,

"We wait," Richard said.

They did so, more or less silently. "My arm's going to sleep," one girl muttered. "So am I," complained her friend. Minutes after they had spoken, their words remained, hovering as though the air had grown stagnant. The room seemed to be darkening, as if with the approach of a storm—the young girl's eyes must be tired, that was all. Headlights trailed over the ceiling and dragged at the pattern of the wallpaper, which shifted slyly. No light reached the ajar door, beyond which stood blackness. She imagined how much of the dark house she would have to brave to escape.

Boredom or unease was growing. "How long are we going to have to sit?" protested the wispy boy. Free hands were exploring.

"Oh, get off," one girl cried furiously.

"I don't think this is going to work," said the boy with the moustache. "The planchette's too heavy. You need something lighter."

At once, accompanied by an odd sound which seemed to come from deep in the house, the wooden skate began to quest toward the edge of the table, advancing and recoiling like a trapped rat.

"Of course if you're going to *make* it move—"

"I'm not doing it," Richard said resentfully.

"Well, somebody must be." He gazed at each of them in turn. The girl noticed that his moustache was glistening: with sweat? Nothing he saw in their eyes seemed to please him. "Well, it's certainly not me," he said as though denying a bad smell.

The skate faltered and was still. Richard was glaring—because of the interruption, or because he had ceased to be the leader? "Are we just going to sit here and argue?" he demanded.

"We're supposed to ask questions. What was the name of the fellow who died here?"

"Allen. Mr. Allen."

"All right." The moustached boy sat forward like an executive at a conference; perhaps he was imitating a film. "We'll see if it's him." Slowly and loudly, as though addressing a retarded child, he asked the skate, "Are you Mr. Allen?"

He was answered at once, by stifled giggles. He permitted himself a faint smile; the joke was really too childish for him. Only Richard held himself solemn, furiously so.

The girl restrained herself from giggling more loudly than the others. Why was she afraid to draw attention to herself? Because the room was so dim? Again she heard the faint sound, which was perhaps not so deep in the house, after all: a feeble restlessness. A mouse? No, it must be the noise of the skate, made to sound distant by the oppressive atmosphere—for the skate was moving. It turned purposefully and went straight to a square of paper, where it halted.

That seemed comfortingly meaningless. One letter could tell them nothing. Then the girl saw that two additional squares interrupted the alphabet, on opposite sides of the table: YES and NO. NO, the skate had said.

No, it was not Mr. Allen who was advancing through the house, making doors squeak in the downstairs hall and now on the landing. It must be only a draft. But it was not Mr. Allen who had come into the room, whose feeble restlessness was clearly audible now, though its position was obscure. Richard's head turned, searching. Reluctantly he said, "That's what I heard."

Now the sound was more definable. Yes, it was like someone very old or very ill fumbling about in the dark—except that just as she was close to locating it in one part of the room, it seemed to reappear elsewhere. Her fingers on the skate were paralysed, they felt glued together by sweat, but they were trembling. Neither her hand nor the rest of her body could do anything about her panic.

Perhaps everyone was waiting for somebody else to be the first to flee. Before anyone could move, the skate began turning. Though their arms were heavy with exhaustion and nerves, it was quicker now, more efficient, I AM, it spelled rapidly.

The moustached boy sat forward, awaiting the rest of the message. His free hand wiped his glistening moustache. The others watched unwillingly as the skate dragged their hands about the table. When it had finished they sat

stiffly, not daring to remark on the message in case that lent it power. Only the moustached boy mouthed it silently, frowning: I AM EVERYWHERE IN HERE.

"I think we'd better go," stammered the wispy boy. His last word sprang into falsetto, but nobody laughed. Nor did anyone move, for the formless sounds were groping about the room, hemming them in. Headlamps slipped rectangles of light into the room; the rectangles turned into gliding parallelograms and vanished. The girl kept her gaze away from the light, for it might make the source of the groping visible.

The skate darted into the centre again and dodged about the table. Its swiftness seemed almost gleeful. One of the girls was sobbing dryly and incessantly; it sounded as though she was choking. The skate picked out its message deftly, then rested beneath the crowd of their fingertips, DO AS YOU'RE TOLD, it had said.

A wave of resentment, violent as electricity, flashed through the group. "Fuck that," said Ken, whom the young girl had yet to hear speak. His voice proved to be high and thin, unsuited to the protest; it breathed out beer, the smell of bravado. His chair creaked as he made to stand up. The sobbing girl managed to gulp herself space between sobs for words, to cry, "Don't let go!"

Perhaps she believed that while the presence was occupied in spelling messages it would be unable to do worse. And indeed, the sound of unlocated fumbling had ceased—but the young girl felt it had only come to rest. She thought she could hear the faintest of shiftings, like the movements which betray the serenity of a cat as it prepares to leap on its prey. She dared not look.

In any case, she had to watch the skate, for it was darting urgently about the table. Their fingertips clung to it as though it was their sole protection from the dark. Before the message had ended, the girl was seized by a fit of trembling. Everyone stared at the table, unwilling to meet anyone else's eyes. She felt as though her hand was trying to shake her body to pieces. The message was expanding in her mind, like an afterimage in sudden and absolute darkness.

ALL EXCEPT ONE GO OUT.

"Oh, that's too fucking much," Ken protested. "That's just fucking stupid." He was speaking at the top of his voice—to impress them, or himself, or someone else entirely? His piping voice was scrawny in the dark. Nevertheless Richard, at whom he was glaring, turned defensive. "I didn't make it say that," he retorted. "I'd have said who the one had to be, wouldn't I?"

At once, as though it had been waiting for his cue, the skate pounced. It rushed toward the bed, sweeping letters to the floor, jerking their arms with such force that Wendy fell against the young girl. Wendy began shuddering as though with fever—for the skate was pointing straight at her.

"No," Wendy cried. "I won't. I won't." She sounded hardly able to form the words. She managed to stumble to her feet, and fled toward the landing. The young girl struggled away from the wispy boy, who shook himself impatiently free of her.

As she sat up, regaining the place from which Wendy had elbowed her, she realised that the skate was pointing directly at her.

Wendy's flight had released the others. They retreated from the table as though it was diseased. None of them glanced at the young girl; indeed, they seemed to have forgotten her—for in their haste they shoved the table against her, knocking her backward on the bed.

The bed was not empty. As she fell back, she glimpsed a face upturned on the pillow. A convulsion seized her whole body; she arched upward, straining her spine—anything rather than touch what lay in the bed. Was the face only an accident of shadows on the lumpy pillow? Perhaps, for as she wrenched her neck in peering wildly, she saw that the face was incomplete. But as her hand tried to lever her away from the bed it touched, through the bedclothes, a thin yet flabby limb.

She heard someone stumble over the drawer in the doorway and kick it aside. The door slammed. "Hey, Richard," said the muffled voice of the wispy boy, "did you realise we've left that kid in there? Was she supposed to be the one?" Several of them giggled, relieved; perhaps they had known they were shutting her in.

She kicked the table away and ran blindly to the door. Her gasp of terror had hurt her chest, leaving her no breath with which to cry out. She heard Wendy from what seemed a great distance. "You haven't really left her in

there, have you? You silly fool, she's only a kid! I'm supposed to be looking after her!"

"All right. Calm down." It was the voice of the moustache. "The door isn't locked, is it? She's braver than half you people, anyway. I didn't hear *her* whining." The handle of the door rattled. There was a thud and a silence.

When he spoke again his voice was low with anger. "What sort of games are you playing, Richard? The handle's come out and the door won't budge."

The dark closed around the young girl, like the embrace of fever. The door shook as shoulders thumped it, but held. Now the babble of angry voices was retreating from her. Was Richard calling, "It's all right, don't fret, I'll get something"? The voices faded down the stairs, leaving her alone with silence.

It was not quite silence. Behind her, something dropped softly to the floor. She could neither turn nor cry out, but she knew without turning what the sound was: the fall of the bedclothes. Had something else got down from the bed?

She could move her hand now. She hooked her finger in the hole where the doorhandle ought to be. She dragged at the door, though her hand was trembling so violently that it threatened to jerk out of the hole, but it was no use; the door refused to budge. Now she was trapped there, unable to let go of the door, held fast by the dark as though it was a marsh.

When she was seized from behind she was not even able to scream. They must be hands, for they had fingers, though they felt soft as putty—far softer than putty, indeed, to be able to do to her what they began to do then.

1978

Eye Of Childhood

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The teacher gazed at Mary's painting, at the hair like a blue rag and the lopsided splotchy mouth, the right leg longer than the other. Behind her Donna had grown tired of being a model, and was making faces. At the back of the class Tommy was whining, "Please Miss, please Miss." Beyond the windows the tenements blazed like the seaside beneath floating ice-cream clouds.

"I'm disappointed in you, Mary," the teacher said.

Mary's legs drew up beneath her seat as though she had a stomach-ache. "We all know you've got plenty of imagination," the teacher said, "but I told you to paint Donna, not what's inside your head."

"But Miss—"

"Pardon?"

Mary flinched visibly. "But Mrs. Tweedle," she said, and the teacher glared at the class to suppress any outbursts of giggles like farting. She acted like an old woman sometimes, though she wasn't quite—probably no older than thirty. "Miss Dix said we shouldn't listen to what people said was right," Mary said, "only paint until we liked what we'd done."

"I'm not in the least interested. This is my classroom now, not hers." She returned to Mary's painting. "Just think about what you're doing. Can you imagine someone who looked like that actually walking about? How do you think they would look?"

"Like Mr. Waddicar."

Again the teacher glared about to head off giggles. "You aren't nearly as clever as you think you are, Mary. Just try to put your cleverness to some use."

She hardly glanced at Karen's picture. "Maybe your glasses need changing," she said sarcastically. When she moved on, Karen thought Mary

was trembling. Mary had rather deserved to be told off, for thinking herself so superior—but it was partly the teacher's fault for making Mary her favourite. On the whole Karen felt sorrier for Mary than the others did. Someone had to sit next to her, after all.

"Oh no," the teacher said angrily behind her. Tommy, forgetting that she refused to answer to Miss, had concluded that she wouldn't let him leave the room. "Well, don't look at me, I can't do anything," she cried. "Go and clean yourself up and get a mop."

He was hobbling out when the bell rang. Donna jumped up with a loud sigh of relief. Mary was gazing wistfully at her picture. "Can't we put them up?"

"You can do whatever you like with them. Go out as soon as you've finished." The teacher hurried away to her lunch, leaving them to climb on chairs.

When they'd stuck up the paintings, which made the room less like a chalky concrete box, they ran downstairs. Mr. Waddicar the caretaker was hobbling across the landing, like an old lollipop man frustrating traffic. They tried not to giggle as they remembered Mary's remark.

The yard was full of interweaving independent games. A few panting children defended a narrow strip of shade beside the school. Cloud-shadows tried to creep the length of the street, but were swept away by the sun. The four-story tenements, layer on layer of them dwindling toward the horizon, had swallowed their own shadows and looked thirsty for more.

A man was pacing outside the bars, having helped Miss Floyd to chase away a gang of four-year-olds who had been throwing things into the yard. "That's Mr. Tweedle," Mary said.

Several of the others broke into a chorus of "Tweedle Tweedle" until giggling choked them. "Well, it isn't, see," Donna said. "He's just a man. My mam says she used to be married to someone, that's why she's a Mrs."

Just then the teacher emerged from the school, her large earrings glinting like thin bangles. They could smell her dry perfume from yards away. Mary ran over. "Mrs. Tweedle!"

The teacher pulled her hand away, frowning at a smear of paint. Though Mary's smile wavered, she blurted, "Is he your husband?"

"Don't you dare speak to me like that, child. Just remember who you're talking to." With that she stalked out of the yard.

Karen had to say "Sallright," for Mary was trembling again. Perhaps more than the rebuff had upset her: she seemed always to need to seize people's names at once, perhaps for reassurance, just as she'd grabbed the teacher's hand. But she didn't want Karen's reassurance now, for she turned her back, furious that anyone had seen her upset.

The teacher didn't help. All afternoon, as the chalk-dust grew steeped in perfume, Mary kept taking her stories up to her for praise. Miss Dix wouldn't have minded; she'd used to let anyone cling to her, as though she was their mother. The more impatient the teacher became, the more Mary pestered her. Karen didn't see what the teacher had to be impatient about, for she was only crunching peppermints to hide the smell of beer and looking at a big book of paintings, just splodges of colour, no drawing at all.

Eventually she said, "Look, Mary, you aren't the only child here. In the time you waste bringing this to me you could be thinking up something new."

This time Mary didn't begin shaking. She sat quietly and drew in her exercise book, though they weren't what Karen would have called drawings: spirals that wound tightly inward until they merged into lumps of black, jagged lines that came scratching outward. Wherever Mary was gazing, it wasn't at the page.

But she'd thought of something new. When they left the school she said, "Let's follow her."

The teacher was walking beside the tenements with the man who wasn't her husband. It might be fun to hear what they were saying. Karen ran after Mary into the nearest tenement entry, and upstairs.

Crushed beer-cans huddled in the corners of steps. The children raced past them, onto the balcony. Front doors gleamed like plastic, identical windows glared out over the concrete wall. Figures stood beneath gathered net curtains: glass animals, a wooden toreador. Graffiti made stairwells resemble bad porous skin, tattooed. Their running feet sounded like a downpour within the close walls, until Mary hushed her.

"Look at this place," the teacher was saying. "It's no wonder they don't want to learn. That has to be the reason, hasn't it? Ten years old—eleven, some of them—and already their heads are full of cotton wool and last night's telly."

Mary looked tempted to reply, but the teacher was chattering on. "Why do they build places like this? I thought they must all have been pulled down yonks ago. I just can't understand why the authority sent me here. My teaching practice was at a lovely school, with lovely kids and all the aids you could think of. I felt I was doing something. But here half of them can't do arithmetic, some of them can hardly read. I have to repeat things over and over, and I can't stand that. And even when—"

After a pause, perhaps amazed that he could get a word in, the man said, "What's the matter?"

"Don't start that again." She sounded as angry as Mary had been when she'd let her feelings show. "My nerves are perfectly all right now, I've told you."

"Perhaps working here doesn't agree with you."

"Perhaps you're right, but that's just tough tit. I'm going to do my year here, otherwise they'll say I wasn't able to keep the job." Irritably she said, "I'm all right. I just thought for a moment that we were being watched."

Karen froze, choking down a gasp. Mary didn't move, except for a smile that crept across her mouth. "Nothing excites them," the teacher was complaining, "not even art. I spent half yesterday showing them how to sketch and paint, and what do they give me today? The same old chimpanzee pictures. There's one girl, Mary, who really frustrated me. She wasn't trying, that's what I can't stand. None of them—Jesus!"

There came a rush of scampering. Karen risked a glance over the balcony wall. The gang of four-year-olds had pounced from an entry and were running away, yelling and making faces. Their faces already looked like masks, made up with dirt and paint and food.

"See what I mean," the teacher said tightly. "They're all the same. They'll grow up just like the class I have to teach."

When she moved out of earshot, Mary didn't follow. She was squatting in a corner of the balcony, knees drawn up to her chest, as though clutching to

herself the things she'd heard the teacher say. Her smile grew wider, and less like a smile. "I know something we can do," she said.

Karen didn't like her smile, nor her eyes, which were blank as the eyes of a painting. Nevertheless she had to follow, ducking beneath washing like breathless sails, since Mary's was on her way home. Mary was silent. If she spoke, perhaps her smile would crack.

Like the rest of the flats, Mary's had a view like a mirror maze. Beyond the window, a screen whose net curtains looked poised to fall, Karen heard voices. Beyond the front door which blazed like a brake-light and the inevitable hall the size of a telephone kiosk, a bicycle bent almost double under the stairs.

When Mary saw the bicycle, her face pinched like an old woman's. Then she remembered what she planned to do, or that she mustn't let Karen see her feelings. Snubbing the bicycle, she crept to a cupboard beneath the stairs.

She had just opened the cupboard when her mother called, "Is that you, Mary? Uncle Ron's here."

"Oh, all right." Her face pinched again as she rummaged in the cupboard, which was full of library books whose labels had been torn out. She was struggling with a large black book which was the foundation of two stacks. As she dragged it free—its unhinged covers staggering, scattering loose pages which displayed lists like recipes and a picture of a woman in a pointed hat surrounded by small lumpy creatures—the living room door was snatched open. "What are you hanging about here for?" a man said.

He must be Uncle Ron, for the cuffs of his overalls were still manacled by cycle-clips. Within a frame of stubble his lips were smeared with pink lipstick. "Who said you could read that?"

Before Mary could answer, he snarled, "What are you showing them to her for?" He'd noticed Karen. "You just forget you saw any books."

Mary was taking advantage of the diversion to sneak away toward her room. "You come back here with that," he said.

"Uncle Jack lets me read them."

"Never mind Uncle Jack. I'm your uncle now. I'll give you Uncle Jack if you don't bring that here." He banged on the living room door. "Why do

you let her read this muck? Witches and bloody magic. I don't know what you wanted with it anyway—you don't even read half of them. Why don't you give her something decent if she wants to read? Don't you care how she grows up?"

"She's always in some book or other," her mother's disembodied voice complained. "Thinks more of them than she does of me. Rather have fairy stories than her own mother."

"Give it here." Before Mary could move, he pulled the book out of her hands and hit her across the forehead with it. "And you just be on your way," he told Karen, jerking his thumb at the door.

"See you tomorrow, Mary." But Mary was neither listening nor registering pain. Her blank eyes were watching where he replaced the book.

Karen's home was in chaos. The baby was screaming, her little brother and sister were fighting in front of the television, her father was shouting over Tom and Jerry for his tea so that he could get ready for the darts tournament, her big sister was running about accusing everyone of having hidden her eyelashes, her mother was threatening to leave them all to it. Karen was glad to help her sort everything out, not least because it gave her no time to wonder what Mary was planning. Later, as she lay beside her little sister and waited for her big sister to come home so that she could go to sleep, she heard litter stumbling and hopping along the balcony outside. Remembering the lumpy creatures in the book, she hoped Mary had given up her plan.

Next morning she thought at first that Mary might have, for her eyes were puffy and dull. Things obviously hadn't improved at home. At these times Miss Dix had used to make a fuss of her, but Mrs. Tweedle only grew irritated with her dullness, then ignored her, then began picking on her for not concentrating, "Come on, child, this should be easy for you." Mary's eyes brightened secretly at that, and Karen knew that if she'd thought of giving up her plan, she didn't intend to do so now.

Perhaps she meant to carry it out by herself—but no, she kept glancing at Karen with a look that both promised a secret and warned her not to tell. An unpleasant smell seemed to waft from the airline bag Mary always carried to school. It smelled like something dead or dying.

At the end of the day the teacher was as eager to leave as the children. She only said "Well, hurry up" when, at the cloakrooms, Mary said, "Oh, I've left something." She gave Karen a skillfully meaningful glance. "You left yours too."

Mary closed the classroom door behind her. "We'll do it in here. This is her place."

Certainly the teacher's perfume was still in the air. Otherwise the room seemed empty, apart from the chalk-dust that hung everywhere as though the white walls were crumbling, and the pictures which were dancing a little, stiff two-dimensional puppets, in the draft from the closing door. The emptiness seemed to strengthen the dead stench.

"You don't have to do much," Mary said as she unzipped her bag. "Just say her name when I do. It won't take long." She brought out a rattling matchbox, which looked too small to smell so bad. From one end a hair, or the leg of an insect, or something else was protruding.

Mary stood behind the teacher's desk and closing her eyes, brought the matchbox close to her face. Now Karen knew she was unnervingly serious, for she didn't react to the stench at all, though the mixture of that smell with perfume and chalk-dust made Karen feel dry-mouthed and sick. Squeezing her eyes so tightly shut that they looked like senile lips, Mary began to gabble.

Was she making it up? It didn't sound like a language to Karen. If she'd learned it from the book in the cupboard she must have done so overnight. Surely there was a good chance that she'd got it wrong—yet she sounded fiercely convinced that it would work. Chalk-dust sank through the tainted air, the paintings became still on the walls, and in the midst of her gabbling Mary said, "Mrs. Tweedle."

Her puckered eyes opened and glared at Karen, who stammered "Mrs. Tweedle." In a few moments she had to say it again, her words stumbling after Mary's. It was almost like a nonsense song, but Karen wasn't at all inclined to giggle, for the stench was thickening, overpowering the perfume, while the room had grown oppressively still. The air tasted parched with chalk. She didn't like the way all the paintings seemed to be looking at her, particularly since in several of the paintings the eyes weren't the same size. Their colours seemed violent as neon. Those figures whose

legs were unequal—which was most of them—looked caught in the act of moving.

Suddenly, over Mary's gabbling, Karen heard an ominous yet welcome sound. Mr. Waddicar was hobbling along the corridor. Now Mary would have to stop, or they would be found out. Whoever was crossing the yard toward the school might see her too. Karen glanced toward the window, and at once her tongue felt like a gag. How could Mr. Waddicar be limping doggedly along the corridor when she could see him outside in the yard?

She managed to speak. "I'm going," she said, too loudly. Mary's furious stare couldn't make her stay. Perhaps the corridor might do so, for though it was sunlit and bare, its linoleum stained by chalky reflections of the walls, it was very long. As she ran down it, keeping to the far side from the classroom doors, were all of the footsteps her echoes, or were some of them hobbling? She ran past the classrooms, where a coat dangled its handless arms from a metal sketch of shoulders, and out.

Before she'd gone far, Mary emerged from the school, looking murderous. Karen had spoiled her game. Karen hoped that was the end of it, especially since she dreamed that night of a corridor whose ends were sealed. As she ran desperately along it, back and forth, she heard things in the classrooms, struggling to open the doors with their half-formed hands.

If possible, the following day was even hotter. The sky was blinding as steam, pierced by the sun. The tenements looked carved from chalk. In the distance, everything quivered; thin streams of water pretended to lie across the roads. Surely Karen was safe from her fears on a day like this—and yet something was wrong.

The teacher was nervous. Everything seemed to disturb her: muttering at the back of the class where she couldn't see who it was, confused echoes of running in the corridor, the sleepy flapping of the paintings on the walls. Was she unnerved by the way Mary kept staring at her, or by the faint dead stench? Was the stench coming from the airline bag, or clinging to the room?

Perhaps she was nervous of something else entirely, for when they returned to class that afternoon, a man was sitting at the back of the room.

Karen knew what he was. He was going to watch the teacher to see if she was any good. No wonder the teacher had been nervous, and she was

growing worse. Standing stiffly in front of the blackboard and breaking pieces of chalk as she wrote, she addressed them as slowly and clearly as if they were deaf. Her smile dared them not to understand.

Of course she only made them nervous too. When she asked Karen a question, even though Karen knew the answer her mind immediately went blank. Her mouth gaped, her skin felt acrawl with chalk. The teacher was growing irritable; one of her fingers snapped, but it was a stick of chalk; she called the twins by each other's names, as though to get her own back for being called Miss. All at once her eyes gleamed rather desperately. "Mary," she said.

Mary must be her last hope—but Mary had been in an odd mood all day, virtually ignoring Karen and everyone else, pretending to work while she listened for something. Now she stared blankly at the teacher.

"Didn't you hear the question?"

"Yes." There was a further pause. "I don't know."

"Of course you do. It's simple. Don't tell me you of all people don't know." Her voice was threatening to shrill. "Just think, for heaven's sake," she said.

Couldn't she sense Mary's hatred? "I don't know," Mary said resentfully, and refused to say anything more.

The teacher was glaring as though Mary had deliberately betrayed her; she couldn't know how furious Mary was at having been shown up in front of the man.

After class Karen hurried away before Mary could detain her. When she saw Mary loitering near the cloakrooms, waiting to sneak back into the classroom, she knew she'd been right to do so.

At the gate of the yard she looked back. The man was talking to the teacher, who looked chastened, perhaps even ashamed. As Karen watched, they left the classroom. When she reached the tenement balcony she glanced back again and saw Mary standing alone by the teacher's desk, head bowed over an object in her hands. Karen couldn't see much at that distance; even the paintings on the walls looked like blank paper.

That night she couldn't sleep. The heat was so oppressive that it felt solid. Whenever she closed her eyes, part of it came hobbling toward her. At last,

despite the muttering and turning of her sisters, she slept intermittently, but felt as though she hadn't.

Morning brought no relief from the heat. The sky was a whitish blur in which the sun was indistinguishable, perhaps because the entire sky was white-hot. People trudged to work or to school, fanning themselves and blowing. On the way to school she met Mary, who looked uneasy but determined—to face what? She made Karen reluctant to go into the classroom, not only because it felt like a greenhouse. The walls trapped the heat and reflected it back. They were bare. All the paintings were gone.

Had Mary torn them down last night, enraged that Karen wouldn't help her? Or had the teacher done so after she'd been told off by the man? Karen didn't think it could have been the teacher, for she seemed to have changed overnight for the better: she encouraged instead of demanding, she made a visible effort to get the twins' names right, when she repeated something and the children didn't understand she didn't grow irritable, only popped a capsule into her mouth and started again. Even though Karen realised she had to do what the man had told her, the teacher's behaviour looked like an apology to the class.

She was especially gentle with Mary. "This afternoon," she said, and though she meant all of them she was looking at Mary, "I want you to paint what you like. Show me what you like." The girl stared resentfully at her, then looked away.

Karen thought Mary was being unreasonable. The teacher was trying to be kind—why couldn't she give her a chance? Besides, Mary's sullen muteness had begun to annoy Karen. As soon as they reached the schoolyard at lunchtime she demanded, "Did you pull down all the paintings?"

"No. Don't be stupid." For a moment her feelings glared through. She wished Karen hadn't asked her that, hadn't reminded her of something she'd done that she regretted now. She started nervously at a glimpse of the four-year-olds dodging behind the school. That was who it must have been, for their faces were messily multicoloured.

Heat haze seemed to coat Karen's glasses. She felt too limp to join in any of the games. She was glad when lunchtime was over; at least she would have to do something in class. Mary was still nervous, for she drew back from the classroom door, staring at the hand with which she'd opened it.

Someone who'd forgotten to wash their hands after painting must have touched the knob.

The teacher had brought them some special paints, in tubes which she took from her bag. Karen painted the sun in a white sky over green fields, and tried to make the trees luminous too, balls of fire instead of foliage. "That's very good, Karen," the teacher said, sounding surprised. Somewhere in the school Mr. Waddicar was hobbling.

Was someone hobbling alongside him, or were they echoes?

Mary painted someone running. Karen couldn't tell if the figure was meant to be chasing someone or running away; its face was a pink blob, as though Mary didn't want to fill it in. The teacher seemed puzzled too, but impressed. "That's very expressive, Mary." It couldn't be Mr. Waddicar in the corridors, for the footsteps were too numerous. It must be children, hobbling worse than him.

The sky was darkening. Unbroken clouds pressed heat into the room. When the teacher switched on the fluorescent lights, the paints glared, uncomfortably vivid. Karen felt trapped by colours. Without warning, Mary, who had begun to tremble, dug her brush into a well of black paint and blotted out her picture. What would the teacher say to her? Nothing: before she'd returned to the front of the class and Mary's desk, the bell rang.

"I'll see you all on Monday," the teacher said, hurrying away. Mary seemed about to run after her—to tell her something, or to walk along with her? Perhaps she was afraid to do either. Through the window Karen could just make out the gang of four-year-olds lying in wait beyond the railings. Distance and haze obscured their messy faces.

When she emerged from the school, they'd gone. The sky was withholding its rain. She watched the teacher hurrying alone beside the tenements, which looked harsh as lime. Karen felt irritable; she was growing as bad as Mary, glancing at the balconies and entries. Why should the glimpses of colours worry her? Her mother was always saying that the estate needed brightening up. It was only that the dark sky made them look ominous, and that Karen couldn't quite catch sight of them directly.

All at once it began to rain, drops large as gobs of spit. She would never reach the tenements without getting drenched. She sheltered in the school doorway, and wished she was standing with someone other than Mary.

The teacher had dodged into the tenements. For a moment Karen felt resentfully nervous: where did she think she was going? Of course, she was going to make her way across the estate under cover. A minute later she reappeared on a first-floor balcony. Only the top half of her body was visible, and she resembled a moving target on a shooting gallery.

Mary was watching with a kind of agonised fascination. Karen thought she knew what Mary was waiting for—she refused to believe it could be anything else—and she wished they'd get it over with. Oblivious, the teacher hurried along the chalky balconies beneath the leaden sky.

She'd crossed three balconies when they appeared from a dark stairway. Karen could just see their small heads, pouncing from the darkness. Yes, they were the gang of four-year-olds, for she could see how blotchily multicoloured their faces were. It must be the rain on her glasses which made their movements look so jerky, and their faces appear to be running, spreading, dripping.

She had only just noticed how silent they were when the teacher screamed and all at once was gone. Then she could only stand in the school doorway, unable to think what to do until Mary began to trudge toward the tenements.

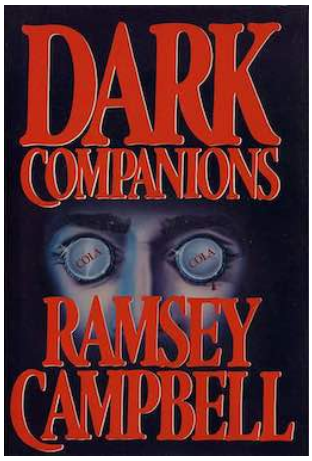
That was almost the end of the summer term, and the holidays gave Karen a chance to forget. The new motherly teacher, Mrs. Castell, was clearly anxious to help her. But she hadn't seen anything very horrible, only the teacher lying at the foot of the tenement stairs; it hadn't been apparent that her neck was broken. The walls had been covered with fresh paint, no doubt by vandals, and the teacher's face had been smeared with colours like messy kisses. They must have come from the tubes of paint in her bag.

Was Mary unable to forget? She was still very nervous, though Mrs. Castell knew to make a fuss of her. She was shivering at a noise in the corridor. "It's all right," Karen said. "It's only Mr. Waddicar."

Mrs. Castell looked dismayed, angry with herself for not having spoken sooner. "I'm sorry, Karen, Mr. Waddicar died during the holidays."

Now Mary was shivering in earnest, and Karen felt in danger of doing so too. The nights were growing darker, the corridor was very long, and far down its length something was hobbling, hobbling.

The Show Goes On



"*The Show Goes On* started out as *The Usher* on 24 May 1978. By the 27th it had the title it bears now, and the next day it was done. The cinema was based on the Hippodrome in Liverpool, converted from a variety theatre [...] in 1929. A maze of dressing-rooms survived behind the cinema screen, and one night I got lost among them while searching for an exit. Eventually I came to a pair of double doors, and as I made to push them apart I seemed to glimpse a large dim room beyond, full of figures that rose or tottered to their feet to await me. Perhaps they were homeless, but the light reminded me of waking from a nightmare in an ill-lit childhood bedroom, and I made haste to find another way out. Need anyone ask why I write as I do?"—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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The nails were worse than rusty; they had snapped. Under cover of several coats of paint, both the door and its frame had rotted. As Lee tugged at the door it collapsed towards him with a sound like that of an old cork leaving a bottle.

He hadn't used the storeroom since his father had nailed the door shut to keep the rats out of the shop. Both the shelves and the few items which had been left in the room—an open tin of paint, a broken-necked brush—looked merged into a single mass composed of grime and dust.

He was turning away, having vaguely noticed a dark patch that covered much of the dim wall at the back of the room, when he saw that it wasn't dampness. Beyond it he could just make out rows of regular outlines like teeth in a gaping mouth: seats in the old cinema.

He hadn't thought of the cinema for years. Old resurrected films on television, shrunken and packaged and robbed of flavour, never reminded him. It wasn't only that Cagney and Bogart and the rest had been larger than life, huge hovering faces like ancient idols; the cinema itself had had a personality—the screen framed by twin theatre boxes from the days of the music-hall, the faint smell and muttering of gaslights on the walls, the manager's wife and daughter serving in the auditorium and singing along

with the musicals. In the years after the war you could get in for an armful of lemonade bottles, or a bag of vegetables if you owned one of the nearby allotments; there had been a greengrocer's old weighing machine inside the paybox. These days you had to watch films in concrete warrens, if you could afford to go at all.

Still, there was no point in reminiscing, for the old cinema was now a back entry for thieves. He was sure that was how they had robbed other shops on the block. At times he'd thought he heard them in the cinema; they sounded too large for rats. And now, by the look of the wall, they'd made themselves a secret entrance to his shop.

Mrs Entwistle was waiting at the counter. These days she shopped here less from need than from loyalty, remembering when his mother had used to bake bread at home to sell in the shop. "Just a sliced loaf," she said apologetically.

"Will you be going past Frank's yard?" Within its slippery wrapping the loaf felt ready to deflate, not like his mother's bread at all. "Could you tell him that my wall needs repairing urgently? I can't leave the shop."

Buses were carrying stragglers to work or to school. Ninety minutes later —he could tell the time by the passengers, which meant he needn't have his watch repaired—the buses were ferrying shoppers down to Liverpool city centre, and Frank still hadn't come. Grumbling to himself, Lee closed the shop for ten minutes.

The February wind came slashing up the hill from the Mersey, trailing smoke like ghosts of the factory chimneys. Down the slope a yellow machine clawed at the remains of houses. The Liver Buildings looked like a monument in a graveyard of concrete and stone.

Beyond Kiddiegear and The Wholefood Shop, Frank's yard was a maze of new timber. Frank was feeding the edge of a door to a shrieking circular blade. He gazed at Lee as though nobody had told him anything. When Lee kept his temper and explained, Frank said "No problem. Just give a moan when you're ready."

"I'm ready now."

"Ah, well. As soon as I've finished this job I'll whizz round." Lee had reached the exit when Frank said "I'll tell you something that'll amuse you..."

Fifteen minutes later Lee arrived back, panting, at his shop. It was intact. He hurried around the outside of the cinema, but all the doors seemed immovable, and he couldn't find a secret entrance. Nevertheless he was sure that the thieves—children, probably—were sneaking in somehow.

The buses were full of old people now, sitting stiffly as china. The lunchtime trade trickled into the shop: men who couldn't buy their brand of cigarettes in the pub across the road, children sent on errands while their lunches went cold on tables or dried in ovens. An empty bus raced along the deserted street, and a scrawny youth in a leather jacket came into the shop, while his companion loitered in the doorway. Would Lee have a chance to defend himself, or at least to shout for help? But they weren't planning theft, only making sure they didn't miss a bus. Lee's heart felt both violent and fragile. Since the robberies had begun he'd felt that way too often.

The shop was still worth it. "Don't keep it up if you don't want to," his father had said, but it would have been admitting defeat to do anything else. Besides, he and his parents had been even closer here than at home. Since their death, he'd had to base his stock on items people wanted in a hurry or after the other shops had closed: flashlights, canned food, light-bulbs, cigarettes. Lee's Home-Baked Bread was a thing of the past, but it was still Lee's shop.

Packs of buses climbed the hill, carrying home the rush-hour crowds. When the newspaper van dumped a stack of the evening's Liverpool Echo on the doorstep, he knew Frank wasn't coming. He stormed round to the yard, but it was locked and deserted.

Well then, he would stay in the shop overnight; he'd nobody to go home for. Why, he had even made the thieves' job easier by helping the door to collapse. The sight of him in the lighted shop ought to deter thieves—it better had, for their sakes.

He bought two pork pies and some bottles of beer from the pub. Empty buses moved off from the stop like a series of cars on a fairground ride. He drank from his mother's Coronation mug, which always stood by the electric kettle.

He might as well have closed the shop at eight o'clock; apart from an old lady who didn't like his stock of cat food, nobody came. Eventually he locked the door and sat reading the paper, which seemed almost to be

written in a new language: head raps shock axe, said a headline about the sudden closing of a school.

Should he prop the storeroom door in place, lest he fall asleep? No, he ought to stay visible from the cinema, in the hope of scaring off the thieves. In his childhood they would hardly have dared sneak into the cinema, let alone steal—not in the last days of the cinema, when the old man had been roaming the aisles.

Everyone, perhaps even the manager, had been scared of him. Nobody Lee knew had ever seen his face. You would see him fumbling at the dim gaslights to turn them lower, then he'd begin to make sounds in the dark as though he was both muttering to himself and chewing something soft. He would creep up on talkative children and shine his flashlight into their eyes. As he hissed at them, a pale substance would spill from his mouth.

But they were scared of nothing these days, short of Lee's sitting in the shop all night, like a dummy. Already he felt irritable, frustrated. How much worse would he feel after a night of doing nothing except waste electricity on the lights and the fire?

He wasn't thinking straight. He might be able to do a great deal. He emptied the mug of beer, then he switched off the light and arranged himself on the chair as comfortably as possible. He might have to sit still for hours.

He only hoped they would venture close enough for him to see their faces. A flashlight lay ready beside him. Surely they were cowards who would run when they saw he wasn't scared of them. Perhaps he could chase them and find their secret entrance.

For a long time he heard nothing. Buses passed downhill, growing emptier and fewer. Through their growling he heard faint voices, but they were fading away from the pub, which was closing. Now the streets were deserted, except for the run-down grumble of the city. Wind shivered the window. The edge of the glow of the last few buses trailed vaguely over the storeroom entrance, making the outlines of cinema seats appear to stir. Between their sounds he strained his ears. Soon the last bus had gone.

He could just make out the outlines of the seats. If he gazed at them for long they seemed to waver, as did the storeroom doorway. Whenever he closed his eyes to rest them he heard faint tentative sounds: creaking,

rattling. Perhaps the shop always sounded like that when there was nothing else to hear.

His head jerked up. No, he was sure he hadn't dozed: there had been a sound like a whisper, quickly suppressed. He hunched himself forward, ears ringing with strain. The backs of the cinema seats, vague forms like charcoal sketches on a charcoal background, appeared to nod towards him.

Was he visible by the glow of the electric fire? He switched it off stealthily, and sat listening, eyes squeezed shut. The sudden chill held him back from dozing.

Yes, there were stealthy movements in a large enclosed place. Were they creeping closer? His eyes sprang open to take them unawares, and he thought he glimpsed movement, dodging out of sight beyond the gap in the wall.

He sat absolutely still, though the cold was beginning to insinuate cramp into his right leg. He had no way of measuring the time that passed before he glimpsed movement again. Though it was so vague that he couldn't judge its speed, he had a nagging impression that someone had peered at him from the dark auditorium. He thought he heard floorboards creaking.

Were the thieves mocking him? They must think it was fun to play games with him, to watch him gazing stupidly through the wall they'd wrecked. Rage sprang him to his feet. Grabbing the flashlight, he strode through the doorway. He had to slow down in the storeroom, for he didn't want to touch the shelves fattened by grime. As soon as he reached the wall he flashed the light into the cinema. The light just managed to reach the walls, however dimly. There was nobody in sight. On either side of the screen, which looked like a rectangle of fog, the theatre boxes were cups of darkness. It was hard to distinguish shadows from dim objects, which perhaps was why the rows of seats looked swollen.

The thieves must have retreated into one of the corridors, towards their secret entrance; he could hear distant muffled sounds. No doubt they were waiting for him to give up—but he would surprise them.

He stepped over a pile of rubble just beyond the wall. They mustn't have had time to clear it away when they had made the gap. The flashlight was heavy, reassuring; they'd better not come too near. As soon as he reached

the near end of a row of seats and saw that they were folded back out of his way, he switched off the light.

Halfway down the row he touched a folding seat, which felt moist and puffy—fatter than it had looked. He didn't switch on the light, for he oughtn't to betray his presence more than was absolutely necessary. Besides, there was a faint sketchy glow from the road, through the shop. At least he would be able to find his way back easily—and he'd be damned if anyone else got there first.

When he reached the central aisle he risked another blink of light, to make sure the way was clear. Shadows sat up in all the nearest seats. A few springs had broken; seats lolled, spilling their innards. Underfoot the carpet felt like perished rubber; occasionally it squelched.

At the end of the aisle he halted, breathing inaudibly. After a while he heard movement resounding down a corridor to his left. All at once—good Lord, he'd forgotten that—he was glad the sounds weren't coming from his right, where the Gents' had been and still was, presumably. Surely even thieves would prefer to avoid the yard beyond that window, especially at night.

Blinking the light at the floor, he moved to his left. The darkness hovering overhead seemed enormous, dwarfing his furtive sounds. He had an odd impression that the screen was almost visible, as an imperceptible lightening of the dark above him. He was reminded of the last days of the cinema, in particular one night when the projectionist must have been drunk or asleep: the film had slowed and dimmed very gradually, flickering; the huge almost invisible figures had twitched and mouthed silently, unable to stop—it had seemed that the cinema was senile but refusing to die, or incapable of dying.

Another blink of light showed him the exit, a dark arch a head taller than he. A few scraps of linoleum clung to the stone floor of a low corridor. He remembered the way: a few yards ahead the corridor branched; one short branch led to a pair of exit doors, while the other turned behind the screen, towards a warren of old dressing-rooms.

When he reached the pair of doors he tested them, this time from within the building. Dim light drew a blurred sketch of their edges. The bars which ought to snap apart and release the doors felt like a single pole encrusted

with harsh flakes. His rusty fingers scraped as he rubbed them together. Wind flung itself at the doors, as unable to move them as he was.

He paced back to the junction of the corridors, feeling his way with the toes of his shoes. There was a faint sound far down the other branch. Perhaps the thieves were skulking near their secret entrance, ready to flee. One blink of the light showed him that the floor was clear.

The corridor smelt dank and musty. He could tell when he strayed near the walls, for the chill intensified. The dark seemed to soak up those of his sounds that couldn't help being audible—the scrape of fallen plaster underfoot, the flap of a loose patch of linoleum which almost tripped him and which set his heart palpitating. It seemed a very long time before he reached the bend, which he coped with by feeling his way along the damp crumbling plaster of the wall. Then there was nothing but musty darkness for an even longer stretch, until something taller than he was loomed up in front of him.

It was another pair of double doors. Though they were ajar, and their bars looked rusted in the open position, he was reluctant to step through. The nervous flare of his light had shown him a shovel leaning against the wall; perhaps it had once been used to clear away fallen plaster. Thrusting the shovel between the doors, he squeezed through the gap, trying to make no noise.

He couldn't quite make himself switch off the flashlight. There seemed to be no need. In the right-hand wall were several doorways; he was sure one led to the secret entrance. If the thieves fled, he'd be able to hear which doorway they were using.

He crept along the passage. Shadows of dangling plaster moved with him. The first room was bare, and the colour of dust. It would have been built as a dressing-room, and perhaps the shapeless object, further blurred by wads of dust, which huddled in a corner had once been a costume. In the second deserted room another slumped, arms folded bonelessly. He had a hallucinatory impression that they were sleeping vagrants, stirring wakefully as his light touched them.

There was only one movement worth his attention: the stealthy restless movement he could hear somewhere ahead. Yes, it was beyond the last of the doorways, from which—he switched off the flashlight to be sure—a faint glow was emerging. That must come from the secret entrance.

He paused just ahead of the doorway. Might they be lying in wait for him? When the sound came again—a leathery sound, like the shifting of nervous feet in shoes—he could tell that it was at least as distant as the far side of the room. Creeping forward, he risked a glance within.

Though the room was dimmer than fog, he could see that it was empty: not even a dusty remnant of clothing or anything else on the floor. The meagre glow came from a window barred by a grille, beyond which he heard movement, fainter now. Were they waiting outside to open the grille as soon as he went away? Flashlight at the ready, he approached.

When he peered through the window, he thought at first there was nothing to see except a cramped empty yard: grey walls which looked furred by the dimness, grey flagstones, and—a little less dim—the sky. Another grille covered a window in an adjoining wall.

Then a memory clenched on his guts. He had recognised the yard.

Once, as a child, he had been meant to sneak into the Gents' and open the window so that his friends could get in without paying. He'd had to stand on the toilet seat in order to reach the window. Beyond a grille whose gaps were thin as matchsticks, he had just been able to make out a small dismal space enclosed by walls which looked coated with darkness or dirt. Even if he had been able to shift the grille he wouldn't have dared to do so, for something had been staring at him from a corner of the yard.

Of course it couldn't really have been staring. Perhaps it had been a half-deflated football; it looked leathery. It must have been there for a long time, for the two socketlike dents near its top were full of cobwebs. He'd fled, not caring what his friends might do to him—but in fact they hadn't been able to find their way to the yard. For years he hadn't wanted to look out of that window, especially when he'd dreamed—or had seemed to remember—that something had moved, gleaming, behind the cobwebs. When he'd been old enough to look out of the window without climbing up, the object was still there, growing dustier. Now there had been a gap low down in it, widening as years passed. It had resembled a grin stuffed with dirt.

Again he heard movement beyond the grille. He couldn't quite make out that corner of the yard, and retreated, trying to make no noise, before he could. Nearly at the corridor, he saw that a door lay open against the wall. He dragged the door shut as he emerged—to trap the thieves, that was all; if they were in the yard that might teach them a lesson. He would certainly

have been uneasy if he had still been a child. Then he halted, wondering what else he'd heard.

The scrape of the door on bare stone had almost covered up another sound from the direction of the cinema. Had the thieves outwitted him? Had they closed the double doors? When he switched on the flashlight, having fumbled and almost dropped it lens-first, he couldn't tell: perhaps the doors were ajar, but perhaps his nervousness was making the shadow between them appear wider than it was.

As he ran, careless now of whether he was heard, shadows of dead gaslights splashed along the walls, swelling. Their pipes reminded him obscurely of breathing-tubes, clogged with dust. In the bare rooms, slumped dusty forms shifted with his passing.

The doors were still ajar, and looked untouched. When he stepped between them, the ceiling rocked with shadows; until he glanced up he felt that it was closing down. He'd done what he could in here, he ought to get back to the shop—but if he went forward, he would have to think. If the doors hadn't moved, then the sound he had almost heard must have come from somewhere else: perhaps the unlit cinema.

Before he could help it, he was remembering. The last weeks of the cinema had been best forgotten: half the audience had seemed to be there because there was nowhere else to go, old men trying to warm themselves against the grudging radiators; sometimes there would be the thud of an empty bottle or a fallen walking-stick. The tattered films had jerked from scene to scene like dreams. On the last night Lee had been there, the gaslights had gone out halfway through the film, and hadn't been lit at the end. He'd heard an old man falling and crying out as though he thought the darkness had come for him, a little girl screaming as if unable to wake from a nightmare, convinced perhaps that only the light had held the cinema in shape, prevented it from growing deformed. Then Lee had heard something else: a muttering mixed with soft chewing. It had sounded entirely at home in the dark.

But if someone was in the cinema now, it must be the thieves. He ought to hurry, before they reached his shop. He was hurrying, towards the other branch of the corridor, which led to the exit doors. Might he head off the thieves that way? He would be out of the building more quickly, that was the main thing—it didn't matter why.

The doors wouldn't budge. Though he wrenched at them until his palms smarted with rust, the bars didn't even quiver. Wind whined outside like a dog, and emphasised the stuffy mustiness of the corridor. Suddenly he realised how much noise he was making. He desisted at once, for it would only make it more difficult for him to venture back into the cinema. Nor could he any longer avoid realising why.

Once before he'd sneaked out to this exit, to let in his friends who hadn't been able to find their way into the yard. Someone had told the usherette, who had come prowling down the central aisle, poking at people with her flashlight beam. As the light crept closer, he had been unable to move; the seat had seemed to box him in, his mouth and throat had felt choked with dust. Yet the panic he'd experienced then had been feeble compared to what he felt now—for if the cinema was still guarded against intruders, it was not by the manager's daughter.

He found he was trembling, and clawed at the wall. A large piece of plaster came away, crunching in his hand. The act of violence, mild though it was, went some way towards calming him. He wasn't a child, he was a shopkeeper who had managed to survive against the odds; he had no right to panic as the little girl had, in the dark. Was the knot that was twisting harder, harder, in his guts renewed panic, or disgust with himself? Hoping that it was the latter, he made himself hurry towards the auditorium.

When he saw what he had already noticed but managed to ignore, he faltered. A faint glow had crept into the corridor from the auditorium. Couldn't that mean that his eyes were adjusting? No, the glow was more than that. Gripping the edge of the archway so hard that his fingers twitched painfully, he peered into the cinema.

The gaslights were burning.

At least, blurred ovals hovered on the walls above their jets. Their light had always fallen short of the central aisle; now the glow left a swathe of dimness, half as wide as the auditorium which it divided. If the screen was faintly lit—if huge vague flattened forms were jerking there, rather than merely stains on the canvas—it failed to illuminate the cinema. He had no time to glance at the screen, for he could see that not all the seats were empty.

Perhaps they were only a few heaps of rubbish which were propped there—heaps which he hadn't been able to distinguish on first entering. He had

begun to convince himself that this was true, and that in any case it didn't matter, when he noticed that the dimness was not altogether still. Part of it was moving.

No, it was not dimness. It was a glow, which was crawling jerkily over the rows of seats, towards the first of the objects propped up in them. Was the glow being carried along the central aisle? Thank God, he couldn't quite distinguish its source. Perhaps that source was making a faint sound, a moist somewhat rhythmic muttering that sounded worse than senile, or perhaps that was only the wind.

Lee began to creep along the front of the cinema, just beneath the screen. Surely his legs wouldn't let him down, though they felt flimsy, almost boneless. Once he reached the side aisle he would be safe and able to hurry, the gaslights would show him the way to the gap in his wall. Wouldn't they also make him more visible? That ought not to matter, for—his mind tried to flinch away from thinking—if anything was prowling in the central aisle, surely it couldn't outrun him.

He had just reached the wall when he thought he heard movement in the theatre box above him. It sounded dry as an insect, but much larger. Was it peering over the edge at him? He couldn't look up, only clatter along the bare floorboards beneath the gaslights, on which he could see no flames at all.

He still had yards to go before he reached the gap when the roving glow touched one of the heaps in the seats.

If he could have turned and run blindly, nothing would have stopped him; but a sickness that was panic weighed down his guts, and he couldn't move until he saw. Perhaps there wasn't much to see except an old coat full of lumps of dust or rubble, which was lolling in the seat; nothing to make the flashlight shudder in his hand and rap against the wall. But sunken in the gap between the lapels of the coat was what might have been an old Halloween mask overgrown with dust. Surely it was dust that moved in the empty eyes—yet as the flashlight rapped more loudly against the wall, the mask turned slowly and unsteadily towards him.

Panic blinded him. He didn't know who he was nor where he was going. He knew only that he was very small and at bay in the vast dimness, through which a shape was directing a glow towards him. Behind the glow

he could almost see a face from which something pale dangled. It wasn't a beard, for it was rooted in the gaping mouth.

He was thumping the wall with the flashlight as though to remind himself that one or the other was there. Yes, there was a wall, and he was backing along it: backing where? Towards the shop, his shop now, where he wouldn't need to use the flashlight, mustn't use the flashlight to illuminate whatever was pursuing him, mustn't see, for then he would never be able to move. Not far to go now, he wouldn't have to bear the dark much longer, must be nearly at the gap in the wall, for a glow was streaming from behind him. He was there now, all he had to do was turn his back on the cinema, turn quickly, just turn. He had managed to turn halfway, trying to be blind without closing his eyes, when his free hand touched the object which was lolling in the nearest seat. Both the overcoat and its contents felt lumpy, patched with damp and dust. Nevertheless the arm stirred; the object at the end of it, which felt like a bundle of sticks wrapped in torn leather, tried to close on his hand.

Choking, he pulled himself free. Some of the sticks came loose and plumped on the rotten carpet. The flashlight fell beside them, and he heard glass breaking. It didn't matter, he was at the gap, he could hear movement in the shop, cars and buses beyond. He had no time to wonder who was in there before he turned.

The first thing he saw was that the light wasn't that of streetlamps; it was daylight. At once he saw why he had made the mistake: the gap was no longer there. Except for a single brick, the wall had been repaired.

He was yelling desperately at the man beyond the wall, and thumping the new bricks with his fists—he had begun to wonder why his voice was so faint and his blows so feeble—when the man's face appeared beyond the brick-sized gap. Lee staggered back as though he was fainting. Except that he had to stare up at the man's face, he might have been looking in a mirror.

He hadn't time to think. Crying out, he stumbled forward and tried to wrench the new bricks loose. Perhaps his adult self beyond the wall was aware of him in some way, for his face peered through the gap, looking triumphantly contemptuous of whoever was in the dark. Then the brick fitted snugly into place, cutting off the light.

Almost worse was the fact that it wasn't quite dark. As he began to claw at the bricks and mortar, he could see them far too clearly. Soon he might see

what was holding the light, and that would be worst of all.

The Ferries

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When Berry reached Parkgate promenade he heard the waves. He couldn't recall having heard them during his stroll down the winding road from Neston village, between banks whispering with grass, past the netted lights of windows. Beneath clouds diluted by moonlight, the movement of the waves looked indefinably strange. They sounded faint, not quite like water.

The promenade was scarcely two cars wide. Thin lanterns stood on concrete stalks above the sea wall, which was overlooked by an assortment of early Victorian buildings: antique shops, cafés that in the afternoons must be full of ladies taking tea and cakes, a nursing home, a private school that looked as though it had been built for something else. In the faltering moonlight all of them looked black and white. Some were Tudor-striped.

As he strolled—the June night was mild, he might as well enjoy himself as best he could now he was here—he passed the Marie Celeste Hotel. That must have appealed to his uncle. He was still grinning wryly when he reached his uncle's address.

Just then the moon emerged from the clouds, and he saw what was wrong with the waves. There was no water beyond the sea wall, only an expanse of swaying grass that stretched as far as he could see. The sight of the grass, overlooked by the promenade buildings as though it was still the River Dee, made him feel vaguely but intensely expectant, as though about to glimpse something on the pale parched waves.

Perhaps his uncle felt this too, for he was sitting at the black bow window on the first floor of the white house, gazing out beyond the sea wall. His eyes looked colourless as moonlight. It took three rings of the bell to move him.

Berry shouldn't feel resentful. After all, he was probably his uncle's only living relative. Nevertheless there were decisions to be made in London, at the publishers: books to be bought or rejected—several were likely to be

auctioned. He'd come a long way hurriedly, by several trains; his uncle's call had sounded urgent enough for that, as urgent as the pips that had cut him off. Berry only wished he knew why he was here. When at last his uncle opened the door, he looked unexpectedly old. Perhaps living ashore had aged him. He had always been small, but now he looked dwindled, though still tanned and leathery. In his spotless black blazer with its shining silvery buttons, and his tiny gleaming shoes, he resembled a doll of himself.

"Here we are again."

Though he sounded gruff, his handshake was firm, and felt grateful for company. When he'd toiled upstairs, using the banisters as a series of walking-sticks, he growled "Sit you down."

There was no sense of the sea in the flat, not even maritime prints to enliven the timidly patterned wallpaper. Apart from a couple of large old trunks, the flat seemed to have nothing to do with his uncle. It felt like a waiting-room.

"Get that down you, James." His uncle's heartiness seemed faded; even the rum was a brand you could buy in the supermarkets, not one of the prizes he'd used to bring back from voyages. He sat gazing beyond the promenade, sipping the rum as though it was as good as any other.

"How are you, Uncle? It's good to see you." They hadn't seen each other for ten years, and Berry felt inhibited; besides, his uncle detested effusiveness. When he'd finished his rum he said "You sounded urgent on the phone."

"Aye." The years had made him even more taciturn. He seemed to resent being reminded of his call.

"I wouldn't have expected you to live so far from everything," Berry said, trying a different approach.

"It went away." Apparently he was talking about the sea, for he continued "There used to be thirteen hotels and a pier. All the best people came here to bathe. They said the streets were as elegant as Bath. The private school you passed, that was the old Assembly Rooms."

Though he was gazing across the sea wall, he didn't sound nostalgic. He sat absolutely still, as though relishing the stability of the room. He'd used to pace restlessly when talking, impatient to return to the sea.

"Then the Dee silted up," he was saying. "It doesn't reach here now, except at spring tides and in storms. That's when the rats and voles flee onto the promenade—hordes of them, they say. I haven't seen it, and I don't mean to."

"You're thinking of moving?"

"Aye." Frowning at his clenched fists, he muttered "Will you take me back with you tomorrow and let me stay until I find somewhere? I'll have my boxes sent on."

He mustn't want to make the journey alone in case he was taken ill. Still, Berry couldn't help sounding a little impatient. "I don't live near the sea, you know."

"I know that." Reluctantly he added "I wish I lived further away."

Perhaps now that he'd had to leave the sea, his first love, he wanted to forget about it quickly. Berry could tell he'd been embarrassed to ask for help—a captain needing help from a nephew who was seasick on hovercraft! But he was a little old man now, and his tan was only a patina; all at once Berry saw how frail he was. "All right, Uncle," he said gently. "It won't be any trouble."

His uncle was nodding, not looking at him, but Berry could see he was moved. Perhaps now was the time to broach the idea Berry had had on the train. "On my way here," he said carefully, "I was remembering some of the tales you used to tell."

"You remember them, do you?" The old man didn't sound as though he wanted to. He drained a mouthful of rum in order to refill his glass. Had the salt smell that was wafting across the grass reminded him too vividly?

Berry had meant to suggest the idea of a book of his uncle's yarns, for quite a few had haunted him: the pygmies who could carry ten times their own weight, the flocks of birds that buried in guano any ships that ventured into their territory, the light whose source was neither sun nor moon but that outlined an island on the horizon, which receded if ships made for it. Would it be a children's book, or a book that tried to trace the sources? Perhaps this wasn't the time to discuss it, for the smell that was drifting through the window was stagnant, very old.

"There was one story I never told you."

Berry's head jerked up; he had been nodding off. Even his uncle had never begun stories as abruptly—as reluctantly—as this.

"Some of the men used to say it didn't matter if you saw it so long as you protected yourself." Was the old man talking to himself, to take his mind off the desiccated river, the stagnant smell? "One night we all saw it. One minute the sea was empty, the next that thing was there, close enough to swim to. Some of the men would almost have done that, to get it over with." He gulped a mouthful of rum and stared sharply out across the pale dry waves. "Only they could see the faces watching. None of us forgot that, ever. As soon as we got ashore all of us bought ourselves protection. Even I did," he said bitterly, "when I'd used to say civilised men kept pictures on walls."

Having struggled out of his blazer, which he'd unbuttoned carefully and tediously, he displayed his left forearm. Blinking sleepily, Berry made out a tattoo, a graceful sailing ship surrounded by a burst of light. Its masts resembled almost recognisable symbols. "The younger fellows thought that was all we needed. We all wanted to believe that would keep us safe. I wonder how they feel now they're older." The old man turned quickly towards the window; he seemed angry that he'd been distracted. Something had changed his attitude drastically, for he had hated tattoos. It occurred to Berry, too late to prevent him from dozing, that his uncle had called him because he was afraid to be alone.

Berry's sleep was dark and profound. Half-submerged images floated by, so changed as to be unrecognisable. Sounds reached him rather as noise from the surface might try to reach the depths of the sea. It was impossible to tell how many times his uncle had cried out before the calls woke him.

"James..." The voice was receding, but at first Berry failed to notice this; he was too aware of the smell that filled the room. Something that smelled drowned in stagnant water was near him, so near that he could hear its creaking. At once he was awake, and so afraid that he thought he was about to be sick.

"James..." Both the creaking and the voice were fading. Eventually he managed to persuade himself that despite the stench, he was alone in the room. Forcing his eyes open, he stumbled to the window. Though it was hard to focus his eyes and see what was out there, his heart was already jolting.

The promenade was deserted; the buildings gleamed like bone. Above the sea wall the lanterns glowed thinly. The wide dry river was flooded with grass, which swayed in the moonlight, rustling and glinting. Over the silted river, leaving a wake of grass that looked whiter than the rest, a ship was receding.

It seemed to be the colour and the texture of the moon. Its sails looked stained patchily by mould. It was full of holes, all of which were misshapen by glistening vegetation. Were its decks crowded with figures? If so, he was grateful that he couldn't see their faces, for their movements made him think of drowned things lolling underwater, dragged back and forth by currents.

Sweat streamed into his eyes. When he'd blinked them clear, the moon was darkening. Now the ship looked more like a mound from which a few trees sprouted, and perhaps the crowd was only swaying bushes. Clouds closed over the moon, but he thought he could see a pale mass sailing away, overtopped by lurid sketches that might be masts. Was that his uncle's voice, its desperation overwhelmed by despair? When moonlight flooded the landscape a few moments later, there was nothing but the waves of grass, from which a whiter swathe was fading.

He came to himself when he began shivering. An unseasonably chill wind was clearing away the stench of stagnant water. He gazed in dismay at his uncle's blazer, draped neatly over the empty chair. There wasn't much that he could tell the police. He had been visiting his uncle, whom he hadn't seen for years. They had both had a good deal to drink, and his uncle, who had seemed prematurely aged, had begun talking incoherently and incomprehensibly. He'd woken to find that his uncle had wandered away, leaving his blazer, though it had been a cold night.

Did they believe him? They were slow and thorough, these policemen; their thoughts were as invisible as he meant his to be. Surely his guilt must be apparent, the shame of hiding the truth about his uncle, of virtually blackening his character. In one sense, though, that seemed hardly to matter: he was sure they wouldn't find his uncle alive. Eventually, since Berry could prove that he was needed in London, they let him go.

He trudged along the sweltering promenade. Children were scrambling up and down the sea wall, old people on sticks were being promenaded by relatives. In the hazy sunshine, most of the buildings were still black and white. Everywhere signs said fresh shrimps. In a shop that offered "Gifts

and Bygones," ships were stiff in bottles. Waves of yellowing grass advanced, but never very far.

He ought to leave, and be grateful that he lived inland. If what he'd seen last night had been real, the threat was far larger than he was. There was nothing he could do.

But suppose he had only heard his uncle's voice on the silted river, and had hallucinated the rest? He'd been overtired, and confused by his uncle's ramblings; how soon had he wakened fully? He wanted to believe that the old man had wandered out beyond the promenade and had collapsed, or even that he was alive out there, still wandering.

There was only one way to find out. He would be in sight of the crowded promenade. Holding his briefcase above his head as though he was submerging, he clambered down the sea wall.

The grass was tougher than it looked. Large patches had to be struggled through. After five hundred yards he was sweating, yet he seemed to be no closer to the far bank, nor to anything else. Ahead through the haze he could just distinguish the colours of fields in their frames of trees and hedges. Factory chimneys resembled grey pencils. All this appeared to be receding.

He struggled onward. Grass snagged him, birds flew up on shrill wings, complaining. He could see no evidence of the wake he'd seen last night; nothing but the interminable grass, the screeching birds, the haze. Behind him the thick heat had blurred the promenade, the crowds were pale shadows. Their sounds had been swallowed by the hissing of grass. He'd been tempted several times to turn back, and was on the point of doing so, when he saw a gleam in the dense grass ahead. It was near the place where he'd last glimpsed the ship, if he had done so. The gleaming object looked like a small shoe.

He had to persuade himself to go forward. He remembered the swaying figures on the decks, whose faces he'd dreaded to see. Nevertheless he advanced furiously, tearing a path through the grass with his briefcase. He was almost there before he saw that the object wasn't a shoe. It was a bottle.

When inertia carried him forward, he realised that the bottle wasn't empty. For an unpleasant moment he thought it contained the skeleton of a small animal. Peering through the grime that coated the glass, he made out a

whitish model ship with tattered sails. Tiny overgrown holes gaped in it. Though its decks were empty, he had seen it before.

He stood up too quickly, and almost fell. The heat seemed to flood his skull. The ground underfoot felt unstable; a buzzing of insects attacked him; there was a hint of a stagnant smell. He was ready to run, dizzy as he was, to prevent himself from thinking.

Then he remembered his uncle's despairing cry: "James, James..." Even then, if he had been able to run, he might have done nothing—but his dizziness both hindered him and gave him time to feel ashamed. If there was a chance of helping his uncle, however impossible it seemed—He snatched up the bottle and threw it into his briefcase. Then, trying to forget about it, he stumbled back towards the crowds.

His uncle was calling him. He woke to the sound of a shriek. Faces were sailing past him, close enough to touch if he could have reached through the glass. It was only a train on the opposite line, rushing away from London. Nevertheless he couldn't sleep after that. He finished reading the typescript he'd brought with him, though he knew by now he didn't want to buy the book.

The state of his desk was worse than he'd feared. His secretary had answered most of his letters, but several books had piled up, demanding to be read. He was stuffing two of them into his briefcase, to be read on the bus and, if he wasn't too tired, at home, when he found he was holding the grimy bottle. At once he locked it in a drawer. Though he wasn't prepared to throw it away until he understood its purpose, he was equally reluctant to take it home.

That night he could neither sleep nor read. He tried strolling in Holland Park, but while that tired him further, it failed to calm him. The moonlit clouds that were streaming headlong across the sky made everything beneath them look unstable. Though he knew that the lit houses beyond the swaying trees were absolutely still, he kept feeling that the houses were rocking slyly, at anchor.

He lay trying to relax. Beyond the windows of his flat, Kensington High Street seemed louder than ever. Nervous speculation kept him awake. He felt he'd been meant to find the bottle, but for what purpose? Surely it couldn't harm him; after all, he had only once been to sea. How could he help his uncle? His idea of a book of stories was nagging him; perhaps he

could write it himself, as a kind of monument to his uncle—except that the stories seemed to be drifting away into the dark, beyond his reach, just like the old man. When eventually he dozed, he thought he heard the old man calling.

In the morning his desk looked even worse; the pile of books had almost doubled. He managed to sort out a few that could be trusted to readers for reports. Of course, a drain must have overflowed outside the publishers; that was why only a patch of pavement had been wet this morning—he knew it hadn't rained. He consulted his diary for distractions.

Sales conference 11 am: he succeeded in being coherent, and even in suggesting ideas, but his thoughts were elsewhere. The sky resembled sluggish smoke, as though the oppressive day was smouldering. His mind felt packed in grey stuffing. The sound of cars outside seemed unnaturally rhythmic, almost like waves.

Back at his desk he sat trying to think. Lack of sleep had isolated him in a no-man's-land of consciousness, close to hallucination. He felt cut off from whatever he was supposed to be doing. Though his hand kept reaching out impulsively, he left the drawer locked. There was no point in brooding over the model ship until he'd decided what to do.

Beyond the window his uncle cried out. No, someone was shouting to guide a lorry; the word wasn't "James" at all. But he still didn't know how to help his uncle, assuming that he could, assuming that it wasn't too late. Would removing the ship from the bottle achieve something? In any case, could one remove the ship at all? Perhaps he could consult an expert in such matters. "I know exactly whom you want," his secretary said, and arranged for them to meet tomorrow.

Dave Peeples lunch 12:30: ordinarily he would have enjoyed the game, especially since Peeples liked to discuss books in pubs, where he tended to drink himself into an agreeable state. Today's prize was attractive: a bestselling series that Peeples wanted to take to a new publisher. But today he found Peeples irritating—not only his satyr's expressions and postures, which were belied by his paunch, but also the faint smirk with which he constantly approved of himself. Still, if Berry managed to acquire the books, the strain would have been worthwhile.

They ate in the pub just around the corner from the publishers. Before long Berry grew frustrated; he was too enervated by lack of sleep to risk drinking

much. Nor could he eat much, for the food tasted unpleasantly salty. Peeples seemed to notice nothing, and ate most of Berry's helping before he leaned back, patting his paunch.

"Well now," he said when Berry raised the subject of the books. "What about another drink?" Berry was glad to stand up, to feel the floor stable underfoot, for the drinkers at the edge of his vision had seemed to be swaying extravagantly.

"I'm not happy with the way my mob are promoting the books," Peeples admitted. "They seem to be letting them just lie there." Berry's response might have been more forceful if he hadn't been distracted by the chair that someone was rocking back and forth with a steady rhythmic creaking.

When Berry had finished making offers Peeples said "That doesn't sound bad. Still, I ought to tell you that several other people are interested." Berry wondered angrily whether he was simply touring publishers in search of free meals. The pub felt damp, the dimness appeared to be glistening. No doubt it was very humid.

Though the street was crowded, he was glad to emerge. "I'll be in touch," Peeples promised grudgingly, but at that moment Berry didn't care, for on the opposite pavement the old man's voice was crying "James!" It was only a newspaper-seller naming his wares, which didn't sound much like James. Surely a drain must have overflowed where the wet patch had been, for there was a stagnant smell.

Editors meeting 3 pm: he scarcely had time to gulp a mug of coffee beforehand, almost scalding his throat. Why did they have to schedule two meetings in one day? When there were silences in which people expected him to speak, he managed to say things that sounded positive and convincing. Nevertheless he heard little except for the waves of traffic, advancing and withdrawing, and the desperate cries in the street. What was that crossing the intersection, a long pale shape bearing objects like poles? It had gone before he could jerk his head round, and his colleagues were staring only at him.

It didn't matter. If any of these glimpses weren't hallucinations, surely they couldn't harm him. Otherwise, why hadn't he been harmed that night in Parkgate? It was rather a question of what he could do to the glimpses. "Yes, that's right," he said to a silence. "Of course it is." Once he'd slept he would be better able to cope with everything. Tomorrow he would consult

the expert. After the meeting he slumped at the desk, trying to find the energy to gather books together and head for home.

His secretary woke him. "Okay," he mumbled, "you go on." He'd follow her in a moment, when he was more awake. It occurred to him that if he hadn't dozed off in Parkgate, his uncle might have been safe. That was another reason to try to do something. He'd get up in a few moments. It wasn't dark yet.

When he woke again, it was.

He had to struggle to raise his head. His elbows had shoved piles of books to the edge of the desk. Outside, the street was quiet except for the whisper of an occasional car. Sodium lamps craned their necks towards his window. Beyond the frosted glass of his office cubicle, the maze of the open-plan office looked even more crowded with darkness than the space around his desk. When he switched on his desk lamp, it showed him a blurred reflection of himself trapped in a small pool of brightness. Hurriedly he switched on the cubicle's main light.

Though he was by no means awake, he didn't intend to wait. He wanted to be out of the building, away from the locked drawer. Insomnia had left him feeling vulnerable, on edge. He swept a handful of books into the briefcase —God, they were becoming a bad joke—and emerged from his cubicle.

He felt uncomfortably isolated. The long angular room was lifeless; none of the desks seemed to retain any sense of the person who sat there. The desertion must be swallowing his sounds, which seemed not only dwarfed but robbed of resonance, as though surrounded by an emptiness that was very large.

His perceptions must be playing tricks. Underfoot the floor felt less stable than it ought to. At the edge of his vision the shadows of desks and cabinets appeared to be swaying, and he couldn't convince himself that the lights were still. He mustn't let any of this distract him. Time enough to think when he was home.

It took him far too long to cross the office, for he kept teetering against desks. Perhaps he should have taken time to waken fully, after all. When eventually he reached the lifts, he couldn't bring himself to use one; at least the stairs were open, though they were very dark. He groped, swaying, for

the light switch. Before he'd found it, he recoiled. The wall he had touched felt as though it were streaming with water.

A stagnant stench welled up out of the dark. When he grabbed the banister for support, that felt wet too. He mustn't panic: a door or window was open somewhere in the building, that was all he could hear creaking; its draught was making things feel cold—not wet—and was swinging the lights back and forth. Yes, he could feel the draught blustering at him, and smell what must be a drain.

He forced himself to step onto the stairs. Even the darkness was preferable to groping for the light switch, when he no longer knew what he might touch. Nevertheless, by the time he reached the half-landing he was wishing for light. His vertigo seemed to have worsened, for he was reeling from side to side of the staircase. Was the creaking closer? He mustn't pause, plenty of time to feel ill once he was outside in a taxi; he ought to be able to hold off panic so long as he didn't glimpse the ship again—

He halted so abruptly that he almost fell. Without warning he'd remembered his uncle's monologue. Berry had been as dopey then as he was now, but one point was all at once terribly clear. Your first glimpse of the ship meant only that you would see it again. The second time, it came for you.

He hadn't seen it again. Surely he still had a chance. There were two exits from the building; the creaking and the growing stench would tell him which exit to avoid. He was stumbling downstairs because that was the alternative to falling. His mind was a grey void that hardly even registered the wetness of the banisters. The foyer was in sight now at the foot of the stairs, its linoleum gleaming; less than a flight of stairs now, less than a minute's stumbling—

But it was no linoleum. The floorboards were bare, when there ought not even to be boards, only concrete. Shadows swayed on them, cast by objects that, though out of sight for the moment, seemed to have bloated limbs. Water sloshed from side to side of the boards, which were the planks of a deck.

He almost let himself fall, in despair. Then he began to drag himself frantically up the stairs, which perhaps were swaying, after all. Through the windows he thought he saw the cityscape rising and falling. There seemed

to be no refuge upstairs, for the stagnant stench was everywhere—but refuge was not what he was seeking.

He reeled across the office, which he'd darkened when leaving, into his cubicle. Perhaps papers were falling from desks only because he had staggered against them. His key felt ready to snap in half before the drawer opened.

He snatched out the bottle, in which something rattled insectlike, and stumbled to the window. Yes, he had been meant to find the bottle—but by whom, or by what? Wrenching open the lock of the window, he flung the bottle into the night. He heard it smash a moment later. Whatever was inside it must certainly have smashed too. At once everything felt stable, so abruptly that he grew dizzier. He felt as though he'd just stepped onto land after a stormy voyage.

There was silence except for the murmur of the city, which sounded quite normal—or perhaps there was another sound, faint and receding fast. It might have been a gust of wind, but he thought it resembled a chorus of cries of relief so profound it was appalling. Was one of them his uncle's voice?

Berry slumped against the window, which felt like ice against his forehead. There was no reason to flee now, nor did he think he would be capable of moving for some time. Perhaps they would find him here in the morning. It hardly mattered, if he could get some sleep.

All at once he tried to hold himself absolutely still, in order to listen. Surely he needn't be nervous any longer, just because the ship in the bottle had been deserted, surely that didn't mean—But his legs were trembling, and infected the rest of his body until he couldn't even strain his ears. By then, however, he could hear far better than he would have liked.

Perhaps he had destroyed the ship, and set free its captives; but if it had had a captain, what else might Berry have set loose? The smell had grown worse than stagnant—and up the stairs, and now across the dark office, irregular but purposeful footsteps were sloshing.

Early next morning several people reported glimpses of a light, supposedly moving out from the Thames into the open sea. Some claimed the light had been accompanied by sounds like singing. One old man tried to insist that the light had contained the outline of a ship. The reports seemed little

different from tales of objects in the skies, and were quickly dismissed, for London had a more spectacular mystery to solve: how a publisher's editor could be found in a first-floor office, not merely dead but drowned.

Midnight Hobo

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As he reached home, Roy saw the old man who lived down the road chasing children from under the railway bridge. "Go on, out with you," he was crying as though they were cats in his flowerbeds. He was brandishing his string bags, which were always full of books.

Perhaps the children had been climbing up beneath the arch; that was where he kept glancing. Roy wasn't interested, for his co-presenter on the radio show was getting on his nerves. At least Don Derrick was only temporary, until the regular man came out of hospital. As a train ticked away its carriages over the bridge, Roy stormed into his house in search of a soothing drink.

The following night he remembered to glance under the arch. It did not seem likely that anyone could climb up there, nor that anyone would want to. Even in daylight you couldn't tell how much of the mass that clogged the corners was soot. Now the arch was a hovering block of darkness, relieved only by faint greyish sketches of girders. Roy heard the birds fluttering.

Today Derrick had been almost tolerable, but he made up for that the next day. Halfway through "Our Town Tonight" Roy had to interview the female lead from *The Man on Top*, a limp British sex comedy about a young man trying to seduce his way to fame. Most of the film's scrawny budget must have been spent on hiring a few guest comedians. Heaven only knew how the producers had been able to afford to send the girl touring to promote the film.

Though as an actress she was embarrassingly inexperienced, as an interviewee she was far worse. She sat like a girl even younger than she was, overawed by staying up so late. A man from the film distributors watched over her like a nanny.

Whatever Roy asked her, her answers were never more than five words long. Over by the studio turntables, Derrick was fiddling impatiently with

the control panel, making everyone nervous. In future Roy wouldn't let him near the controls. Ah, here was a question that ought to inspire her. "How did you find the experience of working with so many veterans of comedy?"

"Oh, it really helped." He smiled desperate encouragement. "It really really did," she said miserably, her eyes pleading with him.

"What do you remember best about working with them?" When she looked close to panic he could only say "Are there any stories you can tell?"

"Oh—" At last she seemed nervously ready to speak, when Derrick interrupted "Well, I'm sure you've lots more interesting things to tell us. We'll come back to them in a few minutes, but first here's some music."

When the record was over he broke into the interview. "What sort of music do you like? What are your favourite things?" He might have been chatting to a girl in one of the discotheques where he worked. There wasn't much that Roy could do to prevent him, since the programme was being broadcast live: half-dead, more like.

Afterwards he cornered Derrick, who was laden with old 78ness, a plastic layer cake of adolescent memories. "I told you at the outset that was going to be my interview. We don't cut into each other's interviews unless invited."

"Well, I didn't know." Derrick's doughy face was growing pinkly mottled, burning from within. If you poked him, would the mark remain, as though in putty? He must look his best in the dim light of discos. "You know now," Roy said.

"I thought you needed some help," Derrick said with a kind of timid defiance; he looked ready to flinch. "You didn't seem to be doing very well."

"I wasn't, once you interfered. Next time, please remember who's running the show."

Half an hour later Roy was still fuming. As he strode beneath the bridge he felt on edge; his echoes seemed unpleasantly shrill, the fluttering among the girders sounded more like restless scuttling. Perhaps he could open a bottle of wine with dinner.

He had nearly finished dinner when he wondered when the brood would hatch. Last week he'd seen the male bird carrying food to his mate in the

hidden nest. When he'd washed up, he strolled under the bridge but could see only the girders gathering darkness. The old man with the string-bags was standing between his regimented flower-beds, watching Roy or the bridge. Emerging, Roy glanced back. In the May twilight the archway resembled a block of mud set into the sullen bricks.

Was there something he ought to have noticed? Next morning, on waking, he thought so—but he didn't have much time to think that day, for Derrick was sulking. He hardly spoke to Roy except when they were on the air, and even then his face belied his synthetic cheerfulness. They were like an estranged couple who were putting on a show for visitors.

Roy had done nothing to apologise for. If Derrick let his animosity show while he was broadcasting, it would be Derrick who'd have to explain. That made Roy feel almost at ease, which was why he noticed belatedly that he hadn't heard the birds singing under the bridge for days.

Nor had he seen them for almost a week; all he had heard was fluttering, as though they were unable to call. Perhaps a cat had caught them, perhaps that was what the fluttering had been. If anything was moving up there now, it sounded larger than a bird—but perhaps that was only his echoes, which seemed very distorted.

He had a casserole waiting in the oven. After dinner he browsed among the wavelengths of his stereo radio, and found a Mozart quartet on an East European frequency. As the calm deft phrases intertwined, he watched twilight smoothing the pebble-dashed houses, the tidy windows and flowerbeds. A train crossed the bridge, providing a few bars of percussion, and prompted him to imagine how far the music was travelling.

In a pause between movements he heard the cat.

At first even when he turned the radio down, he couldn't make out what was wrong. The cat was hissing and snarling, but what had happened to its voice? Of course—it was distorted by echoes. No doubt it was among the girders beneath the bridge. He was about to turn up the music when the cat screamed.

He ran to the window, appalled. He'd heard cats fighting, but never a sound like that. Above the bridge two houses distant, a chain-gang of telegraph poles looked embedded in the glassy sky. He could see nothing underneath

except a rhomb of dimness, rounded at the top. Reluctantly he ventured onto the deserted street.

It was not quite deserted. A dozen houses further from the bridge, the old man was glaring dismayed at the arch. As soon as Roy glanced at him, he dodged back into his house.

Roy couldn't see anything framed by the arch. Grass and weeds, which looked pale as growths found under stones, glimmered in the spaces between bricks. Some of the bricks resembled moist fossilised sponges, cemented by glistening mud. Up among the girders, an irregular pale shape must be a larger patch of weeds. As he peered at it, it grew less clear, seemed to withdraw into the dark—but at least he couldn't see the cat.

He was walking slowly, peering up in an attempt to reassure himself, when he trod on the object. Though it felt soft, it snapped audibly. The walls, which were padded with dimness, seemed to swallow its echo. It took him a while to glance down.

At first he was reminded of one of the strings of dust that appeared in the spare room when, too often, he couldn't be bothered to clean. But when he stooped reluctantly, he saw fur and claws. It looked as it had felt: like a cat's foreleg.

He couldn't look up as he fled. Echoes sissified his footsteps. Was a large pale shape following him beneath the girders? Could he hear its scuttling, or was that himself? He didn't dare speculate until he'd slammed his door behind him.

Half an hour later a gang of girls wandered, yelling and shrieking, through the bridge. Wouldn't they have noticed the leg, or was there insufficient light? He slept badly and woke early, but could find no trace in the road under the bridge. Perhaps the evidence had been dragged away by a car. The unlucky cat might have been run over on the railway line—but in that case, why hadn't he heard a train? He couldn't make out any patch of vegetation among the girders, where it was impenetrably dark; there appeared to be nothing pale up there at all.

All things considered, he was glad to go to work, at least to begin with. Derrick stayed out of his way, except to mention that he'd invited a rock group to talk on tonight's show. "All right," Roy said, though he'd never heard of the group. "Ian's the producer. Arrange it with him."

"I've already done that," Derrick said smugly.

Perhaps his taste of power would make him less intolerable. Roy had no time to argue, for he had to interview an anti-pornography campaigner. Her glasses slithered down her nose, her face grew redder and redder, but her pharisaic expression never wavered. Not for the first time, he wished he were working for television.

That night he wished it even more, when Derrick led into the studio four figures who walked like a march of the condemned and who looked like inexpert caricatures of bands of the past five years. Roy had started a record and was sitting forward to chat with them, when Derrick said "I want to ask the questions. This is *my* interview."

Roy would have found this too pathetic even to notice, except that Derrick's guests were grinning to themselves; they were clearly in on the secret. When Roy had suffered Derrick's questions and their grudging answers for ten minutes—"Which singers do you like? Have you written any songs? Are you going to?—he cut them off and wished the band success, which they certainly still needed. When they'd gone, and a record was playing, Derrick turned on him. "I hadn't finished," he said petulantly. "I was still talking."

"You've every right to do so, but not on my programme."

"It's my programme too. You weren't the one who invited me. I'm going to tell Hugh Ward about you."

Roy hoped he would. The station manager would certainly have been listening to the banal interview. Roy was still cursing Derrick as he reached the bridge, where he baulked momentarily. No, he'd had enough stupidity for one day; he wasn't about to let the bridge bother him.

Yet it did. The weeds looked even paler, and drained; if he touched them—which he had no intention of doing—they might snap. The walls glistened with a liquid that looked slower and thicker than water: mixed with grime, presumably. Overhead, among the encrusted girders, something large was following him.

He was sure of that now. Though it stopped when he did, it wasn't his echoes. When he fled beyond the mouth of the bridge, it scuttled to the edge of the dark arch. As he stood still he heard it again, roaming back and forth

restlessly, high in the dark. It was too large for a bird or a cat. For a moment he was sure that it was about to scuttle down the drooling wall at him.

Despite the heat, he locked all the windows. He'd grown used to the sounds of trains, so much so that they often helped him sleep, yet now he wished he lived further away. Though the nights were growing lighter, the arch looked oppressively ominous, a lair. That night every train on the bridge jarred him awake.

In the morning he was in no mood to tolerate Derrick. He'd get the better of him one way or the other—to start with, by speaking to Ward. But Derrick had already seen the station manager, and now Ward wasn't especially sympathetic to Roy; perhaps he felt that his judgement in hiring Derrick was being questioned. "He says his interview went badly because you inhibited him," he said, and when Roy protested "In any case, surely you can put up with him for a couple of weeks. After all, learning to get on with people is part of the job. We must be flexible."

Derrick was that all right, Roy thought furiously: flexible as putty, and as lacking in personality. During the whole of "Our Town Tonight" he and Derrick glared at or ignored each other. When they spoke on the air, it wasn't to each other. Derrick, Roy kept thinking: a tower over a bore—and the name contained 'dreck,' which seemed entirely appropriate. Most of all he resented being reduced to petulance himself. Thank God it was nearly the weekend—except that meant he would have to go home. When he left the bus he walked home the long way, avoiding the bridge. From his gate he glanced at the arch, whose walls were already mossed with dimness, then looked quickly away. If he ignored it, put it out of his mind completely, perhaps nothing would happen. What could happen, for heaven's sake? Later, when an unlit train clanked over the bridge like the dragging of a giant chain in the dark, he realised why the trains had kept him awake: what might their vibrations disturb under the bridge?

Though the night made him uneasy, Saturday was worse. Children kept running through the bridge, screaming to wake the echoes. He watched anxiously until they emerged; the sunlight on the far side of the arch seemed a refuge.

He was growing obsessive, checking and rechecking the locks on all the windows, especially those nearest the bridge. That night he visited friends, and drank too much, and talked about everything that came into his head,

except the bridge. It was waiting for him, mouth open, when he staggered home. Perhaps the racket of his clumsy footsteps had reached the arch, and was echoing faintly.

On Sunday his mouth was parched and rusty, his skull felt like a lump of lead that was being hammered out of shape. He could only sit at the bedroom window and be grateful that the sunlight was dull. Children were shrieking under the bridge. If anything happened there, he had no idea what he would do.

Eventually the street was quiet. The phrases of church bells drifted, interweaving, on the wind. Here came the old man, apparently taking his string bags to church. No: he halted at the bridge and peered up for a while; then, looking dissatisfied but unwilling to linger, he turned away.

Roy had to know. He ran downstairs, though his brain felt as though it were slopping from side to side. "Excuse me—" (damn, he didn't know the old man's name) "er, could I ask what you were looking for?"

"You've been watching me, have you?"

"I've been watching the bridge. I mean, I think something's up there too. I just don't know what it is."

The old man frowned at him, perhaps deciding whether to trust him. Eventually he said "When you hear trains at night, do you ever wonder where they've been? They stop in all sorts of places miles from anywhere in the middle of the night. Suppose something decided to take a ride? Maybe it would get off again if it found somewhere like the place it came from. Sometimes trains stop on the bridge."

"But what is it?" He didn't realise he had raised his voice until he heard a faint echo. "Have you seen it? What does it want?"

"No, I haven't seen it." The old man seemed to resent the question, as though it was absurd or vindictive. "Maybe I've heard it, and that's too much as it is. I just hope it takes another ride. What does it want? Maybe it ran out of—" Surely his next word must have been "food," but it sounded more like "forms."

Without warning he seemed to remember Roy's job. "If you read a bit more you wouldn't need me to tell you," he said angrily, slapping his bagfuls of books. "You want to read instead of serving things up to people and taking them away from books."

Roy couldn't afford to appear resentful. "But since I haven't read them, can't you tell me—" He must be raising his voice, for the echo was growing clearer—and that must have been what made the old man flee. Roy was left gaping after him and wondering how his voice had managed to echo; when a train racketed over the bridge a few minutes later, it seemed to produce no echo at all.

The old man had been worse than useless. Suppose there was something under the bridge: it must be entrapped in the arch. Otherwise, why hadn't it been able to follow Roy beyond the mouth? He stood at his bedroom window, daring a shape to appear. The thing was a coward, and stupid—almost as stupid as he was for believing that anything was there. He must lie down, for his thoughts were cracking apart, floating away. The lullaby of bells for evening mass made him feel relatively safe.

Sleep took him back to the bridge. In the dark he could just make out a halted goods train. Perhaps all the trucks were empty, except for the one from which something bloated and pale was rising. It clambered down, lolling from scrawny legs, and vanished under the bridge, where a bird was nesting. There was a sound less like the cry of a bird than the shriek of air being squeezed out of a body. Now something that looked almost like a bird sat in the nest—but its head was too large, its beak was lopsided, and it had no voice. Nevertheless the bird's returning mate ventured close enough to be seized. After a jump in the continuity, for which Roy was profoundly grateful, he glimpsed a shape that seemed to have lost the power to look like a bird, crawling into the darkest corners of the arch, among cobwebs laden with soot. Now a cat was caught beneath the arch, and screaming; but the shape that clung to the girder afterwards didn't look much like a cat, even before it scuttled back into its corner. Perhaps it needed more substantial food. Roy needn't be afraid, he was awake now and watching the featureless dark of the arch from his bedroom window. Yet he was dreadfully afraid, for he knew that his fear was a beacon that would allow something to reach for him. All at once the walls of his room were bare brick, the corners were masses of sooty cobweb, and out of the darkest corner a top-heavy shape was scuttling.

When he managed to wake, he was intensely grateful to find that it wasn't dark. Though he had the impression that he'd slept for hours, it was still twilight. He wasn't at all refreshed: his body felt odd—feverish, unfamiliar,

exhausted as though by a struggle he couldn't recall. No doubt the nightmare, which had grown out of the old man's ramblings, was to blame.

He switched on the radio to try to rouse himself. What was wrong? They'd mixed up the signature tunes, this ought to be—He stood and gaped, unable to believe what he was hearing. It was Monday, not Sunday at all.

No wonder he felt so odd. He had no time to brood over that, for he was on the air in less than an hour. He was glad to be leaving. The twilight made it appear that the dark of the bridge was seeping towards the house. His perceptions must be disordered, for his movements seemed to echo in the rooms. Even the sound of a bird's claw on the roof tiles made him nervous.

Despite his lateness, he took the long way to the main road. From the top of the bus he watched furry ropes of cloud, orange and red, being drawn past the ends of side streets. Branches clawing at the roof made him start. A small branch must have snapped off, for even when the trees had passed, a restless scraping continued for a while above him.

He'd rarely seen the city streets so deserted. Night was climbing the walls. He was neurotically aware of sounds in the empty streets. Birds fluttered sleepily on pediments, though he couldn't always see them. His footsteps sounded effeminate, panicky, thinned by the emptiness. The builder's scaffolding that clung to the outside of the radio station seemed to turn his echoes even more shrill.

The third-floor studio seemed to be crowded with people, all waiting for him. Ian the producer looked harassed, perhaps imagining an entire show with Derrick alone. Derrick was smirking, bragging his punctuality. Tonight's interviewees—a woman who wrote novels about doctors and nurses in love, the leader of a group of striking undertakers—clearly sensed something was wrong. Well, now nothing was.

Roy was almost glad to see Derrick. Trivial chat might be just what he needed to stabilise his mind; certainly it was all he could manage. Still, the novelist proved to be easy: every question produced an anecdote—her Glasgow childhood, the novel she'd thrown out of the window because it was too like real life, the woman who wrote to her asking to be introduced to the men on whom she based her characters. Roy was happy to listen, happy not to talk, for his voice through the microphone seemed to be echoing.

"—and Mugsy Moore, and Poo-Poo, and Trixie the Oomph." Reading the dedications, Derrick sounded unnervingly serious. "And here's a letter from one of our listeners," he said to Roy without warning, "who wants to know if we aren't speaking to each other."

Had Derrick invented that in a bid for sympathy? "Yes, of course we are," Roy said impatiently. As soon as he'd started the record—his hands on the controls felt unfamiliar and clumsy, he must try to be less irritable—he complained "Something's wrong with the microphone. I'm getting an echo."

"I can't hear anything," Ian said.

"It isn't there now, only when I'm on the air."

Ian and one of the engineers stared through the glass at Roy for a while, then shook their heads. "There's nothing," Ian said through the headphones, though Roy could hear the echo growing worse, trapping his voice amid distortions of itself. When he removed the headphones, the echo was still audible. "If you people listening at home are wondering what's wrong with my voice"—he was growing coldly furious, for Derrick was shaking his head too, looking smug—"we're working on it."

Ian ushered the striking undertaker into the studio. Maybe he would take Roy's mind off the technical problems. And maybe not, for as soon as Roy introduced him, something began to rattle the scaffolding outside the window and squeak its claws or its beak on the glass. "After this next record we'll be talking to him," he said as quickly as he could find his way through echoes.

"What's wrong now?" Ian demanded.

"That." But the tubular framework was still, and the window was otherwise empty. It must have been a bird. No reason for them all to stare at him.

As soon as he came back on the air the sounds began again. Didn't Ian care that the listeners must be wondering what they were? Halfway through introducing the undertaker, Roy turned sharply. Though there wasn't time for anything to dodge out of sight, the window was blank.

That threw him. His words were stumbling among echoes, and he'd forgotten what he meant to say. Hadn't he said it already, before playing the record?

Suddenly, like an understudy seizing his great chance on the night when the star falls ill, Derrick took over. "Some listeners may wonder why we're digging this up, but other people may think that this strike is a grave undertaking..." Roy was too distracted to be appalled, even when Derrick pounced with an anecdote about an old lady whose husband was still awaiting burial. Why, the man was a human vacuum: no personality to be depended on at all.

For the rest of the show, Roy said as little as possible. Short answers echoed less. He suppressed some of the monosyllables he was tempted to use. At last the signature tune was reached. Mopping his forehead theatrically, Derrick opened the window.

Good God, he would let it in! The problems of the show had distracted Roy from thinking, but there was nothing to muffle his panic now. Ian caught his arm. "Roy, if there's anything—" Even if he wanted to help, he was keeping Roy near the open window. Shrugging him off, Roy ran towards the lift.

As he waited, he saw Ian and the engineer stalking away down the corridor, murmuring about him. If he'd offended Ian, that couldn't be helped; he needed to be alone, to think, perhaps to argue himself out of his panic. He dodged into the lift, which resembled a grey windowless telephone box, featureless except for the dogged subtraction of lit numbers. He felt walled in by grey. Never mind, in a minute he would be out in the open, better able to think—

But was he fleeing towards the thing he meant to elude?

The lift gaped at the ground floor. Should he ride it back to the third? Ian and the engineer would have gone down to the car park by now; there would only be Derrick and the open window. The cramped lift made him feel trapped, and he stepped quickly into the deserted foyer.

Beyond the glass doors he could see a section of pavement, which looked oily with sodium light. Around it the tubes of the scaffolding blazed like orange neon. As far as he could judge, the framework was totally still—but what might be waiting silently for him to step beneath? Suddenly the pavement seemed a trap which needed only a footfall to trigger it. He couldn't go out that way.

He was about to press the button to call the lift when he saw that the lit numbers were already counting down. For a moment—he didn't know why

—he might have fled out of the building, had he been able. He was trapped between the lurid stage of pavement and the inexorable descent of the lift. By the time the lift doors squeaked open, his palms were stinging with sweat. But the figure that stumbled out of the lift, hindered a little by his ill-fitting clothes, was Derrick. Roy could never have expected to be so glad to see him. Hastily, before he could lose his nerve, he pulled open the glass doors, only to find that he was still unable to step beneath the scaffolding. Derrick went first, his footsteps echoing in the deserted street. When nothing happened, Roy managed to follow. The glass doors snapped locked behind him.

Though the sodium glare was painfully bright, at least it showed that the scaffolding was empty. He could hear nothing overhead. Even his footsteps sounded less panicky now; it was Derrick's that were distorted, thinned and hasty. Never mind, Derrick's hurry was all to the good, whatever its cause; it would take them to the less deserted streets all the more quickly.

Shadows counted their paces. Five paces beyond each lamp their shadows drew ahead of them and grew as dark as they could, then pivoted around their feet and paled before the next lamp. He was still nervous, for he kept peering at the shadows—but how could he expect them not to be distorted? If the shadows were bothering him, he'd have some relief from them before long, for ahead there was a stretch of road where several lamps weren't working. He wished he were less alone with his fears. He wished Derrick would speak.

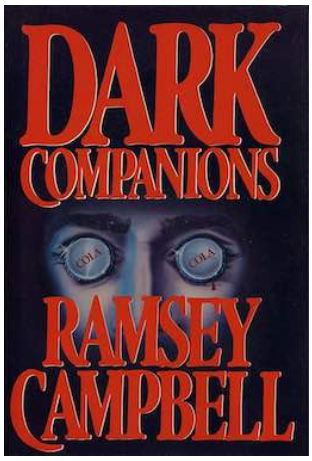
Perhaps that thought halted him where the shadows were clearest, to gaze at them in dismay.

His shadow wasn't unreasonably distorted. That was exactly the trouble. Without warning he was back in his nightmare, with no chance of awakening. He remembered that the thing in the nightmare had had no voice. No, Roy's shadow wasn't especially distorted—but beside it, produced by the same lamp, Derrick's shadow was.

Above all he mustn't panic; his nightmare had told him so. Perhaps he had a chance, for he'd halted several lamps short of the darkness. If he could just retreat towards the studio without breaking into a run, perhaps he would be safe. If he could bang on the glass doors without losing control, mightn't the caretaker be in time?

The worst thing he could do was glance aside. He mustn't see what was casting the shadow, which showed how the scrawny limbs beneath the bloated stomach were struggling free of the ill-fitting clothes. Though his whole body was trembling—for the face of the shadow had puckered and was reaching sideways towards him, off the head—he began, slower than a nightmare, to turn away.

The Puppets



"*The Puppets* returns to the failed relationship that's at the heart of *Napier Court*. One crucial disagreement with Rosemary (the real girl) was over horror fiction, which she didn't care for, not least mine. Dentistry represents or at least is substituted for it in this tale, and the village pageant is an objective correlative for a spectacle Rosemary coaxed out of me, perhaps because she thought it was remote from horror. At a performance in Hoylake of Debussy's Prélude de l'Après-Midi d'un Faune she [...] persuaded me to read Mallarmé's poem as a preamble, in French and then in English, to the hapless audience. When at last I'd struggled through the original in an accent worthy of Inspector Clouseau I looked up to see the mayor of Hoylake on the front row, clutching his head in his hands. Afterwards, having fortified himself with at least one glass of wine, he described my performance as a tour de force. His accent was better than mine had been. Still, I don't waste material if I can avoid doing so, and a decade later the memory was nothing but fun. According to my diary the writing of the tale (then known as *Curtain Call*) was pretty hesitant, stretching from 29th June 1978 to 8th July. On one day, admittedly with a hangover, I wrote just a single paragraph."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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That was the summer when I thought I could see everything. Because I knew I'd passed to go to University, my focus wasn't narrowed down to textbooks. More than that, I had what I thought I wanted—which shows that I wasn't seeing very clearly, after all.

Yet I was seeing so much for the first time: how the shadow of the church spire made the village square into a sundial (ten o'clock at Millie's Woollens, eleven at the Acorn, just as the bar was opening); how the campers' tents beside Delamere Forest resembled orange wedges of processed cheese; the workmen's sentry box guarding the pit outside the post office, where they were supposed to be improving the telephone exchange, and the way passersby both frowned at the intrusion and muttered "About time." Even Mr Ince's Punch and Judy show seemed new to me, a childhood delight it would do me no harm to recapture. Again I was wrong: in the end, horribly so.

In its season, Mr Ince's little theatre always stood beneath a clump of trees at the edge of the village green. There seemed hardly to be room in the

striped box for Mr Ince and his sharp elbows, which protruded when he walked. The puppets nodded and pecked and squabbled like birds on a window ledge; sometimes their ledge was so crowded with movement that you might have thought he had more than two hands.

It was his skill that kept me watching. Sometimes on my way home past his cottage, I'd seen him carving his figures with infinite care; now I saw that care in the gestures of their tiny hands, the birdlike cocking of their heads, the timing of their actions. Perhaps at midsummer, when he went travelling, his audiences appreciated his skill.

Of course I liked to think of myself as the only intelligent sensitive person in a village of dullards—or almost the only one. Was she my real reason for loitering near the theatre? Beyond the clump of trees, through the gap in the buildings of the village square, I might, if I was lucky, watch her: Rebecca.

Sometimes she appeared at the window of her parents' antique shop. Sometimes I only thought I glimpsed her among the elaborate furniture, the delicate clocks, the plates like circular miniatures. When she came out of the shop—the frills of her unfashionably long skirts and petticoats billowing, her blonde hair streaming—it was as though a porcelain figure had come to life.

I'd wanted her for years. Perhaps when I was younger I might have approached her, but brooding over the possibility had made me worse and worse. Years at a boys' school had driven me further into myself. There were girls to be had in the village, despite their giggling pretence of aloofness, but they weren't worth even the meagre effort they required. I could only lie in bed with an illusion of Rebecca and feel feverish with guilt afterwards. No doubt those nights left me even less prepared for the day she came to the house.

My father was a dentist; my mother, his anaesthetist. They had brought me up to take care of my teeth, and though he fished inside my mouth with a mirror twice a year, I never needed treatment. Often I imagined what he did with his hooks and drills and pliers, especially when his victim was someone I didn't like. I felt smug when I saw the victims in the waiting-room, chatting bravely or louring over spineless magazines.

One morning quite early in my long holiday I finished a book by Camus. When I'd stared at the forested horizon for a while, depressing myself with

thoughts of suffering, I went downstairs. I glanced into the waiting-room, past the stand whose curlicues were bare of coats, and there was Rebecca.

At once I saw how little reassurance there was in the framed Edwardian comic postcards on the walls, the simian chatter of a radio announcer and his records. Only I could comfort her, for she was alone—and all I could do was dodge out of sight, afraid that she would catch me watching.

I patrolled the hallway several times before I managed to enter. "Hello," I mumbled, but she seemed not to hear me; I had scarcely heard myself. My momentum carried me to the magazine table, where at least I needn't face her while I pretended to look for something to read.

Impulsively I grabbed the least dog-eared of the magazines and swung round. I wasn't fast enough, for my face was already a mask that must be blazing visibly, my stiff tongue thrust painfully against my bottom teeth. I could only poke the magazine towards her while slowly, very slowly, she looked up.

Her smile almost overbalanced me. "Oh, no thank you," she said, and let her hand stray towards a magazine that lay abandoned at her feet.

Though my face was puffing up with embarrassment, I managed to read the title: *Musical Times*. "Do you like music?" I stammered, and wished my gaping mouth were even larger, for then I might swallow myself.

"Very much. I play a little. I play the violin."

"Oh, was that you?" Perhaps she had glimpsed me dawdling past her house and gawping at the melodies beyond the trees, thinking that someone besides myself appreciated good music. I had never dreamed that Rebecca herself had been playing.

"Can I be heard all over the village?" She seemed dismayed. "Oh, you heard me as you were passing. I'm afraid I don't play very well—I wish I had the courage to perform for an audience, then I might make myself play better."

"Why, you play—" 'Marvellously, beautifully, magnificently' might expose my feelings about her too soon. "You play quite well," I said.

"Thank you very much." I thought she must be thanking me for distracting her. "Are you very knowledgeable about music?"

"Oh, yes." At once I wished I hadn't said that, but if I had denied it my compliment would have been rendered meaningless. "I particularly like Strauss—Richard Strauss, obviously. And Mozart, of course. And Beethoven, especially Beethoven," I babbled. "Beethoven is—" God knows what I might have said if my father hadn't taken Rebecca away.

He'd saved me from one kind of agony only to afflict me with worse. When the drill began, my hands became spastic claws which struggled to cover my ears. Good God, what was he doing to her? I stumbled about the house like a parody of an expectant father outside a delivery room.

When she emerged she looked as bad as I'd feared. Her face was white as china, and I had the impression that she was barely able to walk. "Come and sit down," I blurted, not minding my father's surprised but relieved grin behind her: I was developing—not before time, he seemed to say. "Would you like some tea or something?" I said.

"No, thank you. I must get home," she said, nervous as Cinderella.

Just in time I realised that I had another chance. I was tempted not to take it, but my father was watching. "I'd better see you home," I said.

Halfway down the hedged path which led, after several diversions, to the green, she stumbled and I dared to take her arm. The leaves of the hedges were plated with light and pricked with rainbows from last night's rain; everything smelled moist and growing. I was too entranced by walking with Rebecca to speak.

The path bent sharply around Mr Ince's garden. Beyond the clipped lawn and the birdbath on its pedestal, the trees from which he carved his puppets crowded about the cottage. I hadn't realised how thick they had grown; I couldn't even see the shed in which he kept the barrow on which he wheeled his theatre, the ramshackle van he used for longer tours. Mr Ince stood still as a tree before the cottage; birds were pecking crumbs from his hands, the sleeves of his old jacket looked stained with droppings. Rebecca glanced aside, wrinkling her nose.

We'd reached the square, and I had let go of her arm as soon as we'd come in sight of people, before I realised that if we were to meet again except by chance, I would have to speak. Perhaps I would summon up the courage on the way to her house—but she halted in front of the antique shop. "Thank you so much," she said.

"I thought you said you were going home."

"I meant here." As I turned away, detesting my bashfulness, she said "Do you go to many concerts?"

"Yes, in Manchester. Sometimes in Liverpool." I was edging away from her, not caring how rude I seemed, when suddenly I wondered if she was as glad to find someone like herself as I had been. Staring anywhere but at her, I mumbled "Would you like to go to one sometime?"

"Well, I haven't much spare time. I'm making costumes for the pageant." A good excuse, I thought bitterly, walking away. "But I'd love to go," she said. "Will you find out what's on and tell me tomorrow?"

I would have dashed home at once and back to the shop with the information, except that it might have been fatal to show how I felt. For hours I wandered around the outskirts of the village, blinded by my good luck. When I reached home I didn't mind my parents' knowing grins. It was only when I woke next morning that I wondered how all this could possibly be happening to me.

But we went to a concert in Manchester, and that was only the beginning. Soon we were strolling hand in hand through the village, and I hoped everyone noticed. Everything—the church rummage sales where I bought Rabelais and Boccaccio, afternoon teas in Mrs Winder's Olde English Tea Shoppe, the Sunday cricket match in which our team beat the next village—was our backdrop. One evening we sat beside the green, which was spread with a sheet of moonlight, and told each other our dreams. Both of us dreamed of touring the world, she to play for audiences, I because I was famished for newness. After that, even when I wasn't with her, I felt drugged by our closeness.

Our first disagreement—quite minor, it seemed at the time—was about Mr Ince. That evening I'd played her a record of Mahler's Third. As we strolled towards her house, we were content to be quiet together for a while. The hedges that walled the path were quivering in breezes; overhead, clouds flooded by. The dimness merged our surroundings like a spoiled painting, and I had almost passed Mr Ince's cottage before I saw the theatre.

Though she resisted, I turned back. The striped booth faced the cottage; I had to crane over the hedge to distinguish the stage. My first hallucinatory

glimpse had been accurate. On the dark stage, beneath miniature curtains that fluttered in the wind, Punch and Judy were performing.

They weren't squabbling now. Indeed, they made no sound at all. They seemed to be dancing: bowing to each other, twirling gracefully though their flapping costumes tugged at them, retreating a few precise steps then gliding together again. Perhaps the dimness helped smooth their movements, made them appear more lifelike, as it did their faces. Their only audience was the trees that loomed above the cottage, shifting restlessly and hissing, dissatisfied giants.

"Come on, Jim," Rebecca was murmuring urgently. "I should be home by now."

"Wait just a minute." There was some aspect of the pirouetting figures I wanted to define. Once I'd seen Mr Ince gazing wistfully at birds that splashed in the birdbath, then sailed away on the wind. Did he wish he could create movements as tiny and perfect as theirs? But tonight's rehearsal didn't look much like that; in an obscure way I was reminded of a dance of trees.

"I'm going, Jim. We've been staying out too late. My parents will be angry again."

Again? It was the first I'd heard of it, and it seemed far less important than the puppets that were dancing just for us. "You want to watch this, don't you?"

"No, I don't." She pulled away violently. She must be frightened of her parents, surely—not of the puppets. But good God, we were adults: I was eighteen, she was twenty.

I caught up with her in the middle of the green. She was very tense; for a moment I thought she would flinch away. Instead she said in a tone which offered both consolation and, vulnerably, trust: "I want you to come home tomorrow night and hear me play."

By the next evening I was nervous. Until recently I'd hardly noticed her parents. Now I sometimes encountered them when I met Rebecca at their shop, where they were guardedly polite to me; I was sure they didn't like me very much. I cut myself while shaving, and had to waste five minutes dabbing at myself. If I had visited the antique shop in that state, heaven knows what I would have broken.

Mr Ince was sitting in a homemade chair as I hurried past his garden. He was staring into the entangled dimness beneath the trees. A large figure he had begun to carve lay abandoned at his feet. Stumps of branches protruded from the faceless head, like boils.

I was shocked by how much he had aged. Had this been a gradual process that I'd been too preoccupied to notice? He looked drained, exhausted, past caring about the large figure he had agreed to carve for the pageant. My passing must have roused him, for he swayed to his feet and dragged chair and figure into the cottage, beneath the dark wings of the trees.

When I reached Rebecca's my carefully combed hair was snatching at my face, my armpits were prickly from hurrying. Her father gazed at me as though I were a salesman whose unwelcomeness he was too polite to show. He said nothing as he ushered me down the oak-panelled hall, which was barnacled with horse brasses.

If he and his wife tried to make me feel at home, in the large stony room where the panels of the walls were as heavy and dark as the piano, it was only for the sake of Rebecca, whose strain was painfully apparent. She seemed afraid to venture near me—because of her parents or because, like an examiner, I'd come to hear her play? She wore a severe black dress, a musician's uniform. Together with everything else, it robbed me of all sense of the times we'd shared.

Eventually her father sat down at the piano. As soon as she tucked the violin beneath her chin she seemed to forget everything except the technical problems of the music. It was as though she and her father were helping each other with tasks set by Mozart and Beethoven; I felt she would never be enough at her ease to let the music flow. Of course, at the end of each piece I applauded wildly.

I drank a lot of sherry in an attempt to calm my nerves; her mother's lips grew more pursed each time she refilled my glass. Mostly to show that I was quite at home, I sang fragments of Verdi in the bathroom, and perhaps that prompted Rebecca's mother to ask me "What are you doing in the pageant?"

Though Rebecca had tried to coax me into participating, I'd managed to avoid the whole thing, in which her parents were heavily involved. "I hadn't really thought," I mumbled.

"We have a song for you." She sat waiting for me to stand up and take the music from her. "Rebecca will accompany you."

"I thought you didn't like to play for audiences," I said to Rebecca.

There was an appalled and wounded silence, which I tried to ignore by glaring at the music, an Elizabethan ballad. "Shall I play it for you?" Rebecca said.

"Can't he sight-read?" Her father made me sound no longer worth noticing. She played the melody for me, and I managed to follow it through the staves. "Now you sing it, James," her mother said.

Could she tell I disliked my full name, because it made me sound like a butler? When at last I finished, and the throbbing of my red-hot face began to lessen, she said "You'll need a lot of practice." She sounded almost accusing, though I had never claimed to be a musician.

After an awkward half hour, during which Rebecca's parents and I confirmed we had nothing in common, I said that I thought I'd better go. "Oh, Rebecca is going to be very busy. She may not see you before the pageant. She'll need to make you a costume." To Rebecca, with an emphasis I thought vindictive, she said "I've invited Alan for his fitting tomorrow. I expect you'll want him to stay for dinner."

Though Rebecca tried to say goodbye at the door, I made her walk along the tree-lined drive. As soon as we were out of earshot of the house I demanded "Who's Alan?"

"Just the son of some friends of theirs." She halted me and squeezed my hand. "They're trying to match us, but you mustn't worry. He and I are friends, that's all. It's you I want." Gripping my shoulders hard and gazing into my eyes, she said "I've always done what they want, but not over this."

Her lingering kiss convinced me more than her words, yet before I reached home I was wondering how, if she had always obeyed her parents, she could be sure of changing now. Was love enough? I felt like Mr Ince's cottage, brooding darkly in its cage of trees.

I saw little of her during the next week, though her mother spent five minutes brusquely measuring me in the shop. If her parents answered the phone, she was in the bath, or too busy to be called, or not at home. Once she suggested that I could sit with her while she worked, but that would have entailed suffering her parents. I preferred to go to Liverpool or

Manchester; somehow the violence I felt towards her parents seemed appropriate to city streets.

The night before the pageant, her mother summoned me to try on my costume. Since Rebecca was watching eagerly, I had to conceal my dismay. In the doublet and hose I felt less like an actor than a transvestite. The following day I felt even worse.

Almost the whole of the village was there, either trudging in procession towards the green or lining the square and the main street to watch. Perhaps all this was meant to celebrate the village anniversary, yet I suspected the pageant of trying to show that the village was an enclave of craftsmanship and culture, not just the site of the fair that would be opening next week.

Rebecca clearly enjoyed wearing her crinoline. I thought of how seldom I'd touched her, how she seemed happiest concealing her body. Alan, a burly fellow several years older than I, was wearing doublet and hose. Worse still, her mother had made us walk together behind Rebecca, like rival suitors. His round face resembled a football I would have loved to kick.

When we took our places on the green, and he began to declaim an Elizabethan description of the village, I realised that he belonged to the village repertory company. No wonder he was so good at posing, I thought bitterly: no wonder he looked so convincing in drag. He was rewarded with an outburst of applause—and then it was my turn.

Though at least I had Rebecca, whereas he had been alone, I didn't do as well. I'd been practising last night and the whole of this morning, but her father had refused to let me rehearse with her; he said it would be less genuine. Did he want me to embarrass her? When I sang, my voice in the middle of the green sounded thinner than a bird's. Children tittered, at me or at Rebecca, who was strumming her violin like a lute.

At the end, which was received by a drizzle of applause, Rebecca told me "You were super. So were you," she said to Alan, and doled out a kiss to each of us.

I was furious. I hardly spoke to her for the rest of the day, except to complain that the pageant was pretentious, trivial, a waste of time. When the festivities began, I drank pint after pint of beer from the table which Mr Blundell of the Acorn kept replenishing; then I loitered near Alan in the hope that he would say something to which I could take exception, so that I

could knock him down. When at last I grew tired of loitering, I found that Rebecca had gone.

I wandered until it grew dark. Trudging home, I thought for a moment that Mr Ince had come back; as usual, he'd gone touring in his van once the fair was due on the green. No, he must still be away, for the cottage was dark and grass sprawled over the garden path—but then what had I heard in the cottage? It had sounded rather like brooms falling over in a cupboard, then falling again. No doubt branches were tapping the cottage; I really didn't care.

Next morning, when my head had stopped drumming savagely, I went to the shop to apologise to Rebecca, while her parents looked forbidding in the background. That night at the fair she refused to go on most of the rides, and when I persuaded her into a dodgem car she felt withdrawn, stony within the clasp of my arm. As I walked her home I nagged her until she agreed to go to a concert in Manchester the following week.

At least she was grateful for the concert. It was Beethoven's Ninth; I'd learned she was happiest with familiar things, though I refused to believe that summed her up. The applause was so rapturous that it provoked an encore, and we missed the train.

I couldn't see that it mattered; there would be another in less than an hour. I tried to keep her occupied on a bare bench as far as possible from the sullen yellowish lights, but she kept starting up to peer along the line, a couple of sketched gleams embedded in sooty darkness. Overhead a large metallic voice announced trains to places I'd never heard of. Could she hear other voices, demanding what she meant by coming home so late? "They'll have to get used to it eventually," I said.

"Why will they have to?"

"Because you're an adult," I said incredulously. "You can't let them tell you what to do."

"Is it adult to behave irresponsibly?"

I thought she was growing pompous. Besides, we were wasting time when we could be necking. "If you always did what they wanted," I pointed out, "you'd never see me again."

"I know that." She seemed close to tears. All at once I saw how to cheer her up and clear the way for myself. "Look," I said, "if they bother you so

much, why don't you move away and get a job?"

"A job?" She made it sound insulting. "I don't want a job. I'm only helping in the shop to keep my parents happy." She added more gently "When I'm married I'll want to devote my time to my music."

That stopped me. Were we planning marriage all of a sudden? She'd said she would resist her parents' choice; who else could she mean except me? I wasn't ready to discuss marriage—and besides, I'd realised at last that her dream of seeing the world was nothing but a dream; Manchester was about as far as she cared to venture.

The romantic mood seemed worth preserving. "You know, I'd wanted to meet you for years," I said. "I could never work out how to, until that day you had to come for treatment. And then I'll bet I suffered more than you did. I never told you," I laughed, feeling that a secret ought to bring us closer together, "but when someone I didn't like was in there, I used to stand outside and listen to the drill."

When she pulled away from me and hurried to the edge of the platform, I thought she was going to vomit, but she was only hoping for the train. Nevertheless she looked sickened when I tried to coax her back to the bench. On the train she tolerated my embrace, but shook her head dismally when I demanded what was wrong. Her parents were waiting on the lit stage of the porch, and I left her at the gate; I'd had enough.

I didn't see her for days. I yearned to, yet I was afraid she might insist on talking marriage; that would force me to ponder our relationship, which I didn't want to do. Why couldn't we just enjoy it, forget our differences and enjoy each other as we had at first? If I'd thought beyond that, I would have had to wonder how, since she insisted on staying at home, we could stay together once I went to University.

As I wandered brooding around the village, I saw Mr Ince. He was pushing his barrow, which was laden with the theatre, towards the green, but it looked almost as though the barrow was dragging him. Not only his elbows but the rest of his bones appeared ready to tear his skin, which resembled tissue paper. Now that the workmen's booth had gone from outside the post office, there was nothing to take the children away from Mr Ince's show, but they may have been as distressed by the performance as I was: Punch and Judy seemed to drag themselves limping along their ledge, their heads nodding as if they were senile, their limbs moving hardly at all.

The following day I received the card. Though the envelope bore Rebecca's return address, it was not in her handwriting. I knew instinctively that the sharp severe letters were her mother's. When I made myself tear open the flap, I found a printed invitation to Rebecca's twenty-first birthday.

I hadn't realised it was so close. What other secrets had she kept from me? I replied that of course I would come, and rushed to Manchester to buy her a present that I hoped would let us share a happy memory: a recording of Beethoven's Ninth.

The birthday reception was at the country club, a converted mansion amid fields overlooked that night by flocks of stars. A uniformed girl took my coat, a liveried usher led me to the party, and Rebecca's mother tried to gain possession of my present. I wanted to hand it to Rebecca, who was surrounded by expensive-looking friends, but her mother said firmly "Leave it on the table."

A long table laden with presents stood against one wall. I stared for a while in dismay; then, remembering the memory it was supposed to evoke, I dumped the record on the table and made in despair for the bar. The table already bore a complete set of Beethoven's symphonies.

I managed to kiss Rebecca before her mother steered her away. For a while I hung about on the edge of conversations, listening as Rebecca's friends agreed what was good (hanging, the birch, repatriation) and bad (unions, comprehensive education, the state of the world outside the village). What upset me most was that her young friends, Alan and the rest, sounded exactly like their elders. I don't know who or what provoked me to say "Why don't you just build a wall around the village?"

"It strikes me you don't care much for our village," Rebecca's father said. "You seem happiest when you're away from it. Like that fellow Ince."

"Don't mention him," his wife said. "Letting us down like that over the pageant, not even bothering to stay."

"He wants locking up," Alan said. "God only knows what he thinks he's doing—I don't think he knows himself. I had a look at his show today. No wonder people are keeping their children away. It isn't entertainment, it's monstrous."

Before I could ask him what he was talking about, Rebecca said "He's so restless. All that travelling. Like a gypsy." She wrinkled her nose as though

at a bad smell.

"What's wrong with gypsies?" I managed not to blurt, restraining myself not only because I could imagine the sort of reply she would make but because I'd suddenly realised the trap that had been set for me. Her parents had wanted her to see how out of place I was; perhaps they'd hoped I would make a scene to estrange her once and for all. Instead I drank and smiled and nodded, and cursed what I thought was my cowardice.

In the morning I had a mission: to save Rebecca from herself, from the attitudes of her parents and friends. She couldn't be as ingrown as they were, not yet; otherwise, how could she appreciate Beethoven's Ninth? But I couldn't reach her all day, and next morning a notice in the antique shop said that they had gone on holiday for two weeks.

Had her parents arranged this swiftly, or was it another secret she had kept from me? My anger couldn't feed on itself for more than a couple of days; before the week was over I felt almost guiltily free, able to do things I wanted to do without thinking of Rebecca. I walked all day through the spread countryside, towards a promise of hills that I never quite reached, and my mind grew attuned to the pace of the clouds. I stood beneath an oak in Delamere Forest and watched a storm fill, then burst, the sky.

The day after she returned, my nervousness infuriated me. I keyed myself up to braving the shop and her parents, only to find that they hadn't opened the shop. Whenever I called her house the phone was engaged, tooting monotonously. There was nothing for it but to go to the house.

I couldn't go in. I'd used up all my courage in braving the shop. I paced back and forth outside the gates, and grimaced furiously at myself in the dark. Wind rushed down the drive, trying to shoulder me away; along the drive, trees roared at me. Twice I strode halfway up the drive before I faltered.

I was still patrolling, almost suffocated by self-disgust, when the porch lit —like a refrigerator, I thought distractedly—and Rebecca emerged. I dodged out of sight, back towards the village. She was alone, and looked determined; perhaps she was going to my house.

I appeared from a lane. "Oh, hello," I said. "I didn't know you were back. I've been walking."

Was her start of pleasure or dismay? She didn't sound as glad to see me as I thought she should, but didn't resist when I took her hand. "Where are you going?" I said.

"Walking, like you."

Perhaps that was a riposte; I thought it best to gain an advantage. "Did you like your record?"

"Yes, very much." But I'd expected her at least to squeeze my hand. Surely she must be grateful not to be alone on the dark road; shouldn't I make the most of her gratitude? But when we reached the square I had to say "You didn't tell me you were going on holiday."

"No." Her voice sounded as though it was trying to hide in the blustery wind.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because of the way I felt." Her hand jerked in mine. "Don't make me worse."

I hurried her past the antique shop, before I could grow too irritable to keep quiet, towards the green. The night we'd sat there, we had been closest. Perhaps the muted glow of the grass would calm us now.

Was it the tension between us that made the place seem too vivid? Large bruises blackened the green where the rides of the fair had stood. Around them the sparse grass looked oily with traces of rain. The glimmering blades were lurid as green wires, and when I gazed at them they seemed to flicker like dying neon. There was no peace here, for in the clump of trees at the edge of the green, someone was croaking.

Should I have guided Rebecca away, since she was growing more tense? Ultimately it would have made no difference between us. I crept towards the trees, but faltered before she did, my hand tightening inadvertently on hers. In the dark beneath the trees, Mr Ince was standing upright in a coffin.

Of course it was the theatre. The back of the stage, which concealed him from the audience, was gone. His head appeared above the ledge, dwarfing the performers. Though the puppets were croaking at each other as they nodded back and forth, in the dimness his mouth seemed not to be moving. Only his eyes rolled in their sockets like marbles in a fairground mask, watching the puppets.

Rebecca was trying to drag me away, but I wanted to hear what the voices were saying, all the more so since they sounded vicious almost to the point of incoherence. I could make out some of Judy's phrases now, though they seemed to ebb and flow like wind in trees: "...living like an animal... nobody to look after you... can't look after yourself..." The croaking rose almost to a shriek. "...might as well dig yourself a hole and live in it... that's where you're going anyway... deep in the dirt..."

I might have heard more if Rebecca hadn't held me back. Was he repeating accusations that had been levelled at him? I couldn't see how, since he had always lived alone. Was part of him accusing himself? "Come on," I said irritably to Rebecca, "don't be stupid. Nothing's going to hurt you."

"No, I won't." Her voice was so cold that it stopped me. "You watch by yourself if you want to. I don't enjoy watching people suffering."

"What do you mean by that?"

Her tone had already made it clear. "You told me how you enjoy listening to people in your father's surgery."

I thought this ridiculously unfair, so much so that I followed her away from the green. "Well, so would you," I said.

"No, I would not. Perhaps I was brought up differently."

"Yes, well," I said ominously, "maybe you'd better leave your parents out of this."

"Don't you dare say anything against my parents."

I felt possessed by an atrociously banal script. "Oh, don't they ever say anything against me?"

"Stop it. Let's talk about something else. I don't know what," she said miserably.

We were outside the antique shop; I was tempted to kick in the window. "I want to hear what they said," I persisted. "Go on. Go on, let's hear it."

"All right, you shall hear. The way I feel now, it doesn't matter." She was staring into the dim maze of antiques. "They say you're not like them or my friends. They say you've never tried to get to know them, and that you're a drunkard, and that you'd make me go out to work." As though to drive me away for good she added defiantly "And they think you're probably a sadist."

I hadn't fully realised that she must have told them everything when I snarled "If their opinion means so much to you, you'd better go to Alan."

"I was on my way to see him when I met you." When I froze, she added dully "At least I feel peaceful with him."

"Well," I said and wondered momentarily if I would be able to say anything so final, "you'd better piss off then, hadn't you?"

She gazed at me, then fled sobbing. I managed to leave the antique shop without committing any of the crimes that were seething in my head. As I stalked towards the green, I thought bitterly that the Punch and Judy show summed up our relationship. I was ready to enjoy it on that level, but the clump of trees was deserted. No doubt the creaking on the hedged path was Mr Ince's barrow. As I passed his cottage he was stumbling in, and for a moment I thought two birds were riding on his shoulders—but no wonder my perceptions were disordered.

I spent the next day brooding over how much of the fault was mine. If I hadn't sworn at her, would she have run away? During my last few days in the village, I managed occasionally not to brood; there was packing to be done before I left for University, trees to be kicked in Delamere Forest, a whole string of curses it took me a quarter of an hour to shout one afternoon amid the fields, a kind of exorcism that didn't quite work. All week I avoided the village square. When I had to pass near it, I turned my face away.

Yet I was realising that our relationship had been a bad mistake. That was why, on the night before I left, I strolled past Rebecca's house: to prove that I could. Beyond the ranks of trees her father was pounding the piano, a dark oppressive sound. I was turning away when Rebecca's violin began to sing. It sounded far more inspired than before.

I wasn't quite adjusted after all. How dare she forget me so easily? Gusts of wind helped me storm towards the village; trees woke shouting, one after the other, beside the road. By the time I reached the square I was determined to speak to her.

Wind slammed the door of the telephone booth for me, and ruffled the directory. Had the wind also interfered with the line, or had the workmen left a fault? I couldn't rouse Rebecca's phone; beyond static vague as wind

there was only a squabbling of faint squeaky voices. "Hello? Hello?" I demanded, and the voices seemed to parrot my words.

When I stepped out of the box I was free of Rebecca. Speaking to her could only have prolonged the unpleasantness. I gazed round the square, at the antique shop cramped by the other cramped buildings. I was free of the village too. Wind soared across the fields.

As I crossed the green, the wind made me feel I was sailing. Tomorrow I would be somewhere new. The clump of trees at the edge of the green lashed convulsively back and forth; I thought of a bird caught by the tail, unable to fly. Nothing stood among the trees.

The hedges were rocking, trying to erase the path with splashes of thicker dimness. The leaves sounded like rain, and seemed to scintillate like a million fragments of breaking glass. Large bluish patches raced through the clouds. Beyond the fields I thought I heard Delamere Forest, a deafening choir made faint by distance.

As I reached Mr Ince's cottage, the sky was clearing. Nevertheless I almost passed by, having observed casually that the trees were creaking, the grass of the unkempt garden was hissing. Had his tour exhausted him that he'd let the grass grow so long? Why, he had even left the theatre standing beside the garden path—wedged there, as far as I could see, by a couple of large stones.

The theatre wasn't deserted. Though there was no sign of Mr Ince within the proscenium—I craned over the hedge, which pushed and clawed at me—Punch and Judy were onstage. Were they nailed to the ledge and moving in the wind? Certainly their nodding and gesturing looked lifeless, all the more so when I made out that the paint of their faces and fixed eyes was peeling, yet I had a hallucinatory impression that they were actually fighting the wind. Apart from the rattle of wooden limbs on the ledge, they made no sound.

I was still peering, determined to make out exactly what I was seeing, when the wind dropped and the figures continued to move.

Perhaps there was still an imperceptible breeze; it wouldn't take much to make the figures totter and nod. But how could a breeze make Punch's cap writhe while failing to stir the miniature curtains? A moment later the edge of the cap gaped, and a snail crawled out down the face, leaving its trail

across one flaking eye. The snail dangled from the set lips like a lolling tongue, then fell.

As I recoiled, a gust of wind rushed over the hedge and hurled the theatre down so violently that the frame collapsed, leaving a canvas shape flattened on the grass. Above the wind I heard something, two things, fleeing through the long grass and scrabbling past the door of the cottage, which I now saw was open.

I should have fled, and then the village would have no hold on me, not even when I wake at four in the morning. But I was determined to find out what was happening—not least because Rebecca would never have let me.

I opened the gate, which had to be lifted on its crumbling hinges, and ventured up the path. Cold wet grass spilled over my ankles. A tree root bulged the path, a swollen muscle beneath cracked stone skin. The trees seemed to have closed even more oppressively about the cottage; I was unable to distinguish them from its walls.

I could see nothing through the small blackened windows. Though the entire cottage seemed to be creaking—no doubt that was the tossing of trees overhead—I made myself go to the door. It was stuck ajar, but when I pushed it, it swung wide.

It opened directly into a room. On the bare stone floor, beside a low table, Mr Ince sat with his back to me, his legs splayed straight out before him, his hands gripping his thighs. He was facing a cold fireplace. Though the door had banged against the wall, he didn't stir.

Perhaps it was concern for him that made me enter, but still I was nervous enough to tiptoe quickly, ready to flee. Before I reached him I glimpsed the conditions under which he had been living—for how long? Both his clothes and the table were spattered with mouldy food; the fireplace and the surrounding wall seemed to be trembling with soot; sagging wallpaper revealed cracks in the walls like the bulging crack in the path. Then I saw his face.

Was he alive? Barely, perhaps, but I hoped not when I realised why his face was more visible than the rest of the room; it was patchily whitish, like an old tree. How could he bear that if he were conscious? Still, that wasn't why I was backing away, too panicky to realise that I was retreating from the

door. Two small things had crawled rattling from his pockets and were tugging, like terrified children, at his hands.

It was only wind that slammed the door, but I flinched back still farther. Perhaps the same wind moved Mr Ince; perhaps I didn't really see his whitish mouth grimace in a parody of senile impatience—but he fell forward on his hands, splintering the objects within them.

My brain felt like a lump of metal. I couldn't grasp what was happening; I knew only that I had to get out of that room, from which the crowd of trees seemed to have drained all but a glimmer of light. Certainly the room was too dark for me to be sure that Mr Ince had swayed upright again, that his arms were reaching out bundles that moved spasmodically. Nevertheless I grabbed a poker, which felt rotten with rust, from beside the fireplace before making for the door.

Did Mr Ince stagger to his feet? Were his eyes gleaming like those boils of sap that sometimes swell on trees? Amid the roar of foliage I thought something responded to his glare: something in a cupboard near the door. It sounded large and uncompleted, no longer much like falling brooms.

Perhaps the cottage door was wedged shut now. I fled to the farthest window and smashed the grimy pane. Panic helped me clamber through without wasting time in glancing back. As I tore myself free of a shard of glass, I thought I glimpsed a moist object swaying stiffly and laboriously out of the cupboard and across the room.

Next morning, after a sleepless night that seemed alive with creaking, I left home. A week later my mother's first letter gave me the news that Mr Ince's cottage had burned down. The villagers thought he must have been careless with the fire; I suspected vandals might have seen the broken window. In any case I was glad, as glad as I could be while I was still so nervous. I hoped the trees had been destroyed too—for as I'd fled past the eager tree root and the sprawled theatre, I was sure that the branches had begun to twitch like the web of a spider robbed of its prey.

The Ways Of Chaos

The Ways Of Chaos is Ramsey's contribution to *Ghor, Kin-Slayer*, a collaborative continuation of a single chapter by Robert E. Howard, which was posthumously released in serialised form by a further sixteen authors through the fanzine *Fantasy Crossroads*. The main character, Ghor, is abandoned by humanity due to a deformity and adopted by a wolf pack. Later rejoining humanity, his lupine upbringing clashes—both metaphorically and literally—with his uneasy humanity.

Since this work is the fourteenth part of a collaborative serial, it is difficult to make clear the story so far. Indeed, Campbell's chapter is inextricably linked to his predecessors ideas of overall plot and characterisation, though Campbell quickly takes us to a new setting. With deft touches of horror accenting the narrative, *The Ways Of Chaos* is a competent continuation of the story and recognisably Campbellian. Indeed, the writing style has much in common with the 1979 *Solomon Kane* stories, and whilst it may seem out of keeping with other Campbell stories of the late nineties and two-thousands, it's worth noting that Campbell returned to the roots of *Solomon Kane* with the official movie novelisation in 2010.

Written in: 1978
First published in *Far Away And Never*, 1996

At dawn the army reached the steppes. Hard earth the colour of baked dung, interrupted only by the tussocks of grass like spiky yellow scalps, spread monotonously to the horizon. The sky was more bare than the land; not a cloud relieved its glaring. Already the horizon was blurred by heat and roving dust. I scanned it constantly, alert for patrols. Though my sight was as keen as any wolf's, I had to strain to penetrate the haze—yet I was glad of that, for it helped me not to dwell on the troops I presumed to command.

All the humans save one had died in the attack. Perhaps some of the things which marched before me had once been human. Their unnaturally regular tread, monotonous as the stamping of a gigantic mechanical hammer, veiled them in clouds of dust, but I had only to glance about me to glimpse horrors.

Here was a swollen lip that dangled lower than the chin, here a head which kept rising from a moist pit between shoulders, there a giant figure on whose left jowl, quivering and blinking as he marched, simpered a rudimentary face. A shape which trudged on the left of my mount might almost have been a shaggy warrior, except that his eyes, whenever the dust stung them, withdrew like snails' horns into his flesh. Often I was near to

falling on these creatures, to rend them to death in my revulsion, in clean animal rage. But I must not, for they were leading me to my prey.

Mentumenen had erred. Remembering, I grinned savagely. Last night, as he had escaped bearing Shanara, the heads of his army had turned to watch him. When the worst of his creatures had begun to struggle in the direction he had taken, I was ready to slaughter them until I saw how they would aid me. In their mindless way, the troops of Chaos were still loyal to Mentumenen, and would follow him as best they could. Since their compulsion was leading them also toward the Hyrkranians, I was doubly right to follow.

The one human who had survived the attack, I had spared. The smell of his fear had led me to the dune behind which he had been cowering. His dark skin and his shaven crown showed him to be one of Mentumenen's acolytes, though it was weedy with stubble now. About to tear out his gulping throat, I had reconsidered: what might he tell me of his master's plans? I had bound his hands—a distasteful task, for his left arm was corrupted by Chaos, the fingertips bloated and gelatinous—and now he rode beside me.

His gratitude disgusted me. I thought of a beaten mongrel, snuffling and licking his master's feet. More intolerably, he seemed to think I had spared him because he was human, as though we were brothers. Nor did he seem likely to prove useful; something—his alliance with Chaos, or Mentumenen's power—had robbed him of the memory of his own name. When we made camp, I was determined that I would pry his secrets from him by whatever means were necessary.

By noon I could bear him no longer: neither his fawning gaze nor his silence. Now the steppes were a featureless sea of parched grass, the colour of senile skin, which rustled harshly beneath the marchers. A pall of brownish clouds seemed to weigh down the air. Infrequent breezes raised shapeless ghosts of dust that hissed through the grass. At the edge of the army, where long angular shapes formed in the grass, the hiss had a slobbering quality, and I knew the Hounds of Tindalos were vigilant. Yet I felt alone with the suffocating landscape, the horizon which appeared to be receding, the clouds of flies which rose from stagnant gullies to feed on the horde. I was growing desperate for action. When several wild horses thundered by on the horizon, it was minutes before I could be sure they were not a patrol.

My gaze was drawn to a marcher ahead of me, his fattened head swollen almost to the breadth of his shoulders. A swarm of flies was feasting there. As I watched, a dozen moist holes gaped in the hairless head and swallowed the flies. I could bear no more; I must act or run amok. Drawing Genseric's sword, I pricked the throat of the bound acolyte. "Tell me of Mentumenen," I snarled. "Enlighten me, or rot here, feeding the flies."

The Stygian's face crumpled; he looked ready to blubber. "The Master," he whispered fearfully. "Mustn't sleep. He is waiting for me in my dreams. He wants to—" He fell silent, shuddering.

Did the wretch fear more than nightmares? I remembered how Mentumenen had appeared to me on the island of the massacre. Seizing the rein of his mount, I drew blood from the Stygian's throat with my sword. "Speak, or there will be no awakening."

"Set is waiting," he babbled. Perhaps the threat of death had reminded him. "Once I saw his snout. He stands always at the Master's shoulder, listening..."

I was tired of his ravings, and barely able to prevent my sword from thrusting deep. Perhaps he sensed this, for all at once he grew perfectly calm, as though he knew he was doomed whatever he might say. "I know what the Master intends," he whispered.

"Tell me quickly," my swordpoint said for me.

He glared about, fearing perhaps that the deformed horde might fall on him to silence him. "The chiefs of the Hyrkranians and of the Picts will dream of him. He will persuade them to unite against the Nemedia—he has ways to persuade them even of that. He will offer them allies beside which this army is as naught. But when they have conquered Nemedia, the chiefs will be his puppets and he will be emperor."

His calm was brief. His eyes began jerking wildly, his bloated fingertips pinched shut his lips. If he had known that Mentumenen was himself a puppet of Chaos, how much worse his fear of the horde might have been! But my sour grin tightened, dragging savagely at my teeth. If Mentumenen was a puppet, what was I?

I glared across the endless fields of scorched grass. Nothing seemed to move out there but dust, groping feebly into the yellowish air, then sinking back. I was alone with my brooding, for I felt estranged from both humanity

and gods. The Ice Gods would rob me of a throne, the earth goddess who claimed to have borne me would steal my mate. Only Chaos had aided me, leading me unwittingly toward my goal.

How I craved the taste of blood, the cries of battle, the moans of the wounded and vanquished—anything rather than the dust that coated my tongue, the ceaseless thirsty rustling of the grass! How I yearned to cut down Shanara's captors, to bear her away—but for whom?

The Stygian acolyte flinched, but I was not snarling at him. By all the gods—if any were trusted enough to be so invoked—I would not give up Shanara again. The Lord Garak had stolen her to present to the oily emir; now Hialmar sought to win her. Would he fight for her tooth and claw, as I already had? No, he would seduce her with soft words; he was too weak to gain her otherwise from me—too human.

Perhaps my mind was parched and suffocated, that I thought of these things of my friend; yet who could say that they were not true? Could I truly call any man friend? Was not the dead landscape proof that the earth goddess had deserted me until she had a use for me once more? Balked of a victim, my lust to savage could only turn inward.

Then I glimpsed a blur on the horizon which neither drifted nor changed, only stood and grew more solid. It was a small forest, the first I had seen all day. My surge of gratitude soured at once, for it was the horde of Chaos, not the earth goddess, that had led me here. Nevertheless I knew that the infrequent forests of the steppes were to be found on the banks of lakes or rivers. My thirst was a harsh ache in my throat as I followed the horde.

The foremost of the creatures had almost reached the lake when a small mounted troop of Hyrkranians came into view beyond the trees. They had been making for the water. Now, no doubt aghast at the size and nature of the army, they turned and fled. The chorus of abominable sounds with which the army set off in pursuit was no more savage than my own roar of glee; at last I had adversaries. Unsheathing Genseric's sword, I spurred my mount onward.

Red rage filled me. I bore down on the Hyrkranians' left flank. I disdained to use the artificial arm—not only was it difficult to operate while I held the sword, but it was a product of civilisation, hence loathsome—yet it saved me from an arrow which my shield failed to deflect, as the Hyrkranians

took a desperate stand. Then I was on them, and they must have seen their deaths glaring out of my eyes.

The first of them was distracted by the things that followed me. My sword plunged through his guts and out beyond them, thrust there as much by the force of my ride as by my instincts; I felt the blade scrape his spine. As I wrenched the blade free he toppled, limp as his spilling entrails.

A warrior taller than I chopped down my shield with a blow that should have lopped my arm—but that arm was metal and his blade recoiled, ringing. Its edge cut into my upper arm. Maddened, I smashed his shield away, and my sword cleaved deep into his side, which opened like a dyke full of blood.

Somewhere within the hot crimson mist I thought that I was serving the earth goddess, after all; the thirsty ground was drinking deep of blood, the parched grass was wet now, crimson. I hurled down a warrior with a blow of my shield, which was still clamped fast by my metal arm. As he fell, my sword split his skull and almost scalped him.

A fourth warrior was trying to flee two creatures which resembled men, except that their arms were as long as their bodies. These arms they had wrapped about the hindquarters of his mount, which they were struggling to topple. Something besides rage made me cut him down; though he must die, at least he deserved a warrior's death. My blow almost scythed his head from his shoulders. The two creatures still clung to the screaming horse, one of whose legs they had now bitten off. Sickened, I killed the beast.

The Hyrkranians were vanquished. My rage was fading, sated, and I was able to survey the battlefield. At once I began to tremble with a new rage; bile rose to my throat. This had not been a battle, for the things I had sought to command fought neither like men nor like animals. Their savagery was perverted, distorted, the antithesis of life.

Some of the Hyrkranians still lived. One creature was reaching a tentacle down the throat of a victim to disembowel him. Two leathery men were dismembering and eating a dying warrior. And this was the army I had thought to wield! My revulsion against them was no more violent than my disgust with my own stupidity. Had Mentumenen hoped that I would choose not to destroy the army, and that the forces of Chaos would corrupt me as they had Tashako? Might he have forseen that I would delude myself

that I could control the army, whereas I could only follow? Had my growing hatred of all life been the first symptom of my corruption?

Mentumenen had not reckoned with my new powers. My face a grim mask, I rode away from the carnage, toward the lake. The Stygian acolyte was cowering behind the trees. At least he had taken no part in the carnage, and for the moment I was loath to kill him. When I had made certain that his bonds were secure, I rode to the far side of the lake. Once my mount had drunk its fill I tethered it, then I hid my sword and metal arm among the exposed roots of trees.

Merely to loose the Hounds of Tindalos on the army would not be enough. I had participated in their atrocities against the Hyrkranians, however inadvertently; now I must lead the pack against them, to clean myself of their corruption. I spoke the words of changing, and at once my pelt was hot and thick, my fangs and claws were sharp, eager to tear. I could barely restrain my animal rage long enough to perform the ritual of the squares.

The hounds came loping through the lattices of trees and shadows. Why did they seem more scrawny, more angular? Was I growing able to see them clearly? In a dreadful way their slavering faces seemed almost human, as humanity might have looked if it had evolved from something unimaginably alien, toward an intelligence dark and distant as the rim of the universe. But I had no time for such reflections now. Howling, I led the pack to the abominable horde.

Some of the creatures were too intent on their perversions even to glimpse their oncoming doom. Those which fled were outrun effortlessly by the pack. I ran down horror after horror, ripping their throats with my teeth, spitting out the gelatinous flesh. Its taste and texture maddened me with disgust, with a fury that could not bear to leave one of the monsters alive. Their cries—squeals, moist gobbling, thick jellied roars—drove me to greater frenzy.

When the last of them was destroyed I lay panting, licking my wounds. Around me in the grass, beyond the wide patch that glistened with blood and inhuman liquids, lay the pack, yet this reminiscence of my childhood among the wolves less heartened than dismayed me: the angular limbs of the Hounds at rest reminded me of the bunched legs of spiders, ready to seize prey. Nevertheless I was too exhausted by the slaughter to move away.

All at once my mind, purged of thought and attuned to the pack by the shared slaughter, seemed to glimpse the dreaming of the Hounds. They were one mind, and their thoughts were the dreams of their masters, the Old Ones. I glimpsed eyes as large as a man's head, opening far beneath sea and stone. Something shapeless and black as liquescence bubbled amid limitless darkness; the bubbles seemed to dance to the rhythms of an atrocious piping, or to become misshapen objects which crawled about the pitchy surface with a kind of life before singing back into the depths. A great dark shape—leathery wings, or webbed claws, or something beyond words—loomed toward the world.

I jerked into full consciousness. The eyes of the Hounds—which I could call eyes only because they were located where those organs should be—watched me unreadably. What forces had I awakened by calling on the pack? How could I be sure of withstanding those utterly alien powers? I had no words nor ritual to dismiss the Hounds, but I must beware of calling on them often, for what else might I unleash?

And so I had nothing: neither an army nor the Hounds. I could only trust that Genseric's sword would arm me against Mentumenen. I must follow the route that the horde had been pursuing, and trust that would lead me to him. Muttering the words of change, I made for the lake.

Once more I found my human aspect difficult to regain. My skin felt stubbled, and I had to make a conscious effort to rise from all fours. Had the change affected my vision? For a moment I scanned the gloom beneath the trees. Shadows slithered over trunks, dimness swayed beneath them; I felt I was trying to peer deep into mud. Then I ran forward, roaring. My horse had gone.

Even before I reached the tree I knew that Genseric's sword had been stolen. The Hounds had not alerted me; why should they, when it served to protect me from their masters? The metal arm still lay beneath the roots; the double burden must have proved too heavy for the thief.

As I seized the arm and thrust my stump viciously into the socket, I saw him. The Stygian acolyte, his hands unbound now, was fleeing towards the horizon in the direction the horde had been following. He was crouched low over his horse, as if praying to remain unseen. The sword of Genseric gleamed dully in his arms, the left of which looked boneless. Chaos had helped him struggle free.

I was about to call the Hounds, whatever the consequences, when I saw my horse. He stood at the far edge of the forest, and I had taken him for a shaking mass of branches and foliage. Had he snapped his reins for fear of the Hounds? At least the thief had been unable to catch him.

I paced toward him through the tangle of roots and undergrowth, and struggled to suppress my blood-lust, lest it panic him. Though I had ridden him only since the battle by the Vilayet, he seemed to have sensed the animal in me, and to know that it meant him no harm. Though he tossed his head and backed away, snorting, he suffered me to stroke him while I murmured sounds I knew instincively rather than understood, and eventually mount him.

Still murmuring, I coaxed him out of the forest; then my rage would be contained no longer. With an inarticulate shout that was more of wolf than of man, I spurred the horse in pursuit of the Stygian, who had almost reached the horizon. Already the horse was foaming, its flanks were beginning to sweat—but I would ride it until its heart burst, so long as I retrieved the sword.

The sky had darkened, and was rumbling. A shower of rain dashed into my face, both refreshing and frustrating me; I was thirsty now not for water but for the Stygian's blood. Already I was gaining on him. When the bald head turned and saw me, he began to kick wildly at his horse's flanks.

The shower was over, having scarcely relieved the oppression. Feeble gleams of lightning tried to part the clouds. The sky was a slate cliff tilted close to the browned landscape, and about to topple. There was nothing but the miniature horse and rider ahead, apparently suspended between the changeless landscape and sky but in fact growing nearer. I gripped the metal wrist. Soon my prey would be in range.

The landscape was not quite so changeless. Another small forest sprang into view on the horizon, and seemed to be the acolyte's goal. Before long my wolfish gaze spied the reason. A figure was perched in one of the foremost trees. Above the bat-wings that cloaked its body its face was vaguely human, insofar as it resembled anything faintly wholesome. It was Mentumenen.

Why had he not flown to meet his acolyte? Perhaps it amused the sorcerer to play us both. Though I could not be sure that the acolyte was yet in range, I could wait no longer. Gripping my steed with both legs, I steadied

my aim as best I could with my remaining hand before I loosed the metal bolt.

At first it seemed that the bolt would fly over the acolyte's head. Then it curved down, too low, too far, losing impetus. My gasp was as loud as my victim's when it struck him at the base of his spine.

Though it failed to penetrate, it knocked him from his horse. Genseric's sword was hurled from his arms, to impale the ground several yards away.

When I head the unfurling of leathery wings I grinned viciously, for I was sure that I would be the first to reach the sword. The acolyte lay stunned, face gaping at the sky. As I spurred my mount into a final effort, I realised that the bat-winged creature had not even taken flight. Let him venture within my reach once I had Genseric's sword.

Moments later I saw why he was biding his time. From behind the trees, a dozen Hyrkranians rode out at me.

By the gods, I would battle them too. I was nearer the sword than they were, and my horse seemed as frenzied as I. Let me only grasp the sword, and whatever the outcome, more of their blood than of mine would be spilled on this field. But I was nowhere near the sword when the first arrow ploughed into my thigh.

Though it felt as though a red-hot poker had been plunged into my flesh, I might still have reached the sword had not a second arrow pierced my steed's eye. When I crashed to the ground, which was as hard as stone, the beast fell on top of me, pinning my metal arm. Now I was weaponless, and unable to struggle free, for my arm was caught almost up to the shoulder.

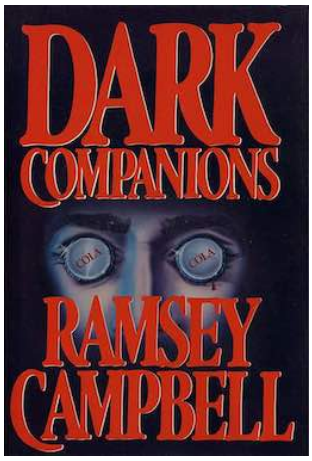
My death was riding at me, two Hyrkranian horsemen with swords raised to chop me like meat. But their commander shouted behind them, "Take him alive!"

In the moments before they reached me, as I dragged wildly at my trapped stump and tried vainly to heave the corpse away with my free arm, I saw the bat-winged creature rise flapping from the trees. It swooped down on the acolyte, and its claws ripped out a handful of his upturned throat. His usefulness, or his ability to amuse, was finished.

When the Hyrkranians dismounted I kicked out wildly, snarling like a trapped beast. I had kicked aside one sword when the hilt of the other struck me a blow that would have caved in a lesser man's skull. I thought my skull

had broken too, for darkness flooded in. Just before it blinded me I saw the thing that was Mentumenen sailing triumphantly toward the zenith, Genseric's sword in its claws.

The Depths



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As Miles emerged, a woman and a pink-eyed dog stumped by. She glanced at the house; then, humming tunelessly, she aimed the same contemptuous look at Miles. As if the lead was a remote control, the dog began to growl. They thought Miles was the same as the house.

He almost wished that were true; at least it would have been a kind of contact. He strolled through West Derby village and groped in his mind for ideas. Pastels drained from the evening sky. Wood pigeons paraded in a tree-lined close. A mother was crying "Don't you dare go out of this garden again." A woman was brushing her driveway and singing that she was glad she was Bugs Bunny. Beyond a brace of cars, in a living room that displayed a bar complete with beer-pumps, a couple listened to Beethoven's Greatest Hits.

Miles sat drinking beer at a table behind the Crown, at the edge of the bowling green. Apart from the click of bowls the summer evening seemed as blank as his mind. Yet the idea had promised to be exactly what he and his publisher needed: no more days of drinking tea until his head swam, of glaring at the sheet of paper in the typewriter while it glared an unanswerable challenge back at him. He hadn't realised until now how untrustworthy inspirations were.

Perhaps he ought to have foreseen the problem. The owners had told him that there was nothing wrong with the house—nothing except the aloofness and silent disgust of their neighbours. If they had known what had happened there they would never have bought the house; why should they be treated as though by living there they had taken on the guilt?

Still, that was no more unreasonable than the crime itself. The previous owner had been a bank manager, as relaxed as a man could be in his job; his

wife had owned a small boutique. They'd seemed entirely at peace with each other. Nobody who had known them could believe what he had done to her. Everyone Miles approached had refused to discuss it, as though by keeping quiet about it they might prevent it from having taken place at all. The deserted green was smudged with darkness. "We're closing now," the barmaid said, surprised that anyone was still outside. Miles lifted the faint sketch of a tankard and gulped a throatful of beer, grimacing. The more he researched the book, the weaker it seemed to be.

To make things worse, he'd told the television interviewer that it was near completion. At least the programme wouldn't be broadcast for months, by which time he might be well into a book about the locations of murder—but it wasn't the book he had promised his publisher, and he wasn't sure that it would have the same appeal.

Long dark houses slumbered beyond an archway between cottages, lit windows hovered in the arch. A signboard reserved a weedy patch of ground for a library. A grey figure was caged by the pillars of the village cross. On the roof of a pub extension gargoyles began barking, for they were dogs. A cottage claimed to be a sawmill, but the smell seemed to be of manure. Though his brain was taking notes, it wouldn't stop nagging.

He gazed across Lord Sefton's estate towards the tower blocks of Cantril Farm. Their windows were broken ranks of small bright perforations in the night. For a moment, as his mind wobbled on the edge of exhaustion, the unstable patterns of light seemed a code which he needed to break to solve his problems. But how could they have anything to do with it? Such a murder in Cantril Farm, in the concrete barracks among which Liverpool communities had been scattered, he might have understood; here in West Derby it didn't make sense.

As he entered the deserted close, he heard movements beneath eaves. It must be nesting birds, but it was as though the sedate house had secret thoughts. He was grinning as he pushed open his gate, until his hand recoiled. The white gate was stickily red.

It was paint. Someone had written sadist in an ungainly dripping scrawl. The neighbours could erase that—he wouldn't be here much longer. He let himself into the house.

For a moment he hesitated, listening to the dark. Nothing fled as he switched on the lights. The hall was just a hall, surmounted by a concertina

of stairs; the metal and vinyl of the kitchen gleamed like an Ideal Home display; the corduroy suite sat plump and smug on the dark green pelt of the living room. He felt as though he was lodging in a show house, without even the company of a shelf of his books.

Yet it was here, from the kitchen to the living room, that everything had happened—here that the bank manager had systematically rendered his wife unrecognisable as a human being. Miles stood in the empty room and tried to imagine the scene. Had her mind collapsed, or had she been unable to withdraw from what was being done to her? Had her husband known what he was doing, right up to the moment when he'd dug the carving-knife into his throat and run headlong at the wall?

It was no good: here at the scene of the crime, Miles found the whole thing literally unimaginable. For an uneasy moment he suspected that might have been true of the killer and his victim. As Miles went upstairs, he was planning the compromise to offer his publisher: Murderers' Houses? Dark Places of the World? Perhaps it mightn't be such a bad book after all.

When he switched off the lights, darkness came upstairs from the hall. He lay in bed and watched the shadows of the curtains furling and unfurling above him. He was touching the gate, which felt like flesh; it split open, and his hand plunged in. Though the image was unpleasant it seemed remote, drawing him down into sleep.

The room appeared to have grown much darker when he woke in the grip of utter panic.

He didn't dare move, not until he knew what was wrong. The shadows were frozen above him, the curtains hung like sheets of lead. His mouth tasted metallic, and made him think of blood. He was sure that he wasn't alone in the dark. The worst of it was that there was something he mustn't do—but he had no idea what it was.

He'd begun to search his mind desperately when he realised that was exactly what he ought not to have done. The thought which welled up was so atrocious that his head began to shudder. He was trying to shake out the thought, to deny that it was his. He grabbed the light-cord, to scare it back into the dark.

Was the light failing? The room looked steeped in dimness, a grimy fluid whose sediment clung to his eyes. If anything the light had made him

worse, for another thought came welling up like bile, and another. They were worse than the atrocities which the house had seen. He had to get out of the house.

He slammed his suitcase—thank God he'd lived out of it, rather than use the wardrobe—and dragged it onto the landing. He was halfway down, and the thuds of the case on the stairs were making his scalp crawl, when he realised that he'd left a notebook in the living room.

He faltered in the hallway. He mustn't be fully awake: the carpet felt moist underfoot. His skull felt soft and porous, no protection at all for his mind. He had to have the notebook. Shouldering the door aside, he strode blindly into the room.

The light which dangled spiderlike from the central plaster flower showed him the notebook on a fat armchair. Had the chairs soaked up all that had been done here? If he touched them, what might well up? But there was worse in his head, which was seething. He grabbed the notebook and ran into the hall, gasping for air.

His car sounded harsh as a saw among the sleeping houses. He felt as though the neat hygienic façades had cast him out. At least he had to concentrate on his driving, and was deaf to the rest of his mind. The road through Liverpool was unnaturally bright as a playing-field. When the Mersey Tunnel closed overhead he felt that an insubstantial but suffocating burden had settled on his scalp. At last he emerged, only to plunge into darkness.

Though his sleep was free of nightmares, they were waiting whenever he jerked awake. It was as if he kept struggling out of a dark pit, having repeatedly forgotten what was at the top. Sunlight blazed through the curtains as though they were tissue paper, but couldn't reach inside his head. Eventually, when he couldn't bear another such awakening, he stumbled to the bathroom.

When he'd washed and shaved he still felt grimy. It must be the lack of sleep. He sat gazing over his desk. The pebble-dashed houses of Neston blazed like the cloudless sky; their outlines were knife-edged. Next door's drain sounded like someone bubbling the last of a drink through a straw. All this was less vivid than his thoughts—but wasn't that as it should be?

An hour later he still hadn't written a word. The nightmares were crowding everything else out of his mind. Even to think required an effort that made his skin feel infested, swarming.

A random insight saved him. Mightn't it solve both his problems if he wrote the nightmares down? Since he'd had them in the house in West Derby—since he felt they had somehow been produced by the house—couldn't he discuss them in his book?

He scribbled them out until his tired eyes closed. When he reread what he'd written he grew feverishly ashamed. How could he imagine such things? If anything was obscene, they were. Nothing could have made him write down the idea which he'd left until last. Though he was tempted to tear up the notebook, he stuffed it out of sight at the back of a drawer and hurried out to forget.

He sat on the edge of the promenade and gazed across the Dee marshes. Heat haze made the Welsh hills look like piles of smoke. Families strolled as though this were still a watering-place; children played carefully, inhibited by parents. The children seemed wary of Miles; perhaps they sensed his tension, saw how his fingers were digging into his thighs. He must write the book soon, to prove that he could.

Ranks of pebble-dashed houses, street after street of identical Siamese twins, marched him home. They reminded him of cells in a single organism. He wouldn't starve if he didn't write—not for a while, at any rate—but he felt uneasy whenever he had to dip into his savings; their unobtrusive growth was reassuring, a talisman of success. He missed his street and had to walk back. Even then he had to peer twice at the street name before he was sure it was his.

He sat in the living room, too exhausted to make himself dinner. Van Gogh landscapes, frozen in the instant before they became unbearably intense, throbbed on the walls. Shelves of Miles's novels reminded him of how he'd lost momentum. The last nightmare was still demanding to be written, until he forced it into the depths of his mind. He would rather have no ideas than that.

When he woke, the nightmare had left him. He felt enervated but clean. He lit up his watch and found he'd slept for hours. It was time for the book programme. He'd switched on the television and was turning on the light when he heard his voice at the far end of the room, in the dark.

He was on television, but that was hardly reassuring; his one television interview wasn't due to be broadcast for months. It was as though he'd slept that time away. His face floated up from the grey of the screen as he sat down, cursing. By the time his book was published, nobody would remember this interview.

The linkman and the editing had invoked another writer now. Good God, was that all they were using of Miles? He remembered the cameras following him into the West Derby house, the neighbours glaring, shaking their heads. It was as though they'd managed to censor him, after all.

No, here he was again. "Jonathan Miles is a crime novelist who feels he can no longer rely on his imagination. Desperate for new ideas, he lived for several weeks in a house where, last year, a murder was committed." Miles was already losing his temper, but there was worse to come: they'd used none of his observations about the creative process, only the sequence in which he ushered the camera about the house like Hitchcock in the Psycho trailer. Viewers who find this distasteful," the linkman said unctuously, "may be reassured to hear that the murder in question is not so topical or popular as Mr Miles seems to think."

Miles glared at the screen while the programme came to an end, while an announcer explained that "Where Do You Get Your Ideas?" had been broadcast ahead of schedule because of an industrial dispute. And now here was the news, all of it as bad as Miles felt. A child had been murdered, said a headline; a Chief Constable had described it as the worst case of his career. Miles felt guiltily resentful; no doubt it would help distract people from his book.

Then he sat forward, gaping. Surely he must have misheard; perhaps his insomnia was talking. The newsreader looked unreal as a talking bust, but his voice went on, measured, concerned, inexorable. "The baby was found in a microwave oven. Neighbours broke into the house on hearing the cries, but were unable to locate it in time." Even worse than the scene he was describing was the fact that it was the last of Miles's nightmares, the one he had refused to write down.

Couldn't it have been a coincidence? Coincidence, coincidence, the train chattered, and seemed likely to do so all the way to London. If he had somehow been able to predict what was going to happen, he didn't want to know—especially not now, when he could sense new nightmares forming.

He suppressed them before they grew clear. He needed to keep his mind uncluttered for the meeting with his publisher; he gazed out of the window, to relax. Trees turned as they passed, unravelling beneath foliage. On a platform a chorus line of commuters bent to their luggage, one by one. The train drew the sun after it through clouds, like a balloon.

Once out of Euston Station and its random patterns of swarming, he strolled to the publishers. Buildings glared like blocks of salt, which seemed to have drained all moisture from the air. He felt hot and grimy, anxious both to face the worst and to delay. Hugo Burgess had been ominously casual. "If you happen to be in London soon we might have a chat about things..."

A receptionist on a dais that overlooked the foyer kept Miles waiting until he began to sweat. Eventually a lift produced Hugo, smiling apologetically. Was he apologising in advance for what he had to say? "I suppose you saw yourself on television," he said when they reached his office.

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"I shouldn't give it another thought. The telly people are envious buggers. They begrudge every second they give to discussing books. Sometimes I think they resent the competition and get their own back by being patronising." He was pawing through the heaps of books and papers on his desk, apparently in search of the phone. "It did occur to me that it would be nice to publish fairly soon," he murmured. Miles hadn't realised that sweat could break out in so many places at once. "I've run into some problems."

Burgess was peering at items he had rediscovered in the heaps. "Yes?" he said without looking up.

Miles summarised his new idea clumsily. Should he have written to Burgess in advance? "I found there simply wasn't enough material in the West Derby case," he pleaded.

"Well, we certainly don't want padding." When Burgess eventually glanced up he looked encouraging. "The more facts we can offer the better. I think the public is outgrowing fantasy, now that we're well and truly in the scientific age. People want to feel informed. Writing needs to be as accurate as any other science, don't you think?" He hauled a glossy pamphlet out of one of the piles. "Yes, here it is. I'd call this the last gasp of fantasy."

It was a painting, lovingly detailed and photographically realistic, of a girl who was being simultaneously mutilated and raped. It proved to be the cover of a new magazine, *Ghastly*. Within the pamphlet the editor promised "a quarterly that will wipe out the old horror pulps—everything they didn't dare to be."

"It won't last," Burgess said. "Most people are embarrassed to admit to reading fantasy now, and that will only make them more so. The book you're planning is more what they want—something they know is true. That way they don't feel they're indulging themselves." He disinterred the phone at last. "Just let me call a car and we'll go into the West End for lunch."

Afterwards they continued drinking in Hugo's club. Miles thought Hugo was trying to midwife the book. Later he dined alone, then lingered for a while in the hotel bar; his spotlessly impersonal room had made him feel isolated. Over the incessant trickle of muzak he kept hearing Burgess. "I wonder how soon you'll be able to let me have sample chapters..."

Next morning he was surprised how refreshed he felt, especially once he'd taken a shower. Over lunch he unburdened himself to his agent. "I just don't know when I'll be able to deliver the book. I don't know how much research may be involved."

"Now look, you mustn't worry about Hugo. I'll speak to him. I know he won't mind waiting if he knows it's for the good of the book." Susie Barker patted his hand; her bangles sounded like silver castanets. "Now here's an idea for you. Why don't you do up a sample chapter or two on the West Derby case? That way we'll keep Hugo happy, and I'll do my best to sell it as an article."

When they'd kissed good-bye Miles strolled along the Charing Cross Road, composing the chapter in his head and looking for himself in bookshop displays. Miles, Miles, books said in a window stacked with crime novels. Night of atrocities, headlines cried on an adjacent newspaper-stand.

He dodged into Foyle's. That was better: he occupied half a shelf, though his earliest titles looked faded and dusty. When he emerged he was content to drift with the rush-hour crowds—until a news vendor's placard stopped him. Britain's night of horror, it said.

It didn't matter, it had nothing to do with him. In that case, why couldn't he find out what had happened? He didn't need to buy a paper, he could read

the report as the news vendor snatched the top copy to reveal the same beneath. "Last night was Britain's worst night of murders in living memory..."

Before he'd read halfway down the column the noise of the crowd seemed to close in, to grow incomprehensible and menacing. The newsprint was snatched away again and again like a macabre card trick. He sidled away from the newsstand as though from the scene of a crime, but already he'd recognised every detail. If he hadn't repressed them on the way to London he could have written the reports himself. He even knew what the newspaper had omitted to report: that one of the victims had been forced to eat parts of herself.

Weeks later the newspapers were still in an uproar. Though the moderates pointed out that the murders had been unrelated and unmotivated, committed by people with no previous history of violence or of any kind of crime, for most of the papers that only made it worse. They used the most unpleasant photographs of the criminals that they could find, and presented the crimes as evidence of the impotence of the law, of a total collapse of standards. Opinion polls declared that the majority was in favour of an immediate return of the death penalty, "men like these must not go unpunished," a headline said, pretending it was quoting. Miles grew hot with frustration and guilt—for he felt he could have prevented the crimes.

All too soon after he'd come back from London, the nightmares had returned. His mind had already felt raw from brooding, and he had been unable to resist; he'd known only that he must get rid of them somehow. They were worse than the others: more urgent, more appalling.

He'd scribbled them out as though he was inspired, then he'd glared blindly at the blackened page. It hadn't been enough. The seething in his head, the crawling of his scalp, had not been relieved even slightly. This time he had to develop the ideas, imagine them fully, or they would cling and fester in his mind.

He'd spent the day and half the night writing, drinking tea until he hardly knew what he was doing. He'd invented character after character, building them like Frankenstein out of fragments of people, only to subject them to gloatingly prolonged atrocities, both the victims and the perpetrators.

When he'd finished, his head felt like an empty rusty can. He might have vomited if he had been able to stand. His gaze had fallen on a paragraph

he'd written, and he'd swept the pages onto the floor, snarling with disgust. "Next morning he couldn't remember what he'd done—but when he reached in his pocket and touched the soft object his hand came out covered with blood..."

He'd stumbled across the landing to his bedroom, desperate to forget his ravings. When he'd woken next morning he had been astonished to find that he'd fallen asleep as soon as he had gone to bed. As he'd lain there, feeling purged, an insight so powerful it was impossible to doubt had seized him. If he hadn't written out these things they would have happened in reality.

But he had written them out: they were no longer part of him. In fact they had never been so, however they had felt. That made him feel cleaner, absolved him of responsibility. He stuffed the sloganeering newspapers into the wastebasket and arranged his desk for work.

By God, there was nothing so enjoyable as feeling ready to write. While a pot of tea brewed he strolled about the house and revelled in the sunlight, his release from the nightmares, his surge of energy. Next door a man with a beard of shaving foam dodged out of sight, like a timid Santa Claus.

Miles had composed the first paragraph before he sat down to write, a trick that always helped him write more fluently—but a week later he was still struggling to get the chapter into publishable shape. All that he found crucial about his research—the idea that by staying in the West Derby house he had tapped a source of utter madness, which had probably caused the original murder—he'd had to suppress. Why, if he said any of that in print they would think he was mad himself. Indeed, once he'd thought of writing it, it no longer seemed convincing.

When he could no longer bear the sight of the article, he typed a fresh copy and sent it to Susie. She called the following day, which seemed encouragingly quick. Had he been so aware of what he was failing to write that he hadn't noticed what he'd achieved?

"Well, Jonathan, I have to say this," she said as soon as she'd greeted him. "It isn't up to your standard. Frankly, I think you ought to scrap it and start again."

"Oh." After a considerable pause he could think of nothing to say except "All right."

"You sound exhausted. Perhaps that's the trouble." When he didn't answer she said "You listen to your Auntie Susie. Forget the whole thing for a fortnight and go away on holiday. You've been driving yourself too hard—you looked tired the last time I saw you. I'll explain to Hugo, and I'll see if I can't talk up the article you're going to write when you come back."

She chatted reassuringly for a while, then left him staring at the phone. He was realising how much he'd counted on selling the article. Apart from royalties, which never amounted to as much as he expected, when had he last had the reassurance of a cheque? He couldn't go on holiday, for he would feel he hadn't earned it; if he spent the time worrying about the extravagance, that would be no holiday at all.

But wasn't he being unfair to himself? Weren't there stories he could sell?

He turned the idea over gingerly in his mind, as though something might crawl out from beneath—but really, he could see no arguments against it. Writing out the nightmares had drained them of power; they were just stories now. As he dialled Hugo's number, to ask him for the address of the magazine, he was already thinking up a pseudonym for himself.

For a fortnight he walked around Anglesey. Everything was hallucinatorily intense: beyond cracks in the island's grassy coastline, the sea glittered as though crystallising and shattering; across the sea, Welsh hills and mist appeared to be creating each other. Beaches were composed of rocks like brown crusty loaves decorated with shells. Anemones unfurled deep in glassy pools. When night fell he lay on a slab of rock and watched the stars begin to swarm.

As he strolled he was improving the chapters in his mind, now that the first version had clarified his themes. He wrote the article in three days, and was sure it was publishable. Not only was it the fullest description yet of the murder, but he'd managed to explain the way the neighbours had behaved: they'd needed to dramatise their repudiation of all that had been done in the house, they'd used him as a scapegoat to cast out, to proclaim that it had nothing to do with them.

When he'd sent the manuscript to Susie he felt pleasantly tired. The houses of Neston grew silver in the evening, the horizon was turning to ash. Once the room was so dark that he couldn't read, he went to bed. As he drifted towards sleep he heard next door's drain bubbling to itself.

But what was causing bubbles to form in the greyish substance that resembled fluid less than flesh? They were slower and thicker than tar, and took longer to form. Their source was rushing upwards to confront him face to face. The surface was quivering, ready to erupt, when he awoke.

He felt hot and grimy, and somehow ashamed. The dream had been a distortion of the last thing he'd heard, that was all; surely it wouldn't prevent him from sleeping. A moment later he was clinging to it desperately; its dreaminess was comforting, and it was preferable by far to the ideas that were crowding into his mind. He knew now why he felt grimy.

He couldn't lose himself in sleep; the nightmares were embedded there, minute, precise, and appalling. When he switched on the light it seemed to isolate him. Night had bricked up all the windows. He couldn't bear to be alone with the nightmares—but there was only one way to be rid of them.

The following night he woke having fallen asleep at his desk. His last line met his eyes: "Hours later he sat back on his haunches, still chewing doggedly..." When he gulped the lukewarm tea it tasted rusty as blood. His surroundings seemed remote, and he could regain them only by purging his mind. His task wasn't even half-finished. His eyes felt like dusty pebbles. The pen jerked in his hand, spattering the page.

Next morning Susie rang, wrenching him awake at his desk. "Your article is tremendous. I'm sure we'll do well with it. Now I wonder if you can let me have a chapter breakdown of the rest of the book to show Hugo?"

Miles was fully awake now, and appalled by what had happened in his mind while he had been sleeping. "No," he muttered.

"Are there any problems you'd like to tell me about?"

If only he could! But he couldn't tell her that while he had been asleep, having nearly discharged his task, a new crowd of nightmares had gathered in his mind and were clamouring to be written. Perhaps now they would never end.

"Come and see me if it would help," Susie said.

How could he, when his mind was screaming to be purged? But if he didn't force himself to leave his desk, perhaps he never would. "All right," he said dully. "I'll come down tomorrow."

When tomorrow came it meant only that he could switch off his desk lamp; he was nowhere near finishing. He barely managed to find a seat on the train, which was crowded with football fans. Opened beer cans spat; the air grew rusty with the smell of beer. The train emerged roaring from a tunnel, but Miles was still in his own, which was far darker and more oppressive. Around him they were chanting football songs, which sounded distant as a waveband buried in static. He wrote under cover of his briefcase, so that nobody would glimpse what he was writing.

Though he still hadn't finished when he reached London, he no longer cared. The chatter of the wheels, the incessant chanting, the pounding of blood and nightmares in his skull, had numbed him. He sat for a while in Euston. The white tiles glared like ice, a huge voice loomed above him. As soon as she saw him Susie demanded "Have you seen a doctor?"

Even a psychiatrist couldn't help him. "I'll be all right," he said, hiding behind a bright false smile.

"I've thought of some possibilities for your book," she said over lunch. "What about that house in Edinburgh where almost the same murder was committed twice, fifty years apart? The man who did the second always said he hadn't known about the first..."

She obviously hoped to revive him with ideas—but the nightmare which was replaying itself, endless as a loop of film, would let nothing else into his skull. The victim had managed to tear one hand free and was trying to protect herself.

"And isn't there the lady in Sutton who collected bricks from the scenes of crimes? She was meaning to use them to build a miniature Black Museum. She ought to be worth tracing," Susie said as the man seized the flailing hand by its wrist. "And then if you want to extend the scope of the book there's the mother of the Meathook Murder victims, who still gets letters pretending to be from her children."

The man had captured the wrist now. Slowly and deliberately, with a grin that looked pale as a crack in clay, he—Miles was barely able to swallow; his head, and every sound in the restaurant, was pounding. "They sound like good ideas," he mumbled, to shut Susie up.

Back at her office, a royalty fee had arrived. She wrote him a cheque at once, as though that might cure him. As he slipped it into his briefcase, she

caught sight of the notebooks in which he'd written on the train. "Are they something I can look at?" she said.

His surge of guilt was so intense that it was panic. "No, it's nothing, it's just something, no," he stammered.

Hours later he was walking. Men loitered behind boys playing pinball; the machines flashed like fireworks, splashing the men's masks. Addicts were gathering outside the all-night chemist's on Piccadilly; in the subterranean Gents', a starved youth washed blood from a syringe. Off Regent Street, Soho glared like an amusement arcade. On Oxford Street figures in expensive dresses, their bald heads gleaming, gestured broken-wristed in windows.

He had no idea why he was walking. Was he hoping the crowds would distract him? Was that why he peered at their faces, more and more desperately? Nobody looked at all reassuring. Women were perfect as corpses, men seemed to glow with concealed aggression; some were dragons, their mouths full of smoke.

He'd walked past the girl before he reacted. Gasping, he struggled through a knot of people on the corner of Dean Street and dashed across, against the lights. In the moments before she realised that he'd dodged ahead of her and was staring, he saw her bright quick eyes, the delicate web of veins beneath them, the freckles that peppered the bridge of her nose, the pulsing of blood in her neck. She was so intensely present to him that it was appalling.

Then she stepped aside, annoyed by him, whatever he was. He reached out, but couldn't quite seize her arm. He had to stop her somehow. "Don't," he cried.

At that, she fled. He'd started after her when two policemen blocked his path. Perhaps they hadn't noticed him, perhaps they wouldn't grab him—but it was too late; she was lost in the Oxford Street crowd. He turned and ran, fleeing back to his hotel.

As soon as he reached his room he began writing. His head felt stuffed with hot ash. He was scribbling so fast that he hardly knew what he was saying. How much time did he have? His hand was cramped and shaking, his writing was surrounded by a spittle of ink.

He was halfway through a sentence when, quite without warning, his mind went blank. His pen was clawing spasmodically at the page, but the urgency

had gone; the nightmare had left him. He lay in the anonymous bed in the dark, hoping he was wrong.

In the morning he went down to the lobby as late as he could bear. The face of the girl he'd seen in Oxford Street stared up at him from a newspaper. In the photograph her eyes looked dull and reproachful, though perhaps they seemed so only to him. He fled upstairs without reading the report. He already knew more than the newspaper would have been able to tell.

Eventually he went home to Neston. It didn't matter where he went; the nightmares would find him. He was an outcast from surrounding reality. He was focused inwards on his raw wound of a mind, waiting for the next outbreak of horrors to infest him.

Next day he sat at his desk. The sunlit houses opposite glared back like empty pages. Even to think of writing made his skin prickle. He went walking, but it was no good: beyond the marshes, factories coughed into the sky; grass blades whipped the air like razors; birds swooped, shrieking knives with wings. The sunlight seemed violent and pitiless, vampirising the landscape.

There seemed no reason why the nightmares should ever stop. Either he would be forced to write them out, to involve himself more and more deeply in them, or they would be acted out in reality. In any case he was at their mercy; there was nothing he could do. But wasn't he avoiding the truth? It hadn't been coincidence that had given him the chance he'd missed in Oxford Street. Perhaps he had been capable of intervention all along, if he had only known. However dismaying the responsibility was, surely it was preferable to helplessness. His glimpse in Oxford Street had made all the victims unbearably human.

He sat waiting. Pale waves snaked across the surface of the grass; in the heat haze they looked as though water was welling up from the marshes. His scalp felt shrunken, but that was only nervousness and the storm that was clotting overhead. When eventually the clouds moved on, unbroken, they left a sediment of twilight that clung to him as he trudged home.

No, it was more than that. His skin felt grimy, unclean. The nightmares were close. He hurried to let his car out of the garage, then he sat like a private detective in the driver's seat outside his house. His hands clenched on the steering wheel. His head began to crawl, to swarm.

He mustn't be trapped into self-disgust. He reminded himself that the nightmares weren't coming from him, and forced his mind to grasp them, to be guided by them. Shame made him feel coated in hot grease. When at last the car coasted forward, was it acting out his urge to flee? Should he follow that street sign, or that one?

Just as the signs grew meaningless because he'd stared too long, he knew which way to go. His instincts had been waiting to take hold, and they were urgent now. He drove through the lampless streets, where lit curtains cut rectangles from the night, and out into the larger dark.

He found he was heading for Chester. Trees beside the road were giant scarecrows, brandishing tattered foliage. Grey clouds crawled grublike across the sky; he could hardly distinguish them from the crawling in his skull. He was desperate to purge his mind.

Roman walls loomed between the timber buildings of Chester, which were black and white as the moon. A few couples were window-shopping along the enclosed rows above the streets. On the bridge that crossed the main street, a clock perched like a moon-faced bird. Miles remembered a day when he'd walked by the river, boats passing slowly as clouds, a brass band on a small bandstand playing "Blow the Wind Southerly." How could the nightmare take place here?

It could, for it was urging him deeper into the city. He was driving so fast through the spotless streets that he almost missed the police station. Its blue sign drew him aside. That was where he must go. Somehow he had to persuade them that he knew where a crime was taking place.

He was still yards away from the police station when his foot faltered on the accelerator. The car shuddered and tried to jerk forward, but that was no use. The nearer he came to the police station, the weaker his instinct became. Was it being suppressed by his nervousness? Whatever the reason, he could guide nobody except himself.

As soon as he turned the car the urgency seized him. It was agonising now. It rushed him out of the centre of Chester, into streets of small houses and shops that looked dusty as furniture shoved out of sight in an attic. They were deserted except for a man in an ankle-length overcoat, who limped by like a sack with a head.

Miles stamped on the brake as the car passed the mouth of an alley. Snatching the keys, he slammed the door and ran into the alley, between two shops whose posters looked ancient and faded as Victorian photographs. The walls of the alley were chunks of spiky darkness above which cramped windows peered, but he didn't need to see to know where he was going.

He was shocked to find how slowly he had to run, how out of condition he was. His lungs seemed to be filling with lumps of rust, his throat was scraped raw. He was less running than staggering forward. Amid the uproar of his senses, it took him a while to feel that he was too late.

He halted as best he could. His feet slithered on the uneven flagstones, his hands clawed at the walls. As soon as he began to listen he wished he had not. Ahead in the dark, there was a faint incessant shriek that seemed to be trying to emerge from more than one mouth. He knew there was only one victim.

Before long he made out a dark object further down the alley. In fact it was two objects, one of which lay on the flagstones while the other rose to its feet, a dull gleam in its hand. A moment later the figure with the gleam was fleeing, its footsteps flapping like wings between the close walls.

The shrieking had stopped. The dark object lay still. Miles forced himself forward, to see what he'd failed to prevent. As soon as he'd glimpsed it he staggered away, choking back a scream.

He'd achieved nothing except to delay writing out the rest of the horrors. They were breeding faster in his skull, which felt as though it was cracking. He drove home blindly. The hedgerows and the night had merged into a dark mass that spilled towards the road, smudging its edges. Perhaps he might crash—but he wasn't allowed that relief, for the nightmares were herding him back to his desk.

The scratching of his pen, and a low half-articulate moaning which he recognised sometimes as his voice, kept him company. Next day the snap of the letter-box made him drop his pen; otherwise he might not have been able to force himself away from the desk.

The package contained the first issue of *Ghastly*. "Hope you like it," the editor gushed. "It's already been banned in some areas, which has helped sales no end. You'll see we announce your stories as coming attractions, and we look forward to publishing them." On the cover the girl was still writhing, but the contents were far worse. Miles had read only a paragraph when he tore the glossy pages into shreds.

How could anyone enjoy reading that? The pebble-dashed houses of Neston gleamed innocently back at him. Who knew what his neighbours read behind their locked doors? Perhaps in time some of them would gloat over his pornographic horrors, reassuring themselves that this was only horror fiction, not pornography at all: just as he'd reassured himself that they were only stories now, nothing to do with reality—certainly nothing to do with him, the pseudonym said so—

The Neston houses gazed back at him, self-confident and bland: they looked as convinced of their innocence as he was trying to feel—and all at once he knew where the nightmares were coming from.

He couldn't see how that would help him. Before he'd begun to suffer from his writer's block, there had been occasions when a story had surged up from his unconscious and demanded to be written. Those stories had been products of his own mind, yet he couldn't shake them off except by writing—but now he was suffering nightmares on behalf of the world.

No wonder they were so terrible, or that they were growing worse. If material repressed into the unconscious was bound to erupt in some less manageable form, how much more powerful that must be when the unconscious was collective! Precisely because people were unable to come to terms with the crimes, repudiated them as utterly inhuman or simply unimaginable, the horrors would reappear in a worse form and possess whomever they pleased. He remembered thinking that the patterns of life in the tower blocks had something to do with the West Derby murder. They had, of course. Everything had.

And now the repressions were focused in him. There was no reason why they should ever leave him; on the contrary, they seemed likely to grow more numerous and more peremptory. Was he releasing them by writing them out, or was the writing another form of repudiation?

One was still left in his brain. It felt like a boil in his skull. Suddenly he knew that he wasn't equal to writing it out, whatever else might happen.

Had his imagination burned out at last? He would be content never to write another word. It occurred to him that the book he'd discussed with Hugo was just another form of rejection: knowing you were reading about real people reassured you they were other than yourself.

He slumped at his desk. He was a burden of flesh that felt encrusted with grit. Nothing moved except the festering nightmare in his head. Unless he got rid of it somehow, it felt as though it would never go away. He'd failed twice to intervene in reality, but need he fail again? If he succeeded, was it possible that might change things for good?

He was at the front door when the phone rang. Was it Susie? If she knew what was filling his head, she would never want to speak to him again. He left the phone ringing in the dark house and fled to his car.

The pain in his skull urged him through the dimming fields and villages to Birkenhead, where it seemed to abandon him. Not that it had faded—his mind felt like an abscessed tooth—but it was no longer able to guide him. Was something anxious to prevent him from reaching his goal?

The bare streets of warehouses and factories and terraces went on for miles, brick-red slabs pierced far too seldom by windows. At the peak hour the town centre grew black with swarms of people, the Mersey Tunnel drew in endless sluggish segments of cars. He drove jerkily, staring at faces.

Eventually he left the car in Hamilton Square, overlooked by insurance offices caged by railings, and trudged towards the docks. Except for his footsteps, the streets were deserted. Perhaps the agony would be cured before he arrived wherever he was going. He was beyond caring what that implied.

It was dark now. At the end of rows of houses whose doors opened onto cracked pavements he saw docked ships, glaring metal mansions. Beneath the iron mesh of swing bridges, a scum of neon light floated on the oily water. Sunken rails snagged his feet. In pubs on street corners he heard tribes of dockers, a sullen wordless roar that sounded like a warning. Out here the moan of a ship on the Irish Sea was the only voice he heard.

When at last he halted, he had no idea where he was. The pavement on which he was walking was eaten away by rubbly ground; he could smell collapsed buildings. A roofless house stood like a rotten tooth, lit by a single streetlamp harsh as lightning. Streets still led from the opposite pavement,

and despite the ache—which had aborted nearly all his thoughts—he knew that the street directly opposite was where he must go.

There was silence. Everything was yet to happen. The lull seemed to give him a brief chance to think. Suppose he managed to prevent it? Repressing the ideas of the crimes only made them erupt in a worse form—how much worse might it be to repress the crimes themselves? Nevertheless he stepped forward. Something had to cure him of his agony. He stayed on the treacherous pavement of the side street, for the roadway was skinless, a mass of bricks and mud. Houses pressed close to him, almost forcing him into the road. Where their doors and windows ought to be were patches of new brick. The far end of the street was impenetrably dark.

When he reached it, he saw why. A wall at least ten feet high was built flush against the last houses. Peering upwards, he made out the glint of broken glass. He was closed in by the wall and the plugged houses, in the midst of desolation.

Without warning—quite irrelevantly, it seemed—he remembered something he'd read about years ago while researching a novel: the Mosaic ritual of the Day of Atonement. They'd driven out the scapegoat, burdened with all the sins of the people, into the wilderness. Another goat had been sacrificed. The images chafed together in his head; he couldn't grasp their meaning—and then he realised why there was so much room for them in his mind. The aching nightmare was fading.

At once he was unable to turn away from the wall, for he was atrociously afraid. He knew why this nightmare could not have been acted out without him. Along the bricked-up street he heard footsteps approaching.

When he risked a glance over his shoulder, he saw that there were two figures. Their faces were blacked out by the darkness, but the glints in their hands were sharp. He was trying to claw his way up the wall, though already his lungs were labouring. Everything was over—the sleepless nights, the poison in his brain, the nightmare of responsibility—but he knew that while he would soon not be able to scream, it would take him much longer to die.

This Time

"*This Time* began with the idea of counting backwards during the onset of an anaesthetic, and was a tale I worked out pretty fully in advance so that I would have something to write once our first child was born."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

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As Crosby emerged from the dentist's he almost tripped over a dog, which vanished behind the bushes. He took more care while crossing the road to the park, for he felt unreal, dreamy. He tongued the hole in his stony jaw and tried to recall what he'd dreamed.

People were walking dogs in Birkenhead Park or being run by them. A man was training an Alsatian called Winston. On the fishpond the white ducks looked moulded out of the reflections of clouds. He had been counting backwards from thirty; he'd reached fourteen before the anaesthetic worked, and then he'd seemed to begin counting an altogether different set of numbers backward—on and on into the dark. He felt he had arrived eventually, but where?

He walked through the short cut from the pond to his street. On the playing-field beside him, rugby posts were panting in the August heat: H H H. As he opened his front door, pushing back a couple of letters, spacious echoes greeted him.

His face no longer felt stony. The gap in his jaw was plugged with an ache. He was glad he'd drawn today's stint before he had gone to the dentist's—but nevertheless he was anxious not to lose the impressions he'd gathered in the waiting-room: a mother holding her child like a ventriloquist's dummy from which she was determined to coax a brave smile, a teenager who had tried to pretend that the bulge in his cheek was nothing worth noticing, just a sweet. Perhaps Crosby could sketch something for his exhibition.

He gazed across his drawing-board, out of the window. Beyond the long garden, the pond blazed among the trees. The head of the little girl next door kept popping over the seven-foot hedge like a Jack-in-the-box; the seat of her swing was concealed by the hedge. She made him feel all the more

unreal, and incapable of sketching the impressions he wanted to fix. When at last he began to sketch he was hardly aware of doing so.

Ten minutes later he had finished. The man's face stared up at him. It was hairless, and looked smooth as a baby's face, as though it had never been spoiled. Was it a face or a mask? It looked too good to be true, especially the eyes.

Was it even worth preserving? It meant nothing at all to him—yet that was why he filed it away, in the hope that he would remember where the impression had come from. His thoughts were dodging aimlessly about his mind, like the echoes in the house.

Never mind: he was visiting Giulia. He would have waited for her in the art gallery, except that he might disturb her at work. Instead he wandered about the park before catching the train, then strolled through Port Sunlight for a while. Along the vistas of the Causeway and the Diamond, the trees were dark and velvety, unrolling their long shadows on the plots of grass. Everything was steeped in evening light: the columns and domes of the Lady Lever Gallery, the half-timbered cottages that looked outlined and latticed in charcoal, their gardens trim as carpet tiles. Even the factories beyond the estate looked to be pouring forth gold smoke, like a lyrical advertisement for cigarettes.

Giulia was wearing her grandmother's apron. "How do you feel?" she said.

"Cut off from everything."

She gave him a wry smile. "That's hardly new, is it?"

He followed her into the kitchen of the cottage; he'd found that he wanted to talk. "I hope you'll be able to eat," she said anxiously.

"Certainly." She was making several of his favourite dishes. They were too old, and had known each other for too long, to express their affection in words.

She emerged from the pantry bearing spices. "So may I take it that your air of gloom is an after-effect of the surgery?"

"No, not really. My book has been out for a month, without a single review. What makes it worse is the trash that gets reviewed—three notices this week for a collection of pornographic comics."

"That's exactly why you shouldn't mind that they don't appreciate you. Few things of any worth are appreciated in their own time, I've told you that before." She frowned exaggeratedly at him. "Now, Thorn, you just enjoy being depressed. Some of your work satisfies you, doesn't it? That's all that any genuine artist can hope for."

"I suppose so." He sighed, to make her chide him further. "I wish I had more time to do something special for the exhibition. Instead I'll be wasting a day on this damn television show."

"You'll be reaching a new audience direct rather than via the reviewers. How can that be wasted time?" She said almost wistfully "If I had a television I'd watch you."

They ate in the kitchen, then carried the rest of the wine into the parlour and played chess. One of Crosby's sketches hung above the mantelpiece: an enormous man whose round head resembled a pudding balanced on a larger, and who was devouring a pudding which looked like him. Secretly he felt that Giulia's appreciation was worth all the gushing of reviewers.

When each of them had won a game, they stood close together in the small porch, not quite touching, and lingered over their goodbyes. The rocking of the dim train lulled him, made him feel he might be able to meet all his commitments, after all. As he reached home, close to midnight, someone was walking an off-white dog in the park.

He woke convinced that he had been counting backwards. The series of numbers had seemed very long. He felt frustrated by his inability to concentrate or to trust himself to his intuition; he had no time now to add to the exhibition, when the private view was only two days hence.

But perhaps—

He retrieved the sketch of the smooth-faced man from the file and pored over it. Had he dreamed that face too? The enigma annoyed him, but there was another feeling which, if defined, might help him complete the picture. Usually he regarded his subjects with detached yet affectionate humour, like a father or a historian—but he was sure that whatever he felt for the smooth face, it wasn't affection.

The sound of applause, which he thought at first was a flock of birds starting from the trees, roused him. Down by the fishpond, fishermen appeared to be presenting one another with awards. They were blurred, for

Crosby's window was wet, though it didn't seem to have been raining overnight: the park was dry, not a twinkle of rain.

The decks of the Liverpool ferry were crowded with shoppers. White stuffing bulged from splits in the blue sky. A pigeon on the mast of a yacht was modelling the metal bird on the tower of the Liver Building. A naked baby was crawling about behind the legs of the crowd. Of course it must have been a dog.

When he'd overseen the mounting of his exhibition in the Bluecoat Gallery, he sat on a bench in Church Street and watched people. A man with a bowler hat and umbrella danced by as though in search of the rest of his troupe. A scrawny man in a pinstripe suit sat opposite Crosby, his limbs like sticks of mint rock. A whitish dog that looked hairless vanished into the crowd.

By the time he reached home he knew what he was going to draw. An hour later it was done: a chorus line of businessmen, all shapes and sizes, trotting to the office. He liked it enough to copy it for the exhibition before sending it for syndication.

And yet he felt he'd overlooked a more important task. He wandered through the house, feeling like a stranger who had strayed into a gallery full of framed drawings while it was closed to the public. "This is the Michaelangelo room," he muttered wryly. "This is the Cruikshank room. And here is the Crosby room—the smallest room, of course." Even if he was being unfair to himself, the echoes agreed with him.

A stroll in the park might help clear his mind. Perhaps his problem related to the smooth-faced sketch, but he felt there was more to remember. When he went out the twilight was deepening: the intricate lattices of grass blades merged into a smouldering impressionistic glow; the pond looked solid and dark as soil. He began to follow the path around the water as the last fragments of light in the sky went out.

Before long he felt uneasy. The path was caged by railings, and hemmed in by trees and bushes on grassy banks. It turned constantly back and forth in a series of blind curves. Suppose he rounded a curve and bumped into someone in the dark?

Why should that bother him? It was nothing that an apology couldn't make right. Of course it would be unpleasant to touch an unseen face without

warning—but how could he do that when his hands were down by his sides? There was no point in brooding, especially since he knew that if he left the path now, even assuming he could, he would be lost.

He hurried onward, stumbling. Tree-roots forced open the cracked lips of the concrete path. A white blotch on the pond grew suddenly larger, flapping. The grey mass the size of his head which came at Crosby's face was a cloud of midges.

Though the park road was no lighter, he let out a guarded sigh of relief when he emerged from the path. He made his way along the road toward the short cut beside the rugby ground, and had almost reached the dark gap when he faltered, his jaw lolling. A flat white face had peered over next door's hedge at him.

He glared up at the seven-foot hedge. He'd had the impression of a face like a bulldog's, but it had only been a glimpse from the corner of his eye; perhaps it hadn't been a face at all, just a piece of paper fluttering in the grasp of the hedge. But weren't the chains of the swing squeaking faintly to a halt? Surely his neighbours wouldn't let their child play out so late; perhaps a strange child had squeezed through the hedge. Their garden was impenetrably dark. Crosby dodged through the short cut, and was blinded by the streetlamps until he reached them.

Next morning he had been dreaming of fire. He'd turned away in dismay, only to find himself surrounded by gloating eyes. More than that he couldn't recall, and had no time to try. He was already later than he'd meant to leave for the Manchester train.

When he arrived panting at the television studios, he had to wait while an old soldier misheard his name and announced him dolefully over the intercom. For a moment Crosby hoped the show had begun without him, but it wasn't that kind of a show. Eventually the producer appeared; his smile was more like a twitch. A makeup girl dabbed at Crosby's face as though cleaning a dusty waxwork before they rushed him into the studio.

The audience applauded, inspired by a placard, as the host strode onstage, a gleaming young man with a disc-jockey's brittle cheerfulness. Crosby was studying his opponents. The woman who drew feminist cartoons seemed all right, if rather lacking in detachment; but what of her partner on the team, 'the wicked wit of Welwyn Garden City'? His hair resembled a shaving-

brush, his smile was as thin as his voice; his quips made Crosby think of a cruel child probing wounds.

Crosby's partner was a plump man who made jokes in the tone of a patient describing symptoms. What of Crosby himself? "He draws like an artist surveying today's world from a Victorian time machine," the host said, quoting. "Kindly but critical, amused but never spiteful." It must have been the only quote they could find, but it was true enough: Crosby did feel apart from the time in which he was living, a visiting observer—and never more so than today.

It wasn't only the game that alienated him, though that, now that he saw it, was repulsive enough: whichever team produced the first cartoon on a theme culled from the audience won a point, as did the team which provoked the loudest applause. The whole thing was as vulgar as its name, *Top Draw*—a debased circus with cartoonists instead of clowns.

But he was more disturbed by the blank gaze of the cameras—because they almost reminded him of something else. When had he suffered the judgement of expressionless gazes that pricked his skin with dread? Some childhood ordeal he'd forgotten, perhaps? He was still trying to remember when the show ended. The other team had won.

At least examples of his work had been displayed to the cameras, and the host had mentioned his exhibition, though Crosby doubted that the show's audience would be interested. When he arrived home that night it was raining on a rugby match; bunches of floodlights glared on bony stalks, lines of rain looked like scratches on glass. Even the roar of the crowd seemed indefinably reminiscent—but why did he feel it wasn't savage enough? Shaking his head, to sort out his thoughts or dislodge them entirely, he let himself into his house.

He was drawing his bedroom curtains, and ready to enjoy the ineffectual assault of the rain on the house, when he saw the mark on the window. Momentarily the floodlights and his angle of vision made it resemble the impression which a flat drooping noseless face might have left on the glass. It must be a trick of the rain, which was pelting now; in a few minutes he couldn't even make out where the outline had seemed to be. Then why did he feel that he'd seen such a mark before?

A glimpse of movement in the park distracted him. The trees beyond the hedge were streaming with dim light. When he'd gazed at them so long that

they swelled and shifted apart, he caught sight of the man who stood among them, gazing out of the park. It took him longer to distinguish the man's pale companion, for it was on all fours. How could anyone go out walking the dog in such a downpour? Crosby lay in bed and listened uneasily to the rain. Sometimes it sounded like a scratching at the windows; sometimes echoes made it sound to be inside the house.

He slept jerkily, and dreamed he was in bed with his wife, though in reality he had never even thought of marrying. Then he was betraying someone to the expressionless judges in order to save himself, and there was fire again. He spent the next day irritably pondering all this, which seemed just beyond his comprehension, and trying to draw a last piece for the Bluecoat Gallery. He had achieved nothing when it was time to leave for the private view.

It was hardly encouraging. The invited audience sipped sherry, smiled politely at his work or seemed afraid to laugh, talked of other things. He wouldn't have thought that dogs were allowed in here—but whenever he looked around he couldn't be sure that anybody had brought one. When people met his eye, their faces turned hurriedly blank. Again he thought of expressionless judges.

At least Giulia was there, which was a pleasant surprise; of course she would have been sent a ticket at the Lady Lever Gallery. "Don't take any notice of how they looked while you were watching," she said afterward. "They liked it, from what I overheard. They were inhibited, that was all." Perhaps sensing that he was unconvinced, she said "Come to me tomorrow and we'll read the reviews over dinner, if you like."

If only he could discuss his problems with her! How could he, when he had no idea what they were? That night in bed he tried to catch them in the dark. Though he wasn't aware of dreaming, he kept starting awake and wondering not only where he was, but who. Several times he restrained himself from getting up to look out of the window.

In the morning he was exhausted, but the notices revived him. They were more favourable than he would have permitted himself to hope: "...an impressively consistent exhibition..." "...real wit and style..." "...civilised humour of a kind one had ceased to hope for..." Perhaps his elation would help him discern the rest of his problems.

He spread out the sketch before him on the desk. There was a background that would make sense of the smooth face, if only he could draw it. He still

had time to include it in his exhibition—but was that why it seemed so urgent to complete the picture?

The sketched eyes outstared him, challenged him to be sure they contained any secret at all. He had not the least idea what he was struggling to draw. Outside in the wind and the rain, trees tossed like the foot of a waterfall. Was it the wind or his awareness that kept fading? His pencil and his head were nodding, starting up. Perhaps he gazed at the smooth face for hours.

When eventually he fell asleep the pencil seemed about to mark the paper, yet he was too exhausted to intervene. Again he dreamed that he was in bed with his wife. He had woken beside her in the dark. She must be having a nightmare, for she was panting, though everything was all right now: he'd betrayed the smooth-faced man to save himself, betrayed the man who had corrupted him. All this was a dream, since he had never been married, and so he could wake up; please let him wake before he lit the candle! But the flint sparked, the wick flared, and he had to turn and look.

His wife lay face up beside him, her mouth gaping. She might have been panting in her sleep, except that her chest was utterly still. No, the sound was coming from the face that quivered above hers, the jowly face with its tongue grey as slime and its tiny pink eyes like pimples sunk in the white flesh. He thought of a bulldog's face, but it was more like a noseless old man's, and its paws on her chest looked like a child's hands.

Crosby woke, for the pencil had snapped in his fingers. The trees in the park were still now, and hardly distinguishable from the night. When he switched on his desk lamp the reflection of his hand went crawling among the trees. He barely noticed, for he'd caught sight of the sketch. Before falling asleep, or while he had been dreaming, he had filled in the background at last.

Background wasn't precisely the word. The smooth-faced man had a body now, though not to his benefit; it was chained to a stake, and was burning. As Crosby stared at this, not at all sure that he wanted to understand, he remembered his spell under anaesthetic. As he'd drifted away he had begun to count backward, not random numbers but years—centuries of them.

All at once fear choked him, yet he wasn't sure what he feared. Once he was with Giulia he would be able to think. He switched off the desk lamp and hurried out, contorting himself into his coat. Why did it seem that a dim reflection of his hand stayed in the park?

He strode to the railway station, and kept close to the streetlamps. The downpour had moved on, but rain continued beneath trees. Dockers were yelling inside and outside pubs. The platforms of the station were deserted, but hardly quiet enough; he wished the noises would come out and make themselves clear. The countryside, a glistening blur, dashed past the train. Fireflies of houses and streetlamps swarmed by.

He had just stepped onto the Port Sunlight platform, and was glad to leave behind the foggy light and brownish repetitive seats of the empty carriage, when something darted out of the train and vanished up the passage to the street.

At once his fear was no longer for himself. He ran along the passage, which was deserted, not even a porter. So were the half-timbered streets and avenues; the black and white buildings looked dead as bone. Shadows or rain bruised the pavements beneath trees. Far down a vista, the beam of a headlight stretched between two rows of trees, then broke up and was gone.

Giulia's cottage was rocking like an anchored boat, for he was stumbling toward it at a run. Something pale was waiting for him in the porch: a crumpled pamphlet wet with rain. Not even a pamphlet—just a ball of paper. But perhaps it wasn't rain that had made it wet, for it was also chewed. It was his sketch that had hung on the wall of Giulia's parlour. It must have strayed out through the front door, which was open.

Mightn't she have left it open for him? Yet when he made himself enter, he couldn't bring himself to call out to her. A tap ticked like a beetle in the bathroom to the right of the narrow hall; at the end of the hall, light angled from the kitchen and lay in wedges on the stairs. Amid the smells of cooking was a stench reminiscent both of a zoo and of decay.

He had almost reached the first door—the parlour's—when something dodged out and past him, down the dark hall. He thought of a slavering child on all fours. He kicked out, but it eluded him. He knew instinctively that there was no longer any reason to hurry into the parlour, and it was a long time before he could.

Giulia lay on her back on the floor, in an overturned chair. Her legs dangled from the seat. Her mouth and her eyes were gaping, her lips were wet. Stooping, he felt for her heartbeat. He was touching her at last, but only to confirm that she was dead. After a while he trudged to the kitchen and switched off the cooker.

Eventually he went back to the station. There was nobody to tell, nothing to do. In the empty carriage a lolling face peered out from beneath the seat opposite, drew back whenever he kicked at it. It was venturing closer, and so at last were his memories, but he was beyond caring.

His street was deserted. Light like glaring metal discs lay beneath the streetlamps. Something like a hairless dog vanished into the short cut to the park. No doubt when Crosby looked out of his window, he would see it and its master waiting among the trees.

He was unlocking his empty house when he thought of Giulia. Both the shock and his sense of meaninglessness had faded, and he began to sob dryly. Suddenly he dragged the front door shut, sending echoes fleeing into the house, and strode toward the park.

His memories were flooding back. Perhaps they would help him. He was almost running now, toward the dark beneath the trees, where the smooth-faced man and his familiar were waiting. Once they were face to face, Crosby would remember both the man's name and his own. He'd got the better of the smooth-faced man once before, and this time, by God—even if it killed him—he would finish the job.

Down There

"For the record, the story came to me when the light failed in the lift at Radio Merseyside, where I then worked as a film reviewer. Some years ago Guillermo del Toro rang me, enthusiastically proposing to film *Down There* as his contribution to an anthology movie. The project was set up—it would have been something like the Twilight Zone film, I believe—but alas, the production company decided not to back it after all. Such is Hollywood."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

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"Hurry along there," Steve called as the girls trooped down the office. "Last one tonight. Mind the doors."

The girls smiled at Elaine as they passed her desk, but their smiles meant different things: just like you to make things more difficult for the rest of us, looks like you've been kept in after school, suppose you've nothing better to do, fancy having to put up with him by yourself. She didn't give a damn what they thought of her. No doubt they earned enough without working overtime, since all they did with their money was squander it on makeup and new clothes.

She only wished Steve wouldn't make a joke of everything: even the lifts, one of which had broken down entirely after sinking uncontrollably to the bottom of the shaft all day. She was glad that hadn't happened to her, even though she gathered the sub-basement was no longer so disgusting. Still, the surviving lift had rid her of everyone now, including Mr Williams the union representative, who'd tried the longest to persuade her not to stay. He still hadn't forgiven the union for accepting a temporary move to this building; perhaps he was taking it out on her. Well, he'd gone now, into the November night and rain.

It had been raining all day. The warehouses outside the windows looked like melting chocolate; the river and the canals were opaque with tangled ripples. Cottages and terraces, some of them derelict, crowded up the steep hills towards the disused mines. Through the skeins of water on the glass their infrequent lights looked shaky as candle flames.

She was safe from all that, in the long office above five untenanted floors and two basements. Ranks of filing cabinets stuffed with blue Inland Revenue files divided the office down the middle; smells of dust and old paper hung in the air. Beneath a fluttering fluorescent tube protruding files drowsed, jerked awake. Through the steamy window above an unquenchable radiator, she could just make out the frame where the top section of the fire escape should be. "Are you feeling exploited?" Steve said.

He'd heard Mr Williams's parting shot, calling her the employers' weapon against solidarity. "No, certainly not." She wished he would let her be quiet for a while. "I'm feeling hot" she said.

"Yes, it is a bit much." He stood up, mopping his forehead theatrically. "I'll go and sort out Mr Tuttle."

She doubted that he would find the caretaker, who was no doubt hidden somewhere with a bottle of cheap rum. At least he tried to hide his drinking, which was more than one could say for the obese half-chewed sandwiches he left on windowsills, in the room where tea was brewed, even once on someone's desk.

She turned idly to the window behind her chair and watched the indicator in the lobby counting down. Steve had reached the basement now. The letter B flickered, then brightened: he'd gone down to the sub-basement, which had been meant to be kept secret from the indicator and from everyone except the holder of the key. Perhaps the finding of the cache down there had encouraged Mr Tuttle to be careless with food.

She couldn't help growing angry. If the man who had built these offices had had so much money, why hadn't he put it to better use? The offices had been merely a disguise for the sub-basement, which was to have been his refuge. What had he feared? War, revolution, a nuclear disaster? All anyone knew was that he'd spent the months before he had been certified insane in smuggling food down there. He'd wasted all that food, left it there to rot, and he'd had no thought for the people who would have to work in the offices: no staircases, a fire-escape that fell apart when someone tried to paint it—but she was beginning to sound like Mr Williams, and there was no point in brooding.

The numbers were counting upwards, slow as a child's first sum. Eventually Steve appeared, the solution. "No sign of him," he said. "He's

somewhere communing with alcohol, I expect. Most of the lights are off, which doesn't help."

That sounded like one of Mr Tuttle's ruses. "Did you go right down?" she said. "What's it like down there?"

"Huge. They say it's much bigger than any of the floors. You could play two football games at once in there." Was he exaggerating? His face was bland as a silent comedian's except for raised eyebrows. "They left the big doors open when they cleaned it up. If there were any lights I reckon you could see for miles. I'm only surprised it didn't cut into one of the sewers."

"I shouldn't think it could be any more smelly."

"It still reeks a bit, that's true. Do you want a look? Shall I take you down?" When he dodged towards her, as though to carry her away, she sat forward rigidly and held the arms of her chair against the desk. "No thank you," she said, though she'd felt a start of delicious apprehension.

"Did you ever hear what was supposed to have happened while they were cleaning up all the food? Tuttle told me, if you can believe him." She didn't want to hear; Mr Tuttle had annoyed her enough for one day. She leafed determinedly through a file, until Steve went up the office to his desk.

For a while she was able to concentrate. The sounds of the office merged into a background discreet as muzak: the rustle of papers, the rushes of the wind, the buzz of the defective fluorescent like an insect trying to bumble its way out of the tube. She manoeuvred files across her desk. This man was going to be happy, since they owed him money. This fellow wasn't, since he owed them some.

But the thought of the food had settled on her like the heat. Only this morning, in the room where the tea urn stood, she'd found an ancient packet of Mr Tuttle's sandwiches in the waste bin. No doubt the packet was still there, since the cleaners were refusing to work until the building was made safe. She seemed unable to rid herself of the memory.

No, it wasn't a memory she was smelling, As she glanced up, wrinkling her nostrils, she saw that Steve was doing so too. "Tuttle," he said, grimacing.

As though he'd given a cue, they heard movement on the floor below. Someone was dragging a wet cloth across linoleum. Was the caretaker doing the cleaners' job? More likely he'd spilled a bottle and was trying to

wipe away the evidence. "I'll get him this time," Steve said, and ran towards the lobby.

Was he making too much noise? The soft moist dragging on the floor below had ceased. The air seemed thick with heat and dust and the stench of food; when she lit a cigarette, the smoke loomed reprovingly above her. She opened the thin louvres at the top of the nearest window, but that brought no relief. There was nothing else for it; she opened the window that gave onto the space where the fire escape should be.

It was almost too much for her. A gust of rain dashed in, drenching her face while she clung to the handle. The window felt capable of smashing wide, of snatching her out into the storm. She managed to anchor the bar to the sill, and leaned out into the night to let the rain wash away the smell.

Nine feet below her she could see the fifth-floor platform of the fire escape, its iron mesh slippery and streaming. The iron stairs that hung from it, poised to swing down to the next platform, seemed to dangle into a deep pit of rain whose sides were incessantly collapsing. The thought of having to jump to the platform made her flinch back; she could imagine herself losing her footing, slithering off into space.

She was about to close the window, for the flock of papers on her desk had begun to flap, when she glimpsed movement in the unlit warehouse opposite and just below her. She was reminded of a maggot, writhing in food. Of course, that was because she was glimpsing it through the warehouse windows, small dark holes. It was reflected from her building, which was why it looked so large and puffily vague. It must be Mr Tuttle, for as it moved, she heard a scuffling below her, retreating from the lifts.

She'd closed the window by the time Steve returned. "You didn't find him, did you? Never mind," she said, for he was frowning.

Did he feel she was spying on him? At once his face grew blank. Perhaps he resented her knowing, first that he'd gone down to the sub-basement, now that he'd been outwitted. When he sat at his desk at the far end of the office, the emptiness between them felt like a rebuff. "Do you fancy some tea?" she said, to placate him.

"I'll make it. A special treat." He jumped up at once and strode to the lobby.

Why was he so eager? Five minutes later, as she leafed through someone's private life, she wondered if he meant to creep up on her, if that was the

joke he had been planning behind his mask. Her father had used to pounce on her to make her shriek when she was little—when he had still been able to. She turned sharply, but Steve had pulled open the doors of the out-of-work lift shaft and was peering down, apparently listening. Perhaps it was Mr Tuttle he meant to surprise, not her.

The tea was hot and fawn, but little else. Why did it seem to taste of the lingering stench? Of course, Steve hadn't closed the door of the room off the lobby, where Mr Tuttle's sandwiches must still be festering. She hurried out and slammed the door with the hand that wasn't covering her mouth.

On impulse she went to the doors of the lift shaft where Steve had been listening. They opened easily as curtains; for a moment she was teetering on the edge. The shock blurred her vision, but she knew it wasn't Mr Tuttle who was climbing the lift cord like a fat pale monkey on a stick. When she screwed up her eyes and peered into the dim well, of course there was nothing.

Steve was watching her when she returned to her desk. His face was absolutely noncommittal. Was he keeping something from her—a special joke, perhaps? Here it came; he was about to speak. "How's your father?" he said. It sounded momentarily like a comedian's catchphrase. "Oh, he's happier now," she blurted. "They've got a new stock of large-print books in the library."

"Is there someone who can sit with him?"

"Sometimes." The community spirit had faded once the mine owners had moved on, leaving the area honeycombed with mines, burdened with unemployment. People seemed locked into themselves, afraid of being robbed of the little they had left.

"I was wondering if he's all right on his own."

"He'll have to be, won't he." She was growing angry; he was as bad as Mr Williams, reminding her of things it was no use remembering.

"I was just thinking that if you want to slope off home, I won't tell anyone. You've already done more work than some of the rest of them would do in an evening."

She clenched her fists beneath the desk to hold on to her temper. He must want to leave early himself and so was trying to persuade her. No doubt he had problems of his own—perhaps they were the secret behind his face—

but he mustn't try to make her act dishonestly. Or was he testing her? She knew so little about him. "He'll be perfectly safe," she said. "He can always knock on the wall if he needs anyone."

Though his face stayed blank his eyes, frustrated now, gave him away. Five minutes later he was craning out of the window over the fire escape, while Elaine pinned flapping files down with both hands. Did he really expect his date, if that was his problem, to come out on a night like this? It would be just like a man to expect her to wait outside.

The worst of it was that Elaine felt disappointed, which was absurd and infuriating. She knew perfectly well that the only reason he was working tonight was that one of the seniors had to do so. Good God, what had she expected to come of an evening alone with him? They were both in their forties—they knew what they wanted by now, which in his case was bound to be someone younger than Elaine. She hoped he and his girlfriend would be very happy. Her hands on the files were tight fists.

When he slammed the window she saw that his face was glistening. Of course it wasn't sweat, only rain. He hurried away without looking at her, and vanished into the lift. Perhaps the girl was waiting in the doorway, unable to rouse Mr Tuttle to let her in. Elaine hoped Steve wouldn't bring her upstairs. She would be a distraction, that was why. Elaine was here to work.

And she wasn't about to be distracted by Steve and his attempts at jokes. She refused to turn when she heard the soft sounds by the lifts. No doubt he was peering through the lobby window at her, waiting for her to turn and jump. Or was it his girlfriend? As Elaine reached across her desk for a file she thought that the face was pale and very fat. Elaine was damned if she would give her the satisfaction of being noticed—but when she tried to work she couldn't concentrate. She turned angrily. The lobby was deserted.

In a minute she would lose her temper. She could see where he was hiding, or they were: the door of the room off the lobby was ajar. She turned away, determined to work, but the deserted office wouldn't let her; each alley between the filing cabinets was a hiding place, the buzz of the defective light and the fusillade of rain could hide the sound of soft footsteps. It was no longer at all funny. He was going too far.

At last he came in from the lobby, with no attempt at stealth. Perhaps he had tired of the joke. He must have been to the street door: his forehead was

wet, though it didn't look like rain. Would he go back to work now, and pretend that the urn's room was empty? No, he must have thought of a new ruse, for he began pacing from cabinet to cabinet, glancing at files, stuffing them back into place. Was he trying to make her as impatient as he appeared to be? His quick sharp footsteps seemed to grow louder and more nerve-racking, like the ticking of the clock when she was lying awake, afraid to doze off in case her father needed her. "Steve, for heaven's sake, what's wrong?"

He stopped in the act of pulling a file from its cabinet. He looked abashed, at a loss for words, like a schoolboy caught stealing. She couldn't help taking pity on him; her resentment had been presumptuous. "You didn't go down to find Mr Tuttle just now, did you?" she said, to make it easier for him.

But he looked even less at ease. "No, I didn't. I don't think he's here at all. I think he left hours ago."

Why must he lie? They had both heard the caretaker on the floor below. Steve seemed determined to go on. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I'm beginning to suspect that he sneaks off home as soon as he can once the building's empty."

He was speaking low, which annoyed her: didn't he want his girlfriend to hear? "But there's someone else in the building," he said.

"Oh yes," she retorted. "I'm sure there is." Why did he have to dawdle instead of coming out with the truth? He was worse than her father when he groped among his memories.

He frowned, obviously not sure how much she knew. "Whoever it is, they're up to no good. I'll tell you the rest once we're out of the building. We mustn't waste any more time."

His struggles to avoid the truth amused and irritated her. The moisture on his forehead wasn't rain at all. "If they're up to no good," she said innocently, "we ought to wait until the police arrive."

"No, we'll call the police once we're out." He seemed to be saying anything that came into his head. How much longer could he keep his face blank? "Listen," he said, his fist crumpling the file, "I'll tell you why Tuttle doesn't stay here at night. The cleaners too, I think he told them. When the men were cleaning out the sub-basement, some of the food disappeared

overnight. You understand what that means? Someone stole a hundredweight of rotten food. The men couldn't have cared less, they treated it as a joke, and there was no sign how anyone could have got in. But as he says, that could mean that whatever it was was clever enough to conceal the way in. Of course I thought he was drunk or joking, but now..."

His words hung like dust in the air. She didn't trust herself to speak. How dare he expect her to swallow such rubbish, as if she were too stupid to know what was going on? Her reaction must have shown on her face; she had never heard him speak coldly before. "We must go immediately," he said.

Her face was blazing. "Is that an order?"

"Yes, it is. I'll make sure you don't lose by it." His voice grew authoritative. "I'll call the lift while you fetch your coat."

Blind with anger, she marched to the cloakroom at the far end of the office from the lobby. As she grabbed her coat the hangers clashed together, a shrill violent sound which went some way towards expressing her feelings. Since Steve had no coat, he would be soaked. Though that gave her no pleasure, she couldn't help smiling.

The windows were shaking with rain. In the deserted office her footsteps sounded high-pitched, nervous. No, she wasn't on edge, only furious. She didn't mind passing the alleys between the cabinets, she wouldn't deign to look, not even at the alley where a vague shadow was lurching forward; it was only the shadow of a cabinet, jerked by the defective light. She didn't falter until she came in sight of the lobby, where there was no sign of Steve.

Had he gone without her? Was he smuggling out his girlfriend? They weren't in the room off the lobby, which was open and empty; the overturned waste bin seemed to demonstrate their haste. The doors of the disused lift shaft were open too. They must have opened when Steve had called the other lift. Everything could be explained; there was no reason for her to feel that something was wrong.

But something was. Between the two lift shafts, the call button was glowing. That could mean only one thing: the working lift hadn't yet answered the call. There was no other exit from the lobby—but there was no sign of Steve. When she made herself go to the disused lift shaft, it was only in order to confirm that her thought was absurd. Clinging to the edges

of the doorway, she leaned out. The lift was stranded in the sub-basement, where it was very dim. At first all she could distinguish was that the trapdoor in its roof was open, though the opening was largely covered by a sack. Could anything except a sack be draped so limply? Yes, for it was Steve, his eyes like glass that was forcing their lids wide, his mouth gagged with what appeared to be a torn-off wad of dough—except that the dough had fingers and a thumb.

She was reeling, perhaps over the edge of the shaft. No, she was stumbling back into the foyer, and already less sure what she'd glimpsed. Steve was dead, and she must get out of the building; she could think of nothing else. Thank God, she need not think, for the working lift had arrived. Was there soft movement in the disused shaft, a chorus of sucking like the mouthing of a crowd of babies? Nothing could have made her look. She staggered away, between the opening doors—into total darkness.

For a moment she thought she'd stepped out into an empty well. But there was a floor underfoot; the lift's bulb must have blown. As the door clamped shut behind her, the utter darkness closed in.

She was scrabbling at the metal wall in a frantic bid to locate the buttons—to open the doors, to let in some light—before she controlled herself. Which was worse: a quick descent in the darkness, or to be trapped alone on the sixth floor? In any case, she needn't suffer the dark. Hurriedly she groped in her handbag for her lighter.

She flicked the lighter uselessly once, twice, as the lift reached the fifth floor. The sudden plunge in her guts wasn't only shock; the lift had juddered to a halt. She flicked the lighter desperately. It had just lit when the doors hobbled open.

The fifth floor was unlit. Beyond the lobby she could see the windows of the untenanted office, swarming with rain and specks of light. The bare floor looked like a carpet of dim fog, interrupted by angular patches of greater dimness, blurred rugs of shadow. There was no sign of Mr Tuttle or whomever she'd heard from above. The doors were closing, but she wasn't reassured: if the lift had begun to misbehave, the least it could do would be to stop at every floor.

The doors closed her in with her tiny light. Vague reflections of the flame hung on the walls and tinged the greyish metal yellow; the roof was a hovering blotch. All the lighter had achieved was to remind her how

cramped the lift was. She stared at the doors, which were trembling. Was there a movement beyond them other than the outbursts of rain? When the doors parted, she retreated a step. The fourth floor was a replica of the fifth—bare floors colourless with dimness, windows that looked shattered by rain—but the shuffling was closer. Was the floor of the lobby glistening in patches, as though from moist footsteps? The doors were hesitating, she was brandishing her tiny flame as though it might defend her—then the doors closed reluctantly, the lift faltered downwards.

She'd had no time to sigh with relief, if indeed she had meant to, when she heard the lobby doors open above her. A moment later the lift shook. Something had plumped down on its roof.

At once, with a shock that felt as though it would tear out her guts, she knew what perhaps she had known, deep down, for a while: Steve hadn't been trying to frighten her—he had been trying not to. She hadn't heard Mr Tuttle on the fifth floor, nor any imaginary girlfriend of Steve's. Whatever she had heard was above her now, fumbling softly at the trapdoor.

It couldn't get in. She could hear that it couldn't, not before the lift reached the third—oh God, make the lift be quick! Then she could run for the fire escape, which wasn't damaged except on the sixth. She was thinking quickly now, almost in a trance that carried her above her fear, aware of nothing except the clarity of her plan—and it was no use.

The doors were only beginning to open as they reached the third when the lift continued downwards without stopping. Either the weight on its roof, or the tampering, was sending it down. As the doors gaped to display the brick wall of the shaft, then closed again, the trapdoor clanged back and something like a hand came reaching down towards her.

It was very large. If it found her, it would engulf her face. It was the colour of ancient dough, and looked puffed up as if by decay; patches of the flesh were torn and ragged, but there seemed to be no blood, only greyness. She clamped her left hand over her mouth, which was twitching uncontrollably, and thrust the lighter at the swollen groping fingers.

They hissed in the flame and recoiled, squirming. Whitish beads had broken out on them. In a way the worst thing was the absence of a cry. The hand retreated through the opening, scraping the edge, and a huge vague face peered down with eyes like blobs of dough. She felt a surge of hysterical mirth at the way the hand had fled—but she choked it back, for

she had no reason to feel triumphant. Her skirmish had distracted her from the progress of the lift, which had reached the bottom of the shaft.

Ought she to struggle with the doors, try to prevent them from opening? It was too late. They were creeping back, they were open now, and she could see the sub-basement. At least, she could see darkness which her light couldn't even reach. She had an impression of an enormous doorway, beyond which the darkness, if it was in proportion, might extend for hundreds of yards; she thought of the mouth of a sewer or a mine. The stench of putrid food was overwhelming, parts of the dark looked restless and puffy. But when she heard scuttling, and a dim shape came darting towards her, it proved to be a large rat.

Though that was bad enough, it mustn't distract her from the thing above her, on the lift. It had no chance to do so. The rat was yards away from her, and darting aside from her light, when she heard a spongy rush and the rat was overwhelmed by a whitish flood like a gushing of effluent. She backed away until the wall of the lift arrested her. She could still see too much—but how could she make herself put out the flame, trap herself in the dark?

For the flood was composed of obese bodies which clambered over one another, clutching for the trapped rat. The rat was tearing at the pudgy hands, ripping pieces from the doughy flesh, but that seemed not to affect them at all. Huge toothless mouths gaped in the puffy faces, collapsed inwards like senile lips, sucking loudly, hungrily. Three of the bloated heads fell on the rat, and she heard its squeals above their sucking.

Then the others that were clambering over them, out of the dark, turned towards her. Great moist nostrils were dilating and vanishing in their noseless faces. Could they see her light with their blobs of eyes, or were they smelling her terror? Perhaps they'd had only soft rotten things to eat down here, but they were learning fast. Hunger was their only motive, ruthless, all-consuming.

They came jostling towards the lift. Once, delirious, she'd heard all the sounds around her grow stealthily padded, but this softness was far worse. She was trying both to stand back and to jab the lift button, quite uselessly; the doors refused to budge. The doughy shapes would pile in like tripe, suffocating her, putting out the flame, gorging themselves on her in the dark. The one that had ridden the lift was slithering down the outside to join them.

Perhaps its movement unburdened the lift, or jarred a connection into place, for all at once the doors were closing. Swollen hands were thumping them, soft fingers like grubs were trying to squeeze between them, but already the lift was sailing upwards. Oh God, suppose it went straight up to the sixth floor! But she'd found the ground floor button, though it twitched away from her, shaken by the flame, and the lift was slowing. Through the slit between the doors, beyond the glass doors to the street, a streetlamp blazed like the sun. The lift's doors opened, and the doughy face lurched in, its fat white blind eyes bulging, its avid mouth huge as a fist. It took her a moment prolonged as a nightmare to realise that it had been crushed between lift and shaft—for as the doors struggled open, the face began to tear. Screaming, she dragged the doors open, tearing the body in half. As she ran through it she heard it plump at the foot of the shaft, to be met by a soft eager rush—but she was fleeing blindly into the torrent of rain, towards the steep maze of unlit streets, her father at the fireside, his quiet vulnerable demand to know all that she'd done today.

Calling Card

"*Calling Card* was written (as *First Foot*) in response to a commission from the *Liverpool Daily Post* to write a ghost story for Christmas and the New Year, which the newspaper then refused to publish."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Dark Companions*

"I started *Calling Card* on 24 November 1978 and completed it two days later. At that stage it was called *First Foot*, a reference to a common New Year's Eve tradition in Britain. It was written in response to a request from the local newspaper for a two-thousand-word ghost story set on Merseyside during the festive season. Alas, the commissioning editor found it too gruesome—presumably he didn't know the kind of thing I wrote."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the 2011 edition of *Dark Companions*

Written In: 1978 (The original Dark Companions introduction identified 1974 as the date of writing; the afterword to the 2011 edition supersedes this.)
First published in *65 Great Spine Chillers*, 1982
Also published in: *Dark Companions*

Dorothy Harris stepped off the pavement and into her hall. As she stooped groaning to pick up the envelopes the front door opened, opened, a yawn that wouldn't be suppressed. She wrestled it shut—she must ask Simon to see to it, though certainly not over Christmas—then she began to open the cards.

Here was Father Christmas, and here he was again, apparently after dieting. Here was a robin like a rosy apple with a beak, and here was an envelope whose handwriting staggered: Simon's and Margery's children, perhaps?

The card showed a church on a snowy hill. The hill was bare except for a smudge of ink. Though the card was unsigned, there was writing within. A Very Happy Christmas And A Prosperous New Year, the message should have said—but now it said A Very Harried Christmas And No New Year. She turned back to the picture, her hands shaking. It wasn't just a smudge of ink; someone had drawn a smeary cross on the hill: a grave.

Though the name on the envelope was a watery blur, the address was certainly hers. Suddenly the house—the kitchen and living room, the two bedrooms with her memories stacked neatly against the walls—seemed far too large and dim. Without moving from the front door she phoned Margery.

'Is it Grandma?' Margery had to hush the children while she said, 'You come as soon as you like, mummy.'

Lark Lane was deserted. An unsold Christmas tree loitered in a shop doorway, a gargoyle craned out from the police station. Once Margery had moved away, the nearness of the police had been reassuring—not that Dorothy was nervous, like some of the old folk these days—but the police station was only a community now.

The bus already sounded like a pub. She sat outside on the ferry, though the bench looked and felt like black ice. Lights fished in the Mersey, gulls drifted down like snowflakes from the muddy sky. A whitish object grabbed the rail, but of course it was only a gull. Nevertheless she was glad that Simon was waiting with the car at Woodside.

As soon as the children had been packed off to bed so that Father Christmas could get to work, she produced the card. It felt wet, almost slimy, though it hadn't before. Simon pointed out what she'd overlooked: the age of the stamp. 'We weren't even living there then,' Margery said. 'You wouldn't think they would bother delivering it after sixty years.'

'A touch of the Christmas spirit.'

'I wish they hadn't bothered,' Margery said. But her mother didn't mind now; the addressee must have died years ago. She turned the conversation to old times, to Margery's father. Later she gazed from her bedroom window, at the houses of Bebington sleeping in pairs. A man was creeping about the house, but it was only Simon, laden with presents.

In the morning the house was full of cries of delight, gleaming new toys, balls of wrapping paper big as cabbages. In the afternoon the adults, bulging with turkey and pudding, lolled in chairs. When Simon drove her home that night, Dorothy noticed that the unsold Christmas tree was still there, a scrawny glistening shape at the back of the shop doorway. As soon as Simon left she found herself thinking about the unpleasant card. She tore it up, then went determinedly to bed.

Boxing Day was her busiest time, what with Christmas dinner Mark II, and making sure the house was impeccable, and hiding small presents for the children to find. She wished she could see them more often, but they and their parents had their own lives to lead.

An insect clung to a tinsel globe on the tree. When she reached out to squash the insect it wasn't there, neither on the globe nor on the floor. Could it have been the reflection of someone thin outside the window? Nobody was there now.

She liked the house best when it was full of laughter, and it would be again soon: 'We'll get a sitter,' Margery promised, 'and first-foot you on New Year's Eve.' That reminded Dorothy to offer the children a holiday treat. Everything seemed fine, even when they went to the door to leave. 'Grandma, someone's left you a present,' little Denise cried.

Then she cried out, and dropped the package. Perhaps the wind had snatched it from her hands. As the package, which looked wet and mouldy, struck the kerb it broke open. Did its contents scuttle out and sidle away into the dark? Surely that was the play of the wind, which tumbled carton and wrapping away down the street.

Someone must have used her doorway for a waste bin, that was all. Dorothy lay in bed, listening to the wind which groped around the windowless side of the house, that faced onto the alley. She kept thinking she was on the ferry, backing away from the rail, forgetting that the rail was also behind her. Her nervousness annoyed her—she was acting like an old fogey—which was why, next afternoon, she walked to Otterspool promenade.

Gulls and planes sailed over the Mersey, which was deserted except for buoys. On the far bank, tiny towns and stalks of factory chimneys stood at the foot of an enormous frieze of clouds. Sunlight slipped through to Birkenhead and Wallasey, touching up the colours of microscopic streets; specks of windows glinted. She enjoyed none of this, for the slopping of water beneath the promenade seemed to be pacing her. Worse, she couldn't make herself go to the rail to prove that there was nothing.

Really, it was heartbreaking. One vicious card and she felt nervous in her own house. A blurred voice seemed to creep behind the carols on the radio, lowing out of tune. Next day she took her washing to Lark Lane, in search of distraction as much as anything.

The Westinghouse Laundromat was deserted. O O O, the washing machines said emptily. There was only herself, and her dervishes of clothes, and a black plastic bag almost as tall as she was. If someone had abandoned it, whatever its lumpy contents were, she could see why, for it was leaking;

she smelled stagnant water. It must be a draught that made it twitch feebly. Nevertheless, if she had been able to turn off her machine she might have fled.

She mustn't grow neurotic. She still had friends to visit. The following day she went to a friend whose flat overlooked Wavertree Park. It was all very convivial—a rainstorm outside made the mince pies more warming, the chat flowed as easily as the whisky—but she kept glancing at the thin figure who stood in the park, unmoved by the downpour. The trails of rain on the window must be lending him their colour, for his skin looked like a snail's.

Eventually the 68 bus, meandering like a drunkard's monologue, took her home to Aigburth. No, the man in the park hadn't really looked as though his clothes and his body had merged into a single greyish mass. Tomorrow she was taking the children for their treat, and that would clear her mind.

She took them to the aquarium. Piranhas sank stonily, their sides glittering like Christmas cards. Toads were bubbling lumps of tar. Finny humbugs swam, and darting fish wired with light. Had one of the tanks cracked? There seemed to be a stagnant smell.

In the museum everything was under glass: shrunken heads like sewn leathery handbags, a watchmaker's workshop, buses passing as though the windows were silent films. Here was a slum street, walled in by photographs of despair, real flagstones underfoot, overhung by streetlamps on brackets. She halted between a grid and a drinking fountain; she was trapped in the dimness between blind corners, and couldn't see either way. Why couldn't she get rid of the stagnant smell? Grey forlorn faces, pressed like specimens, peered out of the walls. 'Come on, quickly,' she said, pretending that only the children were nervous.

She was glad of the packed crowds in Church Street, even though the children kept letting go of her hands. But the stagnant smell was trailing her, and once, when she grabbed for little Denise's hand, she clutched someone else's, which felt soft and wet. It must have been nervousness which made her fingers seem to sink into the hand.

That night she returned to the aquarium and found she was locked in. Except for the glow of the tanks, the narrow room was oppressively dark. In the nearest tank a large dead fish floated towards her, out of weeds. Now she was in the tank, her nails scrabbling at the glass, and she saw that it

wasn't a fish but a snail-coloured hand, which closed spongily on hers. When she woke, her scream made the house sound very empty.

At least it was New Year's Eve. After tonight she could stop worrying. Why had she thought that? It only made her more nervous. Even when Margery phoned to confirm they would first-foot her, that reminded her how many hours she would be on her own. As the night seeped into the house, the emptiness grew.

A knock at the front door made her start, but it was only the Harveys, inviting her next door for sherry and sandwiches. While she dodged a sudden rainstorm Mr Harvey dragged at her front door, one hand through the letter-box, until the latch clicked.

After several sherries Dorothy remembered something she'd once heard. 'The lady who lived next door before me—didn't she have trouble with her son?'

'He wasn't right in the head. He got so he'd go for anyone, even if he'd never met them before. She got so scared of him she locked him out one New Year's Eve. They say he threw himself in the river, though they never found the body.'

Dorothy wished she hadn't asked. She thought of the body, rotting in the depths. She must go home, in case Simon and Margery arrived. The Harveys were next door if she needed them.

The sherries had made her sleepy. Only the ticking of her clock, clipping away the seconds, kept her awake. Twenty past eleven. The splashing from the gutters sounded like wet footsteps pacing outside the window. She had never noticed she could smell the river in her house. She wished she had stayed longer with the Harveys; she would have been able to hear Simon's car.

Twenty to twelve. Surely they wouldn't wait until midnight. She switched on the radio for company. A compère was making people laugh; a man was laughing thickly, sounding waterlogged. Was he a drunk in the street? He wasn't on the radio. She mustn't brood; why, she hadn't put out the sherry glasses; that was something to do, to distract her from the intolerably measured counting of the clock, the silenced radio, the emptiness displaying her sounds—

Though the knock seemed enormously loud, she didn't start. They were here at last, though she hadn't heard the car. It was New Year's Day. She ran, and had reached the front door when the phone shrilled. That startled her so badly that she snatched the door open before lifting the receiver.

Nobody was outside—only a distant uproar of cheers and bells and horns—and Margery was on the phone. 'We've been held up, mummy. There was an accident in the tunnel. We'll be over as soon as we can.'

Then who had knocked? It must have been a drunk; she heard him stumbling beside the house, thumping on her window. He'd better take himself off, or she would call Mr Harvey to deal with him. But she was still inside the doorway when she saw the object on her step.

Good God, was it a rat? No, just a shoe, so ancient that it looked stuffed with mould. It wasn't mould, only a rotten old sock. There was something in the sock, something that smelled of stagnant water and worse. She stooped to peer at it, and then she was struggling to close the door, fighting to make the latch click, no breath to spare for a scream. She'd had her first foot, and now—hobbling doggedly alongside the house, its hands slithering over the wall—here came the rest of the body.

Little Man

Written in: 1978
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Also published in: *Waking Nightmares*, *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

Despite all his frustrations, Neal didn't go straight to the murder machine. First he played the pinballs, old friends he could make allowances for: Lady Luck and her costive straining to produce a ball. King Pin with his buzzing spastic flipper. Lucky Fruit who tricked you into thinking that your ball had reached the replay lane, until a kink in the wire rail let it slip out of play. He lost on all of them, and was glad he'd left the murder machine until last: it always calmed him. It was December. A wind shrill as gulls swept up from the beach, along the stubby Bed & Breakfast terraces, and rattled the windows of The Mint. The fairground was closed for the winter; the rides huddled beneath canvas, enormous doughnuts, giant spiders; the track of the roller coaster might have been the skeleton of a dinosaur which had crawled up from the beach to die. All summer Neal had ridden the dragon of the coaster, which had let him look down on people for once. They'd looked as small as the figures in the murder machine.

He pushed his coin into the rusty slot and gripped the sides of the machine. The miniature street—little more than a strip of plywood on which house-fronts were cartooned—was on a level with his face. As he leaned closer to the glass, the machine rocked forward on its lame front leg. Neither the movement nor his coin brought the performers out of hiding. Sometimes they arrived halfway through the show, like actors who'd sneaked out for a drink.

Here came a woman, juddering out of a hole in the left-hand end of the plywood, painted to resemble the mouth of an alley. She was daubed like a tin soldier—red cheeks, orange flesh, staring eyes; the buttons of her red coat were blurred dabs of white paint. A metal stalk protruded between her feet and jerked her along a track.

She was halfway down the street when a door popped open and the man with the knife pounced, dragging her inside. The door twitched shut.

Beyond the polythene window a light glared red, and the squealing began, something like a siren, something like a mouse. Neal couldn't see what was happening beyond the crimsoned window, even when he pressed his face against the glass.

The light blinked out, the squealing ran down. That was all: no policeman today. No two performances were the same, which was why the machine fascinated him—but when would it repeat the performance he was sure he'd once seen?

He stood back, rubbing the rusty stains from his hands. The sounds of the arcade came flooding back: the giggles of a little girl who was riding a mechanical turtle, the worn-out gunfire of an electronic rifle range, the unsteady tape of rock music, doggedly repeating itself. Again the world was bigger than he was—and it included school.

This year school was worse than ever. Half the masters seemed to delight in humiliating him, pretending they couldn't see him when he was standing up. "Where's that wild guess coming from? Oh, *there* you are." Some were cruel without meaning to be: the English master who'd persuaded him to appear in the end-of-term play, and even Neal's best friend Jim. "Come on, Conan," Jim said. 'It's about time you came to the disco."

The disco was beside the promenade. Gulls swooped over the dark beach, their cries sharp as splintered ice, sharp as the creases of Neal's trousers. He wondered why he'd bothered to dress carefully, for the interior of the disco was chaotic with lights and darkness. When the girls approached he wondered why he'd bothered to come at all.

"Brought your little brother?" one shouted at Jim above the bombardment of music.

"Don't be funny, Di. This is my friend Neal. Karen, this is Neal."

"Hello down there," Karen said.

When the girls danced away Neal said, "I'm going." Jim persuaded him to stay and found a partner whose friend let Neal buy her a Coke, then another, while he put off the moment when they would have to dance. Eventually they did, her lit chin hovering above him like a UFO, and he could tell that she'd taken pity on him. He left as soon as he could, hating himself.

If The Mint hadn't been closed for the night he would have gone straight to the machine. As he stalked home his surroundings looked like shrunken

cartoons of themselves, hardly convincing: the locked fairground and Crazy Golf, the terraces that claimed to be full of hotels. Whenever he felt like this he seemed to be viewing the world through glass, a barrier that walled him into himself, and now that he'd reached puberty the barrier was more difficult to break. It was no wonder. Apart from everything else, each rehearsal increased his dread of the end-of-term play. Why had he let himself be roped in? So that the English master would be on his side? He would pretend to be ill, except that his parents would know he was faking. They had enough to worry about now that two of the families who always stayed in the guest house were going abroad next summer. "You show them," his mother had cried when he'd told her about the play. All he was likely to show the audience, he thought bitterly as he slammed the ball into Lady Luck, was how much of a fool he was.

At least the murder machine distracted him. He couldn't time the performances since he had no watch, but often the arcade seemed to recede, leaving him alone with the machine, for hours. Sometimes a policeman dragged the man in black into a doorway beneath a sketch of a police station's lamp. He was only pretending to drag him—his hand wasn't even touching the murderer's collar—and Neal imagined that as soon as they vanished beyond the door, the man in black dealt with him.

But what did the man in black do? Once, seconds after the scarlet woman had veered into his room, his door twitched ajar. Neal pressed his forehead against the glass. Murderer and victim were standing absolutely still—the man's eggshell face was turned toward Neal, the lifeless pinprick eyes and the mouth like a cut just starting to bleed—yet Neal had the impression that he'd stopped whatever he'd been doing. As the door snapped shut, he glimpsed red notches deep in the back of the woman's neck and in her left wrist.

That reminded him of something someone had once told him. Had it been his grandfather? What exactly had he said? He was no longer alive to be asked. Neal found himself trying to remember in class, the masters' voices receding, calling him back with questions he couldn't answer. "Use your little head," one master told him. Even the sarcasm couldn't reach him; the looming memory preoccupied him—until the end of term, until the play.

As soon as he emerged onto the stage, among the heaps of polystyrene and tinsel that were meant to look like snow, his heart sank. "There you are,

Imp," said the pantomime magician, who was two years older than Neal. Neal's parents were sitting in the front row—his mother emitting small dismayed cries at any risqué jokes, his father frowning down at his fingernails—and so Neal had to scurry about squeaking and pretend he was enjoying it, while he was thinking: scuttle, scuttle, like a rat. He was sure the audience was laughing at him, not with him.

"You were the best," his mother cried afterward. His father nodded gruffly, not looking at him. Neal was glad to get away from them, but before he reached the dressing room he came face to face with Roger. Roger, who had a patchy moustache which failed to hide his pimples, often bullied Neal. "Hello, Imp," he sneered.

"Sod off."

Roger's pasty face reddened and began to quiver. "Don't you tell me to sod off," he said, grabbing Neal with hands like bunches of raw sausage. Neal kicked him viciously on the shin, leaving him howling. "I'll get you for that after Christmas, you little bastard."

Lashing out had relieved Neal's tension, but not enough. He was ready for the murder machine, too much on edge to dawdle over the pinballs. All along the main street, shops were for sale; the circus posters that patched their windows shivered in the wind from the beach. Even the survivors—gift shops full of plastic and cardboard, fish and chip shops called The Chefs, Maxim's, Café de Paris—were dark. The dusty window of the Midland Café was sown with dozens of dead flies.

Neal reached The Mint and halted, his fists and feet clenching. A little girl and her parents were at his machine.

Slamming open the glass doors of the Mint didn't scare them off. He flounced over to King Pin and stood muttering, too impatient to catch the balls with the flippers. No doubt the family thought he was cursing the pinball, not the girl. She seemed to embody all his frustrations; his resentment was scraping his nerves, resentment harsh as the miserly clicking of the fruit machines, the clicking that grew vicious in his ears, and louder. When she screamed, his first reaction was to smile.

She shrank away from the machine and held up her hands, which were smeared red. Behind her, Neal saw, the murderer's door was wide open. Before he could glimpse what was happening beyond, it snapped shut. If

her parents hadn't been there he would have demanded to know what she'd seen, but they were ushering her out. "It's only paint," her mother said, which seemed further to upset the little girl. "Damned disgusting way to run a business," said the father, wondering perhaps where the paint had come from.

Though he hadn't had time to see into the murderer's room, Neal didn't resent the machine; it had got rid of the little girl, after all. The man's blank face with its pinhole eyes seemed friendly, the face of a beloved old toy. When the scarlet woman jerked into view, Neal observed that there were no red grooves in her neck or her wrist. He didn't understand, but he was prepared to wait for understanding.

Soon it was Christmas. His gifts came from The Money Spinner, one of the gift shops—a jigsaw, some pencils that changed colour halfway through. His parents could afford only a dwarfish turkey, and his mother stiffened when he helped himself to a second mince pie. VACANCY said the sign in their front window, which was how the house felt for the rest of the holidays. Perhaps one day he would live somewhere that didn't make him feel so small.

He went for walks along the coast road. At low tide, sea and sand and clouds were bare elongated strips. Splinters of pale green sky were set into the clouds. The miles of flat narrow road were deserted except for gulls, some of which perched like vultures on the waste bins above the beach. He could almost see a figure in black in the distance, dodging along the road from bin to concrete bin, where litter writhed feebly in the wind. His grandfather had described something like that figure once, but why should Neal think he needed to visualise it clearly? For nights he was unable to sleep until he tired himself out with his efforts. Once, at the start of a dream, the figure jerked toward him, and he would have seen its face if the shrieks of gulls, disturbed by something on the coast road, hadn't wakened him. He was still trying to grasp it, no longer even wondering why he should, when the spring term began by confronting him with Roger.

Roger was gripping the rusty railings of the school-yard as if they were spears. "Imp, imp, imp," he sputtered, like an engine trying to start. 'I've been waiting for you, Imp. I've got something to give you tonight, behind the sheds."

"Leave him alone," Jim said. "Pick on someone your own size."

In some ways Neal was glad he'd intervened, for if it came to a fight between himself and Roger he knew he had no chance. But Roger sneered, "What are you afraid of, little boy? Afraid you won't be able to grow up?"

"Come on, Conan. Don't let him rile you."

"Just stop calling me that," Neal shouted. Suddenly he hated both of them. He stalked into the school, where Roger could do nothing.

All day Neal's mind and body felt as though they were seething. Every few minutes he had to wipe his hands down the sides of his desk. Yes, he would fight Roger; he'd kick him in the groin, as Jim had told him they did in the films. Suppose he missed? Roger would grab his leg and break it, he'd throw him down and kick his ribs in, stamp on his face—

"Wake up, Imp. Didn't you hear the question?" The master looked bored, unaware of any sarcasm; Neal was the Imp and that was all there was to it. At four o'clock, almost blind with self-disgust, Neal walked away from the school so quickly he might as well have been running.

The streets were cartoons, hardly even two-dimensional. Nothing was real except him and his thoughts. The sounds of The Mint fell away, leaving him alone with his friend. Murderer and victim disappeared into the room. Was there a shadow on the polythene window, a shadow that looked to be slicing and sawing? When the lights in the machine went out Neal lingered, imagining the tiny black-eyed face waiting in the dark, though it didn't seem so tiny once the dark grew as large as his feelings.

He had no idea how long he stood in front of the machine, nor what he was thinking. One thing was sure: that night he didn't think of Roger. He slept soundly, free of dreams. Next morning Jim told him that Roger had been knocked down on the coast road. He'd stepped in front of the car without looking, though he should have seen it coming hundreds of yards away; nobody could tell what had distracted him. Jim stared, men walked away, as Neal grinned.

Let him go: Neal didn't need him. Everyone had better watch out now, even Jim, if that was his attitude. The sarcasm of the masters no longer bothered Neal; the more they taunted him, he felt, the worse it would be for them, though he didn't examine why he thought so. His sense of security lasted until the night he went to see John Travolta in *Carrie*.

The Grand, which stood at the far end of the promenade, hadn't lived up to its name for years. Its ochre frontage looked built of sand, and ready to crumble. Ghosts of pre-war prices clung to the glass of the pay-box. The manager stood at the top of the steps to the foyer; the knees and elbows of his dress suit were shiny as his toecaps. "About turn," he said to Neal, "This isn't for kids."

Neal's lips felt stiff and swollen, almost paralysed. "I was eighteen last month."

"Aye, and I'm John Travolting. Scuttle away now, scuttle away." What made it worse was that he'd just let in two girls who Neal knew were barely fourteen, younger than himself. Worse yet, they were with Roger, who was hobbling boastfully on crutches. Crowing at Neal, the three vanished into the cinema.

Long before he reached The Mint he could see the shadow on the murderer's window, could hear the manager squealing in the tiny room. The shops on the main street were closed and dark, the bare road was the colour of ice on a pond; worn patches of light lay beneath the streetlamps. He was too deep in himself to wonder at first why there were new dummies in a shop that had been closed for months.

They weren't dummies, nor were they inside the window. They were four youths, absolutely still and silent except for the leathery creaking of their motorcycle gear. Were they waiting for him to turn his back before they pounced? Sweat stung him like lit matches.

As soon as he'd walked past, his neck and his limbs feeling stiff as china, they began to follow him. They still made no sound except for the creaking of leather. He didn't dare to run, for they could certainly outrun him, but if a single shop had been unlocked he might have dodged aside. Here at last was The Mint, but even that was no refuge. One stopped the door from closing with the metal toecap of his boot, and they crowded in after Neal.

"At least something's open in this frigging town," one said loudly. They must have driven along the coast, expecting the fairground to be open. They quickly grew intolerant of the eccentricities of the pinballs—one kicked Lady Luck as though that would tame her. Neal stood guarding the murder machine, which he didn't want to play while they were there, in case they came to watch.

The tallest of them sauntered over. "Go on, kid, put your money in if you're going to." Neal could say nothing, and the youth shoved him aside. "Let someone else have a go, then."

Neal tried to push him away from the machine. Blood rushed to his head, which felt in danger of bursting. His lips were huge and parched. "It's mine," he spluttered.

"Hey, look at this. He wants a fight." The youth picked Neal up easily, and holding him like a ventriloquist's dummy, talked for him in a shrill mechanical voice. "It's mine! It's mine!"

"That's enough." It was Mr. Old, who ran The Mint "Put him down and get out, the four of you, or I'll call the police."

"Go on then," the leader said, dropping Neal so as to menace Mr. Old, "call the bloody police."

"That's exactly what I intend to do. You get away while you can, Neal. Run along now, go on!"

Neal could scarcely walk; his limbs were spastic with rage. He jerked along the street, looking for something to smash. Why couldn't it be the leader of the motorcyclists? When he saw the four emerging from The Mint, without a police car in sight, he fled. That night he lay sleepless for hours, punching the pillow in blind fury, clawing convulsively at the blankets.

In the morning he managed to control his rage, telling himself that tonight he would be alone with the machine. He'd play it until it showed him what he wanted to see, he vowed to himself; what had been troubling him since before Christmas.

Perhaps it was the vow that let him remember at last.

That afternoon one master was discussing local history: how the town had been built as a seaside resort for the Lancashire industrial towns, how it was dying of cheap Spanish holidays. Who could tell him more about the history of the town? Suddenly Neal could, and blurted it out as it came to him. "There was the man who started killing people when he came home from the first world war. He used to cut them up and leave the bits along the coast road. When the police caught him finally he tried to pretend he just had his hands in his pockets, only they weren't his hands."

"No need to sound so pleased about it. I should try to put it out of your mind if I were you," the master said, and called on someone else, leaving Neal feeling guilty and furious because he did. He'd been pleased about remembering, he told himself, and then he wondered if it would make a difference to the machine. Perhaps he would be able to make out what happened in the reddened room, now that he knew what he was looking for.

No, it would not. That was clear as soon as he came in sight of The Mint and saw the pavement outside, littered with broken glass. Every machine was wrecked. The murder machine was a tangle of metal and plywood and jagged glass, amid which he could see no figures at all. He didn't need to ask who had done all this: he could hear their motorcycles roaring along the beach.

He trudged down to the promenade, with not the least idea of what he meant to do. Again he felt crippled by rage. Above the sea the moon hung, a plate whose pattern looked worn and blurred. At the distant edge of the sea, against the dim glittering of the waves, the motorcycles raced back and forth. "You bastards," Neal screamed.

The riders heard him. Now it was fear that crippled his legs. The cycles roared like animals which knew they had trapped their prey. The cycle with the tallest rider reared up and came for Neal. He watched helplessly as it raced toward him, leaving a track pale as a snail's on the sand. The way the cycle grew as it sped closer seemed unreal as a dream, from which he wouldn't waken until it crashed into him. Even if he ran now, the rider would catch him long before he reached the houses. Nevertheless he tried to run, struggled to move his feet—just one and he'd be running. He was still fighting his paralysis when the rider leapt from the motorcycle.

For a moment Neal thought that he'd flung the cycle aside so as to grab him, then that the cycle had collided with a piece of driftwood lying on the beach, driftwood which had sprung up from the collision. But no, the dark shape wasn't wood, for it bounded over to the fallen rider, its movements stiff and jerky against the glittering of the waves. Confused, Neal thought it might be another of the cyclists—surely it must be a helmet, not the head, that looked pale as the moon—but only until it stooped to the groaning youth. Its movements were more assured now, the sawing of its right hand back and forth. Though the scene looked like a pantomime performed by dolls beside a toy motorcycle, the screams were appallingly human.

Neal ran from the coast road, afraid to look back. The streets were unreal, aloof from him, isolating him with his panic. The terraces of houses locked him out. Only the moon was menacingly vivid, a pale sketch of a face playing hide and seek with him among the houses.

By the time he reached home he was wheezing. He slammed the rusty gate behind him and stumbled along the few yards of path. He struggled to turn the key in the front door. Whatever had happened on the beach, it was nothing to do with him. He was home now, safe. The white face behind him was only the moon.

But there was a rusty movement, which might have been the gate—and a scraping voice, small but growing. "What shall we do next?" it said.

1979

The Burning

Written In: 1979
First published in *Ghosts And Scholars #3*, 1981
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Though crowds were making their way to the park, there were still bonfires in the streets. Patches of waste ground were heaped with flame; shadows jerked in gaping windows, made derelict houses flinch back from the creeping fire. When firemen arrived to put out the blaze, children began to stone them. Some of the crowds booed the firemen, some cheered a man who went for the children, brandishing a piece of wood and roaring. People haven't changed, Blake thought as he followed the crowds into the park.

What exactly did he mean? In the park he had no chance to think. At night, even in the open, he could hardly see his way; tonight the sky was a cave's roof of dark clouds overgrown by trees, the uneven ground was treacherous, disguised by fallen leaves. The park felt like rush hour in a blackout. He could only let the crowds bear him along.

Once he strayed onto what felt like a path—his eyes were still dazzled by the flames—where he almost stumbled into a small unlit bonfire. Around it several dim figures seemed to be awaiting a signal. He hurried to rejoin the crowds.

They weren't entirely reassuring. Apart from shuffling their feet, they made very little noise. Were they so eager for the yearly ritual that they had no time for speech? There were so many of them, crowding three deep for hundreds of yards along the fence that held them back from the display. Now they had begun to murmur, an impatient almost ominous sound, as undefined as the constant brooding of the city. He was beginning to wish he hadn't come.

Why had he come? Because it was Guy Fawkes Night, because he'd lost his job, because he had wanted to get out of the house—but those weren't answers to the question. He was here for the same reason as the rest of them: to watch a man burned to ashes.

Of course he wasn't a real man, only a guy—but there had been a real Guy, centuries ago, who had been bound to a hot stone until his flesh was seared. Perhaps Blake was just depressed, yet it seemed to him that while Halloween was supposed to be the feast of the macabre, tonight was altogether grimmer. How else could one describe a night when an executioner's victim was resurrected to be burned a thousandfold?

The display was beginning. Rockets flung out streamers of fire that glared red and blue and green on the clouds. Fireworks spat showers of crackling silver, juggled whirling balls of fire. The dance of light revealed the crowd, which was even larger than Blake had thought. The bonfire writhed with shadows. Above them the guy seemed to struggle. The glare turned the faces of the crowd into bright cardboard masks. Perhaps it was the light that made the watchers seem restless, though they had reason to be, for smoke was flooding over them from the display. There was no need to suppose they were impatient for the burning.

Blake thought they were. People hadn't changed. The crowd that had waited to watch Guy Fawkes hung, drawn and quartered must have looked as mindlessly eager—but why was this crowd so eager now, as men bearing flames converged on the bonfire? Bonfires had been for burning heretics, and also for public rejoicing; how had the two become combined? It was as though tonight's ceremony was so ancient that nobody could recall what it invoked.

People were milling about now, trying to avoid the smoke. Blake's eyes were a jumble of after-images; when someone peered round his shoulder to scrutinise him he couldn't see the face. Were several people searching? Were their faces lopsided as masks that had slipped awry?

He started, and came to himself. For a moment he'd known how it must feel to be trapped in a crowd through which searchers were closing in. Now they had moved away, if indeed they had been there at all. It was no wonder that he was thinking oddly, perhaps hallucinating, when he'd had so little sleep. Every time he managed to doze, the realisation that he had no job jarred him awake. There was no appeal against redundancy, nobody to blame, only the economic climate that also virtually ensured nobody else would employ him now.

"Remember, remember, the fifth of November," a man with a megaphone was saying, "gunpowder, treason and plot. I see no reason why gunpowder

treason should ever be forgot." All at once, as flames scrambled up the bonfire and the crowd cheered more loudly, Blake saw no reason either. The man up there was evil, and deserved to burn. The men who had put Blake out of a job, whoever and wherever they were, deserved it even more. His roar of approval was the loudest of any.

When he heard himself he stopped, dismayed. That was part of himself he didn't want to know. Had the searchers returned, or was everyone nearby peering at him? Ashamed to look, he stared at the bonfire. The face above it was burning now, the arms were writhing; one fell from the shoulder, into the roaring blaze. He could hardly bear to look.

It was quickly over, at least for the watchers. As far as a live victim was concerned, it must have taken longer. A last flourish of fireworks spelt out GOOD NIGHT. He was glad when they faded, for their glare made the faces around him seem even more like masks.

In the dark the crowd seemed to have grown. As people began to disperse, the park sounded like an enormous playground. Of course he'd known that there were many children, but now the thought dismayed him. Had children sounded so excited on the way home from public executions?

He must avoid these thoughts out here in the dark. He was thinking too vividly of Guy Fawkes, tortured and executed centuries ago, only to be revived each year for entertainment. Blake had been thinking about death recently, since it seemed he was no use to anyone. Perhaps death was a kind of sleep—but what if you were jarred awake each year for further torments? The intervals between would seem less and less like sleep.

Suddenly he wanted to be home. At least his house was familiar, empty of surprises. He stumbled along in the midst of the crowd that filled the park. When he glimpsed people their movements looked jerky, tangled among after-images. Here and there flashlights lapped the ground, revealing fallen leaves sketched by frost. The pools of light wavered away from him. At least they were taking the children with them.

Trees closed overhead. They looked like after-images too, branded on the looming sky. He had little time to notice, for he needed to watch his feet, if he could see them. At least the crowd was thinning, though the people around him stank of smoke. The rustling of leaves underfoot was harsh, almost deafening.

Here at last was a path; his feet had sensed it, even if he couldn't make it out. He hurried recklessly, anxious to come in sight of the main road, the streetlamps. His insomnia was oppressing him; the rustling around him sounded harsher, the figures appeared to be moving stiffly as cripples.

He was in too much of a hurry. For the second time that night he almost walked into the unlit bonfire. That was the fault of the people who were crowding him and who had given him no chance to dodge. There were only a few of them; the rest of the crowd, he realised suddenly, had gone. They'd better let him through, or he would make them—he didn't care how rude he had to be.

He was turning away from the bonfire when they seized him.

They were moving as swiftly as he'd thought they were. They were rustling, though there were no leaves underfoot. Their gloved hands felt soft and lumpy, too clumsy to hold him—but before he had thought to struggle they'd twisted wire around him and stuffed a wad smelling of petrol into his mouth.

When they toppled him backwards onto the bonfire he tried to lash out, but his hands and feet were bound tightly. His shoulder caught one of his captors in the face. That paralysed Blake more severely than his bonds had done. Not only did the figure's head feel softer than jelly, but the face slipped awry, revealing a pale blur.

As Blake lay helpless on the bonfire, shuddering as though that would break his bonds, he heard a sound of scrabbling around him in the dark. They were trying to light matches. He threw himself back and forth, but that only sank him further into the bonfire; twigs scratched his face and hands. When he tried to spit out the gag, he began to choke.

A match flared, and another. He saw hands, or stuffed gloves, touching flames to the bonfire on both sides of him. Twigs and leaves blazed up. He could feel the heat through his clothes. He shrank, digging his arms into his sides until he ached.

The flames sputtered and died. The scrabbling began again, sounding vicious now. The depths of the bonfire gave way, engulfing Blake further. The snapping of twigs deafened him, so that at first he wasn't sure that he was hearing a voice. "Good God, what's this?"

All at once lights were darting about the open space, glancing at the masked figures that stood immobile around the bonfire. The flashlights converged on Blake. "God Almighty," said one of the men, the one who'd held the megaphone. "Who did this to you?"

As soon as they'd pulled out the gag and untwisted the wires, Blake fled. Even if the figures propped against the trees were still now, he couldn't bear to stay near them. As he fled, he saw the men lighting the bonfire and throwing the figures into the flames. Was it only the leaves he heard squealing?

When he reached the main road at last, he looked back. Then he ran faster, dodging traffic. The streetlamps had dazzled him; he couldn't have been sure of what he was seeing—yet he thought he'd glimpsed flaming objects across the park, hobbling toward him as best they could as they burned.

He ran down his street, past crawling piles of ash. Against a pink glow deep in one of them, he glimpsed a feeble stirring of charred sticks. He slammed his front door behind him, but couldn't keep out the stench of smoke. He stood in the empty house, wondering if anything was left in the street fires that might move.

Illustration by Alan Hunter, taken from Ghosts And Scholars #3.

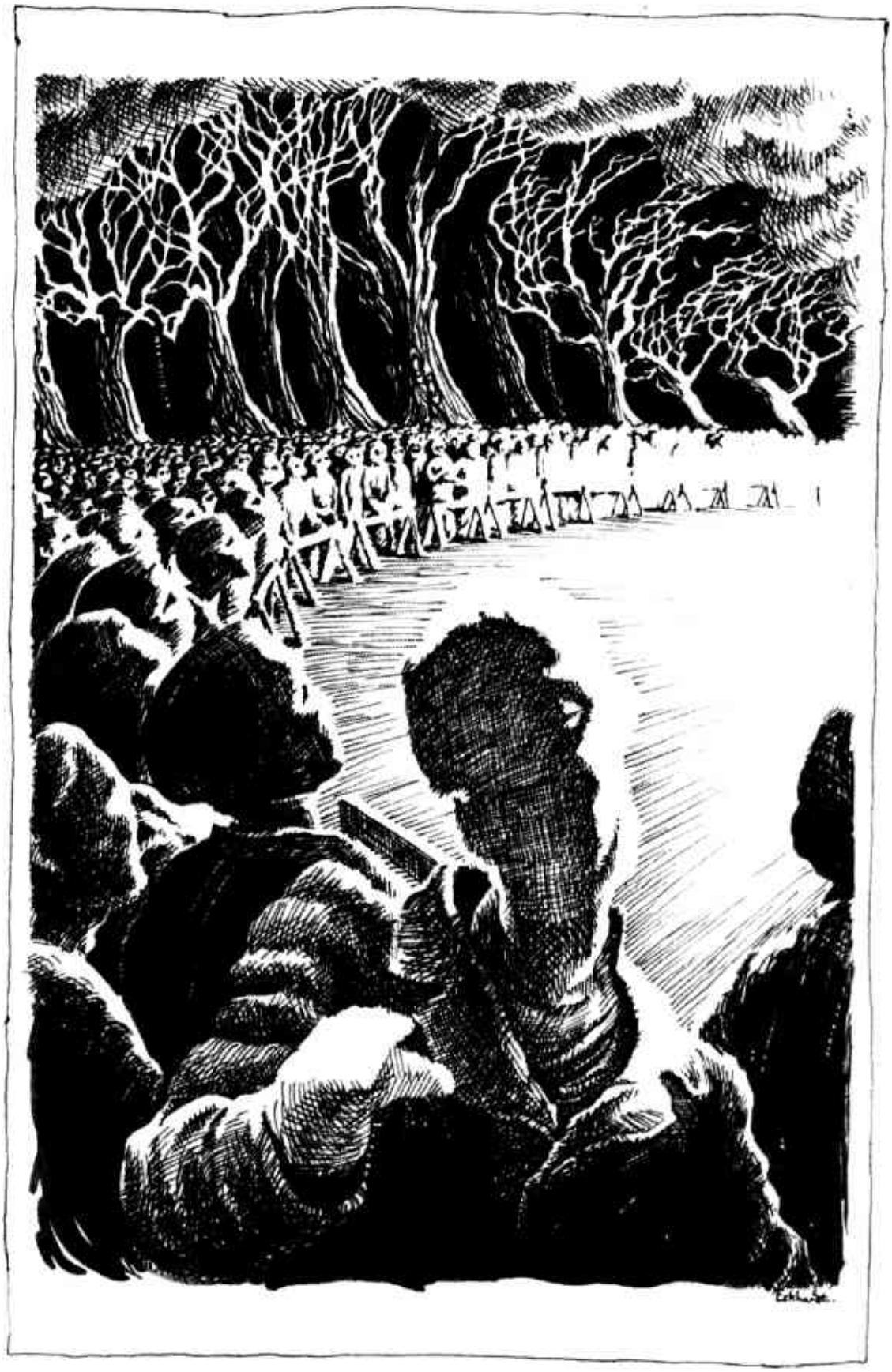

Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt, taken from Inconsequential Tales, 2008.

The Fit

"With a little more sexual explicitness *The Fit* (1979) might have found a place in *Scared Stiff*. Whereas those stories explore what happens to the horror story if sexual themes become overt, *The Fit* may be said to squint at the effects of Freudian knowingness. Fanny Cave indeed! I'd originally written *The Depths* for my anthology *New Terrors*, but when Andrew J. Offutt sent in a story that seemed to share the theme, I wrote *The Fit* as a substitute for mine."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Alone With The Horrors*.

Written in: 1979
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Also published in: *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

I must have passed the end of the path a hundred times before I saw it. Walking into Keswick, I always gazed at the distant fells, mossed by fields and gorse and woods. On cloudy days shadows rode the fells; the figures tramping the ridges looked as though they could steady themselves with one hand on the clouds. On clear days I would marvel at the multitude of shades of green and yellow, a spectrum in themselves, and notice nothing else.

But this was a dull day. The landscape looked dusty, as though from the lorries that pulverised the roads. I might have stayed in the house, but my Aunt Naomi was fitting; the sight of people turning like inexperienced models before the full-length mirror made me feel out of place. I'd exhausted Keswick—games of Crazy Golf, boats on the lake or strolls round it, narrow streets clogged with cars and people scaffolded with rucksacks—and I didn't feel like toiling up the fells today, even for the vistas of the lakes.

If I hadn't been watching my feet trudging I would have missed the path. It led away from the road a mile or so outside Keswick, through a gap in the hedges and across a field overgrown with grass and wild flowers. Solitude appealed to me, and I squeezed through the gap, which was hardly large enough for a sheep.

As soon as I stepped on the path I felt the breeze. That raised my spirits; the lorries had half deafened me, the grubby light and the clouds of dust had made me feel grimy. Though the grass was waist high I strode forward, determined to follow the path.

Grass blurred its meanderings, but I managed to trace it to the far side of the field, only to find that it gave out entirely. I peered about, blinded by smouldering green. Elusive grasshoppers chirred, regular as telephones. Eventually I made my way to the corner where the field met two others. Here the path sneaked through the hedge, almost invisibly. Had it been made difficult to follow?

Beyond the hedge it passed close to a pond, whose surface was green as the fields; I slithered on the brink. A dragonfly, its wings wafers of stained glass, skimmed the pond. The breeze coaxed me along the path, until I reached what I'd thought was the edge of the field, but which proved to be a trough in the ground, about fifteen feet deep.

It wasn't a valley, though its stony floor sloped towards a dark hole ragged with grass. Its banks were a mass of gorse and herbs; gorse obscured a dark green mound low down on the far bank. Except that the breeze was urging me, I wouldn't have gone close enough to realise that the mound was a cottage.

It was hardly larger than a room. Moss had blurred its outlines, so that it resembled the banks of the trough; it was impossible to tell where the roof ended and the walls began. Now I could see a window, and I was eager to look in. The breeze guided me forward, caressing and soothing, and I saw where the path led down to the cottage.

I had just climbed down below the edge when the breeze turned cold. Was it the damp, striking upwards from the crack in the earth? The crack was narrower than it had looked, which must be why I was all at once much closer to the cottage—close enough to realise that the cottage must be decaying, eaten away by moss; perhaps that was what I could smell. Inside the cottage a light crept towards the window, a light pale as marsh gas, pale as the face that loomed behind it.

Someone was in there, and I was trespassing. When I tried to struggle out of the trough, my feet slipped on the path; the breeze was a huge cushion, a softness that forced me backwards. Clutching at gorse, I dragged myself over the edge. Nobody followed, and by the time I'd fled past the pond I couldn't distinguish the crack in the earth.

I didn't tell my aunt about the incident. Though she insisted I call her Naomi, and let me stay up at night far later than my parents did, I felt she might disapprove. I didn't want her to think that I was still a child. If I

hadn't stopped myself brooding about it I might have realised that I felt guiltier than the incident warranted; after all, I had done nothing.

Before long she touched on the subject herself. One night we sat sipping more of the wine we'd had with dinner, something else my parents would have frowned upon if they'd known. Mellowed by wine, I said "That was a nice meal." Without warning, to my dismay which I concealed with a laugh, my voice fell an octave.

"You're growing up." As though that had reminded her, she said "See what you make of this."

From a drawer she produced two small grey dresses, too smartly cut for school. One of her clients had brought them for alteration, her two small daughters clutching each other and giggling at me. Aunt Naomi handed me the dresses. "Look at them closely," she said.

Handling them made me uneasy. As they drooped emptily over my lap they looked unnervingly minute. Strands of a different grey were woven into the material. Somehow I didn't like to touch those strands.

"I know how you feel," my aunt said. "It's the material."

"What about it?"

"The strands of lighter grey—I think they're hair."

I handed back the dresses hastily, pinching them by one corner of the shoulders. "Old Fanny Cave made them," she said as though that explained everything.

"Who's Fanny Cave?"

"Maybe she's just an old woman who isn't quite right in the head. I wouldn't trust some of the tales I've heard about her. Mind you, I'd trust her even less."

I must have looked intrigued, for she said "She's just an unpleasant old woman, Peter. Take my advice and stay away from her."

"I can't stay away from her if I don't know where she lives," I said slyly.

"In a hole in the ground near a pond, so they tell me. You can't even see it from the road, so don't bother trying."

She took my sudden nervousness for assent. "I wish Mrs Gibson hadn't accepted those dresses," she mused. "She couldn't bring herself to refuse,

she said, when Fanny Cave had gone to so much trouble. Well, she said the children felt uncomfortable in them. I'm going to tell her the material isn't good for their skin."

I should have liked more chance to decide whether I wanted to confess to having gone near Fanny Cave's. Still, I felt too guilty to revive the subject or even to show too much interest in the old woman. Two days later I had the chance to see her for myself.

I was mooching about the house, trying to keep out of my aunt's way. There was nowhere downstairs I felt comfortable; her sewing machine chattered in the dining-room, by the table spread with cut-out patterns; dress forms stood in the lounge, waiting for clothes or limbs. From my bedroom window I watched the rain stir the fields into mud, dissolve the fells into mounds of mist. I was glad when the doorbell rang; at least it gave me something to do.

As soon as I opened the door the old woman pushed in. I thought she was impatient for shelter; she wore only a grey dress. Parts of it glistened with rain—or were they patterns of a different grey, symbols of some kind? I found myself squinting at them, trying to make them out, before I looked up at her face.

She was over six feet tall. Her grey hair dangled to her waist. Presumably it smelled of earth; certainly she did. Her leathery face was too small for her body. As it stooped, peering through grey strands at me as though I was merchandise, I thought of a rodent peering from its lair.

She strode into the dining-room. "You've been saying things about me. You've been telling them not to wear my clothes."

"I'm sure nobody told you that," my aunt said.

"Nobody had to." Her voice sounded stiff and rusty, as if she wasn't used to talking to people. "I know when anyone meddles in my affairs."

How could she fit into that dwarfish cottage? I stood in the hall, wondering if my aunt needed help and if I would have the courage to provide it. But now the old woman sounded less threatening than peevish. "I'm getting old. I need someone to look after me sometimes. I've no children of my own."

"But giving them clothes won't make them your children."

Through the doorway I saw the old woman glaring as though she had been found out. "Don't you meddle in my affairs or I'll meddle in yours," she said, and stalked away. It must have been the draught of her movements that made the dress patterns fly off the table, some of them into the fire.

For the rest of the day I felt uneasy, almost glad to be going home tomorrow. Clouds oozed down the fells; swaying curtains of rain enclosed the house, beneath the looming sky. The grey had seeped into the house. Together with the lingering smell of earth it made me feel buried alive.

I roamed the house as though it was a cage. Once, as I wandered into the lounge, I thought two figures were waiting in the dimness, arms outstretched to grab me. They were dress forms, and the arms of their dresses hung limp at their sides; I couldn't see how I had made the mistake.

My aunt did most of the chatting at dinner. I kept imagining Fanny Cave in her cottage, her long limbs folded up like a spider's in hiding. The cottage must be larger than it looked, but she certainly lived in a lair in the earth—in the mud, on a day like this.

After dinner we played cards. When I began to nod sleepily my aunt continued playing, though she knew I had a long coach journey in the morning; perhaps she wanted company. By the time I went to bed the rain had stopped; a cheesy moon hung in a rainbow. As I undressed I heard her pegging clothes on the line below my window.

When I'd packed my case I parted the curtains for a last drowsy look at the view. The fells were a moonlit patchwork, black and white. Why was my aunt taking so long to hang out the clothes? I peered down more sharply. There was no sign of her. The clothes were moving by themselves, dancing and swaying in the moonlight, inching along the line towards the house.

When I raised the sash of the window the night seemed perfectly still, no sign of a breeze. Nothing moved on the lawn except the shadows of the clothes, advancing a little and retreating, almost ritualistically. Hovering dresses waved holes where hands should be, nodded the sockets of their necks.

Were they really moving towards the house? Before I could tell, the line gave way, dropping them into the mud of the lawn. When I heard my aunt's vexed cry I slipped the window shut and retreated into bed; somehow I

didn't want to admit what I'd seen, whatever it was. Sleep came so quickly that next day I could believe I'd been dreaming.

I didn't tell my parents; I'd learned to suppress details that they might find worrying. They were uneasy with my aunt—she was too careless of propriety, the time she had taken them tramping the fells she'd mocked them for dressing as though they were going out for dinner. I think the only reason they let me stay with her was to get me out of the polluted Birmingham air.

By the time I was due for my next visit I was more than ready. My voice had broken, my body had grown unfamiliar, I felt clumsy, ungainly, neither a man nor myself. My parents didn't help. They'd turned wistful as soon as my voice began to change; my mother treated visitors to photographs of me as a baby. She and my father kept telling me to concentrate on my studies and examining my school books as if pornography might lurk behind the covers. They seemed relieved that I attended a boys' school, until my father started wondering nervously if I was 'particularly fond' of any of the boys. After nine months of this sort of thing I was glad to get away at Easter.

As soon as the coach moved off I felt better. In half an hour it left behind the Midlands hills, reefs built of red brick terraces. Lancashire seemed so flat that the glimpses of distant hills might have been mirages. After a couple of hours the fells began, great deceptively gentle monsters that slept at the edges of lakes blue as ice, two sorts of stillness. At least I would be free for a week.

But I was not, for I'd brought my new feelings with me. I knew that as soon as I saw my aunt walking upstairs. She had always seemed much younger than my mother, though there were only two years between them, and I'd been vaguely aware that she often wore tight jeans; now I saw how round her bottom was. I felt breathless with guilt in case she guessed what I was thinking, yet I couldn't look away.

At dinner, whenever she touched me I felt a shock of excitement, too strange and uncontrollable to be pleasant. Her skirts were considerably shorter than my mother's. My feelings crept up on me like the wine, which seemed to be urging them on. Half my conversation seemed fraught with double meanings. At last I found what I thought was a neutral subject. "Have you seen Fanny Cave again?" I said.

"Only once." My aunt seemed reluctant to talk about her. "She'd given away some more dresses, and Mrs Gibson referred the mother to me. They were nastier than the others—I'm sure she would have thrown them away even if I hadn't said anything. But old Fanny came storming up here, just a few weeks ago. When I wouldn't let her in she stood out there in the pouring rain, threatening all sorts of things."

"What sorts of things?"

"Oh, just unpleasant things. In the old days they would have burned her at the stake, if that's what they used to do. Anyway," she said with a frown to close the subject, "she's gone now."

"Dead, you mean?" I was impatient with euphemisms.

"Nobody knows for sure. Most people think she's in the pond. To tell you the truth, I don't think anyone's anxious to look."

Of course I was. I lay in bed and imagined probing the pond that nobody else dared search, a dream that seemed preferable to the thoughts that had been tormenting me recently as I tried to sleep. Next day, as I walked to the path, I peeled myself a fallen branch.

Bypassing the pond, I went first to the cottage. I could hear what sounded like a multitude of flies down in the trough. Was the cottage more overgrown than when I'd last seen it? Was that why it looked shrunken by decay, near to collapse? The single dusty window made me think of a dulling eye, half-engulfed by moss; the façade might have been a dead face that was falling inwards. Surely the flies were attracted by wild flowers—but I didn't want to go down into the crack; I hurried back to the pond.

Flies swarmed there too, bumbling above the scum. As I approached they turned on me. They made the air in front of my face seem dark, oppressive, infected. Nevertheless I poked my stick through the green skin and tried to sound the pond while keeping back from the slippery edge.

The depths felt muddy, soft and clinging. I poked for a while, until I began to imagine what I sought to touch. All at once I was afraid that something might grab the branch, overbalance me, drag me into the opaque depths. Was it a rush of sweat that made my clothes feel heavy and obstructive? As I shoved myself back, a breeze clutched them, hindering my retreat. I fled, skidding on mud, and saw the branch sink lethargically. A moment after it vanished the slime was unbroken. That night I told Aunt Naomi where I'd

been. I didn't think she would mind; after all, Fanny Cave was supposed to be out of the way. But she bent lower over her sewing, as if she didn't want to hear. "Please don't go there again," she said. "Now let's talk about something else."

"Why?" At that age I had no tact at all.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Because I think she probably died on her way home from coming here. That's the last time anyone saw her. She must have been in such a rage that she slipped at the edge of the pond—I told you it was pouring with rain. Well, how was I to know what had happened?"

Perhaps her resentment concealed a need for reassurance, but I was unable to help, for I was struggling with the idea that she had been partly responsible for someone's death. Was nothing in my life to be trusted? I was so deep in brooding that I was hardly able to look at her when she cried out.

Presumably her needle had slipped on the thimble; she'd driven the point beneath one of her nails. Yet as she hurried out, furiously sucking her finger, I found that my gaze was drawn to the dress she had been sewing. As she'd cried out—of course it must have been then, not before—the dress had seemed to twist in her hands, jerking the needle.

When I went to bed I couldn't sleep. The room smelled faintly of earth; was that something to do with spring? The wardrobe door kept opening, though it had never behaved like that before, and displaying my clothes suspended batlike in the dark. Each time I got up to close the door their shapes looked less familiar, more unpleasant. Eventually I managed to sleep, only to dream that dresses were waddling limblessly through the doorway of my room, towards the bed.

The next day, Sunday, my aunt suggested a walk on the fells. I would have settled for Skiddaw, the easiest of them, but it was already swarming with walkers like fleas. "Let's go somewhere we'll be alone," Aunt Naomi said, which excited me in ways I'd begun to enjoy but preferred not to define, in case that scared the excitement away.

We climbed Grisedale Pike. Most of it was gentle, until just below the summit we reached an almost vertical scramble up a narrow spiky ridge. I clung there with all my limbs, trapped thousands of feet above the countryside, afraid to go up or down. I was almost hysterical with self-disgust; I'd let my half-admitted fantasies lure me up here, when all my aunt

had wanted was to enjoy the walk without being crowded by tourists. Eventually I managed to clamber to the summit, my face blazing.

As we descended, it began to rain. By the time we reached home we were soaked. I felt suffocated by the smell of wet earth, the water flooding down my face, the dangling locks of sodden hair that wouldn't go away. I hurried upstairs to change.

I had just about finished—undressing had felt like peeling wallpaper, except that I was the wall—when my aunt called out. Though she was in the next room, her voice sounded muffled. Before I could go to her she called again, nearer to panic. I hurried across the landing, into her room.

The walls were streaming with shadows. The air was dark as mud, in which she was struggling wildly. A shapeless thing was swallowing her head and arms. When I switched on the light I saw it was nothing; she'd become entangled in the jumper she was trying to remove, that was all.

"Help me," she cried. She sounded as if she was choking, yet I didn't like to touch her; apart from her bra, her torso was naked. What was wrong with her, for God's sake? Couldn't she take off her jumper by herself? Eventually I helped her as best I could without touching her. It seemed glued to her, by the rain, I assumed. At last she emerged, red-faced and panting.

Neither of us said much at dinner. I thought her unease was directed at me, at the way I'd let her struggle. Or was she growing aware of my new feelings? That night, as I drifted into sleep, I thought I heard a jangling of hangers in the wardrobe. Perhaps it was just the start of a dream.

The morning was dull. Clouds swallowed the tops of the fells. My aunt lit fires in the downstairs rooms. I loitered about the house for a while, hoping for a glimpse of customers undressing, until the dimness made me claustrophobic. Firelight set the shadows of dress forms dancing spastically on the walls; when I stood with my back to the forms their shadows seemed to raise their arms.

I caught a bus to Keswick, for want of something to do. The bus had passed Fanny Cave's path before I thought of looking. I glanced back sharply, but a bend in the road intervened. Had I glimpsed a scarecrow by the pond, its sleeves fluttering? But it had seemed to rear up: it must have been a bird.

In Keswick I followed leggy girls up the narrow hilly streets, dawdled nervously outside pubs, and wondered if I looked old enough to risk buying a drink. When I found myself in the library, leafing desultorily through broken paperbacks, I went home. There was nothing by the pond that I could see, though closer to Aunt Naomi's house something grey was flapping in the grass—litter, I supposed.

The house seemed more oppressive than ever. Though my aunt tended to use whichever room she was in for sewing, she was generally tidy; now the house was crowded with half-finished clothes, lolling on chairs, their necks yawning. When I tried to chat at dinner my voice sounded muffled by the presence of so much cloth.

My aunt drank more than usual, and seemed not to care if I did too. My drinking made the light seem yellowish, suffocated. Soon I felt very sleepy. "Stay down a little longer," my aunt mumbled, jerking herself awake, when I made to go to bed. I couldn't understand why she didn't go herself. I chatted mechanically, about anything except what might be wrong. Firelight brought clothes nodding forward to listen.

At last she muttered "Let's go to bed." Of course she meant that unambiguously, yet it made me nervous. As I undressed hastily I heard her below me in the kitchen, opening the window a notch for air. A moment later the patch of light from the kitchen went out. I wished it had stayed lit for just another moment, for I'd glimpsed something lying beneath the empty clothesline.

Was it a nightdress? But I'd never seen my aunt hang out a nightdress, nor pyjamas either. It occurred to me that she must sleep naked. That disturbed me so much that I crawled into bed and tried to sleep at once, without thinking.

I dreamed I was buried, unable to breathe, and when I awoke I was. Blankets, which felt heavy as collapsed earth, had settled over my face. I heaved them off me and lay trying to calm myself, so that I would sink back into sleep—but by the time my breathing slowed I realised I was listening.

The room felt padded with silence. Dimness draped the chair and dressing-table, blurring their shapes; perhaps the wardrobe door was ajar, for I thought I saw vague forms hanging ominously still. Now I was struggling to fall asleep before I could realise what was keeping me awake. I drew long

slow breaths to lull myself, but it was no use. In the silence between them I heard something sodden creeping upstairs.

I lay determined not to hear. Perhaps it was the wind or the creaking of the house, not the sound of a wet thing slopping stealthily upstairs at all. Perhaps if I didn't move, didn't make a noise, I would hear what it really was—but in any case I was incapable of moving, for I'd heard the wet thing flop on the landing outside my door.

For an interminable pause there was silence, thicker than ever, then I heard my aunt's door open next to mine. I braced myself for her scream. If she screamed I would go to her. I would have to. But the scream never came; there was only the sound of her pulling something sodden off the floor. Soon I heard her padding downstairs barefoot, and the click of a lock.

Everything was all right now. Whatever it had been, she'd dealt with it. Perhaps wallpaper had fallen on the stairs, and she'd gone down to throw it out. Now I could sleep—so why couldn't I? Several minutes passed before I was conscious of wondering why she hadn't come back upstairs.

I forced myself to move. There was nothing to fear, nothing now outside my door—but I got dressed to delay going out on the landing. The landing proved to be empty, and so did the house. Beyond the open front door the prints of Aunt Naomi's bare feet led over the moist lawn towards the road.

The moon was doused by clouds. Once I reached the road I couldn't see my aunt's tracks, but I knew instinctively which way she'd gone. I ran wildly towards Fanny Cave's path. Hedges, mounds of congealed night, boxed me in. The only sound I could hear was the ringing of my heels on the asphalt.

I had just reached the gap in the hedge when the moon swam free. A woman was following the path towards the pond, but was it my aunt? Even with the field between us I recognised the grey dress she wore. It was Fanny Cave's.

I was terrified to set foot on the path until the figure turned a bend and I saw my aunt's profile. I plunged across the field, tearing my way through the grass. It might have been quicker to follow the path, for by the time I reached the gap into the second field she was nearly at the pond.

In the moonlight the surface of the pond looked milky, fungoid. The scum was broken by a rock, plastered with strands of grass, close to the edge

towards which my aunt was walking. I threw myself forward, grass slashing my legs.

When I came abreast of her I saw her eyes, empty except for two shrunken reflections of the moon. I knew not to wake a sleepwalker, and so I caught her gently by the shoulders, though my hands wanted to shake, and tried to turn her away from the pond.

She wouldn't turn. She was pulling towards the scummy water, or Fanny Cave's dress was, for the drowned material seemed to writhe beneath my hands. It was pulling towards the rock whose eyes glared just above the scum, through glistening strands which were not grass but hair.

It seemed there was only one thing to do. I grabbed the neck of the dress and tore it down. The material was rotten, and tore easily. I dragged it from my aunt's body and flung it towards the pond. Did it land near the edge, then slither into the water? All I knew was that when I dared to look the scum was unbroken.

My aunt stood there naked and unaware until I draped my anorak around her. That seemed to rouse her. She stared about for a moment, then down at herself. "It's all right, Naomi," I said awkwardly. She sobbed only once before she controlled herself, but I could see that the effort was cruel. "Come on, quickly," she said in a voice older and harsher than I'd ever heard her use, and strode home without looking at me.

Next day we didn't refer to the events of the night; in fact, we hardly spoke. No doubt she had lain awake all night as I had, as uncomfortably aware of me as I was of her. After breakfast she said that she wanted to be left alone, and asked me to go home early. I never visited her again; she always found a reason why I couldn't stay. I suspect the reasons served only to prevent my parents from questioning me.

Before I went home I found a long branch and went to the pond. It didn't take much probing for me to find something solid but repulsively soft. I drove the branch into it again and again, until I felt things break. My disgust was so violent it was beyond defining. Perhaps I already knew deep in myself that since the night I undressed my aunt I would never be able to touch a woman.

Hearing Is Believing

Written in: 1979
First published in *Shadows 4*, 1981
Also published in: *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

Suddenly he wasn't on the bus home after a frustrating day at work, but in Greece, in a taverna by the sea. The sky was a block of solid blue; over the plucking of bouzoukis he heard people smashing their empty glasses. Now sunset was turning the sea into lava, and someone like Anthony Quinn was dancing, arms outstretched, at the edge of the taverna, where waves lapped the stones.

Wells emerged from the daydream several streets nearer home. If he couldn't recall having passed through them, that was hardly surprising; beyond the streaming windows of the bus all the streets looked half-erased by rain, smudges and blotches of dull colour. Around him people coughed and sputtered with February chills. No wonder he preferred to anticipate his trip to Greece, the Greece of a film in which a tycoon married an American president's widow.

He ran home as though he were trying to butt the rain aside. The pavements were quivering mirrors of slate. At the top of the hill, rain scrambled over the ruin of the factory. Last week he'd seen the hundred-foot chimney standing for an instant on an explosion of dust before buckling, keeling over, taking with it two hundred jobs.

His house sounded hollow. Except for his bedroom and the living room, most of it was uncarpeted. Bare scruffy plaster overlooked the stairs, littered the boards of the spare room. That was the way his father had left the house, which was still preferable to Wells's old flat—more of an investment, for one thing. Soon Wells must get on with decorating.

But not tonight: he'd already done enough work for one day, if not for several. When he'd eaten dinner the living room fire was blazing; flames snatched at the fur of soot on the back of the chimney. Most of his furniture was crowded into the room, including the Yamaha stereo system, the most expensive item in the house.

He sat with a large Scotch while something by Delius wandered, gentle and vague as the firelight. The coughs of the audience were so far back in the stereo arc that they seemed embedded in the wall. At the end of the music, the applause made the room sound huge and deep. He could almost see the flock of hands fly up clapping.

A soprano began singing German, which Wells neither understood nor found evocative. He imagined the conductor's black-and-white plumage, his gestures at the singer as part of an elaborate mating ritual. Eventually Wells got up and fiddled with the dial. Here was a police call, here was a burst of Chinese, here was a message from a ship out on the Irish Sea. And here was someone whispering beside him, so close that he started back, and the rain came pouring in through the roof.

The voice had a background of rain, that was all. There were two voices, speaking just loudly enough to be heard over the downpour. He couldn't understand what they were saying; even the sound of the language was unfamiliar—not Eastern European, not an Oriental language. Yet he was so impressed by the vividness of the stereo that he sat down to listen.

The two men were in a street, for he could hear the gurgle of roadside drains. It must be dark, for the men were picking their way very hesitantly. Sometimes they slipped—rubble clinked underfoot—and he didn't need to understand the language to know they were cursing.

For a while he listened to the street sounds: the shrill incessant hiss of rain on stone, rain splashing jerkily from broken gutters, dripping on fragments of windows in the houses which loomed close on both sides. It was better than sitting before the fire and listening to a storm outside—or at least it would have been, except that he wished he knew why the men were afraid.

It unnerved him. Had they fled into this area to hide? Surely they would be more conspicuous amid the derelict streets, unless everywhere was like this. Or were they searching for something of which they were afraid? They had lowered their voices; they were certainly afraid that something would hear them, even through the clamour of rain. Wells found himself listening uneasily for some hint that it was near, listening so intently that at first he didn't realise that the men had fallen silent and were listening too.

For a while he could hear only the babble of rain and drains and rubble. The other sound was so similar that at first he couldn't be sure it was there. But yes, there was another sound: in the distance a great deal of rubble was

shifting. If something was pushing it out of the way, that something was unhurried and very large. Surely the sound that accompanied it must be a quirk of the storm—surely it couldn't be breathing.

The men had heard it now. He could tell from their voices that they knew what it was—but why was he so much on edge because he couldn't understand? They dodged to the left, gasping as they stumbled over rubble. Now they were struggling with a door that scraped reluctantly back and forth in a heap of fallen masonry. At last rusty hinges gave way, and the door fell.

What use was it to take refuge here, when they'd made so much noise? Perhaps they were hoping to hide as they fled desperately from room to room. Now that they were in the house they sounded closer to him; everything did—the splat, splat of rain on linoleum in one large room, the dull plump of a drip on carpet in another. There must be very little left of the roof.

Now the men were running upstairs, their feet squelching on the stair carpet. They ran the length of a room that sounded enormous; he heard them splashing heedlessly through puddles. Now they were cowering in the corner to his left, where the light of his fire couldn't reach. He would have switched on the overhead light, except that would have been absurd.

In any case, there was no time. Something had hurled the front door aside and squeezed through the doorway into the house. It started upstairs at once, its sides wallowing against the staircase walls; three or four stairs creaked simultaneously. The breathing of the men began to shudder.

When it reached the top of the stairs it halted. Was it peering into the room? Wells could hear its breathing clearly now, thick and slow and composed of more than one sound, as if it came from several mouths. In the corner beyond the firelight the men were straining not to breathe.

A moment later they were screaming. Though nothing had squeezed through the doorway, Wells heard them dragged onto the landing. Their screams went downstairs as the creaking did, and out of the house. Had their captor's arms been able to reach the length of the room?

Wells sat listening reluctantly for something else to happen. Rain shrilled monotonously outside the house, dripped quicker and quicker on linoleum, sodden carpets, bare boards. That was all, but it went on and on, seemingly

for half an hour. How much longer, for God's sake? As long as he was fool enough to leave it on, perhaps. He switched off the stereo and went to bed, only to lie there imagining unlit streets where some of the dim heaps weren't rubble. He couldn't switch off the rain outside his house.

Next morning he was glad to reach the office, where he could revive his imagination with the Greek travel poster above his desk, and joke with his colleagues until it was time to let the queue in out of the drizzle. Many of the waiting faces were depressingly familiar. Those who meant to plead more social security out of him were far easier to cope with than the growing number of young people who were sure he could find them a job. He hadn't grown used to seeing hope die in their eyes.

One of them was reading "the novel that proves there is life after death." Perhaps she'd grown so hopeless that she would believe anything that seemed to offer hope. He'd heard his colleagues seriously wondering whether God had been an astronaut, he'd seen them gasping at books "more hideously frightening than The Exorcist because everything actually happened." It seemed that any nonsense could find believers these days.

The bus home was full of tobacco smoke, another stale solution. The faces of the riders looked dispirited, apathetic, tired of working to keep up with inflation and taxes. A Jewish shop daubed with a swastika sailed by; the bus was plastered with National Front slogans, no doubt by the same people responsible for the swastika. If that could seem acceptable to some people, what solutions could be found in a worse world?

As soon as he reached home he switched on the tuner. Music would make the house sound more welcoming. He'd left the dial tuned to the station he had listened to last night, and the speakers greeted him with a rush of static. He had begun to alter the tuning when he realised what was wrong. The sound wasn't static, but rain.

There was no mistaking it once he heard its sounds on floorboards and linoleum; he could even hear plaster falling in the derelict house. Who on earth could be broadcasting this? He didn't care if he never found out who or why. He had to turn the knob some way before he lost the station.

That night he listened to records, since static kept seeping into the broadcasts he wanted to hear. Did the music sound thinner than it used to sound at the flat? A dripping tap made the house seem emptier. Perhaps the acoustics would improve once he improved the house. When he went

upstairs to bed, remembering the months he'd lived here after his mother had died, during which he'd given up trying to persuade his father to let him redecorate—"Leave that, I like it as it is"—the dripping tap, whichever it had been, had stopped.

In the morning he felt robbed of sleep. Either a dream or the unnatural cold had kept waking him. Perhaps there was a draught that he would have to trace; he wasn't yet familiar with the house. Still, there were places where his life would seem luxurious.

One of his colleagues was reading a novel about an African state where all the workers were zombies. "That's what we need here," he grumbled. "No more strikes, no more unemployment, no more inflation."

"I hope you're joking," Wells said.

"Not at all. It sounds like paradise compared to this country. If someone took charge now I wouldn't care who it was."

Suddenly Wells remembered his dream: he had been here at his desk and everyone around him had been speaking English, yet he couldn't understand a word. He felt uncomfortable, vulnerable, and at lunchtime he went strolling to avoid more of that sort of thing. It didn't matter where he went —anywhere but here. Before long he saw the sky above the Mediterranean, two shades of piercing blue divided by the razor of the horizon. When he returned to the grey streets he found he was late for work; he couldn't recall having wandered so far.

After dinner he found a broadcast of Greek music. A large Scotch and the firelight helped him drift. Soon the lapping of flames, and their warmth, seemed very like Greek sun and sea—though as he began to doze, losing fragments of the music, the wavering of shadows on the walls made them look to be streaming. Perhaps that was why he dreamed he was sitting in a rainstorm. But when he woke, the rain was in the room.

Of course it was just the sound, coming from the speakers. Had the broadcast slipped awry, into static? He thought he could hear water splashing into puddles on linoleum, yet the dial on the waveband was inches away from the broadcast of two nights ago. He had to turn the knob still further before the noise faded.

He slapped the tuner's switch irritably, then stumped upstairs to bed. At least he might get a good night's sleep, if he didn't lie there brooding about

the stereo. He'd paid enough for it; the shop could damn well make it right. Tonight his bedroom seemed even colder, and damp. Still, the whisky kept him warm, and drowned his thoughts. Soon he was asleep.

When he woke, the first thing he heard was the shifting of rubble. Something must be up the hill, in the ruined factory—a pack of dogs, perhaps, though it sounded larger. Or were the sounds downstairs, in his house? Certainly the sound of rain was.

He hadn't unplugged the stereo. His drowsy swipe must not have switched it off properly. Impatient to deal with it before he woke fully and couldn't get back to sleep, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. As soon as his bare feet touched the floor he cried out, recoiling.

He writhed on the bed, trying to twist the agony out of his foot. He had cramp, that was all; the floor hadn't really felt like drowned linoleum. When he peered at it, the carpet looked exactly as it should.

He stormed downstairs. The dark, or his inability to wake, made the empty rooms look impossibly large. The plaster above the staircase looked not only bare but glistening. Ignoring all this, he strode into the living room. The stereo dial was lit. The room was crowded with sound, a chorus of rain in a derelict house. In the distance there was another sound, a chanting of voices that sounded worshipful, terrified, desperate for mercy. That dismayed him more than anything else he'd heard. He pulled the plug from the wall socket and made himself go straight back to bed, where he lay sleepless for a long time. Somewhere in the house a tap was dripping.

Lack of sleep kept him on edge at work. He could hardly face the youngest of his clients. Though she had failed at interview after interview, she was almost superstitiously convinced that she would find a job. "Why can't I have one of the strikers' jobs?" she demanded, and he couldn't answer. He sent her to another interview, and wished her luck. He couldn't rob her of her faith, which must be all that kept her going.

He was glad he'd reached the weekend. When he arrived home, having visited Greece on the way, he made a leisurely dinner, then sat by the fire and listened to records. Somehow he didn't want to use the radio.

He couldn't relax. Of course it was only the play of firelight and shadow, but the room seemed to tremble on the edge of total darkness. As he drank more whisky in search of calm, he felt that the music was straining to reach

him, drifting away. In the quieter passages he was distracted by the irregular dripping of a tap, he couldn't tell which. When he felt he might be able to sleep, he trudged upstairs. Tomorrow he would go walking in the country, or take the tuner back to the shop, or both.

But on Saturday it was raining. Perhaps that was just as well; he'd dreamed he was walking in the country, only to realise that the walk was a daydream that had lured him somewhere different and far worse. He lay in bed watching the sunlight, which was rediscovering the pattern of the ancient wallpaper. Then he flung himself out of bed, for the rain he could hear was not outside the house.

Though the stereo wasn't plugged in, the sounds filled the speakers: a gust of wind splattered rain across sagging wallpaper, waterlogged plaster collapsed, a prolonged juicy noise. He dismantled the stereo, which fell silent as soon as he unplugged the speakers, then he stormed out to find a taxi.

At last he found one, speeding down the terraced slope as if it wasn't worth stopping. It took him back to his house, where the driver stared into space while Wells manhandled the stereo into the taxi. By the time Wells reached the shop he was ready to lose his temper, especially when the engineer returned a few minutes later and told him that nothing was wrong.

Wells controlled himself and insisted on being taken into the repair shop. "This is what's wrong," he said, tuning the stereo to the unidentifiable station. The engineer gazed at him, smugly patient, and Wells could only look away, for Radio Prague came through loud and clear, with no background noise at all.

Wells roamed the shop rather desperately, tuning stereos in an attempt to find the rain. The engineer took pity on him, or determined to get rid of him. "It may be a freak reception. You may only be able to pick it up in the area where you live."

At once Wells felt much better. He'd heard of odder things, of broadcasts that possessed people's hearing-aids, telephones, even refrigerators. To the engineer's disgust, he left the stereo to be overhauled; then he went strolling in the hills, where spring was just beginning. The moist grass was flecked with rainbows, the sun seemed almost as bright as Greece.

That night he was surprised how alone he felt without the stereo. It must be its absence which made the house seem still emptier. At least he could relax with a book, if only he could locate the dripping tap. Perhaps it was in the bathroom, where the light bulb—years old, no doubt—had failed. The bathroom walls glistened in the dark.

Soon he went to bed, for he was shivering. No doubt the cold and the damp would get worse until he attended to them. In bed his introverted warmth lulled him. A slide show of Greek landscapes played in his head. Starts of sleep interrupted the slides.

When uninterrupted sleep came it was darker, so that he couldn't see his way on the street along which he was creeping. At least the rain had stopped, and there was silence except for the muffled drumming of his heart. When his feet slipped on rubble, the shrill clatter sounded vindictively loud. His panic had made him forget what he mustn't do. There was a car a few yards ahead of him, a vague hump in the darkness; if he crouched behind that he might be safe. But he lost his balance as he reached it, and tried to support himself against its blubbery side. No, it wasn't a car, for something like a head rose out of it at once, panting thickly. The shapes that came scrabbling out of the houses beyond the rubbly gardens on both sides must have been its hands.

He woke and tried to stop shivering. No point in opening his eyes; that would only hold him back from sleep. But why was it so cold in the room? Why were the bedclothes clinging to him like wallpaper? Perhaps his sense that something was wrong was another reason to shiver. When at last he forced his eyes open he saw the night sky, hardly relieved by a handful of stars, above him where the roof should be.

He couldn't think, because that would paralyse him. He thrust his feet into shoes, which were already soaking. He dragged his sodden jacket and trousers on over his pyjamas, then he fled. Now he could hear the rain, the lingering drops that splashed on linoleum, carpet, bare boards. On the stairs he almost fell headlong, for they were covered with fallen plaster. His sounds echoed in all the derelict rooms.

At last he reached the front door, which appeared still to be his, unlike the house. The street was dark; perhaps vandals had put out the lamp. He reeled out into the darkness, for he couldn't bear to stay in the house. He had still forgotten what he mustn't do; he slammed the front door behind him.

He heard rubble falling. When he grabbed at the door, it was already blocked from within. It lurched when he threw himself against it, but that was all; even though it was off its hinges, it was immovable. He mustn't waste time in struggling with it, but what else could he do? At one end of the unknown street, amid a chorus of unhurried breathing, something was feeling for him along the broken façades.

The Mouths Of Light

"Campbell's fourth and final tale of Ryre the warrior, its climax suggests his familiarity with Fritz Lieber's first tale of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, *The Jewels in the Forests*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written in: 1976
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Also published in: *Far Away And Never*

Ryre couldn't tell when he ceased to be pursued by anything but echoes. When he halted his steed, the echoes died reluctantly away. The dark held him like a fist, enormous yet so close it crushed him. It must have proved too much for his pursuers, as it was threatening to do to him. The cavern was huge as night, but far darker. He seemed not to have seen daylight for days.

Once he moved off the echoes returned, fluttering eagerly out of their lairs. Echoes stirred wakefully in the distance that was the underside of the roof, water dripped relentlessly in holes so deep in stone they were beyond echoing. He tried to hear the sounds as his steed's great veined ears must hear them, as it led him through the cavern toward the hope of light beyond.

It was no use. Everything reminded him of his folly. Had he grown so fond of the slave town of Gaxanoi that he had had to go back? For wounding a slave-driver, the priests and their bullies had given him to the vampires of the forest. Victorious but weakened, he'd made his way back toward Gaxanoi: where else could he have found a steed? Though he had fed himself strength—he had eaten what meat he could kill on the journey—it had been winter before he'd arrived.

The echoes were mocking him. They and his memories were calling him fool. For a moment it seemed that riders were waiting ahead in the dark to ambush him. They must be echoes: how could his pursuers have outdistanced him? He would have seen their torches.

Could he not have taken the steed and left Gaxanoi before they knew he was there? But he hated slavery, for he had suffered it himself. He had cut down the guards before the slave-house of Gaxanoi, and had told the slaves they had only to break their chains to be free. He'd brought them metal bars,

he'd shown them how to lever open the links of the chains—but none of them would. Where could they go? They would only be recaptured. Slavery had bound their minds more securely than their bodies. He had ridden away, enraged by their apathy, by his powerlessness. Before he'd reached the edge of the town he had heard sounds of pursuit. The guards had been found.

He wouldn't go back into the forest. He had ridden along the coast, toward the mountains which plunged into the sea. He should have been able to lose his pursuers in one of the passes, or to ambush them there, but all of the passes were blocked by snow. He'd have to go through the caverns, to trust the story he'd heard that the main cavern went all the way through the mountains.

And now he could only trust his steed. It at least was not confused by the echoes, the echoes which jabbed at his mind, already raw with memories. If he had not felt half suffocated by the dark he would have been less ready to entrust his safety. He was too enraged, and the beast was too concerned with its footing on the slippery rock, to realise that he was surrounded until the flints sparked and the torches flared.

Seven men had been waiting for him in the dark. Torchlight made them into hovering torsos with drawn swords. Though they had none of the well-fed look of the slave-drivers and their kind, their thin voracious faces were no less unwelcoming. Reflected flames ran like ghosts of blood up and down their swords.

Ryre grew tense as a bowstring. Perhaps he could drive his steed through their midst, give himself the advantage of surprise while he drew his sword. Must it come to that? He was sick of senseless bloodshed; killing in Gaxanoi had achieved nothing.

The seven were absolutely still. When the man who faced Ryre spoke, it was as though a leathery statue was speaking. "What brings you to this place?"

"I am bound for the land beyond the mountains." Ryre had no idea of its name.

"Why not by sea?" He brought his torch closer to Ryre's face. "No man comes here without a purpose."

"I had no choice. There was no boat, and if I had turned back men would have killed me." Ryre was feeling more sure of himself. These were

fishermen; he could smell that on them. They might have the advantage of numbers but not, he thought, of swordsmanship. What venture could have stranded them here, so far from the sea?

Whatever it was, it had narrowed their minds. "What men? We heard nobody," one said. "It's strange you should have been driven in here just at this time. Keep your hand away!" he cried, prodding Ryre with his sword.

The torchlight must have made Ryre seem to reach for his sword. The scrawny youth kept prodding him, seeking a chink in the leaves of his armour. The dull unrelenting ache made Ryre think that bloodshed might not be entirely senseless after all.

The old man who had spoken first gazed at him. Reflected sparks glared from his eyes. He seemed to be peering through the pinpricks of light, outside which everything was dark, to be distrusted. "It is strange, right enough," he muttered.

A plumper man, who looked squeamish, said "He could ride with us if we took his sword. He could help carry."

Ryre's reaction was almost instinctive. He yielded his sword to no man without a fight. As the scrawny man's blade dug harder into him, poking uselessly but infuriatingly at his armour, he kicked his steed forward, roaring.

He knocked the old man aside with a fist as he drew his sword with the other. Torches jerked, swords blazed, but he was already beyond the torchlight. Should he stand and fight, or lose them in the dark? If whatever they sought was worth fighting for, perhaps he should seek it himself.

There was a prize more immediately worth winning: the torches. In this darkness, light was a treasure in itself. He urged his steed faster, the better to turn before the men could see him.

He was about to turn when he glimpsed lights far off in the dark. Were there other seekers? Though reddish, these lights were not torches; they seemed to be growing. He had an uneasy impression of hungry red mouths, gaping wide. Perhaps that was an illusion, but it was enough to distract him. Before he knew it, his steed had jerked to a halt, and he was falling.

It was a long fall. His steed had baulked at the edge of a pit. When at last he hit rock it thumped the breath from him. He tried to hang on, but the

rock was steep and coated with moss. Eventually he slammed against a wall, a long way farther down.

He lay there, his mind and his body pounding like drums, while the men with their torches peered down at him. Their faces were so distant it seemed that he could have crushed them together in his fist. Before long they withdrew. "We must go back and search again," he heard the leader say. "Bring his steed."

A demon of fury possessed Ryre. He hurled himself upward, clawing at the slippery rock. He gouged the moss with his sword, trying vainly to lever himself up the slope. When at last he realised that he would achieve nothing except to snap the blade, he desisted and began to grope about the bottom of the pit.

He found the exit at once. It was narrow, though high enough to allow him to crawl. It seemed to lead in the direction in which he had been riding. Cursing monotonously but silently, as though he could curse away the darkness, he crawled into the opening.

The walls were soft and moist with moss. It felt unpleasantly like crawling down an unseen throat. His sounds—his breathing that was not quite steady, the squelching of moss—pressed close to him; so did the dark, a blindfold bound tight across his eyes and round his skull. Nevertheless he was advancing steadily. His knees and elbows felt raw with crawling before the tunnel began to narrow.

What if it grew too narrow for him to draw his sword? Cursing aloud, he held the sword before him, probing the dark as he crawled. Suddenly apprehensive lest the sword be snatched away from him, he gripped the hilt more tightly. Though the darkness was impenetrable—solid as the walls which were touching his shoulders now—he could almost see the reddish lights which had yawned like mouths.

When his sword encountered an obstacle more yielding than moss he was ready to hack at it before he realised it was water. How far was the tunnel flooded? He struck the water with his blade and heard the ripples chase into the distance. At least there must be air above the surface.

When he crawled into the water it closed over his head at once. For a moment he was scrabbling at the slimy walls as stagnant water flooded his nose and mouth, then he realised he had room to stand. The walls were

closer than ever—he had to sidle forward between them, sword-arm outstretched—but at least he could keep his head above the water. He sloshed onward, panting, maddened by the scum which kissed his face again and again.

He was underwater without warning. The floor of the tunnel had descended, and so had the roof. There was no air at all. He couldn't drag himself backward; the tunnel was too slippery. He floundered onward, unable to breathe or to hold his breath much longer, unable to tell whether there was any air ahead.

The tunnel bent sharply. As he struggled to wrench himself out of the bend the darkness, a thick harsh fluid that had flooded his brain and his lungs, began to choke him. His chest was jammed between two ridged slabs of rock, his arm was flailing beyond them, about to drop his sword. Then he was free, and gasping above water. More—he could see lights.

They were torches, and they were in the main cavern. The cavern had descended more sharply than the tunnel through which he had crawled. The tunnel had brought him out ahead of the men who had stolen his steed. At once his rage was no longer frustrated but grimly purposeful.

By the time he had eased himself silently out of the water his breathing was under control. For a while he watched the torches. The men were ranging along both sides of the cavern, peering at the entrances to tunnels. Presumably they had marked those tunnels which they had already searched.

Though he was out of reach of the torchlight Ryre hid instinctively behind a group of mossy boulders while he planned what to do. When one of the searchers fell behind the others, Ryre would strike. His free hand was gripping the rock that hid him, gripping as though it was a throat. Or was it rock? It seemed to have grown softer. Perhaps it was only his hand that was numb.

No, it was not rock. He might not be alone in lying in ambush. The object behind which he'd hidden was writhing beneath his hand. It felt like leathery flesh, cold and overgrown, awakening in the dark. He thought he heard huge lips parting stickily.

He recoiled, sword raised to chop—but must he draw attention to himself? One searcher had fallen well behind the others now. Whatever Ryre had

touched, it seemed fixed to the spot. Indeed, there were several of the things; he could see their mouths now, bigger than his head—for the mouths were glowing like embers. He remembered the lights he had glimpsed earlier.

He must have a steed. He made his way quickly but stealthily toward the last of the searchers. Rocks shifted underfoot; moss made the floor treacherous. The sound of gurgling, deep in the rock, helped him avoid pits. Whenever he glanced back the mouths had not moved, except to gape wider. They illuminated nothing but themselves.

The sides of the cavern were even more distant than they appeared. As he advanced, they seemed to float away on the dark. Nevertheless he came within reach of his victim just as the other dismounted in order to peer at a blurred mark on the wall.

Ryre seized him, sword-point at his windpipe, and dragged him into the tunnel at which he had been peering. "Speak softly when you are able," Ryre said through clenched teeth, "or you will never speak again."

It was the plump man. His entire body was shaking. Ryre should have no trouble with him, unless terror made him foolish. Ryre let the point dig lightly into the man's throat. "What are you searching for?"

"The treasure." The man's whisper was hardly audible. Perhaps the threat of the sword had closed his throat, or perhaps he was desperate to seem cooperative. "A ship was wrecked where the mountains go into the sea. It was taking treasure to a king of the Crystal Lands until a storm drove it off course."

"Why search for drowned treasure in here?"

"Some of the crew survived. They rescued part of the treasure. They brought it through here because they were afraid to go to Gaxanoi. You can understand that," he said, perhaps in a desperate attempt to remind Ryre he had been vulnerable too. "But it was heavier than they thought. They had to leave it. All except one died in here or got lost; nobody knows. The one who came out was mad. He'd been wandering in here for months."

His tone grew pleading: now he'd answered Ryre there might be nothing to keep him alive. "Some thought he was raving, but we believed him. The catch was poor this year—we could barely feed our women and children. We need the treasure."

Ryre was wondering who was madder—the seaman who had survived the cavern, or these men who had forsaken their livelihood in the hope he spoke the truth. He was loath to kill the plump man, who had at least tried to persuade his companions to let Ryre live. Perhaps he could send the man ahead while Ryre took his steed.

The man still held the torch, close to his own face in case Ryre suspected him of planning to use it as a weapon.

Suddenly it jerked free of his shaking hands and touched his plump cheek. Crying out, he flung the torch toward his steed, which at once bolted into the dark.

Ryre turned snarling. The beast was heading straight for the lights which were not torches. Before he could pursue it, the plump man hurled him aside. Ryre lost his footing on the slippery rock. His sword flew from his hand and clattered into the tunnel.

He scrambled after it, cursing. It had skidded quite a way; he had to grope weaponless for minutes, and what might be waiting in the dark? He reached it at last, and was glad of its reassurance—for out in the cavern, the screaming had begun.

The plump man's steed had baulked just short of the mouths. Had the man realised what they were? Perhaps he'd thought that to ride away would be quicker than leading the beast. But when he'd mounted, his steed had reared up, tried to throw him. As the plump man clung to it in panic the beast had overbalanced toward the mouths.

Ryre watched, appalled. Screaming, the man dragged his arm free of a mouth. The cave screamed like a chorus of demons, echoing him perfectly. The glow of the mouths was brighter now, and made the chewed stump of his wrist look molten. What was left of him tried to struggle out of reach—but his steed, already half devoured, collapsed and flung him on the upturned mouths.

Though they appeared to be toothless, the mouths sucked him apart in moments. Their raw glow was so violent now that Ryre could distinguish their bodies, stumpy glistening limbless shapes that made him think of maggots. Ripples passed slowly down their length as they swallowed their prey.

Some way off in the dark, torches were converging. The searchers had seen their companion's fate. The younger men sounded close to hysteria; one was being sick. "We can do nothing," the leader said, so loudly that he might have been trying to outshout his echoes. "We must go on, and take more care than he did. Our fortune is here somewhere."

Ryre smiled grimly. If the men were as close to panic as they sounded, they might be worse than careless. In any case, they had no idea that Ryre was still alive. They would be on their guard against things such as those which had devoured their companion, but not against him.

When they recommenced searching, he followed. Now they were searching in groups, three men to each side of the cavern; the death of the plump man had made them more cautious. Ryre thought of animals darting about in search of burrows.

At least they were slowing themselves down, now that three of them had to halt whenever they found an unexplored opening. When he caught up with the nearest group, could he finish them quickly? Bad swordsmen could be dangerously unpredictable, especially if they panicked.

When the nearer group vanished into a side tunnel, he quickened his pace. Rocks skittered away from his feet, but there was no need for stealth; the searchers must be half deafened by their own echoes in the tunnel. The other group was too distant to be dangerous. Perhaps as the three emerged from the tunnel, Ryre could dispose of them one by one.

He had almost reached the tunnel, down which the searchers were returning amid their welling echoes, when he froze, sword raised. Had the other group crept up on him? No, he could see their distant torches. He must be looking at watery reflections of the torches that were approaching down the tunnel—except that the blurred reddish rights toward the middle of the cavern weren't moving but widening. They were more of the devouring mouths.

In a moment he saw why he had thought they were reflections: they were blurred by a greenish miasma which they were exhaling. It made him think of gases of decay. It was drifting thickly toward the tunnel, and would reach it almost as soon as he did.

What would happen if it reached him? These mouths looked larger than the others, so far as he could judge amid the dark; their lips were ragged.

Perhaps age had made them subtler, in their monstrous way.

He was still hesitating when the three searchers emerged from the tunnel and walked into the thick of the miasma. At once their torches began to sputter. Before the men could retreat, the flames went out. Now the only light was the glow of the mouths, which looked deceptively inviting, a fire in the midst of immense darkness.

Ryre could hesitate no longer. The men were utterly confounded, shouting in the dark; he could expect no better chance. He ran at them, sword poised. Perhaps he could cut down the nearest rider and take his steed before the others knew what had happened.

Though the man was still where Ryre had last seen him, he must have been using his torch to feel his way. Ryre's sword chopped not into his side but through the wooden stave. The edge grazed the man's arm. At once he began to slash at the air, crying "Help! Someone's here!"

Ryre listened for the slashing of the blade, then parried it. The shock jerked the sword from his opponent's hand. Ryre plunged his sword into the man's guts, cutting upward. The man fell away from him, groaning.

Where were the others? The miasma filled Ryre's nostrils with a sweetish rotten stench. It made him impatient to be done with the fight, perhaps foolhardily so. As he whirled, brandishing his sword, he heard the fallen man's steed panting almost in his ear. He grabbed for its neck—if he could mount quickly, he might be able to ride away—only to find that it was empty air. He had been tricked by an echo.

He must be quick. The torches of the other party had crept nearer. No, those were the mouths—but were they very distant or very close? If they were distant, surely they must be the torches—in which case he ought to keep them in view, in case they closed in before he knew it. Or had they closed in while the dark confused him? All at once he knew it was more than the dark: the miasma had doused not only the torches but also his mind.

He was barely able to control his rage before it made him stupid. The two riders were stumbling about and shouting, but he could no longer tell how close they were. Echoes crowded him. If he moved he would be even more confused. He must stay absolutely quiet and still. The riders and their steeds must be at least as bewildered as he was.

His ruse almost saved him, until a steed blundered against him. "What's that?" the rider cried. His blade came scything down, barely missing Ryre's shoulder. Ryre thrust his sword upward and felt it cut deep into flesh. Hands scrabbled at the blade, then faltered, fell away. As soon as Ryre wrenched the sword free, his victim toppled to the ground.

Ryre was straining to locate the third rider when he heard the man's steed lose its footing on the mossy rock. As the rider landed on his feet, he screamed. There was a loud clash of swords, then the sound of a falling body. Stupefied by the miasma, the man Ryre had first injured had killed his companion.

When the steeds fled, panicked by the stench of blood, Ryre could do nothing, even though he could see where they were heading. They had almost reached the glow of the mouths when they began to slither. The devourers were in a slippery hollow. Unable to regain their footing, the beasts slid down to them. Ryre turned away, sickened by the screams, by the sounds of tearing and slobbering.

He staggered to the wall of the cavern and groped his way along it. He felt as though his brain had turned to jelly, which was slopping back and forth in his skull. The leader was calling the names of the dead men across the cavern: "Halanc! Erepi! Vamanth!" After a while, receiving no answer, the three survivors moved on.

At least the blazing mouths were clear, no longer blurred by the miasma, when Ryre looked back. Had he managed to leave its influence behind, or would that linger? He sagged against the wall and tried to clean his lungs with deep breaths.

After a while he felt steadier. He was watching lights range back and forth across the cavern; eventually they meant something to him. The three were slowed down by having to search both sides of the cavern. When he could stand, he followed them doggedly.

Were they alert for him? Perhaps, since they must have heard the steeds being devoured, they thought the mouths had killed the riders too. In any case, they were wary of danger. Since the leader was among them, they would be all the more difficult to take by surprise.

Was Ryre's mind still affected? Suddenly, as the men crossed the middle of the cavern, they appeared to be surrounded by a multitude of jerking legs. It

looked as though enormous spiders were clutching down at them. Before long Ryre saw they were surrounded by an inverted forest of stalactites, some almost touching the floor. If he could reach the searchers here they would be easier to pick off one by one. They had moved into the open now and were heading for the left-hand wall, but they would have to come back.

They were quicker than he had hoped. They rode through the stone maze as quickly as they could, apparently nervous of being trapped while they were separated. Shadows of their torchlight ran like water down the stalactites. Could he reach them before they emerged? He ran, clutching at stone spikes, which felt dangerously fragile, to keep his balance. At least he was making little noise—but he had forgotten his sword. Without warning it clanged against a stalactite.

They heard it, and froze as he did. His head was loud with his voiceless cursing. It took him a while to realise that they weren't staring back at him, but ahead. Were the acoustics of the cave helping him?

Reminding himself that he was safe beyond their torchlight, he made the sword clang against the stone. Yes, the cave was tricking the searchers: they bent low over the necks of their steeds, peering ahead for him. Their torch-flames made the stalactites grope about them.

"I am Ryre, whom you left for dead," he said at once. "Leave my steed and you may pass. Otherwise you will die before you see me."

They were glaring about now, though still not looking back. Would the leader have returned Ryre's steed to him? Before the old man could respond, one of the others rode forward wildly, chopping with his sword. He must have thought he saw Ryre in the shadows ahead.

When his sword cut nothing but shadow, his momentum overbalanced him. He fell against stalactites, several of which broke off. One impaled his skull. He was dead, though still twitching, a moment after he struck the ground.

His steed came blundering back toward Ryre. Would the two survivors notice Ryre before he halted it? He cared little if they did; they were only two. But the leader was staring beyond the impaled man. "There," he whispered.

He seemed to have to make an effort to speak louder. "That steed is yours," he said to the shadows, and pointed back unseeing toward Ryre. "You have

said we may pass."

What was making his voice tremble so, with eagerness that could not be suppressed? Ryre knew, and as he quietened the steed, he saw. Beyond the stalactites, at the very edge of the torchlight, was the dim mouth of a cave. Within it shapes glimmered like ashen embers: the shapes of a tiara, necklaces, a crown.

The two men rode furiously toward the cave. They must be frantic in case Ryre reached the treasure. Their torchlight lapped the cavern stormily, if dimly. It must be the jerky light which made the cave appear to yawn wider as they approached.

No, it was not the light. All at once Ryre saw what the riders had missed seeing, in their haste: that though the treasure and the whole interior of the cave were glowing sullenly, the torchlight had yet to reach the cave. He remembered how the devourers had reminded him of maggots— but then what form might they take when fully grown? "Stay back!" he shouted, appalled to think that anyone should die that way. "It's alive!"

The riders must have thought he was trying to trick them. They rode so fast into the cave that the extra steed, Ryre's own, broke free. They leapt from their mounts and knelt eagerly by the treasure. Did they think it was only moss that made the floor so soft? Could they not see how regular the ridges were that led back into the throat? Did they think it was their torches that made the cave glare, that made all the jewels into rubies, the crown and bracelets and tiara look composed of blood?

When the ridges began to shift, gulping them back into the cave, they stared about at last. It was too late; the floor was rising, hurling them backward. They began screaming as the mouth closed. Their screams were mercifully brief, but another sound went on and on: the sound of bones being crushed to pulp.

Ryre's own steed had bolted. He followed it, since it seemed to have found a clear path. Within a minute he felt a change in the air, and almost at once the cavern roof gave place to a night sky choked with clouds.

He was overwhelmed with a sense of futility. The madman who had emerged to tell of the treasure had never known how close he was to escaping the dark at once, and the searchers could never have thought to look so close to the entrance. All of them had died for nothing.

As his eyes grew used to the night, which compared to the cavern was luminous, he made out a clump of trees nearby. A grim idea occurred to him. His own steed had calmed now it was out of the cavern. He tethered both steeds, then cut himself a heavy stave and began to sharpen its ends.

By the time he had finished it, it was daylight. When he dragged the stave into the cavern, the huge raw mouth had begun to open and to glow. It had vomited up the treasure, which lay several paces inside. Could it be conscious of using the treasure as a lure?

Ryre waited hours, until the mouth was fully open; then he jammed the stave into it, propping the jaw wide. The ridges were jerking in agony, but their spasms failed to move the treasure toward him. Eventually he dodged into the mouth and snatched as much as he could carry. The stave was creaking, the roof was straining above him, the ridges seemed eager to trip him—but more than any of this, what made him rush out of the mouth was that entangled in the treasure he left behind, and staring up at him almost accusingly, was part of the old man's face.

He was labouring to carry his armfuls of treasure by the time he reached his steed. For a moment he stared at the other beast, then he loaded it with half the treasure. When he set it loose it seemed to know where it was going—back to the widows and children, he hoped. For himself, he preferred not to encounter the friends of the men he had killed. He rode away toward the foothills and whatever lay beyond.

Root Cause

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I sat behind my second pint of beer and pretended to be unaware. Over by the billiard table a man in motorcycle leathers was selling a Japanese television, next to the fruit machine three sharp-faced youths in impeccable pastel suits seemed to be muttering about the supermarket across the road. Whenever I glanced at my book in case they thought I was watching, Vladimir said "We're waiting for Godot." They must have suspected I could hear them, for suddenly all three were staring at me across the archipelago of tables, the frayed beermats and greying ashtrays. I headed for the door while gulping the last of the beer. In the doorway a girl of about sixteen was loitering. I hurried, anxious not to be late for work, and had reached the wasteland of the intersection when I saw the children beneath the overpass.

They were clambering up the concrete pillars as though the tangled graffiti were vines, toward the roadway overhead. Precisely because I was nervous, I had to intervene. I mustn't flinch away because their lives weren't like mine.

As I reached the concrete island in the middle of the crossroads, the children came scrambling down. They had almost dodged into the traffic before they saw I wasn't following. "He isn't anyone," said a ten-year-old, the daytime mother of the group. "He's only the library man."

"You mustn't play under there. You might hurt yourselves." I felt absurdly pompous, but I could only be true to myself. "If you come to the library I'll find you some books to read."

"Come here till I tell you something," the ten-year-old hissed to the others. When she'd finished whispering, one boy peered beadily at me. "Are you a queer, mister?" he said.

"Certainly not." But I knew how my middle-class accent, stiffened by years of elocution classes, must sound. The concrete gloom pressed down, the muffled hissing of cars overhead made the pillars sound like trees, and I

was afraid that if I went toward the children they would run into the traffic without looking. "Don't come to the library if you don't want to," I said, turning away.

Of course I hoped that would lure them in. Certainly the library needed enlivening. Presumably the plate-glass walls had been intended to attract readers to the tens of thousands of new books, but when I arrived the place was almost deserted. The librarian gave me and the clock a sharp glance, and I hurried to deposit my coat in the staffroom, burping loudly enough to wake an old man who was dozing over the racing pages.

When I emerged, the children were swaggering toward the junior section. The uniformed attendant went after them at once, eager as a policeman on his first beat. Within a minute they were eluding him in four directions, punching the books as they ran, until the shelves looked gap-toothed. The librarian helped chase them while I served a pregnant woman who was returning an armful of overdue books. I didn't charge her a fine, for she already had three children, and I'd seen her husband a few minutes ago, drinking away his unemployment benefit in the Viscount of Knowsley. All at once my neck felt exposed and red-hot, for the librarian was frowning at me, but she hadn't seen me waive the rules. "Brian, did you tell those children to come in here?"

"Yes I did, Mrs Smullen. They didn't seem to have anywhere else to go."

"They most certainly have. They ought to be at school. If they choose to play truant, they mustn't think they have a refuge here. And apart from that, you saw how they behaved."

If the attendant had left them alone they might have found themselves books to read, but I refrained from saying so: I was on probation at the library for the first six months. As the afternoon wore on I stuck labels in books, dealt with a few readers, woke up a snoring drunk, read a landlord's letter to an old lady. The girl who had been loitering in the doorway of the Viscount sat waiting for her mother, a plump pink woman with the fixed thoughtless smile of an inflatable doll. At last the mother appeared in the lobby, beside a man who was averting his face, and beckoned her daughter out. I tried to watch where they went, but Mrs Smullen was saying "You weren't to know about those children, I suppose. You'll learn when you're been here a few weeks. I know it comes as a shock that anyone can live the way these people do."

But they had no choice, I thought as I waited for the bus that night outside the library. They were trapped here in the new town, miles out of the city from which they'd been rehoused. Half the firms which had promised jobs had set up factories elsewhere instead. That was why the overpass was empty now, robbed of the heavy traffic which had been supposed to feed the town.

The April twilight settled on the tower blocks—you couldn't tell it was Spring out here, except by the green tips of the saplings beside the intersection—and I grew nervous in case the bus had broken down, leaving me to wait another hour. Nothing moved on the narrow fenced-in pavements, the pale roads. Few people went out at night here, for there was nowhere to go. The overpass stood like a huge grey humped insect, a dozen legs supporting its midriff, and I found its utter stillness oppressive. It was enough to make me nervous all by itself.

Ten minutes later it was smudged by darkness. Now it looked like a petrified clump of trees. If I stared at it long enough I thought that the children were back again, clambering. Once I was sure that they were, and made a fool of myself by hurrying to look. For a moment I thought they had dodged across to the trees and were peering out at me, as if anyone could hide there: the saplings were no thicker than the poles which were teaching them posture.

I didn't give them a second glance, for I had almost missed the bus. The driver grudgingly opened the doors, then sped up the overpass ramp. I could never understand why buses used the overpass, especially now when the roads were deserted. As the bus reached the top he grimaced—perhaps at the sight of the miles of tower blocks with their racks of windows, or the way the bus juddered in a stray wind, or the only other passenger, who was complaining to nobody in particular that his nose was bleeding again. Neither of them worried me. Now that I was on the bus, I felt safe.

I felt safe until the next morning, when I saw the police cars outside the supermarket. The shattered hole beside the main lock made it clear what had happened, but I already knew. A policeman was talking to the manager, who wore a dark suit and five o'clock shadow. "Nine televisions, eight music centres," the manager was saying, like a belated carol of Christmas spending. I hurried into the library as if I were the culprit, averting my face.

I felt as if I were, but what could I have done? I had only suspicions to offer, and yesterday I would have had even less. Certainly I had no proof. Still, I felt on edge to speak to the police as I unlocked the front door to let in the old men. In they trooped, to squabble over first read of the newspapers.

I was stamping books at the counter when the police found the guard dog on the island beneath the overpass. As they carried it back to the supermarket I saw how its glassy-eyed head lolled, how the fur of its throat was darkly matted. I was angry, but I was more afraid, and very glad to be helping someone search for books when the police came to ask the librarian if she'd noticed anything suspicious yesterday. Until they left, I was afraid they would ask me.

And as soon as they left I was furious with myself, of course. The three youths would never have known that 1 was the one who had told the police. But then, I realised as lunchtime approached, they weren't the type that would need to be sure, and that made me nervous enough to stay away from the Viscount of Owsley in case they had seen the police in the library.

I was too tense to stay with Mrs Smullen when we closed for lunch. Instead I went walking among the tower blocks. Draughty doorless entranceways gaped everywhere; broken glass glittered on stairs, graffiti dwarfed the walls. Here and there I passed terraces with ragged lawns and crippled fences; most of the houses were boarded up. On one of the few larger areas of green I saw children dragging a large plastic letter K and an N through the mud, which explained what had happened to the Viscount. Around the green, injured saplings tried to lean on splintered poles. It occurred to me that the only untouched saplings I'd seen were by the overpass.

I was on edge all day, and glad to leave. A teacher reserved all our junior books on ancient Britain for a school project, the teenage girl and her doll-faced mother strolled along opposite sides of the main road, slowing whenever they heard a car. That night as I waited for the bus I saw how the road stood over the place where the dog had been found, like a spider photographed in the act of seizing its prey. Had the thieves hidden the dog over there, or had it dragged itself? I found that until the bus was beyond the overpass, everything made me nervous—the way the driver grinned to himself, the smell of the raw meat which the woman at the far end of the

bus must be carrying, even the distant chanting that drifted up from below, no doubt football songs in the Viscount. Once they'd begun singing football songs when I was in the pub, and I'd felt more out of place than ever.

At least next day was Thursday, my day off in the week. That afternoon I sat for a while on the pavilion and watched the bowlers, old soldiers and retired businessmen whose moustaches were neat as the green. I could almost believe there was nothing more important than the unhurried click of bowls. Later I strolled through the house of the family which owned the estate: elegant roped-off rooms, portraits safe in the past. Usually while I was there I could pretend I had stepped back in time, but now the house reminded me how I was trying to forget about tomorrow.

When I arrived at the library, it was worse. Overnight half the windows had been smashed. Mrs Smullen watched the workmen, her lips pursed, as they nailed boards over the gaps. She looked furious with everyone—no doubt the police had wakened her during the night—and I hardly dared to say good morning. Besides, I was trying to ignore a secret fear that the windows had been smashed as a warning to me.

Now there was no daylight in the library. I was boxed in with relentless fluorescent light, like a laboratory animal. At lunchtime I sat on the far side of the staffroom from Mrs Smullen and tried to hush the pages of the Vonnegut novel I was reading. I was afraid to show my face in the Viscount of Owly.

All at once, halfway through the afternoon, I was enough on edge to say "Shouldn't we do something about that girl?"

She was sitting at a bare table, waiting for her doll-faced mother and whoever she might bring. "What do you suggest we do?" Mrs Smullen said.

I ignored her sarcastic emphasis. "Well, I don't know, but surely there must be something," I pleaded, fighting to keep my voice low. "She can't be more than sixteen years old, and her mother seems to sell her to anyone who comes along."

"As a matter of fact I happen to know she's thirteen." Before I could react to that, she turned on me. "But what exactly are you implying? Are you alleging that I would allow my library to used in that way?"

I might have been too shocked to pretend that I wasn't. In particular her words dismayed me: suggest, imply, allege—the language of a cautious

newspaper. I hadn't replied when a woman came in with an armful of books. "See to the counter, please," Mrs Smullen said.

The books were overdue, and I felt frustrated enough to take a sadistic delight in counting up the fines. When I announced the total, the woman stared unblinking at me. "My friend owed more than that the other day, and you didn't charge her," she said.

Mrs Smullen intervened at once. "We aren't authorised to waive fines. If your friend wasn't charged it must have been an oversight, and she should count herself lucky."

When the woman had gone, leaving her ticket with the unpaid fine and muttering that she'd rather watch television anyway, Mrs Smullen demanded "Is that true? Have you been waiving fines?"

"Well, there was one lady, that woman's friend." In fact there had been several. "She was pregnant for the umpteenth time, and her husband's unemployed."

"I pay quite enough tax to keep people like her without encouraging them. Because you're new I'll overlook this, but if it happens again I shall have to mention it in your probationary report," she said, turning away.

I might have retorted that it was also public money that paid her wages, but of course I didn't dare. Instead I tried to lose myself in work, though I was neurotically aware of every one of her movements, wherever she was in the library. The sky darkened, the fluorescent light seemed to intensify, the glossy spines of books glared discordantly. By the time Mrs Smullen went for her afternoon break, it was pouring with rain.

As soon as the staffroom door closed behind her, I glanced about. Apart from the old men snoozing and mumbling at the tables, the library was deserted, and I didn't think that anyone else would come in until the rain eased off. I hurried to the phone at once, and called the police.

Immediately I heard a voice, I told it about the young girl and her mother. I'd hoped that would make me feel I had achieved something at last, but I only felt uncomfortably furtive, as guilty as if I were making a hoax call. Of course I didn't give my name, and wouldn't let the owner of the voice put me through to someone else. I replaced the receiver hastily, and spent five minutes worrying in case Mrs Smullen had heard the ring.

The girl at the table had found a picture book of Spain and was leafing through it rather wistfully, but I couldn't spare much time to watch her, for I was too busy watching for the police. Whenever the library doors opened, my stomach felt wrenched. I might have been the person they were looking for, not her at all.

I was glad when Mrs Smullen reappeared. At least I could take refuge in the staffroom. But I couldn't read; I could only gaze out at the dark afternoon, the streaming road, a few cars ascending the overpass, their headlights swollen with rain. I was so nervous that I saw a figure being slashed with knives beneath the overpass. It must have been the shadow of a sapling, knives of rain and headlights. The rain made the graffiti on the pillars resemble huge blotchy faces.

When I emerged from the staffroom, the girl had gone. For a moment I felt guiltily relieved, then I realised that it didn't mean the police would stay away. Suppose they assumed the call had been a hoax? Suppose they recognised my voice? I was afraid to look up when the door opened, and by the time the library closed I was near panic. It was almost a relief to stand outside in the last of the rain and wait for the bus, even though I couldn't help peering across at the overpass. I saw nothing unusual, even when I hurried to the window of the bus and stared down from the overpass. There were only the saplings, glistening darkly.

I didn't sleep well that night. I dreamed I was in the staffroom, unable to look away from the overpass outside the window, while someone came into the room behind me. I jerked awake when I felt an icy touch on my throat. After that I couldn't sleep at all, and perhaps that was why, next morning on the bus, the noise of the engine seemed to turn into chanting as the bus reached the overpass.

At least there was no sign of the young girl. Perhaps Saturday was her day off. I managed to behave as if everything was normal: I asked people to keep their voices down, told readers I would put out the returned books in a few minutes, said "Staff only behind the counter" when they tried to grab returned books from the trolley. Mrs Smullen could have had no reason to suspect that anything was wrong, until I came out of the staffroom at the end of my morning break and saw her talking to the police.

My reaction gave me away. I hesitated long enough in the doorway for her to see that I wanted to hide. I snatched a handful of reservation cards and

tried to look as if I were searching for the books on the shelves, but as soon as the police left she hunted me down. "Was it you who called the police?"

"Well, somebody had to do something..." I kept my voice low, and wished that she would do the same; readers were glancing at her. "You said she was only thirteen..."

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear to you." Her face was growing red, her voice was rising. "I am in charge of this library. From now on you will do exactly as I say, no more and no less. If that girl comes in here again you will tell her to leave at once."

"But that won't achieve anything," I hissed. "She'll only go elsewhere. What are the police going to do about her?"

"Will you go back to the counter and get on with your work." She turned her back on me at once and strode to her desk.

When I had to give a reader his tickets, I almost dropped them. My fingers felt swollen, my face was burning. Not only had all the readers heard Mrs Smullen, some of them had given her approving smiles. When she went into the staffroom for her break I mouthed obscenities at her, but that didn't make me feel any less enraged. I was still standing at the counter, digging my fingers viciously among the book cards and readers' tickets, when the three sharp-faced youths came in.

They hardly glanced at me, but one of them murmured something. All of them sniggered as they sat down at the table furthest from the counter. They began to mutter, heads close together, a low blurred sound like the noise of a fly trapped in a room. Even if they had been three other people I would have found it nerve-racking. As soon as an old man turned to glare at them I strode over. "Will you keep your voices down, please," I said, my lips trembling.

They took their time before they looked at me, smirking. "All right, squire," one said. "You won't even know we're here."

As soon as I turned away they burst out laughing and resumed talking. All at once I felt safe: they were on my territory here, I was in charge of the library while Mrs Smullen was away, whatever she might think. "That's enough," I said with all the violence I felt. "I told you to keep quiet. Get out and make your plans somewhere else."

"And what'll you do? Hit us with a book?" one said. As they rose to their feet, the chair-legs screeched over the linoleum. They were no longer smirking, because I'd revealed that I knew about them. One of them reached in his inside breast pocket, and my face and throat already felt raw.

Before he could withdraw his hand, the library attendant returned from a surreptitious visit to the Viscount of Owl. He saw what was happening, and intervened at once. "Go on, the lot of you," he snarled, exhaling beer over me and the youths alike. "Don't try it. I'll have the law on you." For a moment the youth stood there like Napoleon, then the three of them marched out, kicking all the chairs within reach.

I was relieved that the attendant had intervened—not only because he'd prevented whatever they might have done to me, but also because he had decoyed their hostility away from me. At least, I hoped he had. Certainly Mrs Smullen assumed that I had been helping him throw out some troublemakers. It wasn't until the library closed for the night, and I was waiting for the bus, that I realised fully how blind my hope was. The youths had every reason to cut me up like the dog, and now was their chance.

I hid beneath the overpass and watched for the bus, but I felt by no means safe. Clouds were blackening the twilight; it was very dark among the pillars. I was surrounded by graffiti, incomprehensible as runes. They were confusing the edge of my vision, for there seemed to be too many pillars, disfigured by huge looming faces. I wouldn't look up, even though I kept thinking that children were clambering overhead; I knew it must be an illusion of the graffiti—no children ever had such bright red mouths. I had enough trouble convincing myself that the spidery saplings weren't fat and darkly glistening.

When the bus came in sight I felt safe at last, but not for long. As soon as I sat down I caught sight of the driver's face in his mirror. The bus was racing up the overpass, and he was grinning mirthlessly, grinning like a wooden mask. He looked insane.

As the bus reached the top, it swerved. For a moment I was sure he was going to drive straight through the concrete railing. When I opened my eyes, we were a hundred yards beyond the overpass, and he looked perfectly normal, almost expressionless. Perhaps it was only my lingering nervousness that had made him look anything else.

My nervousness wouldn't go away. It loomed over me all Sunday while I tried to enjoy the Spring among the large scrubbed houses near my home. I thought of calling Mrs Smullen in the morning to say I was ill, but I knew she wouldn't believe me. My probationary report would no doubt be bad enough as it was.

I didn't get much sleep. On Monday I was tense long before I arrived at the library. Everything made me anxious, even a child who had fallen near the overpass and was crying about his bloody knees. But there was a surprise waiting for me. Someone had been sent on relief from another library, to make the staff up to three.

Mrs Smullen must have known in advance, but it didn't matter that she hadn't mentioned it to me; I was too relieved not to be on my own with her. Jack, the new man, was an expansive sort who asked the readers what they thought of the books they were returning, something Mrs Smullen never did. He joked with everyone, even with Mrs Smullen until her face made it clear that joking was against the rules. I felt at ease for the first time in days.

Perhaps Mrs Smullen resented our rapport. Halfway through the morning she showed me an item in the local newspaper. The woman I hadn't charged fines had been arrested for shoplifting; her flat had proved to be full of stolen goods. "I hope that will make you think a little," Mrs Smullen said, but I was depressed less by the report than by how triumphant she seemed. When Jack saw I was depressed he winked at me, and I felt better.

"Coming for a drink, old son?" he said at lunchtime. I didn't mind going to the Cunt of Owl now that there were two of us. Jack challenged me to a game of billiards, which I lost hilariously. He insisted on a third round of beer, and we were gulping it down with barely a minute to go before the library opened when the three youths appeared at the far end of the bar.

I choked on my beer, and stood coughing and spluttering while Jack thumped me between the shoulders. One youth was dawdling ominously toward me along the bar, but it didn't feel at all like a scene in a Western to me. Then one of his companions caught his elbow and muttered something that turned him back, and at once I felt impressive as John Wayne. I wasn't scared of them or of Mrs Smullen. I took my time finishing my drink; I wasn't about to start coughing again.

When we returned to the library it was already open, and the doll-faced woman was flouncing out with her daughter. "You pack while I tell Reg we have to stay with him," the mother was saying. So the police and Mrs Smullen had made them move elsewhere, but what had that achieved? Still, I felt resigned to its inevitability, thanks to the beer.

The beer helped me amble through the next hour or so, chatting with readers and fumbling for their tickets in the narrow metal trays, but by the time I went for my afternoon break I felt sleepy. I sat and blinked at the rain that was striping the staffroom window. Before long I was nodding. I thought there were too many pillars in the gloom beneath the overpass, but then I saw that what I'd taken for a mass of pillars was something else: a glistening tangle of roots or branches or entrails, that were reaching for me. They might have caught me if I hadn't been woken by a crash of glass.

I sat and stared, and couldn't move. Just a couple of feet in front of me, the staffroom window had been smashed. I heard footsteps running away, and the clang of a metal bar thrown on the pavement, but I could only stare at my reflection in the fragment that remained of the window. I could feel glass in my throat, which was wet and growing wetter. Reflected against the streaming overpass, my chest was darkening with a stain.

Mrs Smullen strode in almost at once. I managed to stand up, my feet crunching broken glass, so that she could see what had happened to me, but she hardly spared me a glance. She seemed almost to blame me for the damage. Perhaps she was right—no doubt the broken window was the revenge of the sharp-faced youths—but couldn't she see that my throat had been cut? At last I ventured to the mirror above the sink, and made myself look. There was a tiny splinter of glass under my chin, but no blood. My chest was soaked with rain.

Perhaps I should have been able to laugh at my panic, but the anticlimax only worried me: it seemed the worst was yet to happen. After all, I would have to wait by myself for the bus. The hammering of workmen at the staffroom window resounded through the library. Before long it felt as though they were hammering my ears.

But I didn't have to wait for the bus. Though he didn't live near me, Jack offered me a lift home. I felt limp with relief, even when he headed unnecessarily for the overpass. "Here goes the roller coaster," he cried.

As the car reached the top, it veered alarmingly. I thought there must be a cross-wind, though I couldn't feel one. I glanced at Jack to make some such remark, and at once I was afraid to speak. He was grinning stiffly, showing his teeth. His eyes were fixed as glass.

I watched him, because I couldn't look away, until we were off the overpass. At once his expression began to fade, and a hundred yards further on he looked at me. "What's up?" he said.

He seemed back to normal. "What were you thinking about when you made that face?" I said, trying to relax.

"What face?"

"You made a face just now on the overpass."

"Did I? I'll take your word for it, old son. I can't recall thinking of anything. This bloody place, I expect."

He obviously thought he hadn't told me anything, but I felt he had: it was just that I couldn't define it, especially while his hand kept touching my leg whenever he changed gear. Soon he let his hand rest on the gear lever and my thigh, until I drew away. Once I was alone I tried to pinpoint what I should have noticed, but my mind felt like a lump in my head. That night I kept waking, convinced that the prickling of my throat meant it had been slashed.

Next morning I almost fell asleep on the bus, but I alighted before it reached the overpass. Though I couldn't see the driver's face, I was almost sure that he lost control for a moment at the top. I didn't feel any more confident for having escaped the bus. As I hurried past the intersection the buds of the saplings looked too green, violent as neon.

Jack clapped me on the shoulder when he arrived. "How are you today, old son?" I tried to stay away from him and Mrs Smullen; I didn't feel at ease with either of them. Old ladies jostled in front of the shelves of romances, the attendant threw out several children for giggling at picture books. I searched for adult books on ancient Britain for the class that was coming in later. Through one of the remaining windows I could see the overpass, rearing up as if to pounce.

When I went for my morning break I wasn't conscious of taking a handful of the history books with me. I sat in the boarded-up staffroom and tried to relax. Flats in the tower blocks must feel like this, like cells. More than the

glaring light, it bothered me that I couldn't watch the overpass. I closed my eyes and tried to find a reason for all the tension and frustration I was suffering. If I could understand them, perhaps they would go away. If they lingered they would grow worse, and I couldn't imagine what I would do then.

My hands were clenching. They clenched on the books, which I realised at last I was holding—and suddenly I realised what I'd overlooked.

For a while I stared at the unopened books. I had to know, and yet I was afraid to find out. Eventually I turned to the index of the first book. There wasn't much to find: most of England had been Celtic in the fourth century, the Druids had performed human sacrifices in sacred groves. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps my impressions had no historical basis after all. In any case, how long could an area of land retain its character? Could any influence survive so long?

I opened the second book, and there it was: a Roman description of a sacred grove. Barbaric rites—'barbara ritu sacra deorum'—every tree sprinkled with human gore, altars heaped with entrails. Trees were carved to represent gods—'simulacra maesta deorum'—and I knew how the Romans must have felt to be hemmed in by the huge looming faces, for I had felt it myself. I was sure of myself now. Jack had said more than he knew when he'd called it a bloody place.

I was sure of myself, but not of what to do. Who could I tell? What could I say? I hurried out of the staffroom, trying to think whether there was anything at the intersection that might convince people, and saw the school bus full of children in the distance. It was heading for the library—for the overpass.

At once my sense of danger was so intense that I began to shake. There wasn't time to explain to anyone. I had to act, I mustn't fail again. My whole body was tingling with apprehension, and yet deep down I felt relieved, capable of dealing with the miles of concrete and everything within them at last. All at once everything seemed clear and simple. The bus came speeding down the long straight road as I ran panting toward the intersection. Before I reached it, my lungs felt raw.

By the time I stumbled to the far side of the intersection, the bus was only yards away. I stood in front of the overpass and gestured wildly for the driver to go around. When the grin formed slowly on his face I knew what

I'd failed to anticipate, but it was too late. As he drove straight at me my vision blurred, and the saplings seemed to bend toward me like the tendrils of a carnivorous plant. As the bus knocked me down into darkness, I thought I heard the children chanting.

But perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps I was wrong about everything. When he came to visit me in the hospital, the driver said that the steering had locked. He'd managed to brake, though not in time to prevent the impact from fracturing three of my ribs. Perhaps he had been grimacing as he fought the wheel, not grinning at all.

Yes, I think I was wrong. Now that I read over what I've written, I think that the unfamiliarity of everything distorted my view of it—of the intersection most of all. I can hear the birds in the trees outside the window, singing with their bright red beaks, and it seems to me that the saplings by the intersection may be the most important factor in the lives of all those people. When they grow into trees, surely their green must brighten those lives. Once I leave the hospital, I must do what I can to help the saplings grow as they should.

1980

Bedtime Story

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Soon Jimmy grew bored with watching his parents holding tiny saucers and sipping coffee from tinier cups. They looked awkward as grown-ups playing tea-parties. He could tell that they wanted him out of the way while they talked, and so he ventured upstairs, though he wasn't sure his grandmother would want him to. All at once he was breathless, because there was so much he hadn't seen before: an attic full of objects made mysterious by dust, polished banisters that begged to be slid down, a small room halfway up the house, that faced onto the park. Down in the rose garden paths split the lawns into pieces of a giant green jigsaw, over by the lake trees waited in line to be climbed, and suddenly he wished this was his room—but when he turned, there was already someone in the room behind him.

It was only himself in the wardrobe mirror. The dusty sheen of the glass made it stand out from the backing, made it look like a mirror into another room. He stared until his face grew flat and glary, until he felt as papery as his reflection looked, and very aware of being only seven years old. As he crept downstairs his father was saying that once he found another teaching job he was sure they'd get a mortgage, Jimmy's grandmother was saying she had friends who would bring his mother work if she learned how to sew, and Jimmy thought they'd finished wanting him out of the way.

From her look he thought his grandmother was about to tell him off for going upstairs. "Well, James, you're going to live with me for a while. Will you like that?" she said.

He could feel his parents willing him to be polite. "Yes," he said, for it was the first week of the summer holidays and everything felt like an adventure. Even living here did, especially when he found he was having the room with the mirror. It was as though finding himself already in the mirror had made his wish come true. He didn't even mind when that night his mother

stayed downstairs while his grandmother tucked him into bed and gave him a wrinkled kiss. He made a face at the mirror, where he could just see himself in the light from the park road. Then she turned in the doorway to look at him, that look which made him feel she knew something about him she wished were not so, and he hid under the sheets.

Next morning he ran into the park as soon as he was dressed. It was like having the biggest front garden in the world. Soon he'd made friends with the children from the flats next door, Emma and Indira, who had to wear trousers under her skirt, and Bruce, who was fat and always sniffing and would blubber gratifyingly if they pinched him when they were bored. The children made up for being put to bed too early by Jimmy's grandmother who had somehow taken over that job, for having to be exactly on time for meals, which were formal as going to church. Then his mother started her job at the nursery, and his father kept having to go for interviews, and Jimmy realised his life had scarcely begun to change.

At first she only fussed over him and told him not to do things, until he felt he couldn't breathe. Once, when he lifted down his father's first examination certificate—the glass gleamed from her polishing it every day—she cried "Don't touch that" so shrilly that he almost dropped it. Worse, now he was forever catching her watching him as if she was trying not to believe what he was.

One day, when a downpour crawling on the windows made even the trees look grey, he went up to the attic. Behind a rusty trunk he found several paintings, one a portrait of his father as a child. Before he knew it she was at the door. "Must you always be into mischief, James?" Yet all he was doing was feeling sad that she must have taken weeks over each painting only to leave them up here in the dust.

That night he lay wondering what she'd thought he would do to her paintings, wondering what she knew. The dusty reflection reminded him of a painting, the dim figure still as paint. It was a painting, and that meant he couldn't move. By the time he managed to struggle out of bed he didn't like the mirror very much.

Downstairs his grandmother was saying, "You must say if you think I'm interfering, but I do feel you might choose his friends more carefully."

Jimmy could tell from his father's voice that he'd had another unsuccessful interview. "Who do you mean?"

"Why, the children from the flats. The darky and the others."

"They seem reasonable enough kids to me," his mother said.

"I suppose it depends what you're used to. I'm afraid the class of people round here isn't what it was when I was young. I know we aren't supposed to say that kind of thing these days." She sighed and said, "That sort of child could make life difficult for James if they found out what he is."

Jimmy realised he'd been clinging to his bedroom door, for as he crept forward to hear better it slammed behind him. "I'll see what's wrong," his mother said sharply. "You've done enough for one day."

Jimmy hurried back to bed and tried to look as if he hadn't left it. In the dimmer bed, someone else was hiding beneath the sheets. His mother tiptoed into the room. "Are you awake, Jimmy?"

"I heard granny. What did she mean? What am I?"

"Bloody old woman," his mother whispered fiercely. "I was going to have you when we got married, Jimmy, that's all. It doesn't mean a thing except to people like your grandmother."

As she kissed him goodnight he saw her stooping to the dim face in the mirror, and suddenly it seemed more real than he was. Whatever was wrong must be worse than she'd said, for how could that make his grandmother watch him that way? After that night he could never be quite sure of Emma and her friends. He was afraid they might find out what he was before he knew himself.

One day they came into the house. His grandmother was in the park, calling "Mrs. Tortoiseshell" after a lady who appeared to be very deaf. Jimmy had grown bored with watching the chase when the others came to find him. "I've got to stay in until she comes back," he said. "You can read my comics if you like."

He led them up to his room. Bruce had to read everything out loud, though he was two years older than Jimmy, and the best he could make of Kryptonite was "k, k, kip tonight." Jimmy laughed as loudly as the others, but he didn't like the way they were crumpling his comics. "I know where we can go," he said. "There's a great cellar downstairs."

There were mountains of coal, and a few greying mops and pails that looked stuck to the walls by shadow, and the furnace. That was a hulk like a

safe, taller than his father, overgrown with pipes. Jimmy wished it were winter, because then he could open the door and watch the blaze; now there was nothing inside but a coating of soot and ash. The three of them were hiding from Bruce to make him blubber when Jimmy's grandmother found them.

"Don't you dare come in here again. Just you remember the police are only up the road." She warned Jimmy that she'd tell his parents when they came home, but they didn't seem very concerned. "I can't see what you have against his friends," his mother said.

His father clenched his forehead against a headache. "Neither can I."

"Oh, can't you? Once you could have. Anyway," she said, gazing at Jimmy's mother, "I'm afraid I insist on choosing who comes into my house."

After a painful silence his father said, "That's it, then, Jimmy. You'll have to do as your granny says."

Jimmy sensed his mother was more disappointed than he was. "Do I have to?"

"There, you see, he won't be told. What he needs is a good thrashing."

"He won't get one from us," his mother said. "And anyone else who touches him will be very sorry."

His grandmother ignored her. "Thrashing never did you any harm."

Jimmy found the idea of her beating his father so disturbing that he ran blindly upstairs. His body seemed to have made the decision to run while he tried not to think. What was he that his grandmother hated so much? He reached the landing and was suddenly afraid to open his door in case there was already someone in his bed. Yes, someone was beyond the door, creeping toward it as Jimmy went helplessly forward. Once the door was open they would be face to face, and what would happen to Jimmy then? He was fighting not to turn the doorknob, and unable to be sure that it hadn't already begun to turn, when his mother came upstairs. "That's right, Jimmy," she said, suppressing her anger. "Time for bed."

Nobody was in his room except the face that peered around the edge of the mirror. He could tell it was his own face until he got into bed. His mother seemed anxious to go downstairs—because she wanted to hear what the others were saying, he told himself, not because of anything in his room.

"Don't worry, we won't let anyone harm you," she said, but he wasn't sure she knew the nature of the threat.

The night was hot as a heap of quilts. He was nowhere near sleep when his grandmother came up. She tucked in the sheets which he'd kicked off, and shook her head as if someone hadn't done her job. "You must promise me never to go near the furnace again. Do you know what happens to little boys who go near ovens?" She told him the story about the children whom the old witch lured into the gingerbread house, except that when his mother used to read him the story the children had escaped. He tried to make faces at the mirror so that he wouldn't be frightened, but couldn't be sure of the face in the other bed; it seemed to be grinning, which wasn't at all how he felt. He squeezed his eyes shut, and when she left, having given him a withered kiss, he was afraid to open them; he felt he was being watched.

His father was growing short-tempered as one interview after another proved to be fixed in someone else's favour. In the mornings he loitered near the front door until the mail arrived, and Jimmy heard him saying "Shit" when he opened his letters or when there weren't any. The house felt as if it was waiting for a storm, and it was on the day of the tea party that the nightmare began.

Usually Jimmy managed to avoid these gatherings, but this time his grandmother insisted on showing him to her friends. He stood awkwardly, surrounded by faded tasselled lamps and the smells of age and lavender water, while the old ladies dramatised appreciation of their microscopic sandwiches and grumbled about strikes, crime, Russians, television, prices, bus timetables, teachers, children. "He isn't such a bad boy," his grandmother said, holding his hand while they gazed at him. He was seeing a hairy wart, a hat like a green and purple sea urchin, mouths the colour and texture of healing wounds. "He got off to a bad start, but that isn't everything. He just needs proper handling."

Jimmy felt more confused than ever, and escaped as soon as he could. As he stepped onto the sticky road, Emma waved at him from her window. "Everyone's gone out. We can play being mummy and daddy."

He and his parents had often used to wear no clothes in their flat, but now they wouldn't even let him go undressed. Sure enough, Emma suggested they take off their clothes before dressing up, and he was almost naked when Mrs. Tortoiseshell saw him. She was holding a plastic bag of ice

cubes on top of her head. She stood there aghast, one hand on the bag and the other on her hip, like a caricature of a ballerina. Then she vanished, crying so loudly for his grandmother he could hear her through the two windows.

He felt infested by guilt. Mrs. Tortoiseshell must know what he was. He fled into the park, because he couldn't look at Emma, and hid behind a bush. Soon the old ladies emerged, calling "Bye-ee" like a flock of large pale birds, and his grandmother saw him. "James, come here."

She only wanted to show him an old book. That made him think of a witch in one of his comics, except his grandmother's book was for doctors. "Just you leave girls alone," she said, "unless you want this to happen to you." She seemed to be showing him a picture of a decaying log: did she mean his arms and legs would drop off? He was still trying to make it out when his mother came home and saw the picture. "What the Christ do you think you're doing? What are you trying to turn him into?"

"Someone has to take him in hand while you play nursemaid to other people's children. I never thought my son would end up married to a nanny."

Jimmy thought his mother would explode, her face had turned so mottled. Then his father came in. One look at the tableau of them, and he groaned. "What's wrong now?"

"You tell me. Tell me why she's showing him this crap if you can."

"Because he was up to no good with the little strumpet next door." When his parents demanded what she meant she said, "I should think you would know only too well."

"Don't be ridiculous. He's seven years old," his father said, and Jimmy felt as if he wasn't there at all.

"That means nothing with all this sex you're teaching them in school."

"I can't teach anybody anything with all the education cuts your bloody government is making."

"Oh, is it my fault now that you can't get a job? Well, I shouldn't say this but I will: if it were up to me I wouldn't send you to your interviews looking like a tramp."

It seemed the storm was about to break, when Mrs. Tortoiseshell appeared from upstairs in search of her hat. She was still clutching the bag of melted ice to her head, as if it were a hat someone had left in exchange for hers. "I shouldn't have taken it off," she wailed, and Jimmy imagined her wearing her hat on top of the bag. Eventually he found it, a helmet like a pink cake curly with icing. "That's a good boy," his grandmother said, enraging his parents.

The interruption had turned the row into a hostile silence. Jimmy was almost glad when bedtime came. As his mother tucked him in she said, "I don't know what you were doing with Emma but don't do it again, all right? We've enough problems as it is." He wanted to call her back and tell her what had really happened, but instead he huddled beneath the sheets: he'd glimpsed the face in the other bed, the face that looked swollen and patchy, just like the picture his grandmother had shown him. He was afraid to touch his own face in case it felt like that. He could hardly convince himself he was there in his own bed at all.

The morning was cold and wet, and so was the week that followed. He avoided his room as much as he could. It wasn't only that it seemed the darkest place in the house, its walls swarming with ghosts of rain; it was the face that peered around the edge of the mirror whenever he entered the room. He had to step in before he could switch on the light, and in that moment the puffy blackened face grinned out. When he switched on the light his face looked just as it did in any other mirror, but he'd seen in comics how villains could disguise themselves.

The day it stopped raining was the day his grandmother let him know he was a villain. The wet weather must have made her rusty, for whenever she stood up she winced. She gave him a five-pound note to buy liniment at the chemist's. He was feeling grown-up to have charge of so much when she fixed him with her gaze. "Just remember, James, I'm trusting you."

He had never felt guiltier. She expected him to steal. Since she did, he hardly paused when he saw the new red ball in the toyshop by the chemist's. It cost nearly a pound, and the wind was trying to snatch the four pound notes out of his fist; he'd only to tell her that one had blown away. Buying the ball made him feel vindicated, and he was almost at the house before he wondered how he could explain the ball.

He must hide it before she could see it. He ran in—she'd left the porch door open for him—and was halfway to the stairs when she came out of the living room. He threw the ball desperately onto the landing above him. "Who is it?" she cried as it went thud, thud. "Who's up there?"

"I'll go and see," he said at once, and was running upstairs to hide the ball when she said, "My liniment and four pounds ten pence, please."

"I put it there." He pointed at the jar of liniment on the hall table, but she gazed at his clenched fist until he went reluctantly down and opened his hand above hers. "And the other pound, please," she said as the notes unfurled.

"I haven't got it." He realised too late that he should have said so at once. "It blew in the lake."

She made him turn out his pockets. When they proved to be empty except for a clump of sweets, her face grew even stiffer. "Please stay where I can see you," she said as he followed her upstairs.

The ball wasn't on the landing. It must be in one of the rooms, all of which were open except his. As she looked into each and pushed him ahead of her, the sky grew dark, the trees began to hiss and glisten. She pushed him into his room. The figure with the crawling blotchy face stepped forward to meet him, and the ball was at its feet, beneath the wardrobe. Yet Jimmy's grandmother hardly glanced at the ball, and it took him a while to understand she didn't realise it was new.

She said nothing when his mother came home. She was waiting for his father, to tell him Jimmy had stolen from her. "Is that what happened, Jimmy?" his father said.

"No." Jimmy felt as if he were talking to strangers—as if he were a stranger too. "It blew in the lake."

"That sounds more like it to me." When the old lady's pursed lips opened, his father said, "Look, here's a pound, and now let's forget it. I don't want to hear you saying things like that about Jimmy."

Jimmy felt strange. He could no longer recall taking the money. Someone else had stolen it: whoever had the ball. The idea didn't frighten him until he went to bed and lay there dreading the moment when his mother would leave him in the dark. He wasn't frightened of being alone, quite the

opposite. "Don't switch off the light," he cried. "I don't want to live here anymore."

"We have to for a little while. Be brave. Your father had an interview that looked promising. We're waiting to hear."

He felt a hint of their old relationship. "Don't go out and leave me all day. I have to stay in with her."

"No you haven't. If it's too wet to play you can go to Emma's. I say you can. Now be a big boy and do without the light or you'll be getting us told off for wasting electricity."

Eventually he slept, praying that the noises at the end of the bed were only the stirrings of the radiator. Rain like maracas woke him in the morning, and so did a surge of delight that he wouldn't have to stay in. Emma was glad to see him, for she had a cold. They played all day, and he didn't go home until he heard his parents.

His grandmother wasn't speaking to them. Whenever she spoke to him, it was a challenge meant for them. He felt as if the burning silence were focused on him, especially when, nearly at the end of the endless dinner, they heard Emma sneezing. His mother felt his prickling forehead. "You'd better go to bed," she said at once.

He couldn't protest: something had drained that strength from him. As his mother helped him to his room, no doubt thinking it was illness rather than fear that was slowing him down on the stairs, he heard his grandmother. "I hope you're satisfied now. That's how she cares for your child."

His mother put him to bed and gave him a glass of medicine. All too soon she was at the door. "Leave the light on," he pleaded in a voice he could scarcely hear.

"You certainly can have the light on," she said, loudly enough to be heard downstairs. "Call me if you need anything."

For a while he felt safe, listening to the downpour whipping the window. When his parents came upstairs he thought he would be safer, but then he heard his mother. "You won't stand up to her at all. You as good as admitted he was a thief by giving her that money. I really think you're still afraid of her. Being near her makes you weak." That made Jimmy feel weak himself, made him think of his father being beaten. He buried his head in the pillow, and was trying to decide whether he felt hot or cold when he fell asleep.

When he awoke, the rain had stopped. There was silence except for a faint dull repetitive splashing. Everyone must be in bed. He clawed the sheet away from his face and opened his eyes. He was still in the dark. Someone had switched off the light.

Above his head the window must be streaming, for the wall and the door beyond the foot of the bed were breaking out in glistening patches. The outline of the switch beside the door was crumbling with darkness, it looked ready to fall and leave him with no hope of light, but if he could struggle out of bed it was only a few paces away. Surely he could do that if he closed his eyes, surely he could reach the switch before he saw anything else. But he was already seeing what was in the corner by the window, nearest his face: a small round shape just about the size of his head.

When he saw the blotches breaking out on it he knew it was about to grin —until he saw it was the ball. It had been sent out of the dark to him. He lay staring fearfully, alone but for the muffled regular splashing, and tried to believe he could move, could dart out of bed and out of the room. The mirror was further from the door than he was. When he tried to take deep breaths, they and his heart deafened him. He was afraid not to be able to hear.

Or perhaps he was afraid of what he might hear, for the soft dull sound wasn't quite like splashing. To begin with, it was in the room with him. It must be growing louder: he no longer had to strain to hear that it was a thumping, a patting, the sound of squashy objects striking glass. No, it wasn't at the window. It came from beyond the foot of the bed.

At last he managed to raise his head. He would be able to see without being able to escape. His neck was at an angle—a blazing pain was trying to twitch his head back onto the pillow—but now he could see over the footboard. It was terror, not pain, that made his head fall back. The dim bed in the mirror was empty. A figure covered from head to foot with blotches was standing beyond the bed, pressing its face and hands against the glass, gazing out at him.

As soon as his head touched the pillow he screamed and threw himself out of bed. A moment later he wouldn't have been able to move. He fled towards the door, but the sheets tripped him. As he fell, he twisted his ankle. The soft thumping recommenced at once, more strongly. It sounded determined to break through the glass.

He clawed at the floor above his head and hurled the ball without thinking. It was out of his hands when he realised that it was too light to break the mirror. Yet he heard the smash of glass, fragments splintering on the floorboards. The mirror must have been thin as eggshell, and now he had made it hatch. When he heard the footsteps, which sounded like pats of mud dropped on the floor, he could only shrink into a corner with his hands over his face, and scream.

Though he heard the door opening almost at once, it was some time before the light went on. He dared to look then, and saw his grandmother staring at the broken mirror. "That's the end," she said as his parents pushed past her. "I won't have him in my house."

Jimmy took that as a promise, and wished it could be kept at once, for someone else was at large in the building. It hadn't been his grandmother who had opened his bedroom door. When he heard the crash of glass downstairs, he began to shiver. His grandmother hurried down, and they heard her cry out. Soon she returned, carrying his father's framed certificate, her treasure, smashed and torn. She looked as if she blamed Jimmy, but he couldn't be sure it was his fault. Perhaps it was.

When his grandmother went away to cry, his mother persuaded him back to bed, but he wouldn't let her leave him or switch off the light. Eventually he dozed. Once he woke, afraid that someone was lying in bed with him, but the impression faded almost at once. His mother was still in her chair by the bed. Surely she wouldn't have let anyone creep into the room.

The morning was cloudless, and everything seemed to have changed. His father had been accepted for a teaching post. Perhaps that was why Jimmy felt as if he hadn't caught Emma's cold after all. Perhaps something else had been draining him.

His grandmother said nothing. Jimmy thought she wished that she hadn't sounded so final last night, hoped they would say something that would let her take it back. But his father had already arranged for them to use a friend's flat while she was in London. Jimmy was so elated that when the removal van arrived he hadn't even parcelled up his comics.

In any case, he hadn't said goodbye to Emma. He said he would stay until their friend came back with the van. "I'll stay too if you like," his mother said, but he found her concern irritating. He could look after himself.

As soon as they left, his grandmother went upstairs. He rang Emma's bell, but there was no reply. His grandmother's house was hotter than outside: she'd forgotten to turn off the furnace. He could hear her in her room, weeping as if nothing mattered anymore. He felt rather sorry for her, wanted to tell her he would come and see her sometimes. He didn't mind now, since he was leaving. He ran upstairs.

She must have heard him coming. She was dabbing at her eyes and making up at the dressing-table. He opened his mouth to promise, and heard himself saying, "Granny, there's something wrong with the furnace. I didn't go down, you said not to."

"That's a good boy." She turned to give him a brave moist-eyed smile, and so she couldn't see what he was seeing in the mirror: his face just managing to conceal its grin. For an instant, during which he might have been able to cry out, he saw how another face was hiding beneath his. He remembered the impression he'd had, fading into himself, that someone had crept into bed with him.

"You can come down with me if you like," his grandmother said forgivingly, and he could only follow. He wanted to cry out, so that she or someone else would stop him, but his face was beyond his control. He hurried down the cellar steps behind her, hearing the muffled roar of flames in the furnace, grinning.

The Hands

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Before long Trent wished he had stayed in the waiting-room, though being stranded for two hours on the teetotal platform had seemed the last straw. He'd expected to be in London just as the pubs were opening, but a derailment somewhere had landed him in a town he'd never heard of and couldn't locate on the map, with only his briefcase full of book jackets for company. Were those the Kentish hills in the distance, smudged by the threat of a storm? He might have asked the ticket collector, except that he'd had to lose his temper before the man would let him out for a walk.

The town wasn't worth the argument. It was nothing but concrete: off-white tunnels like subways crammed with shops, spiralling walkways where ramps would have saved a great deal of trouble, high blank domineering walls where even the graffiti looked like improvements. He'd thought of seeking out the bookshops, in the hope of grabbing a subscription or two for the books he represented, but it was early-closing day; nothing moved in the concrete maze but midget clones in the television rental shops. By the time he found a pub, embedded in a concrete wall with only an extinguished plastic sign to show what it was, it was closing time. Soon he was lost, for here were the clones again, a pink face and an orange and even a black-and-white, or was this another shop? Did they all leave their televisions running? He was wondering whether to go back to the pub to ask for directions, and had just realised irritably that no doubt it would have closed by now, when he saw the church.

At least, the notice-board said that was what it was. It stood in a circle of flagstones within a ring of lawn. Perhaps the concrete flying buttresses were meant to symbolise wings, but the building was all too reminiscent of a long thin iced bun flanked by two wedges of cake, served up on a cracked plate. Still, the church had the first open door he'd seen in the town, and it was starting to rain. He would rather shelter in the church than among the deserted shops.

He was crossing the flagstones, which had broken out in dark splotches, when he realised he hadn't entered a church since he was a child. And he wouldn't have dared go in with jackets like the ones in his briefcase: the long stockinged legs leading up into darkness, the man's head exploding like a melon, the policeman nailing a black girl to a cross. He wouldn't have dared think of a church just as a place to shelter from the rain. What would he have dared, for heaven's sake? Thank God he had grown out of being scared. He shoved the door open with his briefcase.

As he stepped into the porch, a nun came out of the church. The porch was dark, and fluttery with notices and pamphlets, so that he hardly glanced at her. Perhaps that was why he had the impression that she was chewing. The Munching Nun, he thought, and couldn't help giggling out loud. He hushed at once, for he'd seen the great luminous figure at the far end of the church.

It was a stained-glass window. As a burst of sunlight reached it, it seemed that the figure was catching the light in its flaming outstretched hands. Was it the angle of the light that made its fingertips glitter? As he stepped into the aisle for a better view, memories came crowding out of the dimness: genuflecting boys in long white robes, distant priests chanting incomprehensibly. Once, when he'd asked where God was, his father had told him God lived "up there," pointing at the altar. Trent had imagined pulling aside the curtains behind the altar to see God, and he'd been terrified in case God heard him thinking.

He was smiling at himself, swinging his briefcase and striding up the aisle between the dim pews, when the figure with the flaming hands went out. All at once the church was very dark, though surely there ought to have been a light on the altar. He'd thought churches meant nothing to him anymore, but no church should feel as cold and empty as this. Certainly he had never been in a church before which smelled of dust.

The fluttering in the porch grew louder, loud as a cave full of bats—come to think of it, hadn't some of the notices looked torn?—and then the outer door slammed. He was near to panic, though he couldn't have said why, when he saw the faint vertical line beyond the darkness to his left. There was a side door.

When he groped into the side aisle, his briefcase hit a pew. The noise was so loud that it made him afraid the door would be locked. But it opened

easily, opposite a narrow passage which led back into the shopping precinct. Beyond the passage he saw a signpost for the railway station.

He was into the passage so quickly that he didn't even feel the rain. Nevertheless, it was growing worse; at the far end the pavement looked as if it was turning into tar, the signpost dripped like a nose. The signpost pointed down a wide straight road, which suggested that he had plenty of time after all so that he didn't sidle past when the lady with the clipboard stepped in front of him.

He felt sorry for her at once. Her dark suit was too big, and there was something wrong with her mouth; when she spoke her lips barely parted. "Can you spare..." she began, and he deduced that she was asking him for a few minutes. "It's a test of your perceptions. It oughtn't to take long."

She must open her mouth when nobody was looking. Her clipboard pencil was gnawed to the core, and weren't the insides of her lips grey with lead? No doubt he was the first passerby for hours; if he refused she would get nobody. Presumably she was connected with the religious bookshop whose window loomed beside her doorway. Well, this would teach him not to laugh at nuns. "All right," he said.

She led him into the building so swiftly that he would have had no chance to change his mind. He could only follow her down the dull green corridor, into a second and then a third. Once he encountered a glass-fronted bookcase which contained only a few brownish pages, once he had to squeeze past a filing cabinet crumbly with rust; otherwise there was nothing but closed doors, painted the same prison green as the walls. Except for the slam of a door somewhere behind him, there was no sign of life. He was beginning to wish that he hadn't been so agreeable; if he tired of the examination he wouldn't be able simply to leave, he would have to ask the way.

She turned a corner, and there was an open door. Sunlight lay outside it like a welcome mat, though he could hear rain scuttling on a window. He followed her into the stark green room and halted, surprised, for he wasn't alone after all; several clipboard ladies were watching people at schoolroom desks too small for them. Perhaps there was a pub nearby.

His guide had stopped beside the single empty desk, on which a pamphlet lay. Her fingers were interwoven as if she was praying, yet they seemed restless. Eventually he said "Shall we start?"

Perhaps her blank expression was the fault of her impediment, for her face hadn't changed since he'd met her. "You already have," she said.

He'd taken pity on her, and now she had tricked him. He was tempted to demand to be shown the way out, except that he would feel foolish. As he squeezed into the vacant seat, he was hot with resentment. He wished he was dressed as loosely as everyone else in the room seemed to be.

It must be the closeness that was making him nervous: the closeness, and not having had a drink all day, and the morning wasted with a bookseller who'd kept him waiting for an hour beyond their appointment, only to order single copies of two of the books Trent was offering. And of course his nervousness was why he felt that everyone was waiting for him to open the pamphlet on his desk, for why should it be different from those the others at the desks were reading? Irritably he flicked the pamphlet open, at the most appalling image of violence he had ever seen.

The room flooded with darkness so quickly he thought he had passed out from shock. But it was a storm cloud putting out the sun—there was no other light in the room. Perhaps he hadn't really seen the picture. He would rather believe it had been one of the things he saw sometimes when he drank too much, and sometimes when he drank too little.

Why were they taking so long to switch on the lights? When he glanced up, the clipboard lady said "Take it to the window."

He'd heard of needy religious groups, but surely they were overdoing it—though he couldn't say why he still felt they had something to do with religion. Despite his doubts he made for the window, for then he could tell them he couldn't see, and use that excuse to make his escape.

Outside the window he could just distinguish a gloomy yard, its streaming walls so close he couldn't see the sky. Drainpipes black as slugs trailed down the walls, between grubby windows and what seemed to be the back door of the religious bookshop. He could see himself dimly in the window, himself and the others, who'd put their hands together as though it was a prayer meeting. The figures at the desks were rising to their feet, the clipboard ladies were converging on him. As he dropped his briefcase and glanced back nervously, he couldn't tell if they had moved at all.

But the picture in the pamphlet was quite as vile as it had seemed. He turned the page, only to find that the next was worse. They made the covers

in his briefcase seem contrived and superficial, just pictures—and why did he feel he should recognise them? Suddenly he knew: yes, the dead baby being forced into the womb was in the Bible; the skewered man came from a painting of hell, and so did the man with an arrow up his rectum. That must be what he was meant to see, what was expected of him. No doubt he was supposed to think that these things were somehow necessary to religion. Perhaps if he said that, he could leave—and in any case he was blocking the meagre light from the window. Why weren't the other subjects impatient to stand where he was standing? Was he the only person in the room who needed light in order to see?

Though the rain on the window was harsh as gravel, the silence behind him seemed louder. He turned clumsily, knocking his briefcase over, and saw why. He was alone in the room. He controlled his panic at once. So this was the kind of test they'd set for him, was it? The hell with them and their test—he wouldn't have followed the mumbling woman if he hadn't felt guilty, but why should he have felt guilty at all? As he made for the door, the pamphlet crumpled in one hand as a souvenir of his foolishness, he glanced at the pamphlets on the other desks. They were blank.

He had to stop on the threshold and close his eyes. The corridor was darker than the rooms; there had been nothing but sunlight there either. The building must be even more disused than it had seemed. Perhaps the shopping precinct had been built around it. None of this mattered, for now that he opened his eyes he could see dimly, and he'd remembered which way he had to go.

He turned right, then left at once. A corridor led into darkness, in which there would be a left turn. The greenish tinge of the oppressive dimness made him feel as if he was in an aquarium, except for the muffled scurrying of rain and the rumbling of his footsteps on the bare floorboards. He turned the corner at last, into another stretch of dimness, more doors sketched on the lightless walls, doors that changed the sound of his footsteps as he passed, too many doors to count. Here was a turn, and almost at once there should be another—he couldn't recall which way. If he wasn't mistaken, the stretch beyond that was close to the exit. He was walking confidently now, so that when his briefcase collided with the dark he cried out. He had walked into a door.

It wouldn't budge. He might as well have put his shoulder to the wall. His groping fingers found neither a handle nor a hole where one ought to be. He must have taken a wrong turning—somewhere he'd been unable to see that he had a choice. Perhaps he should retrace his steps to the room with the desks.

He groped his way back to the corridor which had seemed full of doors. He wished he could remember how many doors it contained; it seemed longer now. No doubt his annoyance was making it seem so. Eight doors, nine, but why should the hollowness they gave to his footsteps make him feel hollow too? He must be nearly at the corner, and once he turned left the room with the desks would be just beyond the end of the corridor. Yes, here was the turn; he could hear his footsteps flattening as they approached the wall. But there was no way to the left, after all.

He'd stumbled to the right, for that was where the dimness led, before his memory brought him up short. He'd turned right here on his way out, he was sure he had. The corridor couldn't just disappear. No, but it could be closed off—and when he reached out to where he'd thought it was he felt the panels of the door at once, and bruised his shoulder against it before he gave up. So the test hadn't finished. That must be what was going on, that was why someone was closing doors against him in the dark. He was too angry to panic. He stormed along the right-hand corridor, past more doors and their muffled hollow echoes. His mouth felt coated with dust, and that made him even angrier. By God, he'd make someone show him the way out, however he had to do so.

Then his fists clenched—the handle of his briefcase dug into his palm, the pamphlet crumpled loudly—for there was someone ahead, unlocking a door. A faint greyish light seeped out of the doorway and showed Trent the glimmering collar, stiff as a fetter. No wonder the priest was having trouble opening the door, for he was trying to don a pair of gloves. "Excuse me, Father," Trent called, "can you tell me how I get out of here?"

The priest seemed not to hear him. Just before the door closed, Trent saw he wasn't wearing gloves at all. It must be the dimness which made his hands look flattened and limp. A moment later he had vanished into the room, and Trent heard a key turn in the lock.

Trent knocked on the door rather timidly until he remembered how, as a child, he would have been scared to disturb a priest at all. He knocked as

loudly as he could, even when his knuckles were aching. If there was a corridor beyond the door, perhaps the priest was out of earshot. The presence of the priest somewhere made Trent feel both safer and a good deal angrier. Eventually he stormed away, thumping on all the doors.

His anger seemed to have cracked a barrier in his mind, for he could remember a great deal he hadn't thought of for years. He'd been most frightened in his adolescence, when he had begun to suspect it wasn't all true and had fought to suppress his thoughts in case God heard them. God had been watching him everywhere—even in the toilet, like a voyeur. Everywhere he had felt caged. He'd grown resentful eventually, he'd dared God to spy on him while he was in the toilet, and that was where he'd pondered his suspicions, such as—yes, he remembered now—the idea that just as marriage was supposed to sanctify sex, so religion sanctified all manner of torture and inhumanity. Of course, that was the thought the pamphlet had almost recalled. He faltered, for his memories had muffled his senses more than the dimness had. Somewhere ahead of him, voices were singing.

Perhaps it was a hymn. He couldn't tell, for they sounded as if they had their mouths full. It must be the wall that was blurring them. As he advanced through the greenish dimness, he tried to make no noise. Now he thought he could see the glint of the door, glossier than the walls, but he had to reach out and touch the panels before he could be sure. Why on earth was he hesitating? He pounded on the door, more loudly than he had intended, and the voices fell silent at once.

He waited for someone to come to the door, but there was no sound at all. Were they standing quite still and gazing towards him, or was one of them creeping to the door? Perhaps they were all doing so. Suddenly the dark seemed much larger, and he realised fully that he had no idea where he was. They must know he was alone in the dark. He felt like a child, except that in a situation like this as a child he would have been able to wake up.

By God, they couldn't frighten him, not any longer. Certainly his hands were shaking—he could hear the covers rustling in his briefcase—but with rage, not fear. The people in the room must be waiting for him to go away so that they could continue their hymn, waiting for him to trudge into the outer darkness, the unbeliever, gnashing his teeth. They couldn't get rid of him so easily. Maybe by their standards he was wasting his life, drinking it

away—but by God, he was doing less harm than many religious people he'd heard of. He was satisfied with his life, that was the important thing. He'd wanted to write books, but even if he'd found he couldn't, he'd proved to himself that not everything in books was true. At least selling books had given him a disrespect for them, and perhaps that was just what he'd needed.

He laughed uneasily at himself, a thin sound in the dark. Where were all these thoughts coming from? It was like the old story that you saw your whole life at the moment of your death, as if anyone could know. He needed a drink, that was why his thoughts were uncontrollable. He'd had enough of waiting. He grabbed the handle and wrenched at the door, but it was no use; the door wouldn't budge.

He should be searching for the way out, not wasting his time here. That was why he hurried away, not because he was afraid someone would snatch the door open. He yanked at handles as he came abreast of them, though he could barely see the doors. Perhaps the storm was worsening, although he couldn't hear the rain, for he was less able to see now than he had been a few minutes ago. The dark was so soft and hot and dreamlike that he could almost imagine that he was a child again, lying in bed at that moment when the dark of the room merged with the dark of sleep—but it was dangerous to imagine that, though he couldn't think why. In any case, this was clearly not a dream, for the next door he tried slammed deafeningly open against the wall of the room.

It took him a long time to step forward, for he was afraid he'd awakened the figures that were huddled in the furthest corner of the room. When his eyes adjusted to the meagre light that filtered down from a grubby skylight, he saw that the shapes were too tangled and flat to be people. Of course, the huddle was just a heap of old clothes—but then why was it stirring? As he stepped forward involuntarily, a rat darted out, dragging a long brownish object that seemed to be trailing strings. Before the rat vanished under the floorboards Trent was back outside the door and shutting it as quickly as he could.

He stood panting in the dark. Whatever he'd seen, it was nothing to do with him. Perhaps the limbs of the clothes had been bound together, but what did it mean if they were? Once he escaped he could begin to think—he was afraid to do so now. If he began to panic he wouldn't dare to try the doors.

He had to keep trying. One of them might let him escape. He ought to be able to hear which was the outer corridor, if it was still raining. He forced himself to tiptoe onward. He could distinguish the doors only by touch, and he turned the handles timidly, even though it slowed him down. He was by no means ready when one of the doors gave an inch. The way his hand flinched, he wondered if he would be able to open the door at all.

Of course he had to, and at last he did, as stealthily as possible. He wasn't stealthy enough, for as he peered around the door the figures at the table turned towards him. Perhaps they were standing up to eat because the room was so dim, and it must be the dimness that made the large piece of meat on the table appear to struggle, but why were they eating in such meagre light at all? Before his vision had a chance to adjust they left the table all at once and came at him.

He slammed the door and ran blindly down the corridor, grabbing at handles. What exactly had he seen? They had been eating with their bare hands, but somehow the only thought he could hold on to was a kind of sickened gratitude that he had been unable to see their faces. The dimness was virtually darkness now, his running footsteps deafened him to any sound but theirs, the doors seemed further and further apart, locked doors separated by minutes of stumbling through the dark. Three locked doors, four, and the fifth opened so easily that he barely saved himself from falling into the cellar.

If it had been darker, he might have been able to turn away before he saw what was squealing. As he peered down, desperate to close the door but compelled to try to distinguish the source of the thin irregular sound, he made out the dim shapes of four figures, standing wide apart on the cellar floor. They were moving further apart now, without letting go of what they were holding—the elongated figure of a man, which they were pulling in four directions by its limbs. It must be inflatable, it must be a leak that was squealing. But the figure wasn't only squealing, it was sobbing. Trent fled, for the place was not a cellar at all. It was a vast darkness in whose distance he'd begun to glimpse worse things. He wished he could believe he was dreaming, the way they comforted themselves in books—but not only did he know he wasn't dreaming, he was afraid to think that he was. He'd had nightmares like this when he was young, when he was scared that he'd lost his one chance. He'd rejected the truth, and so now there was only hell to

look forward to. Even if he didn't believe, hell would get him, perhaps for not believing. It had taken him a while to convince himself that because he didn't believe in it, hell couldn't touch him. Perhaps he had never really convinced himself at all.

He managed to suppress his thoughts, but they had disoriented him; even when he forced himself to stop and listen he wasn't convinced where he was. He had to touch the cold slick wall before the sounds became present to him: footsteps, the footsteps of several people creeping after him.

He hadn't time to determine what was wrong with the footsteps, for there was another sound, ahead of him—the sound of rain on glass. He began to run, fumbling with door handles as he reached them. The first door was locked, and so was the second. The rain was still in front of him, somewhere in the dark. Or was it behind him now, with his pursuers? He scrabbled at the next handle, and almost fell headlong into the room.

He must keep going, for there was a door on the far side of the room, a door beyond which he could hear the rain. It didn't matter that the room smelled like a butcher's. He didn't have to look at the torn objects that were strewn over the floor, he could dodge among them, even though he was in danger of slipping on the wet boards. He held his breath until he reached the far door, and could already feel how the air would burst out of his mouth when he escaped. But the door was locked, and the doorway to the corridor was full of his pursuers, who came padding leisurely into the room.

He was on the point of withering into himself—in a moment he would have to see the things that lay about the floor—when he noticed that beside the door there was a window, so grubby that he'd taken it for a pale patch on the wall. Though he couldn't see what lay beyond, he smashed the glass with his briefcase and hurled splinters back into the room as he scrambled through.

He landed in a cramped courtyard. High walls scaled by drainpipes closed in on all four sides. Opposite him was a door with a glass panel, beyond which he could see heaps of religious books. It was the back door of the bookshop he had noticed in the passage.

He heard glass gnashing in the window-frame, and didn't dare look behind him. Though the courtyard was only a few feet wide, it seemed he would never reach the door. Rain was already dripping from his brows into his eyes. He was praying, incoherently: yes, he believed, he believed in

anything that could save him, anything that could hear. The pamphlet was still crumpled in the hand he raised to try the door. Yes, he thought desperately, he believed in those things too, if they had to exist before he could be saved.

He was pounding on the door with his briefcase as he twisted the handle—but the handle turned easily and let him in. He slammed the door behind him and wished that were enough. Why couldn't there have been a key? Perhaps there was something almost as good—the cartons of books piled high in the corridor that led to the shop.

As soon as he'd struggled past he began to overbalance them. He had toppled three cartons, creating a barrier which looked surprisingly insurmountable, when he stopped, feeling both guilty and limp with relief. Someone was moving about in the shop.

He was out of the corridor, and sneezing away the dust he had raised from the cartons, before he realised that he hadn't the least idea what to say. Could he simply ask for refuge? Perhaps, for the woman in the shop was a nun. She was checking the street door, which was locked, thank God. The dimness made the windows and the contents of the shop look thick with dust. Perhaps he should begin by asking her to switch on the lights.

He was venturing towards her when he touched a shelf of books, and he realised that the grey deposit was dust, after all. He faltered as she turned towards him. It was the nun he had seen in the church, but now her mouth was smeared with crimson lipstick—except that as she advanced on him, he saw that it wasn't lipstick at all. He heard the barricade in the corridor give way just as she pulled off her flesh-coloured gloves by their nails. "You failed," she said.

Playing The Game

"The first draft of this story was published as *Snakes and Ladders*."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

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When Marie called to say that someone wanted a reporter, Hill went out at once. He'd been staring at the blank page in his typewriter and wondering where he could find the enthusiasm to write. The winner of this week's singing contest at the Ferryman was Barbra Silver, fat as Santa Claus, all tinsel and shiny flesh done medium rare in a solarium—but he couldn't write that, and there wasn't another word in his head, any more than there were still ferries on the river. He headed for the lobby, glad of something else to do.

The man looked as if he hoped not to be noticed. His hands were trying to hide the torn pockets of his raincoat; fallen trouser-cuffs trailed over his shoes. Nevertheless Marie was pointing at him, unless she was still drying her green nails, and as Hill approached he turned quickly, determined to speak. "Do you investigate black magic?" he said.

"That depends." The man had the look of a pest in the street, eyes that expected disbelief and challenged the listener to escape before he was convinced. But the blank page was waiting like the worst question in an examination, and here at last might be a story worth writing. "Come and tell me about it," Hill said.

The man was visibly disappointed by the newsroom. No doubt he wanted the Hollywood version—miles of chattering typewriters beneath fluorescent tubes—rather than the cramped room full of half a dozen desks, desks and waste bins overflowing with paper and plastic cups and ragged blackened stubs of cheap cigars, the smells of after-shave and cheap tobacco, the window that buzzed like a dying fly whenever a lorry sped through town. Hill dragged two chairs to face each other and sat forward confidentially over his notebook. "Shoot," he said.

"There's a man down by the docks who claims he can cure illness without medicine. He's got everyone around him believing he can. They say he cures their aches and pains and saves them having to go to the doctor about their depressions. Sounds all right, doesn't it? But I happen to know," the ragged man said, lowering his voice still further until it was almost inaudible, "that he puts up his price once they need him. They have to go back to him, you see—it isn't a total cure. Maybe he doesn't mean it to be, or maybe it's all in their minds, until it wears off. Either way, you can see it's an addiction that costs them more than the doctor would."

He was plucking unconsciously at his torn pockets. "I'll tell you something else—every single one of his neighbours believes he should be left alone because he's doing so much good. That can't be right, can it? People don't take to things like that so easily unless they're afraid not to. Why won't they use the short cut through the docks any longer, if they think there's nothing to be afraid of?"

"You're suggesting that there is."

"I've got to be careful what I say." He looked afraid of being overheard, even in the empty room. "I don't live far from him," he said eventually. "Not far enough. I haven't had any trouble with him personally, but my next-door neighbour has. I can't tell you her name, she doesn't even know I'm here. You mustn't try to find her. In fact, to make sure you don't, I'm not going to tell you my name either."

Hill's interest was waning; his editor would never take a story with so few names. "Anyway," the man whispered, "she antagonised Mr. Matta, though she didn't mean to. She caught him up to no good in one of the old docks. So he said that if she was so fond of water, he'd make sure she got plenty. And the very next day her house started getting damp. She's had people in, but they can't find any reason for it, and it's just getting worse. Mold all over the walls—you wouldn't believe it unless you saw it for yourself. Only you'll have to take my word for it, I'm afraid."

He was faltering, having realised at last how unsatisfactory his information was. Yet Hill was suddenly a great deal more interested. Could it really be the same man? If so, Hill had reasons of his own to investigate him—and by God, there was nothing he'd like better. "This Mr. Matta," he said. "What can you tell me about him?"

His informant seemed to decide that he couldn't avoid telling. "He came every year with the carnival. Only the last time he was too ill to be moved, I think, so they found him a house. Or maybe they were glad to get rid of him."

It was the same man. All at once Hill's memories came flooding back: the carnival festooned with lights on the far bank of the river, in which blurred skeins of light wavered like waterweed as you crossed the bridge; the sounds of the shooting gallery ringing flat and thin across the water, the Ghost Train in which you heard the moaning of ships on the bay—and above all M. O. Matta, with his unchanging child's face and his stall full of games. "So he's still fond of playing games to frighten people, is he?" Hill said.

"He still sells them." That wasn't quite what Hill had meant, but perhaps the man was afraid to think otherwise. Of course Matta had sold games from his stall, though Hill had never understood why people bought them: the monkeys on sticks looked skeletal and desperate, and always fell back with a dying twitch just before they would have reached their goal; the faces of the chessmen were positively dismaying, as Hill had all too strong a reason to remember. In fact, when he recalled the sideshow—the bald bruised heads you tried to knock down with wooden balls but which sprang up at once, grinning like corpses—he couldn't understand why anyone would have lingered there voluntarily at all.

Once he'd seen Matta by the river at low tide, stooping to a fat whitish shape—but he was losing himself in his memories, and there were things he needed to know. "You say your friend antagonised Matta. In what way?"

"I told you, she was taking the short cut home." The man was digging his hands into his pockets, apparently unaware that they were tearing. "She saw the man he lives with taking him into the dock where the crane's fallen in. It was nearly dark, but he just sat there waiting. She thought she heard something in the water, and then he saw her. That's all."

It seemed suggestive enough. "Then unless there's anything else you can tell me," Hill said, "I just need Matta's address."

As soon as he'd given it, the ragged man sidled out, trying to hide behind his shapeless collar. Hill lit his first cigar of the afternoon and thought how popular his investigation should be. They'd used to say that if Matta took a dislike to you when you bought from him, the games would always go

wrong somehow—and how many children other than Hill must he have set out to terrify? As for the business with the docks, if that wasn't a case of drug smuggling, Hill was no investigative reporter. He went in to see the editor at once.

"Not enough," the editor said, too busy searching his waistcoat for pipe-cleaners even to look at Hill. "Someone who won't give his name tells you about someone who won't give her name. Smells like a hoax to me, or a grudge. Either way, it isn't for us. Just don't try to run before you can walk. You shouldn't need me to tell you you aren't ready for investigative work."

No, Hill thought bitterly: after two years he was still only good for the stuff nobody else would touch—Our Trivia Correspondent, Our Paltry Reporter. The others were rolling back from the pub as he returned to his desk, like a schoolboy who'd been kept in for being bored. By God, he'd get his own back, with or without the editor's approval. He'd had nightmares for years after the night he had tried to see what Matta was doing in the caravan behind his stall.

All he'd glimpsed through the window was Matta playing solitaire of some kind, so why had the man taken such delight in terrifying him? All at once there had been nobody beyond the window, and the smooth childish face on its wrinkled neck had stooped out of the door, paralysing the boy as he'd tried to run. "You like games, do you?" the thin soft voice had said. "Then we'll find you one.

The interior of the caravan had been crowded with half-carved shapes. Some looked more like bone than wood, including the one that had been protruding from the humped tangled sheets of the bunk. Eleven-year-old Hill hadn't seen much more, nor had he wanted to. Matta was setting out a chess game, and Hill hadn't known which was worse: the black pieces with their wide fanged grins, or the white, their pale shiny faces so bland he could almost see them drooling. "And there you are," Matta had whispered, carving the head of a limbless figure so deftly that Hill had imagined his face had already been there.

As soon as Matta placed the figure midway on the chessboard, the shadowy corners of the caravan had seemed full of faces, grinning voraciously, lolling expressionlessly. It had taken Hill a very long time to flee, for his legs had felt glued together, and all the time the child's face on the ageing body had watched him as if he were a dying insect. But when at

last he had managed to run it was even worse: not so much the teeth that had glinted in the dark all the way home as the swollen white faces he'd sensed at his back, ready to nod down to him if he stumbled or even slackened his pace.

He emerged from his memories and found he'd torn the blank page out of the typewriter, so violently that the others were staring at him. Something had to be done about Matta, and soon—not only because of the way he'd exploited Hill's young imagination, but because it sounded as if his power over people had grown, with the same childish malevolence at its core. If this editor wouldn't print the story, Hill would find someone who would—and glancing at the red-veined faces of his colleagues, all of them drunk enough to be content with the worn-out town, he thought that might be the best move of all.

All at once he was eager to finish his chores, in order to be ready for what he had to do. By the time his shift was over he'd dealt with Barbra Silver —"a robust performance" he called it, which seemed satisfyingly ambiguous—and the rest of the trivia that was expected of him. As soon as he left the newspaper office he made for Matta's house.

Though it was still only late afternoon, there wasn't much light in the town. Over the bay the March sky was blue, but once you stepped into the streets it was impossible to see beyond their roofs. Shallow bay windows crowded away, overlapping the narrow pavements. Here was a chemist's, and here a Bingo parlour, smaller than front rooms; elsewhere he saw the exposed ribs of a lost neon sign, and crumbling names that had been painted on plaster. No wonder people felt the need for someone like Matta. "Order You're News Now" said a sign in a newsagent's window, and Hill thought the inadvertent promise might be true for everyone in time, the town was so small and dead.

Soon he reached the docks, which had been disused for years. The town lived off its chemical factories now, since trade no longer came so far upriver. Except for the short cut, wherever it was, there was no reason for anyone to visit the docks. They would be a perfect base for smuggling.

The roads into the docks were closed off by solid gates, rusty barbed wire, padlocked chains. He had to make his way between the warehouses, through alleys narrow as single file and even darker than the streets. He was relieved to emerge at last onto a dockside. Crumbling bollards sprouted

from the broken pavement that surrounded several hundred square yards of murky water; warehouses hemmed in the dock. Above him in the small square lightless openings he heard fluttering. As the stagnant water slopped back and forth their reflections mouthed sleepily, a hundred mouths.

It didn't seem to be the dock the ragged man had mentioned. The alleys led him through another dock on the way to Matta's house, but there was no fallen crane there either, only more blackened warehouses, another hive of holes gaping at the sluggish water. The brow of an early moon peered over the edge of a roof at him; otherwise he felt he was alone in the whole dockland.

The next alley led him to a bridge across a small canal that bordered a street. Almost opposite the bridge was one of the poorest streets in town, its uneven cobblestones glittering with broken glass, its gutters clogged with litter. Each side was a terrace like a stage flat, hardly more than a long two-story wall crammed with front doors and windows. It was the street where Matta lived.

There was nothing to distinguish the house from its neighbours—no sign saying M. O. Matta, as there had always been on the sideshow. The black paint of the door was flaking, the number was askew; the windows were opaque with greyish net curtains. He loitered in the empty street, trying to be sure it was the right house. It seemed safe enough to do so, since beyond the curtains the house was dark—but the front door was opened, almost knocking him down, by a man who had to stoop through the doorway. "You want to see Mr. Matta," the huge blank-faced man said.

It wasn't a question. Hill had intended to bring someone whose illness was in no way psychological for Matta to try to cure—but if he fled now, he could never win Matta's confidence. "Yes," he said, though he felt he had no control over his words. "There's something wrong with my leg."

When the hulking man stood aside Hill entered, limping ostentatiously. The front door closed behind him at once, and so did the dark. In the musty unlit hallway, where there was scarcely room for anyone besides the hulking man and the staircase, he felt buried alive. In a moment the other had opened the door to the front room, and Matta sat waiting in a caved-in armchair. "Something wrong with your leg, is it?" Matta said.

He seemed not to have changed at all—the soft secretly delighted voice, the face smooth and placid as a sleeping child's—except that his face

looked even more like a mask, on the ropy wizened frame. He was grinning to himself as always, but at least his words were reassuring; for a panicky moment Hill had thought Matta had recognised him. Why should that make him panic? He limped into the room, and Matta said, "Let's see what we can do."

Hill couldn't see much in the room. Boxes, which he assumed contained games, and bits of wood were piled against the walls, taking up much of the limited space; a few chairs were crowded together in the middle of the floor, beneath an empty light socket. The dimness and the smell of wood seemed stale. All at once the hulking man led him forward and sat him in a hard chair opposite Matta. Faces grinned out of the shadows, but they weren't why Hill was apprehensive. The man had led him forward so quickly that he'd forgotten to limp.

The huge man was returning from the darkest corner of the room, between Hill and the door, and he had a knife in his hand. In a moment Hill saw that the man was also carrying a faceless doll. He went to stand behind the armchair. His hands reached over Matta's shoulders, holding the knife and the doll. Hill sucked in his breath inadvertently and waited for Matta to take them—and then he saw that Matta was paralysed. Only his face could move.

The huge hands began to work at once. In the dimness they looked as if they were growing from Matta's shoulders, their arms no longer than wrists. Almost at once they had finished carving, and the right hand turned the doll for Hill to see. He sat forward reluctantly, and couldn't make himself go closer. He was sure it was only the dimness that made the carved face look exactly like his—but for a moment he felt like a child again, in Matta's power.

Matta had trained his assistant well, that was all. The power was Hill's now, not Matta's. He was going to pretend that his limp was cured, and that would ingratiate him with Matta, help him set his trap. But Matta was gazing at him, and his grin was wider, more gleeful. It looked even more as if he were holding the doll before his face with deformed hands. "You came to spy on us," he said, and at once, almost negligently, one huge hand snapped the doll's leg.

At once Hill couldn't move his leg. Matta was leering at him, a pale mask propped on a wooden body, and above the mask a dim smudge with eyes

was watching emptily. Many more faces were watching him, but he reminded himself that the others were only carved, and that allowed him to stumble to his feet. It had only been panic that had paralysed his leg, after all.

Though Matta was still grinning—more widely, if anything—his eyes were unreadable. "I think you'd better go straight home," he said, his voice soft as dust.

Hill was so glad when the huge man didn't come for him that he headed blindly for the door. He'd have his revenge another day; Matta wasn't going anywhere. Just now he wanted to escape the dim cell of a room, the musty faces, the staleness. Matta was as bad as he remembered, but now that malevolence was senile. He glanced back from the hall and saw the huge man placing a box on Matta's lap—a game, with something like a worm carved on the lid. He hurried into the deserted twilit street, ignoring the twinge in his knee.

When he reached the canal he looked back. The huge man was watching from the doorway of the house. He stood there while Hill crossed the bridge, and all at once the reporter knew he was watching to see which way Hill went. He strode between the warehouses, into the alley he'd emerged from. As soon as he felt he'd waited long enough he peered out to make sure the man had gone back into the house, then he dodged into the adjacent alley.

They must think they'd scared him off with all their mumbo-jumbo and telling him to go straight home. Let Matta sit and play his game, whatever it was, however he could. Hill was going to find out what they wanted to hide, before they had a chance to do so. Though night had already fallen in the alleys, he ought to be able to see in the dock.

Dark cold stone loomed over him on both sides, blinding him. Perhaps he was going too fast, for sometimes the ache in his knee made him stumble; the rough walls scraped his knuckles. He must have strained a muscle in his leg when the huge man had urged him forward, or when he'd left so hurriedly. At least there seemed to be no obstacles to hinder him.

But there were. He reached a junction only to find that the right-hand alley was blocked by a rusty bedstead. It hardly mattered, since that route led to the docks he had already seen. He groped to the left, mortar crumbling between the bricks and gritting beneath his nails.

Before long he'd had to turn aside several times. Piles of chains and bollards, and in one place a door jammed between the walls, blocked some of the routes; sometimes he had to retrace his steps. In those few places where the glow of the darkening sky managed to reach, he could see nothing but the claustrophobic alleys, the towering windowless walls. He wished he hadn't come so far, for he wasn't sure he could find his way back if he had to do so. If Matta's assistant was responsible for the blocking of the alleys, presumably he would have blocked the route into the dock.

Hill was trying to remember the way back when he heard the wallowing. Something large was moving through water, quite near. It must be a boat—perhaps the one that Matta wanted nobody to see. He limped to the next junction, and saw that the attempts to turn people away hadn't quite succeeded. At the far end of the left-hand alley he could just see the width of a dock.

The end of the alley was blocked by a heap of rubble and twisted metal. It would have kept most people out, especially now when it was so nearly dark, but he hadn't come so far only to leave Matta's assistant the chance to clear away any evidence. He clambered over the rubble and dropped to the uneven pavement, where he almost staggered straight into the water as his aching leg gave way.

More than the danger made him stumble backward. His first glimpse of the water had shown him something larger than he was, inching toward the pavement and rising to meet him. When he looked again he saw it was a length of piping, pale as the moon and stouter than a man. It must have been ripples that had made it seem to move.

He would have to hurry despite his leg, which he must have wrenched while clambering. Already he was having to strain his eyes, though at least the moon was just visible above the warehouse to his left. He limped in that direction, peering at the pavement, the water, the warehouses; the blackness peered back at him hundred-eyed. There seemed to be nothing to find, and he'd ventured beyond the edge of moonlight before he realised that it should not be there at all. How could the moon be only just clearing the roofs when he'd seen its brow half an hour ago, barely visible above a warehouse somewhere over here?

It couldn't have been the moon the first time, that was all. He hadn't time to brood over it, for he had noticed something rather more disturbing; access

to the dock from the river was blocked. One end of a bridge had torn loose or been dislodged, wedging tons of rusty iron in the entrance. What could Matta have been waiting for that night if the dock was inaccessible? Just what game was he playing? Surely there was no need to run, whatever the answer was, but Hill was running headlong now, anxious to be out of the darkness. He was so anxious that he almost stepped into space before he realised that the pavement wasn't there.

His bad leg saved him. He'd tottered backward as it threatened to give way. Now he could see the crane, quivering like jelly underwater, through the hole it had torn out of the pavement. There were splintered planks too, which must have bridged the gap until they had been destroyed. The gap was far too wide for him to jump with a bad leg. All at once he felt he was a victim of another of Matta's games, and only his inarticulate rage stood between him and utter panic.

He had no reason to panic. Surely he could find his way back, since he had to do so. There was no point in waiting for the moon to rise higher, when the clouds never left it alone for very long; besides, he preferred not to see the dock more clearly—the walls and the water maggoty with windows, the buildings that seemed so lonely they no longer had anything human about them, the drowned objects that looked as if they were squirming. He was very near to panic as he scrambled over the rubble into the alley, particularly since the whitish pipe appeared to have drifted closer to the pavement. Perhaps it had been a distorted reflection of the moon; certainly it reminded him less of a pipe.

The moonlight didn't reach into the alleys. When he lowered himself from the heap of rubble, the shock of the darkness was almost physical. He made himself hurry—he knew that the floor of the alley was clear of obstructions—though it felt as if the walls had captured him, were leading him blindfolded, too fast for his limp. Somewhere behind him he heard the wallowing again, which sounded now like someone emerging hugely from a bath. He restrained himself from going back to see. He wasn't even sure that he wanted to know.

He'd regained some confidence, and was striding quickly despite his bad leg, when he ran straight into something like an outstretched limb. He'd cried out before he realised what the obstruction was: a pile of bollards. He must have taken a wrong turning in the dark.

He groped his way back to the last junction and limped in the other direction. Yes, this must be right, for now he was able to follow several alleys unhindered, and soon he could see an open space ahead. He was almost there before he saw the fallen bridge, and realised he had come back to the same alley into the dock.

He couldn't think where he had gone wrong. He could only trudge back into the narrow dark. At least the moonlight was beginning to filter down, and showed him an intersection almost at once. He was sure he hadn't turned here on his way to the dock; he would have noticed the row of whitish tyres in the left-hand alley, tyres stacked together like a pipe. In the intermittent moonlight they seemed to squirm restlessly, and he was glad he didn't have to pass them.

Three junctions further on he thought he'd found where he had gone wrong. That was a relief, because the moonlight was reaching as far into the alleys as it would come; soon the light would be receding. He could just see the walls in those moments when the clouds exposed the moon, and so he was able to run, despite the throbbing of his leg. He'd turned three corners, skinning his knuckles on one, before he almost ran into the stack of whitish tyres.

It was impossible. He stumbled back a few yards to the intersection. There was the dock and the fallen bridge, two intersections distant. But hadn't he seen the tyres in the first alley he'd crossed on his way from the dock? He must have been confused by the dark—and by Matta, for he felt as if he was trapped in another of Matta's games.

That made him feel childish, and in danger of panic. But he wasn't childish—Matta was, with his malevolent games. His face was what he was. No doubt he was still sitting with the game his assistant had given him, but Hill refused to try to deduce what that game might be. He needed all his wits to figure out the way back, before the fitful moonlight convinced him that the whitish tyres were squirming silently, mouth open, down the alley toward him. They looked rather large for tyres.

He turned before he was sure where to go, for the moonlight was draining away, up the walls. He plunged into the thickening dark. He was almost sure of his direction, but hadn't he been sure before? He was levering himself along with his hands on both walls, partly to feel that the suffocating dark was nothing but bricks. That wasn't entirely reassuring, for

if he collided with anything now, the first part of him it would touch was his face. For some reason that anxiety intensified once he was out of sight of the whitish segments, the tyres. But it was his left hand that collided with something in the dark, an object that was clinging to the wall.

It was a ladder. The icy rungs felt scarred with rust, which flaked away beneath his fingers. The chafing set his teeth on edge, and he was limping away, relieved that it was only a ladder, before he realised the chance he was missing. He went back and bracing his heels against the wall, seized two rungs and tugged. The ladder held. At once, ignoring his bad leg, he began to climb.

It must be windy at the top, for he could hear a large object slithering closer across the roof. The wind didn't matter, for he wouldn't be crossing the roof. He needed only to climb high enough to see where the street was, which general direction he would have to follow. He was climbing eagerly toward the moonlight—too eagerly, for his aching leg gave way, and he almost fell. As he hung there, gripping the rungs in momentary panic, he was close to realising what game Matta's assistant had brought him.

He tried to grasp the thought, less for its own sake than to distract himself from thinking how high he'd climbed in the dark. He was nearly at the top. Above him the sky swam greyly, suffocating the moon; the edge of the roof sailed free in space. He closed his eyes and clung to the metal, then he recommenced climbing, mechanically but carefully. Matta's game had had something like a worm, a maggot, carved on the box—something fat and sinuous. Of course! One of his hands grabbed a rusty handhold at the roof's edge, then he heaved himself up with the other. There he rested, eyes closed, before looking up. Of course, he should have known at once what the game must be—Matta's version of snakes and ladders.

He was still resting at the top of the ladder when the moon-coloured fat-lipped mouth, yawning wide as its body and wider than his head, stooped toward him.

Again

"Again appeared in the Twilight Zone magazine under T.E.D. Klein's editorship, although I gather Rod Serling's widow took some persuading. One British journal found the tale too disturbing to publish, while a British Sunday newspaper magazine dismissed it as 'not horrid enough.'"—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Alone With The Horrors*

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Before long Bryant tired of the Wirral Way. He'd come to the nature trail because he'd exhausted the Liverpool parks, only to find that nature was too relentless for him. No doubt the trail would mean more to a botanist, but to Bryant it looked exactly like what it was: an overgrown railway divested of its line. Sometimes it led beneath bridges hollow as whistles, and then it seemed to trap him between the banks for miles. When it rose to ground level it was only to show him fields too lush for comfort, hedges, trees, green so unrelieved that its shades blurred into a single oppressive mass.

He wasn't sure what eventually made the miniature valley intolerable. Children went hooting like derailed trains across his path, huge dogs came snuffling out of the undergrowth to leap on him and smear his face, but the worst annoyances were the flies, brought out all at once by the late June day, the first hot day of the year. They blotched his vision like eyestrain, their incessant buzzing seemed to muffle all his senses. When he heard lorries somewhere above him he scrambled up the first break he could find in the brambles, without waiting for the next official exit from the trail.

By the time he realised that the path led nowhere in particular, he had already crossed three fields. It seemed best to go on, even though the sound he'd taken for lorries proved, now that he was in the open, to be distant tractors. He didn't think he could find his way back even if he wanted to. Surely he would reach a road eventually.

Once he'd trudged around several more fields he wasn't so sure. He felt sticky, hemmed in by buzzing and green—a fly in a fly-trap. There was nothing else beneath the unrelenting cloudless sky except a bungalow three

fields and a copse away to his left. Perhaps he could get a drink there while asking the way to the road.

The bungalow was difficult to reach. Once he had to retrace his journey around three sides of a field, when he'd approached close enough to see that the garden which surrounded the house looked at least as overgrown as the railway had been. Nevertheless someone was standing in front of the bungalow, knee-deep in grass—a woman with white shoulders, standing quite still. He hurried round the maze of fences and hedges, looking for his way to her. He'd come quite close before he saw how old and pale she was. She was supporting herself with one hand on a disused bird-table, and for a moment he thought the shoulders of her ankle-length caftan were white with droppings, as the table was. He shook his head vigorously, to clear it of the heat, and saw at once that it was long white hair that trailed raggedly over her shoulders, for it stirred a little as she beckoned to him.

At least, he assumed she was beckoning. When he reached her, after he'd lifted the gate clear of the weedy path, she was still flapping her hands, but now to brush away flies, which seemed even fonder of her than they had been of him. Her eyes looked glazed and empty; for a moment he was tempted to sneak away. Then they gazed at him, and they were so pleading that he had to go to her, to see what was wrong.

She must have been pretty when she was younger. Now her long arms and heart-shaped face were bony, the skin withered tight on them, but she might still be attractive if her complexion weren't so grey. Perhaps the heat was affecting her—she was clutching the bird-table as though she would fall if she relaxed her grip—but then why didn't she go in the house? Then he realised that must be why she needed him, for she was pointing shakily with her free hand at the bungalow. Her nails were very long. "Can you get in?" she said.

Her voice was disconcerting: little more than a breath, hardly there at all. No doubt that was also the fault of the heat. "I'll try," he said, and she made for the house at once, past a tangle of roses and a rockery so overgrown it looked like a distant mountain in a jungle.

She had to stop breathlessly before she reached the bungalow. He carried on, since she was pointing feebly at the open kitchen window. As he passed her he found she was doused in perfume, so heavily that even in the open it was cloying. Surely she was in her seventies? He felt shocked, though he

knew that was narrow-minded. Perhaps it was the perfume that attracted the flies to her.

The kitchen window was too high for him to reach unaided. Presumably she felt it was safe to leave open while she was away from the house. He went round the far side of the bungalow to the open garage, where a dusty car was baking amid the stink of hot metal and oil. There he found a toolbox, which he dragged round to the window.

When he stood the rectangular box on end and levered himself up, he wasn't sure he could squeeze through. He unhooked the transom and managed to wriggle his shoulders through the opening. He thrust himself forward, the unhooked bar bumping along his spine, until his hips wedged in the frame. He was stuck in midair, above a greyish kitchen that smelled stale, dangling like the string of plastic onions on the far wall. He was unable to drag himself forward or back.

All at once her hands grabbed his thighs, thrusting up towards his buttocks. She must have clambered on the toolbox. No doubt she was anxious to get him into the house, but her sudden desperate strength made him uneasy, not least because he felt almost assaulted. Nevertheless she'd given him the chance to squirm his hips, and he was through. He lowered himself awkwardly, head first, clinging to the edge of the sink while he swung his feet down before letting himself drop.

He made for the door at once. Though the kitchen was almost bare, it smelled worse than stale. In the sink a couple of plates protruded from water the colour of lard, where several dead flies were floating. Flies crawled over smeary milk-bottles on the windowsill or bumbled at the window, as eager to find the way out as he was. He thought he'd found it, but the door was mortise-locked, with a broken key that was jammed in the hole.

He tried to turn the key, until he was sure it was no use. Not only was its stem snapped close to the lock, the key was wedged in the mechanism. He hurried out of the kitchen to the front door, which was in the wall at right angles to the jammed door. The front door was mortise-locked as well.

As he returned to the kitchen window he bumped into the refrigerator. It mustn't have been quite shut, for it swung wide open—not that it mattered, since the refrigerator was empty except for a torpid fly. She must have gone

out to buy provisions—presumably her shopping was somewhere in the undergrowth. "Can you tell me where the key is?" he said patiently.

She was clinging to the outer sill, and seemed to be trying to save her breath. From the movements of her lips he gathered she was saying "Look around."

There was nothing in the kitchen cupboards except a few cans of baked beans and meat, their labels peeling. He went back to the front hall, which was cramped, hot, almost airless. Even here he wasn't free of the buzzing of flies, though he couldn't see them. Opposite the front door was a cupboard hiding mops and brushes senile with dust. He opened the fourth door off the hall, into the living room.

The long room smelled as if it hadn't been opened for months, and looked like a parody of middle-class taste. Silver-plated cannon challenged each other across the length of the pebble-dashed mantelpiece, on either side of which were portraits of the royal family. Here was a cabinet full of dolls of all nations, here was a bookcase of Reader's Digest Condensed Books. A personalised bullfight poster was pinned to one wall, a ten-gallon hat to another. With so much in it, it seemed odd that the room felt disused.

He began to search, trying to ignore the noise of flies—it was somewhere further into the house, and sounded disconcertingly like someone groaning. The key wasn't on the obese purple suite or down the sides of the cushions; it wasn't on the small table piled with copies of Contact, which for a moment, giggling, he took to be a sexual contact magazine. The key wasn't under the bright green rug, nor on any of the shelves. The dolls gazed unhelpfully at him.

He was holding his breath, both because the unpleasant smell he'd associated with the kitchen seemed even stronger in here and because every one of his movements stirred up dust. The entire room was pale with it; no wonder the dolls' eyelashes were so thick. She must no longer have the energy to clean the house. Now he had finished searching, and it looked as if he would have to venture deeper into the house, where the flies seemed to be so abundant. He was at the far door when he glanced back. Was that the key beneath the pile of magazines?

He had only begun to tug the metal object free when he saw it was a pen, but the magazines were already toppling. As they spilled over the floor,

some of them opened at photographs: people tied up tortuously, a plump woman wearing a suspender belt and flourishing a whip.

He suppressed his outrage before it could take hold of him. So much for first impressions! After all, the old lady must have been young once. Really, that thought was rather patronising too—and then he saw it was more than that. One issue of the magazine was no more than a few months old.

He was shrugging to himself, trying to pretend that it didn't matter to him, when a movement made him glance up at the window. The old lady was staring in at him. He leapt away from the table as if she'd caught him stealing, and hurried to the window, displaying his empty hands. Perhaps she hadn't had time to see him at the magazines—it must have taken her a while to struggle through the undergrowth around the house—for she only pointed at the far door and said "Look in there."

Just now he felt uneasy about visiting the bedrooms, however absurd that was. Perhaps he could open the window outside which she was standing, and lift her up—but the window was locked, and no doubt the key was with the one he was searching for. Suppose he didn't find them? Suppose he couldn't get out of the kitchen window? Then she would have to pass the tools up to him, and he would open the house that way. He made himself go to the far door while he was feeling confident. At least he would be away from her gaze, wouldn't have to wonder what she was thinking about him.

Unlike the rest he had seen of the bungalow, the hall beyond the door was dark. He could see the glimmer of three doors and several framed photographs lined up along the walls. The sound of flies was louder, though they didn't seem to be in the hall itself. Now that he was closer they sounded even more like someone groaning feebly, and the rotten smell was stronger too. He held his breath and hoped that he would have to search only the nearest room.

When he shoved its door open, he was relieved to find it was the bathroom—but the state of it was less of a relief. Bath and washbowl were bleached with dust; spiders had caught flies between the taps. Did she wash herself in the kitchen? But then how long had the stagnant water been there? He was searching among the jars of ointments and lotions on the window ledge, all of which were swollen with a fur of talcum powder; he shuddered when it squeaked beneath his fingers. There was no sign of a key.

He hurried out, but halted in the doorway. Opening the door had lightened the hall, so that he could see the photographs. They were wedding photographs, all seven of them. Though the bridegrooms were different—here an airman with a thin moustache, there a portly man who could have been a tycoon or a chef—the bride was the same in every one. It was the woman who owned the house, growing older as the photographs progressed, until in the most recent, where she was holding on to a man with a large nose and a fierce beard, she looked almost as old as she was now.

Bryant found himself smirking uneasily, as if at a joke he didn't quite see but which he felt he should. He glanced quickly at the two remaining doors. One was heavily bolted on the outside—the one beyond which he could hear the intermittent sound like groaning. He chose the other door at once.

It led to the old lady's bedroom. He felt acutely embarrassed even before he saw the brief transparent nightdress on the double bed. Nevertheless he had to brave the room, for the dressing-table was a tangle of bracelets and necklaces, the perfect place to lose keys; the mirror doubled the confusion. Yet as soon as he saw the photographs that were leaning against the mirror, some instinct made him look elsewhere first.

There wasn't much to delay him. He peered under the bed, lifting both sides of the counterpane to be sure. It wasn't until he saw how grey his fingers had become that he realised the bed was thick with dust. Despite the indentation in the middle of the bed, he could only assume that she slept in the bolted room. He hurried to the dressing-table and began to sort through the jewellery, but as soon as he saw the photographs his fingers grew shaky and awkward. It wasn't simply that the photographs were so sexually explicit—it was that in all of them she was very little younger, if at all, than she was now. Apparently she and her bearded husband both liked to be tied up, and that was only the mildest of their practises. Where was her husband now? Had his predecessors found her too much for them? Bryant had finished searching through the jewellery by now, but he couldn't look away from the photographs, though he found them appalling. He was still staring morbidly when she peered in at him, through the window that was reflected in the mirror.

This time he was sure she knew what he was looking at. More, he was sure he'd been meant to find the photographs. That must be why she'd hurried

round the outside of the house to watch. Was she regaining her strength? Certainly she must have had to struggle through a good deal of undergrowth to reach the window in time.

He made for the door without looking at her, and prayed that the key would be in the one remaining room, so that he could get out of the house. He strode across the hall and tugged at the rusty bolt, trying to open the door before his fears grew worse. His struggle with the bolt set off the sound like groaning within the room, but that was no reason for him to expect a torture chamber. Nevertheless, when the bolt slammed all at once out of the socket and the door swung inwards, he staggered back into the hall.

The room didn't contain much: just a bed and the worst of the smell. It was the only room where the curtains were drawn, so that he had to strain his eyes to see that someone was lying on the bed, covered from head to foot with a blanket. A spoon protruded from an open can of meat beside the bed. Apart from a chair and a fitted wardrobe, there was nothing else to see—except that, as far as Bryant could make out in the dusty dimness, the shape on the bed was moving feebly.

All at once he was no longer sure that the groaning had been the sound of flies. Even so, if the old lady had been watching him he might never have been able to step forward. But she couldn't see him, and he had to know. Though he couldn't help tiptoeing, he forced himself to go to the head of the bed.

He wasn't sure if he could lift the blanket, until he looked in the can of meat. At least it seemed to explain the smell, for the can must have been opened months ago. Rather than think about that—indeed, to give himself no time to think—he snatched the blanket away from the head of the figure at once. Perhaps the groaning had been the sound of flies after all, for they came swarming out, off the body of the bearded man. He had clearly been dead for at least as long as the meat had been opened. Bryant thought sickly that if the sheet had really been moving, it must have been the flies. But there was something worse than that: the scratches on the shoulders of the corpse, the teeth-marks on its neck—for although there was no way of being sure, he had an appalled suspicion that the marks were quite new.

He was stumbling away from the bed—he felt he was drowning in the air that was thick with dust and flies—when the sound recommenced. For a moment he had the thought, so grotesque he was afraid he might both laugh

wildly and be sick, that flies were swarming in the corpse's beard. But the sound was groaning after all, for the bearded head was lolling feebly back and forth on the pillow, the tongue was twitching about the greyish lips, the blind eyes were rolling. As the lower half of the body began to jerk weakly but rhythmically, the long-nailed hands tried to reach for whoever was in the room.

Somehow Bryant was outside the door and shoving the bolt home with both hands. His teeth were grinding from the effort to keep his mouth closed, for he didn't know if he was going to vomit or scream. He reeled along the hall, so dizzy he was almost incapable, into the living room. He was terrified of seeing her at the window, on her way to cut off his escape. He felt so weak he wasn't sure of reaching the kitchen window before she did.

Although he couldn't focus on the living room, as if it wasn't really there, it seemed to take him minutes to cross. He'd stumbled at last into the front hall when he realised that he needed something on which to stand to reach the transom. He seized the small table, hurling the last of the Contact magazines to the floor, and staggered towards the kitchen with it, almost wedging it in the doorway. As he struggled with it, he was almost paralysed by the fear that she would be waiting at the kitchen window.

She wasn't there. She must still be on her way around the outside of the house. As he dropped the table beneath the window, Bryant saw the broken key in the mortise lock. Had someone else—perhaps the bearded man—broken it while trying to escape? It didn't matter, he mustn't start thinking of escapes that had failed. But it looked as if he would have to, for he could see at once that he couldn't reach the transom.

He tried once, desperately, to be sure. The table was too low, the narrow sill was too high. Though he could wedge one foot on the sill, the angle was wrong for him to squeeze his shoulders through the window. He would certainly be stuck when she came to find him. Perhaps if he dragged a chair through from the living room—but he had only just stepped down, almost falling to his knees, when he heard her opening the front door with the key she had had all the time.

His fury at being trapped was so intense that it nearly blotted out his panic. She had only wanted to trick him into the house. By God, he'd fight her for the key if he had to, especially now that she was relocking the front door.

All at once he was stumbling wildly towards the hall, for he was terrified that she would unbolt the bedroom and let out the thing in the bed. But when he threw open the kitchen door, what confronted him was far worse.

She stood in the living room doorway, waiting for him. Her caftan lay crumpled on the hall floor. She was naked, and at last he could see how grey and shrivelled she was—just like the bearded man. She was no longer troubling to brush off the flies, a couple of which were crawling in and out of her mouth. At last, too late, he realised that her perfume had not been attracting the flies at all. It had been meant to conceal the smell that was attracting them—the smell of death.

She flung the key behind her, a new move in her game. He would have died rather than try to retrieve it, for then he would have had to touch her. He backed into the kitchen, looking frantically for something he could use to smash the window. Perhaps he was incapable of seeing it, for his mind seemed paralysed by the sight of her. Now she was moving as fast as he was, coming after him with her long arms outstretched, her grey breasts flapping. She was licking her lips as best she could, relishing his terror. Of course, that was why she'd made him go through the entire house. He knew that her energy came from her hunger for him.

It was a fly—the only one in the kitchen that hadn't alighted on her—which drew his gaze to the empty bottles on the windowsill. He'd known all the time they were there, but panic was dulling his mind. He grabbed the nearest bottle, though his sweat and the slime of milk made it almost too slippery to hold. At least it felt reassuringly solid, if anything could be reassuring now. He swung it with all his force at the centre of the window. But it was the bottle which broke.

He could hear himself screaming—he didn't know if it was with rage or terror—as he rushed towards her, brandishing the remains of the bottle to keep her away until he reached the door. Her smile, distorted but gleeful, had robbed him of the last traces of restraint, and there was only the instinct to survive. But her smile widened as she saw the jagged glass—indeed, her smile looked quite capable of collapsing her face. She lurched straight into his path, her arms wide. He closed his eyes and stabbed. Though her skin was tougher than he'd expected, he felt it puncture drily, again and again. She was thrusting herself onto the glass, panting and squealing like a pig. He was slashing desperately now, for the smell was growing worse.

All at once she fell, rattling on the linoleum. For a moment he was terrified that she would seize his legs and drag him down on her. He fled, kicking out blindly, before he dared open his eyes. The key—where was the key? He hadn't seen where she had thrown it. He was almost weeping as he dodged about the living room, for he could hear her moving feebly in the kitchen. But there was the key, almost concealed down the side of a chair.

As he reached the front door he had a last terrible thought. Suppose this key broke too? Suppose that was part of her game? He forced himself to insert it carefully, though his fingers were shaking so badly he could hardly keep hold of it at all. It wouldn't turn. It would—he had been trying to turn it the wrong way. One easy turn, and the door swung open. He was so insanely grateful that he almost neglected to lock it behind him.

He flung the key as far as he could and stood in the overgrown garden, retching for breath. He'd forgotten that there were such things as trees, flowers, fields, the open sky. Yet just now the scent of flowers was sickening, and he couldn't bear the sound of flies. He had to get away from the bungalow and then from the countryside—but there wasn't a road in sight, and the only path he knew led back towards the Wirral Way. He wasn't concerned about returning to the nature trail, but the route back would lead him past the kitchen window. It took him a long time to move, and then it was because he was more afraid to linger near the house.

When he reached the window, he tried to run while tiptoeing. If only he dared turn his face away! He was almost past before he heard a scrabbling beyond the window. The remains of her hands appeared on the sill, and then her head lolled into view. Her eyes gleamed brightly as the shards of glass that protruded from her face. She gazed up at him, smiling raggedly and pleading. As he backed away, floundering through the undergrowth, he saw that she was mouthing jerkily. "Again," she said.

1983

Just Waiting

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Fifty years later he went back. He'd been through school and university, he'd begun to write a novel at the end of a year spent searching for jobs, and it had been hailed as one of the greatest books ever written about childhood, had never been out of print since. He'd been married and divorced before they had flown him to Hollywood to write the screenplay of his novel, he'd had a stormy affair with an actress whose boyfriend had sent a limousine and two large monosyllabic men in grey suits to see him off home to England when the screenplay had been taken over by two members of the Writers Guild. He'd written two more books which had been respectfully received and had sold moderately well, he'd once spent a night in a Cornish hotel room with twin teenage girls, and increasingly none of this mattered: nothing stayed with him except, more and more vividly, that day in the forest fifty years ago.

There were few cars parked on the forest road today, and none in the parking areas. He parked near the start of the signposted walk, then sat in the car. He had never really looked at a road before, never noticed how much the camber curved; it looked like a huge pipe almost buried in the earth, its surface bare as the trees, not a soul or a vehicle in sight. The wintry air seeped into the car and set him shivering. He made himself get out, the gold weighing down the pockets of his heavy coat, and step onto the sandstone path.

It sloped down at once. A bird flew clattering out of a tree, then the silence closed in. Branches gleamed against the pale-blue cloudless sky, lingering raindrops glittered on the grass that bordered the path. A lorry rumbled by above him, its sound already muffled. When he looked back he could no longer see his car.

The path curved, curved again. The ingots dragged at his pockets, bruised his hips. He hadn't realised gold weighed so much, or, he thought wryly,

that it would be so complicated to purchase. He could only trust his instinct that it would help.

His feet and legs were aching. Hollywood and his Cornish night seemed less than words. Sunlight streaked through dazzling branches and broke raindrops into rainbows, shone in the mud of trails that looked like paths between the trees. He would have to follow one of those trails, if he could remember which, but how would he be able to keep his footing in all that mud? He made himself limp onward, searching for landmarks.

Soon he was deep in the forest. If there was traffic on the road, it was beyond his hearing. Everywhere trails led into darkness that was a maze of trees. The sound of wind in the trees felt like sleep. Now he was trudging in search of somewhere to sit down, and so he almost missed the tree that looked like an arch.

It must have looked more like an arch when he was ten years old and could hide in the arched hollow of the trunk. For a moment he felt as if the recognition would be too much for his heart. He stooped and peered in, then he squeezed himself into the hollow, his bones creaking.

It was slippery under his hands, and smelled of moss and moist wood. The ingots swung his pockets and thumped the wooden shell. He couldn't stand upright, couldn't turn. He hadn't turned then, either—he'd stood with his face to the cool woody dimness and listened to his parents passing by. He hadn't been wishing anything, he told himself fiercely; he had simply been pretending he was alone in the forest, just to make the forest into an adventure for a few minutes. Now, as he struggled to stoop out of the hollow, he could hear them calling to him. "Don't lag, Ian," his father shouted, so loud that someone in the forest called "Hello?" and his mother called more gently "We don't want you getting lost."

It was midsummer. The sun stood directly over the path, however much the path curved; he could smell the sandstone baking. The masses of foliage blazed so brightly that, whatever their tree, they seemed to be a single incandescent shade of green. His feet were aching, then and now. "Can't we have our picnic yet?" he pleaded as he ran to his parents, bruising his soles. "Can't I have a drink?"

"We're all thirsty, not just you." His father frowned a warning not to argue; sweat sparkled in his bristly moustache. "I'm not unpacking until we get to the picnic area. Your mother wants to sit down."

Ian's mother flapped a handful of her summer dress, through which he could see the lacy outlines of her underwear, to cool herself. "I don't mind sitting on the grass if you want a rest, Ian," she said.

"Good God, you'd think we'd been walking all day," his father said, which Ian thought they had. "Rest and drink when we get to the tables. I never asked for rest when I was his age, and I know what I'd have got if I had."

"It's the school holidays," she said, that rusty edge to her voice. "You aren't teaching now."

"I'm always teaching, and don't you forget it."

Ian wondered which of them that was meant for, especially when his mother said under her breath "I wish he could just have a normal upbringing, how I wish..." He held hands with both of them and marched along for a few hundred yards. Had he grown bored then, or had he felt their tension passing back and forth through him? He remembered only running ahead until his father called "Hang on, old fellow. Let's find your mother some shade."

Ian turned from the path that seemed to curve away in the wrong direction forever. His father was pointing into the trees. "The tables should be along here," he said.

"Don't get us lost on my account," Ian's mother protested.

His father hitched up his knapsack and nodded curtly at it over his shoulder. "I could do with some shade myself."

"I'll carry something if you like. I did make the picnic, you know."

His father turned his back on that and strode onto the path between the trees, his shorts flapping, the black hairs on his legs glinting as the sunlight caught them a last time at the edge of the shade. As soon as Ian followed his mother under the trees, he realised he had already been hearing the stream.

He could hear it now. The sandstone path that was supposed to lead back to its starting point curved away in the wrong direction ahead, not forever but as far as the eye could see, and there on the left was the path his father had taken. It looked dark and cold and treacherous, shifty with dim shadows. He listened while the wind and the trees grew still. There was no sound at all in the woods, not a bird's or a footstep. He had to take a breath that made his head swim before he could step between the trees.

"We can't get lost so long as we can hear the stream," his father said, as if that should be obvious. His path had followed the stream until the sandstone path was well out of sight and hearing, and then it had turned into a maze of trails, which looked like paths for long enough to be confusing. Ian sensed his mother's nervousness as they strayed away from the stream, among trees that made it seem there were no paths at all. "Isn't that the picnic place?" he said suddenly, and ran ahead, dodging trees and undergrowth. The muffled light beneath the leaves was growing dimmer, so that he was in the glade and almost at the standing shape before he realised it was not a table. "Watch out, Ian!" his mother cried.

He could hear her voice now, in the midst of his laborious breathing. He wasn't sure if this was the glade. Despite the bareness of the trees, it seemed shadowy and chill as he stepped out beneath the patch of blue sky. He was shivering violently, even though the glade looked much like any other: a dip in the ground strewn with fallen leaves and a few scraps of rubble—and then he saw the word that was crudely carved on one of the stones, almost obscured by dripping moss: feed.

It was enough—too much. The other words must be among the rubble that had been used to stuff up the hole. He fumbled hastily in his pockets and dropped the ingots beside the word, then he squeezed his eyes shut and wished. He kept them closed as long as he dared, until he had to glance at the trees. They looked even thinner than he remembered: how could they conceal anything? He made himself lower his gaze, hoping, almost giving in to the temptation to risk a second wish. The ingots were still there.

He'd done what he could. He shouldn't have expected proof, not yet, perhaps not while he was alive. A branch creaked, or a footfall, one of many, the only one that had made a sound. He glanced round wildly and hurried back the way he'd come, while he still remembered which way that was. He mustn't hesitate now, mustn't think until he was on the sandstone path.

He didn't know what made him look back as he reached the edge of the glade: certainly nothing he'd heard. He blinked, he drew a shuddering breath, he seized a tree twice the width of his hand and peered until his eyes stung. He could see the rubble, the mossy word, and even the droplets of water gleaming in it—but the gold was gone.

He clung to the tree with both hands for support. So it was all true: everything he'd tried for fifty years to dismiss as a nightmare, a childish version of what he'd grown to hope had happened, was true after all. He struggled not to think as he waited to be able to retreat, fought not to wonder what might be under the leaves, down there in the dark.

It was a well. He'd realised that before his mother caught his arm to save him from falling in, as if he would have been so babyish. He read the words chipped out of stones that were part of the crumbling circular rim: feed me a wish. "They must mean 'feed me and wish'," his mother said, though Ian didn't think there was space for any more letters. "You're supposed to throw some money in."

He leaned over the rim as she held on to his arm. Someone must have made a wish already, for there were several round gleams far down in the dark that smelled of cold and decay, too far for even the sunlight poking through the leaves overhead to reach. She pulled him back and took out her knitted purse. "Here you are," she said, giving him a tarnished penny. "Make a wish."

"I'll reimburse you when we get back to the car," his father told her, joining them as Ian craned over the rim. He couldn't see the round gleams now. His mother gripped the back of his trousers as he stretched his arm out and let go of the coin, then closed his eyes at once.

He didn't want anything for himself except for his parents to stop fighting, but he didn't know what to wish in order to bring that about. He thought of asking that they should have their deepest wishes, but wouldn't that be at least two? He tried to make up his mind who deserved a wish more or whose wish would be more helpful, then he wondered if he'd already had his wish while he was thinking. He opened his eyes, as if that might help, and thought he saw the coin still falling, within reach if he craned over the rim, still available to be taken back. His mother pulled at him, and the coin had gone. He heard a plop like breath rising to the surface of water or mud.

"Step out now, we must be nearly there," his father said, taking his mother's arm, and frowned back at Ian. "I've told you once about lagging. Don't try my patience, I'm warning you."

Ian ran after them before he'd had time to make sure whether the stones with the words were as loose as they looked, whether they could be placed along the rim in a different order. He wasn't sure now, as he shoved himself

away from the glade where the ingots no longer were; he didn't want to be. He was suddenly terrified that he had already lost his way, that he would wander through the winter forest until he strayed onto the path he'd taken that day with his parents, until he ended up where it led, as the short day grew dark. He couldn't shake off his terror even when he stumbled back onto the sandstone path, not until he was in the car, gripping the wheel that his hands were shaking, sitting and praying he would regain control of himself in time to be able to drive out of the forest before nightfall. He mustn't wonder if the gold had brought his wish. He mightn't know until he died, and perhaps not even then.

His father never looked back, not even when the trail he was following out of the glade forked. He chose the left-hand path, which was wider. It continued to be wider until Ian's mother began to glance about as if she could see something besides trees, or wished she could. "Keep up," she said sharply to Ian, and to his father "I'm cold."

"We must be near the stream, that's all." His father spoke as though he could see the stream among the crowding trees, which were so close now that whenever you moved it seemed that someone was moving with you, from tree to tree. When Ian looked back he couldn't see where the path had been wider. He didn't want his mother to notice that; it would only make her more nervous and start another argument. He struggled through a tangle of undergrowth and ran ahead. "Where do you think you're—" his father demanded. "All right. Stay there."

His change of tone made Ian peer ahead. He'd almost reached another glade, but that was no reason for his father to sound as if he'd meant to come here all along; there was nothing in the glade but several heaps of dead branches. He took a few steps forward to clear his eyes of sunlight, and saw that he must have been mistaken. There were several picnic tables and benches, and no heaps of branches after all.

He cried out, for his father had caught up with him silently and was digging his fingers into Ian's shoulder, bruising it. "I told you to stay where you were."

His mother winced and took Ian's hand to lead him to a table. "I won't let him do that again," she murmured. "He may do it to his pupils at school, but I won't have him doing it to you."

Ian didn't quite believe she would be able to stop his father, especially not when his father dumped the knapsack on the table in front of her and sat down, folding his arms. Ian could feel an argument threatening. He moved away to see what was beyond the glade.

There was another picnic area. He could just see a family at a table in the distance; a boy and a girl and their parents, he thought. Perhaps he could play with the children later. He was wondering why their picnic table looked more like one than his, when his father shouted "Come back here and sit down. You have made enough fuss about wanting a drink."

Ian dawdled towards the table, for the argument was starting: it made the glade seem smaller. "You expect to be waited on, do you?" his mother was saying.

"I did the carrying, didn't I?" his father retorted. Both of them stared at the knapsack, until at last his mother sighed and undid the straps to take out the cups and the bottle of lemonade. She sipped hers as his father emptied his cup in four equal swallows punctuated by deep breaths. Ian gulped his and gasped. "Please may I have some more?"

His mother shared what was left in the bottle between the three cups and reached in the knapsack, then stared in. "I'm afraid that's all we have to drink," she said, as if she couldn't believe it herself.

"You could have fooled me." His father squirmed his shoulders ostentatiously. "What the devil have I been carrying?"

She began to unpack the containers of food, cold chicken and salad and coleslaw. Ian realised what was odd about the table: it was too clean for an outdoor table, it looked like... His mother was peering into the knapsack. "We'll have to eat with our fingers," she said. "I didn't bring the plates and cutlery."

"What do you think we are, savages?" His father glared about at the trees, as if someone might see him eating that way. "How can we eat coleslaw with our fingers? I've never heard such nonsense in my life."

"I'm surprised I packed anything at all," she cried, "you've got me so distracted."

It was like a table in a café, Ian thought, and looked up as someone came into the glade. At least now his parents wouldn't be able to argue; they never did in front of people. For a moment, until he blinked and sat aside out of

the sunlight, he had the impression that the eyes of the two figures were perfectly circular.

The two men were heading straight for the table, purposefully. They were dressed from head to foot in black. At first he thought they were some kind of police, coming to tell his parents they weren't supposed to sit here, and then he almost laughed, realising what their black uniform meant. His father had realised too. "I'm afraid we've brought our own food," he said brusquely.

The first waiter shrugged and smiled. His lips in his pale thin face were almost white, and very wide. He made a gesture at the table, and the other waiter went away, returning almost at once with cutlery and plates. He was coming from the direction of the well, where the trees were thickest and the stray beam of sunlight had dazzled Ian. Ian wondered what else he'd failed to notice in passing.

The waiter who'd shrugged opened the containers of food and served it onto the plates. Ian glimpsed a pattern on the china, but the plates were covered before he could make out what it was. "This is more like it," his father said, and his mother pursed her lips.

When Ian reached to pick up a chicken leg, his father slapped his hand down. "You've a knife and fork. Use them."

"Oh, really," Ian's mother said.

"Yes?" his father demanded, as if he were speaking to a child at school.

She stared at him until he looked away, at the food he was brandishing on his fork. They couldn't argue in front of the waiters, Ian thought, but feeling them argue silently was worse. He set about carving his chicken leg. The knife passed easily through the meat and scraped the bone. "That's too sharp for him," his mother said. "Have you another knife?"

The waiter shook his head and spread his hands. His palms were very smooth and pale. "Just be careful then, Ian," she said anxiously. His father tipped his head back to drain the last trickle of lemonade, and the other waiter came over. Ian hadn't realised he had slipped away, let alone where. He was carrying an uncorked wine bottle, from which he filled Ian's father's cup without being asked. "Well, since you've opened it," Ian's father said, sounding ready to argue the price.

The waiter filled Ian's mother's cup and came to him. "Not too much for him," she said.

"Nor for her either," his father said, having rolled a sip around his mouth and frowned, then shrugged approval, "since she's driving."

Ian took a mouthful to distract himself. It was distracting enough: it tasted rusty, and too thick. He couldn't swallow. He turned away from his father and spat the mouthful on the grass, and saw that the waiters were barefoot. "You little savage," his father said in a low hateful voice.

"Leave him alone. He shouldn't have been given any."

To add to Ian's confusion, both waiters were nodding, agreeing with her. Their feet looked thin as bunches of twigs, and appeared to be gripping the earth; he saw grass and soil squeezing up between the long knuckly toes. He didn't want to stay near them or near his parents, whose disagreements felt like thunder. "I want a proper picnic," he complained. "I want to run around like I used to."

"Just don't get lost," his mother said, a moment before his father said "Do as you're told and stay where you are."

His mother turned to the waiters. "You don't mind if he stretches his legs, do you?"

They smiled and spread their hands. Their mouths looked even wider and paler, and Ian could see no lines on the palms of their hands. "Just you move from this table before you're told to," his father said, "and we'll see how you like the belt when you get home."

He could get up, his mother had said. He gobbled coleslaw, since he couldn't eat that away from the table, and peered at the fragment of pattern he'd uncovered on the plate. "You won't lay a finger on him," his mother had whispered.

His father took a swallow that made his lips redder and thumped his cup on the table. His bare arm lay beside a knife in the shaft of sunlight, the blade and his wiry hairs gleaming. "You've just earned him a few extra with the belt if he doesn't do as he's told."

"Mummy said I could," Ian said, and grabbed the chicken leg from his plate as he stood up. His father tried to seize him, but the drink must have made him sleepy, for he lolled over the table, shaking his head. "Come here

to me," he said in a slurred voice as Ian dodged out of reach, having just glimpsed more of the pattern on the plate. It looked like something large trying to escape as it was chopped up. He didn't want to stay near that, or near his parents, or near the waiters with their silent smiles. Perhaps the waiters didn't speak English. He took a bite of the chicken leg as he ran towards the children, who had left the distant table and were playing with a striped ball.

He looked back once. A waiter stood behind each of his parents: waiting to be paid, or to clear the table? They must be impatient for their toes to have been scratching at the earth like that. His father was propping his chin on his hands as Ian's mother stared at him across the table, which looked oddly ramshackle now, more like a heap of branches.

Ian ran into the clearing where the children were. "Can I play with you?"

The girl gave a small cry of surprise. "Where did you come from?" the boy demanded.

"Just over there." Ian turned and pointed, and found he couldn't see his parents. For a moment he wanted to giggle at how he must have surprised the children, then suddenly he felt lost, abandoned, afraid for his mother, and his father too. He backed away as the children stared at him, then he whirled and ran.

The boy's name was Neville; his sister's was Annette. Their parents were the kindest people he had ever known—but he hadn't wished for them, he told himself fiercely as he started the car now that his hands were under control; he didn't know what he had wished at the well. Surely his mother had just been drunk, she and his father must have got lost and gone back to the car on the road through the forest to get help in finding Ian, only for her to lose control almost as soon as she'd started driving.

If only the car and its contents hadn't burned so thoroughly that nobody could tell how his parents had died! He might not have felt compelled to wish on the gold that what he thought he'd seen couldn't have happened, had never happened: the trees separating ahead of him as he ran, then somehow blotting out that last glimpse of his mother scraping at her plate, more and more quickly, staring at the pattern she'd uncovered and rising to her feet, one hand pressed to her lips as she shook his father with the other, shook his shoulder desperately to rouse him, as the thin figures opened their growing mouths and they and the trees closed in.

Watch The Birdie

"*Watch The Birdie* was published as a 100-copy signed and numbered chapbook by Rosemary Pardoe last Christmas. Campbell's own foreword and afterword (yes, they *are* true) more than doubles the story's disquieting impact."—Karl Edward Wagner, Introduction to the story in *The Year's Best Horror Stories 13*, October 1985

"The story was written by the real Ramsey Campbell to be published by the real John Meaking in an issue of his intermittently published newspaper *The Daily Meak*, which apparently never was published."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

Written In: 1983
First published as the chapbook *Watch The Birdie*, 1984
Also published in: *Waking Nightmares*

> *This piece was written over the last two days of April 1983, at the request of John Meakin, then the landlord of the Baltic Fleet, a pub on the dock road in Liverpool. He published an intermittent newspaper called The Daily Meak and was known to his friends as the Admiral. The account that follows was to be published in his newspaper.*—Ramsey Campbell

I hope I shall not be blamed if a true story has no proper ending.

Let me start by explaining that I'm in the business of making Merseyside disappear. No, I'm not a town planner: I create horrors as a writer instead. Many of my tales have been set on Merseyside, and a disconcerting number of the settings no longer exist, rather as the model in the Poe story died as soon as the painter had achieved her likeness on canvas. For example, *The Companion* takes place in the old Tower fairground at New Brighton; *The Show Goes On* is set in the Hippodrome cinema, last seen in a series of skips; my novel *The Face That Must Die* shows Cantril Farm through the eyes of a paranoid schizophrenic, though it looks pretty much as it does to the rest of us, and now they've changed the name of Cantril Farm. And my first novel was set in Toxteth. You will appreciate that I have yet to write about the present government.

My novel *To Wake The Dead* (known in America as *The Parasite*, though I haven't room to explain why) contains a chapter set in the Grapes in Egerton Street, during the reign of the Meakins. That's how I came to be in the Baltic Fleet recently, to present a copy to the Admiral. The place was

packed with office celebrations and planners discussing how many trees they could plant in the car parks next year, and so it wasn't until closing time that I had a chance to make the presentation. The Admiral locked the doors and offered me a coffee, and we settled down by the parrot for a chat.

The parrot had been dozing so soundly that nothing had roused it, not even the cries of anguish from the dock road as someone else discovered there was no way into the Baltic Fleet car park. Now it blinked at us with the balefulness of a Member of Parliament woken by question time, and croaked something that sounded vaguely Russian to me. "I don't know where he got that from," the Admiral said.

I had a momentary impression that I should know, but couldn't think why: something I'd seen in the pub? I glanced round at the deserted tables, smudgy now that clouds like sludge were flooding the sky outside, and wondered aloud if the pub had a resident ghost. "Could be," the Admiral said.

My interest quickened and so, I imagined, did the parrot's—listening for something worth repeating, I supposed. "You've seen it?"

"Heard it. That was enough."

He didn't seem to be joking. "Good places to hear ghosts, pubs," I suggested.

"That's all I'd been drinking," he assured me, tapping the coffee-mug and earning himself a slow reproving psittacine blink. The pub was growing dimmer.

"Tell me about it," I said, "and maybe I can write about it for your newspaper."

"I was sitting here one afternoon drinking coffee." The pub had been locked and deserted, the sun had dazzled the windows so that he couldn't see the deserted interior without moving from where he was sitting, and quite without warning he'd heard someone coming upstairs from below.

You must have seen the steps that lead down to the toilets and their famed graffiti, or if you haven't yet you're bound to: stone steps that look as if they might lead to a vault or a catacomb. He'd heard footsteps where he knew nobody could be, and so he didn't call out, just reached for a weapon. He was still hoping that he wouldn't have to find out if it would work under the

circumstances, when the footsteps faltered and went back downstairs. When he made himself go down, of course there was nobody to be seen.

Again I felt there was something in the pub I should have noticed, again I couldn't think where. "What did the footsteps sound like?"

He pondered. "Not as heavy as they ought to have sounded," he said finally, frowning.

"Incomplete?" I suggested, trying to bring my description to life.

At last he said, "Big and slow, but as if they weren't quite there."

He didn't seem happy with that either. "And how was the parrot behaving while all this was going on?" I said.

"Nervous." Then he grinned. "Talking to himself, God knows what about."

Suddenly I thought I knew. "That Slavonic stuff he was repeating before?"

"Could well have been. How did you know?"

I wasn't sure yet, nor sure that I wanted to be. "Hang on while I have a wee," I said, as I've found one tends to say when one is the father of toddlers.

The steps to the basement were even dimmer than the pub. Somehow the dimness made my footsteps sound muffled, timid. I wished the Admiral would switch on the lights; I wished I hadn't found an excuse to go and look at what I thought I'd seen, instead of inviting him to look for himself. I couldn't help remembering that whatever he'd heard on the steps had come back down here, couldn't help remembering what I was almost sure I'd seen.

It had only been graffiti in the Gents: a few scrawled words among the collectible wit. I'd hardly noticed them except to wonder in passing what they said, for I'd been distracted by the creaking of one of the cubicle doors: I'd thought for a moment that someone had peered out at me, a large pale face which had made me think of a pig leaning out of a stall, in the moment before I'd seen there was nobody. I remembered that now, and suddenly the basement seemed colder. That must have been why I shivered as I went quickly into the Gents.

You've seen the graffiti for yourself, or you've been told about them. No wonder customers come upstairs with a smile on their faces and their heads full of quotes. But all I could see just then were the words in a language I recognised now, scrawled in the midst of the jokes. I'd heard those words

more than once, I realised, and I had a good idea of what they meant and what they could do. I started forward to the nearest cubicle, for a handful of paper to wipe them out. I was nearly at the cubicle door when it creaked open and something squeezed out to take hold of me.

If I'm ever tempted not to trust my instincts I shall remember that moment. Instinct made me close my eyes tight while I lurched out of reach, toward the scrawled words. I kept my eyes on the words as I rubbed at them frantically, with my hands, since that was the quickest way. At the edge of my vision I had the impression of a figure so swollen it filled the doorway through which it was trying to struggle, arms that seemed to be lengthening as they groped toward me, groped then rose toward the large flat face that appeared to have no features. They poked at it, and then it had eyes—holes, at any rate. Then I'd rubbed out the last traces of the words, and I was alone but for the creaking of the door of the empty cubicle.

I admit it didn't take me long to climb the steps, yet by the time I reached the top I'd managed to persuade myself that I couldn't have seen all that, couldn't have seen anything like it. The pub looked as dim as the steps now. I might have asked the Admiral to put on the lights, but just then I wanted to ask my questions and get out of there. "Have you been crossing any Russians lately?" I said, as lightly as I could.

"Not unless you count selling Vladivar, no."

He thought I wasn't serious. "Just think about it. You haven't had trouble with anyone Slavonic?"

"Not in the pub, no."

I could tell he was remembering. "Outside?"

"Might have been. They could have been Slavs. A couple of sailors pulled knives on each other in the car park one night, and we had to sort them out, that's all."

"They couldn't have sneaked in here afterward, could they?"

"Not a chance."

"That makes sense."

He stood up to switch on the lights. "Going to tell me about it?" he said.

"When I've told you how I know." Both his gaze and the parrot's were making me uncomfortable. "You see," I said, "I once did some research for

a novel about the basis of all the vampire legends, until I found someone else had already written it. One thing I did was talk to a specialist in Slavonic languages who told me some of the old Slavonic incantations. There were a couple I wouldn't have used even if I'd written the book; not once he told me what they were supposed to call up. Well," I said, glad to get it over with, "one of them was written on the wall in your Gents."

He jumped up. "It's there now?"

"It was until I rubbed it out."

He sat down again and gave me a doubtful look. I could see he thought I was making up the story for his newspaper. "How come you can read Slavonic writing?" he said suspiciously.

"I can't. I copied the stuff I researched down phonetically, and that's what whoever wrote it in the Gents did. Don't you see, whichever sailor wanted to get his own back on you sent someone in to write it for him, told him what to write. And that's not all they did—"

But there was no need for me to go on, for the parrot had started croaking —croaking the words it had already tried to pronounce. I pointed nervously at it while the Admiral frowned at me, then I punched its cage to interrupt the bird before it could finish.

The Admiral's frown was no longer puzzled but dangerous. "What did you want to do that for?" he demanded.

"Didn't you hear what it was saying? Whoever was sent in here didn't just write the words on the wall, they must have spoken them as well when there was nobody to hear—nobody but him," I said, nodding at the parrot, which glared at me. "Couldn't you tell it was Slavonic?"

The Admiral wasn't convinced. "You haven't told me yet," he growled, "what it was supposed to do."

I couldn't go into that, not then, not there. "Let's just say that if you used the invocation in a graveyard, what it called up would be dreadful enough, but if you weren't in a graveyard it would be something even less human," I said, but my last few words might well have been inaudible, for he was turning his head toward the steps. I saw his face change, and knew what he was hearing before I heard it myself.

I should have known that the footsteps would be terribly slow. "They're bigger," the Admiral whispered, and I could hear what he meant, though I was hearing them for the first time: they sounded as if they were growing as they lumbered up the stairs—as if they were putting on more substance. I had disliked the dimness, but now I wished desperately that he hadn't turned on the lights: at least then we would have been spared seeing. The footsteps came up halfway, unsteadily but purposefully, and I saw what might have been the top of a head, something white and rounded that seemed to be having trouble in keeping its shape. I was praying to be able to look away, to be able not to see any more, when the white dome jerked downward, the footsteps plodded back to the basement. Interrupting had achieved something after all.

Well, I told you at the outset that I couldn't promise you a proper ending. I still visit the Baltic Fleet, for the food as much as anything, but not after dark. I admit I keep a sharp eye on the parrot and the graffiti, and sometimes I need to be spoken to twice. I know the Admiral doesn't take kindly to people hitting the parrot's cage, and so I can only suggest that if you hear the bird speaking what sounds like Slavonic you do your best to interest it in something else. Quickly.

I delivered the story to John Meakin at the beginning of May 1983. I visited the pub several times during that year, but the newspaper hadn't yet been published. Close to Christmas 1983 I arrived at the pub to find it locked and shuttered. It reopened under new management this year. Nobody seems to know where John Meakin is.

Next Time You'll Know Me

Written In: 1983
First published in *Prime Evil*, 1988
Also published in: *Waking Nightmares*

Not this time, oh no. You don't think I'd be taken in like that now, do you? This time I don't care whose name you use, not now I can tell what it is. I only wish I'd listened to my mother sooner. "Always stay one step ahead of the rest," she used to say. "Don't let them get the better of you."

Now you'll pretend you don't know anything about my mother, but you and me know better, don't we? Shall I tell everyone about her so you can say it's the first time you've heard? I will tell about her, so everyone knows. She deserves that at least. She was the one who helped me be a writer.

Oh, but I'm not a writer, am I? I can't be, I haven't had any stories published, that's what you'd like everyone to think. You and me know whose names were on my stories, and maybe my mother did finally. I don't believe she could have been taken in by the likes of you. She was the finest person I ever knew, and she had the best mind.

That's why my father left us, because she made him feel inferior. I never knew him but she told me so. She taught me how to live my life: "Always live as if the most important thing that ever happened to you is just about to happen," she'd advise, and she would always be cleaning our flat at the top of the house with all her bracelets on when I came home from the printer's. She'd have laid the table so the mats covered the holes she'd mended in the tablecloth, and she'd put on her tiara before she ladled out the rice with her wooden spoon she'd carved herself. We always had rice because she said we ought to remember the starving peoples and not eat meat that had taken the food out of their mouths. And then we'd just sit quietly and not need to talk because she always knew what I was going to tell her. She always knew what my father was going to say too, that was what he couldn't stand. "My dear, he never had an original thought in his head," she used to affirm. She was one step ahead of everyone, except for just one exception—she never knew what my stories would be about until I told her.

Now you'll pretend you don't see how that matters, or maybe you really haven't the intelligence, so I'll tell you again: my mother who was always a step ahead of everyone because they didn't know how to think for themselves didn't know what my ideas for stories were until I told her, she said so. "That's your best idea yet," she would always applaud, ever since she used to make me tell her a story at bedtime before she would tell me one. Sometimes I'd lie watching my night light floating away and be thinking of ways to make the story better until I fell asleep. I never remembered the ways in the morning and I never wondered where they went but you and me know, don't we? I just wish I'd been able to follow them sooner and believe me, you'll wish that too.

When I left school I went to work for Mr. Twist, the only printer in town. I thought I'd enjoy it because I thought it had to do with books. I didn't mind at first when he didn't hardly speak to me because I got to be as good as my mother at knowing what he was going to say, then I realised it was because he thought I wasn't as good as he was the day he told me off for correcting the grammar and spelling on the poster for tours of the old mines. "You're the apprentice here and don't you forget it," he proclaimed with a red face. "Don't you go trying to be cleverer than the customer. He gets what he asks for, not what you think he wants. Who do you think you are?" he queried.

He was asking, so I told him. "I'm a writer," I stated.

"And I'm the Oxford University Press."

I laughed because I thought he meant me to. "No you aren't," I contradicted.

"That's right," he stressed, and stuck his red face up against mine. "I'm a second-rate printer in a third-rate town and you're no better than me. Don't play at being a writer with me. I'm old enough to know a writer when I see one."

All I wanted was to tell my mother when I got home, but of course she already knew. "You're a writer, Oscar, and don't let anyone tell you different," she warned. "Just try a bit harder to finish your stories. You ought to have been top of your class in English. I expect the teacher was just jealous."

So I finished some stories to read to her. She was losing her sight by then, and I read her library books every night, but she used to say she'd rather

have my stories than any of them. "You ought to get them published," she counselled. "Show people what real stories are like."

So I tried to find out how to. I joined a writers' circle because I thought they could and would help. Only most of them weren't published and tried to put me off trying by telling me that publishing was full of cliques and all about knowing the right people. And when that didn't work they tried to make me stop believing in myself, by having a competition for the three best short stories and none of mine got anywhere. The judges had all been published and they said my ideas weren't new and the way I told them wasn't the way you were supposed to tell stories. "Take no notice of them," my mother countermanded. "They're the clique, they want to keep you out. You're too original for them. I'll give you the money to send your work to publishers and just you wait and see, they'll buy it and we can move somewhere you'll be appreciated," and I was just going to when you and Mrs. Mander destroyed her faith in me.

Of course you don't know Mrs. Mander either, do you? I don't suppose you do. She lived downstairs and I never liked her and I don't believe my mother did, only she was sorry for her because she lived on her own. She used to wear old slippers that left bits on the carpet after my mother had spent half the day cleaning up even though she couldn't see hardly, and she kept picking up ornaments to look at and putting them down somewhere else. I always thought she meant to steal them when she'd got my mother confused about where they were. She came up when I wasn't there to read books to my mother, and now you can guess what she did.

Oh, I'll tell you, don't worry, I want everyone to know. It was the day they told Mr. Twist not to print any more posters about the old mines because the tours hadn't gone well and they'd stopped them, and I was looking forward to telling my mother that the grammar and spelling had put people off, but Mrs. Mander was there with a pile of paperbacks you could see other people's fingermarks on that she'd bought in the market. As soon as I came in she got up. "You'll be wanting to talk to the boy," she deduced, and went out with some of her books.

She always called me the boy, which was another reason why I didn't like her. I was going to say about Mr. Twist and then I saw how sad my mother looked. "I'm disappointed in you, Oscar," she rebuked.

She'd never said that before, never. I felt as if I was someone else. "Why?" I inquired.

"Because you led me to believe your ideas were original and every one of them are in these books."

She showed me where Mrs. Mander had marked pages for her with bits of newspaper, and by the time I'd finished reading I had a headache from all the small print and fingermarks, I was almost as blind as she was. All the books were the number one best-seller and soon to be major films, but I'd never read a word of them before, and yet they were all my stories, you know they were. And my mother ought to have, but for the first time ever she didn't believe me. That's the first thing you're going to pay for.

I had to take some aspirins and go to bed and lie there until it was dark and I couldn't see the small print dancing any more. Then my headache went away and I knew what must have happened. It was being one step ahead, I knew what stories were going to be about before people wrote them, except they were my stories and I had to be quick enough to write them first and get them published. So I went to tell my mother who was still awake because I'd heard her crying, though she tried to make me think it was just her eyes hurting. I told her what I knew and she looked sadder. "It's a good idea for a story," she dismissed as if she didn't even want me to write any more.

So I had to prove the true facts to her. I went back to the writers' circle and asked what to do about stolen ideas. They didn't seem to believe me, and all they said was I should go and ask the writers to pay me some of their royalties. So I looked the writers of the books up in the Authors and Writers Who's Who, and most of them lived in England because Mrs. Mander liked English books. None of the writers' circle were listed, so that shows it's all a clique.

I couldn't wait until the weekend and I could tell the writers they were my ideas they'd used, but then I realised I'd have to leave my mother for the first time I ever had and keep the money from my Friday pay packet to pay for the train. She hadn't hardly been speaking to me since Mrs. Mander and her books, she'd just kept looking as if she was waiting for me to say I was sorry, and when I told her where I was going she looked twice as sad. "That's going too far, Oscar," she asserted, but she didn't mean to London, she meant I was trying to trick her again when I hadn't really even once.

Then on Friday evening when I was going she entreated, "Please don't go, Oscar. I believe you," but I knew she was only pretending that to stop me. I felt as if I was growing out of her and the further I went the more it hurt, but I had to go.

I had to stand all the way on the train because of the football, and I'd have been sick with all the being thrown back and forth except I couldn't hardly breathe. Then I had to go in the tube to Hampstead. The sun had gone down at last but it was just as hot down there. But being hot meant I could wait outside the writer's house all night when I found it and I could see he'd gone to bed.

I lay down on what they call the heath for a while and I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke up in the morning I felt like toothache all over and there was another car outside the big white writer's house. When I could walk I went and rang the bell, and when I couldn't hear it I banged on the door with my fists to show I didn't care it was so tall.

A man who looked furious opened the door, but he was too young to be the writer and anyway I wouldn't have cared if he had been when he'd made my mother lose her faith in me. "What do you want?" he interrogated.

"I'm a writer and I want to talk to him about his book," I announced.

He was going to shut the door in my face, but just then the writer clamoured, "Who is it?" and his son vociferated back, "He says he's a writer."

"Let him in then for God's sake. If I can let you in I might as well let in the rest of the world. You and I have said all we have to say to each other."

His son tried to shut the door but I wriggled past him and down the big hall to the room where the writer was. I could see he was a famous writer because he could drink whisky at breakfast time and smoke a pipe before getting dressed. He gave me a look that made his face lopsided and I could see he really meant it for his son. "You're not here for a handout as well, are you?" he denied.

"If that means wanting some of your money I am," I sued.

He wiped his hand over his face and shook his head with a grin. "Well, that's honest, I can't deny that. See if you can make a better case for yourself than he's been doing."

His son kept trying to interrupt me and then started punching his thighs as if he wanted to punch me while I told the writer how I'd had his idea first and the story I'd made it into. Then the writer was quiet until he acclaimed, "It took me a quarter of a million words and you did it in five minutes."

His son jumped up and stood in the middle. "You're just depressed, dad. You know you often get like this. All he did was tell you an anecdote built around your book. He probably hasn't even the discipline to write it down."

I caught the writer's eye and I could see he thought his son was worried about whatever money he'd asked for, so I winked at him. "Get out of the way," he directed, and shoved his son with his foot. "Who the devil are you to tell us about discipline? Keep a job for a year and maybe I'll listen to you. And you've the gall to tell us about writing," he enunciated and looked at me. "You and I know better, whatever your name is. Ideas are in the air for whoever grabs them first and gets lucky with them. Nobody owns an idea."

He went over to his desk as if the house was a ship. "I was about to write a cheque when you appeared, and I'm glad I can do so with some justice," he relished. "Who do I make it out to?"

"Dad," his son bleated. "Dad, listen to me," but both of us writers ignored him, and I told his father to make the cheque out to my mother. He started pleading with his father as I put it in my pocket and ran after me to say his father had only been trying to teach him a lesson and he'd give him it back for me. But he didn't touch me because he must have seen I'd have burst his eyes if he'd tried to steal my mother's cheque.

I didn't want her to apologise for doubting me, I just wanted her to be pleased, but she wasn't that when I gave her the cheque. First she thought I'd bought it in a joke shop and then she started thinking the joke was on me because the writer would stop the cheque. She had me believing it had been too easy and meaning to go back to make him write another, but when I got round her to pay it into her account where she kept her little savings the bank said it had been honoured. Then she was frightened because she'd never seen five hundred pounds before. "He must have taken pity on you," she fathomed. "Don't try any more, Oscar. I believe you now."

I knew she didn't and I had to carry on until she did, and now there was money involved I knew who to go to, the solicitor who'd got her the divorce. He didn't believe me until I told him about the check and then he was interested. He told me to write down all my ideas I didn't think anyone

had used yet for him to keep in a safe at the bank, though Mr. Twist tried to put me off writing in my lunch hour, and then he said we'd have to wait and see if the ideas got written after I'd already written them. That wasn't soon enough for me and I went off again at the weekends.

You'd been putting your heads together about me though, hadn't you. The writer in the Isle of Man would only talk to me through a gatepost and wouldn't let me in. The one in Norfolk lived on a barge where I could hear men sobbing and wouldn't even talk to me. And the one in Scotland pretended she had no money and I should go to America where the money was. I wasn't sure if I believed her but I couldn't hurt a woman, not then. Maybe that's why you chose her to trick me. She'll be even sorrier than the rest of you.

So I went to America instead of the seaside with my mother. I told her I was going to sell publishers my stories but she tried to stop me, she didn't think I could be published anymore. "If you go away now you may never see me again," she predicted, but I thought that was like saying the other time she believed me and I kept on at her until she gave me the money. Mrs. Mander promised to look after her, seeing as she wouldn't go away without me. I only wanted the money for her and to make her believe me.

I got off at New York and went to Long Island.

That's where the number one best-seller who stole my best idea lives. Maybe he didn't know he was stealing it, but if I didn't know I'd stolen a million pounds I'd still be sent to prison and he stole more than that from me, all of you did. He had a big long house and a private beach with an electric fence all around, and it was so hot all the way there when I tried to talk to the phone at the gate all I could do was cough. The sand was getting in my eyes and making my cough worse when two men came up behind me and carried me through the fence.

They didn't stop until they were in the house and threw me in a chair where I had to rub my eyes to see, so the writer must have thought I was crying when he came in naked from the beach. "Relax, maybe we won't have to hurt you," he prognosticated as if he was my friend. "You're another reporter, right? Just take a minute to get yourself together and say your piece."

So I told him about my idea he'd used and tried to ignore the men standing behind me until he nodded at them and they each took hold of one of my

ears just lightly as if I'd be able to stand up if I wanted to. "Nothing my friends here like better than a tug-of-war," the writer heralded, then he leaned at me. "But you know what we don't like? Bums who try to earn money with cheap tricks."

I was going to lean at him but I couldn't move my head after all. My ears felt as if they'd been set on fire but suddenly I knew I could show him it wasn't a trick, because all at once it was like what my mother did, not just knowing what someone was going to say but knowing which idea of mine he was going to steal next, one I hadn't even written down. "I can tell you what the book you're going to write is about," I prefaced, and I did.

He stared at me, then he nodded but the men mustn't have understood at first, because I thought they were tearing my head in half before they let me go. "I don't know who you are or what you want," the writer gainsaid to me, "but you'd better pray I never hear of you again. Because if you manage to get into print ahead of me I'll sue you down to your last suit of clothes, and believe me I can do it. And then my friends here," he nuncupated, "will come visit you and perform a little surgery on your hands absolutely free and with my compliments."

They marched me out and on a lonely stretch of path where I couldn't see the house or the bus stop they dragged me over the gravel for a while, then they dusted me off and waited with me until the bus came. There was a curve where you could see the house and when I looked back off the bus I saw the writer talking to them and they jumped into a car. They followed me all the way to New York and either the writer had sent them to find out how I'd known what he was thinking or to get rid of me straightaway.

But they couldn't keep up with the bus in the traffic. I got off into a crowd and wished I could go back to England, only they must have known that's where I'd go and be watching the airport if they'd read any books. So I hid in New York until my holiday was over because if I'd gone to any more writers they might have given me away. I hardly didn't go out except to write to my mother every day.

When I got to the airport I hid at the bookstall and pretended to be choosing books until the plane was ready, and that's how I found out what you'd done to me. I leafed through the best-sellers and found all my ideas that were locked in the safe, and the date on all the books was the year before I'd locked my ideas up. You nearly tricked me like you tricked

everyone until I realised the whole clique of you'd put your heads together, publishers and writers, and changed the date on the books.

I bought them all and couldn't wait to show them to the solicitor. I was sure he'd help me prove they'd been written after I'd written them first. I thought about all the things I could buy my mother all the way home on the plane and the train and the bus. But when I got home my mother wasn't there and there was dust on the furniture and my letters to her on the doormat, and when I went to Mrs. Mander she told me my mother was dead.

You killed her. You made me go to America and leave her alone, and she fell downstairs when Mrs. Mander was at the market and broke her neck. They couldn't even get in touch with me to tell me to go to the hospital because you were making me hide in New York. I'd forgive you for stealing my millions before I'd forgive you for taking away my mother. I was so upset I said all this to the newspaper and they published some of it before I realised that now the Long Island men would know who I was and where to find me.

So I've been hiding ever since and I'm glad, because it gave me time to learn what I can do, more than my mother could. Maybe her soul's in me helping, she couldn't just have gone away. Now I can tell who's going to steal one of my ideas and which one and when, otherwise how do you think I knew this story was being written? I've had time to think it all out down here and I know what to do to make sure I'm published when I think it's safe. Kill the thieves before they steal from me, that's what, and don't think I won't enjoy it too.

That's my warning to you thieves in case it makes you think twice about stealing but I don't believe it will. You think you can get away with it but you'll see, the way Mrs. Mander didn't get away with not looking after my mother. Because the morning of the day I hid down here I went to say goodbye to Mrs. Mander. I told her what I thought of her and when she tried to push me out of her room I shut the door on her mouth and then on her head and then on her neck, and leaned on it. Goodbye, Mrs. Mander.

And as for the rest of you who're reading this, don't go thinking you're cleverer than me either. Maybe you think you've guessed where I'm hiding, but if you do I'll know. And I'll come and see you first, before you tell anyone. I mean it. If you think you know, start praying. Pray you're wrong.

Seeing the World

Written in: 1983
First published in *Shadows 7*, 1984
Also published in: *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

At first Angela thought it was a shadow. The car was through the gates before she wondered how a shadow could surround a house. She craned over the garden wall as Richard parked the car. It was a ditch, no doubt some trick the Hodges had picked up in Italy, something to do with their gardening. "They're back," she murmured when Richard had pulled down the door of the garage.

"Saints preserve us, another dead evening," he said, and she had to hush him, for the Hodges were sitting in their lounge and had grinned out at the clatter of the door.

All the same, the Hodges seemed to have even less regard than usual for other people's feelings. During the night she was wakened by Mozart's Fortieth, to which the conductor had added the rhythm section Mozart had neglected to include. Richard mumbled and thrashed in slow motion as she went to the window. An August dawn glimmered on the Hodges' gnomes, and beyond them in the lounge the Hodges were sitting quite as stonily. She might have shouted but for waking Richard. Stiff with the dawn chill, she limped back to bed.

She listened to the silence between movements and wondered if this time they might give the rest of the symphony a chance. No, here came the first movement again, reminding her of the night the Hodges had come over, when she and Richard had performed a Haydn sonata. "I haven't gone into Haydn," Harry Hodge had declared, wriggling his eyebrows. "Get it? Gone into hidin'." She sighed and turned over and remembered the week she and Richard had just spent on the waterways, fields and grassy banks flowing by like Delius, a landscape they had hardly boarded all week, preferring to let the villages remain untouched images of villages. Before the Mozart had played through a third time she was asleep.

Most of the next day was given over to violin lessons, her pupils making up for the lost week. By the time Richard came home from lecturing, she had dinner almost ready. Afterwards they sat sipping the last of the wine as evening settled on the long gardens. Richard went to the piano and played *La Cathedrale Engloutie*, and the last tolling of the drowned cathedral was fading when someone knocked slowly at the front door.

It was Harry Hodge. He looked less bronzed by the Mediterranean sun than made-up, rather patchily. "The slides are ready," he said through his fixed smile. "Can you come now?"

"Right now? It really is quite late." Richard wasn't hiding his resentment, whether at Hodge's assumption that he need only call for them to come—not so much an invitation anymore as a summons—or at the way Hodge must have waited outside until he thought the Debussy had gone on long enough. "Oh, very well," Richard said. "Provided there aren't too many."

He must have shared Angela's thought: best to get it over with, the sooner the better. None of their neighbours bothered with the Hodges. Harry Hodge looked stiff, and thinner than when he'd gone away. "Aren't you feeling well?" she asked, concerned.

"Just all that walking and pushing the mother-in-law."

He was wearing stained outdoor clothes. He must have been gardening; he always was. He looked ready to wait for them to join him, until Richard said firmly "We won't be long."

They had another drink first, since the Hodges never offered. "Don't wake me unless I snore," Richard muttered as they ventured up the Hodges' path, past gnomes of several nations, souvenirs of previous holidays. It must be the gathering night that made the ditch appear deeper and wider. The ditch reminded her of the basement where Harry developed his slides. She was glad their house had no basement: she didn't like dark places.

When Harry opened the door, he looked as if he hadn't stopped smiling. "Glad you could come," he said, so tonelessly that at first Angela heard it as a question she was tempted to answer truthfully. If he was exhausted, he shouldn't have been so eager to have them round. They followed him down the dark hall into the lounge.

Only the wall lights were on. Most of the light surrounded souvenirs—a pink Notre Dame with a clock in place of a rose window on the

mantelpiece, a plaster bull on top of the gas fire, matches stuck in its back like picadors' lances—and Deirdre Hodge and her mother. The women sat facing the screen on the wall, and Angela faltered in the doorway, wondering what was wrong. Of course, they must have been gardening too; they were still wearing outdoor clothes, and she could smell earth. Deirdre's mother must rather have been supervising, since much of the time she had to be pushed in a wheelchair. "There you are," Deirdre said in greeting, and after some thought her mother said "Aye, there they are all right." Their smiles looked even more determined than Harry's. Richard and Angela took their places on the settee, smiling; Angela for one felt as if she was expected to smile rather than talk. Eventually Richard said "How was Italy?"

By now that form of question was a private joke, a way of making their visits to the Hodges less burdensome: half the joke consisted of anticipating the answer. Germany had been "like dolls' houses"; Spain was summed up by "good fish and chips"; France had prompted only "They'll eat anything." Now Deirdre smiled and smiled and eventually said "Nice ice creams."

"And how did you like it, Mrs... Mrs..." They had never learned the mother's name, and she was too busy smiling and nodding to tell them now. Smiling must be less exhausting than speaking. Perhaps at least that meant the visitors wouldn't be expected to reply to every remark—they always were, everything would stop until they had—but Angela was wondering what else besides exhaustion was wrong with the two women, what else she'd noticed and couldn't now recall, when Harry switched off the lights.

A sound distracted her from trying to recall, in the silence that seemed part of the dark. A crowd or a choir on television, she decided quickly—it sounded unreal enough—and went back to straining her memory. Harry limped behind the women and started the slide projector.

Its humming blotted out the other sound. She didn't think that was on television after all; the nearest houses were too distant for their sets to be heard. Perhaps a whim of the wind was carrying sounds of a football match or a fair, except that there was no wind, but in any case what did it matter? "Here we are in Italy," Harry said.

He pronounced it "Eyetally," lingeringly. They could just about deduce that it was, from one random word of a notice in the airport terminal where the Hodges were posing stiffly, smiling, out of focus, while a porter with a baggage trolley tried to gesticulate them out of the way. Presumably his

Italian had failed, since they understood hardly a word of the language. After a few minutes Richard sighed, realising that nothing but a comment would get rid of the slide. "One day we'd like to go. We're very fond of Italian opera."

"You'd like it," Deirdre said, and the visitors steeled themselves for Harry's automatic rejoinder: "It you'd like."

"Ooh, he's a one," Deirdre's mother squealed, as she always did, and began to sing "Funiculi, Funicula." She seemed to know only the title, to which she applied various melodies for several minutes. "You never go anywhere much, do you?" Deirdre said.

"I'd hardly say that," Richard retorted, so sharply that Angela squeezed his hand.

"You couldn't say you've seen the world. Nowhere outside England. It's a good thing you came tonight," Deirdre said.

Angela wouldn't have called the slides seeing the world, nor seeing much of anything. A pale blob which she assumed to be a scoopful of the nice ice cream proved to be St Peter's at night; Venice was light glaring from a canal and blinding the lens. "That's impressionistic," she had to say to move St Peter's and "Was it very sunny?" to shift Venice. She felt as if she were sinking under the weight of so much banality, the Hodges' and now hers. Here were the Hodges posing against a flaking life-size fresco, Deirdre couldn't remember where, and here was the Tower of Pisa, righted at last by the camera angle. Angela thought that joke was intentional until Deirdre said "Oh, it hasn't come out. Get on to the proper ones."

If she called the next slide proper, Angela couldn't see why. It was so dark that at first she thought there was no slide at all. Gradually she made out Deirdre, wheeling her mother down what appeared to be a tunnel. "That's us in the catacombs," Deirdre said with what sounded like pride.

For some reason the darkness emphasised the smell of earth. In the projector's glow, most of which nestled under Harry's chin, Angela could just make out the women in front of the screen. Something about the way they were sitting: that was what she'd noticed subconsciously, but again the sound beneath the projector's hum distracted her, now that it was audible once more. "Now we go down," Deirdre said.

Harry changed the slide at once. At least they were no longer waiting for responses. The next slide was even darker, and both Angela and Richard were leaning forward, trying to distinguish who the figure with the outstretched arms was and whether it was shouting or grimacing, when Harry said "What do you do when the cat starts moulting?"

They sat back, for he'd removed the slide. "I've no idea," Richard said.

"Give the cat a comb."

"Ooh, he's a one, isn't he," Deirdre's mother shrieked, then made a sound to greet the next slide. "This is where we thought we were lost," Deirdre said.

This time Angela could have wished the slide were darker. There was no mistaking the fear in Deirdre's face and her mother's as they turned to stare back beyond Harry and the camera. Was somebody behind him, holding the torch which cast Harry's malformed shadow over them? "Get it?" he said. "Cat a comb."

Angela wondered if there was any experience they wouldn't reduce to banality. At least there weren't many more slides in the magazine. She glanced at the floor to rest her eyes, and thought she knew where the sound of many voices was coming from. "Did you leave a radio on in the basement?"

"No." All the same, Harry seemed suddenly distracted. "Quick," Deirdre said, "or we won't have time."

Time before what? If they were ready for bed, they had only to say. The next slide jerked into view, so shakily that for a moment Angela thought the street beyond the gap in the curtains had jerked. All three Hodges were on this slide, between two ranks of figures. "They're just like us really," Deirdre said, "when you get to know them."

She must mean Italians, Angela thought, not the ranks of leathery figures baring their teeth and their ribs. Their guide must have taken the photograph, of course. "You managed to make yourself understood enough to be shown the way out then," she said.

"Once you go deep enough," Harry said, "it comes out wherever you want it to."

It was the manner—offhand, unimpressed—as much as his words that made her feel she'd misheard him. "When you've been down there long

enough," Deirdre corrected him as if that helped.

Before Angela could demand to know what they were talking about, the last slide clicked into place. She sucked in her breath but managed not to cry out, for the figure could scarcely be posing for the camera, reaching out the stumps of its fingers; it could hardly do anything other than grin with what remained of its face. "There he is. We didn't take as long as him," Deirdre said with an embarrassed giggle. "You don't need to. Just long enough to make your exit," she explained, and the slide left the screen a moment before Harry switched off the projector.

In the dark Angela could still see the fixed grin breaking through the face. She knew without being able to see that the Hodges hadn't stopped smiling since Harry had opened the door. At last she realised what she'd seen: Deirdre and her mother, she was certain, were sitting exactly as they had been when their record had wakened her—as they had been when she and Richard had come home. "We thought of you," Harry said. "We knew you couldn't afford to go places. That's why we came back."

She found Richard's hand in the dark and tugged at it, trying to tell him both to leave quickly and to say nothing. "You'll like it," Deirdre said.

"It you'll like," Harry agreed, and as Angela pulled Richard to his feet and put her free hand over his mouth to stifle his protests, Deirdre's mother said "Takes a bit of getting used to, that's all." For a moment Angela thought, in the midst of her struggle with panic, that Harry had put on another slide, then that the street had jerked. It was neither: of course the street hadn't moved. "I hope you'll excuse us if we go now," Richard said, pulling her hand away from his mouth, but it didn't matter, the Hodges couldn't move fast, she was sure of that much. She'd dragged him as far as the hall when the chanting under the house swelled up triumphantly, and so did the smell of earth from the ditch that was more than a ditch. Without further ado, the house began to sink.

In The Trees

Written In: 1983
First published in *Night Visions 3*, 1986
Also published in: *Waking Nightmares*

Threlfall saw the aftermath of the crash as he slowed for the detour. Beyond the police cars and their orange barrier, smoke veined with flames smudged the grey sky. Braking, he thought of matches a child had been playing with, matches spilled from a box. They were telephone poles that had fallen from a lorry, blocking both westbound lanes of the motorway and smashing a car. He hoped the driver had got out before the car caught fire, hoped the police hadn't recorded his own speed before he'd seen them. He cruised past them off the motorway, off his planned route.

He was already late for the next town, the next load of unpopular books. He stopped in a parking area with a padlocked toilet and a bin surrounded by litter, and dug out his road atlas from among the week's newspapers. It looked as if the most direct route was through the green blotch on the map and the horizon: pines.

He swung onto the road with a screech of gravel. The road ploughed through the flat landscape, past stubbly fields relieved only by a couple of derelict farmhouses and rusty scraps of cars, and the forest seemed no easier to reach than the blob of sun in the sky. When at last he came to the forest, he had to drive alongside for miles, until he began to suspect that the road through was closed. No, here it was, and he braked fiercely as he turned.

The trees cut off the sunlight, such as it was, at once. He hadn't realised the road would be so gloomy. He might have felt the trees were closing their ranks against him and his vanload of books, pulped wood on the way to be pulped again, books returned by the bookshops because they were too late for the fads they'd been written to cater to. Still, he didn't suppose butchers felt uneasy driving meat past animals. He switched on his headlights and was picking up speed when the children walked into the road.

The sight of the coach parked by the road must have alerted him, for he was braking almost before he saw them—luckily for them, since they

dawdled on the road as if he weren't there or had no right to be. They were boys in their early teens, a classful of them accompanied by a dishevelled teacher whose long legs seemed bent on tripping him up as he scurried after his class. "Hurry up," he cried. "Stop talking. Leave him alone, Selwyn. On the bus, all of you. Double quick."

He saw Threlfall's car and held up one hand. "Could you let them cross?" he shouted. "Would you mind?" Perhaps it made him feel less ineffectual. He turned on the boys behind him. "Leave that, Wood," he cried.

Or it might have been "Leave that wood," for the three boys who were arguing about how many fish and chips they could afford were dragging what looked like a branch. They stared blankly at him and dropped it. "Not in the road, you chump," he yelled and flung it toward the trees.

It wasn't just a branch, it was carved. Threlfall could see that much before he got out of the car. He felt entitled to be outraged by the boys, who'd piled onto the bus and were opening the windows so as to throw out the wrappers of chocolate bars, and by their teacher—all the more so when he saw that the carving at the thick end of the branch was a face. Why, it must have taken days of careful work, more than you could say for too many of the books in the van. "You aren't just leaving that there," he protested.

The teacher thumped on the window nearest the culprits. "Do you hear? You were told to leave those things alone. They weren't rubbish at all." To Threlfall he said apologetically, "You can't tell them anything these days. I'd make them put it back but we're already late."

"Sodding right we are." The coach driver climbed down, hands on hips, and glared at Threlfall. "He isn't a ranger, he's just interfering. Make up your mind if you're coming. Put it back yourself if you like it round here," he growled at Threlfall, and pushed the teacher up the steps.

The bus roared away, its headlights slashing at the dim trees, its windows spilling litter and the clamour of the schoolboys, three of them still arguing over two fish and three lots of chips, no, let's have three chips and two fish... Threlfall went back to the car, started the engine, stared at the dashboard clock, then abruptly he parked off the road and went to pick up the carved branch.

He didn't much care for it now that he looked at it closely. The eyes bulged like knots in the wood, the face looked tormented, struggling to open its

mouth. At least someone had felt something while it was being made, not like the hacks whose failures filled the back of the van. It didn't matter that he didn't care for it, he still had a duty to save it: anything else was vandalism.

The overcast was tattering. Sudden sunlight picked out the trail the branch had made as it had been dragged through the pine needles, beyond a map carved on a board at the side of the road, a map of woodland walks distinguished by markers of different colours. He memorised the positions of the walks before hefting the branch and starting down the slope.

The nearest path was marked by a yellow post. The trail of the branch crossed the path and led under the trees. He had to slow down once the dimness closed in, chill as water. When his eyes adjusted he saw how he appeared to be surrounded by paths, a maze of spaces between the trees. Most of the apparent paths led into long waterlogged hollows. More than once the branch had been dragged through hollows, and he had to jump across.

Soon the trail crossed another marked path. It should be marked red, and when he peered along it, past the glare of sunlight on its stony surface, he could just make out that it was. Now he could hardly see the trail, even when he was among the trees and the glare had drained from his eyes. The piny smell made him think of a hospital, long dim deserted corridors that led nowhere. He stumbled under the weight of the branch and slithered into a hollow, ankle-deep in mud. He could no longer see the trail, either in front of him or behind him, but wasn't there a stony path between the trees ahead? He had to stagger onto it before he was sure there was.

What was more, it led to a building. He could see a corner of the wall beyond the furthest bend in the path. Even if the building wasn't where the carving had come from, whoever was there could take it—Threlfall had spent too much time already in the woods. Which path was this? It ought to be the green one, as he recalled, and soon he passed a post that looked green, though with moss. Whoever was in the building would confirm the way back to the road.

He rounded the bend nearest the building, and nearly dropped the branch for throwing up his hands in frustration. The hut was in ruins: not a wall was left intact, and there was no roof. All the same, the interior looked

crowded with figures, too still to be people. He went forward, trees whispering behind him, the face with its knotted eyes lurching in his arms.

The hut had no floor. The earth between the walls was planted with carved sticks that looked as if they were growing there, not sticks but stunted trees with atrophied branches. All had faces; some had more than one. All the faces gave the impression of being not so much carved as straining to free themselves from the wood.

He stepped through a gap between two walls. Tall grass snapped beneath his feet. If he couldn't find the spot where the branch had been stolen from he would have to leave it wherever there was room. He held it above his head and shivered with the chill that was sharper than under the trees. Perhaps he was shivering a little at the tortured faces too. Of course the carver must have based them on shapes in the wood, that was why they gave the impression of growing. No wonder they were so grotesque, especially the one that looked like a mother whose child's face was growing on her cheek.

He turned away and frowned, realising that there was no space within the hut where the faces could have been carved. Something else was odd: seen from inside, the hut seemed less ruined than partly built and then overgrown. One side of the hut might almost have been a bush that had grown into the shape of a wall; weren't those its roots in the grass? But he was wasting time.

He'd grasped his stick in order to lay it down when the voice said, "What do you think you're doing?"

At first he didn't realise that it was a voice. He thought it was a crow that had made him start and glance round, or a chainsaw, or even a frog croaking close to his ear, especially since he could see no one. "Where are you?" he demanded.

"You'll find out, I promise you."

Perhaps the speaker thought Threlfall hadn't asked where but who. Was the voice coming from the wall that looked most like a bush? "I'm putting this back," Threlfall said.

"Putting it back now, are you? Too late."

"I didn't take it," Threlfall said, resisting a nervous urge to tell the speaker to show himself. "Some children stole it. I brought it back."

Himself or herself—with such a voice one couldn't tell. "You'll do," it said.

Threlfall felt obscurely threatened. He had a sudden unpleasant notion that someone was about to lift one of the carved faces above the wall, a face with its jaw moving. "Look, I'm leaving this here and I'm going," he said sharply, shivering. He laid the branch down carefully, then he fought his way through the grass between the carvings to the gap in the walls.

Nobody had appeared. Nobody was in sight when he looked back from the bend in the path. It wasn't worth trying to retrace his route through the trees; it wasn't worth the risk—he couldn't locate the trail he'd followed—and in any case the green path would soon join the red and so lead him back to the road. He turned the third bend and found that the green path petered out in undergrowth.

On the map the green had crossed the red twice. He could only go back, staring fiercely at the hut as he passed, doing his best to shake off the impression that a face was watching him from among the crowd of carvings. Perhaps one was, he hadn't time to see. He was glad when a bend intervened.

The deserted path wound on. Was there anyone in the woods beside himself and the unpleasant carver? The creaking that made him glance round must be wind in the trees. He hurried on, searching for a junction to interrupt the endless silent parade of trees, trees beyond counting on either side of him, trees massing away beneath their canopy until they merged into impenetrably secret dimness. There—a marker post in the distance, a reason for him to run—but when he reached it and stood panting he found that it didn't mark a junction, only the path he was on, and it was painted orange.

It must have been red until it was weathered. He was sure there hadn't been an orange path on the map. He must have walked at least a mile from the hut by now; surely he had to be near the road—and yes, he could hear voices ahead, where a dog was sitting patiently beside the path. It took him five minutes of running, giving way frequently to jogging, before he was close enough to be certain of what he was seeing. The dog was a tree stump with a root for a tail.

Then the voices had been wind in the trees. If he let himself, he could imagine that he was still hearing them further down the path, laughing or sobbing. Movement in the trees beside him made him turn sharply, but it was a display of inverted trees in a pond, intermittently illuminated as the

clouds parted and closed again. He hurried on, past the sound that wasn't voices. Whatever was making that sound in the murk beneath the trees, he hadn't time to look.

The road couldn't be much further. Wasn't that a car passing in the distance ahead, not a wind? He was walking as fast as he could without running, his feet throbbing from the stony path. It must be the sound of traffic, and there at last was the junction with the yellow path. Nevertheless he hesitated, for the sound had seemed to come from directly ahead, beyond the next bend in the orange path that must once have been red.

He shouldn't turn now. Not only was he sure where the road was, but he could see shadows moving on the path where it curved back into sight for a few yards beyond the bend, shadows of people among the unmoving shadows of trees. Thank God that's over, he thought vaguely, and almost called out to the people round the bend—had his mouth open to speak as he rounded the curve and saw that the shadows were of bushes, so grotesquely shaped they looked deliberately sculpted.

They weren't shaped like people. He hadn't time to decide what they were shaped like, even if he wanted to, nor how their shadows could have appeared to be moving. It must have been a trick of the light, but it wasn't important, especially when he looked away from the bushes. A few hundred yards beyond them, the path came to a dead end.

He ran to it, not thinking, and stared into the endless maze of trees, then he took a deep breath and ran back to the yellow path. That had to be the way, though the paths seemed to have nothing to do with the map. He ran, lungs aching, round a curve and then another, between the trees that he could almost believe his run was multiplying, and let out a gasp so fierce it momentarily blinded him—a gasp of relief. There ahead, where a car swept round the dim curve past a filling station, was the road.

Thank God for the filling station too. He could ask his way back to the map and his car: he didn't trust himself to judge which direction to take along the road.

He looked both ways before crossing to the forecourt, though the curve prevented him from seeing very far along the silent road. He could see someone moving beyond the grimy window of the office. For a moment he'd been near to panic as he realised that the pumps were rusty, the filling station obviously disused.

He grasped the shaky handle of the office door, and cursed. The office was bare and deserted. What he'd taken to be someone was a torn poster, in fact several layers of posters, flapping restlessly on the office wall. He caught sight of a telephone on the crippled table that was the only remaining item of furniture, and he was struggling to open the door in case, miraculously, the telephone might still be working, when he saw that it was nothing but a knotted stick. Were they posters on the wall? Now he peered through the dusty glass, the figure looked more like layers of bark, and all at once Threlfall was walking away, round the bend in the road, which led to a few sawn logs and a forester's hard hat. The sawn logs would have been blocking the road if there were a road, but beyond them were pathless trees and growing darkness.

It was still a road, he told himself desperately. It must be a foresters' road: that explained the vehicle he'd seen passing. It had to lead somewhere, it was preferable to the paths, at least it was wider. He ran back past the disused filling station, and there, surely, was a forester, presumably the one who'd left his hat: certainly someone was standing in a thicket by the road and watching Threlfall through the dark green leaves.

Threlfall turned his back and waited for the man to finish relieving himself. Thank God for someone who would know the way out of the woods. He waited until he began to wonder if the man had been watching after all. Perhaps he hadn't seen Threlfall, but then why was he taking so long in there? Either he was breathing heavily or that was wind in the trees.

Threlfall cleared his throat loudly before turning. The man hadn't moved. "Excuse me," Threlfall said: still no response. He walked around the thicket, making as much noise on the pine needles as he could, without being able to catch sight of the man's face. "Excuse me, are you all right?" The unresponsive silence dismayed him so much that it took more effort to step forward than to force his way through the bushes.

Twigs scraped his skin, the touch of dank leaves on his face made him shiver. Twigs hindered him as he gasped and struggled backward out of the thicket, which felt all at once like a trap. He hadn't seen the body of the figure, only its face grinning at him, the eyes bulging like sap. He hadn't time before he recoiled to be sure, and couldn't make himself go back to determine, that the carved face bore a distorted, almost mocking resemblance to his own.

He ran stumbling along the road, which gave out after a few hundred yards. He peered wildly into the depths of the trees until they seemed to step forward, then he fled back past the figure in the thicket, past the filling station where the figure on the wall was still moving, onto the yellow path. Why him? he thought distractedly, over and over. Why not the schoolboys, the teacher, the coach driver, the hack writers, the publishers, the booksellers, the bookseller who'd given him back the study of English forests with the comment, "I thought this would be different from his other mystical rubbish"? If only Threlfall had that book now, with its maps of walks! But it was in the van, wherever that was.

He had to stay on the yellow path, it was the only one he knew. There must be a junction he'd missed, there must be a route that didn't lead back to the hut and the tortured faces and, presumably, their torturer. The trees or the darkness between them closed in, urging him faster along the path, yet he felt as if he were still in the darkening thicket, not running, not moving at all. He'd mistaken several trees or roots beside the path for marker posts or figures waiting for him when a crumpled piece of paper came scraping toward him around a bend, along the path.

He couldn't have said what made him pick it up: certainly not tidiness—perhaps that it seemed infinitely more human than anything else in the woods. He unfolded it and stared, for the moment past comprehending. It was a map, a tracing of the carved map of the walks. It seemed a vicious joke, since he couldn't locate himself on it in order to find his way. He was preparing dully to throw it away when he rounded the bend and started, seeing where the map had come from. A man was leaning on a stick at the side of the path.

He had a long brown weathered face that hardly moved, a twisted nose, large ears. Threlfall stumbled up to him and handed him the map while he struggled to be able to ask the way, to speak. The man took the paper and displayed it to him, his cracked brown thumb tapping the paper to show where they were, then tracing a route: right here, left, turn back on yourself? He handed it back to Threlfall, nodding stiffly, having spoken not a word.

Something about his eyes made Threlfall mutter a hasty thanks and hurry away—something about the way the man was supported by the stick. The route seemed more like the solution to a puzzle, and Threlfall wasn't even

sure that he remembered it correctly as the dark welled between the trees, the wind snatched at the map until the paper tore, a croaking in the trees behind him began to sound like words as it came closer, first "Give that here" and then, almost at his back, "Look at me." That was the last thing he would do; he couldn't even have looked back at the man with the twisted nose once he'd realised how alike in appearance the stick and the man's weathered skin had been. Here was a junction where he could see no coloured markers, and he had no idea which way to go. A wind took him unawares and carried the map away down one path, and a last instinct made him flee along the other, up a slope that seemed to be growing steeper, actually tilting, as he caught sight of the road beyond it, and his van. He almost dropped his keys as he reached the van, almost lost them again as he locked himself in. As he started the engine he thought that something like sticks clambered swiftly onto the road beside the carved map, croaking.

All the same, as soon as he was out of the woods he stopped the van. The bookshops he was supposed to fit in today would have to wait until tomorrow. He unlocked the back of the van and rummaged through the cartons, where eventually he found the book on English forests, published posthumously, he saw now. It said little about the woods he had escaped except that they weren't worth visiting; perhaps the author had felt that to say more might attract the curious. Threlfall closed the cartons and locked the back of the van and slipped the book into his pocket, then he let out the deep breath he'd had to take before turning to the photograph of the author. This was one book he wouldn't see destroyed, that he would always keep. He climbed into the driving seat and drove away, still seeing the photograph he'd already known was there: the long weathered face, the large ears, the twisted nose.

Old Clothes

"*Old Clothes* was an attempt to develop the notion of apports. I'm as loath as Lovecraft ever was to use stale occult ideas, but I think this one let me have some fun."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Alone With The Horrors*

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"Come on, lad, let's be having you," Charlie shouted, and let the back of the van down with a clatter that sent pigeons flying from the cracked roadway. "Anyone'd think it were Fort Knox."

"Don't call me lad," Eric muttered, shoving all his weight against the door of the house. The July sunlight on his shoulders felt like a weight too, but the door didn't budge, not until Charlie stumped along the weedy path and threw his weight against the door. It cracked, then stuttered inwards, crumpling bills and final reminders and circulars and advertising newspapers, which trailed along the greyish hall towards the ragged staircase. "Go on, lad," Charlie urged. "What are you waiting for?"

"Christmas. Christmas, and the fairy to come off the tree and give me a million pounds." Eric was waiting for his eyes to adjust, that was all. Specks of light, dust that had found sunlight, rose above the stairs, but the house seemed darker than it ought to be.

Charlie gave him a push. "Don't be going to sleep, lad. Time enough for a rest when we've cleared the house."

I'm forty years old, Eric snarled inside himself, and I don't like being pushed. "Try finding someone else who'll put up with you," he muttered as Charlie threw open the first door. "We'll start in here," Charlie said.

The room didn't look as if it had been cleaned for months. Plants with grey fur wilted in pots; cobwebs hung beneath the round table, draped the lopsided chairs. Nevertheless, someone had been in the house since the old lady had died, for the drawers of a bureau had been pulled out, spilling letters. Charlie stuffed the letters into the drawers. "Take the chairs," he said over his shoulder. "You can manage them."

Eric resented being made to feel he'd said he couldn't. By the time he'd finished shifting the chairs, he was wearing grey gloves and a wig. Charlie stared at him as if he'd made a stupid joke. "Give us a hand with the table," he growled.

They had to dance back and forth along the hall and up and down the stairs. As they manhandled the table into the sunlight, Eric thought he glimpsed a pattern round the edge, of pairs of hands or the prints of hands. "Get a move on, lad," Charlie panted, glancing at the darkening sky.

The old lady's relatives must have kicked the papers along the hall, Eric decided as he stooped to a wad of letters that had been wedged behind the bureau. They were thank-you letters, one from a woman who lived a few streets away from Eric: thank you for putting me in touch with my father; thank you, said another, for my wife, for my son... "Never mind prying," Charlie said. "I don't care if she's dead, some things are private."

They were starting on the dining room—spiders fled when Charlie lifted the fat tablecloth—before Eric realised what the letters meant. "What was she, anyway? You never said."

"You never bloody asked, lad. What difference does it make? One of them spiritists, if it's any of your business."

Perhaps it offended him, or maybe he felt that it should, as Eric's father had after Eric's mother died. Eric remembered his father on his knees in church and at bedtime, praying for a sign. They were both dead now, but he'd never felt tempted to contact them, had never been interested in that kind of thing. All the same, he couldn't help peering into each room as he followed Charlie, couldn't help feeling like an intruder as they stripped the beds and unbolted the frames. Venturing into her bedroom, he almost expected to see her or her shape made of dust in the bed. He flinched when something moved, scraping, behind him. It was a raincoat hanging on the door.

The sky was darker when they carried out the bed. By the time they took out the wardrobe, the sky was black. The downpour began as they were about to clear the attic, and so they sat in the cab of the van and ate the sandwiches Charlie's wife had made. She always made half for Eric since she'd taken pity on him, though Charlie gave him less than half. They drank coffee from Charlie's flask, too sweet for Eric's taste, and then Charlie said "Can't wait all day. Back to work."

The grey road looked like a river of tar now, jumping with rain. Charlie shrugged into his plastic raincoat; too bad for Eric if he hadn't brought one. Swallowing the words he would have liked to say, Eric ran out of the cab and into the house. Hall and rooms were squirming with large vague shadows of rain; he thought of the ectoplasm mediums were supposed to ooze, but he grabbed the raincoat from the hook on the bedroom door.

A few shakes and the dust almost blinded him. At least the coat was wearable. He fumbled in the pockets to make sure they were empty. A hint of clamminess in the sleeves made him shiver, but it had gone by the time he'd buttoned the coat on the man's side. Charlie watched him from the bedroom doorway with a kind of dull contempt. "My God, what do you look like."

Eric didn't care, or so he told himself. They cleared the attic. Then he slammed the door of the house. For a moment he thought he heard movement inside; it must be the papers flapping. Charlie was already starting the van, and he had to run.

Charlie left him in the drizzle while he drove along the coast to sell the vanload of furniture and ornaments. Eric strolled around town, reading job advertisements that always asked for people younger or more qualified than he was; then he climbed the streets above the factories that nobody wanted to rent, to his flat.

He reached in the right-hand pocket of the raincoat without thinking. Of course his key wasn't in there, but neither was the pocket empty, though the object was only a flower, easy enough to overlook. Nevertheless, he'd never seen a flower like it, especially one looking so fresh when it must have been in the pocket for weeks. He found an old glass and stood the flower in water.

Later he bought chips in the next street and fried himself an egg; then he tried to watch a film about Hawaii through the snow on the television Charlie had given him from one of the houses. Exhausted by the day's work, he was in bed before it was dark. He saw handprints dancing around a table, heard his parents calling to each other, almost saw a shape with arms that could reach around the world. Once he thought he heard metal jingling further down the room he lived and ate and slept in.

The morning was colder. He waited for Charlie to ring the shaky bell and watched newspapers chasing along the back alleys, birds darting out of the

steep slate roofs. He changed the water in the glass on the mantelpiece—the flower was already drooping—then he decided to wait downstairs in case the bell had stopped working. He opened the door of his flat, and metal jingled among the coats on the hook.

He'd hung the borrowed raincoat on top. In the left-hand pocket he found two tarnished coins of a kind he'd never seen before. On an impulse he put one in his mouth and bit timidly. The metal was soft to his teeth.

He was gazing at the bite-mark when Charlie rang the bell. He hid the coins under the glass on the mantelpiece and searched the pockets twice to make sure they were empty; then, abruptly, his mind a tangle of half-formed thoughts—Long John Silver, nothing up my sleeve—he buttoned himself into the raincoat. He didn't want to leave it when he could take it with him. Charlie looked as if he mightn't even let him in the van. "Slept in it, did you?" he said in disgust. "I'm having my doubts about you."

"I thought it'd keep the dust off."

"No dust where we're going." Nor was there, neither in the house they were clearing nor the one to which the young couple were moving. The wife fussed around them all day, telling them to be careful and not to put that there, and Eric seldom had a chance to feel in the raincoat pockets. There was never anything. Soon he felt more like a stooge than ever, especially when he realised that somehow he'd managed to button the coat on the wrong side, though he remembered buttoning it properly. No wonder the husband avoided looking at him.

Eric half expected the flower and the coins to have vanished: he'd remembered his mother reading him a bedtime story about fairy gold. No, the coins were still there, and the wilting flower. He hung up the coat and tried not to watch it, then made himself go out to the Weights & Scales for a drink. An hour of listening to people decades younger than he complaining about unemployment and immigrants and governments and prophesying the football match up the hill next Saturday, and he went home. The pockets were empty, and so, when he slept, were his dreams.

As soon as he got up, he rummaged in the pockets. Still empty. Much more groping in the old material and he would be finding holes. He put the coat on, out of defiance to Charlie if nothing else, and plunged his hands into the pockets so as to look uncaring as he waited on the doorstep. The right-hand pocket contained a diamond as big as his thumbnail.

He ran upstairs and hid the diamond under his pillow. He ran down, then back up, and hid the coins next to the diamond. The van was just drawing up. Charlie gave him a look that made words superfluous, and took his time in handing over Eric's wages, which were supposed to include Eric's cut from the sale of the contents of the cleared house. The cut seemed smaller than it ought to be. Remembering the diamond, he didn't care. Charlie stared at him when he unbuttoned the raincoat to stow the money in his shirt, but he didn't want to put anything in those pockets in case it might be spirited away.

The diamond made him careless, and so did the old lady whose house they were clearing. "That's not mine," she kept crying as they lifted furniture. "Someone's trying to play a trick on me. Don't bother taking it, I won't have it in my house." They carried on doggedly, hoping her son would arrive soon, and Eric almost dropped a tea-chest full of crockery for reaching in his pocket when he thought he felt it move, and kept on reaching in there for something that would make the day worthwhile. The son, a middle-aged man with pinched eyes and a woeful mouth, arrived as they started on the bedrooms, and calmed his mother down as best he could while they brought down a wardrobe. "Where have you been? I thought you were never coming," she cried as Eric hurried back to the house, missing a step when something rattled in his pocket. It was a pearl necklace. "That's mine. Look at him," the old lady screeched, "you've brought a thief into my house."

"I don't think that's one of yours, Mummy."

"It is, it is. You all want to rob me."

Before Eric could think what to say, Charlie snatched the necklace. "So that's what you've been up to with your bloody silly coat. I ought to give you your cards right now." He handed the necklace to the old lady. "Of course it's yours, ma'am. Please accept my apologies. I've never had anything like this happen before in thirty-eight years of removals."

"Go on then, give me my cards." Eric was sure there must be plenty more where the necklace had come from. "Don't you be making out I'm a thief. You're a thief."

"Watch your tongue, lad, or I'll knock you down." Charlie nodded fiercely at the son as if to tell him to be angry. "And he will, too."

"Don't call me lad. I'm not a lad, I'm forty, and I'm not a thief—you are. You steal my money you get from selling stuff I carried. And he steals my sandwiches," he told the old lady, thinking that should show her—she was a mother, after all.

"Who said anything about sandwiches? You'll get no sandwiches from me. I wouldn't make you a cup of tea," she screeched, "except to pour it over your head."

Eric had had enough. "See how much you can shift by yourself," he told Charlie. "And when you get tired, Muscles here can help you."

He strode home, feeling as if all he'd said was a burden he'd thrown off, leaving him lighter, almost capable of flying. He didn't need Charlie or his cards, he didn't need anyone. The coat would keep him, however it worked —he didn't need to know how. He restrained himself from searching the pockets until he arrived home, in case it mightn't work in the open. But when he'd closed himself in, he found they were empty.

He hung the coat on the door and went out to the Nosebag Café for a pie and chips. When he returned to find the coat empty, he put it on. For a while he watched television so as not to keep reaching in the pockets; then he switched off the set and kept counting one to a hundred with his arms folded. Eventually he dozed and almost saw the face of the shape with arms or hands that could reach around the world, that were reaching into his pockets or out of them. Once he awoke with his hands in his pockets, and snatched them out in a panic.

In the morning he found a stone the size of the palm of his hand, a smooth stone that glittered and looked precious. As soon as he was dressed, he bought the cheapest newspaper to wrap the coins and jewel and stone individually before placing them in a supermarket bag. That left one sheet of newspaper, which he folded around the dead flower.

He clutched the bag to him in both hands all the way to the museum: there were too many thieves about these days. He wouldn't let the girl behind the desk at the museum see what he had; the fewer people who knew, the better. He waited for the top man and occasionally felt in his pockets.

He refused to open the bag until he was in the curator's office. The first item that came to hand was the flower. He didn't expect it to be worth anything; he just wanted to know what it was, while he anticipated learning

how wealthy he was. But the curator frowned at the flower, then at Eric. "Where did you get this?"

"An old lady gave it to me. She didn't know what it was."

"And where did she get it? You can't say? I thought not." The curator picked up the phone on his desk. "She ought to know it's a protected species."

Eric gripped the bag and prepared to flee if the curator was calling the police. Instead he called some doctor to find out if any flowers had been taken from a garden, flowers with a long name that included Himalayas. None had, nor apparently had any other garden been robbed, and he put down the receiver. "What else have you in there?"

"Nothing. I've brought the wrong things." Eric tried not to back away too conspicuously. "I'll have to come back," he lied, and managed not to run until he was out of the museum.

He wandered the thirsty streets. Football fans looking for pubs or mischief elbowed him out of the way. He wasn't sure if he wanted to hide the contents of the bag at home or dump them in the nearest bin. He couldn't take them to be valued until he knew where they'd come from, and how was he to find that out? He was beginning to hate the damned coat; it had made a fool of him, had nearly got him arrested. He'd begun to grow furious, trying to unbutton it and fumbling helplessly, when he remembered the address on the letter he'd seen in the medium's house. At once he made for the hill.

An old lady opened the door of the terraced house and rubbed her eyes as if she had been asleep or weeping. She glanced sharply at his raincoat, then shook her head at herself. "I don't want anything today," she mumbled, starting to close the door.

"I've lost my parents." He couldn't just ask if she knew about the coat. "Someone said you could help me."

"I don't go in for that anymore." Nevertheless, she stood back for him. "You do look lost. Come in if you want to talk."

He didn't, not about his parents: even using them to trick his way in had made him feel guilty. As soon as he was seated in the parlour, which smelled of old furniture and lavender, he said "Why did you give it up?"

She stared, then understood. "The lady who used to put me in touch died herself."

"Was she a good medium? Did they bring her things?"

He thought he'd been too direct, for she stiffened. "That's what killed her, I think."

His hands recoiled from the pockets, where they had been resting. "What, being brought things?"

"Apports, they're called. Them, aye, and growing old." She shivered. "One of her guides was evil, that's what she didn't know."

He gaped at her, out of his depth. "He brought her flowers and treasures until he got to be her favourite," she said. "Then he started bringing other things until she was afraid to hold séances at all, but that didn't stop him. He started putting them in her bed when she was asleep."

Eric was on his feet before he knew it, and struggling to unbutton the coat until he realised that he meant to leave it in her house. She didn't deserve that or the contents of the supermarket bag. "I've got to go now," he stammered, and collided with furniture and doors on his way out of the house.

Football fans came crowding up the hill towards the football ground, singing and shouting and throwing empty beer cans. He went with them, since he didn't know where best to go. He couldn't be sure that the old lady's story had anything to do with the coat, with whatever brought him presents. Nevertheless, when something in the right-hand pocket bumped against him, he found he couldn't swallow.

He wanted desperately to stand still, to prepare himself, if he could, to find out what was there, but the crowd crammed into the narrow streets shoved him onward, wouldn't let him out of its midst. He scarcely had room to reach down to the pocket; he wished he could use that as an excuse not to find out, but he couldn't bear not knowing what was scraping against him with every step. Nor could he simply reach in. His fingers ranged shakily and timidly over the outside of the pocket to trace the shape within.

It felt like a cross. It must be; he could trace the chain it would hang from. He slipped his hand into the pocket and grabbed the chain before he could flinch, managed to raise it to eye level. Yes, it was a cross, a silver cross, and he'd never felt so relieved in his life; the old lady's tale couldn't have

anything to do with him. He dangled the cross into the supermarket bag and lifted his hand to his mouth, for a splinter from somewhere had lodged in his finger. As he pulled out the splinter with his teeth, he noticed that his hand smelled of earth.

He had just realised that the cross was very like the one his father had always worn when he realised there was something in the left-hand pocket too.

He closed his eyes and plunged his hand in, to get it over with. His fingertips flinched from touching something cold, touched it again and discovered it was round, somewhat crusted or at least not smooth, a bulge on it smoother, less metallic. A stone in a ring, he thought, and took it out, sighing. It was the ring his mother had worn to her grave.

Something else was rolling about in the pocket—something which, he realised, choking, had slipped out of the ring. He snatched it out and flung it away blindly, crying out with horror and fury and grief. Those nearest him in the crowd glanced at him, warning him not to go berserk while he was next to them; otherwise the crowd took no notice of him as it drove him helplessly uphill.

He tore at the buttons and then at the coat. The material wouldn't tear; the buttons might have been sewn through buttonholes too small for them, they were so immovable. He felt as if he were going mad, as if the whole indifferent crowd were too—this nightmare of a crowd that wasn't slowing even now that it had come in sight of the football ground and the rest of itself. His hands were clenched on the supermarket bag at the level of his chest so as not to stray near his pockets, in which he thought he felt objects crawling. He was pleading, almost sobbing, first silently and then aloud, telling his parents he was sorry, he would never have stolen from them, he would pray for them if they wanted, even though he had never believed... Then he closed his eyes tight as the crowd struggled with itself, squeezed his eyes shut until they ached, for something was struggling in his pocket, feebly and softly. He couldn't bear it without screaming, and if he screamed in the midst of the crowd, he would know he was mad. He looked down.

It was a hand, a man's hand. A man had his hand in Eric's pocket, a scrawny youth who blinked at Eric as though to say the hand was nothing to do with him. He'd been trying to pick Eric's pocket, which had closed around his wrist just as the holes had closed around the buttons. "My God,"

Eric cried between screaming and laughter, "if you want it that badly, you can have it," and all at once the buttonholes were loose and the coat slipped off his arms, and he was fighting sideways out of the crowd.

He looked back once, then fought free of the crowd and stumbled uphill beyond the streets, towards the heath. Perhaps up there he would know whether to go to Charlie for his cards or his job. At last he realised he was still holding his mother's ring. He slipped it into his safest pocket and forced himself not to look back. Perhaps someone would notice how wild the pickpocket's eyes were growing; perhaps they might help him. In any case, perhaps it had only been the press of the crowd that had been giving him trouble as he struggled with the coat, one hand in the pocket, the other in the sleeve. Perhaps Eric hadn't really seen the sleeve worming, inching. He knew he'd seen the youth struggling to put on the coat, but he couldn't be sure that he'd seen it helping itself on.

1984

The Revelations Of Glaaki

"A 'new' quotation from Campbell's mythical book of occult lore."—Stefan Dziemianowicz, *The Core Of Ramsey Campbell*

"One of the central features of the Cthulhu Mythos, and one of fans' favourite features of it, is the shelf of fictitious grimoires that figure prominently in tale after tale. [...] First we present brand-new scriptural texts from the possessed penmen themselves [including] Ramsey Campbell with a hitherto-unknown fragment of *The Revelations of Glaaki*."—Robert M. Price, foreword to *Crypt Of Cthulhu, #23*

"Like most other writers who have ventured to add to Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, I also invented esoteric volumes to which references could be made. One, The Revelations of Glaaki, was written by members of a cult under the inspiration of the god they worshipped; it was subsequently published in an edition from which many of the more unconventional passages had been cut, now a very rare volume."—Ramsey Campbell, foreword to *The Inhabitant Of The Lake And Other Less Welcome Tenants*

First published in *Crypt of Cthulhu, #23 St. John's Eve*, 1984

"Who has heard the songs of the dead? Who has seen the ropes of faces that gather in the sky on *that* night of the year? Who has shared the dreams of the eye that watches our speck of cosmic dust and is seen by all yet remarked by none? Not the thousand Gothic hacks with their Cerberus novels, that guard nothing but the enemies of mankind; for as these hollow men disseminate their dummy terrors, so They beyond the rim grow unspeakably stronger for our ignorance—so Their grasp roots deeper in our secret souls..."

Apples

Written in: 1984
First published in *Halloween Horrors*, 1986
Also published in: *Dark Feasts*, *Alone With The Horrors*

We wanted to be scared on Halloween, but not like that. We never meant anything to happen to Andrew. We only wanted him not to be so useless and show us he could do something he was scared of doing. I know I was scared the night I went to the allotments when Mr Grey was still alive.

We used to watch him from Colin's window in the tenements, me and Andrew and Colin and Colin's little sister Jill. Sometimes he worked in his allotment until midnight, my mum once said. The big lamps on the paths through the estate made his face look like a big white candle with a long nose that was melting. Jill kept shouting "Mr Toad" and shutting the window quick, but he never looked up. Only he must have known it was us and that's why he said we took his apples when kids from the other end of the estate did really.

He took our mums and dads to see how they'd broken his hedge because he'd locked his gate. "If Harry says he didn't do it, then he didn't," my dad went and Colin's, who was a wrestler, went "If I find out who's been up to no good they'll be walking funny for a while." But Andrew's mum only went "I just hope you weren't mixed up in this, Andrew." His dad and mum were like that, they were teachers and tried to make him friends at our school they taught at, boys who didn't like getting dirty and always had combs and handkerchiefs. So then whenever we were cycling round the paths by the allotments and Mr Grey saw us he said things like "There are the children who can't keep their hands off other people's property" to anyone who was passing. So one night Colin pinched four apples off his tree, and then it was my turn.

I had to wait for a night my mum sent me to the shop. The woman isn't supposed to sell kids cigarettes, but she does because she knows my mum. I came back past the allotments, and when I got to Mr Grey's I ducked down behind the hedge. The lamps that were supposed to stop people being

mugged turned everything grey in the allotments and made Mr Grey's windows look as if they had metal shutters on. I could hear my heart jumping. I went to where the hedge was low and climbed over. He'd put broken glass under the hedge. I managed to land on tiptoe in between the bits of glass. I hated him then, and I didn't even bother taking apples from where he mightn't notice, I just pulled some off and threw them over the hedge for the worms to eat. We wouldn't have eaten them, all his apples tasted old and bitter. I gave my mum her cigarettes and went up to Colin's and told Andrew "Your turn next."

He started hugging himself. "I can't. My parents might know."

"They said we were stealing, as good as said it," Jill went. "They probably thought you were. My dad said he'd pull their heads off and stick them you-know-where if he thought that's what they meant about us."

"You've got to go," Colin went. "Harry went and he's not even eleven. Go now if you like, before my mum and dad come back from the pub."

Andrew might have thought Colin meant to make him, because he started shaking and going "No I won't," and then there was a stain on the front of his trousers. "Look at the baby weeing himself," Colin and Jill went.

I felt sorry for him. "Maybe he doesn't feel well. He can go another night."

"I'll go if he won't," Jill went.

"You wouldn't let a girl go, would you?" Colin went to Andrew, but then their mum and dad came back. Andrew ran upstairs and Colin went to Jill "You really would have gone too, wouldn't you?"

"I'm still going." She was so cross she went red. "I'm just as brave as you two, braver." And we couldn't stop her the next night, when her mum was watching Jill's dad at work being the Hooded Gouger.

I thought she'd be safe. There'd been a storm in the night and the wind could have blown down the apples. But I was scared when I saw how small she looked down there on the path under the lamps, and I'd never noticed how long it took to walk to the allotments, all that way she might have to run back. Her shadow kept disappearing as if something was squashing it and then it jumped in front of her. We couldn't see in Mr Grey's windows for the lamps.

When she squatted down behind Mr Grey's hedge, Andrew went "Looks like she's been taken short" to try to sound like us, but Colin just glared at him. She threw her coat on the broken glass, then she got over the hedge and ran to the tree. The branches were too high for her. "Leave it," Colin went, but she couldn't have heard him, because she started climbing. She was halfway up when Mr Grey came out of his house.

He'd got a pair of garden shears. He grinned when he saw Jill, because even all that far away we could see his teeth. He ran round to where the hedge was low. He couldn't really run, it was like a fat old white dog trying, but there wasn't anywhere else for Jill to climb the hedge. Colin ran out, and I was going to open the window and shout at Mr Grey when he climbed over the hedge to get Jill.

He was clicking the shears. I could see the blades flash. Andrew wet himself and ran upstairs, and I couldn't open the window or even move. Jill jumped off the tree and hurt her ankles, and when she tried to get away from him she was nearly as slow as he was. But she ran to the gate and tried to climb it, only it fell over. Mr Grey ran after her waving the shears when she tried to crawl away, and then he grabbed his chest like they do in films when they're shot, and fell into the hedge.

Colin ran to Jill and brought her back, and all that time Mr Grey didn't move. Jill was shaking but she never cried, only shouted through the window at Mr Grey. "That'll teach you," she shouted, even when Colin went "I think he's dead." We were glad until we remembered Jill's coat was down there on the glass.

I went down though my chest was hurting. Mr Grey was leaning over the hedge with his hands hanging down as if he was trying to reach the shears that had fallen standing up in the earth. His eyes were open with the lamps in them and looking straight at Jill's coat. He looked as if he'd gone bad somehow, as if he'd go all out of shape if you poked him. I grabbed Jill's coat, and just then the hedge creaked and he leaned forward as if he was trying to reach me. I ran away and didn't look back, because I was sure that even though he was leaning further his head was up so he could keep watching me.

I didn't sleep much that night and I don't think the others did. I kept getting up to see if he'd moved, because I kept thinking he was creeping up on the tenements. He was always still in the hedge, until I fell asleep, and when I

looked again he wasn't there. The ambulance must have taken him away, but I couldn't get to sleep for thinking I could hear him on the stairs.

Next night my mum and dad were talking about how some woman found him dead in the hedge and the police went into his house. My mum said the police found a whole bedroom full of rotten fruit, and some books in his room about kids. Maybe he didn't like kids because he was afraid what he might do to them, she said, but that was all she'd say.

Colin and me dared each other to look in his windows and Jill went too. All we could see was rooms with nothing in them now except sunlight making them look dusty. I could smell rotten fruit, and I kept thinking Mr Grey was going to open one of the doors and show us his face gone bad. We went to see how many apples were left on his tree, only we didn't go in the allotment because when I looked at the house I saw a patch on one of the windows as if someone had wiped it clean to watch us. Jill said it hadn't been there before we'd gone to the hedge. We stayed away after that, and every night when I looked out of my room the patch was like a white face watching from his window.

Then someone else moved into his house and by the time the clocks went back and it got dark an hour earlier, we'd forgotten about Mr Grey, at least Colin and Jill and me had. It was nearly Halloween and then a week to Guy Fawkes Night. Colin was going to get some zombie videos to watch on Halloween because his mum and dad would be at the wrestling, but then Andrew's mum found out. Andrew came and told us he was having a Hallowe'en party instead. "If you don't come there won't be anyone," he went.

"All right, we'll come," Colin went, but Jill went "Andrew's just too scared to watch the zombies. I expect they make him think of Mr Toad. He's scared of Mr Toad even now he's dead."

Andrew got red and stamped his foot. "You wait," he went.

The day before Halloween, I saw him hanging round near Mr Grey's allotment when it was getting dark. He turned away when I saw him, pretending he wasn't there. Later I heard him go upstairs slowly as if he was carrying something, and I nearly ran out to catch him and make him go red.

I watched telly until my mum told me to go to bed three times. Andrew always went to bed as soon as his mum came home from night school. I

went to draw my curtains and I saw someone in Mr Grey's allotment, bending down under the apple tree as if he was looking for something. He was bending down so far I thought he was digging his face in the earth. When he got up his face looked too white under the lamps, except for his mouth that was messy and black. I pulled the curtains and jumped into bed in case he saw me, but I think he was looking at Andrew's window.

Next day at school Andrew bought Colin and Jill and me sweets. He must have been making sure we went to his party. "Where'd you get all that money?" Jill wanted to know.

"Mummy gave it to me to buy apples," Andrew went and started looking round as if he was scared someone could hear him.

He wouldn't walk home past Mr Grey's. He didn't know I wasn't going very near after what I'd seen in the allotment. He went the long way round behind the tenements. I got worried when I didn't hear him come in and I went down in case some big kids had done him. He was hiding under the bonfire we'd all built behind the tenements for Guy Fawkes Night. He wouldn't tell me who he was hiding from. He nearly screamed when I looked in at him in the tunnel he'd made under there.

"Don't go if you don't want to," my mum went because I took so long over my tea. "I better had," I went, but I waited until Andrew came to find out if we were ever going, then we all went up together. It wasn't his party we minded so much as his mum and dad telling us what to do.

The first thing his dad said when we went in was "Wipe your feet," though we hadn't come from outside. It was only him there, because Andrew's mum was going to come back soon so he could go to a meeting. Then he started talking in the kind of voice teachers put on just before the holidays to make you forget they're teachers. "I expect your friends would like a Halloween treat," he went and got some baked potatoes out of the oven, but only Andrew had much. I'd just eaten and besides the smell of apples kept getting into the taste of the potatoes and making me feel funny.

There were apples hanging from a rope across the room and floating in a washing-up bowl full of water on some towels on the floor. "If that's the best your friends can do with my Hallowe'en cuisine I think it's about time for games," Andrew's dad went and took our plates away, grousing like a school dinner lady. When he came back, Andrew went "Please may you tie my hands."

"I don't know about that, son." But Andrew gave him a handkerchief to tie them and looked as if he was going to cry, so his dad went "Hold them out, then."

"No, behind my back."

"I don't think your mother would permit that." Then he must have seen how Andrew wanted to be brave in front of us, so he made a face and tied them. "I hope your friends have handkerchiefs too," he went.

He tied our hands behind our backs, wrinkling his nose at Jill's handkerchief, and we let him for Andrew's sake. "Now the point of the game is to bring down an apple by biting it," he went, as if we couldn't see why the apples were hanging up. Only I wished he wouldn't go on about it because talking about them seemed to make the smell stronger.

Jill couldn't quite reach. When he held her up she kept bumping the apple with her nose and said a bad word when the apple came back and hit her. He put her down then quick and Colin had a go. His mouth was almost as big as one of the apples, and he took a bite first time, then he spat it out on the floor. "What on earth do you think you're doing? Would you do that at home?" Andrew's dad shouted, back to being a teacher again, and went to get a dustpan and a mop. "Where did you get them apples?" Colin went to Andrew. Andrew looked at him to beg him not to ask in front of his dad, and we all knew. I remembered noticing there weren't any apples on Mr Grey's tree anymore. We could see Andrew was trying to show us he wasn't scared, only he had to wait until his mum or dad was there. When his dad finished clearing up after Colin, Andrew went "Let's have duck-apples now."

He knelt down by the bowl of water and leaned his head in. He kept his face in the water so long I thought he was looking at something and his dad went to him in case he couldn't get up. He pulled his face out spluttering and I went next, though I didn't like how nervous he looked now.

I wished I hadn't. The water smelled stale and tasted worse. Whenever I tried to pick up an apple with just my mouth without biting into it, it sank and then bobbed up, and I couldn't see it properly. I didn't like not being able to see the bottom of the bowl. I had another go at an apple so I could get away, but Andrew's dad or someone must have stood over me, because the water got darker and I thought the apple bobbing up was bigger than my head and looking at me. I felt as if someone was holding my head down in

the water and I couldn't breathe. I tried to knock the bowl over and spilled a bit of water on the towels. Andrew's dad hauled me out of the bowl as if I was a dog. "I think we'll dispense with the duck-apples," he went, and then the doorbell rang.

"That must be your mother without her keys again," he told Andrew, sounding relieved. "Just don't touch anything until one of us is here." He went down and we heard the door slam and then someone coming up. It wasn't him, the footsteps were too slow and loud. I kept tasting the appley water and feeling I was going to be sick. The footsteps took so long I thought I wouldn't be able to look when they came in. The door opened and Jill screamed, because there was someone wearing a dirty sheet and a skull for a face. "It's only Mummy," Andrew went, laughing at Jill for being scared. "She said she might dress up."

Just then the doorbell rang again and made us all jump. Andrew's mum closed the door of the flat as if the bell wasn't even ringing. "It must be children," Andrew went, looking proud of himself because he was talking for his mother. Jill was mad at him for laughing at her. "I want to duck for apples," she went, even though the smell was stronger and rottener. "I didn't have a go."

Andrew's mum nodded and went round making sure our hands were tied properly, then she pushed Jill to the bowl without taking her hands from under the sheet. Jill looked at her to tell her she didn't care if she wanted to pretend that much, Jill wasn't scared. The bell rang again for a long time but we all ignored it. Jill bent over the bowl and Andrew's mum leaned over her. The way she was leaning I thought she was going to hold Jill down, except Jill dodged out of the way. "There's something in there," she went.

"There's only apples," Andrew went. "I didn't think you'd be scared." Jill looked as if she'd have hit him if she'd been able to get her hands from behind her back. "I want to try the apples hanging up again," she went. "I didn't have a proper go."

She went under the rope and tried to jump high enough to get an apple, and then something tapped on the window. She nearly fell down, and even Colin looked scared. I know I was, because I thought someone had climbed up to the third floor to knock on the window. I thought Mr Grey had. But Andrew grinned at us because his mum was there and went "It's just those children again throwing stones."

His mum picked Jill up and Jill got the apple first time. She bit into it just as more stones hit the window, and then we heard Andrew's dad shouting outside. "It's me, Andrew. Let me in. Some damn fool locked me out when I went down."

Jill made a noise as if she was trying to scream. She'd spat out the apple and goggled at it on the floor. Something was squirming in it. I couldn't move and Colin couldn't either, because Andrew's mum's hands had come out from under the sheet to hold Jill. Only they were white and dirty, and they didn't look like any woman's hands. They didn't look much like hands at all.

Then both the arms came worming out from under the sheet to hold Jill so she couldn't move any more than Colin and me could, and the head started shaking to get the mask off. I'd have done anything rather than see underneath, the arms looked melted enough. All we could hear was the rubber mask creaking and something flopping round inside it, and the drip on the carpet from Andrew wetting himself. But suddenly Andrew squeaked, the best he could do for talking. "You leave her alone. She didn't take your apples, I did. You come and get me."

The mask slipped as if him under the sheet was putting his head on one side, then the arms dropped Jill and reached out for Andrew. Andrew ran to the door and we saw he'd got his hands free. He ran onto the stairs going "Come on, you fat old toad, try and catch me."

Him under the sheet went after him and we heard them running down, Andrew's footsteps and the others that sounded bare and squelchy. Me and Colin ran to Jill when we could move to see if she was all right apart from being sick on the carpet. When I saw she was, I ran down fast so that I wouldn't think about it, to find Andrew. I heard his dad shouting at him behind the tenements. "Did you do this? What's got into you?" Andrew had got matches from somewhere and set light to the bonfire. His dad didn't see anything else, but I did, a sheet and something jumping about inside it, under all that fire. Andrew must have crawled through the tunnel he'd made but him in the sheet had got stuck. I watched the sheet flopping about when the flames got to it, then it stopped moving when the tunnel caved in on it. "Come upstairs, I want a few words with you," Andrew's dad went, pulling him by the ear. But when we got in the building he let go and just gaped, because Andrew's hair had gone dead white.

1985

Beyond Words

Written In: 1985
First published in *Night Visions 3*, 1986

Liverpool's dying of slogans, Ward thinks. Several thousand city council workers are marching through the littered streets under placards and banners and neon signs, Top Man, Burger King, Wimpy Hamburgers, Cascade Amusements. Songs that sound like a primer of bad English blare from shops under failing neon that turns words into gibberish. The chants of the marchers and the chattering of signs lodge in Ward's skull, crushing fragments of the story he's trying to complete. He dodges between stalls that have sprung up in Church Street, hawking cheap clothes and toys and towels imprinted like miraculous shrouds with a pop star's face, and into the optician's.

"So you're a writer, Mr. Smith. I don't get many of those in my chair." The optician's round smooth face is a little too large for the rest of him; Ward's reminded of a lifesize seaside photograph with a hole to stick your face through. "You must need eyes in your job. We'll just have these off," the optician says, and deftly removes Ward's spectacles.

Just a few words may be all that he needs, a solution hidden deep in his mind, but the slippery idea seems more distant than ever. Ward imagines the unwritten words turning red, the bank manager frowning and shaking his head, and is terrified that the resolution of the story may be gone forever—terrified of losing the ability to write now that Tina is soon to quit her job to bear their child. He's straining his mind desperately when the optician fits a pair of medievally heavy glassless spectacles on his nose and slides an eye-patch in front of his left eye, a lens before the other.

As the eye chart lurches into focus, its letters glaring blackly out of the backlit rectangle, Ward reads it all at once, instantly. The words seem a solution to everything, to problems which have yet to arise as well as those he's grappling with. Then he sees that they aren't words at all; what's sounding in his inner ear is the rhythm of the letters, the way he thought

their groups should sound. He sets about pronouncing the letters, down to the bottom line that's almost as small as his handwriting.

"Well, Mr. Smith, you'll be glad to hear you don't need new glasses." Seeing that Ward isn't entirely, the optician continues, "I should see your doctor about your headaches or give yourself a holiday from writing."

If I go away the writing comes too, Ward thinks, shivering in the April sunlight at the bus stop. A windblown polystyrene tray squeals along the stained pavement like a nail on slate. The ghost of a giant spinal column fades from the rumbling sky, a fat woman trots delicately past him—a ball trying to grow into a ballerina, Ward thinks, fighting off the crowd of images that clamour to be caught in words. A bus carries him through Toxteth, where youths with bricks are besieging a police station, and into Allerton, shops growing smaller under signs like samples of typefaces. In Penny Lane, where Ward lives, a coachload of Beatles fans is chattering in Japanese as he lets himself into the house. He runs up the stairs, whose well is smaller than its echoes pretend, and into the flat overlooking the school.

Tina's lying on the sheepskin rug. Her hands are splayed on the bare floor, her red hair seems to stream across the boards from her pale delicate face. Her four months' pregnancy bulks above her in the flowered mound of her maternity smock. "How are you?" Ward says.

"We're both fine. Listen." She clasps his head gently while he rests one ear against her belly. He thinks the heartbeat he's hearing is his own, racing in an elusively familiar rhythm. "How are you?" Tina murmurs.

"Just eyestrain, he said."

"You shouldn't write so small. No good saving paper if you end up losing your vision. Even I couldn't read that last story."

"Guards against plagiarism," Ward says, then smiles. "You know I don't mean you. We're collaborators. That's our first collaboration swimming round in there."

"I'm glad we'll be together."

She means at the birth, and perhaps she's referring to the way she feels excluded from his work. He can't see how to share a process that takes place in his head and on the blank page. "Publishers called, by the way," she says as if reminded. "It's all written down."

It isn't Ward's publisher. He doesn't recognise the name, not that many people seem to know his or that of his publisher. He calls and finds he's reached a new house. "When can we meet for lunch?" Kendle Holmes demands heartily. "I've a proposition to put to you."

"I could come down to London tomorrow?" Ward asks Tina, who nods.

"I'll see you here at one," Holmes says, and tells him where.

Anxious to round off his story so as to be ready for whatever Holmes may propose, Ward heads for the library. In the story a writer haunts libraries in search of comments readers scribble in his books. He begins to find the same handwriting in the margins of every copy wherever he goes, comments addressed more and more directly to him. He becomes obsessed with catching the culprit, but what happens when he does? Nothing Ward can think of that he finds worth writing. When schoolchildren crowd into the library, disarraying his thoughts and the already jumbled shelves of books, he gives up wandering the aisles in a vague vain quest for his own work and walks home as the shops light up the streets.

Tina's lying on the bed in the main room, a computer manual propped against her belly. Ward makes omelettes in the small not quite upright kitchen before she goes to work. Later he listens to the radio, wincing at abuses of language; he can never shrug off the proliferation of solecisms until he's composed a letter of protest in an attic of his mind, even though he never commits it to paper. He's still listening in the dark when Tina comes home, too tired to make love.

In the morning he goes to London, so early that he's a hundred miles from Liverpool before he feels awake. Trees, irrepressibly green, pirouette intricately in the fields while he listens to the rhythm of the wheels, muffled by the vacuum within the panes. Fitting words to the rhythm might lessen his awareness of the sound and let him think what the writer has to confront in the library, but all he can make of the rhythm is WHAT THE WORDS ARE WHAT THE WORDS ARE WHAT THE WORDS ARE? The rhythm seems almost familiar, but he can't tell what's missing, any more than he can put an ending to his story.

Dozens of black cabs pile down the ramp below Euston; Ward thinks of a coal chute. One carries him up into the sunlit maze of traffic, past pavements laden with pedestrians and words. It's his first experience of London, and the rifeness of streets overwhelms him; so does the cost of the

ride. By the time he reaches Greek Court, where Hercules Books have their office, his ears are throbbing rhythmically.

As soon as Ward announces himself to the brisk young woman behind the glossy white horseshoe desk, Holmes strides out of his office like someone who's been waiting impatiently for the doors of a lift to open. He's thinner than he sounded on the phone, and dressed in a green suit. When he sways forward to give Ward a darting handshake Ward thinks of a sapling, bowing.

He sweeps Ward round the corner, into an Italian restaurant where he orders drinks and conveys Ward's order for lunch to the waiter. "Now are you going to be the next Tolkien?"

Ward's at a loss for words. "Well..."

"Of course you aren't. You're the first Ward Smith, the voice of modern British fantasy. That's what the public will say when they've heard of you, and I'm saying it now."

"That's very kind."

"Not kind at all. It's true." Holmes blinks his bright blue eyes twice and rubs his long smooth chin. "I really like your one about the scriptwriter who's haunted by the character he created, can't get rid of him because he's forgotten where he got the name from."

"Gnikomson."

"Right, the Swedish detective. I love the ending when the writer's going to light his first cigarette in years until he sees the No Smoking sign reflected in the train window. 'And then, of course, Gnikomson stood on his head and vanished.' How did that collection of yours do?"

"Pretty well for a book of short stories, they tell me," Ward tells him, shaking his head.

"I take it your wife works too."

"Until she has our baby."

"Good, good, but dear, dear. And will Clarion Press have something else by you out by then?"

"I'm just trying to finish a story to round off another book," Ward says, shaking his head again as if that may dislodge the throbbing.

Holmes rubs his chin as if it's a magic lamp. "Sounds to me as if they aren't looking after you as you deserve to be looked after. If they haven't commissioned you to write a novel yet, I'd like to."

The rhythm in Ward's ears is becoming entangled in his thoughts. "Tell me what to write, you mean?"

"Have you a novel in mind yourself?"

"I've been thinking about one off and on." Ward doesn't mean to shout, but he has to speak up to be sure of what he's saying. "I had the notion of a story from two viewpoints, only really you're always reading the opposite viewpoint from the one you think you are. You'd realise that when you notice wrong words cropping up in each one, and then the whole meaning of the story would change completely."

Holmes gazes at him to make sure he's finished. "Sounds fascinating. A bit obscure for a first novel, don't you think? We want to put your name in as many heads as possible. I think a writer who's as much in love with words as you are has a trilogy in him. Say a trilogy about magic, the power of words. Say a professor of languages who finds he's a magician and he's needed to save humanity. Does that get you thinking?"

Ward's backing into himself, he finds the attempt to shape his ideas so threatening. "I don't know if the people at Clarion Press would want me to write for someone else."

"If you feel they've earned your loyalty that much you mustn't let me come between you. Take a look at how they're doing in the shops before you go home." Holmes changes the subject, so abruptly that Ward feels as if it has been snatched from beneath him. As they part after lunch, Holmes says, "Think about what I said, if you like, and let me know if you change your mind."

Ward feels vulnerable again at once. The prospect of writing someone else's idea seems threateningly meaningless, as meaningless as the cadence that's repeating itself over and over in his ear, like a distant muffled voice he's never heard yet feels he ought to recognise. It's between him and the world. He goes looking for his book in Charing Cross Road, to bring the world closer.

The first two shops sell second-hand books only. The dusty ranks of forgotten names, books like so many decaying untended gravestones,

dismay him. He heads for Foyle's, the bright spines, the outstanding embossed titles. But the subdued cover of his book isn't there, nor in any other bookshop. "Whispers and Titters," he mutters fiercely over the murmur in his ears, as if pronouncing the title will make it appear on the shelves.

He hasn't time to visit Clarion Press. He jogs to Euston so as to save money, then tries to phone Clarion before he's stopped panting, but there's no reply beyond the sound that has lodged in his ear. On the train he tries to doze, and eventually the song of the wheels lulls him: whispers and titterings, whispering titterings, waspishly tittering, waspishly whispering... But when he lurches awake as the Liverpool suburbs speed by, the cadence he's been carrying with him fills his ears like water, and he feels as if he's drowning.

Tina's waiting for him, beaming expectantly over the spread of her computer manuals on the dining-table. "How did it go? Was it worthwhile?"

"I can't tell you yet. I mean, I don't know." He feels as if he won't know anything until his ears are clear. He can't even taste the chilli con carne she has waiting for him. Nor can he make love; his sensations are on the other side of the noise in his ears, and feel as if they belong to someone else. Floppy's a disk, not an impotent dick, his mind chants in time with the noise.

He can't sleep for more than a few minutes. Whenever he jerks awake he thinks an intruder is in the room, stooping at him in the dark and muttering. He holds himself still; it takes very little to wake Tina just now. For hours he feels as if the day will never come, as if he'll never see the doctor.

"Tinnitus," the doctor says.

Ward has waited over an hour to see him, but at once he's glad he has: there's a word for what he's suffering, and that must mean an answer, a cure. "What causes it?" Ward says eagerly.

"Deafness, possibly. You don't suffer from deafness? Catarrh, then, or wax in the ears." When he fails to find either he measures Ward's blood pressure, and frowns. "Of course there are cases where it doesn't seem to be a symptom of anything else."

"I'm one of those, am I? What can we do?"

"To be blunt, nothing except hope it goes away eventually."

"But I make my living as a writer," Ward pleads. "How can I work like this?"

"Many tinnitus sufferers have to cope with more difficult jobs." The doctor lets his face soften. "If you find you aren't able to sleep, sufferers often leave a radio playing."

Ward buys a pair of headphones, whose price dismays him. As he lets himself into the flat he's dreading Tina's sympathy, her sense of being unable to help him. He avoided telling her that he was seeing the doctor, in the hope that he'd come home cured. When he tells her why he bought the headphones she takes his hands, but even this contact seems to be taking place in the distance beyond the incessant noise. "Is there anything I can do?" she murmurs.

"Not unless you can get inside my head."

"I wish I could, believe me."

He dons the headphones and lies on the bed while she works at the table. He can tell by the way her hands creep up the sides of her face that she hears the headphones squeaking. His only chance of ignoring the tinnitus, however momentarily, is to turn the radio up loud enough to blot it out.

He has to grow used to it, he tells himself as he lies sleeplessly beside Tina. People adjust to living next to motorways or near airports. People cope with tinnitus, the doctor said so. Yet being one of many doesn't make it any easier for Ward: in fact, he thinks he might have coped better if it were unique to him, instead of something that can afflict anyone, randomly and meaninglessly. Whenever he turns up the volume minutely on the radio, seeking to fill his head with late-night chatter, Tina stirs beside him.

When the night's darkest, exhaustion overtakes him. A silence between radio programs wakens him. For a few seconds he's alone with the noise in his ears, and as he hangs between sleeping and waking, he hears precisely what it has been trying to say, sees the glowing letters whose message has grown blurred with so much repetition. The simplicity and profundity of the message, such a secret contained in so few words, make him feel large as the night, immensely meaningful, utterly peaceful. Before he knows it, his peace turns back into sleep. He doesn't waken until daylight probes the room. He can't remember a word of the secret he heard in the dark.

His ears continue mumbling when he pulls off the headphones. The message is still there if only he can clarify it to himself. As soon as Tina leaves for the office, glancing anxiously at him as if she feels her sympathy hasn't reached him, he begins to write. He writes every phrase he can think of that fits the rhythm of the mumbling. At first he writes only phrases that mean something to him, then he makes himself relax and scribbles anything that comes to mind, scribbling larger so as not to strain his eyes. Before lunchtime he has to go out for more exercise books.

When he hears Tina's key in the lock he slaps the latest book shut and stows the pile under the bed, his head aching with the notion that he was about to stumble on the message. She wouldn't have noticed; she rushes straight to the bathroom. He strokes her head and murmurs consolingly and tries to feel the emotions he's enacting. "Don't worry about me," he mutters when she's able to ask how he is. All he wants to hear now is the mumbling.

But he has to sleep. In the darkest hours he gives up trying to hear words, only to find as he reaches to turn on the radio that Tina's still awake. "Sorry," he whispers. "Go to sleep."

"I'm trying."

"I'm not much use to you, am I?"

"I love you all the same."

"I'm serious." He pulls off the headphones and props himself against the pillow, which feels no softer than the rest of reality. "You're going to need more support than I can give you while I'm like this. Do you think you ought to move in with your folks for a while? Then you'd be able to sleep as you should."

"Would that make life easier for you?"

"It might."

"I'll call them in the morning."

He can't interpret her tone, out there beyond the tinnitus. He'll leave the radio alone and put up with a sleepless night on her behalf. Whenever he drifts toward sleep he feels close to distinguishing the words. Every time he jerks awake before he can grasp them, and realises that Tina's still awake beside him.

In the morning, when she calls her parents, her eyes are red and moist: from sleeplessness, he assumes. He collects the mail from the downstairs hall—two bills and a letter from Clarion Press. Tina's arranging to go to her parents after work as he tears open the letter. The tinnitus seems to lurch closer as he reads the photocopied paragraphs. Clarion Press has been declared bankrupt. Not only have they ceased publishing, but even the unsold copies of his book are in the hands of the receiver.

Tina blinks at the letter as if she's not sure how she feels about it. "What do you want me to do now?" she murmurs.

"What you were going to do. What else?"

"I thought you might be glad of my support, that's all. I thought you were."

"Yes," Ward says with all the conviction he can muster. He hugs her tight, willing her to leave so that he may be able to think. Everything she says now distracts him—everything she says is pulled into the shape of the tinnitus. "I'll call you," he says as he walks her to the bus, "I'll come and see you," but he thinks she can sense his imminent overwhelming relief.

He sits at the table and tries to think. Hercules Books Are The Answer For You, his mind throbs; children chanting tables in the school seem to be chanting it too. He has no chance of finding another job to support himself and Tina, not with the clamour in his ears; he can't imagine even coping with interviews. But there's still Hercules Books, still Holmes' proposal of a trilogy, and if Ward can finish the library story there will be a collection for Holmes to publish while Ward tries to work on the novels. He carries the phone as far from the chanting as the cord will stretch.

"Hercules Books? Kendle Holmes, if he's there. Sorry, speak up, I can't make out a word. Ward Smith is speaking. He asked me to call."

The rhythm's deafening. It has invaded his speech. Even if he gets through to Holmes, he won't be able to hear him. They have to meet face to face. "Coming to town now. I won't expect lunch," he shouts, and replaces the receiver gently as if that may make up for his hysteria. But when he carries the phone back to its dark square beside the bed, he finds that at some point he has pulled the plug out of the wall.

It mustn't matter. He can only go. He gathers the typescripts of all the stories he's completed for the book and stuffs them into a Safeway bag. A

bus carries him through charred streets to a train that's leaving for London in five minutes. He should be there just after lunch.

He tries to doze, rocked by the train. A slowing wakens him. The chattering arable landscape is winding down; it stops outside his window. Apart from the odd timid lurch of a few feet, the train makes no further move for almost two hours.

He avoids looking at the stoical pensioners opposite him, who appear to be chanting even though their lips are pinched shut, and leafs through his typescripts. "Phosphorescent Montmorency," "Cave Maria"—the titles he worked so hard to frame no longer convey anything to him, and he can't read more than a few words of the stories. A few pages of computer printout have strayed into the pile, and the stories mean as little to him. He shoves the pile into the bag and shrinks into himself, away from the wordless clamour, the senseless framing of landscape.

At last the train jerks forward, speeds to Euston. A huge voice explains the delay as Ward runs along the platform, but even that voice can't reach him. He mustn't take a taxi, he still has time to run. Euston Road, Tottenham Court Road, Charing Cross Road—he dashes past miles of signs, hugging himself to squeeze the spikiness out of his armpits. Hordes of books and commuters and vehicles jumble by, and give way to Greek Court. Ward dodges out of the crowd, taking the uproar with him, and shoulders his way into Hercules Books.

The receptionist in the melamine horseshoe mouths at him, but he hears a different rhythm. "Sorry I'm late, but my train was held up," Ward shouts. "Ward Smith, the writer. I'm here to see Holmes."

He stands his ground when she steps round the horseshoe, shaking her head and pointing at her watch. Suddenly he darts past her and flings open the door of the inner office. Holmes is alone, leaning back in his chair, reading a manuscript piled on his desk. He looks more surprised than pleased to see Ward. "Kendle, it's me," Ward says, trying not to bellow. "I've got something for you."

He hands Holmes the Safeway bag, waits while he frowns over the contents. "You'll publish these, won't you, while I compose. A fantasy trilogy, that's what you said. About time I extended myself."

When Holmes looks up, Ward hardly needs him to speak, his eyes say so much. "I can write your novels. Give me a chance," Ward pleads.

Holmes speaks then, though inaudibly to Ward. He points at the manuscript he's been reading. Surely nobody could have written a trilogy so swiftly, but perhaps he's claiming that the manuscript or the writer can be developed. A sense of meaninglessness more profound than anything he's experienced hitherto spreads through Ward, so profound that it feels like relief. He can do nothing for anyone, and nobody can need him as he is now. He swings round dizzily and heads for the streets, feeling as if he may fly.

The thought of Tina slows him. He should call her, not least to explain that Kendle Holmes will presumably be returning the typescripts, which she's welcome to sell on her own behalf if she can. He huddles in the nearest phone booth as the hordes of books surrounding him decay imperceptibly, as the commuters and the traffic do, dust of the future. All the sounds around him are decaying too, merging into a single rhythm. If anyone answers the phone he won't even know whose voice it is, let alone what she's saying.

He makes for Euston through the evening streets, the dwindling crowds. He's glad he knows his way there, doesn't have to try and read the street names. But going to Tina will only make the situation harder for them both. On the way to Euston he repeats her parents' number over and over to himself. Thank heaven it fits the rhythm. At Euston he dials it, then counts to ten. "I'm not coming back," he says. "Blame me, not yourself. All my money is yours, all my manuscripts too. Look after the baby. I love..." He can't say he loves her, it doesn't fit the rhythm. Perhaps emotions don't. He repeats everything he's just said, then he makes for the ticket windows.

Scotland is farthest and sparsest, he thinks. Tinnitus booms in his ears and his brain. Signs all around him are chanting the chant. He must get beyond signs, the unbearable clamour, unstable changing of signs. Ten hours to Inverness, farthest of all—details he learned for an unwritten tale. Night wipes out England, the train races in. The fluorescent cradle rocks him to sleep.

Dawn is in Inverness, lighting the signs. Ward leaves the town just as fast as he can. Opticians' shops make him falter, then run. He heads for the mountains beyond the firth, for the unpeopled roads and peaks, for the comfort of names in no language he knows.

Winds and rain slash him, mists isolate him. Food he finds growing, and sometimes in bins. He no longer remembers his life or his name, he no longer washes or cares how he smells. His body is something that carries him on; he is only the chant. What remains of his voice chants it constantly now. Perhaps he is chanting words that he can't hear. Perhaps he must walk until he's understood. Should he welcome that prospect or shrink from it fearfully? The rhythm must go on, must go on, must go on,

The Other Side

"*The Other Side* was an attempt to equal the surrealism of J. K. Potter's picture on which it was based. The last thing I wanted to do was end the story with his image, since the combination would have had much the same effect as the infamous *Weird Tales* illustration that gave away one of Lovecraft's best endings."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Alone With The Horrors*

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When Bowring saw where the fire engines were heading, he thought at first it was the school. "They've done it, the young swine," he groaned, craning out of his high window, clutching the cold dewy sill. Then flames burst from an upper window of the abandoned tenement a mile away across the river, reddening the low clouds. That would be one less place for them to take their drugs and do whatever else they got up to when they thought nobody was watching. "Bow-wow's watching, and don't you forget it," he muttered with a grin that let the night air twinge his teeth, and then he realised how he could.

A taste of mothballs caught at the back of his throat as he took the binoculars from the wardrobe where they hung among his suits. The lenses pulled the streets across the river towards him, cut-out terraces bunched together closely as layers of wallpaper. The tenement reared up, a coaly silhouette flaring red, from the steep bank below them. Figures were converging to watch, but he could see nobody fleeing. He let the binoculars stray upwards to the flames, which seemed calming as a fireside, too silent and distant to trouble him. Then his face stiffened. Above the flames and the jets of water red as blood, a figure was peering down.

Bowring twisted the focusing-screw in a vain attempt to get rid of the blur of heat, to clear his mind of what he thought he was seeing. The figure must be trapped, crying for help and jumping as the floor beneath its feet grew hotter, yet it appeared to be prancing with delight, waving its hands gleefully, grinning like a clown. To believe that was to lose control, he told himself fiercely. A jet of water fought back the flames below the window he was staring at, and he saw that the window was empty.

Perhaps it always had been. If anyone had been crying for help, the firemen must have responded by now. Among the spectators he saw half a dozen of his pupils sharing cigarettes. He felt in control again at once. He'd be having words with them tomorrow.

In the morning he drove ten miles to the bridge, ten miles back along the far bank. The school was surrounded by disorder, wallpaper flapping beyond broken windows, houses barricaded with cardboard against casual missiles, cars stranded without wheels and rusting in streets where nothing moved except flocks of litter. Ash from last night's fire settled on his car like an essence of the grubby streets. In the midst of the chaos, the long low ruddy school still looked as it must have a hundred years ago. That felt like a promise of order to him.

He was writing a problem in calculus on the blackboard when those of his class who'd come to school today piled into the classroom, jostling and swearing, accompanied by smells of tobacco and cheap perfume. He swung round, gown whirling, and the noise dwindled sullenly. Two minutes' slamming of folding seats, and then they were sitting at their desks, which were too small for some of them. Bowring hooked his thumbs in the shoulders of his gown. "Which of you were at the fire last night?" he said in a voice that barely reached the back of the room.

Twenty-three faces stared dully at him, twenty-three heads of the monster he had to struggle with every working day. There was nothing to distinguish those he'd seen last night across the river, not a spark of truth. "I know several of you were," he said, letting his gaze linger on the six. "I suggest you tell your friends after class that I may have my eye on you even when you think nobody's watching."

They stared, challenging him to identify them, and waited until dark to answer him with a scrawl of white paint across the ruined tenement. FUCK OFF BOW WOW, the message said. The binoculars shook until he controlled himself. He was damned if he'd let them reach him in his home, his refuge from all they represented. Tomorrow he'd deal with them, on his patch of their territory. He moved the binoculars to see what he'd glimpsed as they veered.

A figure was standing by the tenement, under one of the few surviving streetlamps. The mercury-vapour glare made its face look white as a clown's, though at first he couldn't see the face; the long hands that

appeared to be gloved whitely were covering it while the shoulders heaved as if miming rage. Then the figure flung its hands away from its face and began to prance wildly, waving its fists above its spiky hair. It was then that Bowring knew it was the figure he'd seen above the flames.

It must be some lunatic, someone unable to cope with life over there. Suddenly the mercury-vapour stage was bare, and Bowring resisted scanning the dark: whatever the figure was up to had nothing to do with him. He was inclined to ignore the graffiti too, except that next morning when he turned from the blackboard several of his class began to titter. He felt his face stiffen, grow pale with rage. That provoked more titters, the nervous kind he'd been told you heard at horror films. "Very well," he murmured, "since you're all aware what I want to hear, we'll have complete silence until the culprit speaks up."

"But sir, I don't know—" Clint began, pulling at his earlobe where he'd been forbidden to wear a ring in school, and Bowring rounded on him. "Complete silence," Bowring hissed in a voice he could barely hear himself.

He strolled up and down the aisles, sat at his desk when he wanted to outstare them. Their resentment felt like an imminent storm. Just let one of them protest to his face! Bowring wouldn't lay a finger on them—they wouldn't lose him his pension that way—but he'd have them barred from his class. He was tempted to keep them all in after school, except that he'd had enough of the lot of them.

"Wait until you're told to go," he said when the final bell shrilled. He felt unwilling to relinquish his control of them, to let them spill out of his room in search of mischief, sex, drugs, violence, their everyday lives; for moments that seemed disconcertingly prolonged, he felt as if he couldn't let go. "Perhaps on Monday we can get on with some work, if you haven't forgotten what that's like. Now you may go," he said softly, daring them to give tongue to the resentment he saw in all their eyes.

They didn't, not then. He drove across the bridge to be greeted by the scent of pine, of the trees the April sunlight was gilding. Hours later he lay in his reclining chair, lulled by a gin and tonic, by Debussy on the radio. Halfway through the third movement of the quartet, the phone rang. "Yes?" Bowring demanded.

"Mr Bowring?"

"Yes?"

"Mr Bowring the teacher?"

"This is he."

"It's he," the voice said aside, and there was a chorus of sniggers. At once Bowring knew what the voice would say, and so it did: "Fuck off, Bow-wow, you—"

He slammed the phone down before he could hear more, and caught sight of himself in the mirror, white-faced, teeth bared, eyes bulging. "It's all right," he murmured to his mother in the photograph on the mantelpiece below the mirror. But it wasn't: now they'd found him, they could disarray his home life any time they felt like it; he no longer had a refuge. Who had it been on the phone? One of the boys with men's voices, Darren or Gary or Lee. He was trying to decide which when it rang again. No, they wouldn't get through to him. Over the years he'd seen colleagues on the teaching staff break down, but that wouldn't happen to him. The phone rang five times in the next hour before, presumably, they gave up. Since his mother's death he'd only kept the phone in case the school needed to contact him.

Sunlight woke him in the morning, streaming from behind his house and glaring back from the river. The sight of figures at the charred tenement took him and his binoculars to the window. But they weren't any of his pupils, they were a demolition crew. Soon the tenement puffed like a fungus, hesitated, then collapsed. Only a rumble like distant thunder and a microscopic clink of bricks reached him. The crowd of bystanders dispersed, and even the demolition crew drove away before the dust had finished settling. Bowring alone saw the figure that pranced out of the ruins.

At first he thought its face was white with dust. It sidled about in front of the jagged foundations, pumping its hips and pretending to stick an invisible needle in its arm, and then Bowring saw that the face wasn't covered with dust; it was made up like a clown's. That and the mime looked doubly incongruous because of the plain suit the man was wearing. Perhaps all this was some kind of street theatre, some anarchist nonsense of the kind that tried to make the world a stage for its slogans, yet Bowring had a sudden disconcerting impression that the mime was meant just for him. He blocked the idea from his mind—it felt like a total loss of control—and turned his back on the window.

His morning routine calmed him, his clothes laid out on the sofa as his mother used to place them, his breakfast egg waiting on the moulded ledge in the door of the refrigerator, where he'd moved it last night from the egg box further in. That evening he attended a debate at the Conservative Club on law and order, and on Sunday he drove into the countryside to watch patterns of birds in the sky. By Sunday evening he hadn't given the far side of the river more than a casual glance for over twenty-four hours.

When he glimpsed movement, insectlike under the mercury lamp, he sat down to listen to Elgar. But he resented feeling as if he couldn't look; he'd enjoyed the view across the river ever since he'd moved across, enjoyed knowing it was separate from him. He took as much time as he could over carrying his binoculars to the window.

The clown was capering under the lamp, waving his fists exultantly above his head. His glee made Bowring nervous about discovering its cause. Nervousness swung the binoculars wide, and he saw Darren lying among the fallen bricks, clutching his head and writhing. At once the clown scampered off into the dark.

In the false perspective of the lenses Darren looked unreal, and Bowring felt a hint of guilty triumph. No doubt the boy had been taunting the clown; maybe now he'd had a bit of sense knocked into him. He watched the boy crawl out of the debris and stagger homewards, and was almost certain that it had been Darren's voice on the phone. He was even more convinced on Monday morning, by the way that all Darren's cronies sitting round the empty desk stared accusingly at him.

They needn't try to blame him for Darren's injury, however just it seemed. "If anyone has anything to say about any of your absent colleagues," he murmured, "I'm all ears." Of course they wouldn't speak to him face to face, he realised, not now they had his number. His face stiffened so much he could barely conduct the lesson, which they seemed even less eager to comprehend than usual. No doubt they were anticipating unemployment and the freedom to do mischief all day, every day. Their apathy made him feel he was drowning, fighting his way to a surface which perhaps no longer existed. When he drove home across the bridge, their sullen sunless sky came with him.

As soon as he was home he reached out to take the phone off the hook, until he grabbed his wrist with his other hand. This time he'd be ready for

them if they called. Halfway through his dinner of unfrozen cod, they did. He saw them before he heard them, three of them slithering down the steep slope to a phone box, miraculously intact, that stood near a riverside terrace that had escaped demolition. He dragged them towards him with the binoculars as they piled into the box.

They were three of his girls: Debbie, whom he'd seen holding hands with Darren—he didn't like to wonder what they got up to when nobody could see them—and Vanessa and Germaine. He watched Debbie as she dialled, and couldn't help starting as his phone rang. Then he grinned across the river at her. Let her do her worst to reach him.

He watched the girls grimace in the small lit box, shouting threats or insults or obscenities at the phone in Debbie's hand as if that would make him respond. "Shout all you like, you're not in my classroom now," he whispered, and then, without quite knowing why, he swung the binoculars away from them to survey the dark. As his vision swept along the top of the slope he saw movement, larger than he was expecting. A chunk of rubble half as high as a man was poised on the edge above the telephone box. Behind it, grinning stiffly, he saw the glimmering face of the clown. Bowring snatched up the receiver without thinking. "Look out! Get out!" he cried, so shrilly that his face stiffened with embarrassment. He heard Debbie sputter a shocked insult as the binoculars fastened shakily on the lit box, and then she dropped the receiver as Vanessa and Germaine, who must have seen the danger, fought to be first out of the trap. The box shook with their struggles, and Bowring yelled at them to be orderly, as if his voice might reach them through the dangling receiver. Then Vanessa wrenched herself free, and the others followed, almost falling headlong, as the rubble smashed one side of the box, filling the interior with knives of glass.

Maybe that would give them something to think about, but all the same, it was vandalism. Shouldn't Bowring call the police? Some instinct prevented him, perhaps his sense of wanting to preserve a distance between himself and what he'd seen. After all, the girls might have seen the culprit too, might even have recognised him.

But on Tuesday they were pretending that nothing had happened. Debbie's blank face challenged him to accuse her, to admit he'd been watching. Her whole stance challenged him, her long legs crossed, her linen skirt ending high on her bare thighs. How dare she sit like that in front of a man of his

age! She'd come to grief acting like that, but not from him. The day's problems squealed on the blackboard, the chalk snapped.

He drove home, his face stiff with resentment. He wished he hadn't picked up the phone, wished he'd left them at the mercy of the madman who, for all Bowring knew, had gone mad as a result of their kind of misbehaviour. As he swung the car onto the drive below his flat, a raw sunset throbbed in the gap where the tenement had been.

The sun went down. Lamps pricked the dark across the river. Tonight he wouldn't look, he told himself, but he couldn't put the other side out of his mind. He ate lamb chops to the strains of one of Rossini's pre-adolescent sonatas. Would there ever be prodigies like him again? Children now were nothing like they used to be. Bowring carried the radio to his chair beside the fire and couldn't help glancing across the river. Someone was loitering in front of the gap where the tenement had been.

He sat down, stood up furiously, grabbed the binoculars. It was Debbie, waiting under the mercury lamp. She wore a pale blue skirt now, and stockings. Her lipstick glinted. She reminded Bowring of a streetwalker in some film, that image of a woman standing under a lamp surrounded by darkness.

No doubt she was waiting for Darren. Women waiting under lamps often came to no good, especially if they were up to none. Bowring probed the dark with his binoculars, until his flattened gaze came to rest on a fragment of the tenement, a zigzag of wall as high as a man. Had something pale just dodged behind it?

Debbie was still under the lamp, hugging herself against the cold, glancing nervously over her shoulder, but not at the fragment of wall. Bowring turned the lenses back to the wall, and came face to face with the clown, who seemed to be grinning straight at him from his hiding-place. The sight froze Bowring, who could only cling shakily to the binoculars and watch as the white face dodged back and forth, popping out from opposite edges of the wall. Perhaps only a few seconds passed, but it seemed long as a nightmare before the clown leapt on the girl.

Bowring saw her thrown flat on the scorched ground, saw the clown stuff her mouth with a wad of litter, the grinning white face pressing into hers. When the clown pinned her wrists with one hand and began to tear at her clothes with the other, Bowring grabbed the phone. He called the police

station near the school and waited feverishly while the clown shied Debbie's clothes into the dark. "Rape. Taking place now, where the tenement was demolished," he gasped as soon as he heard a voice.

"Where are you speaking from, sir?"

"That doesn't matter. You're wasting time. Unless you catch this person in the act you may not be able to identify him. He's made up like a clown."

"What is your name, please, sir?"

"What the devil has my name to do with it? Just get to the crime, can't you! There, you see," Bowring cried, his voice out of control, "you're too late."

Somehow Debbie had struggled free and was limping naked towards the nearest houses. Bowring saw her look back in terror, then flee painfully across the rubble. But the clown wasn't following, he was merely waving the baggy crotch of his trousers at her. "I need your name before we're able to respond," the voice said brusquely in Bowring's ear, and Bowring dropped the receiver in his haste to break the connection. When he looked across the river again, both Debbie and the clown had gone.

Eventually he saw police cars cruising back and forth past the ruined tenement, policemen tramping from house to house. Bowring had switched off his light in order to watch and for fear that the police might notice him, try to involve him, make an issue of his having refused to name himself. He watched for hours as front door after front door opened to the police. He was growing more nervous, presumably in anticipation of the sight of the clown, prancing through a doorway or being dragged out by the police.

Rain came sweeping along the river, drenching the far bank. The last houses closed behind the police. A police car probed the area around the ruined tenement with its headlights, and then there was only rain and darkness and the few drowning streetlamps. Yet he felt as if he couldn't stop watching. His vision swam jerkily towards the charred gap, and the clown pranced out from behind the jagged wall.

How could the police have overlooked him? But there he was, capering beside the ruin. As Bowring leaned forward, clutching the binoculars, the clown reached behind the wall and produced an object which he brandished gleefully. He dropped it back into hiding just as Bowring saw that it was an axe. Then the clown minced into the lamplight.

For a moment Bowring thought that the clown's face was injured—distorted, certainly—until he realised that the rain was washing the makeup off. Why should that make him even more nervous? He couldn't see the face now, for the clown was putting his fists to his eyes. He seemed to be peering through his improvised binoculars straight at Bowring—and then, with a shock that stiffened his face, Bowring felt sure that he was. The next moment the clown turned his bare face up to the rain that streamed through the icy light.

Makeup began to whiten his lapels like droppings on a statue. The undisguised face gleamed in the rain. Bowring stared at the face that was appearing, then he muttered a denial to himself as he struggled to lower the binoculars, to let go his shivering grip on them, look away. Then the face across the river grinned straight at him, and his convulsion heaved him away from the window with a violence that meant to refute what he'd seen.

It couldn't be true. If it was, anything could be. He was hardly aware of lurching downstairs and into the sharp rain, binoculars thumping his chest. He fumbled his way into the car and sent it slewing towards the road, wipers scything at the rain. As trees crowded into the headlights, the piny smell made his head swim.

The struts of the bridge whirred by, dripping. Dark streets, broken lamps, decrepit streaming houses closed around him. He drove faster through the desertion, though he felt as if he'd given in to a loss of control: surely there would be nothing to see—perhaps there never had been. But when the car skidded across the mud beside the demolished tenement, the clown was waiting barefaced for him.

Bowring wrenched the car to a slithering halt and leapt out into the mud in front of the figure beneath the lamp. It was a mirror, he thought desperately: he was dreaming of a mirror. He felt the rain soak his clothes, slash his cheeks, trickle inside his collar. "What do you mean by this?" he yelled at the lamplit figure, and before he could think of what he was demanding "Who do you think you are?"

The figure lifted its hands towards its face, still whitewashed by the mercury lamp, then spread its hands towards Bowring. That was more than Bowring could bear, both the silence of the miming and what the gesture meant to say. His mind emptied as he lurched past the lamplight to the fragment of tenement wall.

When the figure didn't move to stop him, he thought the axe wouldn't be there. But it was. He snatched it up and turned on the other, who stepped towards him, out of the lamplight. Bowring lifted the axe defensively. Then he saw that the figure was gesturing towards itself, miming an invitation. Bowring's control broke, and he swung the axe towards the unbearable sight of the grinning face.

At the last moment, the figure jerked its head aside. The axe cut deep into its neck. There was no blood, only a bulging of what looked like new pale flesh from the wound. The figure staggered, then mimed the axe towards itself again. None of this could be happening, Bowring told himself wildly: it was too outrageous, it meant that anything could happen, it was the beginning of total chaos. His incredulity let him hack with the axe, again and again, his binoculars bruising his ribs. He hardly felt the blows he was dealing, and when he'd finished there was still no blood, only an enormous sprawl of torn cloth and chopped pink flesh whitened by the lamplight, restless with rain. Somehow the head had survived his onslaught, which had grown desperately haphazard. As Bowring stared appalled at it, the grinning face looked straight at him, and winked. Screaming under his breath, Bowring hacked it in half, then went on chopping, chopping, chopping.

When at last exhaustion stopped him he made to fling the axe into the ruins. Then he clutched it and reeled back to his car, losing his balance in the mud, almost falling into the midst of his butchery. He drove back to the bridge, his eyes bulging at the liquid dark, at the roads overflowing their banks, the fleets of derelict houses sailing by. As he crossed the bridge, he flung the axe into the river.

He twisted the key and groped blindly into his house, felt his way upstairs, peeled off his soaked clothes, lowered himself shakily into a hot bath. He felt exhausted, empty, but was unable to sleep. He couldn't really have crossed the river, he told himself over and over; he couldn't have done what he remembered doing, the memory that filled his mind, brighter than the streetlamp by the ruin. He stumbled naked to the window. Something pale lay beside the streetlamp, but he couldn't make it out; the rain had washed the lenses clean of the coating that would have let him see more in the dark. He sat there shivering until dawn, nodding occasionally, jerking awake with a cry. When the sunlight reached the other side, the binoculars showed him that the ground beside the lamp was bare.

He dragged on crumpled clothes, tried to eat breakfast but spat out the mouthful, fled to his car. He never set out so early, but today he wanted to be in his classroom as soon as he could, where he still had control. Rainbows winked at him from trees as he drove, and then the houses gaped at him. As yet the streets were almost deserted, and so he couldn't resist driving by the tenement before making for the school. He parked at the top of the slope, craned his neck as he stood shivering on the pavement, and then, more and more shakily and reluctantly, he picked his way down the slope. He'd seen movement in the ruin.

They must be young animals, he told himself as he slithered down. Rats, perhaps, or something else newborn—nothing else could be so pink or move so oddly. He slid down to the low jagged gappy wall. As he caught hold of the topmost bricks, which shifted under his hands, all the pink shapes amid the rubble raised their faces, his face, to him.

Some of the lumps of flesh had recognisable limbs, or at least portions of them. Some had none, no features at all except one or more of the grimacing faces, but all of them came swarming towards him as best they could. Bowring reeled, choked, flailed his hands, tried to grab at reality, wherever it was. He fell across the wall, twisting, face up. At once a hand with his face sprouting from its wrist scuttled up his body and closed its fingers, his fingers, about his throat.

Bowring cowered into himself, desperate to hide from the sensation of misshapen crawling all over his body, his faces swarming over him, onto his limbs, between his legs. There was no refuge. A convulsion shuddered through him, jerked his head up wildly. "My face," he shrieked in a choked whisper, and sank his teeth into the wrist of the hand that was choking him.

It had no bones to speak of. Apart from its bloodlessness, it tasted like raw meat. He shoved it into his mouth, stuffed the fingers in and then the head. As it went in it seemed to shrink, grow shapeless, though he felt his teeth close on its eyes. "My face," he spluttered, and reached for handfuls of the rest. But while he'd been occupied with chewing, the swarming had left his body. He was lying alone on the charred rubble.

They were still out there somewhere, he knew. He had to get them back inside himself, he mustn't leave them at large on this side of the river. This side was nothing to do with him. He swayed to his feet and saw the school. A grin stiffened his mouth. Of course, that was where they must be, under

the faces of his pupils, but not for long. The children couldn't really be as unlike him as they seemed; nothing could be that alien—that was how they'd almost fooled him. He made his way towards the school, grinning, and as he thought of pulling off those masks to find his face, he began to dance.

Second Sight

Written in: 1985
First published in *Masques II*, 1987
Also published in: *Waking Nightmares*

Key was waiting for Hester when his new flat first began to sound like home. The couple upstairs had gone out for a while, and they'd remembered to turn their television off. He paced through his rooms in the welcome silence, floorboards creaking faintly underfoot, and as the kitchen door swung shut behind him, he recognised the sound. For the first time the flat seemed genuinely warm, not just with central heating. But he was in the midst of making coffee when he wondered which home the flat sounded like.

The doorbell rang, softly since he'd muffled the sounding bowl. He went back through the living room, past the bookcases and shelves of records, and down the short hall to admit Hester. Her full lips brushed his cheek, her long eyelashes touched his eyelid like the promise of another kiss. "Sorry I'm late. Had to record the mayor," she murmured. "Are you about ready to roll?"

"I've just made coffee," he said, meaning yes.

"I'll get the tray."

"I can do it," he protested, immediately regretting his petulance. So this peevishness was what growing old was like. He felt both dismayed and amused by himself for snapping at Hester after she'd taken the trouble to come to his home to record him. "Take no notice of the old grouch," he muttered, and was rewarded with a touch of her long cool fingers on his lips.

He sat in the March sunlight that welled and clouded and welled again through the window, and reviewed the records he'd listened to this month, deplored the acoustic of the Brahms recordings, praised the clarity of the Tallis. Back at the radio station, Hester would illustrate his reviews with extracts from the records. "Another impeccable unscripted monologue," she said. "Are we going to the film theatre this week?"

"If you like. Yes, of course. Forgive me for not being more sociable," he said, reaching for an excuse. "Must be my second childhood creeping up on me."

"So long as it keeps you young."

He laughed at that and patted her hand, yet suddenly he was anxious for her to leave, so that he could think. Had he told himself the truth without meaning to? Surely that should gladden him: he'd had a happy childhood, he didn't need to think of the aftermath in that house. As soon as Hester drove away he hurried to the kitchen, closed the door again and again, listening intently. The more he listened, the less sure he was how much it sounded like a door in the house where he'd spent his childhood.

He crossed the kitchen, which he'd scrubbed and polished that morning, to the back door. As he unlocked it he thought he heard a dog scratching at it, but there was no dog outside. Wind swept across the muddy fields and through the creaking trees at the end of the short garden, bringing him scents of early spring and a faceful of rain. From the back door of his childhood home he'd been able to see the graveyard, but it hadn't bothered him then; he'd made up stories to scare his friends. Now the open fields were reassuring. The smell of damp wood that seeped into the kitchen must have to do with the weather. He locked the door and read Sherlock Holmes for a while, until his hands began to shake. Just tired, he told himself.

Soon the couple upstairs came home. Key heard them dump their purchases in their kitchen, then footsteps hurried to the television. In a minute they were chattering above the sounds of a gunfight in Abilene or Dodge City or at some corral, as if they weren't aware that spectators were expected to stay off the street or at least keep their voices down. At dinner time they sat down overhead to eat almost when Key did, and the double image of the sounds of cutlery made him feel as if he were in their kitchen as well as in his own. Perhaps theirs wouldn't smell furtively of damp wood under the linoleum.

After dinner he donned headphones and put a Bruckner symphony on the compact disc player. Mountainous shapes of music rose out of the dark. At the end he was ready for bed, and yet once there he couldn't sleep. The bedroom door had sounded suddenly very much more familiar. If it reminded him of the door of his old bedroom, what was wrong with that? The revival of memories was part of growing old. But his eyes opened

reluctantly and stared at the murk, for he'd realised that the layout of his rooms was the same as the ground floor of his childhood home.

It might have been odder if they were laid out differently. No wonder he'd felt vulnerable for years as a young man after he'd been so close to death. All the same, he found he was listening for sounds he would rather not hear, and so when he slept at last he dreamed of the day the war had come to him.

It had been early in the blitz, which had almost passed the town by. He'd been growing impatient with hiding under the stairs whenever the siren howled, with waiting for his call-up papers so that he could help fight the Nazis. That day he'd emerged from shelter as soon as the All Clear had begun to sound. He'd gone out of the back of the house and gazed at the clear blue sky, and he'd been engrossed in that peaceful clarity when the stray bomber had droned overhead and dropped a bomb that must have been meant for the shipyard up the river.

He'd seemed unable to move until the siren had shrieked belatedly. At the last moment he'd thrown himself flat, crushing his father's flowerbed, regretting that, even in the midst of his panic. The bomb had struck the graveyard. Key saw the graves heave up, heard the kitchen window shatter behind him. A tidal wave composed of earth and headstones and fragments of a coffin and whatever else had been upheaved rushed at him, blotting out the sky, the searing light. It took him a long time to struggle awake in his flat, longer to persuade himself that he wasn't still buried in the dream.

He spent the day in appraising records and waiting for Hester. He kept thinking he heard scratching at the back door, but perhaps that was static from the television upstairs, which sounded more distant today. Hester said she'd seen no animals near the flats, but she sniffed sharply as Key put on his coat. "I should tackle your landlord about the damp."

The film theatre, a converted warehouse near the shipyard, was showing Citizen Kane. The film had been made the year the bomb had fallen, and he'd been looking forward to seeing it then. Now, for the first time in his life, he felt that a film contained too much talk. He kept remembering the upheaval of the graveyard, eager to engulf him.

Then there was the aftermath. While his parents had been taking him to the hospital, a neighbour had boarded up the smashed window. Home again, Key had overheard his parents arguing about the window. Lying there

almost helplessly in bed, he'd realised they weren't sure where the wood that was nailed across the frame had come from.

Their neighbour had sworn it was left over from work he'd been doing in his house. The wood seemed new enough; the faint smell might be trickling in from the graveyard. All the same, Key had given a piano recital as soon as he could, so as to have money to buy a new pane. But even after the glass had been replaced the kitchen had persisted in smelling slyly of rotten wood.

Perhaps that had had to do with the upheaval of the graveyard, though that had been tidied up by then, but weren't there too many perhapses? The loquacity of Citizen Kane gave way at last to music. Key drank with Hester in the bar until closing time, and then he realised that he didn't want to be alone with his gathering memories. Inviting Hester into his flat for coffee only postponed them, but he couldn't expect more of her, not at his age.

"Look after yourself," she said at the door, holding his face in her cool hands and gazing at him. He could still taste her lips as she drove away. He didn't feel like going to bed until he was calmer. He poured himself a large Scotch.

The Debussy preludes might have calmed him, except that the headphones couldn't keep out the noise from upstairs. Planes zoomed, guns chattered, and then someone dropped a bomb. The explosion made Key shudder. He pulled off the headphones and threw away their tiny piano, and was about to storm upstairs to complain when he heard another sound. The kitchen door was opening.

Perhaps the impact of the bomb had jarred it, he thought distractedly. He went quickly to the door. He was reaching for the doorknob when the stench of rotten wood welled out at him, and he glimpsed the kitchen—his parents' kitchen, the replaced pane above the old stone sink, the cracked back door at which he thought he heard a scratching. He slammed the kitchen door, whose sound was inescapably familiar, and stumbled to his bed, the only refuge he could think of.

He lay trying to stop himself and his sense of reality from trembling. Now, when the television might have helped convince him where he was, someone upstairs had switched it off. He couldn't have seen what he'd thought he'd seen, he told himself. The smell and the scratching might be there, but what of it? Was he going to let himself slip back into the way he'd

felt after his return from hospital, terrified of venturing into a room in his own home, terrified of what might be waiting there for him? He needn't get up to prove that he wasn't, so long as he felt that he could. Nothing would happen while he lay there. That growing conviction allowed him eventually to fall asleep.

The sound of scratching woke him. He hadn't closed his bedroom door, he realised blurrily, and the kitchen door must have opened again, otherwise he wouldn't be able to hear the impatient clawing. He shoved himself angrily into a sitting position, as if his anger might send him to slam the doors before he had time to feel uneasy. Then his eyes opened gummily, and he froze, his breath sticking in his throat. He was in his bedroom—the one he hadn't seen for almost fifty years.

He gazed at it—at the low slanted ceiling, the unequal lengths of flowered curtain, the corner where the new wallpaper didn't quite cover the old—with a kind of paralysed awe, as if to breathe would make it vanish. The breathless silence was broken by the scratching, growing louder, more urgent. The thought of seeing whatever was making the sound terrified him, and he grabbed for the phone next to his bed. If he had company—Hester—surely the sight of the wrong room would go away. But there had been no phone in his old room, and there wasn't one now.

He shrank against the pillow, smothering with panic, then he threw himself forward. He'd refused to let himself be cowed all those years ago and by God, he wouldn't let himself be now. He strode across the bedroom, into the main room.

It was still his parents' house. Sagging chairs huddled around the fireplace. The crinkling ashes flared, and he glimpsed his face in the mirror above the mantel. He'd never seen himself so old. "Life in the old dog yet," he snarled, and flung open the kitchen door, stalked past the blackened range and the stone sink to confront the scratching.

The key that had always been in the back door seared his palm with its chill. He twisted it, and then his fingers stiffened, grew clumsy with fear. His awe had blotted out his memory, but now he remembered what he'd had to ignore until he and his parents had moved away after the war. The scratching wasn't at the door at all. It was behind him, under the floor.

He twisted the key so violently that the shaft snapped in half. He was trapped. He'd only heard the scratching all those years ago, but now he

would see what it was. The urgent clawing gave way to the sound of splintering wood. He made himself turn on his shivering legs, so that at least he wouldn't be seized from behind.

The worn linoleum had split like rotten fruit, a split as long as he was tall, from which broken planks bulged jaggedly. The stench of earth and rot rose toward him, and so did a dim shape—a hand, or just enough of one to hold together and beckon jerkily. "Come to us," whispered a voice from a mouth that sounded clogged with mud. "We've been waiting for you."

Key staggered forward, in the grip of the trance that had held him ever since he'd wakened. Then he flung himself aside, away from the yawning pit. If he had to die, it wouldn't be like this. He fled through the main room, almost tripping over a Braille novel, and dragged at the front door, lurched into the open. The night air seemed to shatter like ice into his face. A high sound filled his ears, speeding closer. He thought it was the siren, the All Clear. He was blind again, as he had been ever since the bomb had fallen. He didn't know it was a lorry until he stumbled into its path. In the moment before it struck him he was wishing that just once, while his sight was restored, he had seen Hester's face.

1986

Where The Heart Is

Written In: 1986
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I've just walked through your house. I lay on your bed and tried to see my wife's face looming over me, the way I used to. I spent longest in your baby's room, because that was where I began to die. Before I do, I want to tell you who I am and why I'm here, and so I'm writing this.

I'm at your dining-table now, but I won't be when you find me. You'll have found me, or you couldn't be reading this. There may not be much of me for you to recognise, so let me introduce myself again. I'm the man whose house you bought. This is my house, and you'll never get rid of me now.

I've nothing against you personally. It wasn't your fault that the two of you nearly destroyed my wife and me—you weren't to know what you were doing. I can't let that stop me, but at least I can tell you my reasons. The truth is, I never should have let you or anyone else into my house.

Maybe you remember coming to view it, in the rain. I was sitting in the front room, hearing the rain shake the windows and knowing it couldn't touch me. I was feeling peaceful and secure at last. As a matter of fact, I was wondering if the rain might be the last thing I ever heard, if I could sink into that peace where my wife must be, when your car drew up outside the house.

By the time you got out of your car and ran up the path, you were drenched. I may as well be honest: I took my time about answering the doorbell. Only I heard you saying you'd seen someone in the front room, and that made me feel discovered. So I took pity on you out there in the storm.

I don't suppose you noticed how I drew back as you came in. As you trod on the step I had the feeling that you meant the house to be yours. Did you realise you hung your wet coats as if it already was? Maybe you were too drenched to wait for me to tell you, but you made me feel redundant, out of place.

That's one reason why I didn't say much as I showed you over the house. I didn't think you would have listened anyway—you were too busy noticing cracks in the plaster and where damp had lifted the wallpaper and how some of the doors weren't quite straight in their frames. I really thought when we came downstairs that you'd decided against the house. Perhaps you saw how relieved I was. I wondered why you asked if you could be alone for a few minutes. I let you go upstairs by yourselves, though I must say I resented hearing you murmuring up there. And all I could do when you came down and said you were interested in the house was make my face go blank, to hide my shock.

You must have thought I was trying to get you to raise your offer, but it wasn't that at all. I was simply feeling less and less sure that I ought to leave the house where my wife and I had spent our marriage. I told you to get in touch with the estate agent, but that was really just a way of saving myself from having to refuse you outright. I should have told you about my wife. You knew I was selling because she'd died, and you'd made sympathetic noises and faces, but I should have told you that she'd died here in the house.

When you'd left I went upstairs and lay on the bed where she'd died. Sometimes when I lay there and closed my eyes to see her face, I could almost hear her speaking to me. I asked her what I ought to do about you, and I thought I heard her telling me not to let my feelings get the better of me, to think more and feel less, as she often used to say. I thought she was saying that I shouldn't let the house trap me, that so long as I took the bed with me we'd still be together. So I accepted your offer and signed the contract to sell you the house, and the moment I'd finished signing I felt as if I'd signed away my soul.

It was too late by then, or at least I thought it was. I'd already agreed to move out so that you could start the repairs and get your mortgage. When the removal van was loaded I walked through the house to make sure I hadn't left anything. The stripped rooms made me feel empty, homeless, as if my wife and I had never been there. Even the removal van felt more like home, and I sat on our couch in there as the van drove to my new flat.

I'd bought it with the insurance my wife had on herself, you remember. We'd always been equally insured. What with our bed and the rest of the furniture we'd chosen together being moved to the flat and her insurance

money buying it, she should been been there with me, shouldn't she? I thought so that first night when I turned off the lamp and lay in the bed and waited to feel that she was near me.

But there was nothing, just me and the dark. The heating was on, yet the bed seemed to get colder and colder. All I wanted was to feel that I wasn't totally alone. But nights went by, and the bed grew colder, until I felt I'd die of the chill in a place I'd let myself be evicted to, that was nothing like home.

You must be wondering why, if I wanted to be with my wife so much, I didn't consult a medium. My wife was a very private person, that's why—I couldn't have asked her to communicate with me in front of a stranger. Besides, I didn't trust that sort of thing much anymore. I hadn't since I'd thought we'd been given a sign that we were going to have a child.

We'd started a child when it was really too late. That was one time my wife let her feelings get the better of her. We'd been trying for years, and then, when she'd given up expecting to be able, she got pregnant. I was afraid for her all those months, but she said I mustn't be: whatever was going to happen would happen, and we'd be prepared for it, whatever it was. She didn't even make the guest-room into a nursery, not that we ever had guests.

She went into hospital a month before we thought she would. The first I knew of it was when the hospital phoned me at the bank. I visited her every evening, but I couldn't see her on weekdays—too many of my colleagues were on their summer holidays. I became afraid I wouldn't be with her at the birth.

Then one evening I saw something that made me think I'd no reason to be anxious for her. I was going upstairs to bed in the dark when I saw that I'd left the light on in the guest-room. I opened the door and switched off the light, and just as I did so I saw that it wasn't a guest-room any longer, it was a nursery with a cot in it and wallpaper printed with teddy bears dancing in a ring. When I switched on the light again it was just a guest-room, but I didn't care—I knew what I'd seen. I didn't know then what I know now.

So when they called me to the hospital urgently from work I felt sure the birth would be a success, and when I learned that the baby had been born dead I felt as if the house had cheated me, or my feelings had. I felt as if I'd killed the baby by taking too much for granted. I almost couldn't go in to see my wife.

She tried to persuade me that it didn't matter. We still had each other, which was pretty well all that we'd had in the way of friendship for years. But she must have thought it was dangerous to leave me on my own, because she came home before she was supposed to, to be with me. That night in bed we held each other more gently than we ever had, and it seemed as if that was all we needed, all we would ever need.

But in the middle of the night I woke and found her in agony, in so much pain she couldn't move or speak. I ran out half-naked to phone for an ambulance, but it was too late. I got back to her just in time to see the blood burst out of her face—I wasn't even there to hold her hand at the end. I just stood there as if I didn't have the right to touch her, because it was my feelings that had killed her, or her concern for them had. You see now why I didn't tell you where she died. It would have been like admitting I hoped she was still in the house. Sometimes I thought I sensed her near me when I was falling asleep. But once I'd moved to the flat I couldn't sleep, I just lay growing colder as the nights got longer. I thought she might have left me because she'd had enough of me. She still had to be alive somewhere, I knew that much.

By then you'd started work on the house, and I felt as if it didn't belong to me, even though it still did. Sometimes I walked the two miles to it late at night, when I couldn't sleep. I told myself I was making sure nobody had broken in. I remember one night I looked in the front window. The streetlamp showed me you'd torn off the wallpaper and hacked away the plaster. The orange light from outside blackened everything, made it seem even more ruined, made the room look as if it hadn't been lived in for years. It made me feel I hardly existed myself, and I walked away fast, walked all night without knowing where, until the dawn came up like an icy fog and I had to huddle in my flat to keep warm.

After that I tried to stay away from the house. The doctor gave me pills to help me sleep, the old kind that aren't addictive. I didn't like the sleep they brought, though. It came too quickly and took away all my memories, didn't even leave me dreams. Only I knew I had to sleep or I'd be out of a job for making too many mistakes at the bank. So I slept away the nights until you got your mortgage and were able to buy the house.

I expected that to be a relief to me. I shouldn't have felt drawn to the house, since it wasn't mine any longer. But the day I had to hand over my last key I

felt worse than I had when I'd signed the contract, and so I made a copy of the key to keep.

I couldn't have said why I did it. Every time I thought of using the key I imagined being caught in the house, taken away by the police, locked up in a cell. Whenever I felt drawn back to the house I tried to lose myself in my work, or if I was in the flat I tried to be content with memories of the time my wife and I had in the house. Only staying in the flat so as not to be tempted to go to the house made me feel as if I'd already been locked up. I went on like that for weeks, telling myself I had to get used to the flat, the house was nothing to do with me now. I took more of the pills before going to bed, and the doctor renewed the prescription. And then one morning I woke up feeling cold and empty, hardly knowing who I was or where, feeling as if part of me had been stolen while I was asleep.

At first I thought the pills were doing that to me. It was snowing as I walked to work, it looked as if the world was flaking away around me, and I felt as if I was. Even when I leaned against the radiator in the bank I couldn't stop shivering. I made myself sit at the counter when it was time for the manager to open the doors, but he saw how I was and insisted I go home, told me to stay there till I got better. He ordered me a taxi, but I sent it away as soon as I was out of sight of the bank. I knew by then I had to come to the house.

You see, I'd realised what was missing. There was part of the house I couldn't remember. I could still recall making love to my wife, and the way we used to prepare alternate courses of a meal, but I couldn't call to mind how we'd spent our evenings at home. I fought my way to the house, the snow scraping my face and trickling under my clothes, and then I saw why. You'd torn down a wall and made two rooms into one.

We must have had a front room and a dining-room. Presumably we moved from one room to the other when we'd finished dinner, but I couldn't recall any of that, not even what the rooms had looked like. Years of my life, of all I had left of my marriage, had been stolen overnight. I stood there with the snow weighing me down until I felt like stone, staring at the wound you'd made in the house, the bricks gaping and the bare floor covered with plaster dust, and I saw that I had to get into the house.

I'd left the key under my pillow. I might have broken in—the street was deserted, and the snow was blinding the houses—if you hadn't already

made the house burglar-proof. I struggled back to the flat for the key. I fell a few times on the way, and the last time I almost couldn't get up for shivering. It took me five minutes or more to open the front door of my new building; I kept dropping the key and not being able to pick it up. By the time I reached my flat I felt I would never stop shivering. I was barely able to clench my fist around the key to the house before I crawled into bed.

For days I thought I was dying. When I lay under the covers I felt hot enough to melt, but if I threw them off, the shivering came back. Whenever I awoke, which must have been hundreds of times, I was afraid to find you'd destroyed more of my memories, that I'd be nothing by the time I died. The fever passed, but by then I was so weak that it was all I could do to stumble to the kitchen or the toilet. Sometimes I had to crawl. And I was only just beginning to regain my strength when I felt you change another room.

I thought I knew which one. It didn't gouge my memories the way the other had, but I had to stop you before you did worse. I knew now that if my wife was anywhere on this earth, she must be at the house. I had to protect her from you, and so I put on as many clothes as I could bear and made myself go out. I felt so incomplete that I kept looking behind me, expecting not to see my footprints in the snow.

I was nearly at the house when I met one of my old neighbours. I didn't want to be seen near the house, I felt like a burglar now. I was trying desperately to think what to say to her when I realised that she hadn't recognised me after all—she was staring at me because she wondered what someone who looked like I looked now was doing in her street. I walked straight past and round the corner, and once the street was deserted I came back to the house.

I was sure you were out at work. There was such a confusion of footprints in the snow on the path that I couldn't see whether more led out than in, but I had to trust my feelings. I let myself into the house and closed the door, then I stood there feeling I'd come home.

You hadn't changed the hall. It still had the striped Regency wallpaper, and the dark brown carpet my wife had chosen still looked as if nobody had ever left footprints on it, though you must have trodden marks all over it while you were altering the house. I could almost believe that the hall led to the rooms my wife and I had lived in, that the wall you'd knocked down

was still there, except that I could feel my mind gaping where the memories should be. So I held my breath until I could hear that I was alone in the house, then I went up to the guest-room.

Before I reached it I knew what I'd see. I'd already seen it once. I opened the door and there it was, the nursery you'd made for the child you were expecting, the cot and the wallpaper with teddy bears dancing in a ring. My feelings when my wife was in hospital hadn't lied to me after all, I'd just misinterpreted them. As soon as I realised that, I felt as if what was left of my mind had grown clearer, and I was sure I could sense my wife in the house. I was about to search for her when I heard your car draw up outside.

I'd lost track of time while I was ill. I thought you'd be at work, but this was Saturday, and you'd been out shopping. I felt like smashing the cot and tearing off the wallpaper and waiting for you to find me in the nursery, ready to fight for the house. But I ran down as I heard you slam the car doors, and I hid under the stairs, in the cupboard full of mops and brushes.

I heard you come in, talking about how much better the house looked now you'd knocked the wall down and put in sliding doors so that you could have two rooms there or one as the mood took you. I heard you walk along the hall twice, laden with shopping, and then close the kitchen door. I inched the door under the stairs open, and as I did so I noticed what you'd done while you were putting in the central heating. You'd made a trapdoor in the floor of the cupboard so that you could crawl under the house. I left the cupboard door open and tiptoed along the hall. I was almost blind with anger at being made to feel like an intruder in the house, but I managed to control myself, because I knew I'd be coming back. I closed the front door by turning my key in the lock, and almost fell headlong on the icy path. My legs felt as if they'd half melted, but I held on to garden walls all the way to the flat and lay down on my bed to wait for Monday morning.

On Sunday afternoon I felt the need to go to church, where I hadn't been since I was a child. I wanted to be reassured that my wife was still alive in spirit and to know if I was right in what I meant to do. I struggled to church and hid at the back, behind a pillar, while they were saying mass. The church felt as if it was telling me yes, but I wasn't sure which question it was answering. I have to believe it was both.

So this morning I came back to the house. The only thing I was afraid of was that one of the neighbours might see me, see this man who'd been

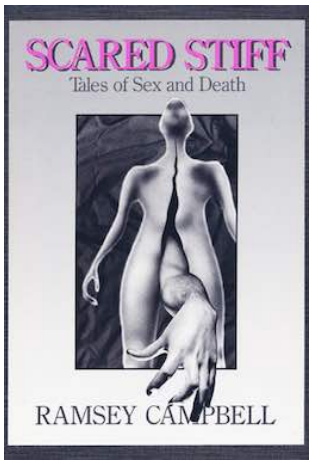
loitering nearby last week, and call the police. But the thaw had set in and was keeping people off the streets. I had to take off my shoes as soon as I'd let myself in, so as not to leave footprints along the hall. I don't want you to know I'm here as soon as you come home. You'll know soon enough.

You must be coming home now, and I want to finish this. I thought of bolting the front door so that you'd think the lock had stuck and perhaps go for a locksmith, but I don't think I'll need to. I haven't much more to tell you. You'll know I'm here long before you find me and read this.

It's getting dark here now in the dining-room with the glass doors shut so that I can't be seen from the street. It makes me feel the wall you knocked down has come back, and my memories are beginning to. I remember now, my wife grew houseplants in here, and I let them all die after she died. I remember the scents that used to fill the room—I can smell them now. She must be here, waiting for me.

And now I'm going to join her in our house. During the last few minutes I've swallowed all the pills. Perhaps that's why I can smell her flowers. As soon as I've finished this I'm going through the trapdoor in the cupboard. There isn't enough space under the house to stretch your arms above your head when you're lying on your back, but I don't think I'll know I'm there for very long. Soon my wife and I will just be in the house. I hope you won't mind if we make it more like ours again. I can't help thinking that one day you may come into this room and find no sliding doors any longer, just a wall. Try and think of it as our present to you and the house.

Merry May



Written in: 1986
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As Kilbride left the shadow of the house whose top floor he owned, the April sunlight caught him. All along this side of the broad street of tall houses, trees and shrubs were unfurling their foliage minutely. In the years approaching middle age the sight had made him feel renewed, but now it seemed futile, this compulsion to produce tender growth while a late frost lay in wait in the shadows. He bought the morning paper at the corner shop and scanned the personal columns while his car warmed up.

Alone and desperate? Call us now before you do anything else... There were several messages from H, but none to J for Jack. Deep down he must have known there wouldn't be, for he hadn't placed a message for weeks. During their nine months together, he and Heather had placed messages whenever either of them had had to go away, and the day when that had felt less like an act of love to him than a compulsion had been the beginning of the end of their relationship. The thought of compulsion reminded him of the buds opening moistly all around him, and he remembered Heather's vulva, gaping pinkly wider and wider. The stirring of his penis at the memory depressed and angered him. He crumpled the newspaper and swung the car away from the curb, deeper into Manchester.

He parked in his space outside the Northern College of Music and strode into the lecture hall. So many of his female students reminded him of Heather now, and not only because of their age. How many of them would prove to be talented enough to tour with even an amateur orchestra, as she had? How many would suffer a nervous breakdown, as she had? The eager bright-eyed faces dismayed him: they'd drain him of all the knowledge and insight he could communicate, and want more. Maybe he should see himself as sunlight to their budding, but he felt more like the compost as he climbed onto the stage.

"Sonata form in contemporary music..." He'd given the lecture a dozen times or more, yet all at once he seemed to have no thoughts. He stumbled through the introduction and made for the piano, too quickly. As he sat down to play an example there wasn't a note of living music in his head except his own, his thoughts for the slow movement of his symphony. He hadn't played that music to anyone but Heather. He remembered her dark eyes widening, encouraging him or yearning for him to succeed, and his fingers clutched at the keys, hammered out the opening bars. He'd reached the second subject before he dared glance at his students. They were staring blankly at him, at the music.

Surely they were reacting to its unfamiliarity; or could it be too demanding or too esoteric in its language? Not until a student near the back of the hall yawned behind her hand did it occur to Kilbride that they were simply bored. At once the music sounded intolerably banal, a few bits of second-hand material arranged in childishly clever patterns. He rushed through the recapitulation and stood up as if he were pushing the piano away from him, and felt so desperate to talk positively about music that he began another lecture, taking the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth to demonstrate the processes of symphonic breakdown and renewal. As the students grew more visibly impatient he felt as if he'd lost all his grasp of music, even when he realised that he'd already given this lecture. "Sorry, I know you've heard it all before," he said with an attempt at lightness.

It was his only lecture that Friday. He couldn't face his colleagues, not when the loss of Heather seemed to be catching up with him all at once. There was a concert at the Free Trade Hall, but by the time he'd driven through the lunchtime traffic clogged with roadworks, the prospect of Brahms and early Schoenberg seemed to have nothing to do with him. Perhaps he was realising at last how little he had to do with music. He drove on, past the Renaissance arcades of the Hall, past some witches dancing about for a camera crew outside the television studios, back home to Salford.

The road led him over the dark waters of the Irwell and under a gloomy bridge to the near edge of Salford. He had to stop for traffic lights, so sharply that the crumpled newspaper rustled. He wondered suddenly if as well as searching for a sign of Heather he'd been furtively alert for someone to replace her. He made himself look away from the paper, where his gaze

was resting leadenly, and met the eyes of a woman who was waiting by the traffic lights.

Something in her look beneath her heavy silvered eyelids made his penis raise its head. She wasn't crossing the road, just standing under the red light, drumming silver fingernails on her hip in the tight black glossy skirt. Her face was small and pert beneath studiedly shaggy red hair that overhung the collar of her fur jacket. "Going my way?" he imagined her saying, and then, before he knew he meant to, he reached across the passenger seat and rolled the window down.

At once he felt absurd, aghast at himself. But she stepped toward the car, a guarded smile on her lips. "Which way are you going?" he said just loud enough for her to hear.

"Whichever way you want, love."

Now that she was close he saw that she was more heavily made up than he'd realised. He felt guilty, vulnerable, excited. He fumbled for the catch on the door and watched her slip into the passenger seat, her fishnet thighs brushing together. He had to clear his throat before he could ask "How much?"

"Thirty for the usual, more for specials. I won't be hurt, but I'll give you some discipline if that's what you like."

"That won't be necessary, thank you."

"Only asking, love," she said primly, shrugging at his curtness. "I reckon you'll still want to go to my place."

She directed him through Salford, to a back street near Peel Park. At least this wasn't happening in Manchester itself, where the chief constable was a lay preacher, where booksellers were sent to jail for selling books like *Scared Stiff* and the police had seized *The Big Red One* on videocassette because the title was suggestive, yet he couldn't quite believe that it was happening at all. Children with scraped knees played in the middle of the street under clotheslines stretched from house to house; when at first they wouldn't get out of the way, Kilbride was too embarrassed to sound his horn. Women in brick passages through pairs of terraced houses stared at him and muttered among themselves as he parked the car and followed the silvered woman into her house.

Beyond the pink front door a staircase led upward, but she opened a door to the left of the stairs and let him into the front room. This was wedge-shaped, half of an already small room that had been divided diagonally by a partition. A sofa stood at the broad end, under the window, facing a television and video recorder at the other. "This is it, love," the woman said. "Don't be shy, come in."

Kilbride made himself step forward and close the door behind him. The pelt of dark red wallpaper made the room seem even smaller. Presumably there was a kitchen beyond the partition, for a smell of boiled sprouts hung in the air. The sense of invading someone else's domesticity aggravated his panic. "Relax now, love, you're safe with me," the woman murmured as she drew the curtains and deftly pulled out the rest of the sofa to make it into a bed.

He watched numbly while she unfolded a red blanket that was draped over the back of the sofa and spread it over the bed. He could just leave, he wasn't obliged to stay—but when she patted the bed, he seemed only able to sit beside her while she kicked off her shoes and hitched up her skirt to roll down her stockings. "Want to watch a video to get you in the mood?" she suggested.

"No, that isn't..." The room seemed to be growing smaller and hotter, which intensified the smell of sprouts. He watched her peel off the second stocking, but then the shouts of children made him glance nervously behind him at the curtains. She gave him an unexpected lopsided smile. "I know what *you* want," she said in the tone of a motherly waitress offering a child a cream cake. "You should've said."

She lifted a red curtain that had disguised an opening in the partition and disappeared behind it. Kilbride dug out his wallet hastily, though an inflamed part of his mind was urging him just to leave, and hunted for thirty pounds. The best he could do was twenty-seven or forty. He was damned if he would pay more than he'd been quoted. He crumpled the twenty-seven in his fist as she came back into the room.

She'd dressed up as a schoolgirl in gymslip and knee socks. "Thought as much," she said coyly. As she reached for the money she put one foot on the bed, letting her skirt ride up provocatively, and he saw that her pubic hair was dyed red, like her hair. The thought of thrusting himself into that greying crevice made him choke, red dimness and the smell of sprouts

swelling in his head. He flung himself aside and threw the money behind her, to gain himself time. He fumbled open the inner door, then the outer, and fled into the street.

It was deserted. The women must have called in their children in case they overheard him and their neighbour. She'd thought when he glanced at the window that the children were attracting him, he thought furiously. He stalked to his car and drove away without looking back. What made it worse was that her instincts hadn't been entirely wrong, for now he found himself obsessively imagining Heather dressed as a schoolgirl. Once he had to stop the car in order to drag at the crotch of his clothes and give his stiffening penis room. Only the fear of crashing the car allowed him to interrupt the fantasy and drive home. He parked haphazardly, limped groaning upstairs to his flat, dashed into the bathroom and came violently before he could even masturbate.

It gave him no pleasure, it was too like being helpless. His penis remained pointlessly erect, until he was tempted to shove it under the cold tap, to get rid of his unfulfilling lust that was happier with fantasy than reality. Its lack of any purpose he could share or even admit to himself appalled him. At least now that it was satisfied, it wouldn't hinder his music.

He brewed himself a pot of strong coffee and took the manuscript books full of his score to the piano. He leafed through them, hoping for a spark of pleasure, then he played through them. When he came to the end he slammed his elbows on the keyboard and buried his face in his hands while the discord died away.

He thought of playing some Ravel to revive his pianistic technique, or listening to a favourite record, Monteverdi or Tallis, whose remoteness he found moving and inspiring. But now early music seemed out of date, later music seemed overblown or arid. He'd felt that way at Heather's age, but then his impatience had made him creative: he'd completed several movements for piano. Couldn't he feel that way again? He stared at the final page of his symphony, Kilbride's Unfinished, The Indistinguishable, Symphony No. 1, Symphony of a Thousand Cuts, not so much a chamber symphony as a pisspot symphony... Twilight gathered in the room, and the notes on the staves began to wriggle like sperm. When it was too dark to see he played through the entire score from memory. The notes seemed to pile

up around him like the dust of decades. He reached out blindly for the score and tore the pages one by one into tiny pieces.

He sat for hours in the dark, experiencing no emotion at all. He seemed to see himself clearly at last, a middle-aged nonentity with a yen for women half his age or even younger, a musical pundit with no ability to compose music, no right to talk about those who had. No wonder Heather's parents had forbidden him to visit her or call her. He'd needed her admiration to help him fend off the moment when he confronted himself, he realised. The longer he sat in the dark, the more afraid he was to turn on the light and see how alone he was. He flung himself at the light switch, grabbed handfuls of the torn pages and stuffed them into the kitchen bin. "Pathetic," he snarled, at them or at himself.

It was past midnight, he saw. He would never be able to sleep: the notes of his symphony were gathering in his head, a cumulative discord. There was nowhere to go for company at this hour except nightclubs, to meet people as lonely and sleepless as himself. But he could talk to someone, he realised, someone who wouldn't see his face or know anything about him. He tiptoed downstairs into the chilly windswept night and snatched the newspaper out of the car.

Alone and desperate? Call us now before you do anything else... The organisation was called Renewal of Life, with a phone number on the far side of Manchester. The distance made him feel safer. If he didn't like what he heard at first he needn't even answer.

The phone rang for so long that he began to think he had a wrong number. Or perhaps they were busy helping people more desperate than he. That made him feel unreasonably selfish, but he'd swallowed so much self-knowledge today that the insight seemed less than a footnote. He was clinging stubbornly to the receiver when the ringing broke off halfway through a phrase, and a female voice said "Yes?"

She sounded as if she'd just woken up. It *was* a wrong number, Kilbride thought wildly, and felt compelled to let her know that it was. "Renewal of Life?" he stammered.

"Yes, it is." Her voice was louder, as if she was wakening further, or trying to. "What can we do for you?"

She must have nodded off at her post, he thought. That made her seem more human, but not necessarily more reassuring. "I—I don't know."

"You've got to do something for me first, and then I'll tell you."

She sounded fully awake now. Some of what he'd taken for drowsiness might have been something else, still there in her voice: a hint of lazy coyness that could have implied a sexual promise. "What is it?" he said warily.

"Swear you won't hang upon me."

"All right, I swear." He waited for her to tell him what was being offered, then felt absurd, embarrassed into talking. "I don't know what I was expecting when I called your number. I'm just at a low ebb, that's all, male menopause and all that. Just taking stock of myself and not finding much. Maybe this call wasn't such a good idea. Maybe I need someone who's known me for a while to show me if there's anything I missed about myself."

"Well, tell me about yourself then." When he was silent she said quickly, "At least tell me where you are."

"Manchester."

"Alone in the big city. That can't be doing you any good. What you need is a few days in the country, away from everything. You ought to come here, you'd like it. Yes, why don't you? You'd be over here for the dawn."

He was beginning to wonder how young she was. He felt touched and amused by her inexpertness, yet the hint of an underlying promise seemed stronger than ever. "Just like that?" he said laughing. "I can't do that. I'm working tomorrow."

"Come on Saturday, then. You don't want to be alone at the weekend, not the way you're feeling. Get away from all the streets and factories and pollution and see May in with us."

Sunday was May Day. He was tempted to go wherever she was inviting him—not the area to which the telephone number referred, apparently. "What sort of organisation are you, exactly?"

"We just want to keep life going. That's what you wanted when you rang." She sounded almost offended, and younger than ever. "You wouldn't have

to tell us anything about yourself you didn't want to or join in anything you didn't like the sound of."

Perhaps because he was talking to her in the middle of the night, that sounded unambiguously sexual. "If I decide to take you up on that I can call you then, can't I?"

"Yes, and then I'll give you directions. Call me even if you think you don't want to, all right? Swear."

"I swear," Kilbride said, unexpectedly glad to have committed himself, and could think of nothing else to say except "Good night." As soon as he'd replaced the receiver he realised that he should have found out her name. He felt suddenly exhausted, pleasantly so, and crawled into bed. He imagined her having been in bed while she was talking to him, then he saw her as a tall slim schoolgirl with a short skirt and long bare thighs and Heather's face. That gave him a pang of guilt, but the next moment he was asleep.

The morning paper was full of oppression and doom. He scanned the personal columns while he waited for his car engine to rouse itself. He no longer expected to find a message from Heather, but there was no sign of the Renewal of Life either.

That was his day for teaching pianistic technique. Some of his students played as if passion could replace technique, others played so carefully it seemed they were determined not to own up to emotion. He was able to show them where they were going wrong without growing impatient with them or the job, and their respect for him seemed to have returned. Perhaps on Tuesday he'd feel renewed enough to teach his other classes enthusiastically, he thought, wondering if the printers had omitted the Renewal of Life from today's paper by accident.

One student lingered at the end of the last class. "Would you give me your opinion of this?" She blushed as she sat down to play, and he realised she'd composed the piece herself. It sounded like a study of her favourite composers—cascades of Debussy, outbursts of Liszt, a token tinkle of Messiaen—but there was something of herself too, unexpected harmonic ideas, a kind of aural punning. He remarked on all that, and she went out smiling with her boyfriend, an uninspired violinist who was blushing now on her behalf. She had a future, Kilbride thought, flattered that she'd wanted

his opinion. Maybe someday he'd be cited as having encouraged her at the start of her career.

A red sky was flaring over the turrets and gables of Manchester. Was he really planning to drive somewhere out there beyond the sunset? The more he recalled the phone conversation, the more dreamlike it seemed. He drove home and made sure he had yesterday's paper, and thought of calling the number at once—but the voice had said Saturday, and to call now seemed like tempting fate. The success of the day's teaching had dampened his adventurousness; he felt unexpectedly satisfied. When he went to bed he had no idea if he would phone at all.

Birdsong wakened him as the sky began to pale. He lay there feeling lazy as the dawn. He needn't decide yet about the weekend, it was too early—and then he realised that it wasn't, not at all. He wriggled out of bed and dialled the number he'd left beside the phone. Before he could even hear the bell at the other end a voice said "Renewal of Life."

It was brisker than last time. It had the same trace of a Lancashire accent, the broad vowels, but Kilbride wasn't sure if it was the same voice. "I promised to call you today," he said.

"We've been waiting. We're looking forward to having you. You are coming, aren't you?"

Perhaps the voice sounded different only because she had clearly not just woken up. "Are you some kind of religious organisation?"

She laughed as if she knew he was joking. "You won't have to join in anything unless you want to, but whatever you enjoy, you'll find it here."

She could scarcely be more explicit without risking prosecution, he thought. "Tell me how to get to you," he said, all at once fully awake.

Her directions would take him into Lancashire. He bathed and dressed quickly, fuelled the car and set out, wondering if her route was meant to take him through the streets and factories and pollution the first call had deplored. Beyond the city centre streets of small shops went on for miles, giving way at last to long high almost featureless mills, to warehouses that made him think of terraced streets whose side openings had been bricked up. Their shadows shrank back into them as the sun rose, but he felt as if he would never be out of the narrow streets under the grubby sky.

At last the road began to climb beyond the crowding towns. Lush green fields spread around him, shrinking pools shone through the half-drowned grass. The grimy clouds were washed clean and hung along the horizon, and then the sky was clear. He drove for miles without meeting another car on the road. He was alone with the last day of April, the leaves opening more confidently, hovering in swarms in all the trees.

Half an hour or so into the countryside he began to wonder how much further his destination was. "Drive until you get to the Jack in the Green," she'd said, "and ask for us." He'd taken that to be a pub, or was it a location or a monument? Even if he never found it, the sense of renewal he had already derived from the day in the open would be worth the journey. The road was climbing again, between banks of ferns almost as large as he was. He'd find a vantage point and stop for a few minutes, he thought, and then the road led over a crest and showed him the factory below.

The sight was as unexpected as it was disagreeable. At least the factory was disused, he saw as the car sped down the slope. All the windows in the long dull-red façade had fallen in, and so had part of the roof. Once there had been several chimneys, but only one remained, and even that was wobbling. When he stared at it, it appeared to shift further. He had to strain his eyes, for something like a mist hung above the factory, a darkening of the air, a blurring of outlines. The chimney looked softened, as did all the window openings. That must be an effect of the air here in the valley—the air smelled bad, a cold slightly rotten stench—but the sight made him feel quiverish, particularly around his groin. He trod hard on the accelerator, to be out from among the drab wilting fields.

The car raced up into the sunlight. He blinked the dazzle out of his eyes and saw the village below him, on the far side of the crest from the factory. A few streets of limestone cottages led off the main road and sloped down to a village green overlooked by an inn and a small church. Several hundred yards beyond the green, a forest climbed the rising slopes. Compared with the sagging outlines of the ruin, the clarity of the sunlit cottages and their flowery gardens was almost too intense. His chest tightened as he drove past them to the green.

He parked near the inn and stared at its sign, the Jack in the Green, a jovial figure clothed and capped with grass. He hadn't felt so nervous since stage fright had seized him at his first recital. When he stepped out of the car, the

slam of the door unnerved him. A dog barked, a second dog answered, but there was no other sound, not even of children. He felt as if the entire village was waiting to see what he would do.

A tall slim tree lay on the green. Presumably it was to be a maypole, for an axe gleamed near it in the grass, but its branches had still to be lopped. Whoever had carried it here might be in the inn, he thought, and turned toward the building. A woman was watching him from the doorway.

She sauntered forward as his gaze met hers. She was tall and moderately plump, with a broad friendly face, large grey eyes, a small nose, a wide very pink mouth. As she came up to him, the tip of her tongue flickered over her lips. "Looking for someone?" she said.

"Someone I spoke to this morning."

She smiled and raised her eyebrows. Her large breasts rose and fell under the clinging green dress that reached just below her knees. He smelled her perfume, wild and sweet. "Was it you?" he said.

"Would you like it to be?"

He would happily have said yes, except that he wondered what choices he might be rejecting. He felt his face redden, and then she touched his wrist with one cool hand. "No need to decide yet. When you're ready. You can stay at the Jack if you like, or with us."

"Us?"

"Father'll be out dancing."

He couldn't help feeling that she meant to reassure him. There was an awkward pause until she said, "You're wondering what you're supposed to do."

"Well, yes."

"Anything you like. Relax, look around, go for a walk. Tomorrow's the big day. Have some lunch or a drink. Do you want to work up an appetite?"

"By all means."

"Come over here then and earn yourself a free lunch."

Could he have been secretly dreaming that she meant to take him home now? He followed her to the maypole, laughing inwardly and rather wildly

at himself. "See what you can do about stripping that," she said, "while I bring you a drink. Beer all right?"

"Fine," he said, reflecting that working on the maypole would be a small price to pay for what he was sure he'd been led to expect. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Sadie." With just the faintest straightening of her smile she added, "Mrs. Thomas."

She could be divorced or a widow. He picked up the axe, to stop himself brooding. It was lighter than he expected, but very sharp. When he grasped a branch at random and chopped experimentally at it, he was able to sever it with two blows.

"Not bad for a music teacher," he murmured, and set to work systematically, starting at the thin end of the tree. Perhaps he should have begun at the other, for after the first dozen or so branches the lopping grew harder. By the time Sadie Thomas brought him a pint of strong ale, his arms were beginning to ache. As she crossed the green to him he looked up, wiping sweat from his forehead in a gesture he regretted immediately, and found that he had an audience, several men sitting on a bench outside the inn.

They were Kilbride's age, or younger. He couldn't quite tell, for their faces looked slack, blurred by indolence—pensioned off, he thought, and remembered the factory. Nor could he read their expressions, which might be hostile or simply blank. He was tempted to step back from the maypole and offer them the job—it was their village, after all—but then two of them mopped their foreheads deliberately, and he wondered if they were mocking him. He chopped furiously at the tree, and didn't look up until he'd severed the last branch.

A burst of applause, which might have been meant ironically, greeted his laying down the axe. He felt suddenly that the phone conversations and the rest of it had been a joke at his expense. Then Sadie Thomas squatted by him, her green skirt unveiling her strong thighs, and took his hands to help him up. "You've earned all you can eat. Come in the Jack, or sit out if you like."

All the men stood up in case he wanted to sit on the bench. Some looked resentful, but all the same, they obviously felt he had the right. "I'll sit

outside," he said, and wondered why the men exchanged glances as they moved into the inn.

He was soon to learn why. A muscular woman with cropped grey hair brought out a table which she placed in front of him and loaded with a plateful of cheese, a loaf and a knife and another tankard of ale, and then Sadie came to him. "When you're done eating, would you do one more thing for us?"

His arms were trembling from stripping the maypole; he was only just able to handle the knife. "Nothing strenuous this time," she said reassuringly. "We just need a judge, someone who isn't from around here. You've only to sit and choose."

"All right," Kilbride said, then felt as if his willingness to please had got the better of him. "What am I judging?"

She gave him a coy look that reminded him of the promise he thought he'd heard in the telephone voice. "Ah, that'd be telling."

Perhaps the promise would be broken if he asked too many questions, especially in public. It still excited him enough to be worth his suffering some uncertainty, not least over how many of the villagers were involved in the Renewal of Life. His hands steadied as he finished off the cheese, and he craned to watch Sadie as she hurried into the village, to the small schoolhouse in the next street. He realised what they must want him to judge at this time of the year as the young girls came marching from the school and onto the green.

They lined up in front of the supine maypole and faced him, their hands clasped in front of their stomachs. Some gazed challengingly at him, but most were shy, or meant to seem so. He couldn't tell if they knew that besides casting their willowy shadows toward him, the sun was shining through their uniforms, displaying silhouettes of their bodies. "Go closer if you like," Sadie said in his ear.

He stood up before his stiffening penis could hinder him, and strode awkwardly toward the girls. They were thirteen or fourteen years old, the usual age for a May Queen, but some of them looked disconcertingly mature. He had to halt a few yards short of them, for while embarrassment was keeping his penis more or less under control, every step rubbed its rampant tip against his fly. Groaning under his breath, he tried to look only

at their faces. Even that didn't subdue him, for one girl had turned her head partly away from him and was regarding him through her long dark eyelashes in a way that made him intensely aware of her handfuls of breasts, her long silhouetted legs. "This one," he said in a loud hoarse voice, and stretched out a shaky hand to her.

When she stepped forward he was afraid she would take his hand in front of all of them. But she walked past him, flashing him a sidelong smile, as the line of young girls broke up, some looking relieved, some petulant. Kilbride pretended to gaze across the green until his penis subsided. When he turned, he found that several dozen people had gathered while he was judging.

The girl he'd chosen had joined Sadie. Belatedly he saw how alike they were. Even more disconcerting than that and the silent arrival of the villagers was the expression he glimpsed on Sadie's face as she glanced at her daughter, an expression that seemed to combine pride with a hint of dismay. The schoolgirls were dispersing in groups, murmuring and giggling. Some of the villagers came forward to thank Kilbride, so hesitantly that he wasn't sure what he was being thanked for; the few men who did so behaved as if they had been prodded into approaching him. Close up their faces looked flabbier than ever, almost sexless.

Sadie turned back from leading away her daughter to point along the street behind the inn. "You're staying with us, aren't you? We're at number three. Dinner's at seven. What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Walk, I should think. Find my way around."

"Make yourself at home," said a stocky bespectacled woman, and her ringletted stooping companion added, "Anything you want, just ask."

He wanted to think, though perhaps not too deeply. He sat on the bench as the shadows of the forest crept toward the green. He was beginning to think he knew why he'd been brought here, but wasn't he just indulging a fantasy he was able at last to admit to himself? He stood up abruptly, having thought of a question he needed to ask.

The inn was locked, and presumably he wasn't meant to go to Sadie's before seven. He strolled through the village in the afternoon light, flowers in the small packed gardens glowing sullenly. People gossipping outside cottages hushed as he approached, then greeted him heartily. He couldn't

ask them. Even gazing in the window of the only shop, a corner cottage whose front room was a general store, he felt ill at ease.

He was nearly back at his starting point after ten minutes' stroll when he noticed the surgery, a cottage with a doctor's brass plaque on the gatepost, in the same row as Sadie's. The neat wizened gnomish man who was killing insects on a rockery with precise bursts from a spray bottle must be the doctor. He straightened up as Kilbride hesitated at the gate. "Is there something I can do for you?" he said in a thin high voice.

"Are you part of the Renewal of Life?"

"I certainly hope so."

Kilbride felt absurd, though the doctor didn't seem to be mocking him. "I mean, are all of you here in the village part of that?"

"We're a very close community." The doctor gave a final lethal squirt and stood up. "So don't feel as if you aren't welcome if anyone seems unfriendly."

That was surely a cue for the question, if Kilbride could frame it carefully enough. "Am I on my own? That's to say, was anyone else asked to come here this weekend?"

The doctor looked straight at him, pale eyes gleaming. "You're the one."

"Thank you," Kilbride said and moved away, feeling lightheaded. Passing the church, where a stone face with leaves sprouting from its mouth and ears grinned from beneath the steep roof, he strolled toward the woods. The doctor's reply had seemed unequivocal, but questions began to swarm in Kilbride's mind as he wandered through the fading light and shade. Whether because he felt like an outsider or was expected to be quite the opposite, he skulked under the trees until he saw the inn door open. As he returned to the village, a hint of the stench from the factory met him.

The bar was snug and darkly panelled. The flames of a log fire danced in reflections on the walls, where photographs of Morris dancers hung under the low beams. Kilbride sat and drank and eventually chatted to two slow men. At seven he made his way to Sadie Thomas' house, and realised that he couldn't remember a word of the conversation in the pub.

Sadie's cottage had a red front door that held a knocker in its brass teeth. When Kilbride knocked, a man came to the door. He was taller and bulkier

than Kilbride, with a sullen almost circular face. A patchy moustache straggled above his drooping lips. He stared with faint resentment at the suitcase Kilbride had brought from the car. "Just in time," he muttered, and as an afterthought before Kilbride could step over the threshold, "Bob Thomas."

When he stuck out his hand Kilbride made to shake it, but the man was reaching for the suitcase. He carried it up the steep cramped stairs, then stumped down to usher Kilbride into the dining kitchen, a bright room the width of the house, its walls printed with patterns of blossoms. Sadie and her daughter were sitting at a round table whose top was a single slice of oak. They smiled at Kilbride, the daughter more shyly, and Sadie dug a ladle into a steaming earthenware pot. "Sit there," Bob Thomas said gruffly when Kilbride made to let him have the best remaining chair.

Sadie heaped his plate with hotpot—mutton stewed with potatoes—and he set about eating as soon as seemed polite, to cover the awkwardness they were clearly all feeling. "Good meat," he said.

"Not from around here," Sadie said as if it was important for him to know.

"Because of the factory, you mean?"

"Aye, the factory," Bob Thomas said with unexpected fierceness. "You know about that, do you?"

"Only what I gathered over the phone—I mean, when I was told to get away from factories."

Bob Thomas gazed at him and fingered his moustache as if he were trying to conjure more of it into existence. Kilbride froze inside himself, wondering if he'd said too much. "Daddy doesn't like to talk about the factory," the daughter murmured as she raised her fork delicately to her lips, "because of what it did to him and all the men."

"Margery!"

Kilbride couldn't have imagined that a father could make his child's name sound so like a curse. Margery flinched and gazed at the ceiling, and Kilbride was searching for a way to save the conversation when Margery said, "Did you notice?"

She was talking to him. Following her gaze, he saw that the rounded beam overhead seemed more decorative than supportive. "It's a maypole," he

realised.

"Last year's."

She sounded prouder than he could account for. "You believe in keeping traditions alive, then," he said to Bob Thomas.

"They'll keep theirselves alive whatever I believe in, I reckon."

"I mean," Kilbride floundered on, "that's why you stay here, why you don't move away."

Bob Thomas took a deep breath and stared furiously at nothing. "We stay here because family lived here. The factory came when we needed the work. Him who owned it was from here, so we thought he was doing us a kindness, but he poisoned us instead. We found work up road and closed him down. Poisoned we may be, we'll not be driven out on top of it. We'll do what we have to to keep place alive."

It was clearly an unusually sustained speech for him, and it invited no response. Kilbride was left wondering if any of it referred to himself. Sadie and her daughter kept up the conversation during the rest of the meal, and Kilbride listened intently, to their voices rather than to their words. "Father isn't like this really, it's just the time of year. Don't let him put you off staying," Sadie said to Kilbride as she cleared away the plates.

"Swear you won't," Margery added.

He did so at once, because now he was sure he'd spoken to her on the phone at least the first time. Bob Thomas lowered his head bull-like, but said nothing. His inertia seemed to sink into the house; there was little to say, and less to do—the Thomases had neither a television nor a radio, not even a telephone as far as Kilbride could see. He went up to his bedroom as soon as he reasonably could.

He stood for a while at the window that was let into the low ceiling, which followed the angle of the roof, and watched the moon rise over the woods. When he tired of that he lay on the bed in the small green room and wished he'd brought something to read. He was loath to go out of the room again, in case he met Bob Thomas. Eventually he ventured to the bathroom and then retired to bed, to watch an elongating lozenge of moonlight inch down the wall above his feet. He was asleep before it reached him.

At first he thought the voices were calling him, dozens of voices just outside his room. They belonged to all the girls who had paraded for his judgement on the green, and now they were here to collect a consolation prize. They must be crowded together on the steep staircase—he'd have no chance of escaping until they had all had a turn, even if he wanted to. Besides, his penis was swelling so uncontrollably that he was helpless; already it was thicker than his leg, and still growing. If he didn't answer the voices the girls would crowd into the room and fall on him, but he was unable to make any sound at all. Then he realised that they couldn't be calling him, because nobody in the village knew his name.

The shock wakened him. The voices were still calling. He shoved himself into a sitting position, almost banging his head on the ceiling, and peered wildly about. The voices weren't calling to him, nor were they in the house. He swung his feet off the bed, wincing as a floorboard creaked, and gazed out of the window.

The moon was almost full. At first it seemed to show him only slopes coated with moonlight. Nothing moved except a few slow cows in a field. Not only the cows but the field were exactly the colour of the moon. The woods looked carved out of ivory, so still that the shifting of branches sent a shiver through him. Then he saw that the trees which were stirring were too far apart for a wind to be moving them.

He raised the window and craned out to see. He stared at the edge of the woods until the trunks began to flicker with his staring. The voices were in the woods, he was sure. Soon he glimpsed movement in the midst of the trees, on a hillock that rose above the canopy of branches. Two figures, a man and a woman, appeared there hand in hand. They embraced and kissed, and at last their heads separated, peering about at the voices. The next moment they disappeared back into the woods.

They were early, Kilbride thought dreamily. They ought to wait until the eleventh, May Day of the old calendar, the first day of the Celtic summer. In those days they would be blowing horns as well as calling to one another, to ensure that nobody got lost as they broke branches and decorated them with hawthorn flowers. Couples would fall silent if they wanted to be left alone. He wondered suddenly whether he was meant to be out there—whether they would be calling him if they knew his name.

He opened the bedroom door stealthily and tiptoed onto the tiny landing. The doors of the other bedrooms were ajar. His heart quickened as he paced to the first and looked in. Both rooms were empty. He was alone in the cottage, and he suspected that he might be alone in the village.

Surely he was meant to be in the woods. Perhaps tradition forbade anyone to come and waken him, perhaps he had to be wakened by the calling in the trees. He closed his bedroom window against the stench that seeped down from the factory, then he dressed and hurried downstairs.

The front door wasn't locked. Kilbride closed it gently behind him and made for the pavement, which was tarred with shadow. Less than a minute's walk through the deserted village took him into the open, by the church. Though only the stone face with leaves in its ears and mouth seemed to be watching him, he felt vulnerable in the moonlight as he strode across the green, past the supine maypole, and into the field that was bordered by the woods. Once he started, for another stone face with vegetation dangling from its mouth was staring at him over a gate, but it was a cow. All the way from the cottage to the woods, he heard voices calling under the moon.

He hesitated at the edge of the trees, where the shadow of a cloud crept over bleached knuckly roots. The nearest voices were deep in the woods. Kilbride made his way among the trees, his feet sinking into leaf-mould. He stopped and held his breath whenever he trod on a twig, however muffled the sound was, or whenever he glimpsed movement among the pale trunks etched intricately with darkness. All the same, he nearly stumbled over the couple in the secluded glade, having taken them for moving shadows.

Kilbride dodged behind a tree and covered his mouth while his breathing grew calmer. He didn't want to watch the couple, but he dared not move until he could measure his paces. The woman's skirt was pushed above her waist, the man's trousers were around his ankles; Kilbride could see neither of their faces. The man was tearing at the mossy ground with his hands as his buttocks pumped wildly. Then his shoulders sagged, and the woman's hands cupped his face in a comforting gesture. The man recommenced thrusting at her, more and more desperately, and Kilbride was suddenly convinced that they were Bob and Sadie Thomas. But the man's head jerked back, his face distorted with frustration, and Kilbride saw that he was no more than twenty years old.

In that moment a good deal became clear to Kilbride. What was happening in the woods wasn't so much a celebration of Spring as a desperate ritual. Now he saw how total the effect of the pollution by the factory had been, and he realised that he hadn't seen or heard any young children in the village. He hid behind the tree, his face throbbing with embarrassment, and tiptoed away as soon as he thought he could do so unnoticed. All the way out of the woods he was afraid of intruding on another scene like the one he'd witnessed. He was halfway across the moonlit field, and almost running for fear that someone would see him and suspect that he knew, when he realised fully what they must expect of him.

He stood in the shadow of the inn to think. He could fetch his suitcase and drive away while there was nobody to stop him—but why should he fear that they would? On the contrary, the men seemed anxious to see the last of him. He wouldn't be driven out, he promised himself. It wasn't just that he'd been invited, it was that someone needed him. All the same, back in the green bedroom he lay awake for hours, wondering when they would send for him, listening to the distant voices calling in the dark. They sounded plaintive to him now, almost hopeless. It was close to dawn before he fell asleep.

This time his dreams weren't sexual. He was at a piano in an empty echoing concert hall, his fingers ranging deftly over the keys, drawing music from them that he'd never heard before, music calm as a lingering sunset then powerful as a mountain storm. The hands on the keys were his hands as a young man, he saw. He looked for pen and paper, but there was none. He'd remember the music until he could write it down, he told himself. He must remember, because this music was the whole point of his life. Then a spotlight blazed into his eyes, which jerked open, and the dream and the music were gone.

It was the sun, shining through the window in the roof. He turned away from it and tried to grasp the dream. Sunlight groped over his back and displayed itself on the wall in front of him. Eventually he gave up straining, in the hope that the memory would return unbidden. The silence made itself felt then. Though it must be midday at least, the village was silent except for the lowing of a cow and the jingle of bells. The sound of bells drew him to the window.

The maypole was erect in the middle of the green. The villagers were standing about on the grass. The young women wore short white dresses, and garlands in their hair. Half a dozen Morris dancers in uniform—knee-breeches, clogs, bracelets of bells at their wrists—stood near the inn, drinking beer. At the far side of the green were two empty seats. Kilbride blinked sleepily toward these, and then he realised that one of them must be his—that the whole village was waiting for him.

They might have wakened him, then. Presumably they had no special costume for him. He bathed hastily, dressed and hurried out. As he reached the green, the villagers turned almost in unison to him.

The Morris man who came over to him proved to be Bob Thomas. Kilbride found the sight of him in costume disconcerting in a variety of ways. "Ready, are you?" Bob Thomas said gruffly. "Come on, sit you down." He led Kilbride to the left-hand of the chairs, both of which were made of new wood nailed together somewhat roughly. As soon as Kilbride was seated, two of the garlanded girls approached him with armfuls of vines, wrapping them around his body and then around his limbs, which they left free to move, to his relief. Then Margery came forward alone and sat by him.

She wasn't wearing much under the long white dress. As she passed in front of him, shyly averting her eyes, her nipples and the shadows around them appeared clearly through the linen. Kilbride gave her a smile which was meant to reassure her but which he suspected might look lecherous. He turned away as the girls approached once more, bearing a crown composed of blossoms on a wiry frame, which they placed on Margery's head.

The festivities began then, and Kilbride was able to devote himself to watching. When Sadie Thomas brought him and Margery a trayful of small cakes, he found he was ravenous. The more he ate, the stranger and more appealing the taste seemed: a mixture of meat, apple, onion, thyme, rosemary, sugar and another herbal taste he couldn't put a name to. Margery ate a token cake and left the rest for him.

The young girls danced around the maypole, holding onto ribbons that dangled from the tip. The patterns of the dance and the intricate weaving of the ribbons gradually elaborated themselves in Kilbride's mind, a kind of crystallising of the display on the green, the grass reaching for the sunlight, the dazzling white dresses exposing glimpses of bare thighs, the girls glancing at himself and Margery with expressions he was less and less sure

of. How long had they been dancing? It felt like hours to him and yet no time at all, as though the spring sunlight had caught the day and wouldn't let it go.

At last the girls unweaved the final pattern, and the Morris dancers strode onto the green. Bob Thomas wasn't the leader, Kilbride saw, feeling unaccountably relieved. The men lined up face-to-face in two rows and began to dance slowly and deliberately, brandishing decorated staves two feet long, which they rapped together at intervals. The patterns of their turns and confrontations seemed even more intricate than the maypole dance; the muscularity of the dancing made his penis feel thickened, though it wasn't erect. The paths the dancers described were solidifying in his mind, strengthening him. He realised quite calmly that the cakes had been drugged.

The shadows of the Morris men grew longer as he watched, shadows that merged and parted and leapt toward the audience of villagers on the far side of the green. Shouldn't shadows be the opposite of what was casting them? he thought, and seemed unable to look away from them until the question was resolved. He was still pondering when the dancing ended. The shadows appeared to continue dancing for a moment longer. Then the Morris men clashed their staves together and danced away toward the nearest field.

Kilbride watched bemused as all the males of the village followed them. Several boys and young men glared at him, and he realised that his time was near. Led by the Morris dancers, the men and boys disappeared over the slope toward a green sunset. The jingling of bells faded, and then there was only the sound of birdsong in the woods behind him.

He supposed he ought to turn to Margery, but his head was enormous and cumbersome. He gazed at the dimming of the green, which felt like peace, imperceptibly growing. His awareness that Sadie and another woman were approaching wasn't enough to make him lift his head. When they took hold of his arms he rose stiffly to his feet and stood by the chair, his body aching from having sat so long, while they unwound the vines from him. Then they led him away from Margery, past the maypole and its willowy garlands, past the clods the Morris dancers' heels had torn out of the ground. The women beside the green parted as he reached them, their faces expressionless, and he saw that Sadie and her companion were leading him to the church.

They led him through the small bare porch and opened the inner door. Beyond the empty pews the altar was heaped with flowers. A few yards in front of the altar, a mattress and pillows lay on the stone floor. The women ushered Kilbride to the mattress and lowered him onto it, so gently that he felt he was sinking like an airborne seed. They walked away from him side by side without looking back, and closed the doors behind them.

The narrow pointed windows darkened gradually as he lay waiting. The outlines of pews sank into the gathering dark. The last movements he'd seen, the women's buttocks swaying as they retreated down the aisle, filled his mind and his penis. His erection felt large as the dark, yet not at all peremptory. He had almost forgotten where he was and why he was waiting when he heard the porch door open.

The inner door opened immediately after. He could just see the night outside, shaped by the farther doorway. Against the outer darkness stood two figures in white dresses. Their heads touched to whisper, and then the slimmer figure ventured hesitantly forward.

Kilbride pushed himself easily to his feet and went to meet her. He hadn't reached her when her companion stepped back and closed the inner door. A moment later the porch door closed. Kilbride paced forward, feeling his way along the ends of the pews, and as he gained the last he made out the white dress glimmering in front of him. He reached out and took her hand.

He felt her stiffen so as not to flinch, heard her draw a shaky breath. Then she relaxed, or made herself relax, and let him lead her toward the altar. Though the dark had virtually blinded him, his other senses were unusually acute; the warmth of her flesh seemed to course into him through her hand; her scent, more delicate than Sadie's, seemed overwhelming. He hardly needed to touch the pews to find his way back to the mattress. Once there he pushed her gently down on it and knelt beside her. The next moment she reached clumsily for him.

Her hands groped over his penis, fumbling at his fly. He stroked her hair, which was soft and electric, to soothe her, slow her down, but she dragged at his clothes all the more urgently. She'd eaten one of the cakes, he remembered; it might well have been an aphrodisiac. He wriggled out of his clothes and left them on the stone floor, then he found her again in the dark.

Her hands closed around his swelling penis, her nervous fingers traced its length. He stroked her narrow shoulders, ran his hands down her slim body,

over her firm buttocks, which tensed as his hands slid down her thighs and back up under her dress. She raised herself so that he could pull the dress over her head, then her hands returned to his penis, more confidently. When he stroked her buttocks, which were clad in thin nylon, she moaned under her breath.

As soon as he began to ease her knickers down she pulled them off and kicked them away, then grabbed his hand and closed her thighs around it. He ran his thumb through her wiry pubic bush, and her thighs opened wide to him. The lips of her sex closed over his fingers, gulping them moistly, more and more greedily, and then she curled herself catlike and took his penis in her mouth.

As her tongue flickered over the tip his erection grew suddenly urgent. His penis felt like pleasure incarnate, pleasure so intense it made the darkness blaze and throb behind his eyes. He put one hand under her chin to raise her head. Before he could move she climbed over him and lowered herself onto his penis, thrust him deep into her.

He couldn't tell if her cry expressed pain or pleasure: perhaps both. She pressed herself fiercely against him as her body grasped his penis moistly, sucking him deeper. Despite the urgency, each crescendo of sensation was longer and slower and more lingering. Her arms began to tremble with supporting herself above him, and he rolled her over and plunged himself as deep as he could. When he came, it seemed to last forever. He was intensely aware of her and of the church around them, and the slow flowering of himself seemed an act of worship of both.

As he dwindled within her, sensations fading slowly as a fire, he felt capable of embracing the world. All at once the path of his life, leading through it to this moment, grew clearer to him. He viewed it with amused tolerance, even the music in his dream, which he remembered now. It wasn't that good, he saw, but it might be worth transcribing. Just now this sense of all-embracing peace was enough.

Or almost enough, for the girl was shivering. He could see the outline of her face now, in the moonlight that had begun to seep through the narrow windows. He lay beside her, his penis still in her, and stroked her face. "It was the first time for Renewal of Life too, wasn't it? I hope it achieves what it was meant to. I just want to tell you that I've never experienced anything like it, ever. Thank you, Margery."

He must be speaking more loudly than he intended, for his voice was echoing. He thought that was why she jerked away from him, lifted herself clear and fled along the glimmering aisle—and then he realised what he'd done to make her flee. He'd used her name, he'd betrayed that he knew who she was. They would never let him go now.

The notion of dying at this point in his life was unexpectedly calming. He felt as if he'd achieved the best he was capable of. He dressed unhurriedly and paced along the aisle, through stripes of moonlight. As he stepped into the darkness of the porch he heard a muffled sobbing outside the church. He hoped it wasn't Margery. He grasped the iron ring and opened the outer door.

The moon was high above the green. From the porch it looked impaled by the rearing maypole. The sound of renewed sobbing made him turn toward the inn. Several women had gathered outside, and in their midst was Margery, weeping behind her hands. Someone had draped a black coat over her white dress. Sadie Thomas glanced at Kilbride, regret and resignation and a hint of sympathy on her face, as the Morris men who had been waiting outside the church moved toward him.

Bob Thomas was leading them. For the first time Kilbride saw power in his eyes, though the man's face was expressionless. All the men had taken off their bracelets of bells, but they still carried the decorated staves two feet long they'd used in the dance. Their clogs made no sound on the grass. As Bob Thomas raised his stave above his head Kilbride closed his eyes and hoped it would be the last thing he would see or feel.

The first blow caught him across the shoulders. He gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes tighter, prayed that the next blow wouldn't miss. But the stave struck him across his upper arm, agonisingly. He opened his teary eyes in protest and saw that the women had gone. He turned to Bob Thomas, to try belatedly to reason with him, and read on the man's face that they didn't mean to kill him—not yet, at any rate.

They began to beat Kilbride systematically, driving him away from the church, heading him off when he tried to dodge toward his car. He fled toward the woods, his bruised body aching like an open wound. With their clogs they wouldn't be able to keep up with him, he told himself, and once he was far enough out of reach he could double back to the car. But they drove him into the woods, where he tripped over roots in the dark. Soon he

was limping desperately. When he saw that they were herding him toward a hut beside a glade he lurched aside, but they caught him at once. One shoved a stave between his legs and felled him in the glade.

Kilbride struggled around on the soft damp ground to face them. He was suddenly afraid that they meant to stamp him to death with their clogs, especially when four of them seized his arms and legs. As Bob Thomas stooped to him, jowls dangling, Kilbride realised that someone had followed the chase, a small figure in the shadows at the edge of the glade. "Never experienced anything like it, haven't you?" Bob Thomas muttered. "You've not experienced the half of what you're going to, my bucko."

Kilbride tried to wrench himself free as he heard metallic sounds in the shadows, saw the glint of a knife. Bob Thomas moved aside as the doctor came forward, carrying his bag. He might never have seen Kilbride before, his wizened face was so impassive. "Our women make us feel small but our friend here won't, I reckon," Bob Thomas said and stood up, rubbing his hands. "We'll feed him and nurse him and keep him hidden safe, and comes Old May Day we'll have our own Queen of the May."

Boiled Alive

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Each weekday morning Mee was first in the pay-office. He would sip coffee from a dwarfish plastic cup and watch the car park rearrange itself as the factory changed shifts, several thousand random blocks of colour gathering about his green car on the concrete field. He would spend the next four hours at the computer, and three hours after lunch. The chirping cursor leapt to do his bidding, danced characters onto the screen. He had charge of half the payroll, half of the three-letter codes that denoted employees so secretively that he didn't even know if he was in his own batch. Now and then Clare trotted in from the outer office with a handful of changes of tax coding, but Mee was mostly unaware of Till, who computed the other half of the payroll, and Macnamara the supervisor, who was always repeating himself, always repeating himself.

Each day after work Mee listened in his car to wartime crooners rhyming the moon and waited until he had a clear path through the car park. The music rode with him along the motorway to the estate that was mounting the sandstone hills. His street was of sandy bungalows, identical except for curtains or cacti or porcelain in the windows. He parked his car in the garage that took the place of one front room and walked down the drive, round the end of his strip of lawn like a hall carpet, and up the path to his front door.

Each night he prepared the next day's dinner and stored it in the refrigerator. He would eat it facing the view back towards the factory, miles away. Roads and looped junctions left no room for trees, but the earliness of headlights signified the onset of winter. He was digging at his dessert with a fork and watching the swarming of lights, the landscape humming constantly like a dynamo, when the telephone rang.

A darts match at the pub, he guessed, or a message from the Homewatch leader, probably about youngsters using the back alleys to take drugs, as if

reality weren't enough for them. Munching, he lifted the receiver, and a voice said "Boiled alive."

"Pardon?" Mee wondered if the man had mistaken him for a restaurant—but the voice was too lugubriously meaningful. "Boiled alive," it repeated in an explanatory tone that sounded almost peevish, and rang off.

No doubt the caller was on drugs and phoning at random, and Mee wanted to believe the phrase was just as meaningless. He switched on the television and watched manic couples win holidays on a quiz show. A dentist's receptionist was leaping and squealing and popping her eyes at her prize when the phone rang again. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?" a voice said.

"I'm afraid not, sorry." Mee waited politely for a response, and was about to break the connection when the voice said "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

"I've already said not. Can't you hear me?" Perhaps deafness was why the man was calling. "You've got a wrong number," Mee said, so loudly that the mouthpiece vibrated.

This time the silence was shorter. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

"Don't be ridiculous. What do you want?" The doctor, Mee thought, and felt somewhat ridiculous himself. It wasn't the voice that had called earlier; it had an odd quality—a blandness, a lack of accent. "Is this—" it recommenced, and he cut it off.

Had its silences really been exactly the same length? Certainly it had repeated itself with precisely the same intonation. He might have been talking to a robot, he thought, but that seemed to miss the point somehow. He went out to the pub, a longer bungalow, and tried to interest himself in the quiz league's semifinal, questions about places he'd never heard of.

Next day the lassitude he always suffered after a morning at the computer was worse, but the sight of men from the assembly line swapping pirated videos in the windowless canteen wakened him and a memory he'd been trying to gain access to. He stopped at the video library in the wine shop on his way home after work. Horror films had occupied the shelves nearest the window: *Shriek of the Mutilated*, *Headless Eyes*, *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain*, *Boiled Alive*.

The box showed photographs of people reddening and screaming, presumably the actors who were listed, though they sounded like pseudonyms. He would learn no more unless he hired a video recorder. At home he ate boiled beef and watched the lights until he felt their swarming was preventing him from thinking. He was late for the committee meeting at the church hall, and had to struggle to interest himself in the question of rents to be charged for jumble sales and Boy Scout gatherings. He voted against letting the peace movement use the hall. Life wasn't as precarious as they made it out to be, he thought as he strode home, it had a pattern you could glimpse if you had faith. The phone was ringing as he reached his path. He slammed the door, dashed to the phone, snatched the receiver. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

Mee let out a long sigh, which his panting interrupted. "Do I get a prize for the right answer?"

Silence. It really was a total silence, empty even of static. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

"Where you are, you mean? It may be, for all I know."

Silence. Mee found he was counting the seconds. If the silence was even fractionally longer he would know he'd thrown the caller, as he realised he very much wanted to do. But no: "Is this—"

"Go to the devil where you belong, you lunatic," Mee shouted, and chopped at the cradle with the edge of his palm. He nursed his bruised hand and thought of contacting the police. They would only tell him to keep on receiving the calls so that the caller could be traced, and he wouldn't be able to sleep for waiting tensely. He left the phone off the hook overnight and watched *Boiled Alive*, which varied wildly from dream to dream. Whenever he awoke he felt colder, as if the dreams were draining him.

Next morning he said to Till "You've a video recorder, haven't you?"

Till blinked at him under his perpetual grey-browed scowl. "Used to have. Can't afford it with the kids at private school. Besides, most of the films weren't fit for them to watch. Puts ideas in people's heads, that sort of thing."

"Something you wanted to watch, Mr Mee?" Macnamara said across the room, his hollow drone resounding. "Was there something you wanted to see?"

"A tape in my local library."

"Bring it round on Sunday. Come for dinner after church, my mother likes the company. You can't get too much use out of a machine, am I right? You can't get too much use out of a machine."

Should Mee let him know the kind of film it was? But he might seem to be rejecting Macnamara's gesture. He busied himself at the screen, wondering afresh whether any of the three-letter codes coincided with the employee's car registration or whether someone had ensured they did not. Certainly none of his highest earners had the same codes as the limousines outside.

That night he hired *Boiled Alive* for the weekend. He'd finished eating dinner and watched the racing lights for some time before he realised the phone hadn't rung. He had a sudden irrational conviction that it wouldn't while he had the videocassette. Such thoughts were dangerous, things didn't work like that. All the same, the only call that weekend was from Macnamara, to make sure Mee was coming.

Macnamara lived in the town beyond the factory, in a house at the top of a flight of railed steps. "Here he is," he announced as he let Mee into the long narrow hall beneath a lampshade like a flower of stained glass. "He's here."

His mother darted out from the furthest doorway. She couldn't really be that small, Mee thought nervously, but when she squeezed alongside her son her head was barely as high as his chest. Otherwise, apart from having all the hair, she looked much like Macnamara: thin oval face, sharp nose, colourless lips. "Didn't you bring the film?" she said in a stage whisper. "Sidney said you were bringing a film."

They made Mee think of the voice on the phone, but neither of them would be capable of that voice. He dug the cassette out of his pocket. "Some kind of comedy, is it?" Macnamara said, raising his eyebrows at the title, and to his mother "Some kind of comedy."

She herded them into the dining-room then, to Mee's acute embarrassment, she pretended to charge at them like a goat, emitting sounds of shooing. Dinner was Greek, and went on for hours. Whenever he thought the end was near she produced another course. "Is it good?" she demanded anxiously before he'd had a mouthful, and as soon as he had "It's good, isn't it?" Her whispering was the result of a throat disease, he realised, but nevertheless she talked constantly, interrogating him about himself long

after the details ceased to interest him. Worse, she told him in intimate detail about her problems in bringing up her son after his father had deserted them. "How's my Sidney getting on at work?" she asked Mee, and wouldn't let him mumble vaguely. "Fine, I'm sure," he stammered, yearning for it to be time to watch the film.

Macnamara's reluctance was obvious as he picked up the cassette. "Sounds exciting, *Boiled Alive*," his mother whispered enthusiastically, and he slipped it into the player with a despairing shrug. "That's funny, isn't it?" she suggested as several thin flat scientists squeezed into sight behind the widescreen credits, then she gasped as they inflated, released from the bonds of the words. Whatever they were doing to measure psychic energy, their experiment was going wrong: laboratory monitors were melting, a man's face was blistering. "How do they do that?" Mrs Macnamara cried in a whisper, and Mee had to restrain himself from hushing her, for one of the scientists had just been called Doncaster.

She talked throughout the film. Mee wondered if she was trying to shut out the sight of people being boiled alive by some vindictive psychic power. "Is that the kind of car you make at the factory?" she whispered as a scientist's hands fused to a steering wheel. Another man's eyes burst one by one, and she struggled to her feet, croaking "I think I'll go to bed now."

Mee stared open-mouthed at the screen, which was filled with a telephone dial. A detective's finger was dialling Mee's phone number. "My mother wants to go to bed," Macnamara growled, but Mee barely noticed he was speaking as the detective, mouthing, said "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

"I'll see you up, Mother," Macnamara said furiously, and Mee lurched forward to listen to the detective. "Is Dr Doncaster there?" "What do the words 'boiled alive' mean to you?" "We all have hidden powers that only need to be unlocked"? "We can't talk now, this may be being traced" "Right, I'll meet you in an hour." But he was boiled en route, leaving only his girlfriend, a reporter, to gun down the culprit in a refrigerator. Suddenly the gun was too hot to hold, and as she dropped it, a silhouette stepped out from behind a side of beef. "I am Dr Doncaster," it said.

"The End." Had something been missed out? The tape began to rewind, and as Mee picked up the remote control he noticed Macnamara, who was

watching him from the hall. "That wasn't funny," Macnamara said, even slower than usual. "Not funny at all."

Mee thought of apologising, but wasn't sure what for. Had Dr Doncaster really been the culprit, or only in English? The question formed a barrier in his mind as he followed taillights home. Even the inclusion of his number in the film couldn't quite break through.

In the morning he tried to phone the distributor of *Boiled Alive*, but whenever the number wasn't engaged there was no answer. He had to desist when Macnamara kept glaring at him. Otherwise Macnamara behaved as if Mee's visit had never taken place. Mee crouched over the screen and tried to interest himself in the dance of the symbols, telling himself that they were as real as he was.

He had to make himself return the cassette, for his notion that its presence precluded the calls was even stronger. In the library the proprietor held up a box to the bars of his cage. "Lots of naked women being tortured. By the feller who made the one you just had."

"I've no interest in that kind of thing. I only borrowed this because they used my phone number in it."

"I'd sue them. Or send reporters after them, they'll cough up quick enough."

Mee had meant to consult the factory's lawyers, but the nearest television station was less than half an hour's drive away. His phone call was put through to a bright young woman who wanted him to come in straight away and record an interview for the local news programme. They made up his face, sat him in a puffy leather chair on a metal stalk, shone lights on him while the bright young woman asked him if he thought films like *Boiled Alive* should be banned and how "being haunted by phone" was affecting him. On his way out, his head swimming, he made her promise not to broadcast his number.

Why did the interview persist in troubling him? He spent the evening in trying to think, and flung the phone off the hook when it rang just before midnight. Next day he was so preoccupied that he almost deleted his morning's work on the computer. Working at a screen while waiting to watch himself on another didn't help. He was home well before the six o'clock news. Rising crime and unemployment, nuclear escalation, famines,

terrorism? The bright young woman appeared at last, and there was Mee, trying to look as if he belonged in the leather chair. How plump and red and blotchy his face was! His voice sounded bland and timid as he said that he believed films should be banned if they did harm, he didn't think much of the film anyway, his privacy had been invaded, at the very least the number should be changed in every copy of the film... They might just as well have broadcast his number, since he'd named the film. His consciousness lurched at that, and then he wondered if he had actually just said "It's Dr. Doncaster's number, not mine."

The co-presenter turned from the interview with a look that all but winked. "We tried to contact the film's distributor in Wigan, but we understand they're bankrupt. Serves them right, our friend at the wrong end of the phone might say. Now, if you've ever wondered where flies go to in the wintertime—"

Mee turned him off and waited for the phone to ring. Eventually he realised he'd been waiting for hours, hadn't even eaten his dinner. Of course, he thought, people couldn't phone until they'd seen the film. By midnight he thought they might have, but the phone was a black lump of silence. Even when he closed his eyes and tried to sleep, it stood out from the dark.

At least now Macnamara ought to know why Mee had been interested in the film—but neither he nor Till gave any sign of having seen the interview. Their silence unnerved Mee, made him feel guilty about letting himself be interviewed, but why should he blame himself? In the canteen he sensed that half the people who weren't looking at him had only just looked away. They'd better not offend him. Maybe they hadn't been impressed by his appearance on the screen, but they ought to see themselves, bunches of letters he could treat however he liked. The calls began that evening. Mee heard smothered laughter and sounds of a party in the background every time a different voice asked for Dr Doncaster. None of them was the bland voice that had plagued him with the exact intonation of the line from the film. To his confusion, he found he almost missed that voice. After the fourth call he went to the pub.

Though he didn't recognise many of the drinkers, he thought they all recognised him. Freddy from the darts team bought him a drink, but his small talk sounded stiffer than the dubbing in the film, and so, when Mee listened, did all the conversations around him. When he began to suspect

that some of the drinkers were assuming more than one voice, he stalked home through the floodlit identical streets.

He waited for the voice that knew its lines, but there were no more calls. He slept unexpectedly, woke late, drove hastily to work. He had to park at the far side of the concrete field and trudge between the cooling cars in a drizzle. Several people and some kind of machine paced him beyond two ranks of cars.

"How's your mother now?"

"Getting better, getting better," Macnamara told Till, and they fell silent as Mee came in. If they blamed him for that too, let them say so. Maybe he sounded like three letters on a screen, but they mustn't treat him as if he weren't real. Perhaps the voice that knew its lines hadn't been able to reach him last night because of the hoax calls, he was thinking.

Despite Macnamara's disapproval, Mee switched off his computer in time to beat the homeward rush. But by the time his car started, there was a long queue for the exit. Car, he thought, feeling trapped in three letters. He swung into the course of light at last and edged into the middle lane as soon as he could. He was almost unaware that the car was moving when lights blazed into the vehicle and flung his silhouette onto the windscreen.

He thought of the floodlights at the television interview. But it was a lorry, blaring at him to force him into the outer lane, where lights were racing faster than he was. When he trod on the accelerator the car jerked towards the taillights beyond the half-blinded windscreen, too fast, too close. He swerved into a momentary gap in the outer race, overtook the car in the middle lane, dodged in ahead of it. He was groaning with relief when the entire lorry slewed towards him.

It had jackknifed, swinging across all three lanes. It struck the car behind Mee's, hurling it into the inside lane, where it smashed into another vehicle. The impact jarred a roof light on, and Mee glimpsed the driver's face, lockjawed with terror, in the instant before it went out. As he sped onward he heard traffic crashing into the far side of the lorry and into one another, the tardy screech of brakes, crash upon crash, screams of the injured and dying. When he reached home he could see fires from his window, vehicles blazing hundreds of yards apart. Behind the blaze headlights bunched for miles, a comet's tail.

The local newscast was devoted to the crash. "Some of the drivers were driving as if they had no sense of reality," a police spokesman said. He couldn't mean Mee, since Mee hadn't been involved. Later, at the committee meeting in the church hall, Mee mentioned how he'd been ahead of the crash. How could he have known that the chairman's sister and nephews had been killed in the pile-up? The committee seemed almost to blame Mee for surviving. As he trudged home he recognised screams in an empty street. Someone must be watching the nude women being tortured in one of the neat bright houses.

In the morning there was no sign of the crash. A sprinkling of snow covered any traces it had left on the motorway. Till asked how close to it Mee had been, but Mee denied all knowledge and stood at the window, hardly aware of the plastic tumbler of coffee in his reddening hand. Surely the car park hadn't always looked so short of perspective.

He was restless all day. He felt as if the heat of the fires on the motorway, or of the guilt that everyone was trying to make him accept, were building up in his skull. Even the green screen wasn't soothing. He kept straying near Till's desk, but was never in time to see the letters of his name. If they were there, what would it prove? They couldn't reduce him, nor could Macnamara's inability to get his lines right first time, nor the unnatural silence when the computers were switched off.

There had been no calls while he was at home last night, but tonight the phone greeted him with the young shrill voice of an admirer of *Boiled Alive*, accusing Mee of having put the distributor out of business just because he wasn't able to distinguish between fiction and reality. When it wouldn't listen to his objections, Mee cut it off. On television a streetful of identical houses let out their men to advertise a car, and he saw that one of the men who had the wrong car was himself.

Did they think they could do what they liked with him? Now that he'd appeared before the cameras, was he fair game for however they wanted to edit him? They were trying to undermine his sense of reality, he thought; the police spokesman had as good as said Mee's was above average. That would explain why, when he went shopping at the supermarket, everyone not only pretended not to recognise him but acted like extras around him, most of them using the same voice. When he strode home the only sounds

in the glaring streets were his footsteps, as if someone had turned off the other sounds or forgotten to record them.

The idea of living in a film wasn't entirely unappealing. If it had been a better film he might even have been flattered. Being able to repeat favourite moments and speed up the boring parts was certainly tempting, not to mention the ability to say of bad times "it's only a film" or to have a hidden voice explain things when he looked at them. But how much control would he have? About as much as one generally has of one's life, he thought, then felt as if the voice that knew its lines could put him right if he could just work out how to respond.

Next day the snow had melted, but there were no marks of the crash. The view from his car trembled slightly in the frames of the windscreen and windows. It must be the car that was shaking, not the image, for he noticed cameras in several of the vehicles that passed him, filming him. They must have been filming him before the crash—that was how they'd been on the scene so quickly. Why, the camera car might have made the lorry jackknife!

He would have pointed this out to his colleagues, except that they didn't seem real enough to be worth telling, Macnamara and his dogged repetitions, Till and his switched-off silences. The computer screen seemed more real, and took more out of him. But in the canteen at lunchtime, he was unexpectedly upset by the sight of two men smirking at him as they exchanged cassettes, for one of the cassettes was *Boiled Alive*.

They wanted him to see them, did they? Then let them see what he could do. At last he knew why he'd been missing the voice on the phone: he wanted to be told about the hidden powers—but he didn't need it to unlock him. As he stared at the cassette of *Boiled Alive* the fire in his head flared up, yet he didn't feel as if he was focusing it, he felt reality focusing through him, the cassette and the man who held it growing intensely real. "Shit," the man cried, and dropped the cassette deafeningly to clutch the fingers of one hand with the other.

"Hot stuff, eh? Too hot to handle?" Mee suggested, and felt he was cheapening himself. He swung away and hurried through the corridors, past the unstable windowscapes. The shaking of his reality had just been a step in the process of unlocking, then. In an impersonal way, he had never felt nearly so real.

He sat in the pay-office and gazed at his blank monitor. What would happen when they realised what he'd done in the canteen? They already disapproved of him, but now they'd try to use him or stop him, not realising how they would be endangering themselves. It wasn't as if he was sure he could control the power: he felt more like a channel for reality, far harder to close than to open. The inside of his head felt dry and hot and shrunken. He had to think what to do before Till and Macnamara came back.

He prowled the office, staring at the blank walls, at his car in the midst of the random pattern of cars. He even switched on Till's screen and scanned the columns. There were the letters of his name, against a salary several times the size of his. Something about the sight of a version of himself he would have liked to be inspired him. He turned off the computer and slipped down to his car.

Between the factory and home he managed not to pass or be passed by another vehicle. It was a question of balance, he thought. He had to preserve a balance between reality before he'd seen the film and after, between himself and the way the world saw him, between the governments that would want to use him as a weapon. His street was deserted, which was welcome: to be seen at the start of his mission, to have to cope with someone else's perception of him, would only confuse him. It seemed wholly appropriate that he would start by entering so unremarkable a house.

He bolted the front and back doors and secured all the windows. He hadn't prepared tonight's dinner, he saw. That didn't matter; the less he ate, the sooner he would finish. He was surprised how easy it was to take responsibility for the world. He'd expected to feel lonely, but he found he didn't; perhaps there were others like himself. He used the toilet, combed his hair in front of the mirror, straightened his tie, brushed his shoulders, and then sat down by the phone with his back to the window and dialled his own number. When the phone rang he picked it up, knowing that he wouldn't get the intonation quite right and that he'd have to go for retake after retake, especially if he heard any kind of a response. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?" he said.

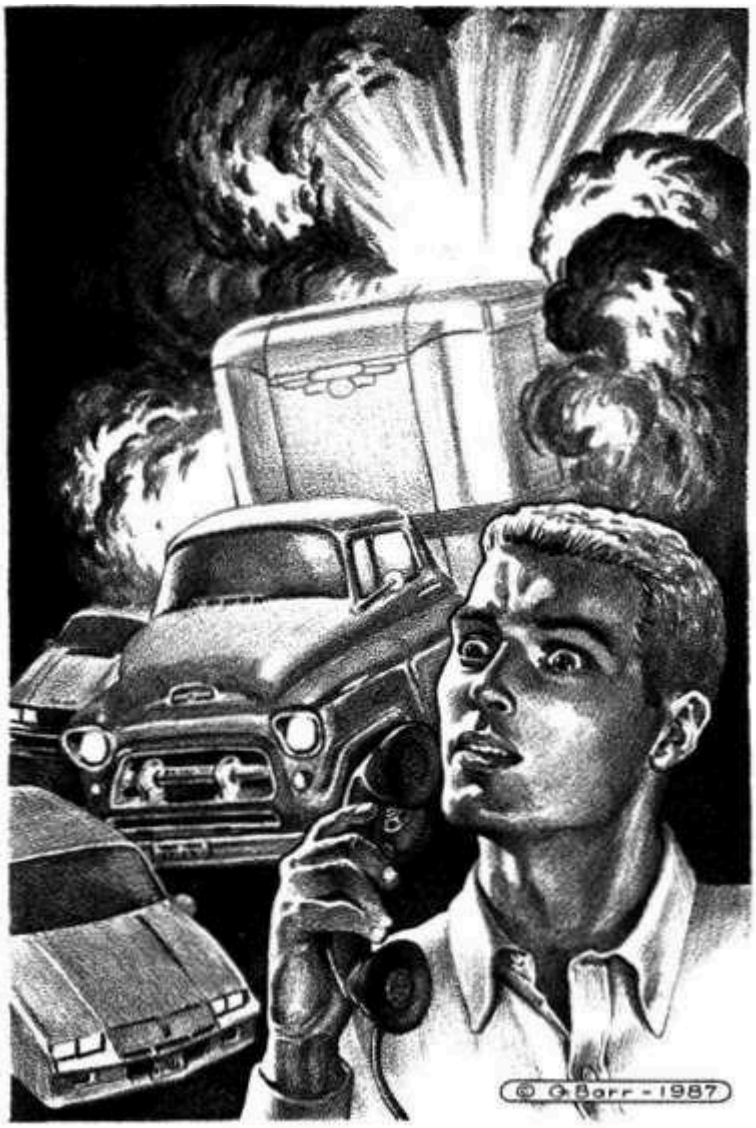

Illustration by George Barr, taken from Weird Tales, Spring 1988.

1987

Another World

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When Sonny thought his father hadn't stirred for three days he took the old man's spectacles off. His father was sitting in the chair stuffed with pages from the Bible, facing the cracked window that looked towards the church beyond the shattered targets of the maisonnettes, the church that the women came out of. The black lenses rose from his father's ashen face, and sunlight blazed into the grey eyes, ball-bearings set in webs of blood. They didn't blink. Sonny pulled the wrinkled lids over them and fell to his knees on the knobbly carpet to pray that the Kingdom of God would come to him. He hadn't said a tithe of the prayers he knew when the sunlight crept away towards the church.

He had to keep his promise that he'd made on all the Bibles in the chair—proofs of the Bibles they printed where his father used to work until he'd realised that God's word required no proof—but he shouldn't leave his father where the world might see that he was helpless. He slipped one arm beneath his father's shrivelled thighs and the other around his shoulders, which protruded like the beginnings of wings, and lifted him. His father was almost the shape of the chair, and not at all pliable. His dusty boots kicked the air as Sonny carried him up the narrow walled-in staircase and lowered him onto the bed. He flourished his bent legs until Sonny eased him onto his side, where he lay as if he were trying to shrink, legs pressed together, hands clasped to his chest. The sight was far less dismaying than the thought of going out of the house.

He didn't know how many nights he had kept watch by his father, but he was so tired that he wasn't sure if he heard the world scratching at the walls on both sides of him. His father must have suspected that the Kingdom of God wouldn't be here by now, whatever he'd been told the last time he had gone out into the world. Sonny made himself hurry downstairs and take the spectacles from the tiled mantelpiece.

"Eye of the needle, eye of the needle," his father would mutter whenever he put on the spectacles. Sonny had thought they were meant to blind him to the world, the devil's work—that the Almighty had guided his father as he strode to the market beyond the church, striding so fiercely that the world fell back—but now he saw that two holes had been scratched in the thick black paint which coated the lenses. The arms nipped the sides of his skull, and two fists seemed to close around his eyes: the hands of God? The little he could see through the two holes was piercingly clear. He gazed at the room that shared the ground floor with the stony kitchen where his father scrubbed the clothes in disinfectant, gazed at the walls his father had scraped bare for humility to help God repossess the house, the Stations of the Cross that led around them to the poster of the Shroud. Blood appeared to start out of the nailed hands, but he mustn't let that detain him. Surely it was a sign that he could stride through hell, as his father used to.

His father had braved the forbidden world out there on his behalf, and Sonny had grown more and more admiring and grateful, but now he wished his father had taken him out just once, so that he would know what to expect. His father had asked them to come from the Kingdom of God to take care of his body, but would they provide for Sonny? If not, where was his food to come from? You weren't supposed to expect miracles, not in this world. He clasped his hands together until the fingers burned red and white and prayed for guidance, his voice ringing like a stone bell between the scraped walls, and then he made himself grasp the latch on the outer door.

As he inched the door open his mouth filled with the taste of the disinfectant his father used to wash their food. A breeze darted through the gap and touched his face. It felt as if the world had given him a large soft kiss that smelled of dust and smoke and the heat of the summer day. He flinched, almost trapping his fingers as he thrust the door away from him, and reminded himself of his promise. Gripping the key in his pocket as if it were a holy relic, he took his first step into the world.

The smell of the world surged at him, heat and fallen houses and charred rubbish, murmuring with voices and machinery. The sunlight lifted his scalp. Even with the spectacles to protect him, the world felt capable of bursting his senses. He pressed himself against the wall of the house, and felt it shiver. He recoiled from the threat of finding it less solid than he prayed it was, and the pavement that met the house flung him to his knees.

The whole pavement was uneven. The few stones that weren't broken had reared up as though the Day of Judgement were at hand. As he rubbed his bare knees, he saw that every house except his father's was derelict, gaping. Behind him the street ended at a wall higher than the houses, where litter struggled to tear itself loose from coils of barbed wire. He would never be able to walk on the upheaved pavement unless he could see better. He narrowed his eyes and took off the spectacles, praying breathlessly. The husks of houses surged forward on a wave of sound and smells, but so long as he kept his eyes slitted it seemed he could stave off the world. He strode along the pavement, which flickered like a storm as his eyelids trembled. He had only just passed the last house when he staggered and pressed his hands to his scalp. The world had opened around him, and he felt as if his skull had.

The market stretched across waste land scribbled out by tracks of vehicles. There were so many vans and stalls and open suitcases he was afraid to think of counting them. A crowd that seemed trapped within the boundaries of the market trudged the muddy aisles and picked at merchandise. A man was sprinkling petrol on a heap of sprouts to help them burn. Beyond the shouts of traders and the smouldering piles of rubbish, a few blackened trees poked at a sky like luminous chalk. To his left, past several roofless streets, were concrete stacks of fifty floors or more, where the crowd in the market must live. So this was hell, and only the near edge of hell. Sonny retreated towards the church.

Then he caught hold of his mouth to keep in a cry. It wasn't a church anymore, it was a giveaway discount warehouse. All women were prostitutes, and he'd thought the women he'd seen leaving the church every night had been confessing their sins—but they'd been using God's house to sell the devil's wares. The realisation felt as if the world had made a grab at him. He fumbled the spectacles onto his face just as three muddy children sidled towards him.

Their faces crowded into the clear area of the lens. "Are you a singer or something, mister?" a boy whose nostrils were stained brown demanded. "Are you on video?"

"He's that horror writer with them glasses," said a girl with a bruised mouth missing several teeth.

"Thought he was a fucking Boy Scout before," said a girl in a mangy fur coat. A fleshy bubble swelled out of her mouth and popped sharply. "That why you're dressed like that, mister, because you like little boys?"

They were only imps, sent to torment him. If they seemed about to touch him he could lash out at them with his heavy boots. "Where can I find the Kingdom of God?" he said.

"Here it is, mister," the bubbling girl sniggered, lifting the hem of her coat.

"He means the church, the real church," the bruised girl said reprovingly. "You mean the real church, don't you, mister? It's past them hoardings." Beyond the discount warehouse, at the end of the street that bordered the market, stood three large boards propped with timber. Once the stares and titters were behind him, he took the spectacles off. There was so much smoke and dust on the road ahead that the cars speeding nowhere in both directions appeared to be driverless. The road led under hooked lamps past buildings which he knew instinctively were no longer what they had been created for, lengths of plastic low on the black façades announcing that they were video universe with horror and sci-fi and war, the SMOKE SHOP, THE DRUGSTORE, MAGAZINES TO SUIT ALL TASTES. There was Cleanorama, but he thought it came far too late. He peered narrowly to his left, and the hoardings thrust their temptations at him, a long giant suntanned woman wearing three scraps of cloth, an enormous car made out of sunset, a cigarette several times as long as he was tall. Past them was the church.

It didn't look much like one. It was a wedge that he supposed you'd call a pyramid, almost featureless except for a few slits full of coloured splinters and, at the tip of the wedge, a concrete cross. Feeling as if he were in a parable, though he'd no notion what it meant or if it was intended to convey anything to him, he stalked past the hoardings and a police station like the sheared-off bottom storey of a tower block, and up the gravel path.

The doors of the church seemed less solid than the doors of his father's house. When he closed them behind him, the noise of traffic seeped in. At least the colours draped over the pine pews were peaceful. Kneeling women glanced and then stared at him as he tiptoed towards the altar. The light through a red splinter caught a sign on a door, FATHER PAUL, it said. Daring to open his eyes fully at last, Sonny stepped through the veils of

coloured light he couldn't see until they touched him, and pushed the door wide.

A priest was kneeling on a low velvety shelf, the only furniture in the stark room. His broad red face clenched on a pale O of mouth. "That's not the way, my son. Stay on the other side if you're here to confess."

"I'm looking for the Kingdom of God," Sonny pleaded.

"So should we all, and nothing could be simpler. Everything is God's."

"In here, you mean?"

"And outside too."

He was a false prophet, Sonny realised with a shudder that set bright colours dancing on his arms and legs, and this was the devil's mockery of a church. He stepped out of reach of the hairy hands that looked boiled red and collided with a pew, which spilled black books. The priest was rising like smoke and flames when a voice behind Sonny said "Any trouble, Father?" He might have been another priest, he was dressed blackly enough. The thought of being locked up before he could have his father taken care of made Sonny reckless. "He's not a priest," he blurted.

"I'd like to know what you think you are, coming to church dressed like that," the policeman said, low and leaden. "It may be legal now, but we can do without your sort flaunting yourselves in church. Just give me the word, Father, and I'll teach him to say his prayers."

Sonny backed away and fled as colours snatched at him. Slitting his eyes, he blundered out of the concrete trap. He ought to take refuge at home before the policeman saw where he lived, and then venture out after dark. But he had only reached the elbow on which the giantess was supporting herself when a car drew up beside him.

He thought he was going to be arrested. He recoiled against the hot giantess, who yielded far too much like flesh, as the driver's square head poked out, a titan's blonde shaving brush. "Are you lost?" the driver said. "Can I help?"

Sonny heaved himself away from the cardboardy flesh and staggered against the car. Not having eaten since before his father had stopped moving was catching up with him. He managed to steady himself as the driver

climbed out of the car. "Do you live near here? Can I take you home? Unless you'd like me to find you somewhere else to stay."

He was trying to find out where Sonny lived. "The Kingdom of God," Sonny said deliberately.

"Is that a church organisation? I don't know where it is, but we'll go there if you can tell me."

That took Sonny aback. Surely anyone who meant to tempt him must claim to know where it was. Could this person be as lost and in need of it as Sonny was? "You really look as if you should be with someone," the driver said. "Have you nobody at home?"

Before Sonny could close himself against it, a flood of loss and loneliness passed through him. "Nobody who can help," he croaked.

"Then let's find you where you're looking for. My name's Sam, by the way." Sam held out a hand as if to take Sonny's, but stopped short of doing so. "What's it like, do you know? What kind of building?"

The sensitivity Sam had shown by not touching him won Sonny over. "All I know is it's not far."

"We can still drive if you like."

They would be too close in the car, and Sonny would be giving up too much control. He peered back at the church, where the policeman seemed content to glower from the doorway. "I'll walk," he said. Past the hoardings, the smell of the market pounced on him. The smoke of charred vegetables scraped inside his head as he hurried by, trying to blink his pinched eyes clear. Ahead of him the road of cars flexed like a serpent, like the leg of a giantess. He dug his knuckles into his eyes and told himself that it was only curving past more old buildings claimed by names, MACHO MILITARIA, CAPTIVATING TOTS, LUSCIOUS LEGS, SEX AIDS... Some of the strips of plastic embraced two buildings. "It is an actual place we're looking for, is it?" Sam said, trotting beside him.

Sonny hesitated, but how could he save a soul unless he spoke the truth? "That's what my father said."

"He sent you out, did he?"

"Into the world, yes." Both question and answer seemed to suggest more than they said, but what did the parable mean? "I had to come," he said in

his father's defence. "There's nobody else."

Now that the market and its stench were left behind, the houses appeared to be flourishing. The façades ahead were white or newly painted, their front windows swelled importantly. Gleaming plaques beside their doors named doctors and dentists, false healers one must never turn to. Weren't these houses too puffed up to harbour the Kingdom of God? But the people were the same as the lost souls of the waste land: faces stared at him from cars, murmured about him beyond the lacy curtains of a waiting-room; two young women exhaling smoke sidled past him and hooted with laughter. "He'll get no girls if he goes round dressed like that," one spluttered.

"Maybe he's got better things to do," Sam said icily.

Sonny drew in a breath that tasted of disinfectant, which seemed too clear a sign to doubt. As he strode past the dentist's open door he experienced a rush of trust and hope such as he'd never even felt towards his father. There must be others like himself or potentially like himself in the world, and surely Sam was one. "It's how my father dressed me," he confided.

"Has it anything to do with where we're looking for?"

"Yes, to remind me I'm a child of God," Sonny said, and was reminded more keenly by a twinge from the marks of the birch.

"Does your father dress like that too, then?"

"Of course not," Sonny giggled. "He was, he's my father."

Sam appeared not to notice his indiscretion. "How old are you anyway? You dress like ten years old, but you could be in your early thirties."

"We don't need to know. Years like that don't matter, only the minutes before the fire that consumes the world. If we've spent our time counting our years we'll never be able to prepare ourselves to enter the Kingdom of God. Not the place we're going now, the place of which that's a symbol. Where we're going now is the first and last church, the one that won't be cast into the fire where all corruption goes. That's because we keep ourselves pure in every way and cast out the women once they've given birth."

Sam's mouth opened, but what it said seemed not to be what it had opened for. "You mean your mother."

Though it hadn't the tone of a question, Sonny thought it best to make things clear. "Questions come from the devil. They're how the world tries to trick the faithful."

"So you have to look after your father all by yourself."

Why should that matter to Sam? Sonny couldn't recall having said his father needed looking after. He tried to let the truth speak through him as he searched the curves ahead, where gleaming houses rested their bellies on mats of grass. Newspapers and boards quoting newspapers hung on the corner of a side street, and he glanced away from the devil's messages, perhaps too hastily: the world seemed to pant hotly at him, the houses swelled with another breath. "Only the pure may touch the pure," he mumbled.

"That's why I mustn't touch you."

Such a surge of trust passed through Sonny that his body felt unfamiliar. "Maybe you'll be able to," he blurted.

"Not if—"

"We can all be saved. We just have to admit we need to be," Sonny reassured Sam, who agreed so readily that Sonny wondered if he'd missed the point somehow. Houses white as virgins breathed their stony breaths and expanded their bellies until every polished name-plaque turned to the sun and shone. For a moment he thought it was God who was filling the virgin bellies, and then he recoiled from himself. How could he let the world think for him? Where had he gone wrong? "Quick," he gasped, and tottered round, almost touching Sam's bare downy arm.

The world twisted and tried to throw him. The fat houses between him and the market began to dance, wobbling their whited bellies. He mustn't think of leaning on Sam, but a distant edge of him wished he could. He held the spectacles to his eyes as he came abreast of the dangling newspapers, but the darkness of the lenses seemed a pit into which he was close to falling. As he stepped off the pavement to cross the side street, he felt as if he were stepping off a cliff.

He faltered in the middle of the side street, though cars snarled beside him. He thought a voice had spoken to him, saying "King God." He snatched off the spectacles so eagerly that one lens shattered between his finger and thumb. Black shards crunched under his feet, the sun went for his eyes, but

none of this mattered. He hadn't heard a voice, he'd seen a sign. It hadn't just said King God; only the lens had made it seem to. It said Kingdom of God, and it was in a window.

He ran across the side street, scrambled onto the pavement. How could he have missed the sign before? Surely he needn't blame Sam for distracting him. The Kingdom was here now, that was all that mattered—here beyond the window that blazed like a golden door, like a fire in which only the name of the Kingdom was visible, never to be consumed. He took another pace towards it, and the sunlight drained out of the window, leaving a surface grey with dust and old rain, which he was nevertheless able to see through. Beyond it was ruined emptiness.

He stumbled forward so as not to fall. The sign he'd seen was a faded placard in the window, beside a door whose lock had been gouged out. A rail dragged down by stained curtains leaned diagonally across the window. Several chairs lay on the bare floorboards, their legs broken, their entrails sprung. On a table against the ragged wall, a dead cat glistened restlessly.

Sam pressed his forehead against the window. "This can't be it, can it? Nobody's been here for months."

Sonny's father had been, only days ago: wasn't that what he'd said? He must have meant it as a parable, or meant that he'd met some of the brethren. What could Sonny do now, as the world throbbed with muffled mocking laughter? Go back home in case the Kingdom had come there and if not, stay nearby until they found him? Then Sam said "Don't worry, I'll help you. Shall we see to your father first?"

The window had blackened his forehead as if he'd been branded, and Sonny seemed to perceive him all at once more clearly. "See to him how?"

"Have him taken care of, however he needs to be."

"Who by?"

"I won't know that until I've seen him. I promise I'll do whatever's best for both of you."

Sonny swallowed, though it felt like swallowing chunks of the world. "Who are you?"

"Nobody special, but you might say I help save people too. I'm a social worker."

Sonny felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach, the way his father had punched him sometimes to make him remember. He doubled up, but he had nothing to vomit. People who said they were social were socialists, communists, architects of the devil's kingdom, and he'd let one of them entice him, hadn't even realised he was being led. Perhaps the ruined shop had been set up for him to see, to turn him aside from searching further.

Sam had stepped back. He was afraid Sonny would be sick on him, Sonny realised, and flew at him, retching. When Sam retreated, Sonny turned with the whirlpool of sky and bloated buildings and staggered to the corner of the street, almost toppling into the parade of cars. He jammed the one-eyed spectacles onto his face and fled.

His legs were wavering so much that a kind of dance was the only way he could keep on his feet. The houses joined in, sluggishly flirting their bellies at him, growing blacker as he jigged onward. The giantess lazily raised her uppermost leg, the stench of charred rotten vegetables surged at him down the uneven street. Compared with Sam and the virginal buildings, the smell seemed at least honestly corrupt. It made him feel he was going home.

He was appalled by how familiar the world already seemed to him. The children jeering "Pirate" at him, the pinched faces eager for a bargain, a trader kicking a van that wouldn't start, Sonny thought for a moment which felt like the rim of a bottomless pit that he could have been any one of them. As he stumbled past the discount church and down the disused street he wept to realise that he liked the feel of the open sky more than he expected to like the low dimness of the house. Then he wondered if he might have left his father alone for too long, and fell twice in his haste to get home.

He dug his key into the lock, reeled into the house as the door yielded, shouldered it closed behind him. A smell of disinfectant that seemed holier than incense closed around him. He mustn't let it comfort him until he had taken care of his father. Anyone who'd seen his father sitting in the Bible chair might wonder where he was now, might even try to find him.

His father lay as Sonny had left him, straining to touch his clasped hands with his knees. Sonny gathered him up and wavered downstairs, thumping the staircase wall with his father's shrivelled ankles and once with his uncombed head. Would it look more natural to have his father kneeling in the front room? As soon as he tried, his father keeled over. Sonny sat him on the Bibles and stood back. His father looked at peace now, ready for

anything. The sight was making Sonny feel that the Kingdom of God was near when he heard the key turn in the front door.

He'd been so anxious to reach his father that he'd left the key in the lock. He knew instinctively that it wasn't the Kingdom of God at the door. He felt the house stiffen against the world that was reaching in for his father and him. He scrabbled the hall door open. Sam was in the hall.

All Sonny could think of was his father, powerless to defend himself or even to dodge the grasp of the world. "Get out," he screamed, and when his voice only made Sam flinch, he forgot the warning his father had given him, the warning that was so important Sonny's stomach had been bruised for a week. He put his hands on Sam to cast the intruder out of the house.

And then he realised how thoroughly the world had tricked him, for Sam's chest was the memory Sonny had driven so deep in his mind it had been like forgetting: his mother's chest, soft and warm and thrusting. He cried out as loudly and shrilly as Sam did, and flung her backwards onto the broken road. He staggered after her, for he wasn't fit to stay in a house that had been dedicated to God. He hadn't been ready to venture into the world after all, and it had possessed him. In the moment when he'd flung Sam's breasts away from him he'd felt his body reach secretly for her.

He slammed the door and snatched the key and flew at her, driving her towards the waste where the lost souls swarmed under the dead sky. He tore the spectacles off and shied them at her, narrowly missing her face. The lost souls might tear him to pieces when they saw he was routing one of them, but perhaps he could destroy her first—anything to prevent the world from reaching his father ahead of the Kingdom of God. Then he threw up his hands and wailed and gnashed his teeth, for the world had already touched his father. He had been so anxious to take his father to the safety of the Bibles that he'd forgotten to disinfect himself. He'd held his father with hands the world had tainted.

A smell that made him think of disinfectant drifted along the street to mock him. It was of petrol, in a jug that the trader who had kicked the van was carrying. The trader glanced at the spectacle of Sonny lurching at Sam, trying to knock her down as she retreated towards the market with her hands held out to calm him, and then the trader turned away as if he'd seen nothing unusual. He put down the jug in order to unscrew the cap on the side of the van, and at once Sonny knew exactly what to do.

He ran past Sam and grabbed a stick with a peeling red-hot tip from the nearest fire, and darted to the jug of petrol. He had just seized the handle when the trader turned and lunged at him. Sonny would have splashed petrol over him to drive him back, but how could he waste his father's only salvation? He tipped the jug over himself, and the world shrank back from him, unable to stop him. He poured the last inch of petrol into his mouth.

"Don't," Sam cried, and Sonny knew he was doing right at last. The taste like disinfectant stronger than he'd ever drunk confirmed it too. He ran at Sam, and she sprawled backwards, afraid he meant to spew petrol at her or brand her with the stick. Smiling for the first time since he could remember, Sonny strode back to the house.

He was turning the key when Sam and more of the devil's horde came running. Sonny made a red-hot sign of the cross in the air and stepped into the house, and threw the key contemptuously at them. The stick had burned short as he strode, the mouthful of petrol was searing his nostrils, but he had time, he mustn't swallow. The stick scorched his fingers as he took the three strides across the room to his father. Carefully opening his mouth, he anointed his father and the chair, and then he sat on his father's lap for the first time in his life. It was unyielding as iron, yet he had never felt so peaceful. Perhaps this was the Kingdom of God, or was about to be. As he touched the fire to his chest, he knew he had reached the end of the parable. He prayed he was about to learn its meaning.

It Helps If You Sing

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They could be on their summer holidays. If they were better able to afford one than he was, Bright wished them luck. Now that it was daylight, he could see into all the lowest rooms of the high rise opposite, but there was no sign of life on the first two floors. Perhaps all the tenants were singing the hymns he could hear somewhere in the suburb. He took his time about making himself presentable, and then he went downstairs.

The lifts were out of order. Presumably it was a repairman who peered at him through the smeary window of one scrawled metal door on the landing below his. The blurred face startled him so much that he was glad to see people on the third floor. Weren't they from the building opposite, from one of the apartments that had stayed unlit last night? The woman they had come to visit was losing a smiling contest with them. She stepped back grudgingly, and Bright heard the bolt and chain slide home as he reached the stairs.

The public library was on the ground floor. First he strolled to the job centre among the locked and armoured shops. There was nothing for a printer on the cards, and cards that offered training in a new career were meant for people thirty years younger. They needed the work more than he did, even if they had no families to provide for. He ambled back to the library, whistling a wartime song.

The young job-hunters had finished with the newspapers. Bright started with the tabloids, saving the serious papers for the afternoon, though even those suggested that the world over the horizon was seething with disease and crime and promiscuity and wars. Good news wasn't news, he told himself, but the last girl he'd ever courted before he'd grown too set in his ways was out there somewhere, and the world must be better for her. Still, it was no wonder that most readers came to the library for fiction rather than for the news. He supposed the smiling couple who were filling cartons with

books would take them to the housebound, although some of the titles he glimpsed seemed unsuitable for the easily offended. He watched the couple stalk away with the cartons, until the smoke of a distant bonfire obscured them.

The library closed at nine. Usually Bright would have been home for hours and listening to his radio cassette player, to Elgar or Vera Lynn or the dance bands his father used to play on the wind-up record player, but something about the day had made him reluctant to be alone. He read about evolution until the librarian began to harrumph loudly and smite books on the shelves.

Perhaps Bright should have gone up sooner. When he hurried round the outside of the building to the lobby, he had never seen the suburb so lifeless. Identical grey terraces multiplied to the horizon under a charred sky; a pair of trampled books lay amid the breathless litter on the anonymous concrete walks. He thought he heard a cry, but it might have been the start of the hymn that immediately was all he could hear, wherever it was.

The lifts still weren't working; both sets of doors that gave onto the scribbled lobby were open, displaying thick cables encrusted with darkness. By the time he reached the second floor he was slowing, grasping any banisters that hadn't been prised out of the concrete. The few lights that were working had been spray-painted until they resembled dying coals. Gangs of shadows flattened themselves against the walls, waiting to mug him. As he climbed, a muffled sound of hymns made him feel even more isolated. They must be on television, he could hear them in so many apartments.

One pair of lift doors on the fifth floor had jammed open. Unless Bright's eyes were the worse for his climb, the cable was shaking. He laboured upstairs to his landing, where the corresponding doors were open too. Once his head stopped swimming, he ventured to the edge of the unlit shaft. There was no movement, and nothing on the cable except the underside of the lift on the top floor. He turned toward his apartment. Two men were waiting for him.

Apparently they'd rung his bell. They were staring at his door and rubbing their hands stiffly. They wore black T-shirts and voluminous black overalls, and sandals on their otherwise bare feet. "What can I do for you?" Bright called.

They turned together, holding out their hands as if to show him how grey their palms looked under the stained lamp. Their narrow bland faces were already smiling. "Ask rather what we can do for you," one said.

Bright couldn't tell which of them had spoken, for neither smile gave an inch. They might be two men or even two women, despite their close-cropped hair. "You could let me at my front door," Bright said.

They gazed at him as if nothing he might say would stop them smiling, their eyes wide as old pennies stuck under the lids. When he pulled out his key and marched forward, they stepped aside, but only just. As he slipped the key into the lock, he sensed them close behind him, though he couldn't hear them. He pushed the door open, no wider than he needed to let himself in. They followed him.

"Whoa, whoa." He swung round in the stubby vestibule and made a grab at the door, too late. His visitors came plodding in, bumping the door against the wall. Their expressions seemed more generalised than ever. "What the devil do you think you're doing?" Bright cried.

That brought their smiles momentarily alive, as though it were a line they'd heard before. "We haven't anything to do with him," their high flat voices said, one louder than the other.

"And we hope you won't have," one added while his companion mouthed. They seemed no surer who should talk than who should close the door behind them. The one by the hinges elbowed it shut, almost trapping the other before he was in, until the other blundered through and squashed his companion behind the door. They might be fun, Bright supposed, and he could do with some of that. They seemed harmless enough, so long as they didn't stumble against anything breakable. "I can't give you much time," he warned them.

They tried to lumber into the main room together. One barged through the doorway and the other stumped after him, and they stared about the room. Presumably the blankness of their eyes meant they found it wanting, the sofa piled with Blight's clothes awaiting ironing, the snaps he'd taken on his walks in France and Germany and Greece, the portrait of herself his last girlfriend had given him, the framed copy of the article he'd printed for the newspaper shortly before he'd been made redundant, about how life should be a hundred years from now, advances in technology giving people more control over their own lives. He resented the disapproval, but he was more

disconcerted by how his visitors looked in the light of his apartment: grey from heads to toes, as if they needed dusting. "Who are you?" he demanded. "Where are you from?"

"We don't matter."

"Matter," the other agreed, and they said almost in unison: "We're just vessels of the Word."

"Better give it to me, then," Bright said, staying on his feet so as to deter them from sitting: God only knew how long it would take them to stand up. "I've a lot to do before I can lie down."

They turned to him as if they had to move their whole bodies to look. Whichever responded, the voice through the fixed smile sounded more pinched than ever. "What do you call your life?"

They had no reason to feel superior to him. The grey ingrained in their flesh suggested disuse rather than hard work, and disused was how they smelled in the small room. "I've had a fair life, and it's only right I should make way for someone who can work the new machines. I've had enough of a life to help me cope with the dole."

His visitors stared as if they meant to dull him into accepting whatever they were offering. The sight of their faces stretched tight by their smiles was so disagreeably fascinating that he jumped, having lost his sense of time passing, when one spoke. "Your life is empty until you let him in."

"Isn't two of you enough? Who's that, now?"

The figure on his left reached in a pocket, and the overalls pulled flat at the crotch. The jerky hand produced a videocassette that bore a picture of a priest. "I can't play that," Bright said.

His visitors pivoted sluggishly to survey the room. Their smiles turned away from him, turned back unchanged. They must have seen that his radio could play cassettes, for now the right hand visitor was holding one. "Listen before it's too late," they urged in unison.

"As soon as I've time." Bright would have promised more just then to rid himself of their locked smiles and their stale sweetish odour. He held open the door to the vestibule and shrank back as one floundered in the doorway while the other fumbled at the outer door. He held his breath as the second

set of footsteps plodded through the vestibule, and let out a gasp of relief as the outer door slammed.

Perhaps deodorants were contrary to their faith. He opened the window and leaned into the night to breathe. More of the building opposite was unlit, as if a flood of darkness were rising through the floors, and he would have expected to see more houses lit by now. He could hear more than one muffled hymn, or perhaps the same one at different stages of its development. He was wondering where he'd seen the face of the priest on the videocassette.

When the smoke of a bonfire began to scrape his throat, he closed the window. He set up the ironing board and switched on the electric iron. It took him half an hour to press his clothes, and he still couldn't remember what he'd read about the priest. Perhaps he could remind himself. He carried the radio to his chair by the window.

As he lifted the cassette out of its plastic box, he winced. A sharp corner of the cassette had pricked him. He sucked his thumb and gnawed it to dislodge the sliver of plastic that had penetrated his skin. He dropped the cassette into the player and snapped the aperture shut, then he switched on, trying to ignore the ache in his thumb. He heard a hiss, the click of a microphone, a voice. "I am Father Lazarus. I'm going to tell you the whole truth," it said.

It was light as a disc jockey's voice, and virtually sexless. Bright knew the name; perhaps he would be able to place it now that the ache was fading. "If you knew the truth," the voice said, "wouldn't you want to help your fellow man by telling him?"

"Depends," Bright growled, blaming the voice for the injury to his thumb.

"And if you've just said no, don't you see that proves you don't know the truth?"

"Ho ho, very clever," Bright scoffed. The absence of the pain was unexpectedly comforting: it felt like a calm in which he need do nothing except let the voice reach him. "Get on with it," he muttered.

"Christ was the truth. He was the word that couldn't deny itself although they made him suffer all the torments of the damned. Why would they have treated him like that if they hadn't been afraid of the truth? He was the truth made flesh, born without the preamble of lust and never indulging in it

himself, and we have only to become vessels of the truth to welcome him back before it's too late."

Not too late to recall where he'd seen the priest's face, Bright thought, if he didn't nod off first, he felt so numbed. "Look around you," the voice was saying, "and see how late it is. Look and see the world ending in corruption and lust and man's indifference."

The suggestion seemed knowing. If you looked out at the suburb, you would see the littered walkways where nobody walked at night except addicts and muggers and drunks. There was better elsewhere, Bright told himself, and managed to turn his head on its stiff neck toward the portrait photograph. "Can you want the world to end this way?" the priest demanded. "Isn't it true that you wish you could change it but feel helpless? Believe me, you can. Christ says you can. He had to suffer agonies for the truth, but we offer you the end of pain and the beginning of eternal life. The resurrection of the body has begun."

Not this body, Bright thought feebly. His injured hand alone felt as heavy as himself. Even when he realised that he'd left the iron switched on, it seemed insufficient reason for him to move. "Neither men nor women shall we be in the world to come," the voice was intoning. "The flesh shall be freed of the lusts that have blinded us to the truth."

He blamed sex for everything, Bright mused, and instantly he remembered. EVANGELIST IS VOODOO WIDOWER, the headline inside a tabloid had said, months ago. The priest had gone to Haiti to save his wife's people, only for her to return to her old faith and refuse to go home with him. Hadn't he been quoted in the paper as vowing to use his enemies' methods to defeat them? Certainly he'd announced that he was renaming himself Lazarus. His voice seemed to be growing louder, so loud that the speaker ought to be vibrating. "The Word of God will fill your emptiness. You will go forth to save your fellow man and be rewarded on the day of judgement. Man was made to praise God, and so he did until woman tempted him in the garden. When the sound of our praise is so great that it reaches heaven, our saviour shall return."

Bright did feel emptied, hardly there at all. If giving in to the voice gave him back his strength, wouldn't that prove it was telling the truth? But he felt as if it wanted to take the place of his entire life. He gazed at the photograph, remembering the good-byes at the bus station, the last kiss and

the pressure of her hands on his, the glow of the bus turning the buds on a tree into green fairy lights as the vehicle vanished over the crest of a hill, and then he realised that the priest's voice had stopped.

He felt as if he'd outwitted the tape until a choir began the hymn he had been hearing all day. The emptiness within him was urging him to join in, but he wouldn't while he had any strength. He managed to suck his bottom lip between his teeth and gnaw it, though he wasn't sure if he could feel even a distant ache. Voodoo widower, he chanted to himself to break up the oppressive repetition of the hymn, voodoo widower. He was fending off the hymn, though it seemed impossibly loud in his head, when he heard another sound. The outer door was opening.

He couldn't move, he couldn't even call out. The numbness that had spread from his thumb through his body had sculpted him to the chair. He heard the outer door slam as bodies blundered voicelessly about the vestibule. The door to the room inched open, then jerked wide, and the two overalled figures struggled into the room.

He'd known who they were as soon as he'd heard the outer door. The hymn on the tape must have been a signal that he was finished—that he was like them. They'd tampered with the latch on their way out, he realised dully. He seemed incapable of feeling or reacting, even when the larger of the figures leaned down to gaze into his eyes, presumably to check that they were blank, and Bright saw how the grey, stretched lips were fraying at the corners. For a moment Bright thought the man's eyes were going to pop out of their seedy sockets at him, yet he felt no inclination to flinch. Perhaps he was recognising himself as he would be—yet didn't that mean he wasn't finished after all?

The man stood back from scrutinising him and turned up the volume of the hymn. Bright thought the words were meant to fill his head, but he could still choose what to think. He wasn't that empty, he'd done his bit of good for the world, he'd stood aside to give someone else a chance. Whatever the priest had brought back from Haiti might have deadened Bright's body, but it hadn't quite deadened his mind. He fixed his gaze on the photograph and thought of the day he'd walked on a mountain with her. He was beginning to fight back toward his feelings when the other man came out of the kitchen, bearing the sharpest knife in the place.

They weren't supposed to make Bright suffer, the tape had said so. He could see no injuries on them. Suppose there were mutilations that weren't visible? "Neither men nor women shall we be in the world to come." At last Bright understood why his visitors seemed sexless. He tried to shrink back as the man who had turned up the hymn took hold of the electric iron.

The man grasped it by the point before he found the handle. Bright saw the grey skin of his fingers curl up like charred paper, but the man didn't react at all. He closed his free hand around the handle and waited while his companion plodded toward Bright, the edge of the knife blade glinting like a razor. "It helps if you sing," said the man with the knife. Though Bright had never been particularly religious, nobody could have prayed harder than he started to pray then. He was praying that by the time the first of them reached him, he would feel as little as they did.

Welcomeland

"*Welcomeland* owes its conception to Alan Moore, one of the contemporary British giants—Bryan Talbot and Neil Gaiman and John Coulthart are others—of the comic book. At a party after a signing we did in Peterborough, Alan told me of an abandoned Northern industrial town that a businessman had sought to turn into a theme park until his money ran out. Substances ingested at the party may have helped me to develop the notion as weirdly as it deserved."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

Written in: 1987
First published in *Words International Volume 1, Number 4*, 1988
Also published in: *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

Slade had been driving all day when he came to the road home. The sign isolated by the sullenly green landscape of overgrown canals and weedy fields had changed. Instead of the name of the town there was a yellow pointer, startlingly bright beneath the dull June sky, for the theme park. Presumably vandals had damaged it, for only the final syllables remained: ———MELAND. He mightn't have another chance to see what he'd helped to build. He'd found nothing on his drive north that his clients might want to buy or invest in. He lifted his foot from the brake and let the car carry him onward.

Suppressed gleams darted through the clogged canals, across the cranium of the landscape. The sun was a ball of mist that kept failing to form in the sky. The railway blocked Slade's view as he approached the town. He caught himself expecting to see the town laid out below him, but of course he'd only ever seen it like that from the train. The railway was as deserted as the road had been for the last hour of his drive.

The road sloped toward the bridge under the railway, between banks so untended that weeds lashed the car. The mouth of the bridge had been made into a gateway: gates painted gold were folded back against the wall of the embankment. The shrill darkness in the middle of the tunnel was so thick that Slade reached to turn on his headlamps. Then the car left its echoes behind and showed him the town, and he couldn't help sighing. It looked as if the building of the park had got no further than the gates.

He'd bought shares in the project when his father had forwarded the prospectus, with Slade's new address scribbled across it so harshly that the

envelope had been torn in several places. He'd hoped the park might revive his father and the town now that employment, like Slade, had moved down south. Now his father was dead, and the entrepreneur had gone bankrupt soon after the shares had been issued, and the main street was shabbier than ever: the pavements were turning green, the net curtains of the gardenless terraces were grey as old cobwebs, the displays in the shop windows that interrupted the ranks of cramped houses had been drained of colour. Slade had to assume this was early closing day, for he could see nobody at all.

The town hadn't looked so unwelcoming when he'd left, but he felt as if it had. Nevertheless he owed the place a visit, the one he should have made when his father was dying, if only Slade had known he was, if only they hadn't become estranged when Slade's mother had died—"If only" just about summed up the town, he thought bitterly as he drove to the hotel.

The squat black building was broad as four houses and four storeys high. He'd often sheltered under the iron and glass awning from the rain, but whatever the place had been called in those days, it wasn't the Old Hotel. The revolving doors stumbled round their track with a chorus of stifled moans and let him into the dark brown lobby, where the only illumination came from a large skylight over the stairs. The thin grey-haired young woman at the desk tapped her chin several times in the rhythm of some tune she must be hearing (dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum), squared a stack of papers, and then she looked toward him with a smile and a raising of eyebrows. "Hello, may I help you?"

"Sorry, yes, of course." Slade stepped forward to let her see him. "I'd like a room for the night."

"What would you like?"

"Pardon? Something at the top," Slade stammered, beginning to blush as he tried not to stare at her vacant eyes.

"I'm sure we can accommodate you."

He didn't doubt it, since the key board behind her was full. "I'll fill in one of your forms then, shall I?"

"Thank you, sir, that's fine."

There was a pad of them in front of her, but no pen. Slade uncapped his fountain pen and completed the top form, then pushed the pad between her

hands as they groped over the counter. "Room twenty will be at the top, won't it?" he said, too loudly. "Could I have that one?"

"If there's anything else we can do to make you more at home, just let us know."

He assumed that meant yes. "I'll get the key, shall I?"

"Thank you very much," she said, and thumped a bell on the counter. Perhaps she'd misheard him, but the man who opened the door between the stairs and the desk seemed to have heard Slade clearly enough, for he only poked his dim face toward the lobby before closing the door again. Slade leaned across the desk, his cheeks stiff with blushing, and managed to hook the key with one finger, almost swaying against the receptionist as he lunged. Working all day in the indirect light hadn't done her complexion any good, to put it mildly, and now he saw that the papers she was fidgeting with were blank. "That's done it," he babbled, and scrambled toward the stairs.

The upper floors were lit only by windows. Murky sunlight was retreating over ranks of featureless white doors. If the hotel was conserving electricity, that didn't seem to augur well for the health of the town. All the same, when he stepped into the room that smelled of stale carpet and crossed to the window to let in some air, he had his first sight of the park.

A terrace led away from the main road some hundred yards from the hotel, and there the side streets ended. The railway enclosed a mile or more of bulky unfamiliar buildings, of which he could distinguish little more than that they bore names on their roofs. All the names were turned away from him, but this must be the park. It was full of people, grouped among the buildings, and the railway had been made into a ride; cars with grinning mouths were stranded in dips in the track.

Surely there weren't people in the cars. They must be dummies, stored up there out of the way. Their long grey hair flapped, their heads swayed unanimously in the wind. They seemed more lively than the waiting crowd, but just now that didn't concern him. He was willing the house where he'd spent the first half of his life to have survived the rebuilding.

As he turned from the window he saw the card above the bedside phone. DIAL 9 FOR PARK INFORMATION, it said. He dialled and waited as the

room settled back into staleness. Eventually he demanded, "Park Information?"

"Hello, may I help you?"

The response was so immediate that the speaker must have been waiting silently for him. As he stiffened to fend off the unexpectedness the voice said, "May we ask how you heard of our attraction?"

"I bought some shares," Slade said, distracted by wondering where he knew the man's voice from. "I'm from here, actually. Wanted to do what I could for the old place."

"We all have to return to our roots. No profit in delaying."

"I wanted to ask about the park," Slade interrupted, resenting the way the voice had abandoned its official function. "Where does it end? What's still standing?"

"Less has changed than you might think."

"Would you know if Hope Street's still there?"

"Whatever people wanted most has been preserved, wherever they felt truly at home," the voice said, and even more maddeningly, "It's best if you go and look for yourself."

"When will the park be open?" Slade almost shouted.

"When you get there, never fear."

Slade gave up, and flung the receiver into the air, a theatrical gesture which made him blush furiously but which failed to silence the guilt the voice had awakened. He'd moved to London in order to live with the only woman he'd ever shared a bed with, and when they'd parted amicably less than a year later he had been unable to go home: his parents would have insisted that the breakup proved them right about her and the relationship. His father had blamed him for breaking his mother's heart, and the men hadn't spoken since her death. The way Slade's father had stared at him over her grave had withered Slade's feelings for good, but you prospered better without feelings, he'd often told himself. Now that he was home he felt compelled to make his peace with his memories.

He sent himself out of the room before his thoughts could weigh him down. The receptionist was fidgeting with her papers. As Slade stepped into the lobby the bellman's door opened, the shadowy face peered out and

withdrew. Slade was at the revolving doors when the receptionist said, "Hello, may I help you?" He struggled out through the doors, his face blazing.

The street was still deserted. The deadened sky appeared to hover just above the slate roofs like a ghost of the smoke of the derelict factories. Even his car looked abandoned, grey with the grime of his drive. It was the only car on the road.

Was the park somehow soundproofed so as not to annoy the residents? Even if the rides hadn't begun, surely he ought to be able to hear the crowd beyond the houses. He felt as if the entire town were holding its breath. As he hurried along the buckled mossy pavement, his footsteps sounded metallic, mechanical. He turned the curve that led the road to the town hall. Among the scrawny houses of the terrace opposite him, there was a lit shop.

It was the bakery, where his mother would buy cakes for the family each weekend. The taste of his favourite cake, sponge and cream and jam, filled his mouth at the thought. He could see the baker, looking older but not as old as Slade would have expected, serving a woman in the buttery light that seemed brighter than electricity, brighter than Slade had ever seen the shop before. The sight and the taste made him feel that if he opened the shop door he could step into memory, buy cakes as a homecoming surprise and walk home, back into the warmth of having tea beside the coal fire, the long quiet evenings with his parents when he had been growing up but hadn't yet outgrown them.

He wasn't entitled to imagine that, since he'd ensured it couldn't happen. His mouth went dry, the taste vanished. He passed the shop without crossing the road, averting his face lest the baker should call out to him. As he passed, the light went out. Perhaps it had been a ray of sunlight, though he could see no gap in the clouds.

Someone at the town hall should know if his home was intact. There must be people in the hall, for he could hear a muffled waltz. He went up the worn steps and between the pillars of the token portico. The double doors were too large for the building, which was about the size of the hotel, and seemed at first too heavy or too swollen for him to shift. Then the rusty handles yielded to his weight, and the doors shuddered inward. The lobby was unlit and deserted.

He could still hear the waltz. A track of grey daylight stretched ahead of him and showed him an architect's model on a table in the middle of the lobby. He followed his vague shadow over the wedge of lit carpet. The model had been vandalised so thoroughly it was impossible to see what view of the town it represented. If it had shown streets as well as rides, there was no way of telling where either ended or began.

He made his way past the unattended information desk toward the music. A minute's stumbling along the dark corridor brought him to the ballroom. The only light beyond the dusty glass doors came from high transoms, but couples were waltzing on the bare floor to music that sounded oddly more distant than ever. In the dimness their faces were grey blotches. It must be some kind of old folks' treat, he reassured himself, for more than half of the dancers were bald. Loath to trouble them, he turned back toward the lobby.

The area outside the wedge of daylight was almost indistinguishably dim. He could just make out the side of the information desk that faced away from the public. Someone appeared to be crouched beside the chair behind the desk. If the figure had fallen there Slade ought to find out what was wrong, but the position of the figure was so dismayingly haphazard that he could only believe it was a dummy. The dancers were still whirling sluggishly, always in the same direction, as if they might never stop. He glanced about, craving reassurance, and caught sight of a sliver of light at the end of the corridor—the gap around a door.

It must lead to the park. He almost tripped on the carpet as he headed for the door. It was open because it had been vandalised: it was half off its hinges, and he had to strain to lift it clear of the rucked carpet. He thought of having to go back through the building, and heaved at the door so savagely that it ripped the sodden carpet. He squeezed through the gap, his face throbbing with embarrassment, and ran.

He was so anxious to be away from the damage he'd caused that at first he hardly observed where he was going. Nobody was about, that was the main thing. He'd run some hundred yards between the derelict houses before he wondered where the crowd he'd seen from the hotel might be. He halted clumsily and stared around him. He was already in the park.

It seemed they had tried to preserve as much of the town as they could. Clumps of three or four terraced houses had been left standing in no apparent pattern, with signs on their roofs. He still couldn't read the signs,

even those that were facing him; they might have been vandalised—many of the windows were smashed—or left uncompleted. If it hadn't been for the roundabout he saw between the houses, he might not have realised he was in the park.

It wasn't the desolation that troubled him so much as the impression that the town was yet struggling to change, to live. If his home was involved in this transformation, he wasn't sure that he wanted to see, but he didn't think he could leave without seeing. He made his way over the rubble between two blocks of houses.

The sky was darker than it had been when he'd entered the town hall. The gathering twilight slowed him down, and so did sights in the park. Two supine poles, each with a huge red smiling mouth at one end, might have been intended to support a screen, and perhaps the section of a helter-skelter choked with mud was all that had been delivered, though it seemed to corkscrew straight down into the earth. He wondered if any ride except the roundabout had been completed, and then he realised with a jerk of the heart that he had been passing the sideshows for minutes. They were in the houses, and so was the crowd.

At least, he assumed those were players seated around a Bingo counter inside the section of the terrace ahead, though the figures in the dimness were so still he couldn't be certain. He preferred to sidle past rather than go closer to look. The roundabout was behind him now, and he thought he saw a relatively clear path toward where his old house should be. But the sight of the dungeon inside the next jagged fragment of terrace froze him.

It wasn't just a dungeon, it was a torture chamber. Half-naked dummies were chained to the walls. Signs hung around their necks: one was a RAPIST, another a CHILD MOLESTER. A woman with curlers like worms in her hair was prodding one dummy's armpit with a red-hot poker, a man in a cloth cap was wrenching out his victim's teeth. All the figures, not just the victims, were absolutely motionless. If this was someone's idea of waxworks, Slade didn't see the point. He had been staring so hard and so long that the figures appeared to be staggering, unable to hold their poses, when he heard something come to life behind him.

He felt as if the dimness in which his feet were sunk had become mud. Even if the sounds hadn't been so large he would have preferred not to see what was making them, wheezing feebly and scraping and thudding like a

giant heart straining to revive. He forced his head to turn, his neck creaking, but at first he could see only how dark the place had grown while he had been preoccupied with the dungeon. He glimpsed movement as large as a house between the smudged outlines of the buildings, and shrank into himself. But it was only the roundabout, plodding in the dark.

He couldn't quite laugh at his dread. The horses were moving as if they could hardly raise themselves and yearned to fall more quickly and finally than they could. There were figures on their backs, and now he realised he had glimpsed the figures earlier, in which case they must have been sitting immobile: waiting for the dark? They weren't going anywhere, they were no threat to him, he could look away and make for the house—but when he did he recoiled, so violently he almost fell. The torturers in the dungeon were stirring. They were turning their heads toward him.

He couldn't see much of their faces, and that didn't seem to be only the fault of the dark. He began to sink into a crouch as if they mightn't see him, he was close to squeezing his eyes shut as though that would make him invisible, the way he'd believed it would when he was a child. Then he flung himself aside, out of range of any eyes that might be searching for him, and fled.

Though the night was thickening, he could see more than he wanted to see. One block of unlit houses had been turned into a shooting gallery, although at first he didn't realise that the six disembodied heads nodding forward in unison were meant to be targets. They must be, not least because all six had the same face—a face he knew from somewhere. He stumbled past the heads as the six of them leaned toward him out of the dark beyond the figures that were aiming at them. He felt as if the staring heads were pleading with him to intervene. He was so desperate to outdistance his clinging dismay that he almost fell into the canal.

He hadn't noticed it at first because a section had been walled in to make a tunnel. It must be a Tunnel of Love: a gondola was inching its way out of the weedy mouth, bringing a sound of choked slopping and a smell of unhealthy growth. Slade could just distinguish the heads of the couple in the gondola. They looked as if they hadn't seen daylight for years.

He swallowed a shriek and retreated alongside the canal, toward the main road. As he slithered along the overgrown stony margin, flailing his arms to keep his balance, he remembered where he'd seen the face on the targets: in

a photograph. It was the entrepreneur's face. The man had died of a heart attack soon after he'd gone bankrupt, and hadn't he gone bankrupt shortly after persuading the townsfolk to invest whatever money they had? Slade began to mutter desperately, apologising for whatever he might have helped to cause if it had harmed the town, if anyone who might be listening resented it. He'd only been trying to do his best for the town, he was sorry if it had gone wrong. He was still apologising breathlessly as he sprawled up a heap of debris and onto the bridge that carried the main road over the canal.

He fled along the unlit road, past the town hall and the sound of the relentless waltz in the dark. The aproned baker was serving at his counter, performing the same movements for almost certainly the same customer, and Slade felt as though that was his fault somehow, as though he ought to have accepted the offer of light. He mustn't confuse himself with that, he must get to his car and drive, anywhere so long as it was out of this place. It occurred to him that anyone who could leave the town had done so—and then, as he came in sight of his car, he thought of the blind woman in the hotel.

He mustn't leave her. She mustn't be aware of what had happened to the town, whatever that was. She hadn't even switched on the lights of the hotel. He shoved desperately at the revolving doors, which felt crusty and brittle under his hands, and staggered into the lobby. He grabbed the edges of the doorway to steady himself while his eyes adjusted to the murk that swarmed like darkness giving birth. The receptionist was at her desk, tapping her chin in the rhythm of the melody inside her head. She shuffled papers and glanced up. "Hello, may I help you?"

"No, I want—" Slade called across the lobby, and faltered as his voice came flatly back to him.

"What would you like?"

He was afraid to go closer. He'd remembered the bellman, who must be waiting to open the door beside the desk and who might even come out now that it was dark. That wasn't why Slade couldn't speak, however. He'd realised that the echo of his voice sounded disconcertingly like the voice on the hotel phone. "I'm sure we can accommodate you," the receptionist said.

She was only trying to welcome a guest, Slade reassured himself. He was still trying to urge himself forward when she said, "Thank you, sir, that's fine."

She must be on the phone, otherwise she wouldn't be saying, "If there's anything else we can do to make you more at home, just let us know." Now she would put down the phone Slade couldn't see, and he would go to her, now that she'd said, "Thank you very much"—and then she thumped the bell on the counter.

Slade fought his way out of the rusty trap of the revolving doors as the bellman poked his glimmering face into the lobby. The receptionist was only as sightless as the rest of the townsfolk, he thought like a scream of hysterical laughter. He'd realised something else: the tune she was tapping. Dum, dum-da-dum, dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum. It was Chopin: the Dead March.

He dragged his keys out of his pocket, ripping stitches loose, as he ran to his car. The key wouldn't fit the lock. Of course it would—he was inserting it somehow the wrong way. It crunched into the slot, which sounded rusty, just as he realised why the angle was wrong. Both tyres on that side of the car were flat. The wheels were resting on their metal rims.

He didn't need the car, he could run. Surely the townsfolk couldn't move very fast or, to judge by his observations, very far. He fled to the tunnel that led under the railway. But even if he made himself venture through the shrilly whispering dark in there to the gates, it would be no use. The gates were shut, and several bars thicker than his arm had slid across them into sockets in the wall.

He turned away as if he was falling, as if the pressure of the scream he was suppressing was starving his brain. The road was still deserted. The only other way out of the town was at the far end. He ran, his lungs rusty and aching, past houses where families appeared to be dining in the dark, past the town hall with its smothered waltz, over the bridge toward which a gondola was floundering, bearing a couple whose heads lolled apart from each other and then knocked their mouths together with a hollow bony sound. The curve of the road cut off his view of the far side of town until he was almost there. The last of the houses came in sight, and he tried to tell himself that it was only darkness that blocked the road. But it was solid, and high as the roofs.

Whether it was a pile of rubble or an imperfectly built wall, it was certainly too dangerous to climb. Slade turned away, feeling steeped in despair thick as pitch, and saw his house.

Was it his panic that made it appear to glow faintly in the midst of the terrace? Otherwise it looked exactly like its neighbours, a bedroom window above a curtained parlour beside a nondescript front door with a narrow fanlight. He didn't care how he was able to see it, he was too grateful that he was. As he fled toward it he had the sudden notion that his father might have changed the lock since Slade had left, that Slade's key would no longer let him in.

The lock yielded easily. The door opened wide and showed him the dark hall, which led past the stairs to the parlour on the left, the kitchen at the back. The house felt more familiar than anything else in the world, and it was the only refuge available to him, yet he was afraid to step forward. He was afraid his parents might be there, compulsively repeating some everyday task, blind to him and the state of themselves—though if what was left of them could be aware of him, that might be even worse.

Then he thought he heard movement in the street, and he stumbled to the parlour door and pushed it open. The parlour was deserted, the couch and chairs were as grey as the hearth they faced, yet the stagnant dimness seemed tense, poised to reveal that the room wasn't empty after all. The kitchen with its wooden chairs that pressed against the bare table between the oven and the sink seemed breathless with imminence too, but he was almost sure that he heard movement, slow and stealthy, somewhere outside the house. He scrambled back to the front door and closed it as silently as he could, then he groped his way upstairs.

The bathroom window was a dull rectangle which gleamed faintly in the mirror like a lid that was opening. The bath looked as if it were brimming with tar. Even that was less dismaying than his parents' bedroom: suppose he found them in the bed, struggling to make love like fleshless puppets? He felt as if he were shrinking, reverting to the age he'd been when his father had shouted at him not to open their door. His hands fluttered at it now and inched it far enough to show him their empty bed, and then he dodged into his room.

His bed was still there, his chest of drawers, his wardrobe hardly wide enough for him to hide in any longer. He shouldered the door of the room closed tight and huddled against it. He felt suddenly as though if he went to the bed he might awaken and discover he had been dreaming of the town, just a nightmare about growing up. He mustn't take refuge in the bed, it

would be too like retreating into his childhood—and then he realised he already had.

He'd been left alone in the house just once when he was a child. He'd awakened and blundered through the empty rooms, every one of which seemed to be concealing some terror that was about to show itself. He remembered how that had felt: exactly as the house felt now. He'd retraced the memory without realising. Then a neighbour who'd been meant to keep an eye on him had looked in to reassure him, but he prayed that wouldn't happen now, that nobody would come to keep him company. Surely his house couldn't be where they felt most at home.

"Never fear," the voice on the phone had advised him, but Slade had. The night couldn't last forever, he told himself desperately, pressing himself against the door. The sun would rise, the bars would slide back to let the gates open, and even if they didn't he would be able to see a way out. But he felt as if there was nowhere to go: he couldn't recall the faces of his colleagues, the name of the London firm, even the name of the street where he lived. He didn't need to remember those now, he needed only to stay awake until dawn. Surely the rest of the town was too busy to welcome him home, unless it was his fear that was bringing the movement he could hear in the street. It sounded like a wordless crowd which could barely walk but which was determined to try. They couldn't move fast, he thought like a last prayer, they would have to stop when the sun came up—but clearer than that was the thought of how endless the night could seem when you were a child.

Illustration by Jill Bauman, taken from Weird Tales, Spring 1992.

1988

The Guide

"Part of the fragment at the centre of *The Guide*—the sentence about the spider in human form—presented itself to me in exactly those words while I was strolling with the family in Delamere Forest. When Paul Olsen asked me to contribute a traditional tale to *Post Mortem*, I decided to make it a somewhat didactic piece, because I'd been growing impatient with writers advising younger writers not to learn from the classics of the field: since I'd learned so much from M.R. James, I decided that I'd try to write a tale which would seek to demonstrate that his structure is still vital—with what success, the reader must judge."—Ramsey Campbell, introduction to the story in *The Year's Best Horror Stories 18*

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Also published in: *Waking Nightmares*

The used bookshops seemed to be just as useless. In the first, Kew felt as if he had committed a gaffe by asking for the wrong James or even by asking for a book. The woman who was minding the next bookshop, her lap draped in black knitting so voluminous that she appeared to be mending a skirt she had on, assured him that the bookseller would find him something in the storeroom. "He's got lots of books in the back," she confided to Kew, and as he leaned on his stick and leafed through an annual he'd read seventy years ago, she kept up a commentary: "Fond of books, are you? I've read some books, books I'd call books. Make you sneeze, though, some of these old books. Break your toes, some of these books, if you're not careful. I don't know what people want with such big books. It's like having a stone slab on top of you, reading one of those books..." As Kew sidled toward the door she said ominously, "He wouldn't want you going before he found you your books."

"My family will be wondering what's become of me," Kew offered, and fled.

Holidaymakers were driving away from the beach, along the narrow street of shops and small houses encrusted with pebbles and seashells. Some of the shops were already closing. He made for the newsagent's, in the hope that though all the horror books had looked too disgusting to touch, something more like literature might have found its way unnoticed onto one of the shelves, and then he realised that what he'd taken for a booklover's

front room, unusually full of books, was in fact a shop. The sill inside the window was crowded with potted plants and cacti. Beyond them an antique till gleamed on a desk, and closer to the window, poking out of the end of a shelf, was a book by M. R. James.

The door admitted him readily and tunefully. He limped quickly to the shelf, and sighed. The book was indeed by James: Montague Rhodes James, O. M.. Litt. D., F. B. A., F. S. A., Provost of Eton. It was a guide to Suffolk and Norfolk.

The shopkeeper appeared through the bead curtain of the doorway behind the desk. "That's a lovely book, my dear," she croaked smokily, pointing with her cigarette, "and cheap."

Kew glanced at the price pencilled on the flyleaf. Not bad for a fiver, he had to admit, and only today he'd been complaining that although this was James country there wasn't a single book of his to be seen. He leafed through the guide, and the first page he came to bore a drawing of a bench end, carved with a doglike figure from whose grin a severed head dangled by the hair. "I'll chance it," he murmured, and dug his wallet out of the pocket of his purple cardigan.

The shopkeeper must have been too polite or too eager for a sale to mention that it was closing time, for as soon as he was on the pavement he heard her bolt the door. As he made his way to the path down to the beach, a wind from the sea fluttered the brightly striped paper in which she'd wrapped the volume. Laura and her husband Frank were shaking towels and rolling them up while their eight-year-olds kicked sand at each other. "Stop that, you two, or else," Laura cried.

"I did say you should drop me and go on somewhere," Kew said as he reached them.

"We wouldn't dream of leaving you by yourself, Teddy," Frank said, brushing sand from his bristling gingery torso.

"He means we'd rather stay with you," Laura said, yanking at her swimsuit top, which Kew could see she hadn't been wearing.

"Of course that's what I meant, old feller," Frank shouted as if Kew were deaf.

They were trying to do their best for him, insisting that he come with them on this holiday—the first he'd taken since Laura's mother had died—but

why couldn't they accept that he wanted to be by himself? "Grandad's bought a present," Bruno shouted.

"Is it for us?" Virginia demanded.

"I'm afraid it isn't the kind of book you would like."

"We would if it's horrible," she assured him. "Mum and dad don't mind."

"It's a book about this part of the country. I rather think you'd be bored."

She shook back her hair, making her earrings jangle, and screwed up her face. "I already am."

"If you make faces like that no boys will be wanting you tonight at the disco," Frank said, and gathered up the towels and the beach toys, trotted to the car which he'd parked six inches short of a garden fence near the top of the path, hoisted his armful with one hand while he unlocked the hatchback with the other, dumped his burden in and pushed the family one by one into the car. "Your grandad's got his leg," he rumbled when the children complained about having to sit in the back seat, and Kew felt more of a nuisance than ever.

They drove along the tortuous coast road to Cromer, and Kew went up to his room. Soon Laura knocked on his door to ask whether he was coming down for an aperitif. He would have invited her to sit with him so that they could reminisce about her mother, but Frank shouted "Come on, old feller, give yourself an appetite. We don't want you fading away on us."

Kew would have had more of an appetite if the children hadn't swapped horrific jokes throughout the meal. "That's enough, now," Laura kept saying. Afterwards coffee was served in the lounge, and Kew tried to take refuge in his book.

It was more the M. R. James he remembered nostalgically than he would have dared hope. Comic and macabre images lay low amid the graceful sentences. Here was 'that mysterious being Sir John Shorne', Rector of North Marston, who 'was invoked against ague; but his only known act was to conjure the devil into a boot, the occasion and sequelae of this being alike unknown.' Here were the St. Albans monks, who bought two of St. Margaret's fingers; but who, Kew wondered, were the Crouched Friars, who had 'one little house, at Great Whelnetham'? Then there were 'the three kings or young knights who are out hunting and pass a churchyard, where they meet three terrible corpses, hideous with the ravages of death, who say

to them, "As we are, so will you be"'—a popular subject for decorating churches, apparently.

Other references were factual, or at least were presented as such: not only a rector named Blastus Godly, but a merman caught at Orford in the thirteenth century, who "could not be induced to take an interest in the services of the church, nor indeed to speak." Kew's grunt of amusement at this attracted the children, who had finished reading the horror comics they'd persuaded their father to buy them. "Can we see?" Virginia said.

Kew showed them the sketch of the bench-end with the severed head, and thought of ingratiating himself further with them by pointing out a passage referring to the tradition that St. Erasmus had had his entrails wound out of him on a windlass, the kind of thing their parents tried half-heartedly to prevent them from watching on videocassette. Rebuking himself silently, he leafed in search of more acceptably macabre anecdotes, and then he stared. "Grandad," Bruno said as if Kew needed to be told, "someone's been writing in your book."

A sentence at the end of the penultimate chapter—"It is almost always worth while to halt and look into a Norfolk church"—had been ringed in greyish ink, and a line as shaky as the circumscription led to a scribbled paragraph that filled the lower half of the page. "I hope they knocked a few quid off the price for that, old feller," Frank said. "If they didn't I'd take it back."

"Remember when you smacked me," Laura said to Kew, "for drawing in one of mummy's books?"

Frank gave him a conspiratorial look which Kew found so disturbing that he could feel himself losing control, unable to restrain himself from telling Laura that Virginia shouldn't be dressed so provocatively, that the children should be in bed instead of staying up for the disco, that he was glad Laura's mother wasn't here to see how they were developing... He made his excuses and rushed himself up to his room.

He should sleep before the dull sounds of the disco made that impossible, but he couldn't resist poring over the scribbled paragraph. After a few minutes he succeeded in deciphering the first phrase, which was underlined. "Best left out," it said.

If the annotation described something better than the book included, Kew would like to know what it was. Studying the phrase had given him a headache, which the disco was liable to worsen. He got ready for bed and lay in the dark, improvising a kind of silent lullaby out of the names of places he'd read in the guidebook:

> "Great Snoring and Creeling St. Mary, Bradfield Combust and Breckles and Snape; Herringfleet, Rattlesden, Chipley and Weeting; Bungay and Blickling and Diss..."

Almost asleep, too much so to be troubled by the draught that he could hear rustling paper near his bed, he wondered if the scribbled phrase could mean that the omission had been advisable. In that case, why note it at such length?

He slept, and dreamed of walking from church to church, the length and breadth of East Anglia, no longer needing his stick. He found the church he was looking for, though he couldn't have said what his criteria were, and lay down beneath the ribbed vault that somehow reminded him of himself. Laura and the children came to visit him, and he sat up. "As I am, so will you be," he said in a voice whose unfamiliarity dismayed him. They hadn't come to visit but to view him, he thought, terrified of doing so himself. It seemed he had no choice, for his body was audibly withering, a process which dragged his head down to show him what had become of him. Barely in time, his cry wakened him.

If the dream meant anything, it confirmed that he needed time by himself. He lay willing his heartbeat to slacken its pace; his eardrums felt close to bursting. He slept uneasily, and woke at dawn. When he limped to the toilet, his leg almost let him down. He hawked, splashed cold water on his face, massaged his hands for several minutes before opening the book. If he couldn't reread James's ghost stories, then viewing a location that had suggested one of them might be as much of an experience.

The book fell open at the scribbled page, and he saw that the line beneath the phrase he'd read last night wasn't underlining after all. It led from the next word, which was 'map', across the page and onto the fore-edge. Rubbing together his fingers and thumb, which felt dusty, he opened the book where the line ended, at a map of Norfolk.

The line led like the first thread of a cobweb to a blotch on the Norfolk coast, where the map identified nothing in particular, showing only beach

and fields for miles. The next scribbled phrase, however, was easily read: "churchyard on the cliff—my old parish." It sounded irresistibly Jamesian, and not to his family's taste at all.

In the hotel lounge before breakfast he read on: "There was a man so versed in the black arts that he was able to bide his time until the elements should open his grave..." Either Kew was becoming used to the scrawl or it grew increasingly legible as it progressed. He might have read more if the family hadn't come looking for him. "We're going to give grandad a good day out today, aren't we?" Frank declared.

"We said so," Bruno muttered.

Virginia frowned reprovingly at him. "You have to say where we're going," she told her grandfather with a faintly martyred air.

"How about to breakfast?" At the table he said to the children "I expect you'd like to go to Hunstanton, wouldn't you? I understand there are dodgems and roller coasters and all sorts of other things to make you sick."

"Yes, yes, yes," the children began to chant, until Laura shushed them, "That doesn't sound like you, daddy," she said.

"You can drop me off on your way. I've found somewhere I want to walk to, that wouldn't have anything to offer you youngsters."

"I used to like walking with you and mummy," Laura said, and turned on her son. "That's disgusting, Bruno. Stop doing that with your egg."

Kew thought of inviting her to walk to the church with him, but he'd seen how intent Frank and the children had become when she'd hinted at accompanying him. "Maybe we'll have time for a stroll another day," he said.

He sat obediently in the front seat of the car, and clutched his book and his stick while Frank drove eastward along the coast road. Whenever he spoke, Frank and Laura answered him so competitively that before long he shut up. As the road swung away from the coast, the towns and villages grew fewer. A steam train paced the car for a few hundred yards as if it were ushering them into James's era. A sea wind rustled across the flat land, under a sky from which gulls sailed down like flakes of the unbroken cloud. On the side of the road toward the coast, the stooped grass looked pale with salt and sand.

Apart from the occasional fishmonger's stall at the roadside, the miles between the dwindling villages were deserted. By the time the car arrived at the stretch of road that bordered the unnamed area, which the blotch of greyish ink marked on the map, Bruno and Virginia had begun to yawn at the monotonousness of the landscape. Where a signpost pointed inland along a road, an inn stood by itself, and beyond it Kew saw an unsignposted footpath that led toward the sea. "This'll do me. Let me out here," he said.

"Thirsty, old feller? This one's on me."

Kew felt both dismayed by the idea of being distracted from the loneliness of the setting and ashamed of his feelings. "They'll be open in a few minutes," Laura said.

"Boring, boring," the children started chanting, and Kew took the opportunity to climb out and close the door firmly. "Don't spoil the children's day on my account," he said, "or mine will be spoiled as well."

Now he'd made it sound as if they were ruining his holiday. He patted Laura's cheek awkwardly, and then Virginia's, and leaned back from the open window. "Five o'clock here suit you?" Frank said. "If we're late, there's always the pub."

Kew agreed, and watched the car race away. The children waved without turning their heads, but Laura kept him in sight as long as she could. Just as the car reached the first bend, Kew wanted to wave his stick urgently, to call out to Frank that he'd changed his mind. Six hours out here seemed a more generous helping of solitude than even he needed. Then the car was gone, and he told himself that the family deserved a break from him.

He sat on a rustic bench outside the building striped with timber, and turned to the scribbled page while he waited for the door to be unlocked. He found he was able to read straight on to the end, not least because the ink appeared darker. "There was a man so versed in the black arts that he was able to bide his time until the elements should open his grave; only the passage of so many years, and the stresses to which the falling away of the land subjected the grave, twisted not only the coffin almost beyond recognition but also what laired within. Imagine, if you will, a spider in human form with only four limbs, a spider both enraged and made ungainly by the loss, especially since the remaining limbs are by no means evenly distributed. If anything other than simple malevolence let him walk, it was

the knowledge that whoever died of the sight of him would be bound to him."

Kew shivered and grinned at himself. So he could still derive a frisson from that kind of writing, all the more pleasurable when he remembered that James had never believed in his ghosts. Was it really possible that Kew was holding in his hands an unpublished episode by James? He didn't know what else to think. He gazed along the path through the swaying grass and wondered what it led to that had produced the description he'd just read, until the sound of bolts being slid back made him jump.

The landlord, a hairy bespectacled man whose ruddiness and girth suggested that he enjoyed his beer, looked out at Kew and then at the book. "Bit out of your way if you're walking, aren't you?" he said, so heartily that it served as a welcome. "Come in and wet your whistle, my lad."

A bar bristling with decorated handles and thick as a castle parapet marked off a quarter of the L-shaped room, beyond which were a few small tables draped with cloths, and a staircase guarded by a visitors' book. The landlord hauled on the nearest handle and gave Kew a pint of murky beer. "I was driven here," Kew explained. "I'm just about to start walking."

"Are you not using that book?"

"Why, do you know it?"

"I know all of that man's work that's set around this countryside. He had the touch, and no mistake." The landlord pulled himself a pint and drank half of it in one gulp. "But he didn't find anything round here that he wanted to write about."

Kew thought of showing the landlord the annotation but wasn't quite sure of himself. "Do you know if he ever came this way?"

"I should say so. He signed the book."

Excitement made Kew grip the handle of his tankard. "Could I see?"

"Certainly, if I can dig it out. Were you thinking of eating?" When Kew said that he better had, the landlord served him bread and cheese before unlocking a cupboard beside the stairs. Kew glanced at the handwritten paragraph to remind himself what the writing looked like, and then watched the landlord pull out visitor's book after visitor's book and scan the dates. Eventually he brought a volume to Kew's table. "Here he is."

Kew saw the date first: 1890. "He hadn't written any of his stories then, had he?"

"Not one."

Kew ran his gaze down the column of faded signatures, and almost didn't see the name he was searching for. As he came back to it he saw why he had passed over it: the signature bore no resemblance to the handwriting in the guidebook. He sighed, and then sucked in a breath. The signature directly beneath James's was in that handwriting.

Was the signature "A. Fellows"? He touched it with his fingertip, and tried to rub the cobwebby feel of it off his finger with his thumb. "Who was this, do you know?"

"Whoever came after Monty James."

The landlord seemed to be trying not to grin, and Kew gazed at him until he went on. "You'd think these East Anglians would be proud to have James write about their countryside," the landlord said, "but they don't like to talk about his kind of stories. Maybe they believe in that kind of thing more than he did. The chap who ran this place was on his deathbed when he told my father about that signature. It seems nobody saw who made it. It's like one of Monty's own yarns."

"Have you any idea where James had been that day?"

"Some old ruin on the cliff," the landlord said, and seemed to wish he had been less specific.

"Along the path outside?"

"If it was, there's even less there now, and you'll have noticed that he didn't think it had any place in his book."

The annotator had believed otherwise, and Kew thought that was a mystery worth investigating. He finished his lunch and drained his tankard, and was at the door when the landlord said "I wouldn't stray too far from the road if I were you. Remember we're open till three."

This felt so like the protectiveness Kew had escaped earlier that he made straight for the path. Didn't anyone think he was capable of taking care of himself? He'd fought in the war against Hitler, he'd been a partner in an accountancy firm, he'd run every year in the London marathon until his leg had crippled him; he'd tended Laura's mother during her last years and had

confined himself to places where he could wheel her in her chair, and after all that, he wasn't to be trusted to go off the road by himself? James had followed the path, and it didn't seem to have done him any harm. Kew stuffed the book under one arm and tramped toward the sea, cutting at the ragged grassy edges of the path with his stick.

The fields of pale grass stretched into the distance on both sides of him. The low cloud, featureless except for the infrequent swerving gull, glared dully above him. After twenty minutes' walking he felt he had scarcely moved, until he glanced back and found that the inn was out of sight. He was alone, as far as he could see, though the grass of the fields came up to his shoulder now. A chilly wind rustled through the fields, and he limped fast to keep warm, faster when he saw a building ahead.

At least, he thought it was a building until he was able to see through its broken windows. It was the front wall of a cottage, all that remained of the house. As he came abreast of it he saw other cottages further on, and a backward look showed him foundations under the grass. He'd been walking through a ruined village without realising. One building, however, appeared still to be intact: the church, ahead at the edge of the ruins.

The church was squat and blackened, with narrow windows and a rudimentary tower. Kew had to admit that it didn't look very distinguished —hardly worth singling out for the guidebook—though wasn't there a large gargoyle above one of the windows that overlooked the wide grey sea? In any case, the sight of the church, alone on the cliff top amid the fringe of nodding grass, seemed worth the walk. He threw his shoulders back and breathed deep of the sea air, and strode toward the church.

He needn't have been quite so vigorous; there was nobody to show off for. He had to laugh at himself, for in his haste he dug his stick into a hole in the overgrown pavement and almost overbalanced. Rather than risk tearing the paper jacket by trying to hold onto the guidebook, he let the book fall on the grass, where it fell open at the scribbled page.

He frowned at the handwriting as he stooped carefully, gripping the stick, and wondered if exposure to sunlight had affected the ink. The first lines appeared blurred, so much so that he couldn't read the words "best left out" at all. Perhaps the dead light was affecting his eyes, because now he peered toward the church he saw that there was no gargoyle. He could only assume that the wind had pushed forward the withered shrub, which he glimpsed

swaying out of sight around the corner closest to the sea, and a trick of perspective had made it look as if it were protruding from high up on the wall.

The church door was ajar. As Kew limped in the direction of the cliff edge, to see how stable the foundations of the building were, he discerned pews and an altar in the gloomy interior, and a figure in black moving back and forth in front of the glimmering altar. Could the church still be in use? Perhaps the priest was another sightseer.

Kew picked his way alongside the building, over illegibly weathered gravestones whose cracks looked cemented with moss, to the jagged brink, and then he shoved the book under the arm that held the stick and grabbed the cold church wall to support himself. Apart from the slabs he'd walked on, the graveyard had vanished; it must have fallen to the beach as the centuries passed. The church itself stood at the very edge of the sheer cliff now, its exposed foundations sprouting weeds that rustled in the sandy wind. But it wasn't the precariousness of the building that had made Kew feel suddenly shaky, in need of support; it was that there was no shrub beside the church, nothing like the distorted shrunken brownish shape he'd glimpsed as it withdrew from sight. Beside that corner of the church, the cliff fell steeply to the beach.

He clutched the wall, bruising his fingertips, while he tried to persuade himself that the shrub and the portion of ground on which it stood had just lost their hold on the cliff, and then he shoved himself away from the wall, away from the crumbling edge. As he did so, he heard a scrabbling above him, on the roof.

A chunk of moss, too large to have been dislodged by a bird, dropped on the grass in front of him. He clapped his free hand to his chest, which felt as if his heart were beating its way to the surface, and fled to the entrance to the church.

The priest was still by the altar. Kew could see the blotch of darkness that was his robe, and the whitish glint of his collar. Thoughts were falling over one another in Kew's head: the guidebook was a late edition, and so the scribbled annotation must have been made decades later than the signature at the inn, yet the handwriting hadn't aged at all, and couldn't the words in the visitor's book which Kew had taken for a signature have been "A Follower"? The only thought he was able to grasp was how far he would

have to run across the deserted land from the church to the inn—too far for him to be able to keep up the pace for more than a few minutes. He dodged into the gloomy church, his stick knocking against a pew, and heard a larger movement overhead. "Please," he gasped, stumbling down the aisle into the dimness.

He hardly knew what he was saying or doing, but where else could he go for help except to the priest? He wished he could see the man's face, though rather less fervently once the priest spoke. "It brought you," he said.

It wasn't just his words but also his voice that disturbed Kew. Perhaps it was an echo that made it sound so hollow, but why was its tone so eager? "You mean the book," Kew stammered.

"We mean what you read."

Kew was almost at the altar now. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that what he'd taken to be dimness draping the pews and the altar was a mass of dust and cobwebs. More than the tone and timber of the voice, its forced quality was beginning to unnerve him. "Your friend James thought it, but he didn't write it," the voice said. "We inspired him, and then I had to write it for him."

If James had used the handwritten paragraph in one of his tales and identified the setting as he tended to, Kew thought with the clarity of utter panic, more people would have visited this church. He was backing toward the door when he heard something clamber down from the roof and land just outside the doorway with a sound like the fall of a bundle of sticks and leather. "James nearly saw, but he didn't believe," said the figure by the altar, and stepped into the light that seeped through a pinched grimy window. "But you will," it said out of the hole that was most of its face.

Kew closed his eyes tight. His panic had isolated a single thought at the centre of him: that those who died of seeing would be bound to what they saw. He felt the guidebook slip out of his hands, he heard its echoes clatter back and forth between the walls, and then it gave way to another sound, of something that scuttled lopsidedly into the church and halted to wait for him. He heard the priest's feet, bare of more than clothing, begin to drag across the floor toward him. He turned, frantically tapping the pews with his stick, and shuffled in the direction of the door. Beyond it was the path, the inn, and his family at five o'clock, further than his mind could grasp. If he had to die, please let it not be here! What terrified him most, as he swung

the stick in front of him and prayed that it would ward off any contact, was what might be done to him to try and make him look.

Being An Angel

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The first time Fowler heard it he was sixteen years old, and changing in so many ways he might have thought it was another of them. That morning, after scrutinising his face in the mirror for eruptions to nip and dab, he cut himself shaving and had to paper his chin until he was afraid that his mother would start thumping the door and demanding to know what he was up to. But when he took his scrappy face downstairs she only repeated, "Happy birthday. You're going to do well."

She had been reassuring him like that for weeks. "English Literature," she said as if that were a present, which in a sense it was: he'd already unwrapped a volume of Dickens to add to the uniformed rank on his shelf. "You just remember all I've taught you."

His father looked up from scraping carbon off his toast, pushing his lips forward so that his black moustache appeared poised to vanish into the twin burrows of his nose. "He might want to keep in mind the questions his teacher said they might set."

"His teacher's got as little idea as you have," she said, and even more contemptuously: "If we ever want to learn about totting up figures we'll tell you."

Fowler would have liked to say that he appreciated the help his father had given him with mathematics, except that he'd been told not to let his mother know. He ate as much of his toast and almost raw fried egg as he could gather up. His father growled encouragement before his mother straightened Fowler's tie, picked paper off his face, wrapped her pudgy freckled arms around him and pressed her cheek against his. "I'll be praying for you," she vowed.

He wished she wouldn't work herself into a state on his behalf. He'd come home yesterday from sitting English Language to find her propped up shakily in bed, still praying for his success. Now her face was already as

pale as then; her unbrushed red hair seemed to blaze. She gave him a last hug so fierce that he couldn't help wondering if besides trying to take his anxiety on herself she wasn't as sure of his preparedness as she wanted him to think.

He tried to ban the idea from his mind as he stood upstairs on the bus to school, clinging to a pole. He quoted Shakespeare to himself as if his mother were there, testing him. "First to sit down will be first in the class," she often said, and so he hurried to the gymnasium which was being used as the examination room.

When all the examinees had taken their places the invigilator distributed the papers, bared her wrist and raised it to her face, stared at her watch and let her mouth hang open until Fowler thought her false teeth were about to slip. "Begin," she said at last, and the sound of opened papers soared beneath the ceiling. The scrabbling of pens and the smell of years of sweat surrounded Fowler like symptoms of fever as he gazed dismayed at the pages in front of him. Among all the questions on Much Ado About Nothing, there wasn't one for which his mother had coached him.

As for the questions about the other set books, there was just one he had been led to expect by his teacher. He ought to tackle that at once, to give himself more time to struggle with the others, but the sight of so many unforeseen questions was paralysing his thoughts. He had been staring glumly for minutes, and was close to fleeing into the open summer air, when he heard a low voice near him.

He wouldn't look. Glancing at your neighbours was the way to get disqualified. Which of them was it? It didn't sound like Andrew Travis on his left—Andrew's voice was trying out octaves this year—and it wasn't Gozzy Milne on his right, because Gozzy always pretended to be adjusting his glasses or picking his nose in order to whisper in class. Why wasn't the invigilator singling out the offender? Fowler crouched over his desk to demonstrate that he wasn't the murmurer, and then the voice grew clear.

It was behind him, too close to be from the next desk. The speaker might have been reading the questions about Much Ado About Nothing over his shoulder. "Beatrice and Benedick's words get in the way of their feelings," the voice said. "They have to be tricked into saying what they won't admit they feel, and then they admit it by pretending they're saying the opposite."

His mother hadn't had much to say about the characters, except to mutter about people being tricked into marrying someone unworthy of them. What impressed him most about the quiet sexless voice was its absolute sureness. As it began to repeat its comments, he snatched up his pen and started writing. Before long he wasn't aware of hearing the voice, and yet he felt he was taking down its dictation as fast as he could write legibly. Having delayed at the outset left him barely enough time to deal with the required number of questions, and he was on his way out of the gymnasium before he had a chance to wonder whose voice he'd been hearing.

His classmates were celebrating the end of the examinations by boasting of their sexual exploits or telling dirty jokes, Fowler wasn't sure which. He wandered onto the sports field, where a lone footballer was playing cat and mouse with a ball. "Are you there?" Fowler whispered.

Only the sky murmured a response, an airliner passing overhead. "Are you there?" he repeated, and didn't realise how loudly until the footballer stared at him. Fowler covered his mouth and made for the gates.

What voice could he have been hearing except the voice of his own mind? His mother was constantly telling him to be true to himself, though he knew that she was really telling him to live up to her image of him. He hurried home to stop her worrying about him.

As he let himself into the house she darted out of her room, onto the dingy landing. She gripped the creaking banister and leaned down to scrutinise him. "You did well, didn't you? You did your best?"

"I think so, mother."

"I know you did. You'll never let me down." She frowned at him and pinched her nightgown closed over the tops of her freckled breasts. "Just let me rest now until your father comes home. He's bringing one of your favourite dinners and a cake."

Fowler read Dickens in the front room, where the antimacassars smelled of mothballs and the window looked out onto a gardenless terrace like a reflection of the one that contained the room. Two chapters later he heard his father cursing the front door, a birthday cake in one hand and a packet of fish and chips in the other. It sounded to Fowler as if he hadn't had much of a day at the accountancy firm where he worked as a clerk.

Later, once they'd moved the chairs into the corners of the front room so as to unfold the dining-table, Fowler's father shared a bottle of beer with him. "That's enough," his mother cried, hairclips rattling between her teeth as she tidied her hair in front of the mirror over the mantelpiece. "Do you want him developing a taste for alcohol before he's even gone to university? Anyone would think you didn't want him to make the most of himself."

"I made the most of myself today," Fowler blurted.

"I knew you would after all I taught you."

"Just so long as he's passed in a few other subjects as well."

"Of course he has. Anyone would think you resent his abilities, your own son's. Not that I haven't seen a few howlers in your handwriting over the years."

"I'm starving," Fowler said, hoping that dinner would require a truce. At the table, however, his parents talked at each other through him. He went to bed early, pleading a headache brought on by the examinations, and listened to the muffled sounds of the television downstairs, of his mother in the next room complaining about the noise. He was vaguely expecting to hear the voice that had helped him, but instead he fell asleep.

He forgot about it as the school term drew to a close. He spent most of the holidays reading or at the local library. Sometimes he encountered schoolmates, usually with girls to whom they would introduce him as if they were doing him a favour by acknowledging him. Once a group of schoolmates followed him, scoffing because he was reading a book as he walked. He felt most at home in the library, and managed not to stammer when he gave his name to the blue-eyed young woman at the counter.

Her name was Suzanne. She liked cycling, Indian food and jewellery and music, mountain walks where the clouds came to meet her, films with endings so happy that they made her cry or so sad that she had to smile at them. This much he learned from overhearing her conversations with her colleagues, especially with Ben, a broad-shouldered man in his twenties with hairs in his ears. Ben stood closer to Suzanne than Fowler liked, though she sometimes flicked her variously blonde hair back until it seemed likely to sting Ben's eye, and crossed her arms over her breasts whenever he approached. Once, as Ben marched away with the trolley from which Fowler was selecting books, Fowler saw her heart-shaped pink-lipped face

wrinkle its snub nose in a comment he was almost sure had been meant for himself alone.

He ought to have said something. Each time he went to the library he tried, hanging back in the queue to ensure that she would deal with him, and each time he felt more helpless, his failures to speak blocking his mouth. Every time he gave his name it sounded more like an admission of defeat. No wonder, he thought, that his schoolmates used to call "Fowler Noll sleeps with a doll" after him.

One day he was staring in embarrassment at the books he was returning, which his mother had frowned at and none of which he'd had the enthusiasm to finish—a cyclist's guide to the surrounding countryside, a collection of stories by Tagore, a book about mountaineering and a study of Hollywood weepies—when she said, "Waiting for results?"

He wanted to grab his tickets and run. "Fowler Noll," he repeated, massaging his windpipe and feeling as if he were trying to strangle himself.

"I know," she said with a friendly laugh. "Waiting for your exam results, are you? I remember feeling just as nervous as you look."

"They were supposed to come this morning. I hung around the house till after lunch and never saw the postman."

"You should have done well, you read more books than I do. Will you be celebrating?"

"I might have some fish and chips."

She laughed and handed him his tickets. "Tell me how you did next time you're in."

Fowler grinned painfully and lurched toward the shelves. Had she meant him to invite her to celebrate with him? He wandered blindly up and down the aisles of books, tilting his head to make it appear he was examining the spines. At last he launched himself towards the counter, swallowing a breath which he vowed he would use to ask her, and saw Ben leaning over her, propping himself with his fists hairy as pork. Fowler sneered at him, and fled.

His mother would want to know why he hadn't borrowed books. He could only sneak up to his room and pretend that he had. But as he stepped into the hall she came out of the front room to meet him, smiling so thinly that

her lips were even paler than the rest of her face. For a moment he was sure she knew about Suzanne, and then he saw the envelope that she was thrusting at him—his examination results.

How bad must they be to make her look like that? His fingers almost wouldn't close on the envelope. Even more disconcertingly, it proved to be still sealed. He tore it open and unfolded the typed sheet. He'd passed in all six subjects that he'd taken, and could hardly have done better in English Language and Literature. He showed her the page, but her smile grew even grimmer. "You're thinking this will be your first step on the way to university, aren't you? Now you ask your father why it can't be."

His father was sitting amid the smell of mothballs. As he met Fowler's eyes he looked unexpectedly young and responsive to him, more like the father who used to play with him before his wife's disapproval had intervened. "They've brought in computers at work, son. They've been trying to show me the ropes but it's beyond me. I'll still have a job with the firm, but not up to the one I've been doing. It's good of the young boss to keep me on at all."

"Never mind, dad," Fowler said awkwardly, and was about to go to him and touch him, though he hadn't for years, when his mother cried, "Never mind never minding. You'll mind that he won't be earning enough to pay for you to go to university and yet he'll be paid too much for you to get a grant. That's where he's left you after all the trouble I've taken with you."

At once Fowler thought of a solution to their problems. "I can get a job. I know what I want, to work in the library and do all their exams and be a head librarian like you were going to be, mother, before you were ill."

His father ducked as though avoiding a blow. Fowler had forgotten that they weren't supposed to mention how his mother's nerves had lost her her job once she'd had to worry about his first year at school. "You said how much you liked it there," he added hastily. "I'd be with books all day and helping people improve themselves."

She seemed no longer to be hearing him. "Have you and your father been planning this?"

"Of course not, mother," Fowler said, too vehemently, and felt his father withdraw unapproachably into himself while his mother stalked off to the kitchen to throw pots and pans about in the sink.

He sat on his bed with an atlas of the world across his knees and wrote a letter to the city librarian, asking for an interview. He found an envelope on the dressing-table, under a stack of Victorian fairy tales whose reflections seemed to grow dustier as he separated the books from them, and went down to ask his mother for a stamp, which she produced from the battered handbag she carried everywhere. When he came back from posting the letter she stared at him as if she no longer recognised him.

She kept that up until he was given a date for an interview, and then she started worrying on his behalf, her voice growing ragged with resentment that made him feel guilty, but what could he do? He borrowed books about librarianship from the library, and a book of ways to deal with interviews. This one kept him awake at night, trying to remember how to dress, how to shake hands, how to sit, what tone of voice to use, what to say, what not to say... He heard his mother praying harshly in bed, his father stomping about downstairs to indicate that it was time she stopped.

On the morning of the interview she made Fowler a breakfast whose elements, which ranged from charred to almost raw, spilled off the plate. He gobbled it to get it over with, though he felt sick with anticipating the interview. She watched him with a sadness that made him feel condemned, but as he headed for the front door she grabbed his tie, adjusting it so tightly that he gulped, and muttered, "Don't let me down."

At the last moment Fowler scurried upstairs to grab two books about librarianship. She watched him along the street, her face glowing with increasing pallor. His father had arranged to be late for work, and marched along with Fowler, swinging his arms, miming determination. On the bus he leaned against Fowler as if to press strength into him, and squeezed his elbow, looking away, as Fowler reached his stop.

The library was wide as the block of shops that faced it across a square in which a dried-up fountain stood, its basin weedy with graffiti. A dauntingly broad flight of steps led up to a hushed revolving door that admitted him to a foyer so quiet he felt as if he were in church, his footsteps far too loud and numerous. The uniformed man at the security desk seemed to know who he was and why he was there, and phoned for a young woman whose backless sandals made even more noise than Fowler. She led him along several panelled corridors to a muscular leather sofa. Before he had time to grow apprehensive, she came back to usher him into the city librarian's office.

The librarian was a small bald red-nosed man whose head and upper torso stuck up from behind a desk that dwarfed him. "Mr. Doll," he said.

"No, actually," Fowler said as the door cut off the flapping of the secretary's heels, "it's Noll."

"As I said, Bister Doll," the librarian articulated, and Fowler realised with a shock which made him clutch at the books that the man had a heavy cold. "Bake yourself comfortable, Bister Doll," the librarian said.

Fowler did his best once he was seated, placing the books on his lap and then on the floor, tugging at the knees of his trousers and shaking the cuffs down again over his pallid ankles, until he became aware that the librarian was watching his antics. "I'm ready," he said, and sat up, miming eagerness.

"What bakes you feel you are suitable for library work?"

"Well, I'm always in the library. Not this one, the one by me, I expect you know the one. I mean, this one sometimes..." Fowler heard himself babbling, but there seemed to be no other way to distract himself from the sight of the drop of liquid that was growing at the end of the man's nose. "I got these books in the other one," he said desperately.

"How would you describe the difference between this wad and the branches?"

"It's bigger. Lots more books. Different kinds of them," Fowler stammered, agonising over whether to look away or pretend he wasn't seeing. "More for students. Proper books, like these ones I've got."

"Are there any kides of books you feel we shouldn't stock?"

The question sounded like a trap. The drop of liquid lost its grip and plopped on the blotter. The librarian gazed at him, not quite patiently, as another drop took its place. "What radge of politics do you feel we ought to represent? All kinds within the law."

"What?" Fowler said, and then, "I mean, beg pardon?" as he realised what he'd heard: not the librarian answering his own question, but a third voice. "All kinds within the law," he said rapidly.

"And bust we cater to all readers?"

"To every reader according to his needs."

"To every reader according to his needs," Fowler repeated.

"What do you ibagid library work edtails?"

"Knowing where books are," Fowler said before he could be prompted, and added what he heard himself being told: "What their numbers are."

"For idstance?"

"English Literature is 820," Fowler said, and paused to listen. "Librarianship is 020, English History is 942." Soon he was too busy remembering numbers he'd seen on spines of books to pause or to notice when the voice ceased. When the librarian asked him about dealing with the public, Fowler found that the voice had given him enough confidence to repeat what the book about interviews had said. It occurred to him that having to look at someone's leaky nose while talking to them was proof that he could deal with people. All the same, he was glad when the librarian terminated the interview, standing up and dabbing at his nostrils with a handkerchief while he said like a fortune-teller, "You'll be receiving a letter in the course of the next few days."

Fowler strode out of the somber corridors, across the foyer and into the square, feeling as if a series of lids were being lifted above his head. "Thanks for helping," he whispered.

"No more than my duty."

Fowler almost dropped the books. Three shopgirls eating lunchtime sandwiches on benches were staring at him, and he wondered if they could hear the voice too. "You're still there," he said.

"Whenever you most need me, and before you know you do. Hush now, or you'll have people thinking you aren't right in the head."

He thought that unfair, since it was the voice that was making him talk, but it did seem to know what was best for him. He was afraid to question it further in case it went off in a huff. Though he hadn't been to church for years, the idea of guardian angels still appealed to him. Did other people hear theirs and talk to them? Perhaps the world was full of people who did, but the experience was so private that they never spoke of it. He was suddenly ashamed to have let the shopgirls overhear him, and averted his face as he made for the bus.

On the ride home he felt as if he and the voice were playing a game to see which of them could stay quiet longest. He didn't need to talk, he knew he was being watched over. He was smiling as he reached home and heard his

mother praying for him. He eased the front door open so as not to let her know he'd heard how concerned she was for him, but she cried, "Who's there?"

"Just me, mother."

She blundered onto the landing, her hair dishevelled, her doughy cheek marked where she'd pressed her folded hands against it. "Don't ever creep in like that again unless you want to be the death of me. Well?"

"Of course I don't," he said, then realised what she was asking. "I got all the questions right, I think."

"I should hope so."

He heard what she was feeling, a mixture of pride and helplessness and rebuke so fierce and unmanageable it seemed to underlie her attitude to him for days afterward, all the more so when the letter arrived to tell him that he'd got the job and was to report for work on Monday at his local branch. "I'm proud of you, son," his father said.

"And of yourself, no doubt," his mother snapped.

On Monday morning she left Fowler a plateful of cold fried egg and bacon and went back to her room. He thought she was letting him see how unhappy she was, but she reappeared wearing the outfit—dark suit, starry stockings, glossy black shoes and a tortoiseshell comb the width of her head —which she wore on her expeditions into town, to meet the reference librarian for coffee and a chat about old times and then to stroll through the department stores until she tired of deploring the latest fashions. "I suppose you won't object if your mother walks along with you on your first day at work," she said.

She hurried him along the half a mile of streets to make sure he was early, calling out, "His first day at work. You can't hold on to them forever" to anyone she knew. In the shopping precinct the confectioners' and the betting shop were being unshuttered while pensioners queued outside the library for first read of the newspapers. She strode to the head of the queue, gesturing furiously at him to join her. When the librarian, a portly stooping middle-aged man who appeared to be permanently blushing, arrived and tried to let himself in without acknowledging the queue, she tapped him on the shoulder. "This is my son Fowler. He's starting work here today."

The librarian made a sheepish sound and held the door open just enough for Fowler to squeeze past. Fowler's mother waited outside with the pensioners while the librarian, blushing more than ever, showed him the mechanics of dealing with returned books and replacing them on the shelves.

Suzanne arrived as the librarian was admitting the queue. She unzipped her jacket as she tripped in, and swung it over her shoulder by its tag, her dress momentarily rising above her bare knees. She gave Fowler a brief smile that dazzled him. "Why, it's you," she said.

His mother had come in behind her, and saw. She squared her shoulders and marched up to the counter. "Be a credit to me," she said to Fowler, and pushed out past the slowest of the pensioners.

She was relinquishing her hold on him at last, he thought. Suzanne had shown her that she had to. Did she think there was already more between him and Suzanne than he secretly hoped there might be? That evening she wanted to know all about his day, but beneath her pride and resignation he sensed her suspicion that he was holding something back.

As the weeks passed, he was: the way Suzanne smiled at him when her bare arm brushed his, her perfume lingering on his skin; the touch of her hair on his face when she leaned down to murmur to him, the warmth of her breath in his ear. Once, at the counter, the back of his hand accidentally touched one of her breasts, and that night he took her faint ambiguous smile to bed with him.

For a while he blamed hairy-eared Ben for his having to fantasise. Ben proved to be second-in-command at the branch. When it became clear that Suzanne preferred Fowler's company to his, he kept them apart as much as he could, giving them work at opposite ends of the library or insinuating himself between them at the counter. But they had to be together sometimes, and then Fowler felt his inability to ask her out almost choking him. Her being two years older surely wasn't insurmountable; only his silence was. Even when he put his hand over his mouth and whispered to the voice to come and help him, there was silence.

Ben was at least indirectly responsible for his hearing the voice again. That Saturday Ben was in charge, and not only sent Fowler to search for misplaced books while Suzanne worked at the counter but left Fowler to run the library while Ben joined Suzanne in the staffroom for the mid-

morning break. When they reappeared, Fowler gathered that she'd refused to go over to the pub with Ben for lunch.

Fowler's mother came in about twelve with a packet of sandwiches for him, as usual. Some of her hair was straggling out of the tortoiseshell comb, and one of her stockings was crooked. It dismayed him to see how she was beginning to resemble the pensioners whose second home was the library. She must be lonely now that his father went to the football ground on Saturdays, not that she would admit it to herself. If the librarian were here she would chat to him about how well Fowler was settling in, but she hadn't taken to Ben. She nodded curtly to him and frowned at Suzanne's bare knees, and trudged out, mopping her forehead.

At five to one Ben stationed himself beside the door to bar any last-minute arrivals, and slammed the bolt into the socket as soon as the slowest of the pensioners left, wheezing. "Don't hurry back," Ben muttered, and turned to Suzanne. "Make me a coffee as long as you're having one, there's a good girl. No point in going to the pub if I'll be drinking by myself."

She virtually ignored him. "Would you like one, Fowler?"

"I'll make them," Fowler said, and glimpsed a moue of childish anger on Ben's face. He might be years older than Fowler, but his secret self was younger. Fowler ate his sandwiches, thick unequal chunks of bread between which fatty meat lurked, while he waited for the kettle to boil, and carried the mugs out of the kitchen into the staffroom, a small room with net curtains and three unmatched easy chairs. "I like more milk," Ben complained.

"He knows where it is then, doesn't he, Fowler?"

"I'll put it in," Fowler said.

Ben glared at the mug when Fowler had topped it up with milk, and unfolded the Telegraph so sharply Fowler thought it would tear. Suzanne winked at Fowler and began to talk about a film she and some girlfriends had dared each other to watch, the kind of film Fowler's schoolmates would brave. If Ben weren't there, Fowler thought, this would have been his chance to ask her to see a film with him. Suppose he spoke too low for Ben to hear? He was struggling to open his mouth when Ben let the newspaper drop. "If it's shocking you want, we've got books that would make you sit up."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I'll show you," he said as if she had contradicted him, and stalked into the library.

Fowler took a deep breath, and then another and another. "I don't suppose you'd, if you aren't, I mean, some night when you—"

Ben came back with two fat books. "Here, read this," he said, and opened one. "This turned a few stomachs."

"I'd rather not, thank you."

"Not afraid of contemporary German literature, are you?" He read her a passage about eels inside a dead horse and someone being sick. "That's more real than your spooks and monsters."

"And more pointless."

"Maybe you should read the whole book before you dismiss it like that. The real monsters are the things inside people's heads."

"Some people's."

"Maybe a bit of Pynchon will wake yours up."

The title of this book sounded scientific, but Ben began reading a scene involving a brigadier and his mistress that Fowler would have been ashamed even to have dreamed. "Hey, stop it," Fowler shouted. "She doesn't want to hear that."

"What's it to do with you, son? Remember you're on probation here."

"Neither of us wants to hear it," Suzanne said primly. "If that's your taste, just keep it to yourself."

Ben glared between the two of them, his ears bristling. "Never mind acting the innocent. I've seen you stamp both of these books out for people. Don't you want to admit what you're serving them?" he said as if his lips were hindering his words, and shoved himself out of his chair. "I'm going for a drink, and if you stay here I'll have to lock you in."

"Fine. I like the company," Suzanne said.

They heard him tramp into the library, throw the books onto the shelves, open the door and close it behind him with a crash and an overstated rattle of keys. "Good riddance," Suzanne murmured, and began to leaf through a

bicycle repair manual. She glanced up and met Fowler's eyes, and he blurted, "So would you like to go and see one of those films?"

She sighed. "Can't either of you leave me alone?"

Fowler felt his mouth pull his hot face taut. He stared about wildly, but there wasn't a book to be grabbed, nothing to hide him. Suzanne sighed again, more gently. "I'm sorry, Fowler. That was unfair of me. You aren't like him. Let's give it time, shall we?"

Did she mean until he was older? He was already old enough, he thought, but one way to prove it was not to persist. "Thanks. That'd be great," he said, and then he froze. "No she didn't," he said.

"I missed that. What did you say?"

"Nothing, forget it," he stammered, just as the voice repeated, "She led him on."

"Don't be stupid," Fowler muttered, surely too quietly for Suzanne to hear —but she could see that he was speaking. She pulled the hem of her skirt down and blinked at him. "Are you all right, Fowler?"

"Of course I am," he said, with a harshness he meant only for the voice.

"She wanted him to dirty her. See now, she's trying to make you look at her down there by pretending that she doesn't want you to. Don't you know where those legs lead? She's an occasion of sin, Fowler. Turn your eyes away."

"Shut up," Fowler said against his knuckles that were bruising his gums. "See, I'm not looking. Shut up now. Leave me alone."

"I will if you want me to," Suzanne said, not quite evenly. "Perhaps I better had."

He saw her stand up and remember that they were locked in. "You can stay here," he babbled. "I want to get something to read."

He floundered into the library and seized a book from the shelf nearest the counter, something about the subconscious. He flung himself onto a chair behind the counter. "Far enough?" he said through his teeth.

The absence of a response was only a threat of more if he ventured back toward the staffroom, he knew. He sat in the empty library, occasionally shivering from head to foot, until Ben unlocked the outer door. Ben smirked at him and then strode pompously into the staffroom, saying loudly, "I hope

there's been no misbehaviour I should know about." Suzanne fled into the library without replying, and at once the voice said, "Don't look at her."

After that the day grew steadily more unbearable. Whenever Fowler had to stand at the counter with Suzanne, the voice started to harangue him until he could move away. "Occasion of sin, occasion of sin. Don't touch her, you don't know where she's been. Keep back or she'll be smearing you with her dugs, she'll get her smell on you." As the time for the afternoon breaks approached, the voice grew positively deranged, piling up images more obscene than the passage Ben had tried to read aloud, and fell silent only when Suzanne insisted on taking her break by herself.

Fowler spent his break in one of the easy chairs, his eyes closed, his head aching like a rotten tooth. When he made himself go back to the counter the voice recommenced at once: "There she is, little harlot, filth on legs." Somehow he managed to help serve the growing queues of readers, hating himself for feeling relieved when Ben finished his break and kept sidling between him and Suzanne. At last it was closing time, and he groped his way to the staffroom for his coat and walked more or less straight to the door where Ben was waiting, having already let Suzanne flee them both. "I hope you'll be fitter for work on Monday," Ben warned him.

He was stepping out of the shade of the shopping precinct into the humid afternoon when the voice came back. Now it seemed to be trying to soothe him, trying until he thought he might scream. "That's right, you go home where you're safe. Go home where you're loved and looked after. There's only one woman for you..." It sounded more out of control than ever, less and less able to disguise its feelings and itself.

The football game had emptied the streets. When he reached his bunch of houses, he heard his mother praying for him, a sound so ritualised that he knew the prayers couldn't occupy the whole of her mind. He crept along the terrace, sneaking his key out of his pocket, and inched the front door open.

Silence gathered around him as he eased the door shut behind him. Both the praying and the voice that had urged him home had stopped. Did that mean his mother had heard him? Apparently not, for another prayer began at once: his mother had only paused after an amen. He tiptoed upstairs, growing less sure at every step what he meant to do. How could he suspect her, his own mother, of even thinking what he'd heard? But if it hadn't been

her, must it have been himself? He dodged past her bedroom door and peered around the edge.

She was lying on the drab counterpane in the reluctant light from the speckled window, her hair covering the pillow like a rusty stain, her hands clasped on her chest. Except for the movement of her lips, she might have been asleep or worse. She was troubling her rest by praying for him, and his idea of gratitude was to imagine outrageous things about her. He put one hand on the wall to ease himself out of sight and make his way back to the street before she noticed him. He was still gazing at her, his head pounding with guilt, when the voice said, "Why, yes. There I am."

He couldn't mistake its meaning, nor its certainty. He gasped, and shrank back out of sight, praying that his mother hadn't heard him. But her feet thumped the floorboards, and she rushed to the door and threw it open so hard it cracked the wall. "Who's there?" she screamed.

Before Fowler could speak or move, she ran to the top of the stairs. She realised someone was behind her, and swung around, sucking in a breath that rattled in her throat. Just as she saw him, her face lost all colour and collapsed inwards, her eyes rolled up. As he lunged to catch hold of her, she fell backwards down the stairs and struck the hall floor with a lifeless thud.

Fowler leapt, sobbing, down to her. He clutched her hands, rubbed her sagging cheeks, made himself press one palm against her breast. Nothing moved except silvery motes of dust in the air. He dug his fingers into her shoulders and began to shake her, until he saw how her head lolled. He was drawing a breath to cry out helplessly when a voice murmured, "Thank you."

Fowler bent to his mother's face and scrutinised her lips. He had recognised her voice, and yet they weren't moving. He was staring so hard at them that his eyes stung, trying to will them to stir, when the voice said, "Don't look for me there. You've set me free."

He staggered to his feet, twisting about like an animal, almost tripping over his mother's corpse. The voice was above him, or behind him, or on his shoulder, or in front of him. "Just let me get my bearings," it said, "and then I'll tell you what to say to people."

Fowler began to retreat up the stairs, unable to think how else to escape, unable to step over the body that blocked the foot of the stairs. He thought

of going to the top and flinging himself down as injuriously as he could. "Silly boy," the voice said. "Don't you know I'd never let you do that? You mustn't blame yourself for what happened, and you mustn't think you were tricked either. I didn't realise it was me until after you did."

Fowler halted halfway up the staircase, staring through the murky light at the husk of his mother. He felt as incapable of movement himself. "That's right, you get your breath back," the voice said, and then it grew wheedling with just a hint of imperiousness. "Let's see you smile like you used to. I'm going to look after you properly from now on, the way I used to wish I could. You'll always be my baby. Just think, you've made it so we'll always be together. Surely that's worth a smile."

The Old School

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The house was locked. Dean strolled around the outside for a quarter of an hour, gazing through the tall windows at displays of roped-off rooms, and then he climbed the wide steps to the balcony. A lawn broader than his eyesight offered shrubberies and formal gardens and tree-lined walks. At the edge of the lawn, almost half a mile away, woods blotted out every vestige of the further world.

He'd known for years that the house was less than an hour's drive from home. Even better, it was only half an hour from the new town and the school. He could drive here after teaching, when he needed to relax and be taken out of himself. He was gazing at a distant shrubbery, where either mossy statues were hidden in the foliage or the topiary itself was shaped into faces, when the August sun found a gap in the flock of fat white clouds. Sunlight wakened all the drops of rain that still lingered from the afternoon, seeds of rainbows everywhere he looked, and the sight washed away his thoughts.

As he leaned on the parapet, no longer aware of the cold stone through the leather that patched the elbows of his jacket, he heard a sound he would have hoped to have left behind in the new town. Someone was kicking a tin can. He sighed and straightened up, automatically brushing his hair back over as much of his scalp as it would cover these days. Perhaps the tinny footballer was a gardener, and would desist when he saw the place had a visitor.

Dean heard a more determined kick, and the can landed deep in a bush. Three children appeared around the side of the house, two boys and a girl who wore high heels and lipstick so crimson Dean could see it even at that distance. The boy with a black eye poked at the bush with a stick while the other boy, whose pate looked dusty with stubble, danced hyperactively

around him. Branches snapped, the can sprang into the air, and the boys jostled after it towards the steps.

The game ended when the hyperactive boy leapt on the can and trod it flat. His friend made a gesture of generalised menace with the stick and chopped twigs off bushes as he went back to demand a share of the girl's cigarette. The children were about eleven years old, Dean saw. He ought to interfere, though he felt as if there were nowhere his job would leave him alone this side of the grave. When he saw the children whisper and glance warily about, not noticing him, before converging on the nearest window, he went down the steps.

The children veered away at once. The girl blinked over her shoulder at him and nudged her companions, who glanced back, whistling tunelessly. The boy with the stick turned first, raising his shoulders like a boxer, and Dean saw that the bruise around his right eye was a birthmark. "Hello, sir," the boy said like a challenge.

They were from the school where Dean taught. He'd seen the boy in the junior schoolyard, thumping children for calling him Spot the Dog. Surely Dean needn't play this scene like a schoolmaster. "Enjoying your holidays?" he said in his best end-of-term voice.

They stared at him as if he'd made an insultingly feeble joke. "They're all right," the girl mumbled, treading on her cigarette.

"So long as you don't enjoy them at other people's expense. Spoiling them for others might mean you'll spoil them for yourselves."

The hyperactive boy jiggled his head as if to a beat only he could hear, the boy with the black eye swung his stick like a rod divining violence, the girl dug her hands into the pockets of her short faded second-hand dress and stared morosely at her budding breasts. "So have you something to do?" Dean said.

"Like what?" said the boy with the stick.

"Surely you know a few games."

"We've nothing to play with," the girl complained.

"Can't you play with yourselves?" Dean said, and had to laugh at his choice of words. At least that prompted the children to laugh out loud too. "If I were you," he said, "I'd be using this place to play hide and seek."

"Why don't you, then?"

"He won't play with us," the boy with the birthmark said with what sounded like bitterness.

If he were in Dean's class Dean wouldn't treat him with undue sympathy, would insist he join in activities like everyone else. "Of course I'll play if you want me to," Dean blurted, and added when they smirked incredulously: "I'm off school too, you know."

"Suppose so," the girl said as if she were humouring him. "You know how to play Blocko, don't you?"

"Remind me."

"Whoever's It has to count fifty and then try and find us, and run back here and shout 'Blocko Tina one two three' if they've seen me, or Burt if it's him, or Jacko if it's him. Watch out with that stick, Jacko, or you'll hit someone."

She had already been addressing the teacher in the same maternal tone. She began to point at each of them in turn as she chanted:

"Girls and boys come out to play, The moon does shine as bright as day. Eeny meeny miney mo, Bone in the wind and it points at you."

"It's sir," Burt shouted, eager to be running. Jacko struck his own thigh several times with the stick while Tina removed her shoes so as to be quicker. Dean covered his eyes and turning to the steps, began to count. "You have to count so we can hear you," Tina told him.

"One!" Dean pronounced in a voice capable of travelling the length of both schoolyards. "Two! Three!..." He heard the children scatter, and then only his voice. "... Forty-nine! Fifty! Here I come!" he shouted, and swung around to find a couple in their sixties staring warily at him from beside a corner of the house. "I beg your pardon?" the woman said in a voice that refused to admit where she came from.

"Blocko," Dean explained with a conspiratorial grimace.

The man's face grew alarmingly like empurpled blancmange, and he pointed at Dean with his knuckly cane. "What did you say to my wife?"

"Blocko. The children's game, you know. You'll see the children any minute."

The woman grabbed her husband's arm. "What's that about children? Is he raving?"

"Everything's under control, madam. I'm a teacher."

"He says he's their teacher," the man communicated even more loudly.

"Not their teacher," Dean said, and gave up. He crept towards the shrubberies while the couple watched him suspiciously. They distracted him, and so did noticing that there weren't any statues or anything like faces where he thought he'd seen some. He was out of sight of the steps when Tina announced her return there and the boys joined her, shouting.

The suspicious couple had stayed near the steps. As Dean jogged back the woman announced, "He said he wasn't their teacher."

"Then he's up to no good."

Tina brandished her shoes at them. "You leave him alone. He's from our school."

Burt commenced swinging his stick in defence of her or of Dean, and the teacher said hastily, "Time for another game. Off you all go."

This game wasn't too successful. When he pounced on a movement which he glimpsed beyond a shrubbery he came face to face with the elderly couple, though he'd thought he had heard them retreating around one corner of the house. They glared at him as if he'd invaded their bedroom, and he could only jog away as if he hadn't noticed them, trying not to swing his arms too vigorously and yet concerned that he might appear sloppy otherwise, feeling as if he were trapped into miming enjoyment while pretending that he had no audience. When he turned tail and ran back to the steps they followed him, though he was running because he'd seen Tina lurch into view beyond a hedge behind them. "Blocko Tina one two three," he declared.

Tina put on her shoes and stamped. "That wasn't fair. Burt or Jacko scared me, whispering behind me."

The boys appeared around opposite corners of the house, and Dean counted them out. "It couldn't have been the boys, Tina. They were nowhere near you."

"Thank God something frightens her," the woman told nobody in particular. "Children respect nothing these days."

"We aren't frightened of you," Burt said, punching the air.

"You wouldn't dare say that to anyone if you were from the boarding school," the man rumbled, jabbing his cane in the direction of the woods. "That's what teaching should be. You'd be terrified to open your mouth until you were told."

"You're right, Tina, it isn't fair. I'll be It again," Dean said. He began counting very slowly, staring at the couple until they moved away. As the children ran off between the shrubberies, arguing in low voices about something, he closed his eyes.

Now that he'd started counting so slowly he found that he couldn't speed up. In the pauses between numbers he heard the wind in the leaves, the footsteps of the couple marching regally away along the gravel drive, stealthy movements that must be the children tiptoeing around him at some distance, though once he thought he heard a whisper unexpectedly close to him. "Fifty!" he shouted at last, and looked.

The lawn was deserted. He'd already deduced from the movements he'd heard that the children had crept around the house. He was cupping each ear in turn towards the ends of the façade when he caught sight of a child among the trees at the edge of the lawn.

It was a boy—he wasn't sure which one. Dean might have called out, but that wouldn't be fair until he could say the name. In any case, the child wouldn't be able to reach the steps before Dean. He paced towards the trees, keeping his gaze on the boy's face.

At first he thought the child was staying still and hoping that Dean hadn't seen him, and then he realised that the small face was withdrawing through the tall undergrowth at exactly the speed of Dean's approach. The sight made Dean's eyes feel shaky, the child's face seeming to appear and vanish as the shadows of foliage camouflaged it, made it shift and turned it greener. He sprinted towards the woods so as to be able to put a name to it, and at once he couldn't see it at all. Presumably the other children were also in the woods, or they would have been able to saunter to the steps by now. He peered between the trees as he ran to the edge of the lawn.

He could see no obvious path into the woods. Here and there the undergrowth had been trampled, but not for any great distance. Dean headed straight for the place where he had last seen the boy, who must have reached it by another route, since the undergrowth between it and the lawn was undisturbed. Stepping over ferns and spiky grass, raindrops speckling

his trousers and darkening his shoes, Dean stole into the woods. As soon as he was out of the direct sunlight, he saw a child's face blurred by shadows, watching him from the undergrowth between the trees ahead.

The sound of children's voices made him glance towards the house. Three children were walking away along the drive: Tina and the two boys. If they'd tired of the game, who was Dean tracking? He swung round, and glimpsed the boy's face in the instant before it fled, leaving a patch of ferns and grass swaying. The boy was several years younger than Tina and her friends. The idea of such a young child roaming the woods, especially so close to nightfall, dismayed Dean. "Hold on," he called. "I wasn't chasing you. Don't run away."

The trees had begun to vibrate with his scrutiny when he saw the face again, five or six trees further off. He held up one hand and was opening his mouth when the face was swallowed by shadows again and reappeared deeper into the woods. "Don't be frightened," Dean shouted. "I'm a teacher."

The child's face quivered and disappeared. The movement was so violent that it must have been mostly of the low foliage through which the child had been watching. Dean was wondering if he should pretend indifference —if that would coax the boy into the open—when he realised that the child had fled because he'd identified himself as a teacher. He had to assume that the boy was from the boarding school beyond the woods.

Sometimes Dean found it necessary to play the ogre with his classes, but he didn't enjoy it much. The idea of relishing children's fears, as the elderly couple had, disgusted him. When he managed to locate the boy's face again, in the midst of a cluster of leaves, he went forward. He wanted to see the child safe, but also to judge whether the school was as terrible as the couple would like to believe, though he didn't know what he would do if he found that it was.

The woods proved to be even more extensive than they had appeared from the balcony. He must have walked in as straight a line as the trees and patches of marshy ground would allow for nearly half an hour. Before long he saw that there was more than one child. As soon as he glimpsed any of the faces in the foliage or undergrowth, they retreated into the leafy shadows. They were letting him see them, he realised: they were continuing the game he'd started with Tina and the boys. He wished he could enjoy it more. Once when he was sick in bed with a childhood fever, he'd seen the

wallpaper piled high with faces like skulls in a catacomb, and since then the kind of picture puzzle where you had to discover faces hidden in foliage had made him feel feverish too, but now he was nervous also because the boys—five or six of them, he thought there were—seemed to be fleeing from him as much as playing.

By the time he came close enough to the far edge of the woods to be able to distinguish a building through the trees, he was having to pick his way over roots. In the growing dimness the faces of the children were barely visible, through a bush at the edge of the woods. He wasn't even sure that he was seeing them, for when a breeze rustled through the foliage, the greenish faces appeared to separate into fragments that recombined grotesquely. Increasingly nervous, he stumbled out of the woods.

The sight of the school made him catch his breath. For a moment he thought that the long Victorian building, all gloomy red brick and high pinched windows, looked decaying only because the twilight was filling the windows with darkness, and then he saw that it was derelict. The windows were empty of glass, the grounds were rubbly and overgrown; the school must have been abandoned years ago. All the same, he knew instinctively that it had been almost as grim and daunting when it was in use.

A movement at one of the windows overlooking the woods drew his attention. A face was watching him from inside the school—the face of the boy he had followed into the woods. "Stay right where you are, son," Dean shouted. "Don't run off in there, it could be dangerous."

He gritted his teeth as the face vanished. The boy must have stepped back into the dimness. In the poor light the face had seemed to collapse into itself. "What's the matter with you?" Dean said through his teeth, and ran towards the school, across lumps of stone that had been a harsh schoolyard.

The entrance door nearest to the woods was ajar. Presumably that was how the boy, or however many of them were inside, had got in, since the windows were too high for even Dean to reach. He squeezed past the door, which appeared to be wedged open, and halted in the corridor.

He was standing still in order to listen for movements that would help him locate the children, but more than that had halted him. Something was wrong with the place, with the long bleak stone-floored corridor that led past a series of classroom doors, their upper panels gaping. He hadn't time

to stand there, he had to take the children somewhere safer before night fell. He strode along the corridor, pushing the doors open.

He could see nothing of significance in any of the rooms. In the corner of one a legless desk crouched, its distorted lid grinning beneath the single blotchy socket of the inkwell; in another classroom a few chalk marks glimmered on a blackboard like bones hovering in darkness. Despite the emptiness, something was waiting for him beyond the doors, accumulating like the twilight as he went from room to room, as he stared at the desertion where ranks of desks trapping children had stood, no doubt silent as the emptiness was now except for a single voice and a timid response: it was fear.

It wasn't his, he told himself, except insofar as the place reminded him of the worst of his own schooldays. How afraid must the children have been for their fear to have lingered almost palpably in the air? They wouldn't have been able to see the outside world from their desks, and the outside world wouldn't have been able to see in, not that it would have bothered to look. The children must have felt they were in prison without visitors, at the absolute mercy of the staff.

Dean tried to think he was exaggerating, but that would mean some of the fear was his. Certainly the rooms were beginning to make him nervous, because he'd realised what was wrong with them: they were too empty, and so was the corridor. Where were the dust and cobwebs and dead leaves that the building should have accumulated? He was also wondering how the child had managed to look out at him from such a high window when there was nothing to stand on in the classrooms; the broken desk wouldn't have served. He could only think the boy had balanced on someone else's shoulders.

He'd peered into at least a dozen rooms, which seemed more and more to him like huge pitiless cells, when he came to the assembly hall that divided the corridor from its twin. The hall would have held several hundred children, and he felt as if it had retained their fear, imprisoned or awakened by the growing dark. He mustn't let the place or his imagination get to him. He was heading for the opposite corridor when he noticed a door under the stage at the far end of the hall.

It was half open. In the dark beyond it he thought he saw the glint of an eye, watching him. He crossed the hall quickly, his footsteps echoing

through the school as though to demonstrate the extent of the darkness. Fumbling a book of matches out of his pocket, he ducked under the stage. His fingertip counted the matches: one, two, three, only four. He tore one out and struck it, and the gleam leapt at him.

He hadn't seen an eye after all, but the smashed glass on a school photograph. Photographs were stacked as high as the underside of the stage, and a few leaned against the stack. Apart from the photographs, the space was as bare as the rest of the school so far. The picture in front of him was older than the wars, he saw from the date on the frame. Tiny faces brown with age stared at him through the broken glass as the match burned down, and just as it singed his fingers he thought he recognised some of the faces. He shook it out and struck another, and shuffled forward on his knees to pull the photograph towards him. Among the unsmiling teenagers in the tallest rank of schoolboys lined up in front of the building, there were older versions of the faces of all the boys he'd followed through the woods.

The boys in the photograph must have grown up to be their grandparents, he thought, but what possessed the parents to let their children play here so late? He let go of the photograph, intending to back out from under the stage. The photograph fell flat, taking several with it and revealing the one closest to the stack. Pressed beneath the glass of that photograph were faces more familiar than those he'd just seen.

Dean hobbled forward, bruising his knees, holding the match high, hoping to be proved wrong—but there was no mistake. At the front of the photograph, where the youngest boys sat crosslegged, were all the children whose faces he'd seen in the woods. He lowered the match shakily to the frame, and read the date. The photograph was ten years older than the other he'd examined. The match went out, burying him in darkness.

The photograph was too old for the boys to be still alive, let alone looking like children. His mind flinched from that and from an even more dismaying thought: why would they have come back here, when there could have been nowhere they were more afraid of? He was staring into the dark, no longer searching but trying to hide, when he heard movement behind him.

He scrabbled round on all fours, afraid to see, more afraid not to. The fear around him was almost suffocating, and he felt as if it had changed the texture of the floor beneath him. Just beyond the doorway under the stage,

dim shapes that looked thin and malformed were crowding, blocking his way. Though his hands were trembling so badly that he almost dropped the matchbook, he managed to light the third match.

The figures—far more numerous than in the woods—were mostly faces and spidery limbs. The nearest face was the one he'd first seen. This close he was able to see that it and its companions had no eyes to speak of, though they appeared to have done their best not to look incomplete. The substance of the faces and of their token bodies was shifting, not only because the match was quivering. All at once the wind that he could hear blundering about the school flung the figures at him.

As Dean shrank back, they collapsed like discarded puppets. The nearest face fell inward, as it had when he'd seen it at the window, and the materials of which the figures had been composed fluttered across the boards at him: dust, dead leaves and other vegetation, cobwebs loaded with husks of insects. The wind that was driving all this blew out the match, and he was crouching in the dark when he heard the wind slam the entrance door with a click of the lock that resounded through the school.

Dean pressed his hands and his scalp against the underside of the stage as if that could give him strength or at least stop him shivering, but the wood felt softened by fear. Only his brain seemed capable of action, his thoughts chattering desperately as though an explanation could somehow end what was happening. Suppose, he thought, the experience of finding yourself suddenly dead and bodiless was so terrifying that you would use anything you could grasp to persuade yourself that you still had substance, however temporarily? Suppose finding yourself dead was so reminiscent of the greatest terror of your life that you were snatched back to it? Suppose you felt so vulnerable that your mind could only take refuge in the familiarity of remembered terror and imprison you there? None of these ideas helped him deal with the movements he could just see between him and the doorway, shapes wavering up from the floor, remaking themselves. He was struggling not to retreat further under the stage, away from any possibility of escape, when he heard the remains of a voice, hardly a whisper, more like a thought that wasn't his. "He's a teacher," it said.

The shapes leaned towards him, jerry-built heads wavering on rickety necks. "Not like the teachers who were here," Dean pleaded in a voice whose smallness shocked him. "I wouldn't have treated you like that."

There was a rustle of dead things as they crowded around him. "Chase us," said part of the rustling.

They wanted to be frightened, Dean thought in dismay: it was all they knew now. He needn't be frightened, his mind babbled; they were nothing but cobwebs and litter. He wouldn't play, they couldn't make him play. He brandished the unlit match at them as if the threat would keep them off. Perhaps when they saw he wasn't playing they would leave him alone, give him the chance to escape without having to touch them, and if not, he had only to stay still. "I won't ever come back here," he was muttering over and over, like a promise to them or to himself. "I mustn't come back here." He need only stay still until he could see his way out, until dawn.

At first he managed not to run, even when they started touching him to make him chase them. Eventually the touch of spindly disintegrating fingers proved unbearable. He crawled sobbing from under the stage and began to run back and forth through the lightless building, up and down the corridors, in and out of the rooms, leaping at the inaccessible windows, turning tail whenever he ran into something hiding in the dark. Soon he didn't know if he was giggling with fear or they were, nor whether he was chasing or being chased. He only knew that he was willing to play. Indeed, it seemed he might never stop.

Meeting The Author

"My mother has often asked me why don't I write children's books instead of that awful horrible stuff. If I could get her to read *Meeting The Author* she might leave well enough alone."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to the story in *The Year's Best Horror Stories 18*, October 1990

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I was young then. I was eight years old. I thought adults knew the truth about most things and would own up when they didn't. I thought my parents stood between me and anything about the world that might harm me. I thought I could keep my nightmares away by myself, because I hadn't had one for years—not since I'd first read about the little match girl being left alone in the dark by the things she saw and the emperor realising in front of everyone that he wasn't wearing any clothes. My parents had taken me to a doctor who asked me so many questions I think they were what put me to sleep. I used to repeat his questions in my head whenever I felt in danger of staying awake in the dark.

As I said, I was eight when Harold Mealing came to town. All my parents knew about him was what his publisher told the paper where they worked. My mother brought home the letter she'd been sent at the features desk. "A celebrity's coming to town," she said, or at least that's what I remember her saying, and surely that's what counts.

My father held up the letter with one hand while he cut up his meat with his fork. "'Harold Mealing's first book *Beware of the Smile* takes its place among the classics of children's fiction,'" he read. "Well, that was quick. Still, if his publishers say so that's damn near enough by itself to get him on the front page in this town."

"I've already said I'll interview him."

"Robbed of a scoop by my own family." My father struck himself across the forehead with the letter and passed it to me. "Maybe you should see what you think of him too, Timmy. He'll be signing at the bookshop."

"You might think of reviewing his book now we have children writing the children's page," my mother added. "Get some use out of that imagination of yours."

The letter said Harold Mealing had written "a return to the old-fashioned moral tale for children—a story which excites for a purpose". Meeting an author seemed an adventure, though since both my parents were journalists, you could say I already had. By the time he was due in town I was so worked up I had to bore myself to sleep.

In the morning there was an accident on the motorway that had taken the traffic away from the town, and my father went off to cover the story. Me and my mother drove into town in her car that was really only big enough for two. In some of the streets the shops were mostly boarded up, and people with spray paint who always made my father angry had been writing on them. Most of the town worked at the toy factory, and dozens of their children were queueing outside Books & Things. "Shows it pays to advertise in our paper," my mother said.

Mrs. Trend, who ran the shop, hurried to the door to let my mother in. I'd always been a bit afraid of her, with her pins bristling like antennae in her buns of hair that was black as the paint around her eyes, but her waiting on us like this made me feel grown up and superior. She led us past the toys and stationery and posters of pop stars to the bookshop part of the shop, and there was Harold Mealing in an armchair behind a table full of his book.

He was wearing a white suit and bow tie, but I thought he looked like a king on his throne, a bit petulant and bored. Then he saw us. His big loose face that was spidery with veins started smiling so hard it puffed his cheeks out, and even his grey hair that looked as if he never combed it seemed to stand up to greet us. "This is Mary Duncan from the Beacon," Mrs. Trend said, "and her son Timothy who wants to review your book."

"A pleasure, I'm sure." Harold Mealing reached across the table and shook us both by the hand at once, squeezing hard as if he didn't want us to feel how soft his hands were. Then he let go of my mother's and held onto mine. "Has this young man no copy of my book? He shall have one with my inscription and my blessing."

He leaned his elbow on the nearest book to keep it open and wrote "To Timothy Duncan, who looks as if he knows how to behave himself: best wishes from the author." The next moment he was smiling past me at Mrs.

Trend. "Is it time for me to meet the little treasures? Let my public at me and the register shall peal."

I sat on the ladder people used to reach the top shelves and started reading his book while he signed copies, but I couldn't concentrate. The book was about a smiling man who went from place to place trying to tempt children to be naughty and then punished them in horrible ways if they were. After a while I sat and watched Harold Mealing smiling over all the smiles on the covers of the books. One of the children waiting to have a book bought for him knocked a plastic letter-rack off a shelf and broke it, and got smacked by his mother and dragged out while nearly everyone turned to watch. But I saw Harold Mealing's face, and his smile was wider than ever.

When the queue was dealt with, my mother interviewed him. "A writer has to sell himself. I'll go wherever my paying public is. I want every child who will enjoy my book to be able to go into the nearest bookshop and buy one," he said, as well as how he'd sent the book to twenty publishers before this one had bought it and how we should all be grateful to his publisher. "Now I've given up teaching I'll be telling all the stories I've been saving up," he said.

The only time he stopped smiling was when Mrs. Trend wouldn't let him sign all his books that were left, just some in case she couldn't sell the rest. He started again when I said goodbye to him as my mother got ready to leave. "I'll look forward to reading what you write about my little tale," he said to me. "I saw you were enjoying it. I'm sure you'll say you did."

"Whoever reviews your book won't do so under any coercion," my mother told him, and steered me out of the shop.

That evening at dinner my father said, "So how did it feel to meet a real writer?"

"I don't think he likes children very much," I said.

"I believe Timmy's right," my mother said. "I'll want to read this book before I decide what kind of publicity to give him. Maybe I'll just review the book."

I finished it before I went to bed. I didn't much like the ending, when Mr. Smiler led all the children who hadn't learned to be good away to his land where it was always dark. I woke in the middle of the night, screaming because I thought he'd taken me there. No wonder my mother disliked the

book and stopped just short of saying in her review that it shouldn't have been published. I admired her for saying what she thought, but I wondered what Harold Mealing might do when he read what she'd written. "He isn't entitled to do anything, Timmy," my father said. "He has to learn the rules like the rest of us if he wants to be a pro."

The week after the paper printed the review we went on holiday to Spain, and I forgot about the book. When we came home I wrote about the parts of Spain we'd been to that most visitors didn't bother with, and the children's page published what I'd written, more or less. I might have written other things, except I was too busy worrying what the teacher I'd have when I went back to school might be like and trying not to let my parents see I was. I took to stuffing a handkerchief in my mouth before I went to sleep so they wouldn't hear me if a nightmare woke me up.

At the end of the week before I went back to school, my mother got the first phone call. The three of us were doing a jigsaw on the dining table, because that was the only place big enough, when the phone rang. As soon as my mother said who she was, the voice at the other end got so loud and sharp I could hear it across the room. "My publishers have just sent me a copy of your review. What do you mean by saying that you wouldn't give my book to a child?"

"Exactly that, Mr. Mealing. I've seen the nightmares it can cause."

"Don't be so sure," he said, and then his voice went from crafty to pompous. "Since all they seem to want these days are horrors, I've invented one that will do some good. I suggest you give some thought to what children need before you presume to start shaping their ideas."

My mother laughed so hard it must have made his earpiece buzz. "I must say I'm glad you aren't in charge of children any longer. How did you get our home number, by the way?"

"You'd be surprised what I can do when I put my mind to it."

"Then try writing something more acceptable," my mother said, and cut him off.

She'd hardly sat down at the table when the phone rang again. It must have been my imagination that made it sound as sharp as Harold Mealing's voice. This time he started threatening to tell the paper and my school who he was

convinced had really written the review. "Go ahead if you want to make yourself look more of a fool," my mother said.

The third time the phone rang, my father picked it up. "I'm warning you to stop troubling my family," he said, and Harold Mealing started wheedling: "They shouldn't have attacked me after I gave them my time. You don't know what it's like to be a writer. I put myself into that book."

"God help you, then," my father said, and warned him again before cutting him off. "All writers are mad," he told us, "but professionals use it instead of letting it use them."

After I'd gone to bed I heard the phone again, and after my parents were in bed. I thought of Harold Mealing lying awake in the middle of the night and deciding we shouldn't sleep either, letting the phone ring and ring until one of my parents had to pick it up, though when they did nobody would answer.

Next day my father rang up Harold Mealing's publishers. They wouldn't tell him where Harold Mealing had got to on his tour, but his editor promised to have a word with him. He must have, because the phone calls stopped, and then there was nothing for days until the publisher sent me a parcel.

My mother watched over my shoulder while I opened the padded bag. Inside was a book called Mr. Smiler's Pop-Up Surprise Book and a letter addressed to nobody in particular. "We hope you are as excited by this book as we are to publish it, sure to introduce Harold Mealing's already famous character Mr. Smiler to many new readers and a state-of-the-art example of pop-up design" was some of what it said. I gave the letter to my mother while I looked inside the book.

At first I couldn't see Mr. Smiler. The pictures stood to attention as I opened the pages, pictures of children up to mischief, climbing on each other's shoulders to steal apples or spraying their names on a wall or making faces behind their teacher's back. The harder I had to look for Mr. Smiler, the more nervous I became of seeing him. I turned back to the first pages and spread the book flat on the table, and he jumped up from behind the hedge under the apple tree, shaking his long arms. On every two pages he was waiting for someone to be curious enough to open the book that little bit farther. My mother watched me, and then she said, "You don't have to accept it, you know. We can send it back."

I thought she wanted me to be grown-up enough not to be frightened by the book. I also thought that if I kept it Harold Mealing would be satisfied, because he'd meant it as an apology for waking us in the night. "I want to keep it. It's good," I said. "Shall I write and say thank you?"

"I shouldn't bother." She seemed disappointed that I was keeping it. "We don't even know who sent it," she said.

Despite the letter, I hoped Harold Mealing might have. Hoped. Once I was by myself I kept turning the pages as if I would find a sign if I looked hard enough. Mr. Smiler jumped up behind a hedge and a wall and a desk, and every time his face reminded me more of Harold Mealing's. I didn't like that much, and I put the book away in the middle of a pile in my room.

After my parents had tucked me up and kissed me good night, early because I was starting school in the morning, I wondered if it might give me nightmares, but I slept soundly enough. I remember thinking Mr. Smiler wouldn't be able to move with all those books on top of him.

My first day at school made me forget him. The teacher asked about my parents, who she knew worked on the paper, and wanted to know if I was a writer too. When I said I'd written some things she asked me to bring one in to read to the class. I remember wishing Harold Mealing could know, and when I got home I pulled out the pop-up book as if that would let me tell him.

At first I couldn't find Mr. Smiler at all. I felt as if he was hiding to give me time to be scared of him. I had to open the book still wider before he came up from behind the hedge with a kind of shivery wriggle that reminded me of a dying insect. Once was enough. I pushed the book under the bottom of the pile and looked for something to read to the class.

There wasn't anything I thought was good enough, so I wrote about meeting Harold Mealing and how he'd kept phoning, pretty well as I've written it now. I finished it just before bedtime. When the light was off and the room began to take shape out of the dark, I thought I hadn't closed the pop-up book properly, because I could see darkness inside it that made me think of a lid, especially when I thought I could see a pale object poking out of it. I didn't dare get up to look. After a while I got so tired of being frightened I must have fallen asleep.

In the morning I was sure I'd imagined all that, because the book was shut flat on the shelf. At school I read out what I'd written. The children who'd been at Books & Things laughed as if they agreed with me, and the teacher said I wrote like someone older than I was. Only I didn't feel older, I felt as I used to feel when I had nightmares about books, because the moment I started reading aloud I wished I hadn't written about Harold Mealing. I was afraid he might find out, though I didn't see how he could.

When I got home I realised I was nervous of going to my room, and yet I felt I had to go there and open the pop-up book. Once I'd finished convincing my mother that I'd enjoyed my day at school I made myself go upstairs and pull it from under the pile. I thought I'd have to flatten it even more to make Mr. Smiler pop up. I put it on the quilt and started leaning on it, but it wasn't even open flat when he squirmed up from behind the hedge, flapping his arms, as if he'd been waiting all day for me. Only now his face was Harold Mealing's face.

It looked as if part of Mr. Smiler's face had fallen off to show what was underneath, Harold Mealing's face gone grey and blotchy but smiling harder than ever, straight at me. I wanted to scream and rip him out of the book, but all I could do was fling the book across my bed and run to my mother.

She was sorting out the topics she'd be covering for next week's paper, but she dropped her notes when she saw me. "What's up?"

"In the book. Go and see," I said in a voice like a scream that was stuck in my throat, and then I was afraid of what the book might do to her. I went up again, though only fast enough that she would be just behind me. I had to wait until she was in the room before I could touch the book.

It was leaning against the pillow, gaping as if something was holding it open from inside. I leaned on the corners to open it, and then I made myself pick it up and bend it back until I heard the spine creak. I did that with the first two pages and all the other pairs. By the time I'd finished I was nearly sobbing, because I couldn't find Mr. Smiler or whatever he looked like now. "He's got out," I cried.

"I knew we shouldn't have let you keep that book," my mother said. "You've enough of an imagination without being fed nonsense like that. I don't care how he tries to get at me, but I'm damned if I'll have him upsetting any child of mine."

My father came home just then, and joined in. "We'll get you a better book, Timmy, to make up for this old rubbish," he said, and put the book where I couldn't reach it, on top of the wardrobe in their bedroom.

That didn't help. The more my mother tried to persuade me that the pop-up was broken and so I shouldn't care about not having the book, the more I thought about Mr. Smiler's face that had stopped pretending. While we were having dinner I heard scratchy sounds walking about upstairs, and my father had to tell me it was a bird on the roof. While we were watching one of the programs my parents let me watch on television a puffy white thing came and pressed itself against the window, and I almost wasn't quick enough at the window to see an old bin-liner blowing away down the road. My mother read to me in bed to try and calm me down, but when I saw a figure creeping upstairs beyond her that looked as if it hadn't much more to it than the dimness on the landing, I screamed before I realised it was my father coming to see if I was nearly asleep. "Oh, dear," he said, and went down to get me some of the medicine the doctor had prescribed to help me sleep.

My mother had been keeping it in the refrigerator. It must have been years old. Maybe that was why, when I drifted off to sleep although I was afraid to in case anything came into my room, I kept jerking awake as if something had wakened me, something that had just ducked out of sight at the end of the bed. Once I was sure I saw a blotchy forehead disappearing as I forced my eyes open, and another time I saw hair like cobwebs being pulled out of sight over the footboard. I was too afraid to scream, and even more afraid of going to my parents, in case I hadn't really seen anything in the room and it was waiting outside for me to open the door.

I was still jerking awake when the dawn came. It made my room even more threatening, because now everything looked flat as the hiding-places in the pop-up book. I was frightened to look at anything. I lay with my eyes squeezed shut until I heard movements outside my door and my father's voice convinced me it was him. When he inched the door open I pretended to be asleep so that he wouldn't think I needed more medicine. I actually managed to sleep for a couple of hours before the smell of breakfast woke me up.

It was Saturday, and my father took me fishing in the canal. Usually fishing made me feel as if I'd had a rest, though we never caught any fish, but that

day I was too worried about leaving my mother alone in the house or rather, not as alone as she thought she was. I kept asking my father when we were going home, until he got so irritable that we did.

As soon as he was in his chair he stuck the evening paper up in front of himself. He was meaning to show that I'd spoiled his day, but suddenly he looked over the top of the paper at me. "Here's something that may cheer you up, Timmy," he said. "Harold Mealing's in the paper."

I thought he meant the little smiling man was waiting in there to jump out at me, and I nearly grabbed the paper to tear it up. "Good God, son, no need to look so timid about it," my father said. "He's dead, that's why he's in. Died yesterday of too much dashing about in search of publicity. Poor old twerp, after all his self-promotion he wasn't considered important enough to put him in the same day's news."

I heard what he was saying, but all I could think was that if Harold Mealing was dead he could be anywhere—and then I realised he already had been. He must have died just about the time I'd seen his face in the pop-up book. Before my parents could stop me, I grabbed a chair from the dining suite and struggled upstairs with it, and climbed on it to get the book down from the wardrobe.

I was bending it open as I jumped off the chair. I jerked it so hard as I landed that it shook the little man out from behind the hedge. I shut my eyes so as not to see his face, and closed my hand around him, though my skin felt as if it was trying to crawl away from him. I'd just got hold of him to tear him up as he wriggled like an insect when my father came in and took hold of my fingers to make me let go before I could do more than crumple the little man. He closed the book and squeezed it under his arm as if he was as angry with it as he was with me. "I thought you knew better than to damage books," he said. "You know I can't stand vandalism. I'm afraid you're going straight to bed, and think yourself lucky I'm keeping my temper."

That wasn't what I was afraid of. "What are you going to do with the book?"

"Put it somewhere you won't find it. Now, not another word or you'll be sorry. Bed."

I turned to my mother, but she frowned and put her finger to her lips. "You heard your father."

When I tried to stay until I could see where my father hid the book, she pushed me into the bathroom and stood outside the door and told me to get ready for bed. By the time I came out, my father and the book had gone. My mother tucked me into bed and frowned at me, and gave my forehead a kiss so quick it felt papery. "Just go to sleep now and we'll have forgotten all about it in the morning," she said.

I lay and watched the bedroom furniture begin to go flat and thin as cardboard as it got dark. When either of my parents came to see if I was asleep I tried to make them think I was, but before it was completely dark I was shaking too much. My mother brought me some of the medicine and wouldn't go away until I'd swallowed it, and then I lay there fighting to stay awake.

I heard my parents talking, too low for me to understand. I heard one of them go out to the dustbin, and eventually I smelled burning. I couldn't tell if that was in our yard or a neighbour's, and I was too afraid to get up in the dark and look. I lay feeling as if I couldn't move, as if the medicine had made the bedclothes heavier or me weaker, and before I could stop myself I was asleep.

When I jerked awake I didn't know what time it was. I held myself still and tried to hear my parents so that I'd know they hadn't gone to sleep and left me alone. Then I heard my father snoring in their room, and I knew they had, because he always went to bed last. His snores broke off, probably because my mother had nudged him in her sleep, and for a while I couldn't hear anything except my own breathing, so loud it made me feel I was suffocating. And then I heard another sound in my room.

It was a creaking as if something was trying to straighten itself. It might have been cardboard, but I wasn't sure, because I couldn't tell how far away from me it was. I dug my fingers into the mattress to stop myself shaking, and held my breath until I was almost sure the sound was ahead of me, between the door and me. I listened until I couldn't hold my breath any longer, and it came out in a gasp. And then I dug my fingers into the mattress so hard my nails bent, and banged my head against the wall behind the pillow, because Harold Mealing had risen up in front of me.

I could only really see his face. There was less of it than last time I'd seen it, and maybe that was why it was smiling even harder, both wider and taller than a mouth ought to be able to go. His body was a dark shape he was struggling to raise, whether because it was stiff or crippled I couldn't tell. I could still hear it creaking. It might have been cardboard or a corpse, because I couldn't make out how close he was, at the end of the bed and big as life or standing on the quilt in front of my face, the size he'd been in the book. All I could do was bruise my head as I shoved the back of it against the wall, the farthest I could get away from him.

He shivered upright until his face was above mine, and his hands came flapping toward me. I was almost sure he was no bigger than he'd been in the book, but that didn't help me, because I could feel myself shrinking until I was small enough for him to carry away into the dark, all of me that mattered. He leaned toward me as if he was toppling over, and I started to scream.

I heard my parents waken, far away. I heard one of them stumble out of bed. I was afraid they would be too late, because now I'd started screaming I couldn't stop, and the figure that was smaller than my head was leaning down as if it meant to crawl into my mouth and hide there or drag what it wanted out of me. Somehow I managed to let go of the mattress and flail my hands at him. I hardly knew what I was doing, but I felt my fist close around something that broke and wriggled, just as the light came on.

Both my parents ran in. "It's all right, Timmy, we're here," my mother said, and to my father "It must be that medicine. We won't give him any more."

I clenched my fist harder and stared around the room. "I've got him," I babbled. "Where's the book?"

They knew which one I meant, because they exchanged a glance. At first I couldn't understand why they looked almost guilty. "You're to remember what I said, Timmy," my father said. "We should always respect books. But listen, son, that one was bothering you so much I made an exception. You can forget about it. I put it in the bin and burnt it before we came to bed."

I stared at him as if that could make him take back what he'd said. "But that means I can't put him back," I cried.

"What've you got there, Timmy? Let me see," my mother said, and watched until I had to open my fist. There was nothing in it except a smear

of red that she eventually convinced me was ink.

When she saw I was afraid to be left alone she stayed with me all night. After a while I fell asleep because I couldn't stay awake, though I knew Harold Mealing was still hiding somewhere. He'd slipped out of my fist when I wasn't looking, and now I'd lost my chance to trap him and get rid of him.

My mother took me to the doctor in the morning and got me some new medicine that made me sleep even when I was afraid to. It couldn't stop me being afraid of books, even when my parents sent Beware of the Smile back to the publisher and found out that the publisher had gone bankrupt from gambling too much money on Harold Mealing's books. I thought that would only make Harold Mealing more spiteful. I had to read at school, but I never enjoyed a book again. I'd get my friends to shake them open to make sure there was nothing inside them before I would touch them, only before long I didn't have many friends. Sometimes I thought I felt something squirming under the page I was reading, and I'd throw the book on the floor.

I thought I'd grown out of all this when I went to college. Writing what I've written shows I'm not afraid of things just because they're written down. I worked so hard at college I almost forgot to be afraid of books. Maybe that's why he kept wakening me at night with his smile half the height of his face and his hands that feel like insects on my cheeks. Yes, I set fire to the library, but I didn't know what else to do. I thought he might be hiding in one of those books.

Now I know that was a mistake. Now you and my parents and the rest of them smile at me and say I'll be better for writing it down, only you don't realise how much it's helped me see things clear. I don't know yet which of you smilers Harold Mealing is pretending to be, but I will when I've stopped the rest of you smiling. And then I'll tear him up to prove it to all of you. I'll tear him up just as I'm going to tear up this paragraph.

1990

Needing Ghosts

"My wife Jenny was invaluable as always, though she didn't think this book as comic as I did. I'm grateful to John Mottershead of the Chapter One bookshop in Liverpool for the loan of his surname, and I've a special thank you for Deborah Beale, my editor at Legend, without whose encouragement *Needing Ghosts* would never have been written."—Ramsey Campbell, Complete foreword to the original publication.

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First published as the novella *Needing Ghosts*, August 1990
Also published in: *Strange Things And Stranger Places*

For Penny and Alan
and Timmy and Robin
—some of my dark to find your ways through.

He knows this dark. Though it feels piled against his eyes, it doesn't mean he's blind. He only has to lie there until he can tell where he is. As soon as his sense of his body returns he'll know which way he's lying.

He feels as though he has forgotten how to close his eyes and how to breathe. Perhaps he could shout and gain some idea of the extent of his surroundings from whatever happens to his voice, but he can't think of anything to say. The notion of shouting without words dismays him, and so does the possibility that he mightn't know what he means to shout until he hears himself.

In any case, his sense of himself is beginning to gather. His arms are stretched out parallel to his body, his hands are palms downwards by his sides. How thin they are! He's disinclined to raise them to his eyes in case he's unable to see them. The darkness must relent eventually, and meanwhile there's no call for him to move; didn't he take some trouble to achieve this peace? Now that he's aware of the remainder of his body—the outstretched legs, the upturned toes, the tight skin over the ribs—he ought to be able to enjoy lying still.

But the darkness is no longer absolute. It has begun to betray hints of shapes standing tall and immobile as if they're waiting to be seen. Those directly ahead of him appear to be draped in robes, and can't he hear voices

whispering? He thinks of judges watching him with eyes that pierce the blackness, judges waiting for the dawn to reveal them and himself.

To his right he can just distinguish the profile of an open box at least as tall as himself. Hovering within it is an object which looks too oddly proportioned to be complete. To his left is an open horizontal box, from which shapes dangle as though exhausted by their struggle to emerge. He very much hopes that the whispers aren't coming from either box.

His clenched fists spread their fingers and reach out shakily on either side of him. By stretching his arms to their limit he can grasp the edges of the lumpy creaking mattress, and the action gives him some awareness of the room. Those aren't robed figures ahead of him, they're heavy curtains, and he's almost sure that if he parts them to admit more light he'll see that the figure hovering in the wardrobe, the stumps of its legs drawn up towards its handless monkey arms, is nothing of the kind.

He drags his hands over the mattress, the twang and contour and inclination of each buried spring reviving that much of his memory. He digs his knuckles into the frayed canvas and lifts himself into a sitting position, then he swings his legs into the dark and inches them downwards until his feet touch the floor. The carpet is so worn he can distinguish the outlines of the floorboards. Pushing himself away from the bed, he pads to the curtains, beyond which he can hear the whispering. He pokes his fingers through the gap in the musty velvet and heaves the curtains back.

The night is dancing just beyond the grimy window. Poplars whose foliage the dark has transmuted into coal toss their long heads in the wind. Several yards below him, wind ploughs through the grass of an unkempt garden hemmed in by trees. Inside the window, at the bottom left-hand corner of the lower sash, a draught plucks at a stray leaf caught in a spider's glimmering web.

So much for the whispering, however nearly articulate it sounds. He turns to the room. His suit is on a single hanger in the wardrobe, other clothes of his spill out of the chest of drawers. He isn't used to waking by himself in the dark, that's all. Now that he has risen he'll stay up and be on his way by dawn.

He trots out of the room and along the threadbare corridor without switching on the light above the stairs. When he tugs the cord in the bathroom, the light-bulb greets its own reflection in the mirror full of white

tiles, and something disappears into the plug-hole of the bruised bath. It must be a drip from the taps whose marble eyeballs bulge above their brass snout; he sees the movement glisten as it vanishes. He crosses the knotted floor and confronts himself in the mirror.

"There you are, old thinface. Nothing wrong with you that a blade can't put right." He's being deliberately cheerful, because he has never cared for the way electric light looks at this hour—too bright, as if its glare is straining to fend off the dark, and yet too feeble. His face resembles a paper mask, the skin almost smooth except for furrows underlining the sparse shock of grey hair, and almost white save for touches of pink in the twin hollows of the pinched cheeks, in the large nostrils of the long nose, on the pursed lips. The stubble on the pointed chin makes him feel grimy, and he ransacks the clutter by the sink for a razor.

Most of the stuff there seems to have nothing to do with him. At last he finds a razor folded into its handle among the sticky jars. He digs his thumbnail into the crescent-shaped nick in the blade, which springs out so readily that he can't help flinching. What's become of his electric razor? It's posing as another jar, its head clogged by talcum powder. On second thoughts, his chin can stay as it is. He stoops to the sink and wets his face with water from the right-hand tap, which grumbles like a sleeping animal, then he dries himself on a towel with a hole in it the size of his face. He lets down the dark with the cord and hurries to his room.

This time he switches on the light above the bed. The walls absorb much of the glow of the dim unshaded bulb, as their blurred surface seems already to have assimilated the pattern and the colours of the paper. Though the room is spacious, it contains little furniture: the open wardrobe, the overflowing chest of drawers, the double bed with the bare mattress whose stripes trace the unevenness of the springs—just enough, he thinks, to show that it's a bedroom. He lifts his suit from the hanger and picks up the shoes which stand beneath it as though they've fallen from the legs. Once he is dressed he tours the house.

He shuts the lid of the massive toilet and rubs his hands with the ragged towel, and slams the bathroom door. Between it and his room are two bedrooms, an unmade single bed in each. Light through the lampshades steeps his hands in red as he fingers the wall sockets to reassure himself that

they're switched off. As he backs out of each room he turns the light off and shuts the door, holding on to the doorknob until he feels the lock click.

The clatter of his shoes on the uncarpeted staircase tells him how empty the large house is, and reminds him that he doesn't mean it to be empty for much longer. When he has opened the bookshop and customers are selling books to him as well as buying them, he'll store part of his stock in the disused bedrooms. He strides along the L-shaped hall to the kitchen, where fluorescent light smoulders in its tube while he screws the gas taps tight and grovels on the flagstones to examine the electric sockets on the perspiring brownish walls. He needn't check the room next to the kitchen, since it's locked. He looks into the rooms which, once their shared wall is removed, will house the shop. Chairs lean against a dining-table beneath the one live bulb of a chandelier, a lounge suite squats in front of a television tethered to a video recorder. He shuts the doors and lifts his rucksack from the post at the foot of the stairs. Hitching the rucksack over his shoulders, he lets himself out of the house.

The wind has dropped. The poplars are embedded in the tarry sky. Before he reaches the end of his overgrown path and steps into the avenue, his greenish shoes are black with dew. The road leads downhill between buildings which gleam white beyond the trees. Glancing back to reassure himself that he hasn't left a light on by mistake, he sees that all his windows are dark, all the curtains are open except those of the locked room.

He isn't surprised to find himself alone on the road; presumably nobody else rises at this hour. He can't recall ever having met his neighbours, but if they want to avoid him, that suits him. "He's out again," he announces at the top of his voice. "Lock your doors, hide behind the furniture, pull the blankets over your heads or he'll know you're there."

The only response, if it is a response; is the flight of a bird which starts up from among the trees and passes overhead, invisibly black, with a sound like the sweeps of a scythe. When it has gone and he falls silent, he thinks he can hear dew dripping in the trees beside the road. Spider threads caress his face, and he imagines the night as a web in the process of being assembled. He halts on the crown of the tarmac, wondering whether, if he's still enough, he may hear the whisper of the threads. Disturbed by the idea —not so much by the possibility of hearing as by his compulsion to try—he hurries down the avenue, wishing his tread were louder. He's glad when the

landing-stage becomes visible at the end of the road. Perhaps he's too early. Though a ferry is moored there, it's unlit. As he continues downhill, the lights across the bay appear to sink into the black water. Just as he emerges between the last of the poplars, the lights vanish, and he feels as if everything—sky, trees, land, sea—has merged into a single lightless medium. The anchorage creaks as he picks his way to the gangplank and steps onto the deck.

All the stairways to the upper deck are roped off, and the doors of the saloons are locked. He's heading along the narrow strip of deck beside the front saloon when the gangplank is raised with a rattle of chains and the ferry gives a honk which vibrates through the boards underfoot. At once, as if the sound has started the waves up, water slops against the hull as the vessel swings out from the stage.

If it weren't for the occasional creak which reminds him of the sounds a house emits at night, he would hardly know he was on a boat. By the time the engine begins to thump, the ferry is well out from the shore. From the upper deck he would presumably be able to see the lights of his destination. He grips the sides of the prow and thrusts himself forwards like a figurehead, but can't determine whether the unsteady glow which appears to divide the blackness ahead is real or if it's only the flickering which often manifests itself within his eyelids when he can't sleep. He wedges his thighs in the V of the prow and watches the forest swallowing the buildings on the avenue. He finds the sight oddly satisfying, and so he doesn't face forward again until the ferry has almost gained the opposite side of the bay. When the steersman, a bust illuminated like a waxwork by the instruments in the wheelhouse, closes down the engine, he slips out of his niche in the prow and turns to look.

The landing-stage is wider than the one below the poplars. Several figures are rising from benches in a shed at the back of the stage. Floodlights bleach the planks and show him the faces of those waiting—flesh white as candles, eyes like glass—as they crowd to meet him at the gangplank. He sidles past the crewman who has let the gangplank down, a burly man whose black beard so resembles the fabric of his balaclava that his eyes and nose look false, and hurries across the shed to the exit ramp.

Only one of the several pay booths at the top of the tunnel is occupied. The woman inside it is poring over an obese dog-eared paperback, its cover

hanging open to display a resale stamp. She waits until he pushes a pound coin under the glass of the booth before she raises her flat sleepy face, and he thinks of slot machines in the seaside arcades of his childhood, glass booths containing puppets which tottered alive if one fed them a coin. He's heading for the exit when she swivels on her stool and raps on the glass with the largest wedding ring he has ever seen. "Hey!"

If the fare has gone up, the least she can do is tell him by how much. But she only stares at him and thrusts, her hand under the glass, and he thinks she's pointing at him until he notices the coin beneath her fingers. "Too rich to need your change?" she says.

"You've only taken for me."

"That's right, unless you're hiding someone in your bag."

"There's the bicycle."

She stares as if she's refusing to acknowledge a joke, though she can see perfectly well what he means. He gestures at the barrier where he leaned the machine when she called him back, and then he realises with a shock that he has left the bicycle at home. When he apologises and reaches for the coin, her fingers recoil like caterpillars, and she bends the paperback open so fiercely that the bunch of pages she has read loses its grip on the spine and falls inside the booth. He knees the barrier aside and marches out of the tunnel, wondering what else he may have forgotten, feeling as though his very substance has been undermined.

On the far side of a broad deserted road, concrete office buildings catch fragments of the white glare of streetlamps in their multitude of windows. The interiors of the double-decker buses parked in a lay-by opposite the ferry terminal look moonlit. All six bus stops have someone waiting at them.

As he crosses the whitened tarmac, the six men watch him silently. All of them are wearing dark suits—black, unless the light is altering the colour of their clothes as much as it's discolouring their faces. They don't respond when he nods to them, and so he does his best to ignore them while he looks for information. The timetables have been wrenched off the bus-stops; even the numbers on the metal flags have been rendered unidentifiable by graffiti which turns sevens into nines, nines into eights, whole numbers into mixed. Computer displays on the fronts of the vehicles

announce destinations, but they bewilder him. Are the computers malfunctioning? Flicky Doaky, Eyes End, Cranium, Roly Polytechnic, View Hallow, Pearly Swine—he doesn't believe there are any such places; perhaps the names are jokes the drivers crack after the buses stop running. The men by the bus-stops seem to be waiting for him to react, and he can't help suspecting that they're drivers. He leans against a building to wait for someone to board a bus.

The men turn away from him and exchange glances, and begin to call out to one another. "I'll be gone as soon as I get my head down."

"I'll have mine under the covers before the sun's up."

"Nothing like sleeping when the world's abroad."

"Nothing worse than not being able to switch yourself off."

"You mean the poor bat who couldn't even when he was supposed to have retired."

"And wouldn't let anyone else."

It sounds like a prepared routine, passing systematically along the line from right to left, and he feels as if they're talking at him. He's beginning to experience a rage so black it suffocates his words when another man emerges from a crevice beside him, an alley between the buildings. This one must be a driver, though he is almost a dwarf; he's wearing the uniform. He toddles to the second bus from the left and turns a knob which folds the door open, and it seems clear that he's the person to ask. "Excuse me..."

The driver pokes a finger under the brim of his cap. Thick spectacles make his eyes appear to occupy the top half of his wizened face. "Not open yet. You don't see anyone else moving."

True enough, all the dark-suited figures have turned towards the conversation and are frozen in attitudes of listening; some have lifted their hands to their ears. "I only wanted to ask which bus goes to—"

He can't remember. With the loss of the word, his mind seems to shrink and darken. The driver is waiting as though only the word will release him, raising his eyebrows until his eyes fill the lenses of his spectacles. At last a name rises out of the dark. "To Mottershead. Which bus goes to Mottershead?"

"Never heard of it," the driver says triumphantly, and hops onto the bus. "Nothing called that round here."

"Of course there is."

The door flattens into its frame, and he's about to thump on the fingermarked glass when he realises that Mottershead isn't the name of a place: it's his own name. He retreats and presses his spine against the façade of an office in which typewriters are hooded like ranks of cowled heads. He's restraining himself from turning his face to the concrete when the driver, having hoisted himself into the seat behind the wheel, reopens the doors and inclines his torso towards him. "Got another name for me?"

Mottershead thinks he sees a way out of the trap. "Where do you go?"

"Where it says."

Perhaps there really is a district called Eyes End. If Mottershead doesn't board the vehicle he'll be alone with five of the six men who witnessed his discomfiture, the sixth having flashed a rectangle of plastic at the driver and sat in the front downstairs seat. He watches Mottershead with interest and twirls a slow finger in one nostril. "That'll do me," Mottershead tells the driver, and steps onto the platform.

In his pocket is only a twenty-pound note and the change from the ferry. The driver reaches a long arm out of his metal enclosure and plucks the coin from Mottershead's hand. "You'll hear me call when you've run out," he warns, and starts the bus.

Mottershead is on the stairs when the vehicle backs at speed into the road and immediately lurches forward. He grabs the tubular banister and hauls himself to the top deck, where he lunges at the left-hand front seat and flings himself onto it, jamming his heels against the panel behind the destination indicator.

The view ahead has changed. Buildings which at first he takes for disused offices, their windows broken and their exteriors darkened by age, mirror one another across the road. They're warehouses illuminated by increasingly less frequent streetlamps. Black water glints beyond gaps to his right, while to his left, up slopes no wider than the bus, he glimpses unfit houses crammed together on both sides of alleys which appear to narrow as they climb. He'll make for any second-hand bookshop he sees which is

open. Surely he won't be turned off the bus before it brings him to the shops.

When the bus slows, he presses his feet harder against the yielding metal. Two men are standing under an extensively annotated concrete shelter at the corner of an alley, and the foremost of them has extended a white stick like an antenna sensing the approach of the vehicle. The bus screeches to a halt, and Mottershead hears the door flutter open and the stick begin to tap upstairs.

He's assuming that the driver will tone down his driving, but the vehicle jerks forward like a greyhound out of a trap. He's preparing to help until he hears the man's companion following him upstairs. He watches their reflections on the glass in front of him as the man with the stick fumbles for the seat nearest the stairs and lowers himself onto it. Mottershead is shocked to see the companion mimic these actions, all the more so when he realises why he is acting that way. Both men are blind.

If they don't leave the bus before Mottershead does they'll know that he didn't offer to help. The vehicle slows again, and he's afraid that the driver is about to summon him. No, someone is flagging the bus down, a man craning into the road from beside the stump of a bus-stop.

The door flaps shut, the bus lurches off between the warehouses. The new passenger takes some time to ascend the stairs. At the top he stands gripping the handrail, hunching his shoulders and turning his head tortoise-like. "Who's here?" he demands.

He's blind too. Mottershead is fighting a guilty compulsion to answer him when the man with the stick says, "It's us."

"Thought so. Nobody with all their senses is out this early."

He stumbles across the aisle and placing a hand on each man's scalp to support himself, sits down behind them. It doesn't matter to the three how dark it is, Mottershead reflects, and wonders what job they have been doing. What job has he retired from? Before he can start to remember, the thin voice of the newcomer distracts him. "Has he seen to the electricity?"

"Not him," says the man with the stick. "Too busy thinking of himself."

"Can't spare a thought for his people," his companion adds. "You'd think he'd attend when they try to let him know his lights are going to fail."

"We'll have some fun when they're out."

"He'll be sorry he needs his eyes."

By now Mottershead's embarrassment has been supplanted by nervousness. Surely they wouldn't say such things if they knew they were being overheard. He peers along the passing alleys in the hope that he may see a better reason than his nerves to quit the bus. "I remember when the lights fused and I got my own back on my dad," the man with the stick laughs, just as Mottershead catches sight of a lit area beyond two consecutive alleys, which looks like the beginning of a wide street lined with shops. If he has to wait for any bookshops there to open, that's decidedly preferable to skulking in his seat. He plants his feet on the ridged floor and grasping the back of the seat, steers himself into the aisle.

The vehicle provides no means of communicating with the driver. Mottershead could shout or walk noisily, but he doesn't want to startle the three men. He tiptoes to the stairs and is stepping down carefully when the three turn their pale smooth faces to him. All their eyelids are closed, and so flat there might be no eyes behind them. As he falters on the stairs, the trio bursts out laughing.

They've been aware of him all the time. Enraged and bewildered, he clatters downstairs, shouting, "Hold on!"

The driver brakes as Mottershead gains the lower deck, and Mottershead has to grab the only handhold within reach—the shoulder of the man in the dark suit. "What's the upheaval?" the driver complains. "Want to give us all a heart attack?"

"Sorry," Mottershead says to the passenger, apologising not only for grabbing him but for discovering his secret. The man's upper arm is unyielding as plastic; he must have an artificial limb. As the bus regains speed Mottershead staggers to the door, seeing the lit area beyond another alley, shouting, "Let me off here."

"You're nowhere near where you've paid to go."

"This is where I want," Mottershead says through his teeth.

"I doubt it." Perhaps it's his stature, but the driver has begun to resemble a petulant child thwarted in a game. "You'll get no change," he says.

"Keep the change if it makes you happy. Just open up, or I will."

The driver slams the door open, and a wind howls through the bus. Mottershead is trying to prepare himself to accept the apparent challenge when the driver stamps on the brake, almost flinging him off the platform. "Thank you," Mottershead says heavily, holding onto the bus as he steps down.

The door flutters like a crippled wing, and he hears the driver announce to the passengers, "He thinks change makes us happy." The vehicle roars away, trailing oily fumes. When at last the fumes disperse it's still visible, a miniature toy far down the long straight road beneath the low black sky. Down there, perhaps because of the distance, the buildings look windowless. He watches until the bus vanishes as though the perspective has shrunk it to nothing, then he surveys where it has left him. The nearest alley appears to lead into a lightless tunnel. He's about to retreat towards the openings beyond which he saw light, but then the streetlamp overhead allows him to guess at the contents of a window several hundred yards up the alley—piles of old books.

He steps between the walls and hears his rucksack scraping brick. As the darkness thickens underfoot, the sides of the warehouses tower over him. Where the alley bends beyond them, the window of the first building manages to collect a trace of the light, dimly exhibiting the books. He struggles along the passage, his rucksack flopping against the walls like a disabled pursuer, to the window.

He's tightening the shoulder straps of the rucksack and skewing his head in an attempt to decipher the spines of the books when he becomes aware that the window belongs to a house. It could be displaying books for sale, but that seems increasingly unlikely as he begins to distinguish the room beyond the books. It's a bedroom, and although the disorder on the bed consists mostly of blankets, he can just discern a head protruding from them, its bald scalp glimmering. Before he has time to step back the eyes flicker open, and the occupant of the bed rises up like a mask on a pole draped with blankets, emitting a cry which seems to voice Mottershead's own panic.

Why has the tenant of the room stacked books in the window if he doesn't want to draw attention? Perhaps they're meant to conceal him, a rampart to keep out the world. It seems not to matter which way Mottershead runs so

long as the figure he's disturbed can't see him. By the time he regains some control of himself, he's out of sight of the main road.

Terraced houses crowd on both sides of him, their blackened curtains merging with the black glass of the windows. A hint of light between two houses entices him onwards. It's leaking from the mouth of an alley which should lead to the shops he glimpsed from the bus. The high uninterrupted walls of the alley bend left several hundred yards in, towards the source of the light. He dodges into the alley, glancing back for fear that whoever he disturbed may have followed him.

He's heartened by the sight which greets him at the bend. Ahead the alley intersects a lane of unlit terraced houses, on the far side of which it runs straight to a distant pavement illuminated by shops. He's crossing the junction when he notices that the right-hand stretch of the narrow lane is scattered with dozens of dilapidated books and sections of books.

This time there's no doubt that he has found a bookshop. The downstairs windows of two adjacent houses give him a view of a huge room full of shelves stuffed with books. There must be a light in the room, though it's too feeble to locate. Apparently the entrance is in the rear wall. He darts into the passage which divides the shop from the neighbouring houses, and the walls tug at his rucksack as if someone is trying to pull him back.

The passage leads him not to a street but to a back alley alongside the yards of the houses. He has to sidle between the walls to reach the alley he was previously following. There must be a dog in the yard shared by the houses which comprise the bookshop; he hears its claws scrabbling at concrete and scraping the far side of the insecure wall as it leaps repeatedly at him. He can only assume it has lost its voice. A protrusion on the gate of the yard catches a strap of his rucksack, and he almost tears the fabric in his haste to free himself.

At the alley he turns left, determined to find the entrance to the bookshop. As he reaches the junction he grunts with surprise. The glow from the shop has brightened, illuminating the lane, which has been cleared of books. The doorway between the windows is bricked up, but the glow outlines the glass panel of a door to their left. The panel bears an OPEN sign, and the door is ajar.

Since there's no sign of a proprietor or even of a desk where one might sit, Mottershead calls, "Hello" as he crosses the threshold. Only an echo of his

voice responds, and is immediately suppressed by tons of stale paper, but the presence of so many books is enough of a response. They occupy all four walls to the height of the ceiling, and half a dozen double-sided bookcases extend almost the length of the shop, presenting their ends to him. There's barely room for him to sidle between the volumes which protrude into the dim aisles. Shrugging off his rucksack, he lets it fall beside the door.

He's becoming an expert, he thinks. One glance enables him to locate titles he has seen in every second-hand bookshop he has visited so far: *Closeup*, *The Riverside Villas Murder*, *The Birds Fall Down*, sets of the works of Dickens, dozens of issues of the *National Geographic*, editions of Poe. The material which appeals to him will be further from the entrance—books by countless forgotten authors whose work he can enjoy reviving for himself while he sits and waits for customers in his own shop. The notion that although these authors are either dead or as good as dead, he can choose to resurrect whatever they achieved as the fancy guides him, makes him feel as if he has found within himself a power he wasn't aware of possessing.

He's pacing along the line of bookcases in order to decide which aisle looks most promising when the spines of a set of volumes beyond them, on the highest of the shelves on the back wall, catch his eye. The fat spines, patterned like old bark and embossed with golden foliage, appear to be emitting the glow which lights the shop; presumably its source is concealed by the bookcases. Without having read the titles, he knows he wants the trinity of books. Since they're too hefty for even his rucksack to bear, he'll arrange to have them sent once he finds the proprietor. He doesn't immediately notice that he's hesitating. What did he glimpse as he moved away from the door? He turns to squint at the shelves he initially dismissed, which contain the books whose titles he wouldn't have been able to discern in the gloom if they weren't already so familiar. He sees the book at once, and has the disconcerting impression that its neighbours have rearranged themselves, the better to direct his attention to it. He doesn't understand why the nondescript grubby spine should have any significance for him. Hooking one finger in the stall which the top of the spine has become, he drags the book off the shelf.

The illustration on the rubbed cover depicts a man's face composed of a host of unlikely objects. He hasn't time to examine it in detail, even though

the face is familiar, because the words seem to leap at him. The title of the novel is *Cadenza*, and the author's name is Simon Mottershead.

He's able to believe it's only a coincidence until he opens the back cover. Though the photograph may be years or even decades younger than he is, the face which gazes up at him from the flap of the jacket is unquestionably the face he saw in the bathroom mirror.

He slams the cover as if he's crushing a spider. His mind feels dark and crowded; he knows at once that he has forgotten more than the book. He's tempted to replace it on the shelf and run out of the shop, but he mustn't give way to panic. "Is there anyone here but me?" he shouts.

This time not even the echo responds, though someone must previously have unlocked the door and picked up the books in the lane. Perhaps they're upstairs, but he wonders suddenly if the bookseller may be the person he disturbed by staring into the bedroom. On the whole he thinks he would rather not meet the proprietor face to face. He'll pay for the book in his hand and leave a note asking for the others to be reserved for him until a price has been agreed. He's relieved to see a credit card machine and a dusty sheaf of vouchers on a shelf to the left of the door. He gropes in his pocket for his credit card and a scrap of paper.

There's a solitary folded sheet. He shoves the book into the rucksack and unfolds the page. Two-thirds of it is covered with notes for a lecture. At the top, surrounded by a web of doodling, he has written the word LIBRARY and a date. "Today," he gasps.

He's supposed to be lecturing to a writer's group. His mind feels as if it's bursting out of his skull. He digs his nails into his scalp, trying to hold onto his memory until he has recaptured all of it, but he can remember nothing else: neither the name nor the whereabouts of the library, not the name of whoever invited him nor of the group itself. Worst of all, he can't recall what time he has undertaken to be there. He's sure he will be late.

He grabs a pencil from beside the credit card machine. Flattening the page against the end of a bookcase, he prints the shortest message he can think of: PLEASE COMMUNICATE WITH ME RE THESE. He adds his details and then squirms along the nearest aisle, tearing off the message as he goes. Floorboards sag, books quiver around him and above him; he's afraid the bookcases will fall and bury him. By craning towards the tomes he's just able to insert the slip of paper into the niche formed by the florid cornice

and the top of the leafy oaken binding. He leaves it dangling, a tongue blackened by his name, and retreats towards the door.

He still has to buy his own book. He pins a voucher with finger and thumb against the door, which shakes with every movement of the pencil as though someone crouching out of sight is attempting to fumble it open. A mixture of embarrassment at the small amount and determination to see his name clear makes him press so hard with the pencil that the voucher tears as he signs it, and the plumbago breaks. He lays the voucher in the metal bed and inserts his card in the recess provided, then he drags the handle over them to emboss the voucher. As the handle passes over his card there's a sound like teeth grinding, and he feels the card break.

He wrenches the slide back to its starting point and gapes at the card, which has snapped diagonally in half. He opens his mouth to yell for the proprietor, having forgotten his nervousness, but then he sees that the lead which broke off the pencil was under the card when he used the embosser. Shoving his copy of the voucher into his pocket together with the pointed blades which are the halves of the card, he pokes his arms through the straps of the rucksack and flounces out, his book bumping his spine as if it's trying to climb the bony ladder and reinsert its tale into his brain.

The street is grey with a twilight which appears to seep out of the bricks and the pavement, much as mist seems to rise from the ground. A few windows are lit, but no curtains are open. He runs to the junction of the lane and the alley and listens for traffic. The only noises are the slam of an opened door and a rush of feet which sound as though they're stumbling over parts of themselves. Even if they're wearing slippers too large for them, their approach is enough to send Mottershead fleeing towards the light which was his original destination—fleeing so hastily that his impression of his destination doesn't change until he is almost there.

The area is floodlit, though several of the floodlights have been overturned on the flagstones with which the street is paved. Broken saplings strapped to poles loll in concrete tubs along the centre of the street. All the shops are incomplete, but he can't tell whether they are being built or demolished. The figures which peer over the exposed girders and fragments of walls aren't workmen; they're plastic mannequins, more convincingly flesh-coloured than is usually the case. Vandals must have had some fun with them, because they are all beckoning to Mottershead, or are they gesturing him

onwards? Their eyes are unpleasantly red. As he blinks at the nearest, he sees that someone has painstakingly added crimson veins to the painted eyeballs. A wind from the bay flaps the plastic sheets which have been substituted for roofs, the crippled saplings creak as their elongated shadows grope over the flagstones, and beneath the flapping he thinks he hears the creak of plastic limbs.

To his left the paved area curves out of sight towards the bay. To his right, perhaps half a mile distant, several cars are parked. Mustn't they be on or near a road? Willing the cars to be taxis, he sprints towards them.

The roofs stir as if the skeletons of buildings are trying to awaken. Whenever they do so, the arms of the mannequins wave stiffly at him. The state of the figures grows worse as he progresses: some are handless, and brandish rusty prongs protruding from their wrists; most are bald, and those which aren't wear their wigs askew—one wig as grey as matted dust has slipped down to cover a face. All the figures are naked, and sport unlikely combinations of genitalia, presumably thanks to vandalism. Some of the heads have been turned completely round on the necks, which are mottled as senile flesh. As he passes one such figure it falls forward, rattling the bars of the stranded lift which cages it, and Mottershead claps a hand to his chest as he runs onwards.

By now he can see that each of the three cars is occupied, but suppose a car dealer has propped mannequins in each of the drivers' seats? The roofs writhe, and a bald figure sprawls towards him, leaving behind the hand with which it was supporting itself on the back of a solitary dining-chair. Its head is hollow, and empty now that the contents have scuttled away behind a girder. He would cry out if he had breath to do so, but surely there's no need, since the three figures in the cars have sat up and turned towards him. He's no longer alone with the tread, floppy but not quite barefoot, which is following him. He lunges for the foremost vehicle, his eyes so blurred with exertion that he can hardly see the door. He's near to panic before his fingertips snag the handle. He levers It up and collapsing into the back seat, slams the door.

However much of a relief it is just to sit there with his eyes closed, he has to keep moving. "The library," he wheezes.

Either the driver is taciturn by nature or he's losing his voice. "Which?"

At least he seems unlikely to trouble Mottershead with the unnecessary chatter typical of his species, but his response sounds suspiciously like an imitation of Mottershead's wheezing. "The one where a writers' group meets," Mottershead says, interrupting himself twice as he tries to catch his breath.

He's hoping that his words will provoke a further question which may help him clarify his thoughts. To his surprise, the driver starts the car, and Mottershead lets himself sink into the seat, feeling sponge swell to meet his hands through the torn upholstery. When he's no longer aware of having to make himself breathe, he looks where he's going.

The incomplete buildings have been left behind. The car is passing a concrete edifice guarded by railings like fossilised branches and twigs. Despite the stained glass in its windows and the inscriptions carved in scrolls over its broad doorway, it must be a factory rather than a church. Coaches whose windows are impenetrably black are parked inside the gates, and thousands of people, all of them carrying objects which may be toolkits or briefcases and wearing brightly coloured overalls in which they resemble overgrown toddlers, are marching silently into the building. He's trying to decipher the writing on the carved scrolls when he notices that the driver is watching him.

As soon as Mottershead's gaze meets his, the man fixes his attention on the road. Mottershead is almost certain that he is wearing a wig, a curly red wig twice as wide as his neck, above which it perches like a parasite which has drained all colour from the rings of pudgy flesh. The mirror seems to have lent the reflection of his eyes some of its glassiness, for although they're bloodshot, they look dollish—indeed, a flaw in the mirror makes the left eye appear to have been turned inside out. Mottershead throws himself about on the seat in order to shed the rucksack and reach his book.

He intends it both to help him ignore the driver and to revive his ideas for the lecture, but as soon as he reads the opening sentence—"He knows this dark"—he feels threatened by remembering too much. He skims the long paragraphs packed with detail as the unnamed protagonist listens to the dawn chorus and lets his other senses feast on his surroundings, which sunlight and his awareness of his own mortality are beginning to renew. Mottershead has glanced at only the first few pages when the memory of labouring on the novel begins to form like a charred coal in his mind. He

leafs back towards the dedication, but slams the book shut as he realises that the taxi is drawing up at the curb.

He stuffs the book into the rucksack and stares about him. He's outside the entrance to a shopping mall, a pair of glass doors framed by several neon tubes whose glare is almost blinding. "I want the library," he protests.

"You've got it."

There's no doubt now that the driver is mimicking him, raising the pitch of his voice as Mottershead did. "I can't see it," Mottershead says furiously.

"You will."

Mottershead imagines his own voice being forced to rise as the argument continues, topping the driver's mimicry until it becomes a screech. He flings himself out of the vehicle, almost tripping over the rucksack, and thumps the door shut with his buttocks. "What are you expecting?"

"Two and a big pointed one."

Mottershead produces the twenty-pound note. He wishes he could see the driver's face, but the neon at the entrance to the mall has dazzled him. "I've nothing else to offer you."

"You delight me," says the driver in exactly the same tone. He takes the note and hands Mottershead a smaller one. Mottershead keeps his hand extended, though he isn't looking forward to a repetition of the driver's touch; the man's stubby fingertips seem to lack nails. He's still awaiting change when he hears the driver release the handbrake, and the taxi speeds away.

"Wait," Mottershead neighs, struggling to see past the blur which coats his eyes. He slaps his empty hand over his face and stands crying, "Stop thief." The noise of the vehicle fades more swiftly than the blur, until he begins to plead for his sight. Nothing matters more than being able to see. He'll let the driver go if he can only have his vision back.

At last his sight clears. He's beside a dual carriageway, across which the long blank slab of the shopping mall faces acres of waste ground where a few starved shrubs are decorated with litter. Above the carriageway, red lamps grow pale as the light of a glassy sun glares across the waste. There's no sign of the taxi among the traffic which races along both sides of the road, turning grey with the dust in the air. "Good riddance," Mottershead

mumbles, and glances at the note in his hand. It's his own twenty-pound note, except that part of it—about an eighth—has been torn off.

He emits a shriek of rage and swivels wildly. His movement prompts the doors of the mall to slide open, and he veers towards them, through an arch of massive concrete blocks reminiscent of the entrance to an ancient tomb. As soon as he has passed between the doors they whisper shut behind him.

The mall is three floors high. Shops and boarded-up rooms surround a wide tiled area on which more than a dozen concrete drums containing flowers and shrubs are arranged in a pattern he can't quite identify. The air is full of a thin sound, either piped music or the twittering of the birds which are flying back and forth under the glassed-in girders of the roof. Escalators rise from the centre of the open space, bearing figures so stiffly posed that they look unreal. He barely notices all this as he dashes into the nearest shop.

It's a video library called Sammy's Hat. Cracked plastic spines are crammed into shelves on the walls which flank the counter, behind which a large man is watching a dwarfish television. IF YOU'RE NOT HAPPY WITH OUR SERVICE is printed on the front of his T-shirt, which is close to strangling his thick arms and neck beneath his raddled sprawling face. Cassette boxes flaunt their covers behind him: *Don't Look in the Oven*, *The Puncturer*, *Rude and Naked*, *Out of His Head*... He acknowledges Mottershead only by ducking closer to the television, which is receiving the credits of a film called *Nasty, Brutish and Short*. "Is it possible for me to phone?" Mottershead says over the buzzing of kazoos. The shopman's small eyes narrow. "Anything's possible here."

"I mean, may I use your phone?" The man heaves a sigh which sets boxes rattling on the shelves. "What's it all about?"

"I've been robbed," Mottershead declares, waving the remains of the note. "I just paid my taxi fare with this, and this is what the cabby gave me back."

On the tiny screen a stooge who appears to be wearing a monkish wig is poking two fingers in another's eyes. The shopman throws himself back in his high chair, chortling so grossly that his saliva sizzles on the screen. "Come and see this," he shouts.

A woman tented from neck to feet in gingham squeezes through the doorway behind him. Her ruddy face is even wider than his, her eyes

smaller. Mottershead assumes that the shopman has called her to watch the film until the man points at the torn note. "That's what he got when he tried to pay his fare with it," he splutters.

Mottershead feels another screech of rage building up inside him, but it will only waste time; he won't be penniless for long—he'll be paid for the lecture. "Forget it," he says when the hoots and howls of the couple squashed behind the counter begin to relent. "Just tell me where the library is."

The woman lifts her dress, revealing thighs like a pink elephant's, to wipe her eyes. "You're in it, you poor bat."

"Not this kind. The kind with books."

Mottershead intends his tone to be neutral, but the shopman flings himself like a side of beef across the counter and makes a grab for his lapels. "You watch what you're saying to my daughter. Nothing in here to be ashamed of. Stories, that's all they are."

Mottershead backs out of reach, his ankles scraping together. "You don't deserve to have eyes if that's the best you can do with them," he says from the door.

He's hoping to seek help from a security guard, but none is to be seen. At least the couple aren't following him; they've begun to pummel each other, whether because they are choking with laughter or for some more obscure purpose he can't tell. He dodges into the next shop, a tobacconist's full of smoke. "Can you tell me where the library is?"

"At the end."

Perhaps the tobacconist is distracted, having apparently just singed his eyebrows while tuning the flame of a lighter. When Mottershead runs to the far end of the mall he finds only a baker's. "Library?" he wheezes.

"Who says?" The baker looks ready to turn worse than unhelpful. He's digging his fingers into a skull-sized lump of dough which has already been shaped; a swarm of raisins oozes from the sockets into which he has thrust his thumbs. "Thanks anyway," Mottershead blurts, and retreats.

One of the assistants in the adjacent toy shop leaves off playing long enough to direct him. "Up and through," he says, and points a dripping water pistol at him.

Mottershead is afraid that the gun may fire and ruin his lecture notes, and so he makes for the escalators as the assistants recommence chasing one another through the chaos of toys, which reminds him more of a playroom than of a shop. The extravagant threats they're issuing in falsetto voices fade as the deserted stairs lift him towards the roof.

Like the vegetation in the concrete tubs, on closer examination the birds beneath the roof prove to be artificial. Several birds are pursuing their repetitive flights upside down, presumably because of some fault in the mechanism, and their maker appears not to have thought it necessary to provide any of them with eyes. Mottershead finds the spectacle so disagreeably fascinating that he's almost at the top before he notices that someone has stepped forward to meet him.

She's a woman in her sixties whose hair is dyed precisely the same shade of pale blue as her coat. Her flat chest sports a tray which contains a collecting-tin and a mound of copies of the badge pinned to her lapel. "Is there a library here, do you know?" he pleads.

The woman stares at him. Perhaps she didn't hear him for the mechanical twittering of the birds. The escalator raises him until he's a head taller than she is, and he repeats the question. This time she lifts the tin from its nest of badges, which say PENSIONERS IN PERIL in letters red as blood, and rattles it at him. "I'm sorry, I've no money," he complains.

Of course, her stare has grown accusing because he's still holding the remains of the twenty-pound note. "This won't be any use to you. Can't you tell me where the library is?"

Her only response is a look of contempt, and he loses his temper. "Take it if you've got a use for it," he shouts, "if it'll persuade you to answer a simple question."

As he begins to shout, a security guard emerges from a greetings-card shop and jogs towards them. "Is he bothering you?" the guard demands.

"I just want the library," Mottershead wails, seeing himself as the guard must see him, towering over the pensioner and yelling at her. Worse, she has taken the torn note from him, and now she has found her voice. "He tried to pass me this."

"Because you insisted," Mottershead protests, but the guard examines the note before he turns on Mottershead, frowning through the shadow of his

peaked cap.

"I'd say you owe this lady more than an apology."

"I tried to tell her I've no money." Receiving only stares from both of them, Mottershead blunders on: "I'm a writer. I'm needed at the library. They've asked me to talk."

"So have we," the guard says ponderously. Then the woman stuffs the note into her tin and waves Mottershead away as if he's an insect she can't be bothered to swat, and the guard grasps his shoulder. "Let's make sure you end up where you're wanted."

Before Mottershead quite knows what's happening he is being marched to the end of the mall above the baker's. Here, invisible from below, is an unmarked door. When the guard leans on a bellpush beside it Mottershead starts to panic, especially when the door is opened by another man in uniform. He can't judge how large the cell beyond the door may be; it's piled with cartons, and the passage between them is scarcely two men wide. The guard who is holding him tells the other, "He claims you've invited him to talk."

"Show him through, love. He'll be for the soundproof room."

He flattens himself against the cartons to make way, and the guard pats his plump buttocks with one hand as he shoves Mottershead into the passage. The uniformed man purrs like a big cat and rubs himself against the cartons. "Hold on," Mottershead protests, "where are you taking—" Then the guard reaches past him and opens a door, and Mottershead's voice booms out beyond it, earning him so many disapproving stares that he would retreat into the cell if it weren't for the guard.

He's reached his destination by a back door. The library is as large as the mall, and disconcertingly similar, except that the walls which overlook the escalators are occupied by books rather than by shops. In front of the multitude of books are more tables for readers than he's able to count, and all the readers are glaring at him. "Where am I meant to go?" he mutters.

"I'll walk you," the guard says, and steers him leftwards. "What was the name?"

"Simon Mottershead." He raises his voice in the hope that some of the readers will recognise his name, but they only look hostile. He lets himself be ushered past the tables, trying to think how to convince the readers that

he isn't a miscreant. He hasn't succeeded in dredging up a single thought when the guard marshals him left again, through a doorway between shelves of Bibles and other religious tomes, into a room.

The room is white and windowless. Several ranks of seats composed of plastic slabs and metal tubing face away from the door, towards a single chair behind a table bearing a carafe and a glass. About twenty people are scattered among the seats, mostly near the table. Before Mottershead can make for it, the guard leans on his shoulder and sits him in the seat nearest the door. "Simon Mottershead," the guard announces.

Every head glances back and then away. "Not here," someone says.

The guard's hand shifts ominously on Mottershead's shoulder. "I'm Simon Mottershead," Mottershead stammers. "Isn't this the writers' group?"

This time only a few heads respond, and someone murmurs, "Who?" Eventually a woman rumbles, "Are we expected to turn our seats to you?"

"Not if I'm allowed to move." Mottershead heaves himself to his feet and shrugging off the guard's grasp, turns to stare him away. The man's expression is so disappointed and wistful that it throws him, and he blunders towards the table, struggling to unstrap his rucksack.

He hears the guard trudge out and close the door, though not before admitting someone else. The latecomer is wearing either slippers or sandals. The sound of footsteps flopping after him makes Mottershead feel pursued, and unwilling to look back. By the time he's past the table, the newcomer is already seated. Mottershead drags the chair out from the table and dumps his rucksack on the floor, seats himself, lifts the inverted glass from the carafe and turns it over. When nobody comes forward to introduce him, he looks up.

He can't identify the latecomer. He doesn't think it would be any of the several elderly women who sit clutching handbags or manuscripts, more than one of which is protected by a knitted cover. It might be one of the young women who are staring hard at him and poising pencils over notepads, or it could be one of the men—not those who resemble army officers, red-faced with suppressing thoughts, but possibly the lanky man who reminds Mottershead of a horse propped on its tailbone, his shoulders almost level with his ears as he grips his knees and crouches low in his seat, or the man whose bald head gleams behind a clump of hatted women.

Every eye is on Mottershead, aggravating his awareness that he's meant to speak. He tips the carafe and discovers that it contains not water but a film of dust. "As I say, I'm Simon Mottershead," he says, fumbling for his notes.

His audience looks apathetic, perhaps because they're wondering why he is digging in his pockets with both hands. He must have dropped his notes in the bookshop; his pockets are empty except for the voucher and the pieces of his credit card. "What would you like me to talk about?" he says desperately.

The faces before him turn blank as if their power has been switched off. "Tell us about yourself," says a voice he's unable to locate or to sex.

He feels trapped by the question, bereft of words. "Are you married with children?" the voice says.

"Not any more."

"Did it help your writing?"

At least Mottershead has answers, even if they're almost too quick for him. "Nobody except a writer knows how it feels to be a writer."

"Harrumph harrumph humph," a red-faced man on the front row responds.

"I'll tell you how it felt to me," Mottershead says more sharply. "Every day I'd be wakened by a story aching to be told. Writing's a compulsion. By the time you're any good at it you no longer have the choice of giving it up. It won't leave you alone even when you're with people, even when you're desperate to sleep."

By now the faces are so expressionless that he can imagine them fading like masks moulded out of dough. "When it comes to life," he says, anxious to raise his own spirits as much as those of his audience, "it's like seeing everything with new eyes. It's like dreaming while you're awake. It's as if your mind's a spider which is trying to catch reality and spin it into patterns."

"Harrumph harrumph harrumph," the red-faced man enunciates slowly, and leaves it at that. As Mottershead ransacks his mind for memories which don't cause it to flinch, the voice which raised the question of his family speaks. "What's it like to be published?"

"Not as different from not being as you'd think. I used to say I expected the priest at my funeral to ask, 'Did he write under his own name?' and, 'Should

I have heard of him?' and, 'How many novels did he write a year?' "

He's hoping to provoke at least a titter, but no face stirs. "Weren't you on television?" says the voice. which is coming from the bald head beyond the hats.

"Exactly," Mottershead laughs. Then the questioner sidles into view, and Mottershead sees that he wasn't suggesting another cliché but trying to remind him. "If you say so," Mottershead says unevenly. "I told a story once about someone who thought he was."

He's closer than ever to panic, and the sight of his questioner doesn't help. He assumes it's a man, even though the appearance of baldness proves to have been achieved by a flesh-coloured hairnet or skullcap. Although nearly all the flesh of his long mottled face has settled into his jowls, this person isn't as thin as he seemed to be when only his scalp was visible; it's as if he somehow rendered himself as presentable as possible before letting Mottershead see him. His large dark eyes glisten like bubbles about to pop, and his unwavering gaze makes Mottershead feel in danger of being compelled to speak before he knows what he will say. "Everything's material, anything can start a story growing in your head. Maybe that's our compensation for having to use up so much of ourselves in writing that nobody wants to know us."

The man with the unconvincing scalp looks suspicious and secretly gleeful. When his piebald mouth opens, Mottershead stiffens, though the question sounds innocent enough. "Do you still write?"

"I'm leaving it to people like yourselves."

If that signifies anything beyond allowing Mottershead to feel relatively in control, it ought to encourage the audience, but the questioner smiles as if Mottershead has betrayed himself. The smile causes the upper set of the teeth he's wearing to drop, revealing gums black as a dog's, and he sticks out his tongue to lever the teeth into place. "Wouldn't they give you a chance?"

"Who?"

"The powers that decide what people can read."

Everyone nods in agreement. "I don't think we need to look for conspiracies," Mottershead says, feeling as if his own teeth are exposed.

"Then why did you stop?"

He means stop writing, Mottershead assures himself. The man's gaze is a spotlight penetrating the secret places of his brain. "Because it wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth my expending so much of myself on creating the absolute best I was capable of when nobody cared that I had."

"Don't you think you were lucky to be published at all?"

The man's whitish tongue is ranging about his lips; he's begun to look as mentally unstable as Mottershead suspects he is. Genius may be next to madness, Mottershead thinks, but so is mediocrity and worse where creativity is concerned. "I think that's up to my readers to judge, don't you? What does anyone who's read my books think?"

He lets his attention drift heavenwards, or at least towards the twiglike cracks and peeling leaves of plaster which compose the ceiling. When his pretence of indifference produces no response, he sneaks a glance at his audience. How can the back of every head be facing him? "Anyone who's read anything," he says, attempting a careless laugh. "Someone must have read me or I wouldn't be here."

The pink-scalped man rears up, knotting the belt of his faded and discoloured overcoat which could almost be a dressing-gown. "Remind us," he says.

At least the audience is watching Mottershead, but without warmth. "I expect you'll have heard of *Cadenza*. That was my best book."

"Who says?" his interrogator demands.

"I do." There must have been reviews, and surely Mottershead had friends who gave him their opinions, but where those memories should be is only darkness. "I put everything I could into that book, everything of myself that was worth having. It's about the last days of a man who knows he's dying, and how that gives new life to everything we take for granted."

"How does it end?"

"I'll tell you," Mottershead says, only to discover that the dark has swallowed that information too. "Or perhaps," he corrects himself hastily, "someone who's read it should."

The doughy faces slump. Nobody has read the book. The bald man's stare is probing his thoughts, and he feels as if he's being asked, "Why do you

write?"—being compelled to answer, "life is shit and that's why I use up so much paper." He's opening his mouth—anything to break the breathless silence—when it occurs to him that he needn't try to recall the end of the book. He grabs the rucksack and placing it on the table in front of him, unfastens the buckles and opens it towards his audience like a stage magician, displaying the book. "This is me."

It's immediately obvious that he has blundered somehow. "I beg your pardon. This is I," he says, and when their expressions grow more unconvinced: "This am I? I am this?"

The bald man smirks. "I should let it drop."

They needn't quiz Mottershead's grammar; some of them are bound to have perpetrated worse. Losing patience, he lifts the book out of the rucksack, and sees why they are unimpressed. His name is no longer on the cover.

He must have torn the jacket as he shoved the book into the rucksack; it's missing from the front of the book and from the spine, the binding of which is blank. He pulls the rucksack open wide, then forces it inside out, but nothing falls from it except a scattering of soil.

"Harrumph," the red-faced man pronounces, and several heads nod vigorously. The man with the pink scalp, whose cap fits so snugly that it seems to be flattening flesh as well as any hair which the headgear conceals, stares wide-eyed at Mottershead. By God, he'll show them he wrote the novel. He throws it open, its cover striking the table with a sound like a lid being cast off a box, and finds that the copyright and title pages have been torn out. There's no trace of his name in the book.

He can still display the photograph inside the back cover, which seems impatient to be opened; he's almost sure that he feels the book stir. He picks it up gingerly, but the table beneath it is bare. He squeezes the volume between his hands and lets it fall open.

Perhaps his face is on the flap, but so is an object which has been squashed between the cover and the flyleaf. It's where he remembers the photograph to have been, and the markings on its back are very like a face. Despite its having been flattened, it retains some life. He has barely glimpsed it when it raises itself and staggering rapidly off the book, drops into his lap.

He screams and leaps to his feet, hurling the book away from him. The object, whose welter of legs makes it appear to have doubled in size, falls to

the floor and scuttles through a crack beneath the skirting-board. The audience watch as if they're wondering what further antics Mottershead may perform in a vain attempt to shock them into responding. "I'll show you," he babbles. "Just talk among yourselves while I fetch a book."

Everyone turns to watch him as he heads for the door, forcing himself to walk as though he doesn't feel like running out of the room. Nobody speaks while he struggles with the mechanism of the door, twisting a knob above the handle back and forth until he hears a click and the door swings open. He steps out and pulls it to behind him.

Either the readers at the tables are engrossed in their work or they're consciously ignoring him. He tries to move quietly as he hurries from shelf to shelf. Once he identifies the fiction, surely he'll find one or more of his books. All the shelves on this side of the top floor, however, hold only books about psychology and religion, arranged according to some system he can't crack. He sidles between two tables, ensuring that he doesn't brush against the Bible readers in front of him, and his buttocks bump a woman's head. She’s wearing a rain hat which resembles a shower cap, and it must be this which deflates at the contact, but it feels as if her skull has yielded like a dying balloon, a sensation so disconcerting that the apology he means to offer comes out as, "My pleasure." Feeling at the mercy of his own words, he blunders to the edge of the balcony and clutches the handrail.

If the fiction is shelved separately from the rest of the stock, he can't see where; every visible shelf holds books larger than any novel, some as thick and knobbly as full-grown branches. As he runs on tiptoe to the down escalator, a sprint which takes him halfway around the perimeter, a few readers glower at him. They would be better employed, he thinks, in complaining about the muffled shouts and thumping, presumably of workmen, which have begun somewhere offstage. A stair crawls out of hiding and catches his heel with a clang that reverberates through the library, and he sails down to the counter.

This is shaped like a symbol of hope, a curve stretching out its arms towards a way of escape. Two librarians with wide flat faces sit shoulder to shoulder at a table behind it, poring over a tome Mottershead takes to be an encyclopedia of wild animals. He shuffles his feet, clears his throat, knocks on the counter. "Hello?" he pleads.

One librarian removes her steel-framed spectacles and passes them to her colleague, who uses them to peer more closely at an illustration. "Better see what the row is," he suggests.

Mottershead is framing a tart response when he realises that even now they aren't acknowledging him. Both raise their heads towards the shouts and pounding on the top floor. They could be identical twins, and their stubbly scalps, together with the pinstripe suits and shirts and ties they're wearing, seem designed to confuse him. "Can you tell me where to find your fiction?" he says urgently.

"You'll see none of that here," the man says without a glance at him.

"What, nowhere in the library?"

"Only books about it," says the woman, watching someone moving behind and above him.

"No need for fiction here." The man returns her spectacles to her and nods at the book on the desk. It isn't about animals, Mottershead sees now; it's a study of deformed babies, open at a picture of one which appears to have been turned inside out at birth. He's glad to be distracted by a commotion on the top floor, a door releasing a stampede of footsteps and a protesting hubbub—glad, that is, until he looks up.

The uniformed man who admitted him has let the writers out of the room, which is indeed almost soundproof. They glare about the balcony, ignoring the shushing and tutting of the readers, and then several women brandishing handbags and manuscripts catch sight of Mottershead. They rush to the edge and point at him, crying, "He locked us in."

"I didn't mean to," Mottershead calls, but the entire library responds with a sound like the dousing of a great fire. "I didn't mean to," he confides to the librarians, who shrug in unison as the writers march away along the balcony. "Where are they going?"

"Where they came from, I expect," the male librarian says with satisfaction.

"But I haven't finished!" Mottershead flaps his arms, and is preparing to shout when the stares of all the readers gag him. Perhaps he should let the writers go, especially since he hasn't found a book to show them—but then he realises what he has forgotten. "I haven't been paid."

The female librarian tosses her head to prevent her spectacles from slipping off her rudimentary nose. "No use telling us."

"Don't you know who's in charge?" Mottershead begs.

"You want his holiness."

"The reverend," her colleague explains.

He's pointing at the red-faced man whose entire vocabulary seemed to consist of false coughs, and who is making his way around the balcony towards the down escalator. Mottershead pads to the foot of the escalator, trying to phrase a demand which will be polite but firm. "I believe I'm to be paid now," he rehearses as the red-faced man comes abreast of the escalator, The man marches past without sparing it or Mottershead a glance.

Is there another public exit besides the one beyond the counter? Mottershead groans aloud and sprints to the opposite escalator, dodging irate readers who twist in their seats and try to detain him. He grabs the banister, which squirms as it slithers upwards, and runs up the lumbering stairs.

As soon as he's three stairs short of the balcony he manages to heave himself onto it, using the banisters like parallel bars. The only door he can locate leads to the stockroom through which the guard brought him, but he shouldn't be searching for a door. The red-faced man is returning to the down escalator, having replaced a hymn-book on the shelf. Mottershead clutches his aching skull. It will take him several minutes to run around the balcony to that escalator, by which time his quarry may well have left the building. "Reverend," he calls desperately. "Reverend! *Reverend!*"

The man seems not to hear him. Either he's experiencing a vision which renders him unaware of his surroundings as he rides towards the ground floor, or his title is only the librarians' nickname for him. Mottershead lurches onto the stairs which are climbing doggedly towards him and clatters down, shouting "Hey! Hey! Hey!" Even now the red-faced man doesn't look at him, though all the readers do; many of them start to boo and jeer. While Mottershead is managing to outrun the escalator, his quarry is descending at more than twice his speed. He's only halfway down when the red-faced man steps onto the floor and strides past the counter.

"My fee," Mottershead screams. He lifts his feet and slides down, his heels clanking on the edges of the steps. At the bottom he launches himself

between the tables, where at least one reader sticks out a foot for him to jump over. The exit barrier is executing a last few swings, but the red-faced man is already past the doors beyond it. Mottershead is almost at the counter when the man with the pink scalp steps into his path.

"Let me pass," Mottershead cries, but the man widens his glistening eyes and stretches out his arms on either side of him. The librarians are miming indifference, gazing at the roof. "Get away or I'll buffet and belabour you," Mottershead snarls, which earns him admonitory looks from the librarians. He's poising himself to rush his tormentor when the man steps forward, soles flapping. "Reverend Neverend said to give you this."

Is he protracting a joke which the librarians played on Mottershead? But he's waving an envelope, brown as the wrapper of a book which has something to hide. Mottershead suspects that it contains a text he has no desire to read. "Didn't he even have the grace to serve me with it himself?" Mottershead says for the readers to hear, and snatches the envelope. At once he realises that it's full of coins and notes.

The writers must have held a collection for him. Feeling exposed and clownish, he slips the envelope into his pocket, which he pats to convince himself that he hasn't dropped the envelope, and wills the readers to forget about him. As he tries to sneak past the counter the messenger detains him, seizing his elbow with jittery fingers whose nails are caked with ink. "Can I talk to you?"

"You have done."

"That was for the others. I want to talk about ourselves. We've lots in common, I can tell."

"Some other time," Mottershead says insincerely, trying to pull away without looking at him.

"There won't be."

"So be it, then." Mottershead attempts to stare him into letting go, but can't meet the other's eyes for long; they look as if being compelled to see too much has swollen them almost too large for their sockets. "I want to be left alone," he mutters.

"You know that's not possible."

Mottershead feels black helplessness closing around his mind. He wants to lash out, to thump the man's scalp, which he's sure is plastic disguised not quite successfully as flesh. What would it sound like? The temptation dismays him. "Will you have a word with this person?" he says at the top of his voice.

The librarians frown at him. "What about?" the female says.

"About your dress code, I should think."

The man with the replaced scalp is wearing slippers on his bony feet, and if his buttonless garment belted with old rope isn't a dressing-gown, it might as well be; certainly he's wearing nothing under it except striped trousers like a sleeper's or a convict's. The librarians are still frowning at Mottershead, but he doesn't care, because his outburst has caused his tormentor to flinch and loosen his spidery grip. He pulls himself free and knees the barrier aside, shouting, "I think you've got some explaining to do" to freeze the man in case he considers following. He closes both hands around the heavy brass knob of the door and having opened it just wide enough to sidle through, drags it shut behind him.

He has emerged onto an avenue lined with shops beneath a heavily overcast sky. Display windows shine between tree trunks as far as the eye can see. Though the upper storeys are obscured by foliage, it seems to him that the shops have taken over a variety of buildings; through the leaves he glimpses creatures so immobile they must be gargoyles, Bricked-up towers like trees pruned to the trunk, domes green as mounds of moss. To his right, in the distance where the trees appear to meet, the sky is clear. He heads for the light, hoping it will help him think.

Before long he sees that he's approaching a bookshop, its windows full of paperbacks as bright and various as packets in a supermarket. Wasn't *Cadenza* put into paperback? The thought of the book makes him shriek through his teeth; he has left the damaged copy and his rucksack in the library. He can't imagine going back, but perhaps there is no need. Dodging the bicycles which are the only traffic, he crosses to the bookshop.

The glass doors are plastered with posters for a book called *Princess the Frog*. The sight of eyes bulging at him from beneath crowned bridal veils confuses him, so that he grapples with the doors for some time before discovering that the right-hand door is locked into position. He shoulders its twin open and thinks he has cracked the glass. No, he has dislodged a

poster, which the door crumples and tears. He steps over it and moves quickly into the shop, pretending he was nowhere near.

Fiction is ranged around the walls. Anything by Mottershead ought to be on the shelves at the back of the shop. He's passing the authors beginning with I when someone catches up with him. "May I help you?"

"I'm looking—" Mottershead begins, and then his voice goes to pieces. He has been accosted by a frog in a wedding dress. In a moment he's able to distinguish that the frog is an elderly woman, her leathery skin painted green with the makeup she has used to make her mouth seem wider. She's holding the poster he crumpled. "I can find it myself, thank you," he says in a voice so controlled it feels like stifling a belch.

"Keep in mind that we're here."

Whether that is meant as a warning or as an offer of assistance, it aggravates the hysteria he's trying to suppress. She has drawn his attention to her colleagues who are scattered about the shop, all of whom, including at least one man, are dressed as bridal frogs. This must be part of a promotion for the book which is advertised on the posters—there's a mound of copies of the book draped with waterweed beside the cash-desk. He clutches his mouth as he begins to splutter, and flees deeper into the shop.

The letter M covers the whole of the back wall. He has the impression that the patterns formed by the print on the spines spell out several giant versions of the letter. His name is almost at floor level—Mottershead, in several different typefaces. He digs his fingers into the tops of the pages and tugs at the four books. No wonder nobody has bought them if they're wedged so tightly on the shelf. He manages to tip them towards himself until he's able to grasp the corners of the spines. He heaves at them, and without warning they fly off the shelf and sprawl across the floor.

Before he can pick them up, the frog bride who originally followed him hurries over. "It's all right," Mottershead tells her, feeling his mirth coming to the boil again as he stoops to gather the books. "I'll buy these if you'll give me a carrier bag. I wrote them."

Does she think he's lying? Disapproval stretches her mouth wide enough to render her makeup redundant. "Look," he says, no longer wanting to laugh, "I assure you—" Then he sees the covers of the books he's claiming to have written, and his jaw drops.

The author's name is undoubtedly Mottershead; it's spread across the covers in large raised capital letters. The first name, however, is printed small to fit between the thighs of the girls whose naked bottoms are embossed on the covers. The books are called *Eighteen*, *Seventeen*, *Sixteen* and *Fifteen*, and it's clear from the faces gazing over their shoulders that these are the ages of the girls. He doesn't need to focus on the author's first name to be certain that he could never have entertained such thoughts, let alone admitting them on paper—but how can he convince the princess frog?

"You'd better have them before I do any more damage," he mumbles. If she will only take them, he'll run out of the shop; he no longer cares what she thinks of him. But she shakes her head violently and clenches her greenish fists, further crumpling the poster, and two of her fellow frogs close in behind Mottershead. "Trouble?" the male bride croaks.

"The author of those items claims to have found them on the shelf. One wonders who must have put them there."

"I was mistaken. I didn't write any of these books."

The frog with the poster stares incredulously at Mottershead. "Seems not to know when to stop telling tales," remarks the fattest of the frogs.

"Do I look as if I could be responsible for this stuff?" Mottershead cries. "Why would I be trying to buy books I'd written myself?"

The frogs snigger. "Some people will stop at nothing to promote themselves," says the one with the poster.

Mottershead is overwhelmed by rage which feels distressingly like panic. He tosses the books into the air and is on his way to the exit before they come down. He's fleeing past the shop when the three booksellers appear at the window, hopping up and down and croaking inarticulately as they wave the books at him. All the passing cyclists begin to ring their bells as if to draw attention to him, and he dodges behind a chestnut tree, turning up his collar to hide the parts of his face he can't squash against the trunk.

As soon as the bellringing slackens he dodges out from behind the tree and hastens along the avenue, trying to outrun a sound which he has begun to suspect is concealed by the jangle of bells. He has passed only a few buildings, however, when he comes to a bookshop which has taken over a cinema. The compulsion to find himself on the shelves is stronger than ever. Glancing along the deserted pavement, he darts into the shop.

Several life-size cut-out figures, presumably of authors rather than of film stars, loiter inside the entrance. Shelves like exposed girders branch across the walls of the gutted auditorium, and the floor is crowded with tables piled with books: *The Wit of the Answering Machine*, *1001 Great Advertising Slogans*, *Inflate Your Brain*... Beside the propped-up figures two young blondes deep in conversation lean against the cash-desk. "She has the same hair as me," one says in a voice light as tissue, and her friend responds: "I'll have to try it sometime." There's something rather forbidding about the perfection of their young faces, their long eyelashes and blue eyes and pink lips, their unblemished flesh; he can't help thinking of the oldest of the models on the covers of the books he has just disowned. The thought sends words blundering out of his mouth. "Can I have one of you?"

They turn to him with expressions so identically polite that their spuriousness disconcerts him. "I mean, can one of you show me where you keep Simon Mottershead? Not the Mottershead who has fantasies about girls of your age and younger," he adds hastily. "The one who wrote *Cadenza*."

None of this has made any visible impression on them. He feels as if their perfect surfaces are barriers he can't touch, let alone penetrate. "I'm talking about books, you understand," he says. "I want you to show me some books."

The assistant to his left glances at her colleague. "Better call the manager."

"Is that necessary?" Mottershead says. Apparently it is; before he has finished speaking, the other girl presses a button on the desk. A bell shrills somewhere behind a wall, and a woman several years older than those at the desk but made up to look the same age rises like a figure in a pop-up book from behind a table. "What can I do for you?" she asks Mottershead.

"I'm waiting for the manager."

"I am she."

"Then you can help me," Mottershead says, trying to sound friendly and apologetic and amused by his gaffe. "I'm after Simon Mottershead."

"We have nobody of that name here."

"Books by him, I mean."

"We have none."

"Can you show me where to look? I believe you, obviously," Mottershead lies, "but you've such a large stock . . ."

The woman grunts as though he means that as an insult. "You'd be wasting your time. I know every book in this shop."

Why is she trying to get rid of him? He feels as if the blackness which threatens his mind is darkening the shop, gathering like smoke under the roof. His surroundings, the faces of the women included, appear to be losing depth. "At least," he says desperately, "you must have heard of Simon Mottershead."

"I won't pretend I have."

The blackness is about to swallow everything around him except her cut-out face and those of her assistants. "Well, now you've met him," he almost screams, and flounders towards the exit, which he can barely locate. As he makes a grab for the door, someone who has been waiting in the doorway steps into the shop. It's the man with the false scalp.

He blocks Mottershead's path and holds up one hand, and Mottershead loses control. Seizing the man's shoulders, which feel loose and swollen, he hurls him aside. The man falls headlong, taking two of the propped-up figures with him, and Mottershead is sure he's exaggerating his fall, playing to the audience, who emit cries of outrage and run to help him up. Mottershead knocks over the rest of the propped-up figures to hinder any pursuit and kicks the door shut behind him.

He's hardly out when he sees another bookshop through the trees. Its sign —EVERYTHING WORTH READING—is so challenging that he can't resist it. Fewer bicycles are about, and they and their bells seem slowed down. He sprints between them and peers around a tree trunk. When he sees nobody following him he scurries to the third bookshop.

The frontage seems altogether too narrow for the shop to accommodate the stock of which the sign boasts. On the other hand, if the proprietor's standards are higher than those apparent in the other shops, shouldn't this one stock Mottershead's work? He pushes open the black door beside the dim window occupied by a few jacketless leathery books. A bell above the door sounds a low sombre note, and the proprietor raises his head.

His black hair looks spongy and moist as lichen. His whiskers bristle on either side of his long pointed face. He's sitting behind a scratched desk

bearing an ancient cash register and a book catalogue, the corners of whose pages have turned up like dead leaves. His wrinkled eyelids rise lethargically as he stares at Mottershead, who strides forward and sticks out his hand. "Simon Mottershead. *Simon*," he emphasises to ensure there's no mistake.

The man gives the hand a discouraging glance and seems to brace himself as though his instinct is to recoil from his visitor. "Whom do you represent?"

"Myself," Mottershead says with a laugh which is meant to be self-deprecating but which comes out sounding wild. "I'm the writer."

"Which writer?"

"Simon Mottershead."

"Congratulations," the bookseller says with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "To what do I owe such an honour?"

"I was wondering which of my books you might have."

"I can hardly tell you that if they haven't been published."

"They have been," Mottershead wails, struggling to recall titles which will help him fend off the blackness that seems about to consume him; he feels as if he no longer exists. "*Cadenza*. Even if it's out of print, you must have heard of that one."

"No must about it, I fear."

The shop is much longer than was apparent from outside: so long that its depths are almost lightless. The growing darkness might be the absence of his books made visible. "Let me tell you the story," he pleads, "and perhaps if it'll come back to you."

The bookseller stands up and gazes past him. "You'll have to excuse me. I've a customer."

A moment later the bell tolls. Should Mottershead take advantage of the diversion and search the shelves for his name? Finding it in the face of the bookseller's denials would be the greatest triumph he can imagine. He edges past the desk and glances at the newcomer, and darkness rushes at him. "He isn't a customer," he says in a throttled voice.

"If he's about to make the same approach to me," the bookseller says, "I must ask you both to leave."

"Of course he isn't," Mottershead manages to articulate, rather than lay hands on his pursuer. "How could he?"

The bookseller opens a drawer of the desk and reaches into it. "Please leave or I'll have you excluded."

"You already have," Mottershead says bitterly, and lurches towards the exit, away from the tunnel of blackness which the shop feels like. The bald man is in his way. The top of his scalp is concave now, dented by his recent fall; his eyes have grown luridly bright, perhaps as a result of pressure on his brain. "You're a witness," Mottershead appeals to the bookseller. whose hand is still in the drawer, gripping a weapon or a telephone. "I've told this creature to stay away from me, otherwise I won't be responsible for my actions."

The bookseller shakes his head. "Please fight outside."

Mottershead sees himself and his tormentor as the bookseller is seeing them: two unpublished and probably unpublishable writers, mutually jealous because of their lack of success. The unfairness appalls him, and he's about to make a last attempt to persuade the bookseller of his authenticity when the bald man distracts him. "I've got something of yours," he says with a secretive grin.

"Whatever it is, you're welcome to it. Keep it as your fee for leaving me alone," Mottershead tells him, thinking that it must be the damaged copy of *Cadenza*. Since the other doesn't move, Mottershead hinges at him, and is gratified to see him flinch and cover his scalp with both hands. "Stay away or you'll get worse," Mottershead snarls, and marches out of the shop. Then his confidence deserts him, and he flees towards the open space beyond the avenue.

He won't stop for anything, he promises himself. The prospect of failing to find himself in yet another bookshop—of prolonging the black depression which seeps through him like poison—terrifies him, and yet he's unable to refrain from scanning the shop fronts in search of one more bookshop, one more excuse to hope. Didn't he behave like this when *Cadenza* was published? Was that the day when he flustered from bookshop to bookshop, feeling as though just one copy of the book would convince him he existed, until he was ready to do anything that would stop him feeling that way? He's dismayingly grateful that there seem to be no more bookshops on the

avenue. Nevertheless a window causes him to falter: the window of a clothes shop.

He's past it—past the full-length mirror among the shirted torsos and bodiless legs dressed in kilts or trousers—before he knows what he has seen. He wavers, stumbles onwards, backtracks reluctantly. He sees himself reappear in the mirror, walking backwards like a figure in a video cassette playing in reverse. Under his suit, which is so faded that its pattern has vanished, he's wearing only a singlet full of ventilation holes through which the grey hairs of his chest sprout; neither a shirt nor socks.

So this is the image of himself which he has been presenting. No wonder everyone was leery of him. His reflection is beginning to tremble before his eyes; his helpless rage is shaking him. He's staring at the mirror as if he is hypnotising himself—he's unable to look away from the sight of himself among the portions of bodies arranged like a work of art composed of dismemberment—when the man with the dented scalp appears behind him.

The reflection shivers like disturbed water. The movement seems to spread beyond the mirror, causing the torsos and severed limbs to stir as if they, or the single dusty head which lurks in one corner of the window, may be dreaming of recomposition. Perhaps one day he'll be able to derive a story from all this, Mottershead thinks desperately, but hasn't he already written something of the kind? His legs are pressing themselves together, his crossed hands are clutching his chest in an attempt to hide the discoloured flesh. The other cranes over his shoulder, and Mottershead feels as if he has grown a second head. "Just a few words," the man whispers moistly in his ear.

"Suck a turd," Mottershead howls and staggers out of reach, bumping into the window as he twists around to face his pursuer. "Will those do? Will that satisfy you?"

The man rolls his eyes and licks his lips. Perhaps he's trying to adjust his teeth, but he looks as though he is asking for more. Mottershead shouts every insult and obscenity and combination of them he can think of, a monologue which seems endless and yet to need no breath. When at last he runs out of words, his victim hasn't even flinched. He raises one hand to his mouth to shove his teeth into place and gives Mottershead a disappointed look. "That didn't sound much like a writer."

"Then I can't be one, can I?" Mottershead says with a kind of hysterical triumph. "Happy now?"

The other reaches for his teeth again as a preamble to responding, but Mottershead won't hear another word. He knocks the hand aside and digging his fingers into the man's mouth, seizes the upper set of teeth. The tongue pokes bonelessly at his fingers but can't dislodge them until he has taken the teeth, which he shies across the avenue, narrowly missing a lone cyclist. "Fetch," he snarls.

His victim gapes at him as though the weight of his jowls is more than his jaw will sustain. Though he quails at the thought of encountering the tongue again, Mottershead plunges his fingers into the open mouth and grabs the lower set of teeth. Plucking them off the blackened gums, he throws them as high as he can. They lodge in the branches of a chestnut, startling a bird, which flaps away along the avenue. "That should keep you busy for a while. Don't even dream of following," he warns, and runs after the bird.

Ahead, beyond a junction which puts an end to the shops, parkland stretches to the horizon. The sky above the park is cloudless, as though cleared by some emanation from the cropped grass. Here and there clumps of trees shade benches, all of which are unoccupied. As Mottershead passes the last shops the bird soars and seems to expand as it flaps blackly towards the zenith. Then it shrinks and vanishes before he expects it to do so, and he squeezes between two of the rusting cars which stand alongside the park.

The gates are held open by bolts driven deep into the path, cracking the concrete. Each of the stone gateposts is carved with a life-size figure which embraces the post and digs its face into the stone as though trying to hide or to see within. Above the scrawny limbs and torsos, the bald heads are pitted and overgrown with moss. Once he is through the gates Mottershead glances back, but the faces aren't emerging from the parkward sides of the posts, even if the moss on each of them resembles the beginnings of a face. Nor can he see anyone following him.

Beyond the gates the paths fan out. Most of them curve away between the benches, but one leads straight to the horizon, which is furred with trees. As Mottershead strolls along this path he seems to feel the city and everything which has befallen him withdrawing at least as far as the limits of the park. The grass is green as spring and sparkles with rain or dew, drops of which flash like windows to a microscopic world. He won't stop walking until he

reaches the trees on the horizon, and perhaps not then unless he has grasped why the park is so familiar.

He's beyond the outermost of the benches when he begins to remember. He was walking with his family, his wife holding his hand and their son's, their daughter holding Mottershead's other hand. Shafts of misty sunlight through the foliage started the trees singing. He felt as if his family were guiding him, keeping him safe while his dreams took possession of the woods. He felt that he was being led towards the fulfilment of a dream he didn't know he had. Perhaps he was incapable of believing in it or even of conceiving it while he was awake.

In that case, how can he glimpse it now? Too many impressions are crowding it out of his head. Is it a memory, or could it be something he wrote or intended to write? Whichever, he feels certain that he recognises the setting—that he has walked with his family through the woods at the far side of the park. They had a house beyond those woods. Isn't it possible that his wife and children still live there? That would mean he has a chance to make it up to them.

He can't think what he needs to put right, but surely he'll remember when he comes face to face with them. Did he use them in a story in some way that distressed them? He begins to jog towards the woods and then, as the trees remain stubbornly distant, to run. He seems to have got nowhere when he stops dead, having heard a toothless voice call his name.

He whirls around, snarling. The sky overhead seems to shrink and blacken, the clumps of trees appear to stiffen, clenching their branches. He can see nobody except a woman dashing through the gateway, dragged by three obese poodles dyed pink and green and purple, each dog wearing a cap and bells. Then the voice calls again, its speech blurred by the lack of teeth. "Here you are."

His tormentor must be hiding among the nearest clump of trees; Mottershead's rucksack is lolling on the bench they shade. He would happily abandon it, but if he doesn't confront his pursuer he's liable to be followed all the way to his family's house. He stalks towards the bench.

The man isn't in the trees around it. Mottershead can only assume the sight of the rucksack attracted his attention to the wrong clump. He grabs the rucksack and wriggles his arms into the straps, feeling a weight which must

be the damaged copy of *Cadenza* settle on his back. "Thank you. Now please go away," he shouts.

The only movement is of the poodles, which are rolling on the grass near the gates so zealously that they've dragged their owner down with them. As Mottershead stares about, he notices that all the houses bordering the park sport television aerials. Was he on television? He seems to remember cameras being poked at him, lights blazing at him, technicians crowding around him. How many people saw him on their screens, and what did they see? Not knowing makes his surroundings feel like a concealed threat. "Stay away from my family, you lunatic," he cries, and runs back to the straight path.

He feels as if the contents of the rucksack are riding him, driving him towards the woods. Whenever he passes another clump of trees around a bench he scrutinises them, though when he does so they appear to draw themselves up, to become identical with title previous clump. He's dizzy from peering around him and behind him by the time he reaches the end of the path.

Two trails lead from it into the woods. One is wide, and ribbed as though outlined by a giant ladder half buried in the earth. The other winds through a thicket, and he takes it at once, trusting the trees and the undergrowth to betray any attempt to pursue him.

The thicket is more extensive than he anticipates. The trees blot out the sky with branches so closely entangled that it's impossible to tell which foliage belongs to which. The leaves of the shrubs which mass between the trees, narrowing the path, look starved of sunlight; some are pale as the fungi which swell among the roots. Roots encroach on the gloomy path, so that he has to keep glancing down as he sidles through the thicket, peering ahead for the end.

At first he's able to ignore the way the darkness seems to creep closer around him whenever he examines the path, and then he tells himself that it's bound to grow darker as he progresses. But the darkness feels like a sign of pursuit—it feels like a sack which someone is poising over his head. Glaring over his shoulder, he sees that the thicket has closed in behind him, obscuring the view beyond it so thoroughly that the park and the city might never have been there at all.

Though he can neither see nor hear anyone pursuing him, his sense of being followed infests the woods. Foliage gathers overhead like eternal night, fungi goggle at him from beneath the mob of shrubs. He can't keep glancing back, because many of the shrubs between which the path meanders are full of thorns on which he's liable to tear himself. When he fixes his attention on the way ahead, however, he has the impression that he's allowing a pursuer to gain on him—that the dented head is about to crane over his shoulder, protruding its eyes and its discoloured tongue. "Stay out of my mind," he whispers, grabbing at branches and letting them whip savagely past him.

He feels as if he has ventured into a maze of thorns whose points are catching at his mind. He's tempted to retrace his tracks, but when he turns he sees that the branches which he let fly have blocked the path, rendering it indistinguishable in the gloom. At least the way ahead is passable, since initials and whole words are carved on the trees beside the path.

He's less inclined to welcome these signs of life once he succeeds in identifying the words. A tree to his left is inscribed vertically with one word: SOCKETS. A flap of bark has been left hanging from the next tree as though to expose the words DREAM OR SCREAM. Most disconcerting is the message displayed by a trunk on the opposite side of the path—NEARLY A TREE—because when he surveys the woods beyond it, several of the trees seem unconvincing, more like wood carved and assembled to masquerade as trees. He sidles between the thorns as rapidly as he dares in the gathering darkness.

The path bends sharply, and as he approaches the bend he observes that the trees directly ahead of him are carved with words from their roots to their crowns—tree after tree, leading his gaze into the depths of the woods. It seems to him that the thorny gloom must contain words enough to fill at least one book. Should he force his way through the bushes to read them? Perhaps the thorns won't injure him, for he's beginning to identify with them, beginning to think that the thorns themselves must have scratched the words on the trees; he can't imagine anyone struggling through the mass of them to do so. He feels as if the thorns aren't reaching for his mind after all, they're reaching out of it. He tries to grasp that impression, but it's too like an embodiment of the dark for comfort. He drags his gaze away from the engraved trees and edges along the path.

The woods are loath to release him. Thorns snag his rucksack and his shoulders; he feels as if the contents of the rucksack are trying to delay him. How long has he been stumbling through the woods? Will he ever be out of the dark? He's suppressing a fear that the path may have turned back on itself, because wherever he looks in order to pick his way he's confronted with paragraphs gouged out of timber. He's afraid to rest his gaze on them even for a moment, knowing that he'll be compelled to stand and read them while the darkness continues to gather.

Now the thorns ahead are rising above him, as though to drive him back. The rucksack tugs at his shoulders, the thorns overhead seem to writhe. He winces from side to side of the path, convinced that he can feel thorns reaching for his eyes. His left eye twinges as if the point of a thorn has touched the surface of the eyeball, and he claps one hand over his eyes and gropes forward with the other. The skin beneath his fingernails is tingling with apprehension. No thorns have pierced his fingertips, however, when the rucksack slumps against his spine and he flounders into the open.

It's almost as dark outside the forest as it was beneath the trees. Glancing back, he sees that he has emerged through a gap in a hedge which in the darkness, looks impenetrable. The path, or his deviation from it, has led him into the back garden of a large two-storey house.

Light from a kitchen window and between the curtains of the adjacent ground-floor room lies on the worn grass, trapping him in the intervening darkness. He's preparing to dodge through the narrower ray and sneak around the building to the road when he recognises the house. The curtains may not be familiar, but the gap-toothed look of the arch above the curtained window is, and the tilt of the bricked-up chimney and the droop of the handle of the back door. This was once his house.

The gap in the hedge was his doing. No wonder he was able to place the woods; they were his refuge whenever he found that he couldn't think in the house. He remembers taking care to leave the thorny branches intact, to make it harder for anyone to follow him. He remembers returning from the woods one day to find his children carving their initials on the kitchen door-post, glancing fearfully towards him as the hedge creaked. His wife ran through the kitchen to rebuke them before he could lose his temper, but listening to her reasoning with them was more man he could bear. "Give me

the knife," he said to her, and saw the blade flash in all their eyes. "Maybe one day people will know this was where we lived."

The initials are there on the jamb, all four sets of them. The pile of final letters appears to depict a steady hum, a lullaby which he can almost hear and which makes him feel dreamy and safe, home at last. The situation isn't so simple—he can't assume that he will be received with open arms—surely once he sees his family he'll recall what happened in the interim. He creeps along the track of darkness, grinning in anticipation of the sight of their faces when they become aware of him. He's halfway across the lawn when a man appears beyond the gap between the curtains of the downstairs room.

Mottershead throws himself flat. The lawn feels like a mattress hardened by age, prickly and full of lumps. Is the man a burglar or some even more dangerous intruder? Mottershead gropes around himself in search of a weapon and finds a rake, its tines upturned a few inches in front of him. If he'd taken one more step before prostrating himself they would have had his eyes. He draws the rake towards him between the strips of light and begins to raise it through the shadow so as to grasp the handle.

The rake is perpendicular in front of him when he wonders if the man, who has passed the gap between the curtains, may be in the house by invitation. He can't assume that, he has to establish that his family is unharmed and not in danger. He has been pressing both hands on the tines of the rake in order to lift the handle; now he lets go with one in order to reach for it. His other hand can't support the weight, and the rake totters. As he tries to grab it with both hands, it falls into the light with a thump and a clang.

He digs his hands and face into the soil and lies absolutely still. The curtains rattle, the light spreads over him, and then the sash of the window bumps up. "Are you all right, old chap?" the man calls. "Stay there and we'll get you." Mottershead seizes the rake and hauls himself to his feet. The man, who has a long face and a mane of reddish hair, looks concerned until he sees Mottershead clearly; then he frowns. "I lived here," Mottershead gabbles. "I'm just going."

"No hurry, old fellow. Perhaps you still do. Come round the front and we'll see if we can find your room. Shall we put the rake down? It's a bit late for gardening, don't you think? When it's light we can see about finding you your very own plot to look after."

Mottershead lets the rake drop. His embarrassment and discomfiture are giving way to panic, but he has to be certain that he's right to leave. "My wife and children aren't still here, are they?" he says as calmly as he can manage. "The Mottersheads."

"I'm sure they'll be here at visiting time. Let's go round the front now and I'll let you in."

Mottershead makes himself stroll to the corner of the house. As soon as it conceals him he breaks into a run, intending to be past the gates by the time the nurse opens the front door. But he slows to glance through the window in the side of the house.

Beyond the window is the dining-room. All the furniture has been replaced. About a dozen old folk wearing plastic bibs which cover their chests are seated at a trestle table draped with cellophane. Brawny nurses of both sexes stand behind them, spooning greenish slop into their toothless mouths or removing slices of bread which two of the diners have placed on their own heads. One nurse seems about to knock with her knuckles on a balding woman's skull but desists, simpering, when she catches sight of Mottershead. He puts on speed again, too tardily. As he rounds the house, the male nurse opens the front door.

He raises his long face towards Mottershead like a hound on the scent. "Sorry to have bothered you," Mottershead calls to him, backing towards the gates. "I should be somewhere else by now. I'll be on my way."

The man's face seems to elongate as his mouth opens. "We've someone who's a bit confused here. I don't think we want him wandering off."

He's addressing two of his colleagues, who have just stepped into the drive. Their eyes gleam with the light of the streetlamp outside the gates; the rest of their faces are covered with surgical masks. They move to either side of the drive and advance on Mottershead like mirror images, each stretching out a hand to take him by the arms.

He waits until they're almost upon him, his neck twitching as he watches them over his shoulder. At the last moment he dodges around them, leaping and nearly falling over what's left of his wife's rockery, and dashes across the car park which most of the front garden has become. He swings himself around an upright of a sign naming the Wild Rest Home and manages to

drag the right-hand gate open as the concrete catches at its bolt. Struggling through the gap, he clashes the gate shut and looks back.

The nurses have already caught up with him. Though he didn't hear them following, all three are close enough to touch. The eyes of the masked nurses are far too large; their masks are so flat it seems impossible for them to be concealing any features. Their companion's face points like a hound's towards Mottershead, and he poises himself, eager for the chase, as they each seize one of the gates. "Stay," Mottershead cries, and flees into the dark beyond the streetlamp.

Has he strayed back into the woods? Surely the suburban street ought to lead to a main road, but he's having to dodge around trees which sprout thickly from the pavement and even, it seems, from the roadway. There must be houses; he sees the flickering of televisions, though their screens appear to be among the trees themselves rather than in rooms. If he has turned the wrong way at the gates, it's too late to rectify his error. The single lamp has already been blotted out by trees dripping with mist, but he knows his pursuers are behind him. He runs towards the sound of an engine revving somewhere ahead.

It's a bus, and he doesn't care where it's going so long as it helps him escape. When he glances round he sees that the nurses are gaining on him, the long-faced man's nose quivering above the bared teeth, the others flanking him, their lack of faces glimmering. The sound of the engine is moving gradually to Mottershead's left, and he sprints in that direction, trying to avoid the patches of unsteady light where he glimpses figures watching televisions, unless the shapes are monumental statues which have collapsed in front of marble slabs. Then the long-faced nurse draws level with him, leaping over the source of one patch of flickering, which seems to freeze him for a moment so that Mottershead can see him clearly: face like a hound's skull, pallid flapping belly, limbs white and thin as bones. He drops to all fours and bounds ahead, ranging back and forth while he waits to see which way Mottershead will dodge. Mottershead runs straight at him, praying that will make him falter. Instead the man leaps to meet him, his eyes bulging as whitely as his teeth. Mottershead lurches aside and puts on a final desperate burst of speed, which takes him away from the sound of the bus. There are no lights where he's running, only trees which loom in front of him whichever way he stumbles. "I won't go back," he tells himself,

unable to say it aloud for the clamping of his jaw, feeling as though even his voice has deserted him. He swerves around another tree and another, and suddenly he's in a narrow passage where weeds and branches overhang the high walls. He dashes along it, tripping over bricks which have fallen from the walls, and at last it lets him into the open.

He's on a street which winds between dark dumpy houses. All the houses are derelict, as are the cars parked beneath smashed lamps along both sides of the road. Nevertheless the street isn't entirely lifeless; he hears the creaks of rusty springs, and several bunches of heads rise to watch him through the glassless windscreens, their tiny eyes glittering like raindrops. He peers along the brick passage, which for the moment is empty, and tries frantically to judge which way to run. The groaning of the engine becomes audible once more, and the bus grinds into view between the houses to his right.

The vehicle is dark except for its guttering headlamps. He stares at the passage again and sees three figures racing towards him, stretching out their arms until it seems they could finger the ground without stooping. He forces his way between two cars, and feels them shake as he disturbs their occupants. He staggers into the road, waving his hands wildly at the bus.

Is it really bound for somewhere called Frosty Biceps? He hasn't time to reread the destination, he's too busy trying to catch the attention of the driver, who is bent so low over the steering-wheel that his forehead appears to overhang his eyes. The driver sees him and lifts his expressionless face, whose features are squashed into a concavity between the jutting forehead and prominent chin. The vehicle slows, and Mottershead digs in his pocket for the envelope of money. The bus halts a few feet away from him and the door wavers open.

He hasn't reached the platform when the vehicle starts to trundle forward. Glancing behind him, he sees hands drumming their fingers on the walls at the end of the passage, three hands on each wall, as if his pursuers are only waiting for the bus to forsake him before they run him down. "Help me," he pleads.

The driver doesn't brake or look away from the road, but his forehead and chin relax sufficiently to let him open his mouth. "Get if you're getting," he mutters.

Mottershead clutches at the metal pole beyond the door and hauls himself onto the platform. At once the bus sways around the next curve, barely missing two derelict cars and almost throwing Mottershead off. He hangs on to the pole until the door drags shut like a curtain rusty with disuse, then he takes one hand from the pole to reach for the envelope. "Ferry?" he says hopefully.

"You'll end up where you have to go."

The driver seems to begrudge him even that response. Mottershead wraps his legs around the pole, feeling like a monkey, and tries to hold the envelope steady while he inserts a finger beneath the flap. "How much is it?"

The driver jerks his head, vaguely indicating the depths of the bus. "You'll have to deal with him."

Presumably he's referring to a conductor, but the vehicle is too dark for Mottershead to locate him. No doubt he'll come to Mottershead, who clambers upstairs as the bus sways onwards. As soon as he's on the top deck he clings to the banister above the stairs and peers through the grimy windows.

The passage down which he was chased is already out of sight, and the road is deserted. Otherwise the view behind him and ahead of him is less reassuring. The spaces between the houses are piled high with refuse: crumpled cars, bent supermarket trolleys, handless grandfather clocks hollow as coffins, huge verdigrised bells, television sets with doll-sized figures stuffed inside them, their faces and hands flattened against the cracked screens. He can't tell whether the hulks beyond the houses closest to the road are buildings or abandoned buses. He staggers to the front seat and falls into it, sitting forward to let the contents of the rucksack settle themselves, and then he sinks back.

There's movement above him. A round mirror is set in the ceiling over the cabin, allowing the driver to survey the top deck through a spyhole. Having spied Mottershead, the driver returns his attention to the windings of the road, and Mottershead looks back. As far as he can distinguish in the thick gloom, he's alone on the upper deck. He gazes ahead, willing the landing-stage not to be far.

He rather wishes he hadn't noticed the mirror. Its bulbousness stretches the driver's forehead and chin so that his dwarfed eyes and nose and mouth appear to be set in a crescent of flesh surmounted by a tuft of whitish hair. The feeble headlights flicker over the derelict suburb, and Mottershead has the impression that the houses themselves are stuffed to their roofs with refuse; certainly the figures in the gaping windows are being thrust towards the sills by the tangled masses within. As the bus swings around a curve, scraping several cars, he thinks he sees a figure lose its hold on the second-floor sill where it's perched and fall head first onto the concrete. He can't be seeing all this, he tells himself; it's just that he hasn't had a chance to recover from the day, from the effect which the man with the unreal pate had on his mind. Another figure plummets from a window, the impact flinging its head and all its limbs in different directions, and he realises that the figures are dummies. He shouldn't even be watching, he hasn't sorted out his fare. He tears open the envelope and brings it to his eyes.

It contains half a dozen coins and several folded notes. As he pulls out the notes and smooths them on his palm, the coins rattle together. Surely he has misheard the sound. He leafs through the notes, peering so hard at them that his vision shivers, then he glares at the coins. All of the latter are plastic, and apart from a note In some unrecognisably foreign currency, the notes are from a board game too.

He clenches his fists in helpless rage, crushing the notes, splintering the coins. So the writers' group never held a collection for him. The man who handed him the envelope must be responsible for its contents, and Mottershead is certain now that the man has been doing his best to drive him mad. When did he begin? He followed Mottershead into the room in the library, but from where? Perhaps from the bookshop where Mottershead found the copy of *Cadenza*—perhaps from the bedroom which Mottershead thought was a bookshop. The further back he tries to remember, the further and deeper the madness seems to reach; it's like a black pit into which he's falling with increasing speed. Then a glimpse of movement jerks him back into full awareness of his situation, and he glares at the mirror.

At first he thinks it may have been only the driver who moved. The man's face looks more misshapen than ever, the brow drawn further forward than the chin by the globular mirror. Beyond him, however, Mottershead can just discern the reflection of the lower deck, which is no longer empty. Some

way down the aisle there's a hint of a face in the air, a glimmering of eyes and teeth.

The eyes and the grin must be dismayingly large to be visible at such a distance in the dark. They look deserted by flesh. He can see nothing of the head they occupy except for a pale scrawny blur, but he sees movement below them, in front of them. It has begun to reach two hands towards the stairs.

It's as though the mirror is a transparent egg inside which an embryo is forming. That image seems to clarify his vision, and he thinks the eyes are about to hatch or otherwise transform. Though neither the head nor the blur which is presumably its body has advanced, the thin white hands are much closer to the stairs. He can't tell whether the spindly arms or the hands themselves are lengthening, but he feels as if his seeing the shape is allowing it to reach out—as if his inability to look away or to stop seeing is attracting it to him. His fists close convulsively on useless paper and plastic. He shies everything he's holding at the mirror and scrabbles in his pockets. As the last of the notes flutters to the floor he finds the sharp portions of his broken credit card.

He takes them out and holds them between fingers and thumbs. There's one blade for each of his eyes. In the mirror the huge unblinking eyes above the knowing grin watch him. He lifts the points towards his face, trying to take aim despite the tremors which are spreading from his fingers to the rest of him. He'll have to apply the blades one at a time, he thinks. He tears his gaze away from the mirror, from the sight of the driver crouching over the wheel as if determined to ignore the presence in the aisle, the hands which appear to be drawing the rest of it towards the stairs. Mottershead grabs the back of his own head so that it can't flinch out of range, and poises the first blade in front of his left eye.

The bus has arrived at the brow of a hill, where the houses come to an end. Beyond the last ruins, whose walls are almost buried in refuse, the road snakes down a bare slope into blackness. At the foot of the hill is a looming mass relieved only by a few lit windows. His thinking is so constricted that at first he doesn't understand why the two lines of windows, one above the other, are identical. The lower rank is a reflection in black water; the windows are those of a boat.

Dare he risk heading for the stairs if that means the shape in the aisle may touch him? He'll never reach the ferry otherwise. The point wavers in front of his eye, his hand grasps the back of his skull. The bus accelerates downhill, and the sudden movement jerks his head towards the blade. With a choked scream he opens both hands just in time for it to scrape his cheekbone.

The plastic skates across the floor and clatters down the stairs. He still has a weapon, if such a defence will be any use. He mustn't imagine the worst or he'll be lost. The bus is more than halfway down the slope. He shoves himself off the seat and turns towards the stairs, bracing himself to confront what may be waiting at the bottom. But it isn't there, it's in the aisle behind him.

The rudimentary face grins with delight. The thin white fingers are visibly lengthening, and he has stumbled almost within their grasp. They're moving not so much like fingers as like the legs of spiders dangling in the gloom. If he hadn't stood up when he did they would have closed over his eyes. That thought and the sight of them paralyses him, but another swerve of the vehicle throws him forwards. A convulsion of panic sends him sideways, where he manages to duck away from them, onto the stairs. He's two steps down when they swoop over the banisters and touch him.

They touch his eyes. They feel like tongues composed of material softer than flesh. He hurls himself backwards, colliding with the metal wall, hacking at them with the blade. In the moment before they recoil from his attack he seems to feel a fingertip penetrating the surface of each eyeball. Blinking wildly, he slashes at the fingers as they retreat. Their substance tatters like wet paper, and he wonders if any of it is left in his eyes. As the remnants of the hands shrink back over the banister he staggers downstairs, moaning in his throat. "Stop," he screams. If his plea has any effect on the driver, it causes him only to mime indifference. As he leans over the wheel, his features seem to retreat into the hollow between his forehead and chin. Mottershead lunges at the door and wrenches at the handle. Either as a result of his violence or because the driver has released the mechanism, the door folds inwards, but the vehicle maintains its speed. It swerves towards the landing-stage, which consists of no more than a few planks embedded in glistening mud. The bus is travelling so fast that it almost skids onto the

planks. The driver brakes, and Mottershead seizes his chance. As the bus slows momentarily, he launches himself onto the stage.

His impetus carries him across the planks at a helpless run. They shift alarmingly, sliding sideways. Some of them aren't even set in the earth, they're floating in water which looks thick as mud. Before any of this has registered he's stumbling headlong onto the ferry as it bumps against the stage. By grabbing at the banister of the staircase which leads to the upper deck, he manages to halt himself. He clings to the rusty metal and stares back.

The bus is veering up the hill. Nothing appears to have followed him or to be about to follow. Though he can't hear or feel the working of the engine, the boat is drifting away from the stage, several dislodged planks of which are trailing in its wake. He feels hollow with relief, and so the boat is some way out before he notices that it has ceased to show any lights.

Could the crew have abandoned it while he was on the hill? Even being cast adrift seems preferable to his encounter on the bus. All the same, he would like to see where he's going. He scrambles upstairs to the top deck.

Several benches stand by the rail on either side of the deck. Ventilators rise above them, fat pipes whose wide mouths are turned towards the rail. Two pairs of double doors lead to a lounge below the wheelhouse. The sky and the water might be a single medium, a stagnant darkness which coats the surfaces of the vessel and fills the lounge and wheelhouse. He sits on a bench and watches the ruined suburb on the hill withdraw like a stage set and sink as though the blackness is consuming it, and then he sits and waits.

He isn't sure what he's waiting for: perhaps for daylight, or the appearance of another shore, or—best of all—of another boat with a crew to take him on board. He hopes he won't have to wait long, because it's beginning to prey on his nerves; he feels as if he isn't alone on the boat after all. The doors to the lounge keep stirring furtively as if someone is peeping between them. That could be due to the motion of the vessel, though its rocking is imperceptible, but what has he begun to glimpse in the mouths of the ventilators, ducking out of sight whenever he glares at them? Whatever is keeping him company, everything seems to conceal it; even the benches, which remind him increasingly of boxes with concealed lids. Perhaps the lids are about to shift. Certainly he senses movement close to him.

He grabs the rail and pulls himself to his feet. As he stares about the deck in the midst of the shoreless water he feels something dodge behind him. He presses his spine against the rail. The deck is deserted, but something is behind him. He's about to twist around until he catches sight of it, even though his instincts tell him that he won't succeed, that he'll go on spinning until he can't stop. Instead he makes himself stay as he is, and grips the rail to hold himself still. Before long he senses movement at his back.

He knows where it is. He might have known sooner, he thinks, if it hadn't been infecting his perceptions. He shoves himself away from the rail and strides to the middle of the deck, an expression which feels like a grin breaking out on his face. Planting his legs wide to steady himself, he shrugs off the rucksack and dumps it on the end of a bench. As he unbuckles it, the contents stir uneasily. He pulls it wide open and stoops to peer within.

There's no book inside. The only contents are a naked doll about two feet high. Though it's composed of whitish mottled plastic, it looks starved and withered. He inverts the rucksack, and the doll clatters in two pieces to the deck, the unscrewed top of the skull rolling away between the benches, the limbs twitching as the rest of the doll sprawls. What has emerged from the head scuttles into the depths of the rucksack and tries to burrow into a comer. Mottershead slams the rucksack onto the deck and stamps on it until the struggling inside it weakens and eventually ceases, then he kicks it and the doll overboard.

He hangs on to the rail and gazes at the water. Something is reluctant to let go of him. It feels like teeth buried in his brain, gnawing ratlike at its substance. As sluggish ripples spread through the water the teeth seem to burrow deeper and to lose their sharpness. The ripples fade as the doll and the rucksack sink, and he feels as if a toothless mouth has lodged in his skull, its enfeebled tongue poking at the fleshy petals of his brain. The ripples vanish, and so does the kiss in his brain, as if the mouth has been starved of brain matter. Now that his mind is clear he turns to see where the boat is approaching.

It's an island covered with trees and illuminated faintly by a crescent moon. Is it the place which feels as much like a dream as a memory? He has dreamed of being guided through the forest, following shafts of sunlight which appear to be both marking out his path and lingering on secrets of the forest: trees inscribed with messages of lichen; a glade encircled by mounds

composed of moss and tiny blossoms as if the processes of growth are performing an arcane ritual; an avenue of pines whose trunks, which are straight as telephone poles, are surrounded by golden flakes of themselves as though sunlight has solidified in the piny chill and settled to the earth. Surely all this is more than a dream, despite his impression that the forest never ends—and then he sees that the ferry has brought him home.

The prow is pivoting towards the stage where he embarked before dawn. He can just see the avenue of poplars which leads to his house. Couldn't the forest which seems to cover most of the island be the source of his vision? There's no telling in the dark. At least the vessel isn't drifting aimlessly; someone is in the wheelhouse after all, steering the boat to the shore.

As the ferry nudges the stage Mottershead descends the stairs. Since there's nobody to moor the craft, he waits until the hull scrapes the tires at the edge of the stage, then he runs at the gap where the gangplank should be, and jumps. The ferry swings away at once and sails into the blackness, but he has time to glimpse the helmsman. Is it the bearded sailor from the earlier ferry? He's wearing a Balaclava, though he seems to have pulled it down over the whole of his face. If its dim silhouette represents the outline of the skull, then surely Mottershead ought to have noticed how odd the shape was. It's the fault of the darkness, he thinks, or else his perceptions aren't as undistorted as he has allowed himself to hope. He'll feel better once he's home. He turns away from the water and strides towards the house.

The poplars creak and sway as though they're about to collapse beneath the burden of the low thick sky. All the houses among the trees are unlit, and he can't locate any of them by the glow of the moon, within whose curve he seems to glimpse a hint of features. He feels as though he can sense the growth of the forest around him; he keeps his gaze fixed on the tarmac for fear of straying once again into the woods. When he sees the lights of his house ahead he sprints towards them.

It doesn't matter that he can't recall leaving the lights on. He runs up the overgrown path, fishing for his keys, which rattle out of his pocket like the chain of a miniature anchor. He's almost at the front door when he hears a voice beyond the curtains of the lounge: his own voice.

Worse yet, it sounds terrified. He feels as if he isn't really outside the house—as if only his terror is. He's tempted to flee into the woods rather than learn what the voice may have to tell him, but if he takes to his heels now

he knows he will never be able to stop. He aims the key at the lock and grips his wrist with his other hand to steady it. At last the key finds the slot, and he eases the door open.

The bulb above the L-shaped hall is lit. The hall and the uncarpeted staircase look faded with disuse. Beyond the door to the lounge his voice is babbling incomprehensibly as if it's unable to stop. He retrieves his key and creeps into the hall, inching the door shut behind him.

He isn't stealthy enough. The voice is suddenly cut off, and he hears the whir of a speeding video tape. He slams the front door and racing across the hall, flings open the door to the lounge.

Three people are sitting in the slumped armchairs: a woman who may be about his age, a younger woman, a man her age or slightly older. All have greying hair, which seems premature in at least two of them, and faces so wide that their foreheads appear lower than they should. As Mottershead strides into the room the man jumps up and snatches a tape out of the video recorder while his sister clears away a board game strewn with plastic coins and toy notes. "Darling," the woman says to Mottershead, "we were just coming to fetch you."

"We've been wondering where you'd got to," says her daughter.

"Have you been working all this time. Dad?" the man says gently, as if Mottershead isn't already beset by enough questions of his own. Have they come to visit him, or are they living with him despite what he told the writers' group? Were they somewhere in the house when he left it, or did they let themselves in later? "I've been using my mind all right," he tells his son, to get rid of at least that question.

"Then I should put your feet up now," his wife advises.

"Take it easy," says his daughter. "You've earned the rest."

"Try and get some sleep," his son says. "We're here."

Why isn't Mottershead reassured? Part of him yearns to embrace them, and perhaps he'll be able to once he has watched the video cassette—once he no longer feels that they're keeping a secret from him. He knows they'll try to dissuade him from watching if they realise he means to do so. "Aren't we eating?" he suggests.

"If you're ready to put some flesh on yourself," says his wife.

"I'll help you," his daughter tells her, and they both go out. His son has slipped the video cassette into its case and is trying to pretend he isn't holding it. "I'll put that away," Mottershead informs him, staring hard at him until he hands over the cassette and trudges out of the room. "Close the door," Mottershead calls after him. "I'd like to be alone for a while."

The cassette has been recorded from a television broadcast. Handwritten on the label is the title, *Out of His Head*. Does that refer to the creative process? Might he just have heard himself reading one of his stories aloud? Again he seems to remember cameras and lights surrounding him, but now he has the disconcerting notion that it isn't the memory which is vague—it's rather that he was unsure at the time whether the crew and their equipment were actually present. He shoves the cassette into the expressionless black mouth of the player and turns the sound of the television low as the image shivers into focus.

The cassette hasn't been rewound completely; the program is under way. One of his books is hovering in space. *Postpone the Stone*—of course that was a title of his; why couldn't he have called it to mind when he needed to? A trick of the camera flips the book over like a playing card and transforms it into another of his novels. *Make No Bones*, and then into *Cadenza*. He's about to run the tape back to remind himself of his work when he hears what the commentary is saying about him.

"—speculate with an intensity best described as neurotic," an unctuous male voice is saying. "In one of his stories a man who's obsessed with the impossibility of knowing if he has died in his sleep convinces himself that he has, and is dreaming. Another concerns a man who believes he is being followed by a schizophrenic whose hallucinations are affecting his own perceptions, but the hallucinations prove to be the reality he has tried to avoid seeing. The reader is left suspecting that the schizophrenic is really a projection of the man himself."

Did Mottershead write that? He's reaching out to halt the tape, so as to have time to think, when he sees himself appear on the screen. The sight freezes him, his hands outstretched.

He's walking back and forth across a glade—whether in the forest on the island or behind his old home isn't clear—and muttering to himself as rapidly as he is walking. Now and then he lurches at trees to examine the bark or squats to scrutinise the grass, and then he's off again, muttering and

scurrying. His grin is so fixed, and his eyes are so wide, that he looks afraid to do anything but grin. Every few seconds he digs his fingers into his unkempt scalp as if he feels it slipping.

While he has been straining unsuccessfully to distinguish his own words Mottershead has ceased to hear the commentary, but now he becomes conscious of it. "—in the last of his rare interviews," the voice is saying. "The price of such intense commitment to his work may have been an inability to stop. At first this took the form of a compulsion to tell his stories to anyone who could be persuaded to listen. Later, immediately prior to his breakdown, he appears to have been unable to grasp reality except as raw material to be shaped. The breakdown may have been precipitated by the creative urge continuing to make demands on him after he had lost the power to write."

He can almost remember telling stories to people in the street, to anyone who wasn't swift enough to elude him. He has the impression that the last such encounter may have been very recent indeed. Before he can seize the impression, his family enters the glade. They look younger, though their hair is already greying. They're trying to coax him home from the woods, but he keeps dodging them, both his gait and his voice speeding up. His babbling sounds more like the voice he overheard on his way in. He is still failing to understand its words when he hears his family murmuring outside the room.

He drags the cassette out of the player. He hasn't remembered everything; he's at the edge of a deeper blackness. He doesn't want to face his family until he has managed to remember. He hugs the cassette to his chest with both hands as if someone is about to take it from him. When the plastic carapace begins to crack, he's afraid that its contents may escape. He shoves the cassette into its case and stuffs the case into his pocket as he tiptoes to the door to hear what his family is murmuring about him. Before he reaches it, the voices cease.

He clasps the doorknob and presses his ear against a panel, but can hear nothing. He throws the door open, and the women turn to gaze at him from the kitchen at the far end of the hall, while his son comes to the doorway of the dining-room. "Anything we can do. Dad?" he says. "Want someone to sit with you?"

"I'm fine the way I am," Mottershead retorts, wondering how they can all have withdrawn so quickly from discussing him outside the lounge. He advances on his son, expecting to find that he has only been pretending to busy himself. But the table is laid; all four places on the dim tablecloth are set, except for one from which the steak knife is missing. He knows instinctively that it's his place. "You aren't finished," he stammers, and makes for the stairs.

The women continue to watch him. Under the fluorescent tube their hair looks grey with dust, their foreheads appear squashed by shadows. It seems to Mottershead that they may be about to transform, to reveal their true nature, of which these details are merely hints. His mind hasn't quite cleared itself, he thinks. He mustn't let this happen, not to them. "I'll be upstairs," he shouts, "No need to come looking."

"That's right, you put your feet up," his daughter says.

"You've earned it," his son adds.

"Get some rest," says his wife.

Even this unnerves him; it revives an impression of his life with them, of how it became a monotonous descent by excruciatingly minute stages into a banality with which he felt they were doing their best to smother him. Or was that something he tried to write? He dashes upstairs to his room.

He lies on the mattress and gazes at the branching cracks and peeling plaster overhead. The sight makes him uneasy, but so does the rest of the room: the shapeless bulging contents of the chest of drawers, the eternally open wardrobe, the blurred shapes in the wallpaper, where he can see figures flattened like insects if he lets himself. He closes his eyes, but shapes gather behind the lids at once. Should he switch off the light? He feels as if his sole means of finding peace may be to retreat into the dark. He hasn't opened his eyes when his family enters the room.

They must have come through the door from the corridor. Even if he sees them standing on the side of the room furthest from the door, they can't have emerged from the wardrobe. "Having a snooze?" his son says. "That's the ticket. We were just wondering if you'd seen a knife."

"Why should I know where it is?"

"We aren't saying you do," his daughter assures him. "You have your snooze while we see if it's anywhere."

He shouldn't have admitted that he knows what they're searching for; he feels that the admission has made them wary of him. As they peer into the wardrobe and poke through the drawers full of unwashed clothes and fumble at the heavy curtains, he's sure that they are surreptitiously watching him. He inches his hands out on both sides of him and gropes under the mattress, but the knife isn't there. Suddenly afraid to find it, he shoves himself off the bed.

The three of them swing towards him as though they are affecting not to move. "We won't be long," his wife murmurs. "Just pretend we aren't here."

"Bathroom," Mottershead cries, thinking that he'll be alone in there if anywhere. He sprints along the corridor, past the rooms whose shaded light-bulbs steep the single beds in crimson, and into the bathroom, clawing at the bolt until it finds the socket. He crosses his wrists and clutches his shoulders as he stares around him.

The room is less of a refuge than he hoped, but at first he doesn't understand why. Is it the sound like a faint choked gurgling, not quite able to form words, which is making him reluctant to sit on the lid of the toilet or lie in the rusty bath? Though it can only be the plumbing, it seems like a memory, or at least reminiscent of one. His gaze roams the bathroom and is caught by a gleam beside the sink: his open razor.

If he's made to feel trapped in the room, he doesn't know what he might do. He scrabbles at the bolt, to get the door open before his family starts murmuring outside. The door bangs against the wall, and the heads crane out of the other rooms. His children appear flayed by the crimson light behind them, his wife's hair looks matted with dust; they seem to have hardly any foreheads. The sight appals him, and he flees past them, flinching out of reach. There's still somewhere he thinks he may be safe—the locked room.

The key was in the lock earlier, but suppose it has been removed while he was wandering? As he runs downstairs and along the corridor, he feels as though his nerves are all he is. He glances into the dining-room in case the knife has reappeared, but now the other knives are missing too. Even seeing the key in the locked door doesn't help; indeed, he wants to rush out of the house and never come back. But his hand is reaching with uncontrollable smoothness for the key. He turns it and pushes the door open, and switches on the light in the room.

A thought arrests him on the threshold of the bare room, which is so brightly lit by a shadeless bulb that it seems to contain nothing but illumination. Does he mean to lock the door in order to keep his family out, or himself in? Have they hidden the other knives from him? His vision begins to adjust, and he sees the walls white as blank pages, glaring like the walls of an interrogation room. Someone is lying on the floorboards under the bulb.

He can't immediately distinguish who it is, but he thinks that whoever has been persecuting him and his perceptions has managed to hide in the room. Since they are lying where the light is brightest, why can't he see them clearly? It occurs to him that he may not want to see. At once, before he has time to cover his eyes, he does. His family is in the room.

They're lying face up on the boards, their hands folded on their chests. His children's heads are nearest the door, his wife's feet are between them. At each of their throats a book lies open, pinned there by one of the knives driven deep. Their faces look as if someone has tried unsuccessfully to pull and knead and pummel them into a semblance of calm.

For a moment he believes they're watching him, though their eyes are dull with dust. But he's unable to waken any life in their eyes, even when he grabs the flex and moves the light-bulb back and forth, making their eyes gleam and go out, gleam and go out. Falling to his knees achieves nothing; all he can see is the book at his wife's throat. He finds himself reading and re-reading one sentence: "As a child he hoped life would never end; when he grew up he was afraid it might not."

He's rather proud of having phrased that. Did he once write about doing away with his family, or wasn't he able to write it? In either case, having already imagined the act and his ensuing grief may be the reason why he feels empty now, and growing emptier. He feels as if he's about to come to an end. Anything is preferable to the lifelessness of the room, even the kind of day he has been through.

He rises unsteadily and wavers to the door, where he switches off the light. That seems to help a little, and so does locking the door from the outside. "I'm better now," he mumbles, and then he shouts it through the house.

There's no response. He can't blame them for hiding from him while the fourth knife is at large, but if they'll only stay with him they'll be able to ensure that he doesn't find it first. He runs through the ground floor, hoping

to meet them in each room, switching off the light in each to remind him where he has already looked for them. He darkens the stairs and runs up, he turns off the lights in the bathroom, in his son's bedroom and his daughter's. Now only his and his wife's room remains, and mustn't he have had a reason to leave it until last? "Surprise," he cries, starting to laugh and weep as he throws the door open. But nobody is in the room.

He stares at the desertion, one hand on the light switch. Even the meagre furniture seems hardly present. If he finds the knife he'll use it on himself. Why does the thought seem to contain a revelation? He clutches at his eyes with his free hand as if to adjust his vision, then he gazes ahead, barely seeing the room, not needing to see. He'll never find the knife, he realises, because he has already turned it on himself.

Perhaps only he is dead. Perhaps everything else was a story which he has been telling to keep himself company in the dark or to convince himself that he still has some grasp of the world. He has to believe that of at least the contents of the locked room. No wonder his search for his family has shown him empty rooms; dreams can't be forced to appear. At least his instincts haven't failed him, since he has been darkening the house. He needs the dark so that his story can take shape.

He turns off the last light and pacing blindly to the bed, sinks onto the mattress. The room already seems less substantial. He lies back and crosses his hands on his chest, he closes his eyes and waits for them to fill with blank darkness. If he lies absolutely still, perhaps his family will come to him. Hasn't he tried this before, more than once, many times? Perhaps this time there will be light to lead them into the endless sunlit forest. It does no good to wish that he could return to a time when he might have been cured of his visions—when he was only mad.

The Alternative

"*The Alternative* is one of the stories I thought of writing on the theme of a life whose positive qualities depend on dreadful nightmares. Maybe in time I'll write another, though this one also discovers a moral theme."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

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Highton was driving past the disused hospital when the car gave up. On the last fifty miles of motorway he had taken it slow, earning himself glances of pity mingled with hostility from the drivers of the Jaguars and Porsches. As he came abreast of the fallen gates the engine began to grate as though a rusty chunk of it were working itself loose, and the smell of fumes grew urgently acrid. The engine died as soon as he touched the brake.

A wind which felt like shards of the icy sun chafed the grass in the overgrown grounds of the hospital as he climbed out of the Vauxhall, rubbing his limbs. He was tempted to leave the car where it was, but the children who smashed windows were likely to set fire to it if he abandoned it overnight. Grasping the wheel with one hand and the crumbling edge of the door with the other, he walked the car home through the housing estate.

All the windows closest to the hospital were boarded up. Soon he encountered signs of life, random windows displaying curtains or, where the glass was broken, cardboard. A pack of bedraggled dogs roamed the estate, fighting over scraps of rotten meat, fleeing yelping out of the communal entrances of the two-storey concrete blocks.

His skin felt grubby with exertion when at last he reached his block. A drunk with an eyeshade pulled down to his brows was lolling at the foot of the concrete stairs. As Highton approached, he staggered away into the communal yard strewn with used condoms and syringes. Someone had recently urinated at the bend of the staircase, and the first flat on the balcony had been broken into; a figure was skulking in the dark at the far side of the littered front room. Highton was opening his mouth to shout when he saw that the man at the wall wasn't alone: bare legs emerging from a skirt as purple as a flower were clasped around his waist above his fallen

trousers. The couple must have frozen in the act, hoping Highton wouldn't notice them. "Have fun," he muttered, and hurried past six doors to his.

The 9 on the door, where the red paint had been sun-bleached almost pink, had lost one of its screws and hung head downwards from the other, like a noose. When he pushed it upright, it leaned drunkenly against the 6 as he let himself into the flat. The dim narrow corridor which led past three doors to the kitchen and the bathroom smelled of stale carpet and overcooked vegetables. He closed the front door quietly and eased open the first inner door.

Valerie was lying on the bed which they had moved into the living room once the children needed separate bedrooms. Apart from the bed and the unmatched chairs the room contained little but shadowy patches lingering on the carpet to show where furniture had stood. At first he thought his wife was asleep, and then, as he tiptoed through the pinkish light to part the curtains, he saw that she was gazing at the corner which had housed the television until the set was repossessed. She gave a start which raised the ghost of a ring from the disconnected telephone, and tossing back her lank hair, smiled shakily at him. "Just remembering," she said.

"We've plenty to remember." When her smile drooped he added hastily "And we'll have more."

"You got the job?"

"Almost."

She sighed as if letting go of the strength which had helped her to wait for him. As her shoulders sagged, she appeared to dwindle. "We'll have to manage."

He lowered himself into a chair, which emitted a weary creak. He ought to go to her, but he knew that if he held her while they were both depressed she would feel like a burden, not like a person at all. "Sometimes I think the bosses choose whoever travelled furthest because that shows how much they want the job," he said. "I was thinking on the way back, I should have another try at getting jobs round here."

Valerie was flicking a lock of hair away from her cheek. "If I can rewire a few properties," he went on, "so people know they shouldn't associate me with those cowboys just because I was fool enough to work for them, the

work's bound to build up and we'll move somewhere better. Then we can tell Mr O'Mara that he's welcome to his ratholes."

She was still brushing at her greying hair. "Where are Daniel and Lucy?" he said.

"They said they wouldn't be long," she responded as if his query were an accusation, and he saw her withdraw into herself. He was trying to phrase a question which he wouldn't be afraid to ask when he heard the door creep open behind him. He turned and saw Lucy watching him.

He might have assumed Valerie was mistaken—that their fourteen-year-old had been in her room and was on her way out, since the front door was open—if it weren't for her stance and her expression. She was ready to take to her heels, and her look betrayed that she was wondering how much he knew—whether he recognised her cheap new dress as purple as a flower. She saw that he did, and her face crumpled. The next moment she was out of the flat, slamming the door.

As he shoved himself off the chair, his heart pulsating like a wound, Valerie made a grab at him. How could she think he would harm their daughter? "I only want to bring her back so we can talk," he protested.

She shrank against the headboard of the bed and tried to slap away the lock of hair, her nails scratching her cheek. "Don't leave us again," she said in a low dull voice.

"I'll be as quick as I can," he promised, and had a fleeting impression, which felt like a stab of panic, that she meant something else entirely. The clatter of Lucy's high heels had already reached the staircase. He clawed the front door open and sprinted after her.

He reached ground level just in time to see her disappearing into the identical block on the far side of the littered yard. The drunk with the eyeshade flung an empty bottle at him, and Highton was afraid that the distraction had lost him his daughter. Then he glimpsed a flash of purple beyond a closing door on the balcony, and he ran across the yard and up the stairs, on tiptoe now. As he reached the balcony he heard Lucy's voice and a youth's, muffled by the boards nailed over the window. He was at the door in two strides, and flung it open. But his words choked unspoken in his throat. The youth on the floor was his son Daniel.

The fifteen-year-old blinked at him and appeared to recognise him, for a vague grin brought some animation to his face as he went back to unwinding the cord from his bruised bare scrawny arm. Highton stared appalled at the hypodermic lying beside him on the grimy floorboards, at the money which Lucy was clutching. He felt unable to move and yet in danger of doing so before he could control himself. He heard Valerie pleading "Don't leave us again," and the memory seemed to release him. "No," he tried to shout, and woke.

He was alone in bed, and surrounded by some indeterminate distance by a mass of noises: a hissing and bubbling which made his skin prickle, a sound like an endless expelled breath, a mechanical chirping. When he opened his eyes, the room looked insufficiently solid. "Valerie," he managed to shout.

"Coming." The hissing and bubbling grew shriller and became a pouring sound. As he sat himself up she brought him a mug of coffee. "Don't dawdle in the bathroom or your father will be late for work," she called, and told him "You seemed to want to sleep."

"I'm just drying my hair," Lucy responded above the exhalation.

"Finish on the computer now, Daniel. You know not to start playing before school."

"It's not a game," Daniel called indignantly, but after a few seconds the chirping ceased.

Valerie winked at Highton. "At least all that should have woken you up."

"Thank God for it."

She stooped and holding back her long black hair with one hand, kissed each of his eyes. "Have your shower while I do breakfast."

He sipped the coffee quickly, feeling more present as the roof of his mouth began to peel. The dream had been worse this time, and longer; previously it had been confined to the flat. It must have developed as it had because he would be seeing O'Mara this morning.

As usual when Lucy had used it, the bath was full of foam. Highton cleared the mirror and tidied away Daniel's premature electric razor before sluicing the foam down the plughole with the shower. By the time he went downstairs, Valerie was waving the children off to school. When the microwave oven beeped he grabbed his breakfast and wolfed it, though

Valerie wagged a finger at him. "You'll be giving yourself indigestion and nightmares," she said, and he thought of telling her about his recurrent dream. Doing so seemed like inviting bad luck, and he gave her a long kiss to compensate for his secrecy as he left the house.

All along the wide suburban street the flowering cherry was in bloom. Highton inhaled the scent before he drove the Jaguar out of the double garage. He had an uninterrupted run along the dual carriageway into town until the traffic lights halted him at the junction with the road which led to the disused hospital past the flats which O'Mara had bought from the council. When the lights released him Highton felt as if he were emerging from a trance.

The only spaces in the car park were on the ninth floor. Beyond the architectural secrets which the top storeys of the business district shared with the air he saw the old council estate. He put the sight out of his mind as he headed for his office, mentally assembling issues for discussion with O'Mara.

O'Mara was late as usual, and bustled into Highton's office as if he had been kept waiting. He plumped himself on the chair in front of the desk, slung one leg over the other, rubbed his hands together loudly and folded them over his waistcoated stomach, flashing a fat gold ring. Throughout this performance he stared at Highton's chair as if both men were on the wrong sides of the desk. "Tell me all the good news," he demanded, beginning to tap the carpet with the toecaps of his brogues.

"We've identified a few points you overlooked in your accounts."

A hint of wariness disturbed the heavy blandness of O'Mara's round face. "So long as you'll be making me more than I'm paying you.

"It depends whether you decide to follow our advice." Highton picked up the sheet on which he'd made notes for discussion, and blurted out a thought which seemed just to have occurred to him. "You might consider a programme of repairs and improvements to your properties as a tax expense."

O'Mara's face reddened and appeared to puff up. "I can't afford to splash money around now I'm no longer on the council."

"But surely—" Highton said, and heard his voice grow accusing. How could he forget himself like that? It wasn't his job to moralise, only to stay

within the law. The dream must have disturbed him more than he knew for him to risk betraying to O'Mara his dislike of the man. "Let me guide you through your accounts," he said.

Half an hour later the landlord was better off by several thousand pounds, but Highton couldn't take much pleasure in it; he kept seeing how exorbitant the rents were. He showed O'Mara to the lift and made himself shake hands, and wiped off the man's sweat with his handkerchief as soon as the lift door closed. The sympathetic grins his partners and the secretaries gave him raised his spirits somewhat, and so did the rest of the day: he set up a company for a client, argued the case of another with the Inland Revenue, helped a third choose a pension plan. He had almost forgotten O'Mara until he returned to his car.

He leaned on the Jaguar and gazed towards O'Mara's streets. Could they really be as bad as he'd dreamed? He felt as if he wasn't entitled to go home until he had seen for himself. When he reached the junction at the edge of the estate he steered the car off the dual carriageway.

Concrete surrounded him, identical streets branching from both sides of the road like a growth which had consumed miles of terraced streets. The late afternoon sky was the same dull white. From the air the place must resemble a huge ugly crystal of some chemical. Perhaps half the windows he passed were boarded up, but he didn't know if he was more disturbed by the spectacle of so many disused homes or the thought of tenants having to live among the abandoned flats. The few people he passed—children who looked starved or unhealthily overweight, teenagers with skin the colour of concrete, older folk hugging bags tightly for fear of being mugged—either glared at him or dodged out of sight. They must take him for someone on O'Mara's payroll, since the landlord never visited his properties in person, and he was uncomfortably aware that his wallet contained a hundred pounds which he'd drawn from the bank at lunchtime. He'd seen enough to show him the district was all that he'd imagined it to be; but when he turned off the main road it was to drive deeper into the maze.

Why should he assume that he was following the street along which he'd turned in his dream? Apart from the numbers on the doors and over the communal entrances, there was little to distinguish one street from another. He was driving past the low nine hundreds; the block on the far side of a junction scattered with broken glass should contain the flat whose number

he had dreamed of. He avoided the glass and cruised past the block, and then the car shuddered to a standstill beside a rusty Vauxhall as his foot faltered on the accelerator.

It was by no means the only faded red door he'd seen since leaving the dual carriageway, nor the only door on which a number was askew; but the sight of the 9 dangling upside-down as if the final 3 had been subtracted from it seemed disconcertingly familiar. He switched off the ignition and got clumsily out of the car. Glancing around to reassure himself that nobody was near, he ran across the road and up the stairs.

Of course the concrete staircase looked familiar, since he had already driven past a host of them. He peered around the corner at the top and hurried along the balcony as fast as he could creep. There were seven doors between the stairway and the door with the inverted 9. One glance through the gap between the curtains next to the door would quieten his imagination, he promised himself. He ducked his head towards the gap, trying to fabricate an explanation in case anyone saw him. Then he froze, his fingers digging into the rotten wood of the windowsill. On the carpet a few feet from the window was a telephone, and he'd recognised the number on the dial.

Even stronger than the shock which caused him to gasp aloud was the guilt which overwhelmed him at the sight of the room, the ragged pinkish curtains, the double bed against the wall beyond the unmatched chairs. He felt responsible for all this, and unable to retreat until he'd done his best to change it. He groped for his wallet and counted out fifty pounds, which he stuffed through the slot in the front door. Having kept half the cash made him feel unforgivably mean. He snatched the rest of the notes from his wallet and shoved them into the flat, where they flopped on the hall floor.

The sound, and the prospect of confronting anyone from the flat, sent Highton fleeing like a thief. How could he explain to Valerie what he'd just done when he could hardly believe that he'd done it? He swung the car screeching towards the dual carriageway and drove back to the business district, where he withdrew another hundred pounds from the dispenser in the wall outside the bank.

As he let himself into the house Valerie was coming downstairs laden with the manuals she employed to teach her students word processing. "Hello, stranger," she said.

Highton's stomach flinched. "How do you mean?"

"Just that you're late. Though now you mention it, you do look a bit strange."

"I'm home now," Highton said, feeling even more accused. "I had something to tidy up."

"You can't fool me, you've been visiting your mistress," Valerie said smiling. "I've had to eat so I can run. Everything for you three is by the microwave."

He was relieved not to have to face her while his thoughts were in turmoil, but his relief felt like disloyalty. He listened as the dreamy hum of her car receded, fading sooner than he was expecting. When the oven peeped he called the children downstairs. Lucy came at once, her extravagant earrings jangling; Daniel had to be shouted for three times, and would have worn his personal stereo at the dinner table if Highton hadn't frowned at him. "Let's hear about your day instead," Highton appealed to both of them.

Daniel had scored a goal in a football match against a rival school and been praised for his science project, Lucy's work on local history had been singled out to be shown to the headmistress. "Now you have to tell us about your day," Lucy said.

"Just the usual, trying to balance the books." Feeling trapped, Highton went on quickly: "So are you both happy?"

Daniel looked puzzled, almost resentful. "Expect so," he said and shrugged.

"Of course we are. You and mummy see that we are." Highton smiled at her and wondered if she was being sensitive to his emotional needs rather than wholly honest; perhaps it had been an unreasonably direct question to ask people of their ages. Once the dinner things were in the dishwasher Daniel lay on his bed with his headphones on while Lucy finished the homework her class had been set in advance to give them more time at the school disco, and Highton poured himself a large Scotch and put a compact disc of Mozart piano sonatas on the player.

The stream of music and the buzzing in his skull only unsettled him. Had he really donated a hundred pounds to someone he didn't know, with as little thought as he might have dropped a coin beside any of the beggars who were becoming an everyday sight in the downtown streets? In

retrospect the gesture seemed so flamboyant as to be offensive. At least the money had been in old notes, and couldn't be traced to him; the idea that whoever lived in the flat might come to the house in search of an explanation terrified him. Worse still was the thought of their asking Valerie or the children. His growing confusion exhausted him, and he would have gone to bed if that hadn't seemed like trying to avoid Valerie when she came home. He refilled his glass and switched on the television, which was more likely than the music to keep him awake, but he found all the programmes discomforting: newscasts and documentaries about poverty and famine and a millionaire who had never paid tax, a film in which a policeman had to hunt down a jewel thief who had been his best friend when they were children in the slums. He turned off the set and waited for the financial report on the radio, in case the broadcast contained information he should know. The programme wasn't over when he fell asleep in the chair.

The next he knew, Valerie was shaking him. "Wake up, I want to talk to you. Why won't you wake up?"

He found himself clinging to the arms of the chair as if by staying immobile he could hold on to his slumber. One of his fingers poked through a tear in the fabric, into the spongy stuffing of the chair. The sensation was so disagreeable that it jerked his eyes open. Valerie was stooping to him, looking in danger of losing her balance and falling back on the bed. "Don't keep going away from me," she begged.

Highton grabbed her wrists to steady her. "What's wrong now? Is it the children?"

"Lucy's in her room. I've spoken to her. Leave her alone, Alan, or she'll be running off again. She only wanted to give Daniel what she could because she can't bear to see him suffer."

Highton blinked at Valerie as she tried to toss back her greying hair. The light from the overhead bulb glared from the walls of the loom, except where the shadow of the lampshade lay on them like grime, yet he felt as if they or he weren't fully present. "Where is he?"

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Oh, where do you think?" Her resignation gave way momentarily to anger, and Highton felt deeply ashamed of having left her to fend for

herself. "There was some money in the hall," she said as though she was trying to clarify her thoughts. "A hundred pounds that must have been put through our door by mistake. Whoever did that can't be up to any good, and they'll turn nasty if they don't get it back, but Daniel wouldn't listen. He was away with it before we could stop him."

Highton felt that he ought to know where the money had come from, as if he had foreseen it in a dream. The impression was too vague to grasp, and in any case he hadn't time to do so. "How long ago?"

"Ten minutes, maybe quarter of an hour. We didn't see which way he went," Valerie said like an accusation.

"You wouldn't be safe out there this late." Highton squeezed her shoulders through the faded grey checked dress and stood up. You look after Lucy. I'll find him."

He wouldn't return until he had, he vowed to himself. He closed the front door and picked his way along the unlit balcony to the head of the stairs. Through the windy aperture in the rear wall he could see across the yard. Some of the windows that were lit shouldn't be; he glimpsed the glow of an upturned flashlight beyond one set of makeshift shutters, the flicker of candlelight through another. Daniel and youngsters like him would be in one or more of the abandoned rooms while their suppliers hid at home behind reinforced doors and windows. The knowledge enraged Highton, who launched himself at the stairs, too hastily. His foot missed the step it was reaching for, and he fell headlong.

He was bracing himself to hit concrete, but his impact with the carpet was a greater shock. His fists and his knees wobbled, and the crouch he had instinctively adopted almost collapsed. He stared bewildered at the chair from which he'd toppled forwards, the radio whose voice had grown blurred and distant, the glass of Scotch which seemed exactly half empty, half full. The room and its contents made him feel dislocated, unable to think. He stumbled to the telephone and dialled the number which had lingered in his head.

The number was disconnected. Its monotonous wail reached deep into him. He was pressing the receiver against his ear, and feeling as if he couldn't let go until he had conceived a response to the wail for help, when Valerie came into the room. "Who are you calling so late?"

He hadn't realised she was home. He clutched at the earpiece to muffle the wail and fumbled the receiver onto its rest. "Nobody. Nobody's there," he gabbled. "I mean, just the speaking clock."

"Don't look so disconcerted or you'll have me thinking you're being unfaithful." She gazed at him for several protracted seconds, then she winked. "Only teasing. I know you've just woken up," she said, and went upstairs.

Her affectionateness made him feel guiltier. He switched off the mumbling radio and sat trying to think, until he realised how long he had been sitting and followed Valerie. He was hoping they could make love—at least then he might feel closer to her without having to talk—but she was asleep.

He lay beside her and stared up at the dark. His desire for sleep felt like a compulsion to dream. He didn't know which disturbed him more, his fear of finding out what happened next or his need to do so. Why couldn't he accept that he had simply acted on impulse this afternoon—that he'd donated his cash to some of O'Mara's tenants to compensate for his involvement with the man? Given how cramped the flats were, the presence of a bed as well as a few worn-out chairs in the front room didn't require much imagining, and was he really certain that he had dreamed anything more specific about the place before he had looked in the window today? Had he genuinely recognised the phone number? The memory of seeing it through the window was vivid as a photograph—so vivid that it blotted out any memory of his having seen it before. Trying to recall the dream felt like slipping back into it, and he kept recoiling from the promise of sleep.

When at last he dozed off, the alarm seemed to waken him so immediately that he could hardly believe he was awake. As long as sleep had caught up with him, why couldn't the dream have reached a conclusion? He dozed again, and when he was roused by Daniel and Lucy calling their goodbyes he thought he was dreaming. He sprawled on the floor in his haste to be out of bed and under a reviving shower.

Whatever temperature he set it to, the downpour felt more distant than he would have liked. The breakfast Valerie put in front of him was almost too hot to taste, but he mustn't linger or he would be late for work. He kissed her cheek and ran to the car, feeling obscurely treacherous. Because of his unsettled night he drove as slowly as the traffic would allow. At the junction from which the concrete flats were visible he felt in danger of forgetting

which way to go, and had to restrain himself from driving townwards while the lights were against him.

Julie brought him a mug of coffee and the news that a client had cancelled that morning's appointment because one of her boutiques had been looted overnight. Highton set about examining a hairdresser's accounts, but he didn't feel safe with them: in his present state he might overlook something. He dictated letters instead, trusting the secretaries to spot mistakes. Since he had no appointments, should he take the afternoon off and catch up on his sleep? Once Rebecca had collected the tape of his dictation he cleared a space among the tiles on the desk and propped his hand against his mouth.

The phone jolted him awake. He wondered how they had been able to afford to have it reconnected until he saw that he was in the office. "It's Mrs Highton," Julie's voice told him.

"Yes, I want to talk to her."

A moment later Valerie's breathing seemed to nestle against his cheek. "Next time it will be," he said.

"What's that, Alan?"

"I was talking to someone here." Despite his confusion he could lie about that, and say "What can I do for you?"

"Do I have to make an appointment? I was going to ask if you wanted to meet for lunch."

He couldn't say yes when he hadn't had time to think. "I'm already booked," he lied. "I'm awfully sorry."

"So you should be," Valerie retorted, and laughed. "I just thought when you went out you looked as if you could do with easing up on yourself."

"I will when I can."

"Do, for all our sakes. See you this evening. Don't be late."

"Why should I be?" Highton demanded, hoping that didn't sound guilty. He dropped the receiver onto its cradle and pinched his forehead viciously to quicken his thoughts. He knew why he'd greeted Valerie as he had: because on wakening he'd found himself remembering the last words she had addressed to him. "Why did it have to be money? Why couldn't it have been something that might have meant something to him?"

She meant the cash Daniel had taken from the flat. Highton must have dreamed her words at the moment of wakening, but he couldn't recall doing so, which made them seem unassailably real. He wouldn't be able to function until he had proved to himself that they weren't. He told the secretaries that he wouldn't be more than an hour, and hurried to his car.

By the time he reached the junction he had a plan. He needed only to be shown that the tenants of the flat weren't the victims of his dream. If sounding his horn didn't bring someone to the window he would go up and knock. He could always say he had mistaken the address, and surely nobody would take him for a thief.

The pavements were scattered with chunks of rubble. Icy winds ambushed him at intersections and through gaps in the architecture, carrying tin cans and discarded polystyrene into the path of the Jaguar, dislodging an empty liquor bottle from a balcony. As he came in sight of the block where he'd posted the notes, a wind raised washing on the line outside the flat as if the clothes were welcoming him. Closest to the edge of the balcony was a dress as purple as a flower.

He clung to the wheel and sent the car racing onwards. Not only the purple dress was familiar; beside it was a grey checked dress, more faded by another wash. He trod on the brake at last, having realised that he was speeding through the duplicated streets with no idea of where he was. Before he found a route to the dual carriageway his head was brimming with panic. He succeeded in returning to the car park without mishap, though he couldn't recall driving there. He strode almost blindly into his office, shouting "Leave me alone for a while." But when Julie tapped on the glass to inform him that the rest of the office was going home he was no closer to understanding what had happened or where it might lead.

He depressed the accelerator hard when the lights at the junction with the dual carriageway turned amber, and was dismayed to find that he wasn't so much anxious to be home as even more nervous of being sidetracked. He steered the car into the driveway and was unlocking the garage when Valerie opened the French windows and stepped onto the back patio. "You may as well leave your car out, Alan."

"Why, are we going somewhere?"

"You haven't forgotten. You're teasing." Her amused expression disguised a plea. "You're getting worse, Alan. I've been saying for months that you need

to take it easier."

When he didn't respond she marched into the house, and he could only follow her. The sight of Lucy still in her school uniform released his thoughts. "I *was* joking, you know," he called after Valerie. "It's time to meet Lucy's teachers again."

"Don't bother if it's that much trouble," Lucy said.

"Of course it isn't," Highton replied automatically, hearing Valerie tell Daniel "Make sure you're home by nine."

As the family sat down to dinner Highton said to Lucy "You know I like seeing your schoolwork." He saw that she guessed this was a preamble, and he hurried on: "But your mother's right, I've been having to push myself lately. Better too much work than none, eh? Would you mind if I stayed home tonight and had a rest? I can catch up on your achievements next time."

She suppressed her disappointment so swiftly he might almost have believed he hadn't glimpsed it. "I don't mind," she said, and Valerie refrained from saying whatever she had been about to say to him, rationing herself to a frown.

She and Lucy drove away before Daniel made for the youth club. Now that Highton had created a chance for himself—the only time he could foresee when he was certain to be alone in the house—he felt both anxious to begin and nervous of betraying his eagerness to Daniel. Hadn't he time to conduct an investigation which should already have occurred to him? He leafed through the phone directory to the listing for Highton, but none of the numbers alongside the column of names was the one he'd seen in the flat. Nor could Directory Enquiries help him; a woman with a persistent dry cough explained patiently that she couldn't trace the number, and seemed to suspect he'd made it up.

Whatever he'd been hoping the search would prove, it left him even more confused. As soon as Daniel had left the house, Highton ran Valerie's Toyota out of the garage and unlocked the boot, then he carried Daniel's computer out to the car. The boy wouldn't be without it for long, he told himself, and the insurance money might pay for an upgraded model. He felt unexpectedly mean for removing only the computer, and so he rushed through the house, collecting items which he felt ashamed to be able to

afford: the telephone extension in his and Valerie's bedroom, the portable television in the guest room. Dumping them in the boot, he ran back to the house, trying to decide which window to smash. A burglar would enter through the French windows, but the prospect of so much breakage dismayed him. The thief or his accomplice could have been small enough to climb through the kitchen window. He was picking up a tenderiser mallet to break the glass, and a towel to help muffle the sound, before he realised that he couldn't use anything in the house. He dashed out, locking the front door behind him, and ran on tiptoe around the house.

He mustn't take long. He had to leave the items on the balcony outside the flat and drive to the school in time to appear to have decided to see Lucy's work after all. Once they were home he would discover that he'd been in such a hurry to get to the school that he had forgotten to switch on the burglar alarm. There were tools in the garden shed which an unprepared burglar might use, but how would the burglar open the padlock on the door? Highton had been straining for minutes to snap the hasp, using a branch which he'd managed to twist off the apple tree, when he wondered if he could say that he had left the shed unlocked, though wouldn't he be claiming to have been too careless for even pressure of work to explain? He ran to the garage for a heavy spanner, with which he began to lever at the hasp and then to hammer at it, afraid to make much noise in case it attracted attention. He was still attacking the padlock when the Jaguar swung into the drive and spotlighted him.

Lucy was first out of the car. "They couldn't turn off the fire alarm, so everyone had to go home," she called; then her cheerfulness wavered. "What are you doing?"

He felt paralysed by the headlights. He couldn't hide the spanner. "I lost the key," he said, and remembered that Valerie knew it was on the ring with his keys to her car. "I mean, I snapped it. Bent it. Had to throw it away," he babbled. "I was going to come to the school after all when I—" He had no idea how he would have continued if he hadn't been interrupted, but the interruption was anything but welcome. A police car had drawn up behind the Jaguar.

Valerie climbed out of his car as the two policemen approached. "I wasn't speeding, was I?"

"We weren't following you, madam," the broader of the pair assured her, staring at Highton. "We received a report of someone behaving suspiciously around this house."

"There must be some mistake. That's my husband." But as she laughed, Valerie's gaze strayed to the open boot of her car. "It's all right, Lucy," she said—too late, for the girl was already blurting "What are you doing with Daniel's computer?"

"I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation," Valerie said in a tone so clear that she might have been addressing not only Lucy and the policemen but also the neighbours who had appeared at several windows. "In any case, it's a domestic matter."

The police stood their ground. "Perhaps the gentleman would like to explain," the thickset policeman said.

"I was just pottering. Can't I potter around my own property?" Highton felt as if the lights were exposing his attempt at humour for the defensiveness it was, and the police obviously thought so; they stepped forwards, the man who was built like a bouncer declaring "We'll have a look around if you don't mind, to make sure everything's in order."

They stared hard at the spanner and the padlock, they examined all the downstairs locks and bolts. They lingered over the contents of the boot of the Toyota. "These are yours, are they, madam?" the wiry policeman enquired, and looked ready to ask Valerie to produce receipts. Eventually the police left, having expressed dissatisfaction by their ponderousness. "There won't be any reason for us to come back, I hope," the broad policeman commented, and Highton knew that they'd concluded they had cut short an insurance fraud.

Once they had driven away, Valerie glared at the neighbouring houses until the pairs of curtains fell into place. "Don't say anything, Lucy. Help me carry these things into the house." To Highton she said "You look terrible. For God's sake try and get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll talk about what has to be done. We can't go on like this."

He felt too exhausted to argue, too exhausted even to be afraid of sleep. He fumbled through washing his face and brushing his teeth, and crawled into bed. Sleep held itself aloof from him. In a while he heard Daniel and Lucy murmuring in the back garden, obviously about him. The unfamiliar smell

of smoke made him flounder to the window, from which he saw them sharing a cigarette. "Don't start smoking or you won't be able to give it up," he cried, and they fled around the house.

Later, as he lay feeling that sleep was gathering just out of reach, Valerie came to bed. When he tried to put an arm round her she moved away, and he heard muffled sobs. He had the notion that somehow her grief wouldn't go to waste, but before he succeeded in grasping the idea, sleep blotted out his thoughts.

Then she was leaning over him and whispering in his ear. "Come and see," she repeated.

Her voice was too low for him to distinguish its tone, but when he opened his eyes he saw she had been crying. He swung his legs off the bed, on which he had been lying fully dressed. "What is it?

"Nothing bad," she assured him, and he realised that her tears had been of relief. "Come and see."

He followed her into the hall of the flat and saw a portable television near the front door. "Where did that come from?"

"That's part of it. Have you really been asleep in there all this time?" She was too full of her news to wait for an answer. "He couldn't spend that money on drugs. That's why you couldn't find him. He bought the television for us and something for himself to keep him straight."

She put a finger to her lips and beckoned him to the door of Daniel's room. Daniel and Lucy were sitting together on the chair in front of the rickety dressing-table, which bore a computer with a small monochrome screen. Both of them were engrossed in the calculations which it was displaying. "I'm teaching them how to use it," Valerie said in his ear. "Once they're old enough to get a job doing it, maybe I can go back to mine."

Though Highton recognised that he shouldn't enquire too closely into how or where Daniel had been able to buy both a computer and a television for a hundred pounds, it looked like a miracle. "Thank God," he said under his breath.

She squeezed his arm and led him back to the front room. "It won't be easy," she said with a strength which he'd feared had deserted her. "The next few days are going to be awful for him. He swears he'll straighten himself

out so long as we don't leave him alone for a moment. He means you particularly, Alan. He needs you to be here.

She wasn't referring only to the present, Highton knew. "I will be, I promise," he said, trying to grasp why he felt less sure of himself than he sounded. "Do you mind if I go out for a stroll and a think, seeing as I won't be going anywhere for a while? I won't be long."

"Don't be," she said, and hugged him fiercely.

He would go back to her, he vowed as he descended the dark concrete stairs, just as soon as he understood why he was harbouring any doubt that he would. Not far now, not much farther, he kept telling himself as he tramped through the dark between the broken streetlamps, trying to relax enough to think. When at last he turned and saw only darkness and looming blocks of flats he was seized by panic. Before he could run back to the flat, he awoke.

Valerie had wakened him by sitting up. When he reached for her, desperate to feel that she was there, she slid out of bed without looking at him. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

She gave him a wavering glance and sat on the far end of the bed. "I don't even want to know what you thought you were doing, but I need to know what's wrong."

"It's as you've been saying, pressure of work."

"You're going to have to tell me more than that, Alan."

He couldn't tell her the truth, but what else might convince her? "I'm not happy about some of the clients I have to work for. One in particular, a landlord called O'Mara."

"You used to talk to me about anything like that," Valerie said as if he had confirmed his disloyalty. She nodded at the open door, past which Lucy was padding on her way to the bathroom. "Wait until we're alone."

Once the bathroom was free Highton made for the shower. If he closed his eyes he could imagine that the water was lukewarm rain, surging at him on a wind between the blocks of flats. He hurried downstairs as soon as he was dressed, not wanting the children to leave the house until he'd bidden them goodbye.

They were still at the table. They stared at their food and then smiled at him, so brightly yet so tentatively that he felt like an invalid whose condition was obvious to everyone except himself. As Valerie put his plate in front of him with a kind of resentful awkwardness, Lucy said "Don't worry about Mr O'Mara."

The side of Highton's hand brushed against the hot plate. The flare of pain was too distant to bother him. "What do you know about O'Mara?"

"Only that he says you're the best accountant in town," she said, flinching from his roughness. "I didn't mean to listen to what you and mummy were saying."

"Never mind that. Where have you come across him?"

"I haven't yet. His son Lionel told me what he said. Lionel goes to our school." She lifted a forkful of scrambled egg to her lips before adding defiantly "He's taking me to the disco."

Highton could see that she was expecting an argument, but he didn't want to upset her now, particularly since there was no need. He finished his breakfast and waited near the front door to give her and Daniel a hug. "Don't let life get you down," he told them, and watched as they walked away beneath the sunlit cherry trees and turned the corner.

Valerie was switching on the dishwasher. "So tell me about this O'Mara," she said with more than a hint of accusation.

"You look after Lucy. I'll deal with him."

"Not in your present state of mind you won't. You need to see someone, Alan. Maybe they'll prescribe some time off work, which we can afford."

That was true, especially since she was a director of the firm. "At the very least I have to tidy things up," he said.

She seemed resigned, even relieved. "Shall I drive you to the office?"

A surge of love almost overwhelmed him, and he would have pulled her to him if he hadn't been afraid that the violence of his emotion would rouse her suspicions. "I don't know how long I'll be," he said. "I'll come back as soon as I can."

Having to be so careful of his words to her distressed him. He yearned to linger until he had somehow communicated his love for her, except that if he stayed any longer he might be unable to leave. He grabbed his overcoat

and made for the front door. "We want you back," she said, and for a moment he was certain that she had an inkling of his plan; then he realised that she was referring to the way he had become unfamiliar. He gave her a wordless smile which he just managed to hold steady, and hurried out to the car.

The lights at the junction on the road into town remained green as he approached them, and he drove straight through. For years he had driven through without considering where the side road led, but now there was barely room for anything else in his mind. It wasn't the money he'd left at the flat which had changed the situation, he thought; it was the balance of fortune. Life at the flat had started to grow hopeful because life at the house had taken a turn for the worse. He parked the car and marched himself to the office, thinking how to restore the balance.

"I'm going to have to take some time off. I wish I could be more definite." His partners reassured him that they could handle the extra workload; they didn't seem surprised by his decision. He discussed with them the cases about which they needed information, and when they left him he grabbed the phone. "No, I can't leave a message. I want to speak to Mr O'Mara in person."

Eventually the landlord picked up the car phone. "I hope I'm going to like what you have to tell me, Alan."

"You won't," Highton said, savouring the moment. "I warn you to tell your son to stop sniffing around my daughter. I won't have her feeling that she needs to prostitute herself for the family's sake."

For some time O'Mara only spluttered, so extravagantly that Highton imagined being sprayed in the face with saliva. "He won't be going near her again," O'Mara shouted, "but I'll be wanting a few words with her father in private."

"Just so long as you don't send your thugs to do your talking. I'm not one of your tenants," Highton said, and felt reality lurch. "And if you come anywhere near my house the police will want to know why."

When O'Mara began spluttering obscenities Highton cut him off and held onto the receiver as if he couldn't bear to let go until he'd placed one last call. He dialled and closed his eyes, waiting for Valerie's voice. "Look after one another," he said, and set the receiver on its cradle before she could

respond. Snatching a fistful of old financial journals from the table in the reception area, he headed for his car.

The lights at the junction seemed almost meaningless. He had to remind himself not to turn left while they were against him. As soon as they changed he drove through the rubbly streets until he found a courtyard entirely surrounded by boarded-up flats. With the tyre-iron he wrenched the number-plates off the Jaguar, then he thrust the rolled-up magazines into the petrol tank. Once they were all soaked he piled them under the car and set fire to them with the dashboard lighter. As he ran out of the courtyard he shoved the plates between the planks over a window, and the numbers fell into the dark.

He was nearly at the flat when he heard the car explode. Surely that would be enough misfortune for his family to suffer. The sound of the explosion spurred him onwards, up the smelly concrete steps, along the balcony. The door of the flat swung inwards as he poked a key from his ring at the lock. "I'm home," he called.

Silence met him. The cramped kitchen and bathroom were deserted, and so were the untidy bedrooms and the front room. The small television in the latter, and the computer in the boy's room next to it, were switched off. He prayed that he wasn't too late—that Daniel had gone wherever Lucy and his mother were so that they could watch over him. Thank heaven the phone wasn't working, or he might have been tempted to make a call which could only confuse and distract him. He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, wondering if he might dream of his life in the house while he waited for his family to come to him.

A Street Was Chosen

"*A Street was Chosen* has at its root the kind of trick writers should play on themselves every so often—requiring themselves to use a style they don't ordinarily employ. My task here was to write in the passive voice without undue repetition, and in the form of a scientific report. I found this virtually impossible until I switched from writing longhand, always my way with first drafts, to composing directly onto the computer screen. That's how I write non-fiction [...] and perhaps that's why the method worked for *A Street was Chosen*."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*.

Written in: 1990
First published in *Weird Tales*, Summer 1991
Also published in: *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

A street was chosen. Within its parameters, homes were randomly selected. Preliminary research yielded details of the occupants as follows:

A (husband, insurance salesman, 30; wife, 28; infant daughter, 18 months)

B (widow, 67)

C (husband, 73; wife, 75; son, library assistant, 38)

D (mother, bank clerk, 32; daughter, 3)

E (husband, social worker, 35; wife, social worker, 34)

F (electrician, male, 51; assistant, male, 25)

G (husband, 42; wife, industrial chemist, 38; son, 4; infant son, 2)

H (mother, 86; son, teacher, 44; son's wife, headmistress, 41; granddaughter, 12; grandson, 11)

I (window-cleaner, male, 53)

J (tax officer, female, 55)

K (milkman, male, 39)

L (waiter, 43)

It was noted that subjects I-L occupied apartments in the same house.

Further preliminary observation established that:

(a) subject B wrote letters to newspapers

(b) the children of couples A and G visited each other's homes to play

(c) granddaughter H sat with child D while mother D was elsewhere on an average of 1 evening per week

(d) husband G experienced bouts of temporary impotence lasting between 6 and 8 days

(e) elder F performed sexual acts with his partner in order to maintain the relationship

(f) subject L had recently been released into the community after treatment for schizophrenia.

It was decided that stimuli should be applied gradually and with caution. During an initial 8-night period, the following actions were taken:

(1, i) each night a flower was uprooted from the garden of subject B, and all evidence of removal was erased.

(1, ii) the lights in house H were caused to switch on at random intervals for periods of up to 5 minutes between the hours of 3 and 6 in the morning.

(1, iii) on alternate nights, subject J was wakened shortly after entering deep sleep by telephone calls purporting to advertise life insurance.

(1, iv) the tinfoil caps of milk-bottles delivered to subject D were removed after delivery, and feeding nipples substituted.

At the end of 8 days, it was noted that subject B was less inclined than previously to engage her neighbours in conversation, and more prone to argue or to take offence. From the 7th day onwards she was seen to spend extended periods at the windows which overlooked her garden.

Subjects F were employed by couple H to trace the source of an apparent electrical malfunction. It was observed that mother H became increasingly hostile to her son's wife both during this process and after electricians F had failed to locate any fault in the wiring. Observations suggested that she blamed either her daughter-in-law or her grandchildren for tampering with the electricity in order to disturb her sleep.

Subject J was observed to approach Subject A in order to obtain names and addresses of insurance companies which advertised by telephone. It was noted that when the list provided by A failed to yield the required explanation, A undertook to make further enquiries on J's behalf.

It was observed that subject D initially responded to the substitution of nipples as if it were a joke. After 2 days, however, she was seen to accuse subject K of the substitution. At the end of the 8-day period she cancelled the delivery and ordered milk from a rival company. It was decided to discontinue the substitution for an indefinite period.

After observations were completed, the following stimuli were applied during a period of 15 days:

(2, i) An anonymous letter based on a computer analysis of B's prose style was published in the free newspaper received by all subjects, objecting to the existence of househusbands and claiming that the writer was aware of two people who committed adultery while their children played together.

(2, ii) Every third night as subject L walked home, he was approached by religious pamphleteers whose faces had been altered to resemble the other tenants of his building in the order I, K, J, I, K.

(2, iii) The dustbin of subjects F was overturned, and pages from a magazine depicting naked pre-pubertal boys were scattered around it.

(2, iv) The figure of subject I was projected on the bedroom window of subjects E and caused to appear to pass through it while husband E was alone in the room.

(2, v) Brochures advertising old folks' homes were sent on alternate days to son C.

(2, vi) Telephone calls using a simulation of the voice of subject J were made between 3 and 5 in the morning on 6 occasions to house A, complaining that J had just received another advertising call.

At the end of the second period of stimuli, the following observations were made:

After the appearance of the letter in the newspaper, husband G was observed to suffer a bout of impotence lasting 11 days. It was also noted that subject D attempted to befriend wives A and G, who appeared to be suspicious of her motives. As a result of this encounter, increasing strain was recorded within couples A and G.

Subject L was seen to examine the mail addressed to subjects I, J, and K, and also to attempt to view the apartments of these subjects through the keyholes. Whenever any two of these subjects began a conversation while L

was in the building, attempts by L to overhear were observed. Also noted was the growing tendency of L to scrutinise the faces of diners while he waited on them in the restaurant.

After the elder of subjects F discovered the pages which had apparently been hidden in the dustbin, several disagreements of increasing length and violence between subjects F were recorded, both subjects accusing the other of responsibility for the material. At the end of 11 days, the younger of the subjects was seen to take up residence beyond the parameters of the present experiment. It was further observed that mother G required her sons to promise to inform her or their father if they were approached in any way by subjects F.

It was noted that subject E did not mention the apparition of subject I to his wife.

After the first delivery of brochures to their son, parents C were observed to cease speaking to him, despite his denial of responsibility for the receipt of the material. It was noted that parents C opened and destroyed all brochures subsequently delivered. Hot meals prepared for son C were left on the table for him for up to 1 hour before his consumption of them.

Husband A was seen twice to request subject J not to telephone his house after 11 o'clock at night. When the calls continued, wife A was observed to threaten J with legal action, despite J's denial of all knowledge. During this confrontation, subject L was seen to accuse J of attempting to distress both himself and wife A. It was recorded that wife A advised him to take up the matter with the landlord of the apartments.

A decision was reached to increase the level of stimuli. The following actions were taken during a 6-day period:

(3, i) In the absence of subject B, all the furniture in her house was dismantled.

(3, ii) Several brochures concerning euthanasia and the right to die were addressed to son C.

(3, iii) Whenever husband G succeeded in achieving an erection, the car alarm of subjects A was made to sound.

(3, iv) A box of fireworks labelled as a free sample was delivered to children H. Several fireworks were later removed and were exploded inside the house of subject F.

(3, v) The face of subject B was made to appear above the beds of children G. When infant G fled, he was caused to fall downstairs. Snapping of the neck was observed to occur.

(3, vi) Live insects were introduced into meals which subject L was about to serve to diners.

(3, vii) The outer doors of apartments I and K were painted crimson overnight.

During and after this period, the following observations were made:

After parents C were seen to examine the brochures addressed to their son, it was noted that they placed his belongings outside the house and employed a neighbour to change the external locks. It was observed that when on his return son C attempted to protest that he owned the house, he was refused any response. Later he was found to be sleeping in a public park. Information was received that when his workmates attempted to counsel him he quit his job. It was observed that although mother C wished to take the son's belongings into the house, father C insisted on their remaining outside.

Grandmother H was seen to attack grandchildren H under the impression that they were responsible for the damage to house F, although the police had accepted evidence that the children could not have been involved. When mother H defended her children from their grandmother, it was noted that she was accused of having succeeded professionally at the expense of her husband. A protracted argument between all five subjects H was observed, after which increases in tension between all subjects were recorded, the greatest increase being between son and wife.

It was observed that when granddaughter H offered to sit with child D, mother D refused to employ her. Mother H was later seen to accuse mother D of attempting to befriend families in the hope of developing a sexual relationship with the father.

Husband G was observed to destroy the headlights of car A with a hammer. The ensuing altercation was seen to be terminated when wife G reported that infant G had been injured on the stairs. It was noted that infant G died en route to the nearest hospital.

It was recorded that subject L was unable to determine whether or not the insects placed in the meals he was about to serve were objectively real. It

was noted that this confusion caused L to lose his job. Subsequently L was observed to attempt to persuade several of the other subjects that a pattern was discernible in the various recent events, without success. It was noted that L overheard subjects I and K suggesting that L had repainted their doors.

Surviving child G was seen to inform its parents that subject B had driven infant G out of the children's room. It was observed that when mother G confronted B with this, B accused G of having caused the apparition by experimenting on the children with drugs produced in the laboratory where G worked. It was further noted that subjects E attempted to intervene in the argument but were met with hostility bordering on accusation, both by B and G and by several bystanders. When subject I was attracted by the confrontation, husband E was observed to take refuge in house E.

It was noted that subject L approached his landlord and tried to persuade him that subjects I, J, and K were conspiring against L. It was further observed that when L was given notice to quit the apartment, L set fire to the building in the absence of the other tenants. Temperatures in excess of 450 degrees Celsius were recorded, and it was observed that L was trapped beneath a fallen lintel. Melting of the flesh was seen to precede loss of consciousness, and death was subsequently observed. Husband E was seen to propose a separation from wife E while refusing to explain his motives. The separation was observed to take place and to become permanent. Preparations for suicide by subject B were observed. It was noted that the previously dismantled chair used by B for support gave way as the subject was seen to decide against this course of action. Dislocation of the neck by hanging was recorded, and death from strangulation ensued after a period of 53 minutes 27 seconds. It was further observed that after 8 days subject F entered house B and discovered the corpse of subject B.

Because of the risk of discovery, it was decided to discontinue the experiment at this stage. Since the results were judged to be inconclusive, it is proposed that several further experiments on larger groups of subjects should be conducted simultaneously. Communities have been chosen at random, and within them a further random selection of streets has been made.

See How They Run

"*See How They Run* was written for an anthology about psychopaths edited by my old, and now lamented, friend Robert Bloch. Bob was happy with the tale but not the title, which he'd used for a story of his own, and so I retitled mine *For You to Judge*. I still preferred my original title, however, and after Bob's death I used it for a reprinting by another much-missed friend, Karl Wagner."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

Written In: 1990
Also known as *For You To Judge*
First published in *Monsters In Our Midst*, November 1993
Also published in: *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

Through the reading of the charges Foulsham felt as if the man in the dock was watching him. December sunshine like ice transmuted into illumination slanted through the high windows of the courtroom, spotlighting the murderer. With his round slightly pouting face and large dark moist eyes Fishwick resembled a schoolboy caught red-handed, Foulsham thought, except that surely no schoolboy would have confronted the prospect of retribution with such a look of imperfectly concealed amusement mingled with impatience.

The indictment was completed. "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty," Fishwick said in a high clear voice with just a hint of mischievous emphasis on the first word. Foulsham had the impression that he was tempted to take a bow, but instead Fishwick folded his arms and glanced from the prosecuting counsel to the defence, cueing their speeches so deftly that Foulsham felt his own lips twitch.

"...a series of atrocities so cold-blooded that the jury may find it almost impossible to believe that any human being could be capable of them..." "...evidence that a brilliant mind was tragically damaged by a lifetime of abuse..." Fishwick met both submissions with precisely the same attitude, eyebrows slightly raised, a forefinger drumming on his upper arm as though he were commenting in code on the proceedings. His look of lofty patience didn't change as one of the policemen who had arrested him gave evidence, and Foulsham sensed that Fishwick was eager to get to the meat of the case. But the judge adjourned the trial for the day, and Fishwick contented himself with a faint anticipatory smirk.

The jurors were escorted past the horde of reporters and through the business district to their hotel. Rather to Foulsham's surprise, none of his fellow jurors mentioned Fishwick, neither over dinner nor afterwards, when the jury congregated in the cavernous lounge as if they were reluctant to be alone. Few of the jurors showed much enthusiasm for breakfast, so that Foulsham felt slightly guilty for clearing his plate. He was the last to leave the table and the first to reach the door of the hotel, telling himself that he wanted to be done with the day's ordeal. Even the sight of a news vendor's placard which proclaimed FISHWICK JURY SEE HORROR PICTURES TODAY failed to deter him.

Several of the jurors emitted sounds of distress as the pictures were passed along the front row. A tobacconist shook his head over them, a gesture which seemed on the point of growing uncontrollable. Some of Foulsham's companions on the back row craned forwards for a preview, but Foulsham restrained himself; they were here to be dispassionate, after all. As the pictures came towards him, their progress marked by growls of outrage and murmurs of dismay, he began to feel unprepared, in danger of performing clumsily in front of the massed audience. When at last the pictures reached him he gazed at them for some time without looking up.

They weren't as bad as he had secretly feared. Indeed, what struck him most was their economy and skill. With just a few strokes of a black felt-tipped pen, and the occasional embellishment of red, Fishwick had captured everything he wanted to convey about his subjects: the grotesqueness which had overtaken their gait as they attempted to escape once he'd severed a muscle; the way the crippled dance of each victim gradually turned into a crawl—into less than that once Fishwick had dealt with both arms. No doubt he'd been as skilful with the blade as he was with the pen. Foulsham was re-examining the pictures when the optician next to him nudged him. "The rest of us have to look too, you know."

Foulsham waited several seconds before looking up. Everyone in the courtroom was watching the optician now—everyone but Fishwick. This time there was no question that the man in the dock was gazing straight at Foulsham, whose face stiffened into a mask he wanted to believe was expressionless. He was struggling to look away when the last juror gave an appalled cry and began to crumple the pictures. The judge hammered an admonition, the usher rushed to reclaim the evidence, and Fishwick stared

at Foulsham as if they were sharing a joke. The flurry of activity let Foulsham look away, and he did his best to copy the judge's expression of rebuke tempered with sympathy for the distressed woman.

That night he couldn't get to sleep for hours. Whenever he closed his eyes he saw the sketches Fishwick had made. The trial wouldn't last forever, he reminded himself; soon his life would return to normal. Every so often, as he lay in the dark which smelled of bath soap and disinfectant and carpet shampoo, the taps in the bathroom released a gout of water with a choking sound. Each time that happened, the pictures in his head lurched closer, and he felt as if he was being watched. Would he feel like that over Christmas if, as seemed likely, the trial were to continue into the new year? But it lacked almost a week to Christmas when Fishwick was called to the witness box, and Fishwick chose that moment, much to the discomfiture of his lawyer, to plead guilty after all.

The development brought gasps from the public gallery, an exodus from the press benches, mutters of disbelief and anger from the jury; but Foulsham experienced only relief. When the court rose as though to celebrate the turn of events he thought the case was over until he saw that the judge was withdrawing to speak to the lawyers. "The swine," the tobacconist whispered fiercely, glaring at Fishwick. "He made all those people testify for nothing."

Soon the judge and the lawyers returned. It had apparently been decided that the defence should call several psychiatrists to state their views of Fishwick's mental condition. The first of them had scarcely opened his mouth, however, when Fishwick began to express impatience as severe as Foulsham sensed more than one of the jurors were suffering. The man in the dock protruded his tongue like a caricature of a madman and emitted a creditable imitation of a jolly banjo which all but drowned out the psychiatrist's voice. Eventually the judge had Fishwick removed from the court, though not without a struggle, and the psychiatrists were heard.

Fishwick's mother had died giving birth to him, and his father had never forgiven him. The boy's first schoolteacher had seen the father tearing up pictures Fishwick had painted for him. There was some evidence that the father had been prone to uncontrollable fits of violence against the child, though the boy had always insisted that he had broken his own leg by falling downstairs. All of Fishwick's achievements as a young man seemed

to have antagonised the father—his exercising his leg for years until he was able to conceal his limp, his enrolment in an art college, the praise which his teachers heaped on him and which he valued less than a word of encouragement from his father. He'd been in his twenties, and still living with his father, when a gallery had offered to exhibit his work. Nobody knew what his father had said which had caused Fishwick to destroy all his paintings in despair and to overcome his disgust at working in his father's shop in order to learn the art of butchery. Before long he had been able to rent a bedsitter, and thirteen months after moving into it he'd tracked down one of his former schoolfellows who used to call him Quasimodo on account of his limp and his dispirited slouch. Four victims later, Fishwick had made away with his father and the law had caught up with him.

Very little of this had been leaked to the press. Foulsham found himself imagining Fishwick brooding sleeplessly in a cheerless room, his creative nature and his need to prove himself festering within him until he was unable to resist the compulsion to carry out an act which would make him feel meaningful. The other jurors were less impressed. "I might have felt some sympathy for him if he'd gone straight for his father," the hairdresser declared once they were in the jury room.

Fishwick had taken pains to refine his technique first, Foulsham thought, and might have said so if the tobacconist hadn't responded. "I've no sympathy for that cold fish," the man said between puffs at a briar. "You can see he's still enjoying himself. He only pleaded not guilty so that all those people would have to be reminded what they went through."

"We can't be sure of that," Foulsham protested.

"More worried about him than about his victims, are you?" the tobacconist demanded, and the optician intervened. "I know it seems incredible that anyone could enjoy doing what he did," she said to Foulsham, "but that creature's not like us."

Foulsham would have liked to be convinced of that. After all, if Fishwick weren't insane, mustn't that mean anyone was capable of such behaviour? "I think he pleaded guilty when he realised that everyone was going to hear all those things about him he wanted to keep secret," he said. "I think he thought that if he pleaded guilty the psychiatrists wouldn't be called."

The eleven stared at him. "You think too much," the tobacconist said.

The hairdresser broke the awkward silence by clearing her throat. "I never thought I'd say this, but I wish they'd bring back hanging just for him."

"That's the Christmas present he deserves," said the veterinarian who had crumpled the evidence.

The foreman of the jury, a bank manager, proposed that it was time to discuss what they'd learned at the trial. "Personally, I don't mind where they lock him up so long as they throw away the key."

His suggestion didn't satisfy most of the jurors. The prosecuting counsel had questioned the significance of the psychiatric evidence, and the judge had hinted broadly in his summing-up that it was inconclusive. It took all the jurors apart from Foulsham less than half an hour to dismiss the notion that Fishwick might have been unable to distinguish right from wrong, and then they gazed expectantly at Foulsham, who had a disconcerting sense that Fishwick was awaiting his decision too. "I don't suppose it matters where they lock him up," he began, and got no further; the rest of the jury responded with cheers and applause, which sounded ironic to him. Five minutes later they'd agreed to recommend a life sentence for each of Fishwick's crimes. "That should keep him out of mischief," the bank manager exulted.

As the jury filed into the courtroom Fishwick leaned forwards to scrutinise their faces. His own was blank. The foreman stood up to announce the verdict, and Foulsham was suddenly grateful to have that done on his behalf. He hoped Fishwick would be put away for good. When the judge confirmed six consecutive life sentences, Foulsham released a breath which he hadn't been aware of holding. Fishwick had shaken his head when asked if he had anything to say before sentence was passed, and his face seemed to lose its definition as he listened to the judge's pronouncement. His gaze trailed across the jury as he was led out of the dock.

Once Foulsham was out of the building, in the crowded streets above which glowing Santas had been strung up, he didn't feel as liberated as he'd hoped. Presumably that would happen when sleep had caught up with him. Just now he was uncomfortably aware how all the mannequins in the store windows had been twisted into posing. Whenever shoppers turned from gazing into a window he thought they were emerging from the display. As he dodged through the shopping precinct, trying to avoid shoppers rendered angular by packages, families mired with small children, clumps of

onlookers surrounding the open suitcases of street traders, he felt as if the maze of bodies were crippling his progress.

Foulsham's had obviously been thriving in his absence. The shop was full of people buying Christmas cards and rolled-up posters and framed prints. "Are you glad it's over?" Annette asked him. "He won't ever be let out, will he?"

"Was he as horrible as the papers made out?" Jackie was eager to know.

"I can't say. I didn't see them," Foulsham admitted, experiencing a surge of panic as Jackie produced a pile of tabloids from under the counter. "I'd rather forget," he said hastily.

"You don't need to read about it, Mr Foulsham, you lived through it," Annette said. "You look as though Christmas can't come too soon for you."

"If I oversleep tomorrow I'll be in on Monday," Foulsham promised, and trudged out of the shop.

All the taxis were taken, and so he had to wait almost half an hour for a bus. If he hadn't been so exhausted he might have walked home. As the bus laboured uphill he clung to the dangling strap which was looped around his wrist and stared at a grimacing rubber clown whose limbs were struggling to unbend from the bag into which they'd been forced. Bodies swayed against him like meat in a butcher's lorry, until he was afraid of being trapped out of reach of the doors when the bus came to his stop.

As he climbed his street, where frost glittered as if the tarmac was reflecting the sky, he heard children singing carols in the distance or on television. He let himself into the house on the brow of the hill, and the poodles in the ground floor flat began to yap as though he was a stranger. They continued barking while he sorted through the mail which had accumulated on the hall table: bills, advertisements, Christmas cards from people he hadn't heard from since last year. "Only me, Mrs Hutton," he called as he heard her and her stick plodding through her rooms towards the clamour. Jingling his keys as further proof of his identity, and feeling unexpectedly like a jailor, he hurried upstairs and unlocked his door.

Landscapes greeted him. Two large framed paintings flanked the window of the main room: a cliff baring strata of ancient stone above a deserted beach, fields spiky with hedgerows and tufted with sheep below a horizon where a spire poked at fat clouds as though to pop them; beyond the

window, the glow of streetlamps streamed downhill into a pool of light miles wide from which pairs of headlight beams were flocking. The pleasure and the sense of all-embracing calm which he habitually experienced on coming home seemed to be standing back from him. He dumped his suitcase in the bedroom and hung up his coat, then he took the radio into the kitchen.

He didn't feel like eating much. He finished off a slice of toast laden with baked beans, and wondered whether Fishwick had eaten yet, and what his meal might be. As soon as he'd sluiced plate and fork he made for his armchair with the radio. Before long, however, he'd had enough of the jazz age. Usually the dance music of that era roused his nostalgia for innocence, not least because the music was older than he was, but just now it seemed too good to be true. So did the views on the wall and beyond the window, and the programmes on the television—the redemption of a cartoon Scrooge, commercials chortling "Ho ho ho", an appeal on behalf of people who would be on their own at Christmas, a choir reiterating "Let nothing you display", the syntax of which he couldn't grasp. As his mind fumbled with it, his eyelids drooped. He nodded as though agreeing with himself that he had better switch off the television, and then he was asleep.

Fishwick wakened him. Agony flared through his right leg. As he lurched out of the chair, trying to blink away the blur which coated his eyes, he was afraid the leg would fail him. He collapsed back into the chair, thrusting the leg in front of him, digging his fingers into the calf in an attempt to massage away the cramp. When at last he was able to bend the leg without having to grit his teeth, he set about recalling what had invaded his sleep.

The nine o'clock news had been ending. It must have been a newsreader who had spoken Fishwick's name. Foulsham hadn't been fully awake, after all; no wonder he'd imagined that the voice sounded like the murderer's. Perhaps it had been the hint of amusement which his imagination had seized upon, though would a newsreader have sounded amused? He switched off the television and waited for the news on the local radio station, twinges in his leg ensuring that he stayed awake.

He'd forgotten that there was no ten o'clock news. He attempted to phone the radio station, but five minutes of hanging on brought him only a message like an old record on which the needle had stuck, advising him to try later. By eleven he'd hobbled to bed. The newsreader raced through

accounts of violence and drunken driving, then rustled her script. "Some news just in," she said. "Police report that convicted murderer Desmond Fishwick has taken his own life while in custody. Full details in our next bulletin."

That would be at midnight. Foulsham tried to stay awake, not least because he didn't understand how, if the local station had only just received the news, the national network could have broadcast it more than ninety minutes earlier. But when midnight came he was asleep. He wakened in the early hours and heard voices gabbling beside him, insomniacs trying to assert themselves on a phone-in programme before the presenter cut them short. Foulsham switched off the radio and imagined the city riddled with cells in which people lay or paced, listening to the babble of their own caged obsessions. At least one of them—Fishwick—had put himself out of his misery. Foulsham massaged his leg until the ache relented sufficiently to let sleep overtake him.

The morning newscast said that Fishwick had killed himself last night, but little else. The tabloids were less reticent, Foulsham discovered once he'd dressed and hurried to the newsagent's. MANIAC'S BLOODY SUICIDE. SAVAGE KILLER SAVAGES HIMSELF. HE BIT OFF MORE THAN HE COULD CHEW. Fishwick had gnawed the veins out of his arms and died from loss of blood.

He must have been insane to do that to himself, Foulsham thought, clutching his heavy collar shut against a vicious wind as he limped downhill. While bathing he'd been tempted to take the day off, but now he didn't want to be alone with the images which the news had planted in him. Everyone around him on the bus seemed to be reading one or other of the tabloids which displayed Fishwick's face on the front page like posters for the suicide, and he felt as though all the paper eyes were watching him. Once he was off the bus he stuffed his newspaper into the nearest bin.

Annette and Jackie met him with smiles which looked encouraging yet guarded, and he knew they'd heard about the death. The shop was already full of customers buying last-minute cards and presents for people they'd almost forgotten, and it was late morning before the staff had time for a talk. Foulsham braced himself for the onslaught of questions and comments, only to find that Jackie and Annette were avoiding the subject of Fishwick, waiting for him to raise it so that they would know how he felt,

not suspecting that he didn't know himself. He tried to lose himself in the business of the shop, to prove to them that they needn't be so careful of him; he'd never realised how much their teasing and joking meant to him. But they hardly spoke to him until the last customer had departed, and then he sensed that they'd discussed what to say to him. "Don't you let it matter to you, Mr Foulsham. He didn't," Annette said.

"Don't you dare let it spoil your evening," Jackie told him.

She was referring to the staff's annual dinner. While he hadn't quite forgotten about it, he seemed to have gained an impression that it hadn't much to do with him. He locked the shop and headed for home to get changed. After twenty minutes of waiting in a bus queue whose disgruntled mutters felt like flies bumbling mindlessly around him he walked home, the climb aggravating his limp.

He put on his dress shirt and bow tie and slipped his dark suit out of the bag in which it had been hanging since its January visit to the cleaners. As soon as he was dressed he went out again, away from the sounds of Mrs Hutton's three-legged trudge and of the dogs, which hadn't stopped barking since he had entered the house. Nor did he care for the way Mrs Hutton had opened her door and peered at him with a suspiciousness which hadn't entirely vanished when she saw him.

He was at the restaurant half an hour before the rest of the party. He sat at the bar, sipping a Scotch and then another, thinking of people who must do so every night in preference to sitting alone at home, though might some of them be trying to avoid doing something worse? He was glad when his party arrived, Annette and her husband, Jackie and her new boyfriend, even though Annette's greeting as he stood up disconcerted him. "Are you all right, Mr Foulsham?" she said, and he felt unpleasantly wary until he realised that she must be referring to his limp.

By the time the turkey arrived at the table the party had opened a third bottle of wine and the conversation had floated loose. "What was he like, Mr Foulsham," Jackie's boyfriend said, "the feller you put away?"

Annette coughed delicately. "Mr Foulsham may not want to talk about it."

"It's all right, Annette. Perhaps I should. He was—" Foulsham said, and trailed off, wishing that he'd taken advantage of the refuge she was offering. "Maybe he was just someone whose mind gave way."

"I hope you've no regrets," Annette's husband said. "You should be proud."

"Of what?"

"Of stopping the killing. He won't kill anyone else."

Foulsham couldn't argue with that, and yet he felt uneasy, especially when Jackie's boyfriend continued to interrogate him. If Fishwick didn't matter, as Annette had insisted when Foulsham was closing the shop, why was everyone so interested in hearing about him? He felt as though they were resurrecting the murderer, in Foulsham's mind if nowhere else. He tried to describe Fishwick, and retailed as much of his own experience of the trial as he judged they could stomach. All that he left unsaid seemed to gather in his mind, especially the thought of Fishwick extracting the veins from his arms.

Annette and her husband gave him a lift home. He meant to invite them up for coffee and brandy, but the poodles started yapping the moment he climbed out of the car. "Me again, Mrs Hutton," he slurred as he hauled himself along the banister. He switched on the light in his main room and gazed at the landscapes on the wall, but his mind couldn't grasp them. He brushed his teeth and drank as much water as he could take, then he huddled under the blankets, willing the poodles to shut up.

He didn't sleep for long. He kept wakening with a stale rusty taste in his mouth. He'd drunk too much, that was why he felt so hot and sticky and closed in. When he eased himself out of bed and tiptoed to the bathroom the dogs began to bark. He rinsed out his mouth but was unable to determine if the water which he spat into the sink was discoloured. He crept out of the bathroom with a glass of water in each hand and crawled shivering into bed, trying not to grind his teeth as pictures which he would have given a good deal not to see rushed at him out of the dark.

In the morning he felt as though he hadn't slept at all. He lay in the creeping sunlight, too exhausted either to sleep or to get up, until he heard the year's sole Sunday delivery sprawl on the doormat. He washed and dressed gingerly, cursing the poodles, whose yapping felt like knives emerging from his skull, and stumbled down to the hall.

He lined up the new cards on his mantelpiece, where there was just enough room for them. Last year he'd had to stick cards onto a length of parcel tape and hang them from the cornice. This year cards from businesses

outnumbered those from friends, unless tomorrow restored the balance. He was signing cards in response to some of the Sunday delivery when he heard Mrs Hutton and the poodles leave the house.

He limped to the window and looked down on her. The two leashes were bunched in her left hand, her right was clenched on her stick. She was leaning backwards as the dogs ran her downhill, and he had never seen her look so crippled. He turned away, unsure why he found the spectacle disturbing. Perhaps he should catch up on his sleep while the dogs weren't there to trouble it, except that if he slept now he might be guaranteeing himself another restless night. The prospect of being alone in the early hours and unable to sleep made him so nervous that he grabbed the phone before he had thought who he could ask to visit.

Nobody had time for him today. Of the people ranked on the mantelpiece, two weren't at home, two were fluttery with festive preparations, one was about to drive several hundred miles to collect his parents, one was almost incoherent with a hangover. All of them invited Foulsham to visit them over Christmas, most of them sounding sincere, but that wouldn't take care of Sunday. He put on his overcoat and gloves and hurried downhill by a route designed to avoid Mrs Hutton, and bought his Sunday paper on the way to a pub lunch.

The Bloody Mary wasn't quite the remedy he was hoping for. The sight of the liquid discomforted him, and so did the scraping of the ice cubes against his teeth. Nor was he altogether happy with his lunch; the leg of chicken put him in mind of the process of severing it from the body. When he'd eaten as much as he could hold down, he fled.

The papery sky was smudged with darker clouds, images too nearly erased to be distinguishable. Its light seemed to permeate the city, reducing its fabric to little more than cardboard. He felt more present than anything around him, a sensation which he didn't relish. He closed his eyes until he thought of someone to visit, a couple who'd lived in the house next to his and whose Christmas card invited him to drop in whenever he was passing their new address.

A double-decker bus on which he was the only passenger carried him across town and deposited him at the edge of the new suburb. The streets of squat houses which looked squashed by their tall roofs were deserted, presumably cleared by the Christmas television shows he glimpsed through

windows, and his isolation made him feel watched. He limped into the suburb, glancing at the street names.

He hadn't realised the suburb was so extensive. At the end of almost an hour of limping and occasionally resting, he still hadn't found the address. The couple weren't on the phone, or he would have tried to contact them. He might have abandoned the quest if he hadn't felt convinced that he was about to come face to face with the name which, he had to admit, had slipped his mind. He hobbled across an intersection and then across its twin, where a glance to the left halted him. Was that the street he was looking for? Certainly the name seemed familiar. He strolled along the pavement, trying to conceal his limp, and stopped outside a house.

Though he recognised the number, it hadn't been on the card. His gaze crawled up the side of the house and came to rest on the window set into the roof At once he knew that he'd heard the address read aloud in the courtroom. It was where Fishwick had lived.

As Foulsham gazed fascinated at the small high window he imagined Fishwick gloating over the sketches he'd brought home, knowing that the widow from whom he rented the bed-sitter was downstairs and unaware of his secret. He came to himself with a shudder, and stumbled away, almost falling. He was so anxious to put the city between himself and Fishwick's room that he couldn't bear to wait for one of the infrequent Sunday buses. By the time he reached home he was gritting his teeth so as not to scream at the ache in his leg. "Shut up," he snarled at the alarmed poodles, "or I'll—" and stumbled upstairs.

The lamps of the city were springing alight. Usually he enjoyed the spectacle, but now he felt compelled to look for Fishwick's window among the distant roofs. Though he couldn't locate it, he was certain that the windows were mutually visible. How often might Fishwick have gazed across the city towards him? Foulsham searched for tasks to distract himself —cleaned the oven, dusted the furniture and the tops of the picture frames, polished all his shoes, lined up the tins on the kitchen shelves in alphabetical order. When he could no longer ignore the barking which his every movement provoked, he went downstairs and rapped on Mrs Hutton's door.

She seemed reluctant to face him. Eventually he heard her shooing the poodles into her kitchen before she came to peer out at him. "Been having a

good time, have we?" she demanded.

"It's the season," he said without an inkling of why he should need to justify himself. "Am I bothering your pets somehow?"

"Maybe they don't recognise your walk since you did whatever you did to yourself."

"It happened while I was asleep." He'd meant to engage her in conversation so that she would feel bound to invite him in—he was hoping that would give the dogs a chance to grow used to him again—but he couldn't pursue his intentions when she was so openly hostile, apparently because she felt entitled to the only limp in the building. "Happy Christmas to you and yours," he flung at her, and hobbled back to his floor.

He wrote out his Christmas card list in case he had overlooked anyone, only to discover that he couldn't recall some of the names to which he had already addressed cards. When he began doodling, slashing at the page so as to sketch stick-figures whose agonised contortions felt like a revenge he was taking, he turned the sheet over and tried to read a book. The yapping distracted him, as did the sound of Mrs Hutton's limp; he was sure she was exaggerating it to lay claim to the gait or to mock him. He switched on the radio and searched the wavebands, coming to rest at a choir which was wishing the listener a merry Christmas. He turned up the volume to blot out the noise from below, until Mrs Hutton thumped on her ceiling and the yapping of the poodles began to lurch repetitively at him as they leapt, trying to reach the enemy she was identifying with her stick.

Even his bed was no refuge. He felt as though the window on the far side of the city was an eye spying on him out of the dark, reminding him of all that he was trying not to think of before he risked sleep. During the night he found himself surrounded by capering figures which seemed determined to show him how much life was left in them—how vigorously, if unconventionally, they could dance. He managed to struggle awake at last, and lay afraid to move until the rusty taste like a memory of blood had faded from his mouth.

He couldn't go on like this. In the morning he was so tired that he felt as if he was washing someone else's face and hands. He thought he could feel his nerves swarming. He bared his teeth at the yapping of the dogs and tried to recapture a thought he'd glimpsed while lying absolutely still, afraid to

move, in the hours before dawn. What had almost occurred to him about Fishwick's death?

The yapping receded as he limped downhill. On the bus a woman eyed him as if she suspected him of feigning the limp in a vain attempt to persuade her to give up her seat. The city streets seemed full of people who were staring at him, though he failed to catch them in the act. When Jackie and Annette converged on the shop as he arrived he prayed they wouldn't mention his limp. They gazed at his face instead, making him feel they were trying to ignore his leg. "We can cope, Mr Foulsham," Annette said, "if you want to start your Christmas early."

"You deserve it," Jackie added.

What were they trying to do to him? They'd reminded him how often he might be on his own during the next few days, a prospect which filled him with dread. How could he ease his mind in the time left to him? "You'll have to put up with another day of me," he told them as he unlocked the door.

Their concern for him made him feel as if his every move was being observed. Even the Christmas Eve crowds failed to occupy his mind, especially once Annette took advantage of a lull in the day's business to approach him. "We thought we'd give you your present now in case you want to change your mind about going home."

"That's thoughtful of you. Thank you both," he said and retreated into the office, wondering if they were doing their best to get rid of him because something about him was playing on their nerves. He used the phone to order them a bouquet each, a present which he gave them every Christmas but which this year he'd almost forgotten, and then he picked at the parcel until he was able to see what it was.

It was a book of detective stories. He couldn't imagine what had led them to conclude that it was an appropriate present, but it did seem to have a message for him. He gazed at the exposed spine and realised what any detective would have established days ago. Hearing Fishwick's name in the night had been the start of his troubles, yet he hadn't ascertained the time of Fishwick's death.

He phoned the radio station and was put through to the newsroom. A reporter gave him all the information which the police had released.

Foulsham thanked her dully and called the local newspaper, hoping they might contradict her somehow, but of course they confirmed what she'd told him. Fishwick had died just before nine-thirty on the night when his name had wakened Foulsham, and the media hadn't been informed until almost an hour later.

He sat at his bare desk, his cindery eyes glaring at nothing, then he stumbled out of the cell of an office. The sounds and the heat of the shop seemed to rush at him and recede in waves on which the faces of Annette and Jackie and the customers were floating. He felt isolated, singled out—felt as he had throughout the trial.

Yet if he couldn't be certain that he had been singled out then, why should he let himself feel that way now without trying to prove himself wrong? "I think I will go early after all," he told Jackie and Annette.

Some of the shops were already closing. The streets were almost blocked with people who seemed simultaneously distant from him and too close, their insect eyes and neon faces shining. When at last he reached the alley between two office buildings near the courts, he thought he was too late. But though the shop was locked, he was just in time to catch the hairdresser. As she emerged from a back room, adjusting the strap of a shoulder bag stuffed with presents, he tapped on the glass of the door.

She shook her head and pointed to the sign which hung against the glass. Didn't she recognise him? His reflection seemed clear enough to him, like a photograph of himself holding the sign at his chest, even if the placard looked more real than he did. "Foulsham," he shouted, his voice echoing from the close walls. "I was behind you on the jury. Can I have a word?"

"What about?"

He grimaced and mimed glancing both ways along the alley, and she stepped forward, halting as far from the door as the door was tall. "Well?"

"I don't want to shout."

She hesitated and then came to the door. He felt unexpectedly powerful, the winner of a game they had been playing. "I remember you now," she said as she unbolted the door. "You're the one who claimed to be sharing the thoughts of that monster."

She stepped back as an icy wind cut through the alley, and he felt as though the weather was on his side, almost an extension of himself. "Well, spit it

out," she said as he closed the door behind him.

She was ranging about the shop, checking that the electric helmets which made him think of some outdated mental treatment were switched off, opening and closing cabinets in which blades glinted, peering beneath the chairs which put him in mind of a death cell. "Can you remember exactly when you heard what happened?" he said.

She picked up a tuft of bluish hair and dropped it in a pedal bin. "What did?"

"He killed himself."

"Oh, that? I thought you meant something important." The bin snapped shut like a trap. "I heard about it on the news. I really can't say when."

"Heard about it, though, not read it."

"That's what I said. Why should it matter to you?"

He couldn't miss her emphasis on the last word, and he felt that both her contempt and the question had wakened something in him. He'd thought he wanted to reassure himself that he hadn't been alone in sensing Fishwick's death, but suddenly he felt altogether more purposeful. "Because it's part of us," he said.

"It's no part of me, I assure you. And I don't think I was the only member of the jury who thought you were too concerned with that fiend for your own good."

An unfamiliar expression took hold of Foulsham's face. "Who else did?"

"If I were you, Mr Whatever-your-name-is, I'd seek help, and quick. You'll have to excuse me. I'm not about to let that monster spoil my Christmas." She pursed her lips and said "I'm off to meet some normal people."

Either she thought she'd said too much or his expression and his stillness were unnerving her. "Please leave," she said more shrilly. "Leave now or I'll call the police."

She might have been heading for the door so as to open it for him. He only wanted to stay until he'd grasped why he was there. The sight of her striding to the door reminded him that speed was the one advantage she had over him. Pure instinct came to his aid, and all at once he seemed capable of anything. He saw himself opening the nearest cabinet, he felt his finger and thumb slip through the chilly rings of the handles of the scissors, and

lunging at her was the completion of these movements. Even then he thought he meant only to drive her away from the door, but he was reckoning without his limp. As he floundered towards her he lost his balance, and the points of the scissors entered her right leg behind the knee.

She gave an outraged scream and tried to hobble to the door, the scissors wagging in the patch of flesh and blood revealed by the growing hole in the leg of her patterned tights. The next moment she let out a wail so despairing that he almost felt sorry for her, and fell to her knees, well out of reach of the door. As she craned her head over her shoulder to see how badly she was injured, her eyes were the eyes of an animal caught in a trap. She extended one shaky hand to pull out the scissors, but he was too quick for her. "Let me," he said, taking hold of her thin wrist.

He thought he was going to withdraw the scissors, but as soon as his finger and thumb were through the rings he experienced an overwhelming surge of power which reminded him of how he'd felt as the verdict of the jury was announced. He leaned on the scissors and exerted all the strength he could, and after a while the blades closed with a sound which, though muffled, seemed intensely satisfying.

Either the shock or her struggles and shrieks appeared to have exhausted her. He had time to lower the blinds over the door and windows and to put on one of the plastic aprons which she and her staff must wear. When she saw him returning with the scissors, however, she tried to fight him off while shoving herself with her uninjured leg towards the door. Since he didn't like her watching him—it was his turn to watch—he stopped her doing so, and screaming. She continued moving for some time after he would have expected her to be incapable of movement, though she obviously didn't realise that she was retreating from the door. By the time she finally subsided he had to admit that the game had grown messy and even a little dull.

He washed his hands until they were clean as a baby's, then he parcelled up the apron and the scissors in the wrapping which had contained his present. He let himself out of the shop and limped towards the bus stops, the book under one arm, the tools of his secret under the other. It wasn't until passers-by smiled in response to him that he realised what his expression was, though it didn't feel like his own smile, any more than he felt personally involved in the incident at the hairdresser's. Even the memory of all the

jurors' names didn't feel like his. At least, he thought, he wouldn't be alone over Christmas, and in future he would try to be less hasty. After all, he and whoever he visited next would have more to discuss.

The Same In Any Language

"I'd wanted to use Spinalonga as a setting in any case, having forgotten that John Ware had already done so in the thirteenth volume of Herbert van Thal's increasingly pornographic Pan books of horror stories, a series later rescued from itself by Steve Jones and his partner in excellence David Sutton. Ware's tale is an old-fashioned ghost story. How about mine?"—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

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The day my father is to take me where the lepers used to live is hotter than ever. Even the old women with black scarves wrapped around their heads sit inside the bus station instead of on the chairs outside the tavernas. Kate fans herself with her straw hat like a basket someone's sat on and gives my father one of those smiles they've made up between them. She's leaning forwards to see if that's our bus when he says, "Why do you think they call them lepers, Hugh?"

I can hear what he's going to say, but I have to humour him. "I don't know."

"Because they never stop leaping up and down."

It takes him much longer to say the first four words than the rest of it. I groan because he expects me to, and Kate lets off one of her giggles I keep hearing whenever they stay in my father's and my room at the hotel and send me down for a swim. "If you can't give a grin, give a groan," my father says for about the millionth time, and Kate pokes him with her freckly elbow as if he's too funny for words. She annoys me so much that I say, "Lepers don't rhyme with creepers, Dad."

"I never thought they did, son. I was just having a laugh. If we can't laugh we might as well be dead, ain't that straight, Kate?" He winks at her thigh and slaps his own instead, and says to me, "Since you're so clever, why don't you find out when our bus is coming?"

"That's it now."

"And I'm Hercules." He lifts up his fists to make his muscles bulge for Kate and says, "You're telling us that tripe spells A Flounder?"

"Elounda, Dad. It does. The letter like a Y upside-down is how they write an L."

"About time they learned how to write properly, then," he says, staring around to show he doesn't care who hears. "Well, there it is if you really want to trudge around another old ruin instead of having a swim."

"I expect he'll he able to do both once we get to the village," Kate says, but I can tell she's hoping I'll just swim. "Will you two gentlemen see me across the road?"

My mother used to link arms with me and my father when he was living with us. "I'd better make sure if it's the right bus," I say, and run out so fast I can pretend I didn't hear my father calling me back.

A man with skin like a boot is walking backwards in the dust behind the bus, shouting "Elounda" and waving his arms as if he's pulling the bus into the space in line. I sit on a seat opposite two Germans who block the aisle until they've taken off their rucksacks, but my father finds three seats together at the rear. "Aren't you with us, Hugh?" he shouts, and everyone on the bus looks at him.

When I see him getting ready to shout again I walk down the aisle. I'm hoping nobody notices me, but Kate says loudly, "It's a pity you ran off like that, Hugh. I was going to ask if you'd like an ice cream."

"No thank you," I say, trying to sound like my mother when she was only just speaking to my father, and step over Kate's legs. As the bus rumbles uphill I turn as much of my back on her as I can, and watch the streets.

Agios Nikolaos looks as if they haven't finished building it. Some of the tavernas are on the bottom floors of blocks with no roofs, and sometimes there are more tables on the pavements outside than in. The bus goes downhill again as if it's hiccupping, and when it reaches the bottomless lake where young people with no children stay in the hotels with discos, it follows the edge of the bay. I watch the white boats on the blue water, but really I'm seeing the conductor coming down the aisle and feeling as if a lump's growing in my stomach from me wondering what my father will say to him.

The bus is climbing beside the sea when he reaches us. "Three for leper land," my father says.

The conductor stares at him and shrugs. "As far as you go," Kate says, and rubs herself against my father. "All the way."

When the conductor pushes his lips forwards out of his moustache and beard my father begins to get angry, unless he's pretending. "Where you kept your lepers. Spiny Lobster or whatever you call the damned place."

"It's Spinalonga, Dad, and it's off the coast from where we're going."

"I know that, and he should." My father is really angry now. "Did you get that?" he says to the conductor. "My ten-year-old can speak your lingo, so don't tell me you can't speak ours."

The conductor looks at me, and I'm afraid he wants me to talk Greek. My mother gave me a little computer that translates words into Greek when you type them, but I've left it at the hotel because my father said it sounded like a bird which only knew one note. "We're going to Elounda, please," I stammer.

"Elounda, boss," the conductor says to me. He takes the money from my father without looking at him and gives me the tickets and change. "Fish is good by the harbour in the evening," he says, and goes to sit next to the driver while the bus swings round the zigzags of the hill road.

My father laughs for the whole bus to hear. "They think you're so important, Hugh, you won't be wanting to go home to your mother."

Kate strokes his head as if he's her pet, then she turns to me. "What do you like most about Greece?"

She's trying to make friends with me like when she kept saying I should call her Kate, only now I see it's for my father's sake. All she's done is make me think how the magic places seemed to have lost their magic because my mother wasn't there with me, even Knossos where Theseus killed the Minotaur. There were just a few corridors left that might have been the maze he was supposed to find his way out of, and my father let me stay in them for a while, but then he lost his temper because all the guided tours were in foreign languages and nobody could tell him how to get back to the coach. We nearly got stuck overnight in Heraklion, when he'd promised to take Kate for dinner that night by the bottomless pool in Agios Nikolaos. "I don't know," I mumble, and gaze out the window.

"I like the sun, don't you? And the people when they're being nice, and the lovely clear sea."

It sounds to me as if she's getting ready to send me off swimming again. They met while I was, our second morning at the hotel. When I came out of the sea my father has moved his towel next to hers and she was giggling. I watch Spinalonga Island float over the horizon like a ship made of rock and grey towers, and hope she'll think I'm agreeing with her if that means she'll leave me alone. But she says, "I suppose most boys are morbid at your age. Let's hope you'll grow up to be like your father."

She's making it sound as if the leper colony is the only place I've wanted to visit, but it's just another old place I can tell my mother I've been. Kate doesn't want to go there because she doesn't like old places—she said if Knossos was a palace she was glad she's not a queen. I don't speak to her again until the bus has stopped by the harbour.

There aren't many tourists, even in the shops and tavernas lined up along the winding pavement. Greek people who look as if they were born in the sun sit drinking at tables under awnings like stalls in a market. Some priests who I think at first are wearing black hat boxes on their heads march by, and fishermen come up from their boats with octopuses on sticks like big kebabs. The bus turns round in a cloud of dust and petrol fumes while Kate hangs onto my father with one hand and flaps the front of her flowery dress with the other. A boatman stares at the tops of her boobs which make me think of spotted fish and shouts "Spinalonga" with both hands round his mouth.

"We've hours yet," Kate says. "Let's have a drink. Hugh may even get that ice cream if he's good."

If she's going to talk about me as though I'm not there I'll do my best not to be. She and my father sit under an awning and I kick dust on the pavement outside until she says, "Come under, Hugh. We don't want you with sunstroke."

I don't want her pretending she's my mother, but if I say so I'll only spoil the day more than she already has. I shuffle to the table next to the one she's sharing with my father and throw myself on a chair. "Well, Hugh," she says, "do you want one?"

"No thank you," I say, even though the thought of an ice cream or a drink starts my mouth trying to drool.

"You can have some of my lager if it ever arrives," my father says at the top of his voice, and stares hard at some Greeks sitting at a table. "Anyone here a waiter?" he says, lifting his hand to his mouth as if he's holding a glass.

When all the people at the table smile and raise their glasses and shout cheerily at him, Kate says, "I'll find someone and then I'm going to the little girls' room while you men have a talk."

My father watches her crossing the road and gazes at the doorway of the taverna once she's gone in. He's quiet for a while, then he says, "Are you going to be able to say you had a good time?"

I know he wants me to enjoy myself when I'm with him, but I also think what my mother stopped herself from saying to me is true—that he booked the holiday in Greece as a way of scoring off her by taking me somewhere she'd always wanted to go. He stares at the taverna as if he can't move until I let him, and I say, "I expect so, if we go to the island."

"That's my boy. Never give in too easily." He smiles at me with one side of his face. "You don't mind if I have some fun as well, do you?"

He's making it sound as if he wouldn't have had much fun if it had just been the two of us, and I think that was how he'd started to feel before he met Kate. "It's your holiday," I say.

He's opening his mouth after another long silence when Kate comes out of the taverna with a man carrying two lagers and a lemonade on a tray. "See that you thank her," my father tells me.

I didn't ask for a lemonade. He said I could have some lager. I say, "Thank you very much" and feel my throat tightening as I gulp the lemonade, because her eyes are saying she's won.

"That must have been welcome," she says when I put down the empty glass. "Another? Then I should find yourself something to do. Your father and I may be here for a while."

"Have a swim," my father suggests.

"I haven't brought my cossy."

"Neither have those boys," Kate says, pointing at the harbour. "Don't worry, I've seen boys wearing less."

My father smirks behind his hand, and I can't bear it. I run to the jetty the boys are diving off, and drop my T-shirt and shorts on it and my sandals on top of them, and dive in.

The water's cold, but not for long. It's full of little fish that nibble you if you only float, and it's clearer than tap water, so you can see down to the pebbles

and the fish pretending to be them. I chase fish and swim underwater and almost catch an octopus before it squirms out to sea. Then three Greek boys about my age swim over, and we're pointing at ourselves and saying our names when I see Kate and my father kissing.

I know their tongues are in each other's mouths—getting some tongue, the kids at my school call it. I feel like swimming away as far as I can go and never coming back. But Stavros and Stathis and Costas are using their hands to tell me we should see who can swim fastest, so I do that instead. Soon I've forgotten my father and Kate, even when we sit on the jetty for a rest before we have more races. It must be hours later when I realise Kate is calling, "Come here a minute."

The sun isn't so hot now. It's reaching under the awning, but she and my father haven't moved back into the shadow. A boatman shouts "Spinalonga" and points how low the sun is. I don't mind swimming with my new friends instead of going to the island, and I'm about to tell my father so when Kate says, "I've been telling your dad he should be proud of you. Come and see what I've got for you."

They've both had a lot to drink. She almost falls across the table as I go to her. Just as I get there I see what she's going to give me, but it's too late. She grabs my head with both hands and sticks a kiss on my mouth.

She tastes of old lager. Her mouth is wet and bigger than mine, and when it squirms it makes me think of an octopus. "Mmmmwa," it says, and then I manage to duck out of her hands, leaving her blinking at me as if her eyes won't quite work. "Nothing wrong with a bit of loving," she says. "You'll find that out when you grow up."

My father knows I don't like to be kissed, but he's frowning at me as if I should have let her. Suddenly I want to get my own back at them in the only way I can think of. "We need to go to the island now."

"Better go to the loo first," my father says. "They wouldn't have one on the island when all their willies had dropped off."

Kate hoots at that while I'm getting dressed, and I feel as if she's laughing at the way my ribs show through my skin however much I eat. I stop myself from shivering in case she or my father makes out that's a reason for us to go back to the hotel. I'm heading for the toilet when my father says, "Watch out you don't catch anything in there or we'll have to leave you on the island."

I know there are all sorts of reasons why my parents split up, but just now this is the only one I can think of—my mother not being able to stand his jokes and how the more she told him to finish the more he would do it, as if he couldn't stop himself. I run into the toilet, trying not to look at the pedal bin where you have to drop the used paper, and close my eyes once I've taken aim.

Is today going to be what I remember about Greece? My mother brought me up to believe that even the sunlight here had magic in it, and I expected to feel the ghosts of legends in all the old places. If there isn't any magic in the sunlight, I want there to be some in the dark. The thought seems to make the insides of my eyelids darker, and I can smell the drains. I pull the chain and zip myself up, and then I wonder if my father sent me in here so we'll miss the boat. I nearly break the hook on the door, I'm so desperate to be outside.

The boat is still tied to the harbour, but I can't see the boatman. Kate and my father are holding hands across the table, and my father's looking around as though he means to order another drink. I squeeze my eyes shut so hard that when I open them everything's gone black. The blackness fades along with whatever I wished, and I see the boatman kneeling on the jetty, talking to Stavros. "Spinalonga," I shout.

He looks at me, and I'm afraid he'll say it's too late. I feel tears building up behind my eyes. Then he stands up and holds out a hand towards my father and Kate. "One hour," he says.

Kate's gazing after a bus that has just begun to climb the hill. "We may as well go over as wait for the next bus," my father says, "and then it'll be back to the hotel for dinner."

Kate looks sideways at me. "And after all that he'll be ready for bed," she says like a question she isn't quite admitting to.

"Out like a light, I reckon."

"Fair enough," she says, and uses his arm to get herself up.

The boatman's name is Iannis, and he doesn't speak much English. My father seems to think he's charging too much for the trip until he realises it's that much for all three of us, and then he grins as if he thinks Iannis has cheated himself. "Heave ho then, Janice," he says with a wink at me and Kate.

The boat is about the size of a big rowing boat. It has a cabin in the front and benches along the sides and a long box in the middle that shakes and smells of petrol. I watch the point of the boat sliding through the water like a knife and feel as if we're on our way to the Greece I've been dreaming of. The white buildings of Elounda shrink until they look like teeth in the mouth of the hills of Crete, and Spinalonga floats up ahead.

It makes me think of an abandoned ship bigger than a liner, a ship so dead that it's standing still in the water without having to be anchored. The evening light seems to shine out of the steep rusty sides and the bony towers and walls high above the sea. I know that it was a fort to begin with, but I think it might as well have been built for the lepers.

I can imagine them trying to swim to Elounda and drowning because there wasn't enough left of them to swim with, if they didn't just throw themselves off the walls because they couldn't bear what they'd turned into. If I say these things to Kate I bet more than her mouth will squirm—but my father gets in first. "Look, there's the welcoming committee."

Kate gives a shiver that reminds me I'm trying not to feel cold. "Don't say things like that. They're just people like us, probably wishing they hadn't come."

I don't think she can see them any more clearly than I can. Their heads are poking over the wall at the top of the cliff above a little pebbly beach which is the only place a boat can land. There are five or six of them, only I'm not sure they're heads; they might be stones someone has balanced on the wall—they're almost the same colour. I'm wishing I had some binoculars when Kate grabs my father so hard the boat rocks and Iannis waves a finger at her, which doesn't please my father. "You keep your eye on your steering, Janice," he says.

Iannis is already taking the boat toward the beach. He didn't seem to notice the heads on the wall, and when I look again they aren't there. Maybe they belonged to some of the people who are coming down to a boat bigger than Iannis's. That boat chugs away as Iannis's bumps into the jetty. "One hour," he says. "Back here."

He helps Kate onto the jetty while my father glowers at him, then he lifts me out of the boat. As soon as my father steps onto the jetty Iannis pushes the boat out again. "Aren't you staying?" Kate pleads.

He shakes his head and points hard at the beach. "Back here, one hour."

She looks as if she wants to run into the water and climb aboard the boat, but my father shoves his arm around her waist. "Don't worry, you've got two fellers to keep you safe, and neither of them with a girl's name."

The only way up to the fort is through a tunnel that bends in the middle so you can't see the end until you're nearly halfway in. I wonder how long it will take for the rest of the island to be as dark as the middle of the tunnel. When Kate sees the end she runs until she's in the open and stares at the sun, which is perched on top of the towers now. "Fancying a climb?" my father says.

She makes a face at him as I walk past her. We're in a kind of street of stone sheds that have mostly caved in. They must be where the lepers lived, but there are only shadows in them now, not even birds. "Don't go too far, Hugh," Kate says.

"I want to go all the way round, otherwise it wasn't worth coming."

"I don't, and I'm sure your father expects you to consider me."

"Now, now, children," my father says. "Hugh can do as he likes as long as he's careful and the same goes for us, eh, Kate?"

I can tell he's surprised when she doesn't laugh. He looks unsure of himself and angry about it, the way he did when he and my mother were getting ready to tell me they were splitting up. I run along the line of huts and think of hiding in one so I can jump out at Kate. Maybe they aren't empty after all; something rattles in one as if bones are crawling about in the dark. It could be a snake under part of the roof that's fallen. I keep running until I come to steps leading up from the street to the top of the island, where most of the light is, and I've started jogging up them when Kate shouts, "Stay where we can see you. We don't want you hurting yourself."

"It's all right, Kate; leave him be," my father says. "He's sensible."

"If I'm not allowed to speak to him, I don't know why you invited me at all."

I can't help grinning as I sprint to the top of the steps and duck out of sight behind a grassy mound that makes me think of a grave. From up here I can see the whole island, and we aren't alone on it. The path I've run up from leads all round the island, past more huts and towers and a few bigger buildings, and then it goes down to the tunnel. Just before it does it passes the wall above the beach, and between the path and the wall there's a stone yard full of slabs. Some of the slabs have been moved away from holes like

long boxes full of soil or darkness. They're by the wall where I thought I saw heads looking over at us. They aren't there now, but I can see heads bobbing down towards the tunnel. Before long they'll be behind Kate and my father.

Iannis is well on his way back to Elounda. His boat is passing one that's heading for the island. Soon the sun will touch the hills. If I went down to the huts I'd see it sink with me and drown. Instead I lie on the mound and look over the island, and see more of the boxy holes hiding behind some of the huts. If I went closer I could see how deep they are, but I quite like not knowing—if I was Greek I expect I'd think they lead to the underworld where all the dead live. Besides, I like being able to look down on my father and Kate and see them trying to see me.

I stay there until Iannis's boat is back at Elounda and the other one has almost reached Spinalonga, and the sun looks as if it's gone down to the hills for a rest. Kate and my father are having an argument. I expect it's about me, though I can't hear what they're saying; the darker it gets between the huts the more Kate waves her arms. I'm getting ready to let my father see me when she screams.

She's jumped back from a hut which has a hole behind it. "Come out, Hugh. I know it's you," she cries.

I can tell what my father's going to say, and I cringe. "Is that you, Hugh? Yoo-hoo," he shouts.

I won't show myself for a joke like that. He leans into the hut through the spiky stone window, then he turns to Kate. "It wasn't Hugh. There's nobody."

I can only just hear him, but I don't have to strain to hear Kate. "Don't tell me that," she cries. "You're both too fond of jokes."

She screams again, because someone's come running up the tunnel. "Everything all right?" this man shouts. "There's a boat about to leave if you've had enough."

"I don't know what you two are doing," says Kate like a duchess to my father, "but I'm going with this gentleman."

My father calls to me twice. If I go with him I'll be letting Kate win. "I don't think our man will wait," the new one says.

"It doesn't matter," my father says, so fiercely that I know it does. "We've our own boat coming."

"If there's a bus before you get back I won't be hanging around," Kate warns him.

"Please yourself," my father says, so loud that his voice goes into the tunnel. He stares after her as she marches away; he must be hoping she'll change her mind. But I see her step off the jetty into the boat, and it moves out to sea as if the ripples are pushing it to Elounda.

My father puts a hand to his ear as the sound of the engine fades. "So every bugger's left me now, have they?" he says in a kind of shout at himself. "Well, good riddance."

He's waving his fists as if he wants to punch something, and he sounds as if he's suddenly got drunk. He must have been holding it back when Kate was there. I've never seen him like this. It frightens me, so I stay where I am.

It isn't only my father that frightens me. There's only a little bump of the sun left above the hills of Crete now, and I'm afraid how dark the island may be once that goes. Bits of sunlight shiver on the water all the way to the island, and I think I see some heads above the wall of the yard full of slabs, against the light. Which side of the wall are they on? The light's too dazzling; it seems to pinch the sides of the heads so they look thinner than any heads I've ever seen. Then I notice a boat setting out from Elounda, and I squint at it until I'm sure it's Iannis's boat.

He's coming early to fetch us. Even that frightens me, because I wonder why he is. Doesn't he want us to be on the island now he realises how dark it's getting? I look at the wall, and the heads have gone. Then the hills put the sun out, and it feels as if the island is buried in darkness.

I can still see the way down—the steps are paler than the dark—and I don't like being alone now that I've started shivering. I back off from the mound, because I don't like to touch it, and almost back into a shape with bits of its head poking out and arms that look as if they've dropped off at the elbows. It's a cactus. I'm just standing up when my father says, "There you are, Hugh."

He can't see me yet. He must have heard me gasp. I go to the top of the steps, but I can't see him for the dark. Then his voice moves away. "Don't start hiding again. Looks like we've seen the last of Kate; but we've got each other, haven't we?"

He's still drunk. He sounds as if he's talking to somebody nearer to him than I am. "All right, we'll wait on the beach," he says, and his voice echoes. He's gone into the tunnel, and he thinks he's following me. "I'm here, Dad," I shout so loud that I squeak.

"I heard you, Hugh. Wait there. I'm coming." He's walking deeper into the tunnel. While he's in there my voice must seem to be coming from beyond the far end. I'm sucking in a breath that tastes dusty, so I can tell him where I am, when he says, "Who's there?" with a laugh that almost shakes his words to pieces.

He's met whoever he thought was me when he was heading for the tunnel. I'm holding my breath—I can't breathe or swallow—and I don't know if I feel hot or frozen. "Let me past," he says as if he's trying to make his voice as big as the tunnel. "My son's waiting for me on the beach."

There are so many echoes in the tunnel I'm not sure what I'm hearing besides him. I think there's a lot of shuffling, and the other noises must be voices, because my father says, "What kind of language do you call that? You sound drunker than I am. I said my son's waiting."

He's talking even louder as if that'll make him understood. I'm embarrassed, but I'm more afraid for him. "Dad," I nearly scream, and run down the steps as fast as I can without falling.

"See, I told you. That's my son," he says as if he's talking to a crowd of idiots. The shuffling starts moving like a slow march, and he says, "All right, we'll all go to the beach together. What's the matter with your friends, too drunk to walk?"

I reach the bottom of the steps, hurting my ankles, and run along the ruined street because I can't stop myself. The shuffling sounds as if it's growing thinner, as if the people with my father are leaving bits of themselves behind, and the voices are changing too—they're looser. Maybe the mouths are getting bigger somehow. But my father's laughing, so loud that he might be trying to think of a joke. "That's what I call a hug. No harder, love, or I won't have any puff left," he says to someone. "Come on then, give us a kiss. They're the same in any language."

All the voices stop, but the shuffling doesn't. I hear it go out of the tunnel and onto the pebbles, and then my father tries to scream as if he's swallowed something that won't let him. I scream for him and dash into the tunnel,

slipping on things that weren't on the floor when we first came through, and fall out onto the beach.

My father's in the sea. He's already so far out that the water is up to his neck. About six people who look stuck together and to him are walking him away as if they don't need to breathe when their heads start to sink. Bits of them float away on the waves my father makes as he throws his arms about and gurgles. I try to run after him, but I've got nowhere when his head goes underwater. The sea pushes me back on the beach, and I run crying up and down it until Iannis comes. It doesn't take him long to find my father once he understands what I'm saying. Iannis wraps me in a blanket and hugs me all the way to Elounda, and the police take me back to the hotel. Kate gets my mother's number and calls her, saying she's someone at the hotel who's looking after me because my father's drowned; and I don't care what she says, I just feel numb. I don't start screaming until I'm on the plane back to England, because then I dream that my father has come back to tell a joke. "That's what I call getting some tongue," he says, leaning his face close to mine and showing me what's in his mouth.

Illustration by Bob Walters, taken from Weird Tales, Summer 1991

A Play For The Jaded

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A schoolroom. It contains a blackboard on whose ledge rests a stick of chalk. The room occupies half of the stage, which is divided by a wall containing a door. On the other side of the wall is a flower-bed from which protrudes a trowel. Between the schoolroom and the audience is a locked box with holes bored in it. Sounds of clawing and thumping as of something trying to escape are heard from the box.

The schoolteacher enters and chalks the name *Jack* on the board. On this cue, **Jack** appears from the rear of the auditorium and makes his way to the stage.

Teacher: "This is Jack."

The teacher writes *Jill,* and **Jill** joins **Jack** on the stage.

Teacher: "This is Jill."

Jack and **Jill** stand on either side of the box and face the audience.

The teacher chalks the word *owl* on the board and hands the key of the box to **Jack,** who unlocks it. **Jill** reaches in and produces an owl that she dangles upside down by its legs while showing it to the audience. The owl flaps and hoots, as should the audience.

Teacher: "This is an—"

Jack and **Jill** in unison: "Owl."

The teacher chalks the word *fowl* on the board.

Teacher: "The owl is a—"

Jack and **Jill** in unison: "Fowl."

The teacher chalks *howl* on the board. (The timing of what s/he writes and of what s/he then says ought to give the audience time to anticipate how the word is going to figure in the action.)

Teacher, speaking directly to the audience: "Shall we make the owl howl?"

Jack and **Jill** nod eagerly. **Jack** grasps one leg of the still inverted owl while **Jill** keeps hold of the other. They pull in opposite directions, very slowly. The owl begins to screech.

Teacher, in the tone of someone teaching an important lesson: "A screech owl cannot howl."

Jack and **Jill** continue to pull. The teacher chalks the word *bowel*.
Teacher: "See the owl's—"

Jack and **Jill** are too taken aback by what they've done to respond. The teacher repeats the cue more loudly and raps the word on the blackboard while s/he stares at the auditorium. Once members of the audience have responded, **Jack** and **Jill** repeat the word as if it causes them some distress.

Jill: "That bowel is foul."

The teacher's expression makes it clear that the pupils are not supposed to anticipate words. As the teacher angrily chalks *foul* on the blackboard, **Jack** lets go of the leg he's holding, and the remains of the owl swing towards **Jill,** who cries out and drops the object.

The teacher swings round and, having seen what's happened, paces toward **Jill**. When s/he's close enough to touch her s/he points at the mess on the floor, then returns to the board and chalks the word *trowel*.

Teacher: "Jill must dig with a—"

Jack, delighted: "Trowel."

Jill trudges to the flower-bed and begins to dig. She grimaces at the audience.

Jack, more delighted than ever: "See her scowl."

The teacher turns slowly and stares at **Jack** with hideous menace, but **Jack** doesn't notice. *Scowl is* chalked on the board. **Jill** continues to dig until the hole is several feet long and a couple of feet wide.

Jack, puzzled: "That's a big hole for an owl."

The teacher shares an evil grin with the audience. **Jill** is standing in the hole and wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. The teacher chalks up *towel*.

Jill to **Jack:** "Towel."

Jack to audience: "Hear her growl."

The teacher's expression makes it clear that if there had been any hope of a reprieve for **Jack,** there certainly isn't now. While **Jack** saunters offstage the teacher chalks *growl* and then, after a short pause, *yowl*.

Teacher to audience as if sharing a secret: "Is the towel for Jill to mop her jowl?"

The teacher's delivery ought to be sufficient answer in itself. If anyone in the audience calls out a response, the teacher may stare hard at them as if identifying them for future reference. **Jack** returns and takes a towel to **Jill**. It has obviously been pulled off a roller—it's quite narrow, but several yards long. He teases her, offering it to her and snatching it away, before she is able to grab it from him.

Jill mops her face and gazes after **Jack** as he moves away. He goes to the owl and grins wickedly at the audience. Squatting down, he separates the body from its contents. He doesn't notice that **Jill** is tying a noose in one end of the towel, which she then conceals in the earth at the side of the hole. The teacher watches.

Jill: "Owl."

Jack winks at the audience. He hides the entrails in one hand before picking up the owl. The teacher chalks up the word *yowl* on the board as **Jack** walks innocently up to **Jill. Jack** drops the owl in the hole and then stuffs the contents of the owl down **Jill's** collar. He's so overcome by mirth at the result that he can't move from where he's standing—that's to say, in the noose concealed by the earth. **Teacher** to audience: "Shall we make Jack yowl?" This question may be repeated more than once. When the audience seems sufficiently enthusiastic about the prospect, **Jill** slips the noose over **Jack's** ankles and pulls it tight. He falls on his back at the edge of the hole. As he tries to push himself upright, **Jill** wraps the other end of the towel around his wrists and pulls it tight before tying his arms behind his back. He's now lying on his side by the hole.

The teacher writes *bowel* on the board, and then *trowel*. He takes his time about this and about asking the next question. **Teacher** to audience: "Shall Jill trowel his bowel?" The teacher shouldn't be satisfied with less than full encouragement. When the appropriate business has been performed the teacher speaks again.

Teacher to **Jill:** "Feed Jack his bowel."

Jill sets about this operation. As **Jack's** protests become less coherent, the teacher poises the chalk at the blackboard.

Teacher: "Jack, that sound is a—" [writing the word while speaking it] "—vowel."

Once **Jack** is gagged, **Jill** stands back to admire her handiwork. His struggles grow weaker and eventually cease, and she pushes him into the hole. Throughout this action the teacher waits at the blackboard with the chalk poised to write another word. When **Jill** has finished, the teacher gazes about the audience, locating those people who were vociferous earlier, and then chalks the word *prowl*.

Teacher: "Prowl, Jill, prowl."

Jill surveys the audience. Her experiences have obviously turned her brain. She advances towards one or more of the members of the audience identified by the teacher, then rushes at whichever of them first responded to the teacher's prompting. Flourishing part of her victim as she goes, she dashes out of the auditorium.

The teacher looks satisfied with a job well done, and calls the theatre staff to clear the auditorium. As the audience leaves, the teacher shouts after them.

Teacher: "Now Jill is on the prowl."

Facing It

"In 1990 I was one of six diners in the *Horror Café*, a special extended edition of a BBC television arts programme. Also round the table were Pete Atkins, Clive Barker, John Carpenter, Roger Corman and Lisa Tuttle. As we ate and drank we discussed horror. I recall surprising Clive, the elected host, by suggesting that my tales celebrated the unknown—and eventually improvised a round-robin story. [...] Later that year the Radio Times approached me to put the round robin into publishable form to help promote the broadcast, but whoever commissioned the tale felt I hadn't done justice to the material. Is *Facing It* fun in its own right? You'll have judged for yourself."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The dead*

Written in: 1990
First published in *Peeping Tom 18*, 1995
Also published in: *Told By The Dead*.

In the morning Jessica told herself it had all been a dream. After such a night, no wonder she felt as if she wasn't fully awake. Even the first sting of the shower failed to rid her of the impression that her awareness was somehow muffled. Steam clung to the bathroom mirror as she towelled herself, but why should she find that reassuring? "Get it together," she told herself, and rubbed the glass clear. She stared at her face until it began to seem meaningless, then she dressed and sent herself out of her apartment, into New York.

On the subway faces surrounded her. Whenever the train halted, more of them crowded in; whenever it left a station behind, twice as many swarmed out of the dark that enclosed the train. The train was as hot as a bathroom, and she remembered turning from Jonathan's bathroom mirror to find someone faceless waiting for her. Only a dream, she told herself. When she emerged from the subway the October air felt like a promise of wakening.

The elevator hummed to itself as it raised her to the fifteenth floor. Most of the desks in the acres of open-plan office were occupied by her colleagues, who said "Hi" or "Happy Halloween" to her. The concealed lighting appeared to have seeped beneath the skin of each face, rendering them mask-like. Jessica felt herself smile and heard herself return their greetings as she headed for her desk.

The senior editor had already left for a long weekend in Connecticut. Jessica sorted through his mail and then set about copy-editing the

typescript of a layman's guide to Heisenberg and the uncertainty principle. Beyond the wide tall windows, traffic streamed up Park Avenue towards Grand Central. Usually the sight reminded her how the city never slept, but now it seemed simply mechanical. When the lines of type began to grow restless under her scrutiny she made for the water cooler.

Jake the art director was sipping from a paper cup. "What's happening?" he said.

"I seemed to spend all last night dreaming."

"Yeah? Me too."

The water in the cooler churned and gurgled like a nervous stomach as Jessica filled a cup. "What did you dream?" she said.

"Some weird stuff. We were all of us heading for Central Park, it seemed like just about everyone in New York was."

"Do you remember why?"

"Can't say. All I know is we each had to bring something sharp." He must have seen that disturbed her, because he added quickly "You weren't there."

Somehow that wasn't reassuring. Jessica returned to her desk and worked for an hour, which was as long as she could force herself to concentrate. She kept reaching for the phone to call Jonathan at the *Voice* and not quite managing to pick up the receiver. She must have dreamed she'd met him last night—she couldn't actually have met him, since the rest of it couldn't be real. By the time she made herself phone he had gone out for lunch.

Jessica bought herself a hero sandwich in the deli on the ground floor and sat with some friends from the publicity department. Several times she thought of asking if they'd dreamed last night, but the question kept shrinking back. She went up to the office and tried to work, but it wasn't long before she found herself reaching for the phone. This time she reached Jonathan. "Jessica," he said.

Could she hear a hint of secret eagerness? She swallowed and said "I know this is a crazy question, but I didn't see you last night, did I?"

"Sure did."

His eagerness had danced into the open. Jessica felt her mind turn over. "So if I saw you..." she faltered.

"You know I'm with you."

She knew either nothing or far too much. "I've got to talk to you face to face," she said, perhaps to delay realising.

"I'll be ready. Give me till this evening."

"Where?"

"I'll find you there. You're on the way. Just remember you're not alone," he said.

She let the receiver fall into its cradle and gazed along Park Avenue. Everything felt like a mask she was wearing. If she had really met Jonathan last night, was the rest of it true? Not just the newscasts about the discovery of yet another corpse without a face, but the way her old friends had seemed to know more about Jessica than she did herself? Today she'd been behaving as though the newscasts had made her dream her friends had told her that she was somehow responsible for the mutilations, but if she had really fled from her friends to Jonathan... If she had, only to find someone faceless handing her a razor in his bathroom, how could she not recall anything beyond that? How had she got home?

She felt as if she were close to accepting concepts vaster in their implications than she could grasp, or to bursting out laughing without knowing why, or both. She had a sense that there was nowhere for her to go, nothing to do except wait. She resumed poring over the typescript, but the theories it discussed seemed simple-minded by comparison with the notions hovering at the edge of her awareness. She stayed bent low over the typescript, as if she was trying to escape being noticed, until the office was almost deserted and Jake stopped by her desk. "Time to go," he said.

Wasn't his tone a shade too urgent? "I'll be okay. I want to finish this," she told him.

He hesitated, then shrugged. "We'll see you soon."

He turned quickly and left the office, but not before she glimpsed the expression on his face: a look of bewilderment mixed with anticipation—a look of almost knowing. She leafed onwards through the typescript, and then she grabbed the phone and dialled the *Voice*. There was no reply at all from the switchboard at the newspaper.

Jessica didn't know how long she held onto the receiver, having redialled twice to make sure of the number, before she realised that something larger was wrong. The murmur of New York had changed.

She ran to the window and leaned out. All the traffic had stopped. The streets were choked with cars. The only sound from down there was the shuffling of countless footsteps. The sidewalks were invisible beneath an apparently endless crowd, which was heading towards Central Park. As the figures passed beneath the street lamps Jessica saw objects glinting in their hands.

The spectacle entranced and appalled her. When she heard the door opening behind her and footsteps approaching, she couldn't turn. There was no need: above her on the tilted window she made out a ghost of the office and her own face hovering in the night sky like an apparition over the city. Before long Jonathan's face appeared beside hers. "It's starting," he said.

"What is?"

"The millennium."

"What are they doing?" she demanded, though she felt she knew.

"Releasing themselves from their faces."

"Why, for God's sake?"

"Exactly."

Now she could sense what was happening. Waves of a sensation too extreme to be called pain were reaching her from somewhere out of sight, a silent explosion that seemed to make the buildings shiver. "We can go and see if you like," Jonathan murmured.

The idea dismayed her almost as much as the sight of the crowds tramping towards their fate. "Where are they going?"

The question seemed meaningless until he answered it. "Towards the new world."

"What kind of world can it be without faces?" she demanded as if just one question, the right question, might halt everything.

Jonathan didn't answer directly. He moved aside so that the only face she could see was her own. "Faces are the lies we tell ourselves every time we look in a mirror," he said. "They're what prevents us from making the great change. They're why the world is dying of its own lack of wisdom. What you're seeing is our last chance."

All she was seeing was her own face in the sky. Both sky and face appeared to tremble. "You're crazy," she whispered.

"Everyone but you, huh?" He made a sound she couldn't interpret. "Maybe you're right," he said. "Look beyond."

Again she had the impression of already knowing. His voice hardly sounded like his any more; it seemed to be expressing her own most secret thoughts. "Two thousand years ago a man came to earth to show us what we might be without our bodies. A thousand years ago there was only darkness. Now again there's someone who can change the world."

She heard herself ask without moving her lips. "Who?"

"Who else?"

The answer was before her: her face. Now that she wasn't speaking aloud it reminded her even more of a mask, a gigantic image hovering above the destination of the crowds like an evangelist's face projected on a screen at a rally. The lights of the city were beginning to fail, windows blinking on and off in patterns which seemed about to reveal a meaning, but the waves of ecstatic agony reaching for her were a promise of illumination. "I don't want this," she cried into herself.

"You still have a choice."

Was her face displaying choices to her? It had acquired an evangelical look, lips set, eyes wide and unwavering, but then it changed. A strip of black cloud attached itself to her upper lip like a painted moustache, and all it needed to complete the image of Groucho Marx was a cigar. If she began laughing and couldn't stop, would that help?

"God has two faces," the voice said, "and the third is under your own."

Perhaps Jessica was holding a cigar; certainly there was an object in her hand. "The God of the fundamentalists can only bear an ordered universe," the voice was saying, "but Groucho God plays dice with his. You have to choose which universe we'll inhabit for the third millennium. Hello, I must be going. In the Groucho universe even time is sometimes an illusion."

Jessica made herself focus on what she was holding. It wasn't a cigar, it was a cut-throat razor whose blade was folded into the handle. It looked very like the one she had been handed in Jonathan's bathroom, and perhaps she was still there; perhaps everything she had seemed to experience since that moment was a prophetic vision, or perhaps she had already chosen the universe where time could flow in any direction. All she could see was her

own face, reflected by a plane of glass that might be a window or a bathroom mirror.

She felt her free hand dig a fingernail into the object she was holding. For the moment it wasn't clear whether she was inserting her nail into a recess in a razor blade or into the skin of a cigar. It wouldn't be clear until she made her choice. Nobody could make that for her, she thought, nobody could help. But as she took a breath that felt like her last on this earth, she sensed the face or the world turning towards her to watch.

The Limits Of Fantasy

The Limits Of Fantasy is provided with a lengthy introduction in the anthology *The Year's Best Horror Stories 21*, which can be read here.

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As Syd Pym passed his door and walked two blocks to look in the shop window, a duck jeered harshly in the park. March frost had begun to bloom on the window, but the streetlamp made the magazine covers shine: the schoolgirl in her twenties awaiting a spanking, the two bronzed men displaying samples of their muscles to each other, the topless woman tonguing a lollipop. Sid was looking away in disgust from two large masked women flourishing whips over a trussed victim when the girl marched past behind him.

Her reflection glided from cover to cover, her feet trod on the back of the trussed man's head. Despite the jumbling of images, Sid knew her. He recognised her long blond hair, her slim graceful legs, firm breasts, plump jutting bottom outlined by her ankle-length coat, and as she glanced in his direction, he saw that she recognised him. He had time to glimpse how she wrinkled her nose as her reflection left the shop window.

He almost started after her. She'd reacted as if he was one of the men who needed those magazines, but he was one of the people who created them. He'd only come to the window to see how his work shaped up, and there it was, between a book about Nazi war crimes and an Enid Stone romance. He'd given the picture of Toby Hale and his wife Jilly a warm amber tint to go with the title *Pretty Hot*, and he thought it looked classier than most of its companions. He didn't think Toby needed to worry so much about the rising costs of production. If Sid had gone in for that sort of thing he would have bought the magazine on the strength of the cover.

The newspapers had to admit he was good, one of the best in town. That was why the *Weekly News* wanted him to cover Enid Stone's return home, even though some of the editors seemed to dislike accepting pictures from him since word had got round that he was involved in *Pretty Hot*. Why

should anyone disparage him for doing a friend a favour? It wasn't even as though he posed, he only took the photographs. There ought to be a way to let the blonde girl know that, to make her respect him. He swung away from the shop window and stalked after her, telling himself that if he caught up with her he'd have it out with her. But the street was already deserted, and as he reached his building her window, in the midst of the house opposite his rooms, lit up.

He felt as if she had let him know she'd seen him before pulling the curtains—as if she'd glimpsed his relief at not having to confront her. He bruised his testicles as he groped for his keys, and that enraged him more than ever. A phone which he recognised as his once the front door was open had started ringing, and he dashed up the musty stairs in the dark.

It was Toby Hale on the phone. "Still free tomorrow? They're willing."

"A bit different, is it? A bit stronger?"

"What the punters want."

"I'm all for giving people what they really want," Sid declared, and took several quick breaths. The blonde girl was in her bathroom now. "I'll see you at the studio," he told Toby, and fumbled the receiver into place.

What was she trying to do to him? If she had watched him come home she must know he was in his room, even though he hadn't had time to switch on the light. Besides, this wasn't the first time she'd behaved as if the frosted glass of her bathroom window ought to stop him watching her. "Black underwear, is it now?" he said through his teeth, and bent over his bed to reach for a camera.

God, she thought a lot of herself. Each of her movements looked like a pose to Sid as he reeled her towards him with the zoom lens. Despite the way the window fragmented her he could distinguish the curve of her bottom in black knickers and the black swellings of her breasts. Then her breasts turned flesh-coloured, and she dropped the bra. She was slipping the knickers down her bare legs when the whir of rewinding announced that he'd finished the roll of Tri-X. "Got you," he whispered, and hugged the camera to himself.

When she passed beyond the frame of the window he coaxed his curtains shut and switched the room light on. He was tempted to develop the roll now, but anticipating it made him feel so powerful in a sleepy generalised

way that he decided to wait until the morning, when he would be more awake. He took *Pretty Hot* to bed with him and scanned the article about sex magic, and an idea was raising its head in his when he fell asleep.

He slept late. In the morning he had to leave the Tri-X negatives and hurry to the studio. Fog slid flatly over the pavements before him, vehicles nosed through the grey, grumbling monotonously. It occurred to him as he turned along the cheap side street near the edge of town that people were less likely to notice him in the fog, though why should he care if they did?

Toby opened the street door at Sid's triple knock and preceded him up the carpetless stairs. Toby had already set up the lights and switched them on, which made the small room with its double bed and mock-leather sofa appear starker than ever. A brawny man was sitting on the sofa with a woman draped face down across his knees, her short skirt thrown back, her black nylon knickers more or less pulled down.

Apart from the mortarboard jammed onto his head, the man looked like a wrestler or a bouncer. He glanced up as Sid entered, and the hint of a warning crossed his large bland reddish face as Sid appraised the woman. She was too plump for Sid's taste, her mottled buttocks were too flabby. She looked bored—more so when she glanced at Sid, who disliked her at once.

"This is Sid, our snapshooter," Toby announced. "Sid, our friends are going to model for both stories."

"All right there, mate," the man said, and the woman grunted.

Sid glanced through the viewfinder, then made to adjust the woman's knickers; but he hadn't touched them when the man's hand seized his wrist. "Hands off. I'll do that. She's my wife."

"Come on, the lot of you," the woman complained. "I'm getting a cold bum."

It wouldn't be cold for long, Sid thought, and felt his penis stir unexpectedly. But the man didn't hit her, he only mimed the positions as if he were enacting a series of film stills, resting his hand on her buttocks to denote slaps. For the pair of colour shots Toby could afford the man rubbed rouge on her bottom.

"That was okay, was it, Sid?" Toby said anxiously. "It'd be nice if we could shoot *Slave of Love* tomorrow."

"Wouldn't be nice for us," the woman said, groaning as she stood up. "We've got our lives to lead, you know."

"We could make it a week today," her husband said.

"They look right for the stories, I reckon," Hale told Sid when they'd left. "I'm working on some younger models, but those two'll do for that kind of stuff. The perves who want it don't care."

Sid thought it best to agree, but as he walked home he grew angrier: how could that fat bitch have given him a tickle? Working with people like her might be one of Sid's steps to fame, but she needed him more than he needed her. "I'll retouch you, but I won't touch you," he muttered, grinning. Someone like the blonde girl over the road, now—she would have been Sid's choice of a model for *Spanked and Submissive*, and it wouldn't all have been faked, either.

That got his penis going. He had to stand still for a few minutes until its tip went back to sleep, and the thought of the negatives waiting in his darkroom didn't help. He would have her in his hands, he would be able to do what he liked with her. He had to put the idea out of his head before he felt safe to walk.

After the fog, even the dim musty hall of the house seemed like a promise of clarity. In his darkroom he watched the form of the blonde girl rise from the developing fluid, and he felt as if a fog of dissatisfaction with himself and with the session at the studio were leaving him. The photographs came clear, and for a moment he couldn't understand why the girl's body was composed of dots like a newspaper photograph enlarged beyond reason. Of course, it was the frosting on her bathroom window.

Having her in his flat without her knowing excited him, but not enough. Perhaps he needed her to be home so that he could watch her failure to realise he had her. He opened a packet of hamburgers and cooked himself whatever meal it was. The effort annoyed him, and so did the eating: chew, chew, chew. He switched on the television, and the little picture danced for him, oracular heads spoke. He kept glancing at the undeveloped frame of her window.

By the time she arrived home the fog was spiked with drizzle. As soon as she had switched on the light she began to remove her clothes, but before she'd taken off more than her coat she drew the curtains. Had she seen him?

Was she taking pleasure in his frustration at having to imagine her undressing? But he already had her almost naked. He spread the photographs across the table, and then he lurched towards his bed to find the article about sex magic.

By themselves the photographs were only pieces of card, but what had the article said? Toby Hale had put in all the ideas he could find about images during an afternoon spent in the library. The Catholic church sometimes made an image of a demon and burned it to bring off an exorcism... Someone in Illinois killed a man by letting rain fall on his photograph... Here it was, the stuff Tony had found in a book about magic by someone with a degree from a university Sid had never heard of. The best spells are the ones you write yourself. Find the words that are truest to your secret soul. Focus your imagination, build up to the discharge of psychic energy. Chant the words that best express your desires. Toby was talking about doing that with your partner, but it had given Sid a better idea. He hurried to the window, his undecided penis hindering him a little, and shut the curtains tight.

As he returned to the table he felt uneasy: excited, furtive, ridiculous—he wasn't sure which was uppermost. If only this could work! You never know until you try, he thought, which was the motto on the contents page of *Pretty Hot*. He pulled the first photograph to him. Her breasts swelled in their lacy bra, her black knickers were taut over her round bottom. He wished he could see her face. He cleared his throat, and muttered almost inaudibly, "I'm going to take your knickers down. I'm going to smack your bare bum."

He sounded absurd. The whole situation was absurd. How could he expect it to work if he could barely hear himself? "By the time I've finished with you," he said loudly, "you won't be able to sit down for a week."

Too loud! Nobody could hear him, he told himself. Except that he could, and he sounded like a fool. As he glared at the photograph, he was sure that she was smiling. She had beaten him. He wouldn't put it past her to have let him take the photographs because they had absolutely no effect on her. All at once he was furious. "You've had it now," he shouted.

His eyes were burning. The photograph flickered, and appeared to stir. He thought her face turned up to him. If it did, it must be out of fear. His penis

pulled eagerly at his fly. "All right, miss," he shouted hoarsely. "Those knickers are coming down."

She seemed to jerk, and he could imagine her bending reluctantly beneath the pressure of a hand on the back of her neck. Her black knickers stretched over her bottom. Then the photograph blurred as tears tried to dampen his eyes, but he could see her more clearly than ever. By God, the tears ought to be hers. "Now then," he shouted, "you're going to get what you've been asking for."

He seized her bare arm. She tried to pull away, shaking her head mutely, her eyes bright with apprehension. In a moment he'd trapped her legs between his thighs and pushed her across his knee, locking his left arm around her waist. Her long blond hair trailed to the floor, concealing her face. He took hold of the waistband of her knickers and drew them slowly down, gradually revealing her round creamy buttocks. When she began to wriggle, he trapped her more firmly with his arm and legs. "Let's see what this feels like," he said, and slapped her hard.

He heard it. For a moment he was sure he had. He stared about his empty flat with his hot eyes. He almost went to peer between the curtains at her window, but gazed at the photograph instead. "Oh no, miss, you won't get away from me," he whispered, and saw her move uneasily as he closed his eyes.

He began systematically to slap her: one on the left buttock, one on the right. After a dozen of these her bottom was turning pink and he was growing hot—his face, his penis, the palm of his hand. He could feel her warm thighs squirming between his. "You like that, do you? Let's see how much you like."

Two slaps on the left, two on the right. A dozen pairs of those, then five on the same spot, five on the other. As her bottom grew red she tried to cover it with her hands, but he pinned her wrists together with his left hand and forcing them up to the dimple above her bottom, went to work in earnest: ten on the left buttock, ten on its twin... She was sobbing beneath her hair, her bottom was wriggling helplessly. His room had gone. There was nothing but Sid and his victim until he came violently and unexpectedly, squealing.

He didn't see her the next day. She was gone when he wakened from a satisfied slumber, and she had drawn the curtains before he realised she was

home again. She was making it easier for him to see her the way he wanted. Anticipating that during the days which followed made him feel secretly powerful, and so did Toby Hale's suggestion when Sid rang him to confirm the *Slave of Love* session. "We're short of stories for number three," Toby said. "I don't suppose you've got anything good and strong for us?"

"I might have," Sid told him.

He didn't fully realise how involving it would be until he began to write. He was dominating her not only by writing about her but also by delivering her up to the readers of the magazine. He made her into a new pupil at a boarding school for girls in their late teens. "Your here to lern disiplin. My naime is Mr Sidney and dont yoo forgett it." She would wear kneesocks and a gymslip that revealed her uniform knickers whenever she bent down. "Over my nee, yung lady. Im goaing to give you a speling leson."

"Plese plese dont take my nickers down, Ill be a good gurl."

"You didnt cawl me Mr Sidney, thats two dozin extrar with the hare brush..." He felt as if the words were unlocking a secret aspect of himself, a core of unsuspected truth which gave him access to some kind of power. Was this what they meant by sex magic? It took him almost a week of evenings to savour writing the story, and he didn't mind not seeing her all that week; it helped him see her as he was writing her. Each night as he drifted off to sleep he imagined her lying in bed sobbing, rubbing her bottom.

At the end of the story he met her on the bus.

He was returning from town with a bagful of film. She caught the bus just as he was lowering himself onto one of the front seats downstairs. As she boarded the bus she saw him, and immediately looked away. Even though there were empty seats she stayed on her feet, holding onto the pole by the stairs.

Sid gazed at the curve of her bottom, defining itself and then growing blurred as her long coat swung with the movements of the bus ploughing through the fog. Why wouldn't she sit down? He leaned forwards impulsively, emboldened by the nights he'd spent in secret with her, and touched her arm. "Would you like to sit down, love?"

She looked down at him, and he recoiled. Her eyes were bright with loathing, and yet she looked trapped. She shook her head once, keeping her

lips pressed so tight they grew pale, then she turned her back on him. He'd make her turn her back tonight, he thought, by God he would. He had to sit on his hands for the rest of the journey, but he walked behind her all the way from the bus stop to her house.

"You're not tying me up with that," the woman said. "Cut my wrists off, that would. Pyjama cord or nothing, and none of your cheap stuff neither."

"Sid, would you mind seeing if you can come up with some cord?" Toby Hale said, taking out his reptilian wallet. "I'll stay and discuss the scene."

There was sweat in his eyebrows. The woman was making him sweat because she was their only female model for the story, since Toby's wife wouldn't touch anything kinky. Sid kicked the fog as he hurried to the shops. Just let the fat bitch give him any lip.

Her husband bound her wrists and ankles to the legs of the bed. He untied her and turned her over and tied her again. He untied her and tied her wrists and ankles together behind her back, and poked his crotch at her face. Sid snapped her and snapped her, wondering how far Tony had asked them to go, and then he had to reload. "Get a bastard move on," the woman told him. "This is bloody uncomfortable, did you but know."

Sid couldn't restrain himself. "If you don't like the work we can always get someone else."

"Can you now?" The woman's face rocked towards him on the bow of herself, and then she toppled sideways on the bed, her breasts flopping on her chest, a few pubic strands springing free of her purple knickers like the legs of a lurking spider. "Bloody get someone, then," she cried.

Toby had to calm her and her suffused husband down while Sid muttered apologies. That night he set the frosted photograph in front of him and chanted his story over it until the girl pleaded for mercy. He no longer cared if Toby had his doubts about the story, though Sid was damned if he could see what had made him frown over it. If only Sid could find someone like the girl to model for the story... Even when he'd finished with her for the evening, his having been forced to apologise to Toby's models clung to him. He was glad he would be photographing Enid Stone tomorrow. Maybe it was time for him to think of moving on.

He was on his way to Enid Stone's press conference when he saw the girl again. As he emerged from his building she was arriving home from wherever she worked, and she was on his side of the road. The slam of the front door made her flinch and dodge to the opposite pavement, but not before a streetlamp had shown him her face. Her eyes were sunken in dark rings, her mouth was shivering; her long blond hair looked dulled by the fog. She was moving awkwardly, as if it pained her to walk.

She must have female trouble, Sid decided, squirming at the notion. On his way to the bookshop his glimpse of her proved as hard to leave behind as the fog was, and he had to keep telling himself that it was nothing to do with him. The bookshop window was full of Enid Stone's books upheld by wire brackets. Maybe one day he'd see a Sid Pym exhibition in a window.

He hadn't expected Enid Stone to be so small. She looked like someone's shrunken crabby granny, impatiently suffering her hundredth birthday party. She sat in an armchair at the end of a thickly carpeted room above the bookshop, confronting a curve of reporters sitting on straight chairs. "Don't crowd me," she was telling them. "A girl's got to breathe, you know."

Sid joined the photographers who were lined up against the wall like miscreants outside a classroom. Once the reporters began to speak, having been set in motion by a man from the publishers, Enid Stone snapped at their questions, her head jerking rapidly, her eyes glittering like a bird's. "That'll do," she said abruptly. "Give a girl a chance to rest her voice. Who's going to make me beautiful?"

This was apparently meant for the photographers, since the man from the publishers beckoned them forwards. The reporters were moving their chairs aside when Enid Stone raised one bony hand to halt the advance of the cameras. "Where's the one who takes the dirty pictures? Have you let him in?"

Even when several reporters and photographers turned to look at Sid he couldn't believe she meant him. "Is that Mr Muck? Show him the door," she ordered. "No pictures till he goes."

The line of photographers took a step forwards and closed in front of Sid. As he stared at their backs, his face and ears throbbing as if from blows, the man from the publishers took hold of his arm. "I'm afraid that if Miss Stone won't have you I must ask you to leave."

Sid trudged downstairs, unable to hear his footsteps for the extravagant carpet. He felt as if he weren't quite there. Outside, the fog was so thick that the buses had stopped running. It filled his eyes, his mind. However fast he walked, there was always as much of it waiting beyond it. Its passiveness infuriated him. He wanted to feel he was overcoming something, and by God, he would once he was home.

He grabbed the copy of the story he'd written for Toby Hale and threw it on the table. He found the photograph beside the bed and propped it against a packet of salt in front of him. The picture had grown dull with so much handling, but he hadn't the patience to develop a fresh copy just now. "My name's Mister Sidney and don't you forget it," he informed the photograph.

There was no response. His penis was as still as the fingerprinted glossy piece of card. The scene at the bookshop had angered him too much, that was all. He only had to relax and let his imagination take hold. "You're here to learn discipline," he said soft and slow.

The figure composed of dots seemed to shift, but it was only Sid's vision; his eyes were smarting. He imagined the figure in front of him changing, and suddenly he was afraid of seeing her as she had looked beneath the streetlamp. The memory distressed him, but why should he think of it now? He ought to be in control of how she appeared to him. Perhaps his anger at losing control would give him the power to take hold of her. "My name's Mr Sidney," he repeated, and heard a mocking echo in his brain. His eyes were stinging when it should be her bottom that was. He closed his eyes and saw her floating helplessly towards him. "Come here if you know what's good for you," he said quickly, and then he thought he knew how to catch her. "Please," he said in a high panicky voice, "please don't hurt me."

It worked. All at once she was sprawling across his lap. "What's my name?" he demanded, and raised his voice almost to a squeak. "Mr Sidney," he said.

"Mr Sidney sir," he shouted, and dealt her a hefty slap. He was about to give the kind of squeal he would have loved her to emit when he heard her do so—faintly, across the road.

He blinked at the curtains as if he had wakened from a dream. It couldn't have been the girl, and if it had been, she was distracting him. He closed his eyes again and gripped them with his left hand as if that would help him

trap his image of her. "What's my name?" he shouted, and slapped her again. This time there was no mistaking the cry which penetrated the fog.

Sid knocked his chair over backwards in his haste to reach the window. When he threw the curtains open he could see nothing but the deserted road boxed in by fog. The circle of lit pavement where he'd last seen the girl was bare and stark. He was staring at the fog, feeling as though it was even closer to him than it looked, when he heard a door slam. It was the front door of the building across the road. In a moment the girl appeared at the edge of the fog. She glanced up at him, and then she fled towards the park.

It was as if he'd released her by relinquishing his image of her and going to the window. He felt as though he was on the brink of realising the extent of his secret power. Suppose there really was something to this sex magic? Suppose he had made her experience at least some of his fantasies? He couldn't believe he had reached her physically, but what would it be like for her to have her thoughts invaded by his fantasies about her? He had to know the truth, though he didn't know what he would do with it. He grabbed his coat and ran downstairs, into the fog.

Once on the pavement he stood still and held his breath. He heard his heartbeat, the cackling of ducks, the girl's heels running away from him. He advanced into the fog, trying to ensure that she didn't hear him. The bookshop window drifted by, crowded with posed figures and their victims. Ahead of him the fog parted for a moment, and the girl looked back as if she'd sensed his gaze closing around her. She saw him illuminated harshly by the fluorescent tube in the bookshop window, and at once she ran for her life.

"Don't run away," Sid called. "I won't hurt you, I only want to talk to you." Surely any other thoughts that were lurking in his mind were only words. It occurred to him that he had never heard her speak. In that case, whose sobs had he heard in his fantasies? There wasn't time for him to wonder now. She had vanished into the fog, but a change in the sound of her footsteps told him where she had taken refuge: in the park.

He ran to the nearest entrance, the one she would have used, and peered along the path. Thickly swirling rays of light from a streetlamp splayed through the railings and stubbed themselves against the fog. He held his breath, which tasted like a head cold, and heard her gravelly footsteps

fleeing along the path. "We'll have to meet sooner or later, love," he called, and ran into the park.

Trees gleamed dully, wet black pillars upholding the fog. The grass on either side of the path looked weighed down by the slow passage of the murk which Sid seemed to be following. Once he heard a cry and a loud splash—a bird landing on the lake which was somewhere ahead, he supposed. He halted again, but all he could hear was the dripping of branches laden with fog.

"I told you I don't want to hurt you," he muttered. "Better wait for me, or I'll—" The chase was beginning to excite and frustrate and anger him. He left the gravel path and padded across the grass alongside it, straining his ears. When the fog solidified a hundred yards or so to his right, at first he didn't notice. Belatedly he realised that the dim pale hump was a bridge which led the path over the lake, and was just in time to stop himself striding into the water.

It wasn't deep, but the thought that the girl could have made him wet himself enraged him. He glared about, his eyes beginning to sting. "I can see you," he whispered as if the words would make it true, and then his gaze was drawn from the bridge to the shadows beneath.

At first he wasn't sure what he was seeing. He seemed to be watching an image developing in the dark water, growing clearer and more undeniable. It had sunk, and now it was rising, floating under the bridge from the opposite side. Its eyes were open, but they looked like the water. Its arms and legs were trailing limply, and so was its blond hair.

Sid shivered and stared, unable to look away. Had she jumped or fallen? The splash he'd heard a few minutes ago must have been her plunging into the lake, and yet there had been no sounds of her trying to save herself. She must have struck her head on something as she fell. She couldn't just have lain there willing herself to drown, Sid reassured himself, but if she had, how could anyone blame him? There was nobody to see him except her, and she couldn't, not with eyes like those she had now. A spasm of horror and guilt set him staggering away from the lake.

The slippery grass almost sent him sprawling more than once. When he skidded onto the path the gravel ground like teeth, and yet he felt insubstantial, at the mercy of the blurred night, unable to control his thoughts. He fled panting through the gateway, willing himself not to slow

down until he was safe in his rooms; he had to destroy the photographs before anyone saw them. But fog was gathering in his lungs, and he had a stitch in his side. He stumbled to a halt in front of the bookshop.

The light from the fluorescent tubes seemed to reach for him. He saw his face staring out from among the women bearing whips. If they or anyone else knew what he secretly imagined he'd caused... His buttocks clenched and unclenched at the thought he was struggling not to think. He gripped his knees and bent almost double to rid himself of the pain in his side so that he could catch his breath, and then he saw his face fit over the face of a bound victim.

It was only the stitch that had paralysed him, he told himself, near to panic. It was only the fog which was making the photograph of the victim appear to stir, to align its position with his. "Please, please," he said wildly, his voice rising, and at once tried to take the words back. They were echoing in his mind, they wouldn't stop. He felt as if they were about to unlock a deeper aspect of himself, a power which would overwhelm him.

He didn't want this, it was contrary to everything he knew about himself. "My name is—" he began, but his pleading thoughts were louder than his voice, almost as loud as the sharp swishing which filled his ears. He was falling forwards helplessly, into himself or into the window, wherever the women and pain were waiting. For a moment he managed to cling to the knowledge that the images were nothing but the covers of magazines, and then he realised fully that they were more than that, far more. They were euphemisms for what waited beyond them.

1991

The Dead Must Die

Written in: 1991
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As soon as I push the doors open I know I am in the presence of evil. The lobby walls are white as innocence, but the place stinks of deceit. It is crowded with lost souls who wander aimlessly or talk to one another in low voices as though they are in church. Sensitivity to atmospheres is yet another gift which the mass of mankind has abandoned. I breathe a prayer and cross the threshold, steeling myself against the unhealthy heat which refutes the pretence of healing, the disinfectant stench bespeaking the presence of corruption, the closeness of so much unredeemed flesh.

Except I single myself out I may pass unnoticed. I silently intone the Twenty-third Psalm, and am halfway through the fifth verse when I reach the lifts. I step into the nearest, thumbing the number of the floor to which I have been called. The doors are closing when they spring back as if possessed, and two men dressed like choirboys push in a trolley laden with a draped form that is sucking up blood.

The doors shut, embracing the heat which now I understand is meant to dull the senses, and the lift shudders as though revolted by the burden it is being made to carry. But the cage rises, humming smugly to itself, and I close my eyes and attempt not to breathe in the stink of devil's incense that reminds me I am in a place which might be a chapel of rest if it were not teeming with unholy corrupt life. "Aren't you well?" one of the surpliced attendants says.

His clammy breath in my ear is like a shameful kiss. I step back from him and shake one finger at the thing on the trolley, mumbling "Can't stand..."

"You get used to it," he says with a laugh which I gather is intended to express sympathy but which shows me that he sees no deeper into me than I desire. I pray God that all his kind here will be as gullible, as indeed their employment in this place suggests.

The lift stops, and I button the doors open, resisting the instinct to let them close and burst the dangling sac of blood. The temptation to perform good works in haste, at the expense of the greater good, is one of the Adversary's subtlest tricks. As the attendants rush the trolley away the other lift releases a stream of visitors in the direction I am pointed by an arrow on the wall. I let them pass so as to move more swiftly to my goal; but when I emerge I see the way is guarded.

A uniformed woman sits like a wicked child cast out of a schoolroom at a desk in the corridor. She is playing the scribe, noting on a clipboard the names of all who pass. Some she appears to have turned back, for they are slumped against the walls, their faces sagging with the heat. I grip my case more firmly and stride forwards, silently repeating the psalm, and the woman raises first her face and then her eyebrows. "Visiting?"

"As you see."

She shakes her head like a beast that has been struck across the face. "Whom?"

"Paul Vincent."

"Relative?"

"A *caring* relative."

She lowers her gaze to her list as though my emphasis has crushed her. "Name?"

"George Saint."

Presumably this is as nothing to her, for she merely grunts and sets it down. When I make to pass, however, she emits a more bestial grunt and bars my way with a hand luxurious with fat and jewellery. "Two visitors maximum even in the private rooms. You'll have to wait."

I see myself driving a nail through her outstretched palm, and I press my free hand against my thigh. "I have come a long way to be here."

"Then I imagine you'll be staying for a while." When I refrain from contradicting her she says "You needn't be afraid you won't see Mr Vincent again. He's our star patient, getting better every day."

That is a taunt even if she is unaware the Adversary is using her voice. "When his wife wrote to me," I say loudly, "she said he was not expected to live."

"These days we can perform miracles."

Perhaps the triumph in her voice means only that she suspects I would have profited by my brother's death. I retreat for fear of venting my wrath upon her, and I am beyond the lolling visitors when the door of Paul's room opens and my niece Mary looks around for me. "Yes, it was him," she calls into the room. "Hello, Uncle—"

I interrupt before she can arouse suspicion by pronouncing my name from my former life. "Mary. I must wait until someone makes way for me."

"I'll stay out here if you want to see dad."

The guardian of the corridor turns to ensure that she doesn't re-enter the room, and I wait until Mary comes forward. I have not set eyes on her for fifteen years—not since she would sit on my lap while I told her about Our Lord—and if I had any doubts about my mission they vanish at the sight of her. She is paler and thinner than she ought to be, and I believe I glimpse a knowing look in her eyes before she says "Dad will be pleased you've come to see him."

I detect no guile in this, and pray that knowingness is only a façade which she feels bound to present to the world. "I hope he can find it in his heart to welcome me."

"He says it's up to the individual what they believe."

For a moment I assume she is defending her father out of misplaced loyalty, and then I grasp that she thinks I was apologising for my faith, though she has no idea of its strength. I must surmise that she is not beyond redemption, however insidious are the influences which surround her. When she says "I'll wait here" I stride past the desk of the false scribe, repeating the fourth verse of the psalm under my breath, and enter the room.

My brother is lying in a bed, his eyes upturned to Heaven. His wife Penelope sits beside him, holding his hand. Their stillness almost persuades me that I am not needed here, and I succumb to a craven feeling of relief. Then my brother's head wavers up from the pillow, and his eyes, which are watery and veinous, light up with a blasphemous parody of intelligence and life. "Thomas," he whispers.

I want to proclaim my outrage with all my voice, but instead I advance to the foot of the bed and gaze solemnly at him. That appears to satisfy him, and his head sinks back. "Thank you for coming, Thomas," says his wife.

Her gratitude is as bogus as everything else in this evil chamber. She must have felt bound to contact me when my brother was at death's door. His eyes close, and he expels a long slow breath. "He waited for you," Penelope tells me.

Though that sounds as if she is holding me responsible for the unnatural prolongation of his life, I am filled with a hope that it has come to an end. His wide pasty face has collapsed as though it is no longer anything but a mask, and he has folded his hands on his chest. Then his hands stir, betraying their mockery of piety, as his chest rises and falls. He is dead, yet he breathes. He has joined the Undead.

How can God's daylight allow such a thing to be? When I attempt to recall how long it has been since I last saw the sun, it seems to me that the sky has been overcast for weeks before I was called to my brother. And the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit, and there is no sunlight to combat the room's Godless light, which celebrates the flush of my brother's cheeks that gives him the appearance of a whore rouged with the blood of her victims. I turn away in revulsion and confront his wife, who says "I didn't know if you would come. I wasn't even sure we had your right address."

Nor have they, God be thanked. "I felt I had to," I confess.

"You're still born again, then. You're still of the same mind."

"We are all of His mind, however we regard ourselves. There is no birth nor death but proceeds from Him."

At least she has the grace to look embarrassed, though only because in these faithless days God is the dirtiest of words. "We've become quite friendly with the Beynons," she says defensively. "The donor's family."

The heat and stink coagulate in my throat, and for some seconds I cannot swallow for the thought of my brother with part of a corpse sewn up inside him. "Have you visited the grave?" I croak.

"Whose?"

"What you call the donor."

"Why, no," she says as though it is I who am in the wrong. "We don't want to intrude."

"Where is he buried?"

"She. Kidneys don't have a sex, you know. She's in the churchyard near where you used to have your flat."

"A short walk from where I am staying. If there is no objection I shall pay my respects."

"I expect you'll do whatever you think is right," she says in a tone which suggests I ought to be ashamed of doing so. "I hope you don't mind staying in a hotel, by the way. I've my hands full getting the house ready for Paul to come home."

She must take me for a fool if she imagines I assume that otherwise I would be welcome in her house when everything about myself is a reproach. I succeed in sounding casual. "When is that to be?"

"The doctors say Sunday."

The word should choke them. "I shall be in church."

"Come over afterwards to say goodbye to Paul if you have time."

She clearly hopes the opposite, and I may let her think her wish is granted. Sometimes a venial sin is justified in the prosecution of His work. "I have troubled you enough for the nonce," I tell her. "Beynon, you said. What Christian name?"

She seems reluctant to answer, but perhaps she senses that I am prepared to demand the information of my brother, for she replies "Bernadette."

It is indeed Christian—the name of the saint to whom His Blessed Mother chose to appear—which makes the mutilation yet more blasphemous. "May God watch over you and Paul," I curse, and retreat into the corridor.

Only Mary and the guard remain. The guard is studying her clipboard as though it holds a sacred text, while Mary leans against the wall. As I approach, her eyes open and her pale undernourished face attempts to counterfeit a smile. "How was dad?"

I needn't lie. "I am more concerned with how you are, Mary."

"I'm all right. I'm fine," she says, failing to conceal her evasiveness.

I raise my case against my chest so that neither she nor the guard can see what I am carrying, and reach in. "Will you wear this to please me?" I say, and hand Mary the twin of the cross which I never remove.

She hesitates, and I feel as if the Adversary has seized me by the throat. If she is unable to take hold of the cross I shall know she is already a victim of the Undead. Then she holds out a hand palm upwards and suffers me to lay the cross on it. "It's a bit heavy," she complains.

The childishness of her protest convinces me that she is still fundamentally innocent, and I offer up a silent prayer of thanks. "Wear it always," I exhort her. "If anyone tries to dissuade you, do not hesitate to contact me."

"I like wearing pretty things."

I am taken unawares by a wave of grief for her. "I'll buy you a pretty cross if you promise to wear this one at night until I do, and say your prayers."

"Do I really have to, Unc—"

I interrupt her, though the guard appears to be trying not to overhear, by taking the cross from her hand and touching it to her lips before lifting the cord over her head. "Wear it until you get home at least, for His sake."

She looks rebellious, as children can be. I walk quickly to the lifts and step into the nearest before she has time to argue. Perhaps if my brother or his wife attempts to influence her not to wear the cross she will turn her rebelliousness against them. I say another prayer for her as I pass through the lobby and out of that place.

As I entered it had seemed an anteroom to Hell, but now I find it little different from its surroundings. In less time than it takes me to repeat the psalm I am in the shadow of chemical factories discharging their poisons into a sky the colour of sin. Behind them, on the bank of a filthy river, chimneys spout flames that dance and struggle, and I think of machines that begin to consume souls at the hour of death. Opposite the tract of factories gaunt terraces like cell blocks extending as far as the eye can see face one another across pinched streets with narrow pavements unrelieved except by tainted plots of grass. Broken glass surrounds every streetlamp, and I see that the denizens of these streets abhor the light. How many of them may be Undead, freed by the shrouding of the sun to walk by day?

It takes me half an hour's unbroken march to come in sight of the hotel near the factories. I comfort myself by repeating the psalm aloud, and whenever anyone approaches within earshot they pass by on the other side. I raise my voice to let them know they have betrayed themselves. Their dull self-absorbed faces are pale as tissue paper—a tissue of lies.

A few cheap shops huddle opposite the hotel, and I buy vegetables from a greengrocer whose hands are calloused with toil and who wears a small cross at her throat. As I enter the hotel's dim and dismal hall, where the walls are a mass of advertisements for gluttony and other forms of self-indulgence, the landlady accosts me. "I'm afraid cooking isn't allowed in the rooms, Mr Saint," she says, slowly wringing her colourless hands in a pretence of regret.

"Nor do I propose it, Mrs Trollope."

"And I still have to charge for meals even if you don't take them."

"We must all be guided by our consciences, Mrs *Trollope."* Since she has no answer to this I say "If I may have my key I need trouble you no further."

She thrusts at me the cudgel to which the key is attached, and I climb the shabby stairs to my cheerless room, which smells of must and stale smoke and nights of solitary lechery. I hang my overcoat in the nondescript wardrobe and fall to my knees between the sink and the bed. When I feel I have prayed out the evils of the day I eat half a cabbage and two raw potatoes, savouring the taste of God's earth and the gritting of it between my teeth. The vegetables are as wholesome as can be expected in this place, and at least they were sold to me by a believer. Anything that is served in the hotel will have been touched by blood.

Night has fallen. The factories howl and glare with evil light. Hordes who have squandered their day in the factories shuffle into the narrow streets as if their shadows are dragging them home, while their neighbours swarm to take their places in the workshops of pollution. Then the land is quiet until the young begin to prowl, quaffing wine and smashing bottles in the roadways, if indeed the wine has not undergone some sacrilegious transubstantiation. After a time the corpse-lights of the factories show only lost souls fleeing after their shadows through a lurid icy rain, and I have prayed enough that I crave sleep.

I use the communal bathroom, which is full of warm fog and a suggestive smell of perfumed soap, and then I set about defending my room. I rub garlic around the inside of the door and windows, and employ the cloves to plug the taps and the sink. I hang a cross above the bed and another at its foot, and lay a cross on the frayed carpet at each side. Though thus protected, I am reluctant to switch off the lamp while I sense the land is

teeming with corruption. Even the miserly light of the room seems preferable to the unholy glow outside the faded curtains. I kneel to recite Psalm 130, pummelling my breasts and temples as I raise my voice, and when I feel Him answer me in my depths I lay me down to sleep.

But the Adversary has sent his minions to beset me. As I cried out my left-hand neighbour buffeted the wall in a vain attempt to interrupt my supplication, and now I hear Mrs Trollope's voice, first beneath my window and then much closer. I think that she has scaled the outer wall, as the Undead are known to do, until I realise that she is at my door. "I hope you won't be keeping that light on much longer, Mr Saint," she says.

I hold my peace, hoping that she will conclude I am not to be awakened by trifles. Then she begins to smite the door with a clumsiness which suggests to me that she is the worse, if such is possible, for drink. "I know you're in there, Mr Saint," she bawls. "Put that light out or I'll put you out."

When I tire of her blustering I grasp the cord above the bed. As I pull it, darkness descends like the outpouring of a cloaca. A muffled discussion ensues in the corridor outside my room; no doubt the Adversary's minions are plotting further ways to disturb me. Let them seek to enter—they will find me armed. But nothing transpires except the closing of several doors, and so I lie on my back and take a cross in each hand.

In the fullness of time I slumber, as best I can while maintaining a vigil over my hands for fear that the Adversary may endeavour to loosen their grasp and trick them into repudiating the cross. When the sky begins to pale with the dawn I rise and pray that the sun may sear away the pall which darkens the land. Hours later only an enfeebled glow has seeped through the shroud, which I see is the colour of the corpse-lights, as though some poisonous exhalation has grown solid overnight to snuff out the day.

I venture to the bathroom in order to do the penance of voiding myself, then I scour my body at the sink in my room. I plan to spend the greater portion of the day in prayer. The Adversary will have none of this, however. I have scarcely fallen to my knees when he sends his trollop to besiege me. "I want a word with you, Mr Saint," she shouts.

"Have it, then."

"I can't hear you. I won't talk through a door."

"I thought that was a favourite pastime of yours," I say, and fling the door open. "Now you see me, madam."

I have revealed only my right-hand side when she falls back and shields her eyes like Eve after eating the apple. "For God's sake, Mr Saint, cover yourself up."

"We are all naked before Him." Smirking at her hypocrisy, I hold a cross in front of myself. "Now I am as clothed as any man need be."

She stays out of sight and raises her voice. "I'm afraid I must ask you to leave at once."

"May I ask who requires it of you?"

She stamps her foot, shaking the floor. "Let me remind you this is my house."

"It's worthy of your name."

"I don't know what this room smells of, but I want it out, and you. I've had complaints about the row you made all night, snoring and carrying on like I don't know what."

"Why, madam, I took you as my model."

She stamps so hard that the crosses on the floor spring up. "I'm giving you ten minutes to pay up and get out and then I'm calling the police."

So the scheme is to have me cast out before I can fulfil my mission. It would be the work of moments to pursue her and cut her down, but how many of her creatures might I have to put an end to, thereby perhaps drawing unwelcome attention to myself? Shall I abase myself and plead to be allowed to stay two further nights? The notion sticks in my gullet, and then I know that He has not forsaken me, for all at once I see where I may take refuge.

My cases are packed in five minutes, and in less than ten I am downstairs, jangling the bell of ill repute which stands on the counter. When Mrs Trollope pokes her face through the hole in the wall above it I cast my coins before her. "I think you will find that fits the bill."

"Haven't you any notes?"

"I thought silver more appropriate. Please count it."

She glowers and with a Jew's gesture scoops the coins together so as to pick them up with both thumbs and forefingers and drop them onto two piles. "That seems to be right," she grudgingly admits.

Can she really not have noticed there are thirty coins? "Wholly," I assure her, and depart out of that house, shaking off the dust of my feet.

The railway station where I arrived is five minutes' forced march distant, up a steep hill between extravagant windows choked with finery. The flesh of the crowds around me seems no less discoloured and artificial than that of the cheap sculptures modelling luxury in the stores which steep the pavements in alluring light. In the station the voice of a false oracle echoes through the vault, sending the lost fleeing hither and thither. As I slide my suitcase into a locker I am reminded of the ungodly practice of cremation. The thought fuels my anger as I set out on the first stage of my task.

The churchyard crowns a hill ribbed with mean streets. While the spire still points to Heaven, many of the gravestones have been overturned, perhaps by the revels of the Undead. Stone angels display mutilated wrists, as thieves in heathen countries do, so that I wonder if this may be yet another symptom of the undermining of our Christian ways by the influx of the heathen. Let it never be forgotten that the Undead originated in lands less Christian than ours.

A few mourners, if that is what they are, loiter morosely near wreaths, and a pair of silent workmen are spading out a grave. Rather than draw attention to myself by enquiring of the labourers where I should go I play the aimless visitor, wandering the stone rows, at whose junctions wire baskets are piled with empty bottles and withered flowers. I am halfway across the churchyard when a funeral arrives at the new grave, and I watch the mourners weep more copiously than is Christian. By the time I reach my goal, a family grave near the top of the churchyard, a vicious wind has cleared the place except for myself.

The Beynon plot is marked by a granite obelisk. Gilded names and dates are etched on the shaft, and the lowest name is Bernadette. As I would expect of a family which allowed her helpless body to be violated, no prayer has been inscribed on her behalf. Her yearning to be hallowed is as clear to me as though she is murmuring a plea in my ear. I kick the pharisaical wreath away from the obelisk and grind the flowers underfoot before falling to my knees on her mound. "The Day of Judgement shall find

thee whole," I vow, and immediately I sense her gratitude. I grub her mound open with my hands and bury a cross as deep as I can to keep her safe.

I stay at prayer until the hellish lights of the town begin to waken; then I make for the church. I know that tonight the Undead must exert all their powers against me. I pass through the porch and open my flask to collect holy water from the font, and my heart quails within me. The church is starkly furnished with thin pews and an altar. How shall I go unnoticed when the priest locks the church for the night?

As I stopper the flask I hear footsteps on the gravel path outside the porch. I run to the sole refuge the place affords and crouch behind the altar. The inner door opens, and footsteps approach. Should I not declare myself and my mission, and crave sanctuary against the Undead? If the priest doubts my mission he is no priest, and I must strike him down before the altar he has desecrated. Yet I have little stomach for such an act in God's house, and breathe a prayer as the footsteps halt at the altar.

In a very few minutes the priest, having presumably breathed a perfunctory prayer, retreats along the aisle; then I hear him stop at the font and mutter what sounds all too like profanity. How can a man of the cloth let slip such a word, above all in church? I prepare to follow him and cut him down like the fig tree that beareth no fruit but cumbereth the ground. But darkness falls inside the church, the inner door closes, and I hear the false priest lock the outer door.

At once the church is no longer dark. A faint evil glow rises from the town, transforming the saints in the window above me into swarthy heathens and encrusting the pews with a dimness that appears to crawl. I should be safest where I am, guarded by the altar. I grasp two crosses and lie down on stone with my case for a pillow, and try to pray myself to sleep in order to be ready for the morrow's task. Out of the depths have I cr—

A crash of glass! I leap up, brandishing the crosses, and stumble against the altar. The sainted window is intact. I have slumbered; was the sound only in my dream? No, for there comes an outburst of bestial yelling beyond the window, and the thump of gravestones on the earth. The Undead are abroad to trouble my sleep.

When I begin to pronounce an exorcism with all my voice the clamour falters momentarily, then redoubles. The Undead dance and jeer while their hands, if hands they are, belabour the wall of the church. More glass

shatters, and I replace the cross in my right hand with my blade. If anything enters the building I shall shed its foul gore.

Perhaps the church is secure against evil, however, because the Undead content themselves with lupine baying in a vain bid to blot out my exorcism. When I grow so hoarse that I can barely whisper, their uproar subsides. I hear them shambling away, toppling gravestones as perhaps they seep back into their graves. I am seized by a fit of coughing, and when at last I am able to contain myself I strain my ears, distrusting the silence. Much later I sink to the floor behind the altar.

"Who's there? Is someone there?"

The voice is in the church. The door has been unlocked. I have slept longer than I meant to, until a snore wakened me. Too late I understand that the Undead have achieved their purpose after all. I try to remain absolutely still, praying silently that I need not use my blade, as the priest comes up the aisle. He is almost at the altar—he has only to lean over it to see me. Then he turns on his heel and trots away, and I hear him on the gravel that surrounds the church.

I drop the blade into my case as I run on tiptoe to the porch. The priest has yet to reappear around the building; he must be searching among the graves beyond the far end of the church for the sleeper he overheard. I dart over the grass and crouch behind an angel, only to be overwhelmed by the sense that I am in a position for my bowels to betray me. I hear the priest marching over the gravel, muttering and rubbing his hands together, having presumably righted the gravestones. As he arrives at the porch, a loud and lengthy noisome wind escapes me. The pollution of the land must have inured him, for without hesitation he reenters the church.

I compose myself and follow him. I mean to spend my time in prayer and fasting until I must be about my mission. The priest is replenishing the font, and gives me a sharp glance. "God be with you," I bid him as I cross myself.

Perhaps he recognises that I feel it to be more appropriate that I should wish him this than the reverse; he can hardly bring himself to respond "And with you." I make my way to the foremost pew and kneel, scorning the luxury of the kneeler. I shall pray silently until the priest says Mass, and th

—

Something is thrust between my ribs. The Undead have invaded the church and turned my weapons against me. "Retro me, Satanas!" I scream, and find myself surrounded by churchgoers, one of whom has elbowed me. All of them, and the priest in the pulpit, are staring at me. If his sermon and his celebration of the Mass had been sincere I would not have slumbered. "Pray continue," I say with a wave of my hand.

When he tires of striving to force me to avert my gaze he recommences prating to the congregation on the subjects of forgiveness and tolerance. In this land there is far too much of both, and almost all of it misdirected. I keep myself awake by gripping crosses so that their corners dig into my palms, though the false priest appears to frown on crosses. The Mass ends and the congregation straggles out while I remain on my knees. I have by no means done praying when the priest sidles up to me. "Are you in need of help, my son?"

"Psalm Twenty-eight, verse seven."

"I'm sorry, I'm not too familiar—"

"The Lord is my strength and my shield. My heart trusted in him, and I am helped."

He scowls at the rebuff or at having revealed his ignorance, and stalks off to gather prayer-books; then he loiters about the church until I finish praying, although I continue until it is almost dark. It seems that, like the landlady, he is being used to drive me out and rob me of a day's grace, and there are moments when I have to struggle to contain my wrath. When at last I succeed in relaxing my grip on the crosses and return them to my case I perform a solemn obeisance before the altar; then I glare so fiercely at the priest that he feigns a sudden interest in the contents of a hymnal as I stride out of the church.

The grubby light is draining into the vile landscape. As I make my way downhill through the blackened furtive terraces the tethered flames jerk above the soiled roofs, and I see I am descending into Hell. The sight of a telephone box diverts me along a terrace whose windows are shrouded with net curtains like the dusty webs of a dozen or more enormous spiders. The box is derelict; holes gape where its instrument and light should be. No doubt the denizens of the land are anxious to prevent anyone less irredeemable than themselves from communicating with the outside world, though surely I saw telephones in use when I arrived at the railway station.

As I enter its vault the voice of the oracle proclaims the name of the town where I live. This is so transparently intended as a temptation that I scoff aloud. Few are there to hear me, and most of them are supine on benches after some debauch. I walk to the nearest telephone and dial the number of my brother's house before turning my back to the wall.

The bell ceases its measured tolling. "Vincent," says Paul's wife.

"It is I."

"Oh, yes," she says discouragingly. "Calling to say goodbye?"

"That is what I understand you wanted me to do."

"Did I? Paul's home, but he's in bed resting. I'll tell him you rang."

"Perhaps," I suggest after mouthing a prayer, "I could say goodbye to Mary."

"She isn't here. She's at a friend's, watching videos."

My prayer is answered. I need not wait until tomorrow, when Mary will be at college. Nevertheless Penelope's tone is too defiant for me to allow it to pass unreproved. "On a Sunday?" I rebuke her.

"She's been working hard all day helping me to get the house ready for her father."

"Working on the Sabbath is a poor excuse for self-indulgence," I declare, and am abruptly overwhelmed by the panic I experienced on Mary's behalf at the hospital. "Besides, when I last saw her she hardly looked fit for work."

"I suppose you think that's funny."

"I assure you I am not smiling."

"Do you ever?" Penelope says, and with a sudden weariness which I suspect is counterfeit: "This sort of conversation's why I'm glad Paul's in bed. I don't want you upsetting him, or Mary either."

"I fail to see how one can upset somebody by enquiring after their health."

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Or if you don't I'll tell you, because I'm proud of her. She's become a lot more responsible since she nearly lost her father. When you saw her she'd just given a pint of blood."

I shudder so violently that I almost kick my case away, and my knees scrape together. Even worse than the revelation is my sense that I ought to

have known—that only my fears on Mary's behalf had prevented me from realising the Undead were already battening on her. I sway against the wall, and the oracle names my home again. "It sounds as if it's time to go," Penelope says in my ear.

If there is one thing the Father of Lies can be trusted sooner or later to do, it is to contradict himself. The attempt to lure me home has rebounded on my enemies. I hang up the receiver as a response to her and snatching my case, leave the station at a run.

My brother's house is hidden among the terraces opposite the factories. As I stride up the street which leads to it, my shadow lengthens ahead of me. I will not allow myself to feel that it is leading me into darkness; rather am I forcing it onwards between windows black as the pit or flickering with light from screens around which pallid faces cluster. Some of the faces rise as though from feeding and gaze dead-eyed at me. Each step I take brings me closer to a black panic which, it appears, I can fend off only by outrunning it. I force myself to slow down and intone the psalms until their rhythm imparts discipline to my walk.

My brother lives in our parents' old house. It, and the square of which it is a part, seemed like a haven to me until I began to perceive the errors of my life. Now I see it is an unhallowed sepulchre concealed deep in a monstrous graveyard. I unlatch the gate and venture past the willow into the garden, where the cloying scent of flowers cannot disguise the tell-tale smell of turned earth. I have taken out my largest cross, and I hammer with it on the front door.

In a moment my brother's voice, feeble when it should be mute, calls out "Who's that, love?"

"I'll see. You rest," Penelope says beyond the door. At once it is flung open, and her frown multiplies at the sight of me. "I thought you—"

"Is Mary home yet?"

"No, I told you—"

I need hear no more. I raise the cross above my head. If I had any doubts, the fear which immediately fills her eyes would show me what she is. I bring the cross down with all my force, and one arm of it strikes her left temple, which splinters and begins to leak. A second blow shatters her throat as she attempts to cry out. She is already falling to her knees like a

slaughtered beast, making obeisance too late, and I slam the door as I step into the hall. I am raising the cross to deliver a final blow when her eyes go out, and she topples over backwards, still kneeling, so that I hear her knees creak and then snap like pistol shots. If she were alive I am sure she would scream.

I stoop to wipe the bloodied cross on her breast, and then I hear the voice of my dead brother. "Penelope? Penelope?"

The sound infects me with terror, but also rekindles my wrath. As I straighten my back I repeat the Twenty-third Psalm aloud. I have just reached the foot of the stairs when my brother's walking corpse gropes out of his room and advances to the banister on legs that should no longer move. Grotesquely, it is wearing pyjamas instead of a shroud. "Thomas, what are you—" it says in a voice like a wind in a churchyard, and its eyes focus, though they must be rotting from within, on what is left of Paul's wife. "My God, what's happened to—Thomas, what have you—"

I am not interrupting. Its brain must be rotting too, and able to recall only fragments of living speech. The thing is no longer my brother, although may I be right to have heard a plea when it took His name in vain? "God help you, Paul, if you can understand me. I'll save you," I cry, and spring up the stairs.

The suffused remains of its eyes turn to me as if they can hardly focus. I hope it will welcome the end, or else I expect it to recoil before the advance of the cross in my hand. The Adversary has clouded my thoughts, so that I am unprepared when the face of the thing that was once my brother darkens as though all the blood it has consumed is rushing to its brain, and it flies at me, snarling like a wild beast, seeking whom it may devour.

My case is open. I drop it beside me on the stair and snatch out the flask of holy water. I barely have time to unscrew the cap when the Undead thing is upon me. I retreat a step and dash holy water into its eyes. It staggers, moaning, and falls on its back on the stairs. Before it can recover I seize my blade from the case and plunge the point deep between the thing's ribs.

The stolen blood gushes high as though grateful for release. I lean all my weight on the blade, and feel it penetrate the stair beneath as the Undead corpse writhes like an impaled insect, fluttering its hands. When at last it ceases moving I withdraw the blade and hammer the stake in its place, hearing ribs splinter.

The foul but necessary work is not yet done. I unbutton the thing's jacket and cutting open the flesh beneath the lower ribs, widen the incision with my hands. By digging with the blade I am able to lay bare the kidneys. One is slightly smaller, and my instincts tell me this belongs to the victim of the Undead. I hack it free and prise it out of its raw nest, and pray over it before wrapping it in the bag which contained the potatoes. I place the bag in my case and trudge downstairs, bearing the cross before me.

I am almost at the front door when I catch sight of the directory beside the telephone. I leave my gory fingerprints on the page that lists Blood. Long before the prints can be identified my task will be done. The key to a mortice lock protrudes from a keyhole inside the front door, and I lock the door behind me as I leave, then I break off the shaft of the key in the lock. Now Mary must seek help with entering the house, and I pray she will not be the first to see how my brother and his wife have been redeemed. I should like to be with her when she sees them, but there is still much to do. In the morning I shall ask the greengrocer where I can buy a pretty cross to have sent to my niece.

My shadow follows me out of the dead terraces and turns ahead of me. It leads me past the station and uphill to the church. It seems to me that the shadow is my own black soul, urging me to redeem it with further good works. For the moment the churchyard is silent; the Undead must be elsewhere. I make my way swiftly to the Beynon grave and withdrawing the cross from the mound, place the stolen organ in the hole before covering it with the cross and with earth.

Now I shall keep watch here until the morning. I could go now and destroy the house of vampirism, but I mean to strike down those who administer this iniquity. Whatsoever soul it shall be that eateth any manner of blood, even that soul shall be cut off. The victims such as Mary I shall spare, and the town of the Undead shall rise up against me, nor shall I escape. Let my exploit and my martyrdom act as a sign to the righteous, that they may destroy the false healers, the vampires whose uniforms mock sanctity, the halls of intensive care which are factories of mutilation. I am not alone. Our time has come.

End Of The Line

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"Pook."

"Is this Mrs Pook?"

"Who wants to know?"

"My name? My name is Roger and I think you may be interested in what I have to offer you."

"That's what you say. You don't know a thing about me."

"Don't you wish you could see what I look like?"

"Why, what have you got on?"

"I mean, don't you wish you could see my face?"

"Not if it looks like you sound. Mum, there's some weird character on the phone."

"Hang on, I thought you said you were Mrs—"

"He's saying would I like to watch him."

"Who's speaking, please? What have you been suggesting to my daughter?"

"My name is Rum, that is, my name's Ralph, and I think you may be interested in what I'm offering."

"I doubt it. Don't I know you?"

"My name's Ralph."

"I don't know anyone called Ralph, but I'm sure I know your voice. What's your game?"

"He said his name was Roger, Mum, not Ralph."

"Did he now. Charlie? Charlie, pick up the extension and listen to this."

"Mrs Pook, if I can just explain—"

"Charlie, will you pick up the extension. There's one of those perverts who like to hide behind a phone. He can't even remember his own name."

"Who the fuck is this? What do you want with my wife?"

"My name's Ralph, Mr Pook, and perhaps I can speak to you. I'm calling on behalf of—"

"Whoever he is, Charlie, his name isn't Ralph."

"My name isn't important, Mr Pook. I should like to off—"

"Don't you tell me what's important, pal, specially not on my fucking phone. What do you want? How did you get this number?"

"Out of the directory. Can I take just a few minutes of your time? We'd like to offer you a way of avoiding misunderstandings like this one."

"It's we now, is it? You and who else?"

"I'm calling on be—"

"Charlie, I think I know who—"

"Tell you what, pal, I don't care how many of you there are. Just you say where I can find you and we'll settle it like men."

"Just put it down. Just put it down."

"What are you mumbling about, pal? Lost your voice?"

"Mrs Pook, are you still there?"

"Never mind talking to my fucking wife. This is between you and me, pal. If you say another word to her—"

"That's enough, Charlie. Yes, I'm here."

"Mrs Pook, would your first name be Lesley?"

"That's it, pal! I'm warning you! If any fucker says another fucking word —"

"Just put it down," Speke told himself again, and this time he succeeded. The long room was full of echoes of his voice in voices other than his own: "I'm speaking on behalf...", "Don't you wish..." During the conversation his surroundings—the white desks staffed by fellow workers whom he scarcely knew, the walls to which the indirect lighting lent the appearance of luminous chalk, the stark black columns of names and addresses and numbers on the page in front of him—had grown so enigmatic they seemed

meaningless, and the only way he could think of to escape this meaninglessness was by speaking. He crossed out Pook and keyed the next number. "Mrs Pool?"

"This is she."

"I wonder if I could take just a few minutes of your time."

"Take as much as you like if it's any use to you."

"My name is Roger and I'm calling on behalf of Face to Face Communications. I should have said that to begin with."

"No need to be nervous of me, especially not on the phone."

"I'm um, I'm not. I was going to ask don't you wish you could see what I look like."

"Not much chance of that, I'm afraid."

"On the phone, you mean. Well, I'm calling to offer—"

"Or anywhere else."

"I don't rum real um realura really under—"

"I could have seen you up to a few years ago. Do you look as you sound?"

"I suppum."

"I'm sorry that I'm blind, then."

"No, it's my fault. I mean, that's not my fault, I mean I'm the one who should be sorry, apologising, that's to sum—" He managed to drag the receiver away from his mouth, which was still gabbling, and plant the handset in its cradle. He crossed out her name almost blindly and closed his eyes tight, but had to open them as soon as he heard voices reiterating portions of the formula around him. He focused on the next clear line in the column and, grabbing the receiver, called the number. "Mr Poole?"

"Yes."

"This is Mr Poole?"

"Who, you are?"

"No, I'm saying you are, are you?"

"Why, do you know different?"

"Yum, you don't sound—" To Speke it sounded like a woman trying to be gruff—like Lesley, he thought, or even his daughter, if hers had been the

voice which had answered the Pooks' phone. "My name is Roger," he said hastily, "and I'm calling on behalf of Face to Face Communications. I wonder if you can spare me a few minutes of your time."

"It'd be hard for me to spare anyone else's."

"Well, qum. Dum. Um, don't you wish you could see my face?"

"What's so special about it?"

"Not just my face, anyone's on the phone. I'd like to offer you a month's free trial of the latest breakthrough in communication, the videphone."

"So that you can see if I'm who I say I am? Who did you think I was?"

"Was when?"

"Before I was who I said I was."

"Forgum. Forgive me, but you sound exactly like—"

"Sounds like you've got a wrong number," the voice said, and cut itself off.

It seemed to have lodged in his head, blotting out the overlapping voices around him. He returned the handset to its housing and made his way up the aisle to the supervisor's desk, feeling as if his feet were trying to outrun each other. The supervisor was comparing entries on forms with names and addresses in her directory. "How's it coming, Roger?" she said, though he hadn't seen her glance at him.

"A bit hit-and-miss this evening, Mrs Shillingsworth," he managed to say without stumbling. "I wonder if I should vary my approach."

"It seems to be working for everyone else," she said, indicating the forms with an expansive gesture. "Have you any customers for me?"

"Not yet tonight. That's what I was saying."

She ticked a box on the form she was examining and raised her wide-eyed placid flawless face to give him a single blink. "So what did you want to suggest?"

"Maybum, jum, just that maybe we could use our own voices a bit more, I mean our own words."

"I'll mention it next time the boss comes on-screen. Have they installed yours yet, by the way?"

"They were supposed to have by now, but we're still waiting."

"It's important to you, isn't it?"

"I didn't think seeing people's faces while I'm talking to them was, but now I know I can..."

"Customers have priority. I'll speak to the engineers anyway. As for your calls, you can play them by ear to a certain extent. Just don't go mad." She looked down quickly, clearing her throat, and pulled the next form towards herself. "Give them another half an hour, and if you haven't had any joy by then I'll let you go."

The conversation had left Speke feeling locked into the formula, which sounded more enigmatic every time he placed a call. "My name is Roger and I'm speaking on behalf of—"

Only half an hour to go?

"My name is Roger and I'm speaking—"

Only twenty-eight minutes?

"My name is Roger and I—"

Only twenty-six?

"My name is Roger—"

Twenty-four minutes, twenty-two, twenty, one thousand and eighty seconds, nine hundred and fifty-seven, eight hundred and forty-one, seven hundred and?

"My name is Roger and I'm speaking on behalf of Face to Face Communications."

"Really."

"Yes, I wonder if I can borrow a few minutes of your time. I expect that at this very moment you're wishing you could see my face."

"Really."

"Yes, I know I am. I'd like to offer you a month's free trial of the latest breakthrough in communication, the videphone."

"Really."

"Yes, you must know people who already have one, but perhaps you think it's a luxury you can't afford. I'm here to tell you, Mr Pore, that our technicians have brought the cost down to the level of your pocket, even my

pockum. If you'll allow us to install our latest model in your home for a month at no obligation to you, you can see for yourself."

"Really."

"That's what I said."

"Well, go ahead."

"Sorry, you wum—You're asking me to arrange a trial?"

"I thought that was why you were calling, Roger."

"Yes, of course. Just a mum, I'll just gum—" Speke had been growing more and more convinced that Pore was making fun of him. He snatched a form from the pile beside the six-inch screen, on which electrical disturbances continued to flicker as though they were about to take shape. "Let me just take a few details," he said.

Pore responded to his name and address with no more than a grunt at each, and emitted so vague a sound when he was asked what times would be best for him that Speke suggested times which would be convenient for himself, not that it had anything to do with him, When he returned the handset to its nest his half an hour had almost elapsed, but he couldn't call it a day now that he might have made a sale. He pushed the form to the edge of his desk to be collected by the supervisor and found his gaze straying up the column in the directory to Pook, Charles. He crossed out the listing until it resembled a black slit in the page, and then he wished he'd memorised the number.

"My name is Roger and I'm speaking," he repeated as he drove home. Figures were silhouetted against the illuminated windows of shops, or rendered monochrome by streetlights, or spotlighted by headlamps. On the two miles of dual carriageway between the office block and the tower block where he lived he couldn't distinguish a single face, even when he peered in the rearview mirror. Large fierce bare bulbs guarded the car park around the tower block, and the glare of them pulled a bunch of shadows out of him as he left the Mini and walked to the entrance. For a moment numbers other than the combination for the doors suggested themselves to him. He keyed the correct sequence and shouldered his way in.

Although the tower blocks had been gentrified it seemed that a child had been playing in the lift, which stopped at every floor. Someone with long hair was waiting on the seventh, but turned towards the other lift as the door

of Speke's opened, so that Speke didn't see his or her face. Until the person moved Speke had the impression that it was a dummy which had been placed near the lifts to lend some contrast to the parade of otherwise identical floors, fifteen of them before he was able to step out of the shaky box and hurry to his door.

Stef was home. The kitchen and the bedroom lights were on, and the narrow hall, which was papered with posters for English-language films which had been dubbed into other languages, smelled of imminent dinner. Speke eased the door shut and tiptoed past the bedroom and the bathroom to the main room, but he had only just switched on the light above the bar when Stef emerged from the bedroom. "Shall I make us drinks, Roger?"

"Rum," Speke said before he managed to say "Right."

"We haven't any rum unless you've bought some. It looks as if we've just about everything else."

"Whatever's quickest," Speke said, sitting down so as not to seem too eager; then he jumped up and kissed her forehead, giving her bare waist a brief squeeze. "Tell you what, I'll make them if you want to see to dinner."

"I'll get dressed first, shall I?"

"I should."

He had a last sight of her glossy black underwear half-concealed by her long blonde hair as she stepped into the hall while he uncorked the vodka. One swig felt sufficient to take the edge off his thoughts. He made two Bloody Marys, with rather more vodka in his, and carried them into the kitchen, where Stef in a kimono was arranging plates on the trolley. "Busy day?" he said.

"We've a class of students all week at the studio. I've been showing them what you can do with sound and vision."

"What can I?"

"Don't start that. What they can. Tomorrow I'll be on the sidelines while they improvise."

"I know how you feel."

Before she responded she ladled coq au vin onto the plates, wheeled the trolley into the main room, switched on the light over the dining-table and set out the plates, and then she said "What's wrong?"

"I'm..."

"Go on, Roger. Whatever it is, it's better out than in."

"I'm sure I spoke to Lesley and Vanessa."

"What makes you say that?"

"You just did."

"Don't tell me if you don't want me to know."

"I dum," Speke said, draining the cocktail and wrenching the cork out of a litre of Argentinian red. "Someone answered the phone and I thought it was Lesley, but it turned out to be the daughter."

"Why are they on your mind again after all this time?"

Speke topped up her wineglass and refilled his own. "Because I spoke to the husband as well. I can't believe Lesley could have got involved with someone like that, let alone married him."

"Well, all of us—" Stef silenced herself with a mouthful of dinner. After more chewing than Speke thought necessary she said "Someone like what?"

"By the sound of him, an ego with a mouth."

"Some partners cope with worse."

"But if she can handle him, why couldn't shum—Besides, what about Vanessa? She must still be at school, she shouldn't be expected tum—"

"Roger, we agreed you'd try and put them out of your head."

"Wum," Speke said, not so much a stutter as a deliberate attempt to shut himself up, and drained his wine in order to refill the glass.

Once he'd opened a bottle of dessert wine to accompany the ice cream it seemed a pity to cork it after only one glass. Stef allowed him to replenish hers when it was half-empty, but placed her hand over it when he tried again. "I have to get up early," she said.

He was washing up the dinner things when it occurred to him that he'd heard a plea in her voice because she wanted them to make love. When he found his way into the bedroom, however, she was asleep. He switched off all the lights and considered watching television, but the prospect of consuming images on a screen—images which were lifelike and yet no longer alive—had lost its appeal. He sat at the dining-table and finished the bottle while gazing out of the window at the neighbouring tower blocks.

The window resembled a screen too—perhaps a computer display on which enigmatic patterns of luminous rectangles occasionally shifted at random—but at least he could see no faces on it, not even his own. When he'd emptied the bottle he sat for a time and then took himself to bed.

He awoke with a sense that someone had just spoken to him. If Stef had, it must have been more than an hour ago, when she would have left for work. Sunlight streamed into the room, catching dust in the air. Speke sat up and waited for his equilibrium to align itself with him; then he performed several tasks gingerly—showered, shaved, drank a large glass of orange juice, ate cereal heaped with sugar and swimming in milk, downed several mugfuls of black coffee that shrank the image of his face—before he set about tidying up. He dusted everything except the bottles behind the bar, since they hardly called for dusting. He went once through the rooms with the large vacuum cleaner and then again with its baby. He loaded the washing machine and, when it had finished, the dryer. He rearranged the plates in the kitchen cupboard and the cutlery in the drawers, and lined up tins of food and packets of ingredients in alphabetical order. He found himself hoping that all this activity would keep him there until Stef came home, but the only company he had was the persistent sense of having just heard a voice. Before Stef returned it was time for him to leave for work.

The late afternoon sky, and presumably the sun, was the same colour as the extinguished bulbs above the car park. All the colours around him, such as they were—of cars, of leafless saplings, of curtains in the windows of the chalky tower blocks—appeared to be about to fade to monochrome. If he walked fast he would be at work on time, but if he drove he might feel less exposed. Though he drove slowly he was able to glimpse only a handful of faces, all of which seemed unusually remote from him.

Several of his colleagues were already in the long room, draping their jackets over the backs of their chairs or tipping the contents of polystyrene cups into their faces. As Speke aligned the forms and the directory with the lower edge of the screen on his desk the supervisor beckoned to him, hooking a finger before pointing it first at her mouth and then at her ear. "Yes, Mrs Shillingsworth," he said when he felt close enough to speak.

"Pore."

"Pum."

"Mr Pore. Mr Roger Pore. Does the name convey anything to you?"

"Yes, he booked a month's free trial last night."

"You're standing by that, are you?"

"Yes, I should say sum. He was my only catch."

"And you felt you had to give me one."

"Shouldn't I hum?"

"Only if it stands up. His wife says he never spoke to anyone."

"She must have got it wrong, or the engineers did. They're only engineers, num—"

"It was I who had a word with her, Mr Speke, because there were things on your form I didn't understand. Was it a Scotsman you spoke to?"

"A Scum? No, he sounded more like me."

"Mr Pore is a Scotsman."

"How do you know if you spoke to his wife?"

"They both are. I heard them."

"What, his wife sounds like a Scotsmum? I mean, I'm sorry, I must have, maybe I—"

"I should try harder tonight if I were you, but not that hard," Mrs Shillingsworth said, gazing at him over the form which she had lifted from the desk and crumpling it above her wastebasket before letting it drop.

"You aren't me," Speke mumbled as he headed for his desk. He was sitting down when he realised he had walked too far. About to push back the chair, he grabbed the directory instead and turned quickly to the page corresponding to his assignment. Pontin, Ponting, Pool, Poole? He made himself run his gaze down the column more slowly, but there was no entry for Pook.

"Old directory," he told himself, and moved to the desk on his left, where he checked that the directory was up-to-date before heaving it open at the same page. Ponting, Pool. He lowered his face to peer at the names as though the one he was seeking might have fallen through the space between them, then he dodged to the next desk, and the next. Ponting, Pool, Ponting, Pool... He didn't know how long Mrs Shillingsworth had been watching him. "There you are," she said briskly, indicating the blank screen on his desk.

He ran at his chair and flung the directory open. "Mrs Pook," he repeated over and over under his breath until he heard himself saying "Mrs Spook." Between Ponting and Pool was an etched line of black ink wide enough, he was almost sure, to conceal a directory entry. He was holding the page close to his face and tilting the book at various angles in an attempt to glimpse what lay beneath the ink when he realised that the supervisor was still watching him. "Jum, jum—" he explained, and fumbling the handset out of its stand, hastily keyed the first unmarked number.

When the screen flickered he thought he'd called a videphone at last, but the flicker subsided. "Poridge?" a voice said.

"Just cornflakes for me."

"Begp?"

"Um sum, I'm speaking on behalf on behalf of Face to Face Communications and I wonder if, fum. If you can spare me a few minutes."

"Sugar?"

"What?"

"Lots of it for your cereal, sugar."

"How did you know? What are you making out?"

"I think that's enough sweetness," Mr Poridge seemed to respond, and terminated the call.

Speke was grateful to be rid of the voice, whose feminine sound he hadn't cared for. He memorised the next number and turned the directory in an attempt to shed some light on whatever the line of ink concealed as he placed the call. "Pork," a woman told him.

"Ypig."

"What's that? Who's this?"

The screen was flickering so much Speke thought it was about to answer her last question, unless it was his vision that had begun to flicker. When the screen remained blank he said "Miss Pork, my name is Roger and I wonder—"

"Same here."

"You are? You're what?"

"Wondering what I'm being made to listen to."

"I'm not making you. I was jum, just wondering. That is, I'm speaking on behalf of Face to Face Communications."

"That's what you call this, is it?"

"No, that's what I'm saying. I wish we could see each other face to face."

"Do you now?"

Speke's gaze darted from the line of ink to the screen, where the flickering had intensified. "Why?" said the voice.

"Because then I'd see if you lum, if you look, if you don't just sound like —" Speke gabbled before he managed to slam the handset into place.

He kept his head down until he couldn't resist glancing up. Though Mrs Shillingsworth wasn't watching him he was convinced that she had been. He repeated the next number out loud and moved the directory another half an inch, another quarter, another eighth. Something was close to making itself clear: the digits beneath the ink or the restlessness on the screen? He keyed the numbers he was muttering and glanced up, down, up, down... "Porne," a voice said in his ear.

"My name is Roger and I wonder—"

"Porne."

"I wonder what number I've called."

"Ours. Porne."

That was the name in the directory, but Speke suspected that he had inadvertently keyed the numbers which perhaps, for an instant too brief for him to have been conscious of it, had been visible through the line of ink. "Don't I know you?" he said.

"Where from?"

"From in here," Speke said, tapping his forehead and baring his teeth at the screen, where his grin appeared as a whitish line like an exposed bone in the midst of a pale blur. "I expect you wish you could see my face."

"Why, what are you doing with it?"

Speke stuffed the topmost form into the edges of the screen, because each flicker seemed to render his reflection less like his. "Don't you think that your name says a lot?" he said.

"What do you mean by that, young man?"

"You're a woman, aren't you? But not as old as you want me to think."

"How dare you! Let me speak to your supervisor!"

"How did you know I've got one? You gave yourself away there, didn't you? And since when has it been an insult to tell a woman she isn't as old as she seems? Sounds to me as if you've got something to hide, Mrs or Miss."

"Why, you young—"

"Not so young. Not so old either. Same age as you, as a matter of fact, as if you didn't know."

"Who do you imagine you're talking to? Charles, come here and speak to this, this—"

"It's Charles now, is it? Too posh for that ape," Speke said, and fitted the handset into its niche while he read the next number. He fastened his gaze on the digits and touch-typed them on the handset, and lifted the form with which he had covered the screen. His grin was still there amid the restless flickering; the sight made him feel as though a mask had been clipped to his face. He let the page fall, and a voice which felt closer than his ear to him said "Posing."

"Who is?"

"This is Miss Posing speaking."

"Why do you keep answering the phone with just a name? Do you really expect me to believe anyone has names like those?"

"Who is this?"

"You already asked me that two calls ago. Or are you asking if I know who you are? Belum—"

Mrs Shillingsworth was staring at him. He hadn't realised he was speaking loud enough for her to overhear, even if his was the only voice he could hear in the crowded room. The panic which overwhelmed him seemed to flood into his past, so that he was immediately convinced that every voice he'd spoken to on the phone was the same voice, not just tonight but earlier —how much earlier, he would rather not think. "Thanks anyway," he said at the top of his voice, both to assure Mrs Shillingsworth that nothing was wrong and to blot out the chorus around him, which had apparently begun to chant "I'm speaking" in unison. The only voice he wanted to hear, was desperate to hear, was Stef's. He couldn't remember the number. He stared

at the flickering line of black ink while he thumbed through the wad of corners. As soon as he'd glimpsed the number, which now he saw was in the same position as the line of ink, he let the directory fall back to the page from which he was meant to be working. He pulled a form towards him and poised his pen above it as he typed the digits, resisting the urge to grin at Mrs Shillingsworth to persuade her this wasn't a private call. He had barely entered the number when the closest voice so far said "S & V Studios."

"Stef?"

"Hang on." As the voice receded from the earpiece it seemed to retreat into Speke's skull. "Vanessa, is Stefanie still here?"

"Just gone."

"Just gone, apparently. Is there a message?"

"I've already got it," Speke said through his fixed grin.

"I'm sorry?"

"You're forgetting to disguise your voice," Speke said and, dropping the handset into its niche, leaned on it until he felt it was secure. "I'm speaking," said a voice, then another. All the screens around him appeared to be flickering in unison, taking their time from the pulse of the line of black ink on the page in front of him. He shoved himself backwards, his chair colliding with the desk behind him, and was on his feet before Mrs. Shillingsworth looked up. He didn't trust himself to speak; he waggled his fingers at his crotch to indicate that he was heading for the toilet. As soon as the door of the long room closed behind him he dashed out of the building to his car.

He drove home so fast that the figures on the pavements seemed to merge like the frames of a film. He parked as close to the entrance as he could and sprinted the few yards, his shadows sprouting out of him. He wasn't conscious of the number he keyed, but it opened the door. The lift displayed each floor to him, and he wished he'd thought to count them, because when he lurched out of the box it seemed to him that the room numbers in the corridors were too high. He threw himself between the closing doors and jabbed the button for his floor, and the doors shook open; he was on the right level after all. He floundered into the corridor, unlocked his door, and stumbled into the dark which it closed in with him. He was rushing blindly

to the bar when the doorbell rang behind him. He raced back and bumped into the door, yelling "Yes?"

"Me."

Speke shoved his eye against the spyhole. Outside was a doll with Stef's face on its swollen head. "Haven't you got your kum?" he shouted. "Can't you see I've got my hands full? Didn't you see me flashing my lights when you were driving? I've been right behind you for the last I don't know how long."

"I saw some flickering in the mirror," Speke seemed to recall.

"That was me. Well, are you going to open the door or don't you want to see my face?"

"That's a strange way to put it," Speke said and found himself backing away from a fear that he would be letting in the doll with her face on its bulbous outsize head. He wasn't fast enough. His hand reached out and turned the latch, and there was Stef, posing with armfuls of groceries against the blank backdrop of the corridor. He grabbed the bags from her and dumped them in the kitchen, then he fled to the bar. "Drink," he heard his voice say, and fed himself a mouthful from the nearest bottle before switching on the light and calling "Drink?"

She didn't come for it. He traced her to the kitchen by the order in which the lights came on. "Have something to eat if you're going to drink," she said as she accepted the glass. "It's in the microwave."

The sight on the screen of the microwave oven of a plastic container rotating on the turntable like some new kind of record sent him back to the bar. He was still there when Stef switched on the main light in the room and wheeled the trolley in. "Roger, what's—"

He interrupted her so as not to be told that something was wrong. "Who's called Lesley where you work?"

"Leslie's one of the sound men. You've heard me mention him."

"Sound, is he, and that's all?" Speke mused, and raised his voice. "How about Vanessa?"

"Roger..."

"Not Roger, Vanessa."

Stef loaded his plate with vegetarian pasta and gazed at him until he took it. "You told me there was no such name before some writer made it up."

"There is now."

"Not where I work."

Speke's voice appeared to have deserted him. He made appreciative noises through mouthfuls of pasta while he tried to think what to say. By the time Stef brought the ice cream he was well into his second bottle of wine, and it no longer seemed important to recall what he'd been attempting to grasp. Indeed, he couldn't understand why she kept looking concerned for him.

He'd taken his expansive contentment to bed when a thought began to flicker in his skull. "Stef?"

"I'm asleep."

"Of course you aren't," he said, rearing up over her to make sure. "You said we agreed. Who? Who are we?"

Without opening her eyes Stef said "What are you talking about, Roger?"

"About us, aren't I, or am I?" He had to turn away. Perhaps it was an effect of the flickering dimness, but her upturned face seemed almost as flat as the pillow which framed it. He closed his eyes, and presumably the flickering subsided when at last he fell asleep.

Was that the phone? He awoke with a shrill memory filling his skull. He was alone in bed, and the daylight already looked stale. When the bell shrilled again he kicked away the sheets which had been drawn flat over him, and blundered along the hall to the intercom by the front door. "Spum," he declared.

"We've brought your videphone, boss."

The flickering recommenced at once. Speke ran into the main room and, wrestling the window along its track, peered down. Fifteen floors below, two tufts of hair with arms and legs were unloading cartons from a van. They vanished into the entranceway, and a moment later the bell rang again. Speke sprinted to the intercom and shouted "I can't see you now. Go away."

"You asked for us now, it says so here," said the distorted voice. "When do you want us?"

"Never. It could all be fake. You can do anything with sound and vision," Speke protested before he fully realised what he was saying. He rushed

back to the open window and watched until the walking scalps returned to the van, then he grabbed enough clothes to cover himself and heard rather than felt the door slam behind him.

He couldn't drive for the flickering. The floors of the tower block had seemed like frames of a stuck film, and now the figures he passed on the pavements of the carriageway resembled images in a film advancing slowly, frame by frame. The film of cars on the road was faster. The side of the carriageway on which he was walking forked, leading him into a diminishing perspective of warehouses. On one otherwise blank wall he found a metal plaque which, as he approached, filled with whitish daylight out of which the legend *S & V Studios* took form. He leaned all his weight on the colourless door, which seemed insubstantial by comparison with the thick wall, and staggered into a room composed of four monochrome faces as tall as the indirectly lit brick ceiling. A young woman was sitting at a wide low desk with her back to one actor's flat face. "May I help you?" she said.

"Vanessum?" Speke said, distracted by trying to put names to the faces.

"Yes?" she said as though he'd caught her out. "Who are you?"

"Don't tell me you don't know."

"I only started properly this morning," she said, pushing a visitor's book towards him. "If I can just have your—"

Speke was already running down the corridor beyond her desk. On both sides of him glass displayed images of rooms full of tape decks or screens that were flickering almost as much as his eyes, and here was one crowded with students whose faces looked unformed. Even Stef's did. She was lecturing to them, though Speke couldn't hear her voice until he flung open the heavy door; then she said less than a word, which hadn't time to sound like her voice. "You said we agreed I'd try to put them out of my head," Speke shouted. "Who? Who are we?"

"Not here, Roger. Not now."

Speke closed his eyes to shut out the flickering faces. "Who's speaking? Who do you think you sound like?"

"I'm sorry, everyone. Please excuse us. He's..."

He didn't know what sign Stef was making as her voice trailed off, and he didn't want to see. "Don't lie to me," he shouted. "Don't try to put me off. I've seen Vanessa. I won't leave until you show me Lesley."

Without warning he was shoved backwards, and the door thumped shut in front of him. "Roger," Stef's flattened voice said in his ear. "You have to remember. Lesley and Vanessa are—It wasn't your fault, you mustn't keep blaming yourself, but they're dead."

Her voice seemed to be reaching him from a long way off, beyond the flickering. "Who says so?" he heard himself ask in as distant a voice.

"You did. You told me and you told the doctor. It was nothing to do with you, remember. It happened after you split up."

"I split up?" Speke repeated in a voice that felt dead. "No, not me. You did, maybe. They did."

"Roger, don't—"

He didn't know which voice was trying to imitate Stef's, but it couldn't call him back. It shrank behind him like an image on a monitor that had been switched off, as no doubt her face was shrinking. He fled between the warehouses, which at least seemed too solid to transform unexpectedly, though wasn't everything a ghost, an image which he perceived only after it had existed? Mustn't that also be true of himself? He didn't want to be alone with that notion, especially when the echoes of his footsteps sounded close to turning into a voice, and so he fled towards the shops, the crowds.

That was a mistake. At a distance the faces that converged on him seemed capable of taking any form, and when they came closer they were too flat, strips of images of faces that were being moved behind one another or through one another by some complicated trick which he was unable to see through. Their hubbub sounded like a single voice which had been electronically transformed in an attempt to give the impression of many, and as far as he could hear it, it seemed to be chanting in a bewildering variety of unrelated rhythms: "Dum, rum, sum, bum..." The faces were swelling, crowding around him wherever he ran with his hands over his ears. When he saw an alley dividing the blank walls of two dress shops he fought his way to it, his elbows encountering obstructions which felt less substantial than they were trying to appear. The walls took away some of

the pressure of the voices, and when he lowered his hands from his ears he saw that the alley led to a bar.

It was the realest place he could see—so real that he was almost sure he could smell alcohol. He had plenty to drink at home, but the thought of drinking near the open window on the fifteenth storey aggravated his panic. A few drinks ought to help the image stabilise, and then he might go home. He tiptoed to the end of the alley so that his echoes couldn't follow him, and let himself into the bar.

For a moment he was afraid it wasn't open for business. A solitary tube was lit above the counter at the far end of the long room, but nobody was sitting at the small round tables in the dimness. As Speke closed the door behind him, however, a figure came out of a doorway behind the counter. Speke's ears began to throb in time with the flickering as he tried to be prepared to hear what he was afraid to hear. It didn't matter, it mustn't matter, so long as he got his drink. He stepped forward, and the other came to meet him, saying "There's only mum" and then "There's only me." Neither voice was bothering to disguise itself now, even as human. As the face advanced into the light Speke thought that behind every bar was a mirror, and all at once he was afraid to open his mouth.

A Side Of The Sea

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I'm among the first to use the toilet, one of two wheeled sheds parked at the edge of a segment of concrete, but it takes the two coachloads of passengers so long that I need to join the queue again. Beyond the hedge behind the toilets, fields and a few lonely trees turn greener as the sky fills with black clouds. Lorries rush down the slope into the dip in the road and out again with a sound like waves. The plumbing sounds like waves too when at last the queue leads me back into the shed, and I'm just splashing the urinal when I seem to hear the building engulfed by the sea. People scream, but I feel safe until I venture to the exit and see it's a cloudburst so fierce that spikes of rain are leaping off the concrete. Passengers holding coats over their heads dash to the nearest vehicle, the coach I'm supposed to be on, and I can see that long before they all finish clambering up the steps I'll be drenched. I sprint to the further coach and drag myself up the steps beside the driver's seat while trying to wipe my drowned spectacles on my jacket. "Someone took my seat," I say for the benefit of anyone who ought to be informed.

"You weren't on this coach," says a blur.

"That's what I mean. Someone from this one stole my place." The downpour roars on the metal roof, and I'm about to protest "You wouldn't make me go out in that" when the blur retreats along the aisle and knocks on the rear window. Presumably it uses signs to tell someone on my coach that they'll exchange passengers at the next stop, because it calls "Find yourself a seat" to me.

I put on my spectacles, though the lenses are still wet. Beneath the racks laden with swimming costumes wrapped in beach towels, passengers are rubbing their hair dry and turning the windows greyer with every breath. Someone near the back is trying to lead a chorus of "We're going to the sea, sea, sea" without much success. The lenses of my spectacles are blurring,

transforming the passengers into statues sitting underwater, all of them gazing blankly at me. I can't see where I'm to sit until a hand begins to wave extravagantly halfway down the coach. "Here," the owner of the hand shouts. "Here, my dear."

He's wearing a flowery shirt and shorts which are even more florid. His clothes are pasted to him by the rain, so that they resemble wallpaper. He has a large round face which seems to be about to sink into its plumpness, and hands so fat they have dimples for knuckles, and a stomach which rests on the tops of his thighs. As I sit down he squeezes himself against the window to make room. I rub my spectacles to rid them of fog and spots of dried rain, and as I hook them over my ears my seat-mate cranes his head around to me. "What's the game?" he says.

The coach lurches forward, and the person who went to the rear window—a grey-suited woman with severely restrained black hair—nods curtly at me as she returns to her seat by the driver. If she's in charge of the day trip, surely she oughtn't to ignore what I've just been asked. "What do you mean?" I say loudly, hoping that will bring her.

"Name. Name of the game. Both the same. Your name, your game."

It takes me longer to understand than it takes my neighbour to say all this, and longer still to decide if responding is advisable. Maybe an answer is all he requires, and then he won't bother me. "Ah, you want my name. It's Henry."

"Henry." He swings his head back and forth, and I think he's contradicting me until I realise he's looking for something. He focuses on the befogged window across the aisle with an expression of relief. "Can't see the scen'ry," he crows. "Henry who? Henry what else too?"

I don't see why he should demand my surname, and so I tell him the first I can think of which might shut him up. "Hancock."

"Hancock goes to Bangkok," he cries at once.

I find his triumph so annoying that although I was planning to keep quiet in the hope that he would, I say "No, I want to see the sea.

"See the sea," he repeats, giving me a plump nudge as if I meant to imitate his rhyming. "Like me. You'll be like me."

"Hush for a bit now, Algernon," says my neighbour across the aisle, a woman who is knitting into a large open handbag. "We don't want you filling up Henry's head until he's got no room to think."

"Shush and hush. Don't gush. Crush your rush." My seatmate's voice dwindles with each word. "Algernon. Algy. Alg," he murmurs almost inaudibly, then he all but shouts at me "Al's your pal."

"Of course you are," the woman soothes him, her knitting clicking quicker. "Give the glass a wipe now and see what you can see.

She gazes at him until he rubs the window with his hairy forearm, then she turns to me. Her gleaming eyes are very pale. "And what do you think of all this rain?"

My answer seems to be important to her. She raises her eyebrows, crinkling her papery forehead below her hair, which looks like curled shavings of tin. "It's a bit wet," I offer.

"That's how God made it. It wouldn't be rain if it was dry." I smile and shrug in agreement, but apparently that isn't enough for her. "You can see that, can't you?" she says, halting her needles.

"I'm sure you're right."

"It isn't a question of what I am." Her eyebrows are starting to tremble from being held high. "It makes the sea, you might want to remember. Without the rain we'd all be living in the desert. We'd be eating dates for breakfast and wearing dishcloths on our heads and sitting on camels instead of a coach."

"There's that," I say to placate her.

She scrutinises my face before she lets her eyebrows down and recommences knitting. I'm watching the road beyond the wide sweeps of the windscreen wipers, though all I can see are lights like half-eaten strawberry sweets, when she says "Do you think it'll still be raining when we get to the beach?"

"I don't know."

"But is that what you *think,* what you're *thinking*?*"*

"I suppose I am."

"I know you are," she says in the soothing tone she used on Algernon. "Shall we see what we can do about it?"

"About my thinking?"

She drops the shapeless knitting into her handbag and wags a finger at me. "Henry," she rebukes me. "About the rain."

"Not much, I should think."

"Never let yourself despair, Henry. Just put your hands together."

I assume that's a generalised recommendation until she clasps her hands together and gazes unblinking at mine. "Henry, Henry, Henry," she says.

I'm afraid that if she keeps that up she'll provoke my seat-mate into rhyming, and so I fold my hands. Raising her gaze towards the drumming on the roof, she says "Heavenly Father..."

I glare piously at my knuckles, but that doesn't satisfy her. "Heavenly Father," she repeats slowly and firmly, raising her eyebrows at me.

"Heavenly Father," I mouth.

"Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the sun that Thou sendest after the rain."

I'm steeling myself in case Algernon settles on a word of hers, but it's her neighbour, a bony man with a wedge-shaped face that looks as though it was lengthened by someone tugging its knob of a chin, who responds. "Heheavenly Fahatheher," he says, "wehe thahank Thehee fohor teehee suhun thahat Thououow sehehehendest ahafteherherher teehee raihaihain."

He has folded his hands on his chest and rolled his eyes up so that only the whites are visible, shivering in their sockets, and the woman seems to be as unsure as I am whether he is doing his best to pray. "If it be Thy will," she says more loudly, "let it be sunny at the beach."

"Ihif ihit behe Thyhy wihihill, lehet ihihit be, hehe, hehe, suhuhuhunny ahat thehe be, hehe, heheach."

His lips are twitching. He could be struggling either to pray or not to grin. At least he has drawn the woman's attention away from me, and I no longer bother to mouth. "We ask Thee on behalf of Thy child Henry," she bellows, "that the weather forecasters may have read Thy signs aright."

Her words might let me feel protected if it weren't for the prospect of hearing her neighbour turn my name into something else. As he says "Wehe ahahask" I flex my fingers, preparing to stick them in my ears, whatever the

woman will think of me for doing so. Just then, as if I've inadvertently betrayed my thoughts, someone behind me touches my shoulder.

Pain flares in my skull as I twist around. The man standing in the aisle is resting his other hand on the head-rest of my seat. His fingers must have snagged my hair, though he appears not to have noticed. His ruddy big-boned mug has protruding ears for handles. "I'd like to pray if you want to change places," he says.

I shove myself to my feet as the coach speeds downhill. The seat he has vacated is four rows further back. While I stumble towards it, clutching at head-rests, everyone in the intervening seats watches me. Hedges stream by like smoke beyond the obscured windows, and the greyness by which the passengers are framed puts me in mind of a photograph. For some reason that idea disturbs me, but once I reach the seat I feel safer.

My new neighbour is a small neat woman with cropped red hair who is hugging a large canvas tote bag. I return her glancing smile as I sink onto the seat. Through the uproar of the downpour I hear prayers like a battle of words which the knitting woman and her new ally are winning. The sound of rain begins to fade, and the praying soars triumphantly before subsiding. In the relative quiet I'm able to hear the voice of the passenger next to the window across the aisle, a moon-faced man with the left half of his scalp combed flat, the right half bristling. "Smudge Cottages," he's muttering. "Blob Hill."

His seat-mate, a squat man who is either examining his own bitten fingers or counting on them, grunts and tries to squash himself smaller. "Blotch Woods," the moon-faced man declares, "Fog Field, Splosh Road," and leans forward to look at me for agreement. Just in time I realise that he's naming everything he *sees* through the clouded windows, and I nod and grin until he sits back. I turn away with the grin stuck to my face, and my seat-mate assumes it's aimed at her, because she responds with the twin of her earlier smile. "Best to keep your mind occupied on a trip like this," she says.

"I suppose."

"Oh, I think so."

I take it she's referring to the moon-faced man until she claps her hands and says "So what shall we do?"

I struggle to come up with a suggestion before she does, but my mind has grown as foggy as the windows. "I know," she says, "we'll show each other our things."

"Things. Ah, well, I —"

She slaps my knee playfully and gives me the smile. "Things we take with us wherever we go, silly. What did you think I meant? Here, I'll show you what I have in mind."

She lifts her bag and lowers her face, and I'm reminded of a horse feeding. She twirls the bag by its handles and cocks her head, then snatches out a photograph. "Sea," she says.

It isn't the sea at all. It's a bedroom so tidy it might never have been slept in. Either a painting of blue sky or a mirror faces a window across the single bed, and a framed square of perfectly symmetrical embroidery hangs above the headboard. Of course she said "See"—she didn't try to trick me. "Well, there you are," I say, handing back the photograph.

"Now you have to show me one or pay a forfeit."

Though she flashes the smile, a pain seems to tug at my skull. I don't like the sound of the game she has started to play; I only have one photograph. I'm suddenly too nervous to be able to resist dragging my wallet from my inside pocket and taking out the photograph.

"That's nice. Your daughter. What's her name?"

I shake my aching head. "Not my daughter."

"Your wife?"

Shaking makes the ache worse. "My mother."

"That's even nicer." The smile must have a variety of meanings, because the woman adds through it "You should have brought her to the seaside instead of just a photograph."

"She can't get about any more."

"So you look after her like a good boy, I can tell. And someone's taken over while you give yourself a day off."

I keep my head still in the hope that the ache will fade. "Did she use to take you to the sea?" the woman wants to know.

The questions are causing the ache; they feel like a teacher pulling my hair. "No, we never went too far," I say, though talking has begun to hurt as well. "She used to say I didn't need holidays when I had her."

"And was she right?"

When I nod as hard as I dare the woman says "Shall I tell you what else I think?"

"I expect so."

"I think going to the seaside will be even more of an adventure at your age."

I think so too, and her saying "Look, the sun's coming out for you" begins to make me feel safe. Then she says "I'll just show you one more of my things and then I'll let you off."

She spends some time rummaging in her bag. It's this business with photographs that has made me nervous, because I'm growing surer that I've seen a picture somewhere of the people on the coach. When she hands me a photograph I'm afraid this might be the one, but it's another picture of her bedroom. Clothes—underwear and scarves and shoes—cover the bed and the floor. There's a pair of everything, arranged so that the photograph is divided into two identical halves. Down the centre of the bed are six bras, their cups on either side of the dividing line; three pairs are face down, three face up. "What do you say to that?" the woman urges me.

I can't seem to grasp whether the bras with their tips pointing up or those showing their insides represent more of an absence. "Very neat," I manage to respond.

She gives me a smile as quick as the movement with which she snatches the photograph, and I don't like to wonder what the smile means, any more than I care to imagine what other photographs she may have in her bag. In a bid to avoid meeting her eyes I stare through the window across the aisle. The last of the rain is worming its way off the glass, and the people in the window seats are erasing the communal breath.

We must be almost at the seaside. Through a patch like a grey hand squelched and dripping down the window I see a row of tall white hotels and then two fish-and-chip shops. "Room Street," moon-face says, "Fried Bunch," while his neighbour grabs his own right ear with his left hand and blocks his left ear with his upper arm. Are my fellow passengers a troupe of

performers on their way to a seaside engagement? Is that why their faces seem familiar? If they're rehearsing, I wish they would stop. "Flag Holes," says lunar lineaments, "Stubble Humps," and I feel he is snatching reality away from me and making it his before I can perceive it. What will he do to my sea?

The coach swings into a layby alongside the golf course and halts with a gasp. "Car Clump," says selenophysiognomy, but I don't care. When the other coach draws up behind this one I'll be able to return to my own seat. The driver lets the front door puff open and tramps clanking down the steps, and I turn to watch for my vehicle. Then my neck jerks, and the pain in my skull feels like a pin driven so deep into my spine that I can't move my head.

A woman is sitting in the middle of the back row with her feet propped against the seats on either side of the aisle. Her striped pink dress is raised above her waist, and I can see into her. I feel as though the bearded purplish avenue is drawing me in, as though the coach and the passengers and their hubbub have become a tunnel down which I'll go rushing helplessly unless I can look away. Just in time I glimpse the one sight which is able to distract my attention—the other coach. It races around the bend at the edge of the golf course and flashes its lights, and I succeed in swivelling my head. I grab the head-rest in front of me so as to heave myself to my feet as soon as my coach stops. But the coach races past without slowing and disappears over the slope of the road.

I clench my fists and my eyes and my mouth in order not to attract attention to myself. I can't prevent my eyes from twitching open, however, because I have hardly drawn breath when the coach starts to move. Surely there hasn't been time for the driver to climb aboard—and as the coach swerves out of the layby I seem to glimpse a figure running beside the murky windows and waving vainly as it is left behind.

Now I know what kind of company I'm in. They aren't actors, but I know why I would have seen photographs of them in newspapers. Asylums have days out, even asylums where the criminally insane are locked up, though the public aren't supposed to know they do. It must have been a nurse I gave my name to when I got on this coach. Why didn't she prevent whoever's in the driver's seat from starting the engine? She must be afraid to intervene while the vehicle is moving, and I can't do anything, I'm afraid to draw

attention to myself. I'll be able to keep quiet so long as we end up by the sea.

The woman next to me smiles, and then she smiles, and then she smiles, and I make myself smile at her, and smile, and smile; what harm can there be in a smile? Moon-dial is naming everything we pass—"Bucket Bunches, Toddler Splash, Bloat Boats, Wheel Baldies"—but I can cope with this, because he won't be able to bother me once I've left the coach as soon as we get to the beach. The man beside the knitting woman is multiplying syllables again, and I can hear Algernon rhyming and someone else singing "God save our gracious" over and over to any number of tunes as if she can't progress to the next word until she finds the melody, but I mustn't let all this oppress me; above all, I mustn't look back.

Through the windscreen, far away down the aisle, I see sunlit hotels giving way to dunes ahead, and then water shines beyond the dunes. As I take a breath which I mean to hold until my silent wish is granted, the woman beside me smiles and says "Do you mind if I ask you one question?"

The road curves, and I see the other coach. It's parked at the edge of the dunes, and the passengers are climbing down the steps. "Not any more," I say.

"Who's looking after your mother while you're out for the day?"

Algernon has opened a window, and I can hear the waves. They sound exactly like my mother's breathing, which I thought I'd never hear again. Once I lay my head in a hollow between two dunes I shall feel safe. I'm resisting the urge to run along the aisle so as to be first off the coach when the man in the driver's seat honks the horn and passes the parked vehicle without even slowing. "We haven't stopped," I cry. "We have to stop."

"Sand Bumps," says satellite-features. "Screech Air." The woman smiles at me and then smiles at me. The rhyming and the prayers and the syllabic babble and "God save our gracious" and all the other tangled sounds are conspiring to steal my breath and weigh me down in my seat. "Stop," I scream and clawing myself out of the seat, lurch towards the front of the coach.

I've drawn attention to myself. There's no turning back now. I grab the knitting woman's needles, cracking her hands and cutting off her prayer of thanks, and poke at anyone who looks as if they might try to catch hold of

me. The driver brakes and glances at me as I reach him. Now he looks like the proper driver, but how do I know that isn't a trick?

"Knit, knit," I cry—I used to shout that at my mother whenever I was afraid she was about to stop moving—and jab his face. "Snail," I announce, because that's what he looks like with the needles in his face. As he waves his hands frantically at them I heave him out of the seat and grab the wheel. The coach ploughs through the dunes, and I suffer a pang of regret until I understand that the beach and the sea are so much bigger than I am, too big for me to harm. They're waiting for me. They will take me back where I was safe.

McGonagall In The Head

Written in: 1991
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He was on his way to being a reporter. That Monday morning he was early as usual for work, hoping the editor might observe his eagerness. The newspaper office was locked, however, and so Don watched the street through the late October fog of his breath. Buses bearing words and faces scrawled inside their clouded-over windows paraded like a train of elephants through the shopping precinct; girls and young women said "Brrr" to one another before taking refuge in the hot shops where they worked. Half a dozen schoolchildren whose faces looked bruised by the icy air dodged across the road in front of a lorry laden with washing machines, and the screech of brakes awakened in Don's guts a sensation which felt like hunger and nausea combined. Eyewitness Reporter Don Drake, Our Man At The Scene Of The Tragedy... The children skidded onto the pavement, leaving the lorry stalled and fuming, and Tina the receptionist jumped out of her boyfriend's Porsche and waved the rump of her culottes at Don while lingering over a last kiss.

She unlocked the office and switched on the fluorescent lights and ran to press her bottom against the nearest radiator. "Want to warm me up, Don?"

She'd kicked off her left shoe and was rubbing her right calf with her foot. The cuff of her culotte whispered up and down her stockinged thigh, never quite keeping the promise of a glimpse of bare flesh. "Just tell me how," Don said.

"You know where the kettle is, and the coffee's in one of my drawers."

"I knew that was what you meant," he said as his discomfort rose from his groin into his stomach.

When a fist rattled the glass of the door he hurried to let in Ted Mull, who dumped his tweed hat on the counter and rubbed his chest vigorously before unbuttoning his overcoat. "Morning, love's young bloom," he boomed,

tilting his face up and opening his lips as though to catch something in flight. "Any for me?"

"Coffee, you mean," Don said.

"What makes you think I was talking to you, squirt?"

"Don't pick on him, Ted. He's doing his best."

"He's trying all right. Just put it on my desk, son, and give us the milk," Ted said on the way to comb the remnants of his hair.

The rest of the team arrived before the editor. Stanley Brady responded to greetings by muttering "Egh" and displaying today's shade and texture of his tongue. Trevor Horrocks, who wasn't much older than Don, blinked anxiously at the editor's door while unwrapping his stringy neck. Bernadette Hain, who wrote the women's page, came last, treating her colleagues to a look of regal disapproval diluted by conscious tolerance. "It isn't what *I'd* call a good morning," she said.

As the clock struck nine the editor strode in, his astrakhan dangling by the sleeve he was about to peel off. "Morning, Mr Davenport," the staff said in a ragged chorus.

"Mng."

That was neutral. "Mg" was ominous, "Mrng" expansive. He waved away Don's offer of coffee and turned to the other desks. "Two minutes."

Precisely two minutes later the reporters trooped into the inner office. One day, Don promised himself, he would hear what the editor had to say at the morning conferences. All he could distinguish through the door were murmurs, which were enough to distract him from Tina except when her perfume spiced the air. He uncovered his screen and keyboard, then he undipped his gold-plated ballpoint, which he was saving until he needed to take notes, and laid it on his desk. Then the phone on his desk rang, and he was somebody. "*News,"* he announced. "Births, marriages and deaths."

"Deaths?"

"Sorry."

"Sorry?"

"Deaths."

"Is there any limit on how long I can be?"

"Over six feet could be a problem," Don might have said if his professional voice weren't speaking for him. "Entirely up to you, sir," he said. "It's ten pee a word."

"Poetry included?"

"Whatever you want to give me. You can dictate it to me now if you have a credit card."

"I'll cough." The caller did so, sounding as if he was pronouncing the word. "I'll give you my details at the end of the remembrance. Have you pen and paper?"

"Keyboard and monitor."

"Dear me. Are you sure those will serve?"

"You have my word."

"Then here are mine," the caller said, and adopted a tone that suggested he was reading someone else's. "Oh dad we had you all too fast?"

Don had typed the entire line before he grasped what he was being asked. "That fast is fine. Oh dad we had you all—"

"— these years,
But every life must end in cough."

"Tears."

"When we both stepped through life's door,
After mum's yours was the first face we saw.
And if we were unhappy at school
You cheered us up, you cough. Cough, cough."

Don waited for the coughing to subside and said "You cheered us up, you —"

"Played the fool," the caller said with a resentment Don thought unreasonable. "And when we had exams to do—
You gave us help to see us cough."

"Through," Don said, typing, resisting the temptation to say "Are you?"

"You gave us each money to buy cough. Couuggh, cough. To buy cough."

Don lifted the receiver away from his ear to put a distance between himself and the harsh dry sound. At that remove the coughing sounded even falser.

When the caller repeated "To buy" Don held the receiver at arm's length until he heard the voice continue.

"—a flat,
And lent us more when we needed that.
It took us years to get our degrees,
And it was you who paid most of our fees.
Then you and mum saw us both wed,
First Sue and then your little cough."

Don couldn't resist typing "cough" at the end of the sentence, to be deleted when he went through the text to add punctuation and capital letters and to correct any errors in transcription. There couldn't be much more to come, or he might begin to suspect the call was a joke. "Your little—"

"Frough. Cough. Fred," the caller said, and drew a rattling breath. "Mum sat our babies on her knee,
And cur. Currough. Currough. Currough."

It *was* a joke. "And gave you one when they had to pee," Don heard himself say, and was so nervous of doing so out loud that he typed the line instead. "And—" he prompted when the coughing trailed off, but there was a breathless silence. "And gave—"

"What about a grave?"

"Nothing," Don said, deciding that the call was serious after all. "On her knee, you were saying, and—"

"And called them each her little flea."

Don gave the receiver a long slow double-take before he typed the line. "Carry on," he said, keeping his face straight, and his voice.

"We've got us all now that you've gone,
And our thoughts of you will still go cough, cough, cough."

Don typed the last word without speaking it and waited for the coughs to finish. "Who is the message from and to, please?"

After a silence which seemed longer than was necessary for the caller to catch his breath came the response: "To Terence Bernard Moore from daughter Sue, son Fred, grandchildren cough, cough."

"Twins, eh?" Don muttered. "Flea and flea?"

The silence made him nervous that the caller had heard him, until he—Fred, presumably—said "Hope and Charity."

"And called them Hope and Charitee," Don said under his breath, and more loudly "So I just need the details of your card."

"I'll get them now."

Don waited through a spectacular outburst of coughing and what sounded like the contents of a room being exhaustively overturned, at the end of which he thought the phone had been flung on the floor. Instead the caller said in an aggressively aggrieved voice "I can't lay my hands on it just now."

"Then I'm afraid you'll be too late for—"

"I'll send you a cheque. When must you have it?"

"For Thursday's paper, tomorrow morning."

"I'm writing it now. Goodbye."

"Of course you are," Don commented as the phone went dead, and poised his fingers over the keyboard. It would be the work of a few seconds to delete the entire rigmarole, but he should wait for the morning so as to make sure it had indeed been an elaborate joke. The voice had been too old, he reflected, like someone trying to sound older than they were. He was about to call Tina to look at the incredible doggerel when the editor's face loomed beside his own reflection on the screen. "S," Don hissed, and managed to say not "Sorry" but "Sir?"

"Choking us, is it, Mr Drake, the tie? Finding it hard to talk?"

"No?" Don replied, all he could think of to ask.

"Tidy yourself up, then. We're not at college now, we're in the real world," Mr Davenport said, and watched while Don pulled the noose tighter.

Don had failed at the interview for the rival newspaper because his hair had been too long, and now his bare nape seemed to bristle with being spied on by his colleagues. Everyone had to please the editor, he told himself. Ted Mull had emerged from the inner office booming "Of course I will, sir, you can always count on me" as if he didn't care who overheard his slavishness. As the editor headed for the toilet Trevor Horrocks jumped up, gasping "Oh er Mr Dav" to no effect other than to make Mr Davenport hunch his shoulders, and Don felt better at once. He could rely on his professional

voice, and anyone who glimpsed him at his desk would take him for a reporter.

By the end of the day he'd lost count of the births and marriages he'd dealt with, and the rhyming deaths. Why was it death that produced so much doggerel? Perhaps it was a way the living regained control of their lives, even if it meant reducing their experience of death virtually to meaninglessness.

Shops were putting up their shutters as he walked home. The large houses were mostly rest homes, except for those like the one he inhabited, which had been divided into almost as many flats as there were rooms. Otherwise the main difference seemed to be that in houses like his nobody called on anyone else. Cartoon voices climbed from television to television as he raced the time-switched lights up the ragged stairs and let himself into his third of the top floor.

He emptied a can of baked beans and sausages into the pan on the electric ring and fed the toaster its trinity of bread. While he ate dinner he gazed through the windows of the envelopes he'd picked up in the front hall, and having washed up, opened them. The bills weren't quite as greedy as he'd feared, though a reporter's salary would have made them less daunting. He lined up the envelopes on the mantelpiece and tried to read a comic novel, but couldn't lose himself in it, not when he encountered the word "dead" four times in as many pages: dead letters, beat, good, drunk. He abandoned it and strolled down the hill to the pub opposite the graveyard.

It was the Polytechnic's local, where he had been drinking ever since he'd joined the journalism course. Making his way over the bare floorboards of the snug, which was dimmed by the smoke of a crowd worthy of a rush-hour train, felt like coming home. He was taking his first gulp of Letterman's Bitter when a hand clapped him on the shoulder. "Dressing for the part?" Paul Prentiss said.

"What part's that?"

"Don't be modest. You've been seen working at your rag. You look quite the hack."

Don had never cared for the heavy rough humour which went with the chubby scrubbed schoolboyish face, and he liked Prentiss even less for saying "What story are you after at the moment?"

"At the moment all I'm after is a drink."

"I can take a hint." Apparently Don's tone wasn't enough of one, however, because Prentiss bought him another pint and winked over Don's shoulder. "You're in luck, girls. Two real journalists for the price of one. Meet Don Duck, I mean Drake."

Don used the lack of space as an excuse merely to wave his free hand without turning. "So don't keep all the news to yourself, Don," Prentiss said. "What's your big story just now?"

As Don drained his first pint, which made him feel as if his head was separating from the rest of him, he deduced why Prentiss was taunting him. "It was you, wasn't it."

"You're letting the job get on top of you, Don. I'm not a story, I'm real."

"It was you pretending to have lost someone. You shouldn't make fun of the dead."

"Why, can't they keep a straight face? You're never telling us you only deal with dead issues at your rag, when our tutors thought you were so—"

Don took a mouthful of bitter and expelled most of it in Prentiss' face. "You're so funny, I couldn't help it," he said as Prentiss spluttered and mopped himself.

He enjoyed the spectacle until the stocky barman grasped his arm. "I think you've had enough for one night, son. How old are you anyway?"

"Old enough to know when someone's trying to make a fool of me."

"You can do that all by yourself," Prentiss shouted as Don struggled to the door, having drained his tankard. He heaved the door open, receiving the night in his face like a dash of ice water, and stalked into his own fog. DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN JOURNALISTS END IN FRACAS, he thought as he was confronted by the smudged stony messages of the graveyard, BECAUSE ONE WAS A JACKASS. He accepted worse rhymes than that every working day. Surely sometime he would be able to draw on his years spent studying in the library, on all those words.

In the morning he waited outside the *News*. By the time Tina straightened up from the Porsche his lips were stiff, his mouth felt clogged with ice. She ran to her usual radiator, and he followed in her perfumed wake.

"Hello, young lovers, whatever you're up to. Make mine black."

"He isn't in yet, is he, Mr Der—"

"Gagh."

"You're easily pleased."

"Mrng."

Don watched while Tina sorted the mail, delivered by a postman who departed whistling like a blue tit which had almost lost its voice. "Any for me?" Don eventually asked her.

"A pile."

None of the letters and cheques related to yesterday's protracted call. He should have emptied the tankard over Prentiss' head. He called up the eighteen lines of verse on the screen and was grinning wickedly at them when his phone rang. He deleted them and immediately wished he'd waited for the noon mail, but it didn't matter: he could remember every word as if they'd leapt off the screen into his skull. "Births, marriages and deaths," he said.

Of course the noon mail contained nothing from Fred Moore, and Don felt he should be able to relax. The afternoon brought him mostly births and marriages, which was a relief. That night after his tinned dinner he crouched over the television beside the sink in order to switch channels. An album of black and white faces fluttered past until he settled on a comedy, but he couldn't watch for long when the dialogue seemed to be chanted rather than spoken. "Crambojingle, crambojingle," he murmured over and over in bed, and fell asleep wondering where the word came from.

"You'll catch your death one of these days," Tina said next morning, "hanging about in the doorway."

"How's love's young dream today? Time to wake up."

"Gurgh."

"Hmmm.

"Mg."

"Sorry I'm—Mr Dav—"

"God bless you love we miss you chuck."

"God bless you love we miss you chuck," Don confirmed, reminding himself to be professional, not to put words into the caller's mouth, not to

listen to rhymes in his head, however tempting they were. Tomorrow was publication day, and then he would have no reason to be uneasy, not that he had now.

That night he went down to the pub, but saw Prentiss through the windows shrouded in breaths. He strolled through the graveyard, where he kept smelling a newly dug grave. Though the stones gleamed darkly over the crystallised turf he was unable to distinguish a single inscription. As he lay in bed his head felt laden with words, but in the morning his mind was blank, thank... "Enough of that stuff," he muttered as he got himself ready for work.

"Gangway, brrr."

The rest of the greetings were lost in the bustle as some of the deliverers came to Tina for their batch of newspapers and had to be sent around the back. Don imagined all the words for which he was responsible that week spreading across the town, having begun to fade at the instant they were printed.

It was almost lunchtime when a caller addressed him in a tone he wasn't prepared for. "Are you answerable for the contents of today's paper?"

"If it's a birth, a marriage or a cough I am."

"Then where's my father?"

Don was instantly suspicious. "What name?"

"The name's Fred Moore, and my father was Terence Bernard."

"I thought you might say that. Not Paul Prentiss, eh?"

"What's that? What are you raving about?"

"Let it rest, Paul, unless you want another in your eye. Haven't you enough news at the *Advertiser* without trying to make a story out of me?"

"Who the devil d'you imagine you're addressing?"

"You've almost got the voice right this time, but you don't fool me. You went on too long last time, that was what gave you away. Nobody living could be that bad for eighteen lines without noticing."

"I don't think you realise—"

"Sew it up, Paul, before you have a heart attack. There may be real people trying to get through to me."

Don heard a strangled sound that suggested his warning about the heart attack had come too late, and then there was only the moaning of the dialling tone. He grinned at the receiver before replacing it and waiting for the phone to ring. Just now all the calls were for the switchboard, interrupting Tina's sorting of the lunchtime mail. Eventually she brought him a single envelope addressed to Deaths in a shaky hand. "Someone must love you," she said, and hurried back to the switchboard as the editor opened his door. "Mr Drake?"

"Mr Davenport?"

The editor jerked his permanently frowning slab of face towards his shoulder. "My office, please."

Could this be the chance for which Don had been working? He tried to seem nonchalant yet enthusiastic as he walked into the inner office, where all the furniture seemed to smell of the pipe Mr Davenport was relighting. Without inviting him to sit the editor leaned back in his chair, thumping the underside of the desk with his knees. "Enjoying our work, are we, Mr Drake?"

"Certainly are. Am."

"No ambitions elsewhere?" the editor said through his teeth, making the tobacco in the bowl glow red.

"Elsewhere, well..." Don wished he could use his telephone voice; this one wasn't working too well. "Ambitions, you bet, but when you say elsewhere..."

"Take it slow and steady, Mr Drake. Never try to run before you can walk."

"I'll bet you did. Or didn't, rather."

The editor stared at him over the fierce red glow. At last he said "So what's this I hear about your notices?"

"Something good, would—"

Don's voice seemed to stick on the rhyme. "About a Mr Moore," the editor said.

"A Mr Moore? Which Mr Moore?"

Don felt as if he was being forced to recite doggerel. He gripped his lips with his fingertips as the editor's voice grew thin. "A Mr Fred Moore who

has just been on to me, wanting to know what became of his father's obituary."

"If he told you he rang up with it—"

"He didn't, no. His father did."

"His fough—" Don cleared his aching throat and tried again. "His father —"

"His father phoned in his own obituary which I'm assured you copied. Don't ask me why he did, it isn't our business to ask. He knew he was dying, his son says, and almost as soon as he'd spoken to you he coughed himself to death."

The informant could have been Paul Prentiss, Don thought wildly—Prentiss trying to feed the *News* fake news. A single point seemed clear amid the babble of gibberish which the world was threatening to become: whoever the caller had been, he hadn't complained to Mr Davenport about Don's response to his call of a few minutes ago. "We couldn't publish the obituary," Don said, inspired just in time. "We haven't received payment."

The editor gazed at him as if his mind was on something else entirely. "You'd better ascertain what happened to it and let the son know."

"I will," Don promised, and was fleeing towards the door when Mr Davenport said "Try taking these."

"I'm fine, I'm not ill," Don said, "I don't need a pill," and saw too late that the editor was proffering Moore's address and phone number. He clutched them and stumbled out to his desk, where the envelope with the second-class stamp was waiting. As he grabbed it he was afraid he might tear it up, not open, but managed to peel back the flap. The envelope did indeed contain a cheque from T. B. Moore.

Don laid it next to the scrap of paper Mr Davenport had given him, then moved them closer together in an attempt to read them simultaneously without shifting his eyes. As soon as Tina was busy with a call he seized his phone and dialled. "Mr Moore?"

"Who is it?"

Thank God, Don had succeeded in disguising his voice. "I'm calling on behalf of Births, Marriages and Deaths. They've had to go out, he has, I mean, but I can tell you your father's cheque has just this moment arrived."

"Indeed."

"It was second class," Don said, thinking that Moore sounded in the mood to take that as some kind of slur on his father. "I can guarantee your father's piece will be in the *News* next week."

"You'll understand if I make sure, I'm sure."

"You rhyme like your dad," Don managed not to say before breaking the connection. He clipped the cheque and the scrap of paper to the top of his pile of mail, and switched on the monitor. He was hearing the rhythm of T. B. Moore's first line: cough cough, cough cough, cough cough cough cough. He peered at the blank screen and moved his lips, and when the monitor seemed about to flicker in that rhythm he closed his eyes and attempted to mouth. That didn't work either. He couldn't recall a single word of Moore's.

It wasn't urgent, he tried to tell himself. So long as he remembered by next week, nobody would find him out. But his inability to remember felt like a hole in his brain, a vacuum aching to be filled. Moore's rhymes: if Don recalled the rhymes the rest would follow. He was straining to remember just one rhyme when his phone shrilled, and he snatched it up, mumbling a greeting which was all that emerged from the fight of two words to be first past his lips.

"Is that Births, Marriages and Deaths?"

"Yes, this is First and Last Brea—" Don coughed so as to interrupt himself. "Yes."

"I didn't quite hear what you said."

"I deal with the living and—" Don coughed harder. "No tiss says," he managed to pronounce.

"Can I have a remembrance next week?"

"All that you need do is speak."

The woman hesitated, which allowed Don to add "You can pay by credit card, or send a cheque if that's, cough, preferable."

The caller dictated her credit card details at once. "Right, that's done," Don said. "Go on."

"Though it's been years since you said goodbye—"

"Since you went up into the sky... We thought that you would never die..."

The choice of rhymes saved Don—their struggle for priority gave him time to choose only to mouth them. He wiped his forehead with the bristling back of one hand and typed her line. "Go on."

"The thought of you still makes us cry."

Don preferred his lines, but he typed hers. "Go on."

"Each week in church we light a candle—"

He would be fine so long as he didn't type what he was mouthing. He only needed to say "Go on" at the end of each line; his professional voice wouldn't let him down. When the caller finished dictating and said "Is that all right now?" Don managed to confine himself to an affirmative grunt before cutting her off.

His colleagues were returning to their desks with stories from the outside world. Whenever Don had to answer his phone he crouched low over the keyboard so that they wouldn't notice his mouthing outrageous responses to "She is not dead but gone before" and "There never was a sweeter Mum" and "We're glad that now you are at rest." The day was almost spent when Ted Mull stooped to him on the way to the toilet, murmuring "First sign of madness."

"At least it's not badness," Don muttered at his retreating back. Leaving the office was less of a relief than he'd hoped. He'd anticipated being able to think freely once he was alone, but he was surrounded by words. Everything had a name—street, car, lamp, house—and they seemed to be massing between him and the world. He let himself into his house with The Feeling Of A Key and ran upstairs towards The Taste Of Food. He fed himself a few spoonfuls of baked beans out of the can, and felt as though he was feeding himself the late October cold. He needed to relax in order to think, that was it—he needed a drink. He wouldn't be a journalist unless he had a drink.

The pub felt like a refuge from the cold words standing in the dark. The snug wasn't crowded yet, and the barman who had ordered Don out was off duty. Don sat in a corner with a pint and then with another, turning his back on the room so as to whisper. "Dead," he repeated. "Moore must have said dead. I've got dead in my head."

He was searching his brain for a rhyme which he was sure was the key when a fingertip tapped sharply on his shoulder. At some point the snug had filled with drinkers and smoke, and Don felt as though the crowd had forced Paul Prentiss on him. "I want a word," Prentiss said.

"Because you're a—" Don started to retort, and slapped himself across the mouth. He'd told Fred Moore both Prentiss' name and where he worked, and if he didn't keep his promise to Moore the man might well contact the rival paper. "Can't you forget I got you wet?" he babbled. "I'll pay for the damage if you can't cough. You've an empty glass. Let me fill it, you—"

Prentiss was gazing at him with mute amusement. He knew, Don thought: Moore had already been in touch with him. The roar of the crowd—far too many words—engulfed Don. "You can't make me news," he shouted at Prentiss, staggering to his feet. "I'm just here for the booze."

"I should lay off it for a while if I were you."

"I've as much right as you have, you—" Don yelled, backing away from the argument which he was afraid he mightn't be able to stop. He mustn't waste time, he had to remember Moore's words before Prentiss could discover he'd mislaid them. He squirmed through the crowd and lunged into the night.

Dark, stark. Gate, fate. Trees, freeze. Willows, pillows. Walk, stalk. Wreath, teeth. Dates, crates. Earth, berth. Stones, bones. Lines, dines... None of this revived the verses. When he couldn't think for shivering he went home. If the pit in his brain was sucking in reality and reducing it to words, perhaps lying absolutely still in the dark would clear enough space in his overloaded mind for his memory to work.

At some point he fell asleep. He must have continued to rhyme, however, because when icy sunlight wakened him his brain was laden with pairs of words, while his surroundings seemed more aloof than ever. He was going to be late for work. He dashed cold water on himself, shivered into his freezing clothes and ran stiff-faced out of the house.

Though he was almost on time after all, only Tina was in the outer office. Some big local story must have broken overnight, because Don could hear the buzz of discussion beyond Mr Davenport's door. Ted Mull and Bernadette Hain sounded outraged, and for a panicky few moments Don

felt sure they were appalled by something he himself had done. "Didn't you get much sleep?" Tina said.

"Why, do I look like a creep?"

"That's not what I said."

"It's what's in your head."

"Be that way," Tina said, turning her back on him.

"It's all I can say," Don protested, almost missing the hook on the wall with his coat in his haste to take refuge at his desk. Once his monitor was switched on he wouldn't need to speak to anyone around him. Just as the screen lit up, Mr Davenport's door opened. "Ah, Mr Drake. Arrived now, have we?"

"Both of us, you mean, or just me?"

"I didn't quite catch what you said."

"I'm trying to talk for the dead," Don muttered even lower as the phone rang on his desk.

He thought it had saved him. He pressed the receiver against his cheekbone, and his jaw dropped as though a bandage had been snatched away. What might he feel compelled to say? "Is that the births column?" a woman said.

"No need to be solemn," Don managed only to mouth as he grunted encouragingly.

"Can I put in a happy event?"

"One that you couldn't—" Don coughed so hard it hurt his throat. "Mm hm," he said.

"To Dee and Desmond Gray, a son..."

Don would be able to cope so long as he mouthed before he typed, he told himself— and then he gaped at the screen. Instead of her line he had typed "A side effect of a bit of fun." He could take the call and attempt afterwards to deduce from the screen what the caller had actually said, except that wouldn't work: he wouldn't be able to stop rhyming until he remembered Moore's words. "Sorry, I'm having a technical hitch. Could you call back a bit later, you—" he gabbled and drowned his last word in the row he made replacing the receiver. As he perched it slightly askew on the rest so that no

further calls would be able to reach him, Ted Mull leaned over the monitor at him.

Don thought Mull had noticed his ruse with the phone until the reporter said "I heard what you said to the boss."

"That so? Well, I don't give a toss."

Mull snapped his mouth shut as though he'd caught something in it. "You'll get nowhere with that attitude, my lad."

"Then call me a bounder and a rotter and a cad."

Mull's shiny face was turning several shades of pink and white, putting Don in mind of an iced cake. Bernadette Hain was telling Tina about last night's local outrage—vandalism and, by the sound of it, worse in a graveyard—but Don didn't want to hear; they were more words he would be compelled to rhyme. He closed his eyes and thrust his fingers in his ears, and when he looked again he was alone with Tina.

It was the best he could hope for. He mustn't speak to her. He had to make the most of his chance before she or the editor wondered why Don's phone had ceased to ring. Once Don had reproduced Moore's verses, surely he would no longer need to rhyme—surely he would be able to persuade Mr Davenport to give him a different job. Was it Moore who was filling his head with rhymes in an attempt to recapture his own? The notion felt like inspiration, except that now Don's brain was swarming with the rhymes Moore summoned up: viewer, renewer, lure, cure, immure, boor, endure, spoor... Perhaps if Don thought of every single rhyme for Moore that might release him; perhaps if he wrote them all down... He was staring with shaky eyes at the screen, convinced that there was something else he had to type so as to clear his head, when a voice said "Moore."

Don thought he had spoken aloud until he noticed the newcomer, a man in black with a long mottled face that looked pressed between his bushy sideboards. "The editor's on the phone, but I'll tell him as soon as he's free," Tina was saying to him. "What shall I say it's about?"

"About my father. About his obituary you neglected to publish. I've been trying to speak to someone about it all morning, but it seems that number's out of order. I want to see the obituary before it goes in."

"You want Mr Drake there. Don, this gentleman wants a word."

Don felt his lips twitching. They were going to open, he was going to speak, and that would be the end of him. So this was what his nemesis looked like, Moore's grown-up son, no longer little Fred. "First Sue and then your little Fred," he thought and mouthed, and gasped. "Then you and mum saw us both wed..."

All at once the obituary was as present in his mind as it had been while he copied it down, and he was afraid he mightn't be able to type fast enough to record it before it departed from him. He gave Fred Moore a sickly grin and gestured him to wait until Don finished at the screen, and turned away from the counter as his fingers commenced scuttling over the keyboard. Two lines, four, eight, sixteen... Though they weren't in order, all eighteen lines were there, thank God. Moore's son was clearing his throat harshly, but Don put the couplets in chronological order before turning back to him.

He didn't trust himself to speak. He went to the counter and lifted the flap and invited Moore in with an ushering gesture, repeating it until Moore stalked frowning through the gap. He gave Moore his chair and stood beside it while the man peered at the screen. "Oh dad we had you all these years," Moore read aloud.

Don heard the late Moore reading the words. Each line seemed to remove a layer of dead words from his mind. As the son pronounced "And our thoughts of you will still go on," Mr Davenport came to his office door, demanding "Is there some problem?"

"Are you the editor?"

"I have that honour. Can I help?"

Moore poked a finger at the monitor, his nail clinking against the screen. "You can see that this is never published."

It didn't matter, Don told himself. Since the verses were out of him, the compulsion must be. He sensed that a change was about to take place in his head. The editor marched over and scowled at the screen. "What exactly is the trouble?"

"We spoke. Fred Moore. You didn't print my father's obituary, and now you're trying to fob me off with this."

"In what way fob?"

Moore swung one hand at Don. "Your clerk's made this up. My father was never responsible for this rubbish. As if we haven't been through enough..."

Don felt all the rhymes rush back into his head. If nobody believed Moore had composed the obituary he might never be rid of them. His lips shifted, but he mustn't speak. He grabbed his pen from his desk as Fred Moore said unevenly "Last night someone dug my father up, and—and now this."

Don clicked the point of the pen out of the barrel and swivelled in search of scrap paper. He mustn't rhyme with Fred Moore's words. This was what your father said, he's still stuck inside my head, he's been here inside since the moment he died... Before he had time to scribble any of that, Mr Davenport confronted him. "You're fired."

No, hired. Give me a chance, don't lead me a dance, don't make me prance... Don shoved his hands against the sides of his skull as if he could squeeze out what had lodged in there, and felt the point of the pen scrape his temple. "Take yourself off to the doctor if you're ill," Mr Davenport said.

Kill. Don felt his temple begin to twinge as ink mixed with his blood. The rhyme was louder than any of the sounds of the office, the humming of the monitor, the gasps of the men, Tina's scream. It was only doggerel, he didn't have to act it out because he could no longer speak it. Perhaps he had, or else go mad.

1992

Between The Floors

"In 1992 I had time to complete only one short story, *Between the Floors*. That Easter the annual British science fiction convention was held in a Blackpool hotel, where some of the conventioneers were banished to an annexe served by a lift complete with a lugubrious attendant not at all unlike (except in some ways, one hopes) the figure who haunts my tale."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

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Though the view from his window looked like the end of the world, that wasn't why Jack Latimer was anxious to go downstairs. A straight line divided the sea and the sky, slabs of two shades of the grey of a solitary pigeon gliding back and forth against them like a kite left behind on the beach by the departed summer. As he straightened his tie and smoothed the wings of his shirt collar he spied from the window on a tram eight storeys below him, feeling its way after its whine along the wire into Blackpool. The pane was as good as a mirror, and showed him his eyes waiting to be amused, his black moustache as sleek as his hair, his features rather too small for the face that even workouts at the gym near his flat couldn't reduce. He picked up the key by its six-inch plastic tag from the dressing-table strewn with glossy brochures and let himself out of the functional room.

To his left, through the window of the exit to the fire escape, was what might as well have been exactly the same view of the sea. To his right, eight doors identical with his and interrupted only by framed prints as subdued as the lighting led to the first of a series of fire doors, beyond which the corridor must eventually find its way to the main bank of lifts. There was a lift opposite Jack's room, however, and he barely hesitated before prodding the askew lozenge-shaped button further into its niche in the wall.

Once again he felt as though the summons hadn't reached its destination. A wind mumbled under the door onto the fire escape; otherwise there was silence, not even the sound of a radio or television in any of the rooms. For a minute or two he contented himself with performing an impromptu tap-dance that rattled the key on its tag, but when he found himself compelled

to sing he felt he'd waited long enough. "I'm singing in the rain," he crooned, "just sin—" and was stabbing at the button when he heard beyond the door that was grey as the seascape a voice not much louder than the wind. "Gubless us, we're coming as quick as we can. What do they want me to do, get out and push?"

Jack was tempted to retreat into his room so as not to be seen to have rung twice. But he wasn't a child, he was nudging fifty, and he was damned if he would let any petty official intimidate him. As the doors inched open, the scratched outer door withdrawing behind the wall before its twin began to sidle in the opposite direction, he tugged the jacket of his suit down and folded his hands, dangling the plastic tag. The door was still creeping into its hiding place when the attendant greeted him. "It's the feller they stuck at the top," he said in his low Northern groan. "Don't tell me, it's Mr... Mr Latitude."

"Latimer."

"Aye, well, are we going to stand here arguing about it till some other bugger starts playing with my ding-dong? Step in, there's a dear, and I'll take you to the rest of the royalty."

Jack had been preparing to apologise for his impatience with the lift, but now he was provoked just to laugh, except he couldn't quite manage that either. He stepped over the threshold into the stuffy box that smelled of the square of dusty carpet no wider than a double bed, and felt outnumbered at once.

Since there must be as many of himself as of the attendant in the mirrors facing each other from halfway up the side walls, he could only assume that his uneasiness was to be blamed on the indirect lighting, which was the colour of fog. It and the mirrors displayed the attendant to him, the pouchy globe of a face which Jack had to remind himself wouldn't be as pale in any other light, the uniform which looked as dusty as whatever book was sprawled face down on the folding stool under the handle that controlled the lift, the curly mop of faded red hair that reminded Jack more than ever of the kind of wig which came attached to a seaside hat. "Gubless us," the attendant groaned at the handle, grasping it with both pudgy hands and leaning his weight on it until the doors shut and the lift began to creak downwards, and then he turned to Jack. "That's what I should call you, isn't it? Know why?"

Like his voice, his clump of features—eyes so protruding they made Jack wince, small beaky nose, inverted whitish V of a mouth above a nub of chin—seemed constantly on the point of adopting another expression. Perhaps it was his being half a head shorter than Jack and having to peer up at him from beneath his hairless eyebrows that made him appear sly, but Jack felt like a stooge singled out from an audience. "Why?" he couldn't help asking.

"Isn't that a good word for you folk in the picture palace game?"

It took some seconds for Jack's bewilderment to give way to relief. "Royalty, you mean. That's droll. You ought to be at the end of the pier."

"Gets a bit lonely out there in the cold and the wind, specially after dark."

Though it wasn't as though Jack had wished that on him, he found himself feeling defensive. "The cinemas these days aren't what you'd call palaces," he said, "and we're just managers."

The sixth floor went by with a creaking shudder of the lift, and a bulb guttered behind the number in the line set into the wall above the stool. All of the attendant's heads shook themselves slowly, putting Jack in mind of some fairground sideshow being switched on for the night. Either the attendant resented managers or was unhappy with Jack's self-deprecation, because his mouth drooped even further before he said "On our own, are we?"

"Depends what you mean."

"Aye, it all depends, that's what they say." The attendant had lowered his gaze to Jack's crotch or rather, Jack hoped, to the plastic tag hanging in front of it. "Remember that old song?"

Jack shoved the key into his breast pocket, where the tag felt as though it was probing for his heart. "Yes, it's from—"

"Hit... owl... deep-ends... hawn... hayouuu." The attendant had abandoned his Lancashire accent and was singing in a hideous parody of Cockney without raising his gaze; then he stared Jack in the face. "Was it you I heard doing a song and dance?"

If Jack blushed, surely that couldn't be visible in the grey light. "Did you hear someone?"

"Aye, and I've brought no other body to your floor. Happen it's you should be at end of pier."

"I'll stick to the job I've been doing for getting on for thirty years, thanks all the same."

"Happy in our job, are we?"

The number 3 flickered and went out, and Jack felt close enough to quitting the lift to be able to retort "I don't know about you.

"If truth be told, lad, I'm not so sure about thee either."

This time Jack certainly felt himself redden, though there was no sign of it in the mirror. "What the devil do you mean by that?"

"No need to bring him into it. Just trying to keep us lively while we go down."

The man's face had begun to remind Jack of stage make-up seen closer than it was meant to be seen, so that he wondered if the attendant could have been a seaside comedian before ending up in this job. "When do they let you out?" Jack said.

"Who's that?"

The question was so sharp that Jack almost looked for someone in the mirror. "The manager, I suppose, or whoever comes after you, rather. How long before you get out of here?"

"Depends."

The attendant's gaze had lowered itself again. Jack stared over the mop of red hair, noticing how dusty the light made it look, until the lift stumbled to a halt. When there was no further movement, he said "Aren't we here?"

"Aye, and soon one of us won't be."

Jack was about to ask how soon when the attendant did something with the handle to release the doors. Beyond them was a nondescript stretch of corridor, and Jack lunged for it, glimpsing the ranks of himself disappear as though they were returning inside him. Before he was over the threshold the attendant seized him by one upper arm, in a grip which felt unexpectedly strong and yet somehow diffuse. "Up you go," he muttered in Jack's ear.

Only when Jack almost tripped did he realise that the floor of the lift had come to rest an inch lower than the corridor. "Thanks," he said, and stepping up, glanced back. The attendant had already let go of him, and was out of reach of the light from the corridor. As Jack moved away, digging a finger in his ear to get rid of the sensation of its being clogged with a dusty

whisper, he heard the attendant start mumbling to his crowd of grey selves before the doors creaked shut.

Though the corridor changed direction several times on its way to the lobby, it didn't present as much of a challenge as it had when he was carrying his suitcase. The receptionist who had directed Jack to the lift was at the desk, using one of her silver-tipped fingers to trace a route on a street map for two cinema managers Jack didn't recognise. He gave his tie a last adjustment as he crossed the lobby to the bar, where he saw Lucinda Dodd at once.

She was on the far side of the horseshoe overhung by inverted glasses, her plump bare arms resting on the bar-top. Again he thought she had the biggest smile he'd ever seen—almost as wide as her generous face—but now she was directing it at Rex Smythe beside her. "Here's my rival. We were just talking about someone like you, Jack," Rex said in his infuriatingly penetrating voice.

Jack was almost sure he saw Lucinda wincing on his behalf. He took time to greet colleagues at tables as he made his way around the bar, but when he arrived he still hadn't devised a retort witty enough to utter, not least because Rex's unobtrusively styled hair and elegant grey suit made him feel overdressed. "You look like a man after a drink. What'll it be?" Rex said.

"A Scotch will do me, thanks."

"Not even any water? Well, you know yourself best." Rex snapped his fingers once at the young barmaid. "Whenever you're ready, love. The same for the lady, and another of these on the rocks, and a plain Scotch. Better make that a double."

Jack thought Lucinda found Rex's tone as unappealing as the barmaid did. He thanked the young woman for his drink and topped it up with water from a jug on the bar, then nearly spilled it as Rex's glass collided with his. "Here's to the industry," Rex declared. "May it continue to prosper."

"And us," Lucinda said.

"And as many of us as it can support, Lucy, of course. When you've finished that cocktail I'm buying you both dinner in the restaurant."

"I thought we were thinking of going out, Lucy."

"What, and see miles of entertainments closed down for the winter? You want something better than that, don't you, Lucy? Maybe that's more your style, Jack."

Lucinda laid her free hand over Jack's. "It does look a bit bitter for walking."

"There's cabs outside."

"I wouldn't dig too deep into your pocket until you see how things are developing," Rex advised him. "Besides, I always think three in a cab is one too many."

"We can come in here for a drink after dinner, Jack."

There was that, and the way Lucinda had only now removed her hand from his, but Jack wasn't sure if these were meant as more than consolations. He lingered over his Scotch, in case he had reason later not to want to be too drunk, until Rex said "Better get in there before there's no room."

The chandeliered oak-panelled dining-room was indeed already almost full. Rex told the head waiter "Smythe party" and cleared his blank look by slipping him a fiver, not quite surreptitiously enough for Rex's guests to be intended not to notice. At the table by a fountain in the middle of an indoor flower-bed Jack ordered the most expensive dishes on the menu, and felt as though Rex was retaliating by insisting on the best wine. Two glasses of that made Jack take advantage of the first lull in the conversation about last year's films. "Who am I like?"

"Are we playing games now?" Rex asked, aligning his fish-knife and fork alongside the bones of his first course. "I wouldn't like to guess. Who are you?"

"You were saying in the bar you'd been talking about someone I was like."

"Ask Lucy. She brought him up."

"He wasn't much like you, Jack," Lucinda said, dabbing at her lips with a capacious linen napkin as if she wished she could use it to hide her face. "It was only... He wasn't really much like you at all."

"Except Lucy and our friend were like you and me, Jack, her with ten screens and him on the other side of town from her with just a triple."

"So what happened to him?"

"He hadn't been in the business anything like as long as you have." Lucinda obviously hoped that answer would do, but Rex fell on the question. "Exactly what you'd expect from last year's takings is what happened. No room for two sites in one town. The company closed the triple and left Lucy with her multiplex."

"If he'd had more experience they said they'd have sent him to me." Lucinda found her wineglass and proposed a hasty toast. "Here's to how it used to be when I came into the business, when what we did for films meant something to the company. To showmanship."

Rex barely touched her glass with his. "To how things have to be," he said, and rang Jack's almost empty glass.

"Nostalgia isn't what it was," Jack said.

While Lucinda looked sympathetic Rex emitted a grunt with which Jack could imagine he greeted any fault in his cinemas or in his staff. The arrival of the main course relieved an awkward silence, and Jack attacked his lobster until Lucinda coaxed him into joining her in reminiscing about favourite films. They'd agreed on *Casablanca* when Rex said "I prefer to concentrate on current product" in the tone of a future director of the company, and Lucinda interested herself in his opinions as though she'd been reminded that he was buying the meal. Jack thought it advisable just to listen or at least to give the appearance of listening while he ate and, particularly, drank, but eventually found himself saying a good deal about the way the company treated its staff and the cinemas it had bought a few years ago, his included, and how all the films he'd had to show since then seemed to consist of excesses of one sort or another. Diners were glancing at him, and he could see that some of those who were managers felt he was speaking for them. Perhaps he might persuade them to own up to that in the bar. He drained his coffee cup and brandished it for a refill, and considered pointing out that he'd been given a child's cup by mistake. Then Rex was standing up and saying "Are you sure you'll be all right while I have a word with the big boss?"

"You bet your ding-dong," Jack told him, "and thanks." But Rex wasn't talking to him; nor, presumably, when he said "Join us if you like."

Jack succeeded in staying beside Lucinda as far as the lobby, but when Rex strode into the bar she restrained Jack from following. "I should think about having an early night. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to."

"I'll see you up, shall I?"

"That's the idea."

By the sound of it she was only praising him for seeing sense. Once the doors of the lift off the lobby had closed she said "Do you mind if I say something?"

"My pleasure."

"If I were you I'd try and keep on the right side of Rex."

"You aren't me, and it wouldn't be much of a world if you were." He was doing his best to recall if he'd insulted Rex, but couldn't remember anything he'd said. "Never mind Rex. I've had a bellyful of him."

Lucinda glanced down Jack's body, then up at his face. "Well, here I am."

The lift doors opened, and he stumbled towards her, though he realised she had only been announcing her floor. She put one hand on his chest and poked the eighth-floor button, and gave him a kiss so quick he didn't even see it coming. "You get up to bed and sleep it off," she said as the doors intervened between them.

He couldn't believe he'd wasted his chance on thinking about Rex. When the lift opened he stalked along the eighth-floor corridor, muttering. He'd struggled through the last pair of fire doors when he heard sounds besides his own—a soft thud on metal, and then an outburst of thumping and mumbling. Perhaps the attendant had just wakened and was groping to his feet, and Jack had the disconcerting impression that he was fumbling about in total darkness. Why shouldn't he have turned off the light in his box while he snatched a nap? All Jack cared about just now was not coming face to face with him.

Jack had slammed his door behind him, and was feeling about on the furry wall for the living room, when he heard the lift creak open. The attendant must have thought he'd just emerged from his room. Jack's thumb scraped against the plastic switch, and the room lit up, empty as ever. At least there had to be other guests on this floor, since the lift must have brought someone up in order to be where it was, or could the attendant have been waiting to hear when Jack returned to his room? One inadvertent step rushed Jack towards a confrontation with him, but he wasn't quite that drunk. His compensatory lurch took him into the bedroom to grimace at

himself while he brushed his teeth, then he hung up his clothes and managed to aim at the toilet again before sprawling into bed.

His morning call wakened him. Darkness had gathered and grown stale behind his eyes and in his mouth. He held onto the wall, though its pelt made his fingertips twitch, all the way to the bathroom, where the shower attacked him with various extremes of temperature as he flinched against and away from the tiled wall. He took fifteen minutes to dress himself, hoping that would let him feel more able to face breakfast, and then he guided himself into the corridor, easing the door shut and muffling the key on its tag with one hand. He'd scarcely turned along the corridor when the lift doors wavered open. "Just us, is it?" the attendant said with a kind of morose triumph. "Hobble in then, Mr Lamplighter."

"Latimer," Jack said, and had already had enough. The attendant would hardly have spent the entire night in there, though he looked as though he hadn't seen daylight for considerably too long. When Jack faltered into the lift, the man sagged against the handle to send the lift down, then turned his head with an audible creak to peer at Jack. "What's that on your finger?"

Jack had been trying to withdraw inside himself in order to ignore the mustiness, presumably composed of the smells of old carpet and of the book which appeared not to have moved from the stool, and the way the muffled light seemed to have caused the attendant's face to add to its pudginess, but the question made him unsure of himself. "Which?"

"Looks like it should be a ring."

Again Jack had the sensation of being singled out, this time to be accused of pretending not to be married. He held up the shaky finger that retained a band of paler skin. "I got engaged once, but that was as far as it went."

"Far enough if you ask me. Let it drop now, there's a dear. We don't want to look at that all the way down."

Jack found the other possibilities even less attractive, particularly the sight of the crowd of his own discoloured faces, which looked as poisoned as he was trying not to feel. Nor was he anxious to see the attendant's face wobbling as he enquired "Will we be a busy boy today?"

"I should think they've plenty in store for us. How about you? Busy, I mean?"

"Don't you know who that's up to?"

"Who?" Jack demanded, though the attendant was gazing up at him so hard that his lower lids seemed in danger of peeling away from the eyeballs. Jack closed his eyes and leaned against the back wall, feeling the lift quiver each time it passed a floor, smelling a staleness which seemed increasingly to be of flesh. "If you ask me," the attendant said, "you want something."

Jack kept his mouth shut, but opening his eyes was apparently sufficient encouragement. "Get a good fat breakfast down you," the attendant told him. "That was always my cure when I'd had one of those nights."

Jack managed not to rush for the doors until the lift reached the ground floor, and then he weaved his way along the corridor to the lobby and reeled out through the revolving doors. Far down the tram lines beneath the ice-coloured sky he could see a roller coaster and a Ferris wheel, so shrunken and immobile that they and the rest of the fairground resembled cheap toys. He thought the slaps of cold wind in his face were doing him some good, but when he returned to the lobby he found the hotel now felt unbearably hot. As he fled to the lifts, the nearest of them emitted several of his colleagues, Lucinda among them. She left the others and came to Jack. "Feeling better?"

"For seeing you, yes."

"What a gentleman. Are you on your way to breakfast?"

Her perfume—sweet but not cloying—tempted him. "If I can join you."

"That was the idea."

Jack dared to take her arm as they entered the dining-room, where he received a faceful of heat laden with the smells of bacon and sausage and fried bread. "Actually, I won't," he babbled, hoping that she didn't think he had recoiled from touching her. "I'd better just—I'll see you at the screening."

He was already sprinting for the lift she'd emerged from. It took him minutes to reach his floor and his room and the toilet. Some time later he lowered himself gingerly onto the bed, and made himself stand up again not much later than he was supposed to, and picked his way into the corridor. He heard the lift gape behind him, but kept on through the fire doors and down the emergency stairs to the ballroom where the conference was taking place.

He hadn't realised that the door off the staircase would open with such a loud clank, nor that it would admit him beside the podium from which the chairman of the company was holding forth. "As I was saying," Mr Begin said while Jack made apologetic faces at him and raised his hands as if someone had stuck a gun in his back, "the future of our industry depends on teamwork. We all need to set examples to our staff..." Even when Jack located an empty seat and made himself small on it, the chairman took some time to finish looking at him, and much longer to repeat most of last year's address.

At last Mr Begin gave way to previews of forthcoming films, and the darkness let Jack close his eyes whenever the spectacle proved too much for him. Explosions that felt like colossal migraines blew up people and buildings and spaceships and planets, men encased in latex demonstrated unlikely ways to walk and unpleasant things to do to people, young couples swamped in golden light and blanketed with music explored each other, actors found objects to fall over or into or through and roared jokes at one another as though to ensure that the audience made as much noise or couldn't hear itself think... After more than an hour the lights went up, and it was time for lunch. Jack was on his way to standing, having found that sitting still had done him some unexpected good, when he saw Mr Begin heading straight for him. "Jack Latimer, isn't it," the chairman said, towering over him even now Jack was on his feet. "Used to be the Grand."

"That's my place."

"Well, Jack, you missed me saying it's been a good year for us overall," Mr Begin said, and at once Jack was hearing him beyond a hollow sound that filled his ears. The chairman had never called him by his first name before, and Jack knew why he was doing so now. He stared at Mr Begins several ruddy chins that looked gift-wrapped with a bow tie, and scarcely heard the chairman's words for hearing what lay behind them. He heard himself say he got on well with Rex Smythe and call himself a liar, this last after he closed his mouth. "That's the spirit. Teamwork, Jack, keep telling yourself teamwork," Mr Begin said, clapping him on the arm.

Jack rubbed it as he stumbled out of the hotel, into the vicious wind. He caught a tram whose wheels kept up a screech like a circular saw as they followed the lines along the promenade, past miles of stalls boarded up for the winter. Even if the company retained him, what would happen to his

assistants? If he could have afforded to take early retirement he would have made way for at least one of them. The fifth fish and chip shop he passed convinced him he was hungry, and eating felt like the first real thing that had happened to him all day. He walked back to the hotel, shivering from having left his coat there, feeling steadily less present. In the ballroom he gripped his temples and stared at the floor throughout the afternoon's pep talk on management, and hadn't moved from that position when the room emptied and Lucinda came over to him. "Still nursing your head?"

"Just thinking."

"Nothing too bad, I hope."

"Looks like the Grand won't be seeing me for much longer."

"Oh, Jack." She squatted in the aisle beside him, the skirt of her dark suit inching above her smooth knees. "Is that what Mr Big told you?"

"Not in so many words."

Lucinda rested a hand on his shoulder before she stood up. "We haven't had that drink yet."

"You've seen me when I've had a few."

"Let's make it just a couple."

"And dinner as well?"

"All right, dinner. I'm going up for a shower and then I'll see you in the bar, say at seven."

The notion of her in the shower revived Jack as much as anything could at the moment. The promise which it and her tone seemed to extend to him brought him to his feet, and he escorted her as far as the main lifts, only to see Rex Smythe and Mr Begin waiting. "I'll use my own lift," he said in her ear.

As soon as he thumbed the button on the wall of the deserted corridor the lift doors jerked open, and the attendant stepped back further into the grey light, his unhealthily white faces burgeoning on both sides of him. "I thought it'd have to be you, Mr Hatimer."

Jack was too exhausted to argue. "Almost," he said.

"Nearly got you now, have we? Scuttle in then, before I have to do a disappearing trick."

"I'm glad to hear I'm not your only customer," Jack said, stepping into the grey light and seeing it coat face after face until he turned away from himself.

The attendant fell against the lever, then poked his face over his shoulder at Jack as the lift swayed upwards. "Why's that, old thing?"

"I wouldn't like to think you were going up and down just for me. By the way, you're never telling me they still haven't sent anyone to take over."

"Aren't I? Well, I won't, then."

"Would you like me to see if I can get someone for you?"

"Too late for that."

The attendant was resting his chin on his shoulder as though his neck had locked, a position which appeared not to bother him but which Jack found so painful to observe that he had to struggle not to close his eyes. "So how's your day in the big wide world been?" the attendant said.

He was beginning to put Jack in mind of a ventriloquist's dummy which had twisted itself into a dismaying posture while continuing to talk. "Could have been worse," Jack mumbled so as not to be drawn.

"Not over yet, or is it? Did I feel the sun go down?"

"It's dark, yes."

"Time to play then, eh?"

The attendant winked, turning that side of his face into a mass of wrinkles that looked about to crack like the make-up it increasingly resembled, and shoved the lever up. "Here we are again, happy as can be. We'll neither of us get any higher."

His rearing up to move the lever had made Jack think of a body being yanked by a rope around its broken neck. "Are you sure you're all right?" he stammered.

"As sure as you are."

Once Jack had blundered out of the lift he didn't glance across the corridor until he was in his room. The attendant was turning slowly back and forth and yet keeping his face towards Jack. "I'll be waiting," he said, and levered the doors shut.

Jack slammed his and leaned his forehead against it and groped for the chain, which he fumbled into the socket. He stood there for a while, unable to think what he was trying to do, and then he remembered his date with Lucinda. He laid his grey suit out on the bed, where it appeared to be making him a promise of company in his room, before taking a bath. As long as he lay in the water he found it possible not to think about the day or how he might sneak past the lift attendant. A few minutes before seven he dried himself and got dressed, and was combing his hair a third time when the phone rang.

Whoever it was, they wouldn't make him late for Lucinda. As he snatched the receiver he had to remind himself not to say he was the Grand. "Yes, who's this?"

"Jack?"

"Lucy! I'm just on my way down."

"Actually, Jack, forgive me, but I'm going to have to cancel dinner."

"Who's the problem?"

"Who else could it be? I told the boss I was meeting you, but he didn't offer to treat you as well."

"Shall we have our drink afterwards instead?"

"Mr Begin seems to want my whole evening. Lots to discuss, he says. Never mind, Jack, there's always next year."

"Always has been," Jack muttered, and let the phone drop. He grabbed it again on the only impulse that seemed left to him and dialled Reception. "I've a complaint. Let me speak to the manager."

"You're Mr..." After a pause the receptionist said "Mr Latimer, is it?"

"Last time I looked it was."

"I'm sorry, Mr Latimer. We've been trying to contact you. There's been a slight mistake on the computer, and there was a new girl on the desk when you checked in. You weren't supposed to have that room."

"Where do you want me to be?"

"That wing wasn't meant to be in use this weekend, you see. Someone should have noticed you were there, but the chambermaid didn't mention it

till she came off duty. So if we can just move you over to where the rest of your party is staying..."

"I like it where I am. That isn't what I rang about, it's a member of your staff."

"If we could just deal with your room first, and then I'll get you the manager."

"This has waited long enough. I called about the fellow in the lift outside my room."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, sir. If you'd like me to send someone up to help you move—"

"The lift attendant, whatever his name is. He's been in there ever since I got here yesterday, and if you're saying he's been just for me, that's even more ridiculous."

"You must be mistaken, sir. None of our lifts have been manned for years."

"You're as sure of that as you were of which room you put me in, is that right? Tell you what, you speak to the manager and tell him I've been buggered about enough for one weekend or the rest of my life, come to that, and while you're at it tell him nobody knows you've a man in your lift and it's past time someone did something about him, and then one of you call me back."

He had barely replaced the receiver when the phone shrilled at him. If it was the receptionist again, renewing her attempt to persuade him to change rooms—"Yes?"

"Jack?"

"No need to sound as if you don't know."

"Rex Smythe. I thought it might be an idea for us to have a chinwag."

"Whose idea?"

"Mine and the company's. Shall we meet in the bar for a dram? I gather you're free."

For a few seconds Jack was speechless with rage, and then he saw the chance he'd almost missed. "No, come up to my room. There's something I want you to see."

"Is it important?"

"Very." At the moment Jack could think of nothing more important than ensuring Rex saw the attendant too. "Don't use the main lifts. Walk all the way to my end of the hotel, and there's one that brings you right to me."

"I hope this is going to be worth it," Smythe grumbled, which made Jack certain that it was. He hung up the receiver and opening the door, shot the bolt so as it keep it from closing while he crossed the corridor. He thumped on the metal door and shouted "I've reminded the hotel you're in there. They don't seem to know either of us are here."

The doors staggered open, and the attendant peered up at him. He was clinging to the handle as though for support, and his face, whose colour and texture put Jack in mind of mould on an apple, was turned more or less towards the corridor, yet Jack had the decidedly unwelcome impression that he'd twisted his head even further around than before. Nevertheless he spoke, keeping his chin fixed while the rest of his head wobbled up and down. "Mr Hatton."

Jack didn't feel disposed to argue with anyone who looked like that. "Better put it on, then," he said as lightly as he could.

"That's rich. That's good enough for end of pier." The attendant appeared to be laughing silently, his face quaking like a mask about to work itself loose. "Seeing as how you wanted to do me a favour, can I ask you one?"

"What have you in mind?"

"Can I use your...?"

It wasn't the pause which made Jack falter, it was the way the attendant jerked his head to indicate the hotel room, stretching his deeply ridged white neck until Jack had to look away. "God bless us, can't you even use the toilet?" he muttered, and raised his voice. "Go ahead."

He saw the attendant bobbing up at the edge of his vision as though someone had hauled on an invisible rope; then the man rushed across the corridor so fast that Jack hadn't time to look at him. He had the briefest glimpse of a figure on which the grey of the uniform and the white of flesh had somehow become less clearly separated, before the bathroom door slammed and the bolt clicked home like the hammer of a gun. "Keep an eye on the cage, there's a dear," the attendant must have said in transit, because the words were itching in Jack's ears. "Actually—" Jack called,

remembering Smythe, and started back into his room just as the lift began to emit a waspish buzz.

He was afraid it was malfunctioning until he grasped that someone was trying to summon it—Rex. "Excuse me, but—" he recommenced, and then several observations silenced him. By the sound of it the attendant was using the shower rather than the toilet, and whatever he was doing in there, Jack could see from the gap beneath the door and the position of the living room outside the bathroom that he was doing it in total darkness. When Jack heard the noise the plughole of the bath was making, a prolonged choked gurgle that suggested some not entirely solid mass was being washed into the plumbing, he retreated into the corridor, almost falling over backwards in his haste. The lift was buzzing irritably, and it occurred to him that his nearest ally was Rex. The thought was enough to send him into the lift. He shoved the handle down, and the doors shut off the corridor at once.

He could have done without quite so much movement around him: the strip of indicator lights flickering one by one like candles that wouldn't stay lit, the shifting of his pack of faces leading into nothingness at both edges of his vision, the stool wobbling from his having bumped into it as he'd taken refuge in the lift, and now folding its unsteady legs and throwing the book on the worn-out carpet. As the book fell open Jack saw it was a biography of Tony Hancock, but it was the word written in faded ink on the title page that caught his attention. It must be the owner's name—Hatton.

"Don't you even know your own name?" Jack demanded, and then another possibility occurred to him. As he raised his head he glimpsed all his reflections shifting. He hadn't time to glance at them, because the lift was almost at the fourth floor, where he heard Rex grousing—but as he shoved the lever up to halt the lift, then exerted the extra pressure which opened the doors, he couldn't avoid noticing that his suit looked grey as a uniform in the dim light, which had also rendered the mark of his engagement ring invisible. None of this need matter, because the doors were opening, and Rex's surprise at the sight of him would restore Jack to himself.

Rex took one step towards the lift, staring directly into Jack's face, then he grimaced and recoiled, waving a hand in front of his nose. "Forget it. I'll phone him," he said.

"Rex, wait. It's me."

Smythe gave no more sign of hearing him than he had of recognising him. Jack heard him shoulder the nearest pair of fire doors out of his way, and tried to follow. The light from the corridor felt like fire on his whitening skin. The doors in the deserted corridor bumped shut, and he flinched back into the lift. His reflections met him like two packs of cards collapsing towards him, vanishing as they came. He heaved at the lever, which took more of his energy to move now, and sent the lift reeling upwards. It still belonged to the attendant more than to him—but as the cage began to quiver to a halt he wondered what might come dripping and gurgling to find him if he called whatever was left of it out of his room.

1993

Where They Lived

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The Hatchards had just crossed Ataturk Bulvari when a shoeshine boy commenced rubbing the straps of Don's sandals with a cloth. "Your shoes very dirty, sir."

"All right, son, they're only sandals. He'll be polishing my feet next, Maggie. Not the kind of feet you'd want in bed with you." As he walked faster towards the sun-bleached concrete seafront the boy pursued him like a terrier, and Don felt the cloth catch the nail of one big toe. "That's all, son, would you mind? They're going in the sea, so you might as well not bother."

"He has to make a living somehow, Don. If he was a beggar you'd only look away from him."

"You know I hadn't any Turkish money until we went to the bank. What did you want me to give that woman, a travellers' cheque?" He dug in the pocket of his shorts for change, muttering "Have this if it'll help you mind your own business," and jangled the coins for Maggie's benefit before he dropped them into the small thin grubby hand. "I hope you heard that," he said as he tramped puffing after her.

She pulled her sun hat lower, netting her forehead with shadows. "Oh yes, I'm getting expert at hearing what you don't want me to hear."

"I meant the donation, and you know I—We'll look for her on the way back to the hotel if you like." He was reaching out a hand for one of Maggie's, and about to say "Let's start again like we said we would" when a man shouted at his back "Hey, English."

Only a policeman took that tone, Don thought—one of the policemen he'd seen strolling through the town as if all they needed to keep order were the guns they wore. This one must have observed Don appearing to taunt the shoeshine boy, or assumed he was pestering Maggie, and if Don couldn't clarify the situation, where might he end up? "Wait," he called, images of a communal jail cell with plumbing even worse than the hotel provided

crowding into his overheated head. When he turned, however, he saw two tourists bearing down on him.

They might have spent their marriage growing more alike. They looked like body-builders who had settled at some point for plumpness. They had identical pale blue eyes and marble grins, and over their swimwear both wore open buttonless shirts printed with cartoon figures brandishing bubbling cocktails. Their peeling skins were all the colours of new plaster, and oily with lotion. The woman's cropped hair was the same greying red as the strips under the man's nose and above his ears. Cameras bounced on their stomachs as they overtook the Hatchards. "Thank all the saints for someone who speaks English like a native," the woman said in a voice that would have carried across the street. "We were beginning to think we were the only people in town."

Her husband's shout had expressed enthusiasm, Don gathered now, because the man said in the same tone "Gareth and Trixie Lunt. Hotel's just as bad. Run by characters who bring you boiled fruit juice if you ask for tea, that's if you can make yourself heard above the Huns and God knows what else the hotel's full of."

"My friends call me Trick."

"We're Don Hatchard and—"

Maggie swung round from watching a man in an embroidered cap leading a bear on a chain up the dusty slope beyond the promenade. "I'm Maggie," she said, and when Trixie Lunt tittered behind her hand, added with the ostentatious patience she ordinarily reserved for Don "Did I miss something?"

"Just how you can tell you're married, having to fight to get a word past the old man. Don't tell me, china. No, silver."

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"Never only crystal."

"I'm still not—"

"Are you saying ivory? Look at them, Gar, ivory. You wouldn't think it in a million years."

"If you mean anniversaries," Maggie said, "I wouldn't know. It's been nearly twenty."

"Then Don should be ashamed of himself. If Gar missed any he'd know about it till the next one. When was the last time Don bought you something nice?"

"Oh, he has his moments."

"We'll make this one then, won't we, Gar?"

"Actually," Don said, "we were just—"

Trixie retreated a step and seized her husband's arm and rubbed her left cheek as though Don had slapped it. "Don't let us interrupt anything, I'm sure. We were going to ask you to take our photograph."

"Don's better with technology than I am."

"Mine's so simple even a man can't get it wrong. Just look through my hole, Don, and find us in the little lit-up bit, then you squeeze my button till you feel it stick and poke it down."

While the Lunts posed, intensifying their grins and plumping their arms around each other, Don surreptitiously wiped the sweaty back of the camera on his shorts, earning himself a sympathetic grimace from Maggie. He moved so as to frame the Lunts against a rank of bootblacks sitting on low stools behind elaborate brass stands and a stallholder brushing peaches with a small birch broom. The shutter release gave before he thought it would, and he was considering a retake when Trixie strode up to him and bumped him with her leopard-skinned breasts as she retrieved the camera. "Now we'll get you."

Don stood beside Maggie and took her hand, and realised he'd forgotten how it felt—slim and smooth and cooler than the relentlessly hot day. As he stroked it with his thumb she responded with a squeeze which he was almost sure was more affectionate than a request for him to stop. The camera clicked, and Lunt produced a notebook. "We'll need your address."

Maggie relinquished Don's hand at once, from which he assumed she was telling him to give the information. "Well, would you believe it," Trixie said when he had. "You don't live far from us at all. We'll have to deliver your snap personally."

Several seconds later Lunt broke the silence. "First time?"

"I'm the only one who'd put up with him," Maggie said.

"Ha," Lunt commented, and after a pause, "ha. I'm sure Don knows I was asking if you'd been before."

"We've wanted to, but the children never did. This year we decided they were old enough to go off on their own, so we have."

"You ought to have let them know who's in charge," Lunt told him. "So you won't know the best place to eat in town."

"We only flew in yesterday."

"Then we'll show you," Trixie cried. "We'll take you now."

"Actually, we were going—"

"I wouldn't mind some lunch."

"You tell him, Maggie," Trixie said. "Come with us and you'll never eat anywhere else."

Her husband led the way, and whenever anyone looked like approaching them—proprietors of the seafood restaurants by the harbour, stallholders selling imitation Rolexes and Gucci T-shirts in the pedestrian precinct near the mosque, owners of leather shops seeking customers in the crowds constricted by the arches flanking a medieval tower—he said "No thank you" with such authority that those addressed fell back. The narrow street beyond the arches was the Old Bazaar, and Don thought Lunt was conducting them along it towards the market area, where kebabs lay on grills outside restaurants which Maggie had proposed visiting. Instead Lunt marched up an alley. "I bet you're thanking us already," Trixie said.

It was full of would-be English restaurants. Nearest was the Englisch Pub, outside which a blackboard advertised Watneys Red Baral and rost beef and Yorkschire pudding. "Can't expect them to spell when half the yobs at home can't either," Lunt thundered, having caught Don's eye. "They do food that isn't only fit for pigs, that's the appeal."

"Actually, I'm not as hungry as I thought I was."

"We like trying the local cuisine," Don said.

"We'll see how long that lasts. Turkey, isn't that what the Yanks call a dead loss?" Lunt said loudly as a young man with large eyes the same deep brown as his skin opened the door of the pub. "You'll want a drink at least. Is it gin for the ladies? Two of them with tonic, and two pints of your best for the lads."

By the time the drinks were brought to the outside table Trixie had ascertained the name of the Hatchards' hotel. "What are you doing tomorrow?" she enquired, ice-cubes clicking against her display of teeth.

"Taking it easy by the pool," Maggie said at once.

"If you're after conversation, we're at the Turkish Paradise, ha ha. Or are you here on your own so you'll stay together?"

"Does it show?"

"When you've seen as many marriages fall apart as Gar and me have it does. We've found it helps for the hens to go off for a natter, and the same for the cocks if they're that way inclined."

"I expect Don and I will discuss it."

The Lunts had a good deal more to say, but nothing which Don thought he needed to be aware of. When he and Maggie had downed their drinks he felt justified in not offering to buy another round. They left the Lunts groaning and yawning and complaining at the non-appearance of the waiter, and when they were alone in the crowd Maggie said "Suddenly I like you better."

"In that case I'm glad we met them."

"Just let's make sure we never do again."

She took his hand as they arrived at the road beyond the funfair with which the market merged. Once they were across the dual carriageway, which was divided by cacti and interrupted by a roundabout where rights of way seemed chancy as roulette, she kept hold of his hand for long enough to convince him that things might be improving. They plodded up the slope of the pulverised pavement to their hotel, above which horses grazed within the frameworks of new buildings, the most nearly completed of which sprouted concrete weeds bristling with cables, the pillars of unbuilt walls. Don expected Maggie to head for the poolside bar, but she collected their key from Reception. "Coming up?"

"Try and stop me." As she let them into the small sparsely furnished room he added "Maybe all we need is time to get used to being just us again."

"Forever hopeful," she said, less encouragingly than he would have liked. Nevertheless she wriggled out of her swimsuit and lay on her bed and gazed at him, so that he undressed and pushed his bed against hers. He knelt

between her legs and kissed her mottled breasts, and experienced a surge of affection for their wrinkles. Beyond foreplay, however, the situation was as frustrating as it had been all year: both he and Maggie had put on too much weight for him to be able to reach as deep into her as he used to. Before long he was aware only of their stomachs smacking together and the sweat pouring off him. "Never mind," Maggie said as, having fallen out of her a second time, he began to manipulate himself.

"I won't if you don't."

"It's something else we have to see if we can get used to. Come again?"

Don refrained from saying "I wish I could", but "And if we can't?" or "Such as what else?" seemed equally inadvisable. "So long as we're used to each other," he said.

After they'd taken turns to stand on the tiled bathroom floor to use the curtainless shower, they dozed on their united beds, their bodies touching carelessly, until a huge blurred recorded voice singing the praises of Allah wakened them. They ate in a restaurant where a boy in a fez turned a spit with one hand and clattered a bell to attract customers with the other. During the meal all the power failed for hundreds of yards, and in the moments before waiters lit candles on the tables the only light came from the sun drowning in the Aegean. "I wonder what we can do tomorrow to top this," Don said.

"Anything except what I told them we'd do," Maggie responded, more sharply than he thought was called for.

The muezzin roused them before dawn, and a morning chorus of nausea resounding through the pipes kept them awake. They were alone on the patio for breakfast of boiled eggs and goat's cheese. Don sensed she was holding him responsible for something, but if he asked what was wrong she would blame him for not knowing. Over his second apple tea he risked saying "So..."

"I fancy one of those boat trips out of the harbour." Skewered chickens drooped on spits outside restaurants; a teenage youth with a hint of muscles was brushing a poster for a Schwarzenegger film in Turkish onto the medieval tower. Don dropped a coin on the plate in front of a young mother sitting cross-legged in the dust beside the tower, but when he said "No

thank you" as a man with silk scarves draped over his arm commenced an approach, Maggie shot a frown at him.

Several medium-sized motorboats were swaying not quite in unison a few yards out from the pebbly beach. The boat Maggie chose because all the people queueing for it were Turkish was the last to leave. They'd waded through the shallows and were being helped under the awning onto the bench that surrounded the deck when a voice shouted "Hold the boat. You with the boat, wait for us."

"Don't look," Don muttered. "They'll see it's not their sort of day out."

He heard a concerted wallowing behind him, then the boat lurched. "Here, here, don't go starting your engine till we've parked ourselves," Lunt yelled. "We've paid your feller, your partner, whatever the two of you are."

"Make room for two big ones," Trixie bellowed.

Don and Maggie sat still, hoping that the other passengers would close the gaps on either side of them, making space elsewhere on the bench. When the family beside Don backed away from him his mouth opened, and he found himself addressing Maggie, more loudly when she gave him an uncomprehending look. "Garababry splento," he persisted. "Parrawarra akkabroddle prothny binoth."

He was praying that the Lunts would take him for a foreigner, but his performance brought him a scowl from a Turk with a rectangular ebony moustache, who appeared to suspect Don of mocking his countrymen. That dismayed Don less than being joined by the Lunts. "Don't bother trying to learn that jabber," Lunt advised him. "They understand our lingo fast enough when they want to fleece us of our shekels."

Though the boat was already a hundred yards into the deeper water Don might have asked to disembark or even swum for the shore with Maggie, except that she had turned her back on him to watch the captain while he manoeuvred the boat out of the bay and spoke extensively in Turkish. "I speak English," he promised at last. "Name is Bekir."

"What's he on about now?" Trixie demanded, gazing straight at him.

"He's telling us his name," Don said.

"He'd be better off keeping quiet about it," Lunt declared. "Sounds a bit too much like bugger for my taste. I've never seen such a lot as these for

pawing other men. You could get a few sly fingers up your arse round here if you ask me."

"I'll bet you're thanking the saints we came, or by the look of it you'd have had no-one to talk to. Except each other, and we'll see you do that, won't we, Gar?"

So the Lunts did as the boat chugged fuming through the uneven sea, until Don felt that the sunlight, like their questions, was probing for him. He assumed Maggie shared the feeling, but she kept her hand away from him. Two protracted hours later, as an island rose into view, Trixie wanted to know if he and Maggie still made love. "Why on earth should you assume any different?" he blurted.

"We've heard that before, haven't we, Gar? A man who doesn't want to own up there's a problem. Some friendly advice, Mag—sometimes it takes more than one to solve it."

"Really."

Don told himself that she was inching away from the Lunts, not from him. He was almost relieved when Lunt set about haranguing the captain, who had substituted a cassette of Turkish music for the collection of American hits which had just ended. "Can't we do without that heathen racket? Our friends won't like it any more than we do."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind just speaking for yourself," Maggie said.

"Well, pardon us, I'm sure," Trixie said, and as loudly to the captain "As long as it's a barbecue I hope we're getting good plain food. I don't want to end up using your excuse for a toilet, thank you very much."

"A waiter was saying it's too many cold drinks in the heat that upsets people's stomachs," Maggie said with a pointed glance at the latest bottle of beer in Trixie's fist. "He said you should hold it in your mouth before you swallow it."

"Gar said they were dirty buggers," Trixie squealed, wincing in delight, and nudged Don with a quivering elbow.

Several passengers dived off the boat as it glided into a cove, one of them catching the rope thrown by the captain and tying it to a ring embedded in the rocky beach. "Shall we?" Don suggested, first turning away from the

Lunts, and had to swivel his gaze twice towards the water before Maggie deigned to understand.

The shock of his plunge was assuaged in seconds. He swam near the Turks, thinking their presence should keep the Lunts away, then realised that Maggie was staying at a distance from him too. He swam with his face in the gentle waves, hearing the constant undertone of pebbles grinding together on the sea-bed, and was almost in a trance when he felt her hand lay itself on his spine and trail between his legs as he moved. Was it the water that made it seem plumper than usual? As it wriggled like an octopus he turned over and came face to face with Trixie Lunt, whose hand floated up and bumped its knuckles against his flattened crotch. "What do you— Where's Maggie?" he spluttered.

Trixie wiped her grin with the back of her hand. "She's all right, she's with my big feller."

Don's question had been provoked to some extent by guilt, and that was one of the emotions which sent him floundering past the seaward side of the boat. Against the silent chatter of sunlight on the waves he saw Lunt standing waist-deep in the sea and shouting over Maggie as she heaved herself to her knees. "You keep your eyes for your own women," Lunt was shouting at the moustached Turk. "I know you. I've seen you hanging around the hotel."

As the man and his two friends stepped forward, kicking waves aside, the captain called to them in a tone which Don thought sounded altogether too encouraging. His stomach felt inextricably knotted by the time he grasped that the captain was summoning everyone to the barbecue. He stayed in the water with Maggie, wishing she would look at him, until the Lunts and all the Turks had been served, then he paddled ashore with her to collect bread and salad and half a chicken each. As soon as they were seated on a rock the Lunts came over. "Try not to look so nervous. If things turn ugly I'll deal with them," Lunt said. "I've handled a good few men in my time."

"He used to drill them in the army. You never saw such a knees-up."

For a while the Hatchards used their food as an excuse not to talk, then Maggie dropped her greasy paper plate and shoved herself to her feet. "I'm going to lie down."

"See, you should have eaten where we told you," Trixie said.

"Nothing to do with it," Don retorted, and tore at the remains of Maggie's chicken with his teeth to demonstrate.

"You can have mine to chew if you're that starved."

"I've got all I want, thank you," Don said, and devoted himself to gnawing. On his way to the boat he complimented the captain loudly on the food, realising too late that his comment could be interpreted as a rebuke to Maggie as well as to the Lunts. "Let me be," she groaned when he tried to stroke her forehead, and stretched her body away from him along the bench.

She had to sit up when the rest of the passengers boarded. Don could tell she was determined not to be sick while the Lunts were watching, but it was an impossible resolve; she spent much of the last hour of the voyage with her head over the side of the boat. The Lunts took a great deal of persuading not to assist her to the hotel, but Don managed to do so alone, almost losing the way in the littered side streets Maggie insisted on keeping to. In their room she lowered herself onto her bed and looked as if she meant to wave the entire world away with one hand.

That was her for the next day as well. Don ate at the hotel and confined himself to the pool area, where waiters asked after Maggie and sketched sun-hats with their fingers above their heads. She had him bring her bottles of water, but whenever he asked if he could do anything else for her, he received at best a stare.

A cock crow awoke him next day to find her giving him the same look. "What's wrong?" he said through the night's accumulation in his mouth. "How are you feeling?"

"Can't you tell?"

"You sound better," he risked saying. "Shall we do something today?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"What would you like to do besides avoiding you know who?"

"You think that'll take care of it, do you?"

"Unless you've a better idea."

"My idea would have been not to let them take our photograph."

"We didn't know what they were like then."

"Precisely." After a pause she said even more accusingly "Didn't we?"

"Do you want me to tell them to have it developed here and, I don't know, leave it at Reception for us?"

"Oh yes, I'm sure they'd trust the locals with their film."

"We could say, we could say there was a film place another Yorkshire pudding fan had recommended to us."

"What good would that do? They'll still have our address."

"Not much we can do about that, unless you feel like asking for it back."

"It wasn't me who was so anxious to give it to them."

"I didn't notice you trying to stop me," he said, and was tempted to add that he hadn't noticed her trying to avoid Lunt in the sea. "You can't expect me to ask for it. It isn't done."

"It's been a while since I've expected much of you at all."

The dawn showed him her face slackening under the weight of their marriage, wrinkles multiplying as he watched. He must look the same to her. "If there's nothing we can do there's nothing we can do," she said, and turned towards the wall.

What she meant was clear enough to him. It hung unspoken between them as they explored the market which had sprung up overnight in all the streets around the hotel. At Ephesus, where the marble of the ruins hurled back the sunlight, he thought of phoning the Lunts' hotel to discover how long they were staying. At Didyma the stumps of columns leading to the temple of the oracle towered over him as he considered venturing to the hotel instead of attempting to conquer the local phone system. At Pamukkale, where they swam in fizzing water which had drowned an ancient portico, he felt all Maggie's silences weighing him down, and vowed to present her with a plan at dinner.

He was sitting on the narrow concrete balcony outside their room that evening, and watching an old man lead his camel up the road which became a rubbly path, when he saw the Lunts marching towards the hotel. "Thank God for a civilised face," Gareth bellowed, and Trixie yelled "What have you done with her? Don't tell us she's still heaving."

"My wife's in the shower."

"Well, when she comes out," Trixie shouted despite having strode closer, "tell her you're both joining us for dinner."

"I'm afraid we've already booked a table at a Turkish place."

"So if you don't show up," Lunt roared, "they'll think it was the will of Allah. It's our last night. We thought you'd want to help us celebrate."

"I promised Maggie we'd go to her favourite restaurant," Don said, wondering how many lies that encompassed. "While you're here I don't suppose you've got our photograph."

"I haven't finished my roll yet. We didn't find much else worth taking."

"We told you we'd bring it to you at home."

Looking down on them emboldened Don. "No, don't do that. Just send it if you want us to have it."

Lunt fixed him with a stare Don could imagine him thrusting in the faces of new recruits. "If you think again we'll be drinking until the bus leaves for the airport. You know where we'll be."

Don watched them tramp away, swinging their arms, dwindling, gone for good. He felt able to indulge in some pity for them. Now he had plenty to tell Maggie, and he saved it until they were in the restaurant where the boy with the fez rang the bell—saved it until they'd ordered a second bottle of the special reserve, which cost all of five pounds. "Did you hear me talking when you were in the shower?" he asked as the waiter pulled the cork.

"If I had I'd have answered, wouldn't I?"

"Not to you, to guess who. Guess who's going home tonight so we won't need to spend next week watching for them."

"Did you ask?"

Don had raised his glass for hers to chime against, but when she didn't respond he half emptied it. "Ask?"

"For God's sake, Don. For our address."

"Of course I—would have if I'd needed to. I got him to promise they wouldn't come, just send the picture."

"And you believed him."

"What's your reason not to trust him?"

"How much reason do you need? You can tell just by looking at them."

Don could have probed further, but his anger was growing more diffuse. "So what do you want me to make him do, tear it up in front of us?"

"I'm not making anyone do anything. It wasn't me who handed them our address on a plate in the first place."

The remainder of their conversation consisted of the scraping of utensils on china and the thumps of glasses on the table. They had another week together here, Don told himself as they trudged to the hotel, but he could see that wouldn't be enough. As Maggie pulled off her dress in the room he thought of making love to her, and knew that he would fail, not only because he was too drunk. "I'm going for a walk," he blurted.

"I notice you wait until I can't."

"What's stopping you?" he would have retorted, except that an argument now would solve even less than usual. He stalked out, holding his head erect as if to keep his rage steady, and down the randomly lamplit road to the side turning which led to the Turkish Paradise Hotel.

The coach to the airport wouldn't be making its rounds for hours. The forecourt surrounded on three sides by single-storey concrete blocks was empty even of the luggage of the departing guests. Don could hear the murmur of an open-air restaurant beyond the rooms. He went straight to the Reception window at the near end of the left-hand concrete block, and had to slap a bell to summon a large bald Turk from an inner office. "Are Mr and Mrs Lunt here?"

The man touched the dangling key to room 18 and shook his head. "Back later."

"Can I wait for them in the restaurant?"

"Round there," the man said, indicating the end of the right-hand block, and withdrew into the office.

It occurred to Don that the man was loath to spend any more time with a friend of the Lunts than was absolutely necessary. Don reached across the sill and grasping the key and its brass persuader, lifted them off the hook. The bunch of his shadows fanned out and merged like the props in an obscure magic trick as he crossed to room 18, which was directly opposite Reception. He remembered looking down on Lunt, the wallet in the man's breast pocket leaving no room for a notebook. Before his sense of the impossibility of what he planned to do overtook him, he poked the key in the lock and turned it. Glancing back, he stepped in and closed the door behind him. "Attaboy," he muttered, "or maybe Ataturk." An object

crouching at the level of his shins tripped him and sent him sprawling into the dark.

He landed face down on a bed whose crumpled sheets smelled thickly of perfume and felt sodden with sweat. He writhed upright and sat on the edge, rubbing his shins and brandishing the brass club of the key, until he could see around the dim room. It was empty except for two suitcases, one of which had tripped him. By stooping until his face was inches from them he ascertained that neither label identified which Lunt each case belonged to. He heaved his assailant onto the bed, jarring a protest out of the sketches of hangers in the doorless wardrobe, and fumbled for the zipper.

At first he thought the case was locked, the zipper was so stiff. Abruptly it tore along half the length of its track, opening the case as far as the handle. Shirts bulged out of the gap, releasing such a smell of lotion that he thought the Lunts had crept into the room behind him. He flexed his shoulders and dragged the zipper all the way. The canvas lid reared up, exposing Lunts stale underwear. Don was rubbing his fingers on his shirt preparatory to rummaging when he saw the notebook peeking out of a nest of used socks. He fished it out between finger and thumb and hurried to the window.

The margins of the pages were a staircase of initial letters, and it took him mere seconds to locate H. That page and its reverse were full of names and addresses, but he only had time to observe that they didn't include his and Maggie's. Theirs was all by itself on the next page, which he ripped out at once. Doing so revealed that what he'd almost noticed about the names and addresses on the previous page was equally true of those on the I pages, and of as much of the book as he dared linger to examine. Virtually every address, including those listed only under first names, had been crossed out.

Shame at having torn out the page almost made him replace it, then he stuffed it into his pocket. He returned the book to its sweaty niche and struggled to zip the case shut, and had to reopen it so as to extract an escaping arm from the teeth. Hauling the case off the bed, he dumped it where it had lain in wait for him. The memory, and his growing need to urinate, revived his anger. He kicked open the bathroom door and unzipping himself, aimed into the glimmering pedestal. "This'll teach you to keep whatever you didn't keep off my wife," he snarled.

It didn't work. He inched forward and stood wider-legged, but couldn't produce a drop. He smelled the Lunts in the dark and felt as though they'd

seized him by his useless crotch. He packed himself away and waddled aching to the door. Sneaking into the deserted forecourt, he hurried bow-legged to Reception, where he craned over the sill and hooked the key into place with an expertness born of urgency. He limped out of the gate as if the pain in his bladder was a leash and swerved away from the main road. Once he was beyond the glow of the forecourt he bowed over a lump of rubble shaped like an ancient helmet and let himself out, but the pressure in his bladder was its own defeat. He clenched his eyelids and gritted his teeth, and at last was rewarded by a jet so fierce it splashed his ankles. He was luxuriating in the sensation of release when he heard footsteps closing in on him.

If the Lunts had returned, they couldn't touch him. Surely they wouldn't recognise his back view in the gloom. The footsteps continued to approach, and he had to look, still spouting. Behind him were the moustached Turk and his two friends from the boat.

Don felt his buttocks squeezing together, his mouth opening helplessly. He was about to burst into the gibberish he'd spoken on the boat. He'd lost his balance, and as his shoulder bruised itself against the forecourt wall his penis and its jet swung towards them. "Yes, look at it," he heard himself yelling in a parade-ground voice. "Hardly worth having, is it? Might as well be a woman. Tom Thumb, she used to call it when she wanted it, and that was a long time ago."

He felt sick, tingling with nervousness, and hadn't the least idea what he might do next. He could see only the watching faces and eyes, darkened further by the shadow of the wall. He felt his penis trying to shrink as it worked. Then the three brayed wordlessly in contempt and strolled into the forecourt. Don leaned his forehead against the wall and vomited, and remembered Lunt wielding his ballpoint in the notebook like a weapon. He should have torn out the next page too in case it retained an impression of his and Maggie's address.

"Don Hatchard?"

"Who wants him?"

"The name's Lunt. We met this year in Turkey. I've got something for him and his wife."

"You'll need the new address. Are you ready?"

"Fire away." A sound of scribbling fierce enough to be audible over the phone responded to the details. "That's close enough to drive to," Lunt declared.

"I'm glad to hear that. Is it something Mrs Hatchard asked for?"

"Now you mention it, I wouldn't be surprised."

Don broke the connection. "It'll be something for her to remember me by," he said in a voice that sounded very much like Lunt's, and as grim.

The Word

"The Word owes its existence to Douglas E, Winter, the spectacularly talented author of *Run*. Doug conceived an anthology of tales that would span the last century, one long story to a decade. That much I'm sure of, and memory suggests Steve King was originally to evoke the sixties, but wasn't the underlying theme to be a revelation brought down a mountain? I could swear that's why I included it in my piece. For the rest I leave interpretation to the reader, but I'm reminded that I once attracted some hostility with an article on science fiction conventions in *Blazon*, the journal of the Knights of St Fanthony."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The dead*

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Nobody tries to speak to me while I'm waiting for the lift, thank Sod. Whenever you want to go upstairs at a science fiction convention the lift is always on the top floor, and by the time it arrives it'll have attracted people like a dog turd attracts flies. There'll be a woman whose middle is twice as wide as the rest of her, and someone wearing no sleeves or deodorant, and at least one writer gasping to be noticed, and now there's a vacuumhead using a walkie-talkie to send messages to another weekend deputy who's within shouting distance. Here comes a clump wearing convention badges with names made up out of their own little heads, N. Trails and Elfan and Si Fye, and I amuse myself trying to decide which of them I'd least like to hear from. Here's the lift at last, and I shut the doors before some bald woman with dragons tattooed on her scalp can get in as well, but a thin boy in a suit and tie manages to sidle through the gap. He sees my *Retard* T-shirt, then he reads my badge. "Hi there," he says. "I'm—"

"Jess Kray," I tell him, since he seems to think I can't read, "and you sent me the worst story I ever read in my life."

He sucks in his lips as if I've punched him in the mouth. "Which one was that?"'

"How many have you written that are that bad?"

"None that I know of."

Everyone's pretending not to watch his face doing its best not to wince. "You sent me the one about Frankenstein and the dead goat and the two

nuns," I say for everyone to hear.

"I've written lots since."

"Just don't send any to *Retard*."

My fanzine isn't called that now, but I'm not telling him. I leave him to ride to the top with our audience while I lock myself in my room. I was going to write about the Sex, Sects and Subtexts in Women's Horror Fiction panel, which showed me why I've never been able to read a book by the half of the participants I'd heard of, but now I've too much of a headache. I lie on the bed for as long as I can stand being by myself, then I look for someone I can bear to dine with.

We're at Contraception in Edinburgh, but it could be anywhere a mob of fans calling themselves fen take over a hotel for the weekend. As I step into the lobby I nearly bump into Hugh, a writer who used to have tons of books in the shops, maybe because nobody was buying them. Soon books will all be games you play on screens, but I'll bet nobody will play with his. "How are you this year, Jeremy?" he booms.

"Dying like everyone else."

He emits a sound as if he's trying not to react to being poked in the ribs, and the rest of his party comes out of the bar. One of them is Jess Kray, who says "Join us, Jeremy, if you're free for dinner."

He's behaving like the most important person there, grinning with teeth that say we're real and a mouth that says you can check if you like and eyes with a message just for me. I'd turn him down to see how that makes him look, except Hugh Zit says "Do by all means" so his party knows he means the opposite, and it's too much fun to refuse.

Hugh Know's idea of where to eat is a place called Godfathers. I sit next to his Pakistani wife and her friend who isn't even a convention member, and ignore them so they stop talking English. I've already heard Hugh Ever say on panels all the garbage he's recycling, about how it's a writer's duty to offer a new view of the world, as if he ever did, and how the most important part of writing is research. He still talks like the fan he used to be, like all the fen I know talk, either lecturing straight in your face or staring over your shoulder as though there's a mirror behind you. Only Kray couldn't look more impressed. Hugh Cares finishes his pizza at last and says "I feel better for that."

I say "You must have felt bloody awful before."

Kray actually laughs at that while grimacing sympathetically at Hugh, and I can't wait to go back to my room and write a piece about the games he's playing. I write until I can't see for my headache, and after I've managed to sleep I write about the rest of the clowns at Contraception, until I've almost filled up the first issue of *Parade of the Maladjusted and Malformed*, which is what conventions are. On the last day I see Kray buying a publisher's editor a drink, which no doubt means he'll sell at least a trilogy. At least that's what I write once I'm home.

Then it's back to wearing a suit at the bank in Fulham and having people line up for me on the far side of a window, which at least keeps them at a distance while I turn them and their lives into numbers on a screen. But there's the smell of the people on my side of the glass, and sometimes the feel of them if I don't move fast enough. Playing the game of never saying what I think just about sees me through the day, and the one after that, and the one after that. I print my fanzine in my room and mail it and wait for the clowns I've written about to threaten to sue me or beat me up. The year isn't over when among the review copies and the rest of the unnecessaries publishers send to fanzines I get a sheet about Jess Kray, the most exciting new young writer of the decade, whose first three novels are going to give a new meaning to fantasy.

Sod knows I thought I was joking. I ask for copies to see how bad they are, and they're worse. They're about an alternate world where everyone becomes their sexual opposite, so a gay boy turns into a barbarian hero and a dyke becomes his lover, and some of the characters remember when they return to the real world and most of them try to remind the rest, except one thinks it's meant to be forgotten, and piles of similar crap. I just skim a few chapters of the first book to get a laugh at the idea of people buying a book called *A Touch of Other* under the impression that it's a different kind of junk. Apparently the books go on to be about some wimp who teaches himself magic in the other world and gets to be leader of this one. It's nine months since I saw Kray talking to the editor, so either he writes even more glibly than he comes on to people or he'd already written them. One cover shows a woman's face turning into a man's, and the second has a white turning black, and the third's got a tinfoil mirror where a face should be. That's the one I throw hardest across the room. Later I put them in the pile

to sell to Everybody's Fantasy, the skiffy and comics shop near the docks, and then I hear Kray will be there signing books.

How does a writer nobody's heard of put that over on even a shop run by fen? I'm beginning to think it's time someone exposed him. That Saturday I take the books with me, leaving the compliments slips in so he'll see I haven't bought them. Maybe I'll let him see me selling them as soon as he's signed them. But the moment I spot him at the table with his three piles on it he jumps up. "Jeremy, how are you! This is Jeremy Bates, everyone. He was my first critic."

Sod knows who he's trying to impress. The only customers are comics readers, that contradiction in terms, who look as if they're out without their mothers to buy them their funnies. And the proprietor, who I call Kath on account of his kaftan and long hair, doesn't seem to think much of Kray trying to hitch a ride on my reputation, not that he ever seems to think of much except where the next joint's coming from. I give Kray the books with the slips sticking up, but he carries on grinning. "My publishers haven't sent me your review yet, Jeremy."

I should tell him that's because I won't be writing one, but I'm mumbling like a fan, for Sod's sake. "Write something in them for me."

In the first book he writes *For Jeremy who knew me before I was good*, and *To our future* in the second, and *For life* in what I hope's the last. When he hands them back like treasure I stuff them in my armpit and leaf through some tatty fanzines so I can see how many people he attracts.

Zero. Mr Nobody and all his family. A big round hole without a rim. Some boys on mountain bikes point at him through the window until Kath chases them, and once a woman goes to Kray, but only to ask him where the Star Trek section is. Kath's wife brings him a glass of herbal tea, which isn't even steaming and with the bag drowning in it, and it's fun to watch him having to drink that. We all hang around for the second half of the hour, then Kath says in the drone that always sounds as if he's talking in his sleep "Maybe you can sign some stock for us."

I can hear he doesn't mean all the books on the table, but that doesn't stop our author. When Kray's defaced every one he says "How about that lunch?"

Kath and Mrs Kath glance at each other, and Jess Kidding gives them an instant grin each. "I understand. Don't even think of it. You can buy lunch next time, after I've made you a bundle. Let me buy this one."

They shake their heads, and I see them thinking there'll never be a next time, but Jess Perfect flashes them an even more embracing grin before he turns to me. "If you want to interview me, Jeremy, I'll stand lunch. You can be the one who tells the world."

"About what?"

"That'd be telling."

I want the next *PotMaM* to spill a lot more blood, and besides, nobody's ever bought me lunch. I take him round the corner to Le Marin Qui Rit, which some French chef with too much money built in an old warehouse by the Thames. "This is charming," Kray says when he sees the nets full of crabs hanging from the beams and the waiters in their sailor suits, though I bet he doesn't think so when he sees the prices on the menu. As soon as we've ordered he hurries through the door that says Matelots, maybe to be sick over the prices, and I rip through his books until he comes back with his grin and says "Ask me anything." But I've barely opened my mouth when he says "Aren't you recording?"

"Didn't know I'd need to. Don't worry, I remember everything. My ex could tell you." He digs a pocket tape recorder out of his trench coat. "Just in case you need to check. I always carry one for my thoughts."

He heard an ex-success say that at Contraception. A sailor brings us a bottle of sheep juice, Mutton Cadet, and I switch on. "What's a name like Kray supposed to mean to the world?"

"It's my father's name," he says, then proves I was right to be suspicious, because it turns out his father was a Jewish Pole who was put in a camp and left the rest of his surname behind when he emigrated with the remains of his family after the war.

"Speaking of prejudice, what's with the black guy calling himself Nigger when he gets to be the hero?"

"A nigger is someone who minds being called one. Either you take hold of words or they take hold of you."

"Which do you think your books do?"

"A bit of both. I'm learning. I want to be an adventurer on behalf of the imagination."

I can hardly wait to write about him, except here's my poached salmon. He waits until I've taken a mouthful and says "What did you like about the books?"

I'm shocked to realise how much of them has stuck in my mind—lines like 'AIDS is such a hell you'll go straight to heaven.' I want to say "Nothing," but his grin has got to me. "Where you say that being born male is the new original sin."

"Well, that's what one of my characters says."

What does he mean by that? His words keep slipping away from me, and I've no idea where they're going. By the time we finish I'm near to nodding in my pudding, his refusing to be offended by anything I say has taken so much out of me. The best I can come up with as a final question is "Where do you think you're going?"

"To Florida for the summer with my family. That's where the ideas are."

"Here's hoping you get some."

He doesn't twitch off the recorder until we've had our coffee, then he gives me the tape. "Thanks for helping," he says, and insists on shaking hands with me. It feels like some kind of Masonic trick, trying to find out if I know a secret—either that or he's working out the best way to shake hands. He pays the bill without letting his face down and says he's heading for the station, which is on my way home, but I don't tell him. I turn my back on him and take the long way through the streets I always like, with no gardens and no gaps between the houses and less sunlight than anywhere else in town. While I'm there I don't need to think, and I feel as if nothing can happen in me or outside me. Only I have to go home to deal with the tape, which is itching in my hip pocket like a tapeworm.

I'm hoping he'll have left some thoughts on it by mistake, but there's just our drivelling. So either he brought the machine to make sure I could record him or more likely wanted to keep a copy of what we said. Even if he didn't trust me, it's a struggle to write about him in the way I want to. It takes me days and some of my worst headaches. I feel as if he's stolen my energy and turned it into a force that only works on his behalf.

When I seem to have written enough for an issue of *PotMaM* I print out the pages. I have to pick my way around them or tread on them whenever I get up in the night to be sick. I send out the issue to my five subscribers and anyone who sent me their fanzine, though not many do after what I write about their dreck. I take copies to Constipation and Convulsion and sell a few to people who haven't been to a convention before and don't like to say no. When I start screaming at the fanzine in the night and kicking the piles over I pay for a table in the dealers' room at Contamination. But on the Saturday night the dealers' room is broken into, and in the morning every single copy's gone.

It isn't one of my better years. My father dies and my mother tells me my ex-wife went to the funeral. The branch of the bank closes down because of the recession, and it looks as if I'll be out of a job, only luckily one of the other clerks gets his back broken in a hit and run. They move me to Chelsea, where half the lunch time crowd looks like plain-clothes something and all the litter bins are sealed up so nobody can leave bombs in them. At least the police won't let marchers into the district, though you can hear them shouting for employment or life sentences for pornography or Islamic blasphemy laws or a curfew for all males as soon as they reach puberty or all tobacco and alcohol profits to go to drug rehabilitation or church-going to be made compulsory by law... Some writers stop their publisher from sending me review copies, so at least I've bothered them. I give up going to conventions for almost a year, until I forget how boring they are, so that staying in my room seems even worse. And at Easter I set out to find myself a ride to Consternation in Manchester.

I wait most of an hour at the start of the motorway and see a car pick up two girls who haven't waited half as long, so I'm in no mood for any crap from the driver who finally pulls over. He asks what I'm doing for Easter and I think he's some kind of religious creep, but when I tell him about Consternation he starts assuring me how he used to enjoy H. G. Wells and Jules Verne, as if I gave a fart. Then he says "What would you call this new johnny who wrote *The Word*? Is he sci-fi or fantasy or what?"

"I don't know about any word."

"I thought he might be one of you chaps. Went to a publisher and told him his ideas for the book and came away with a contract for more than I expect to make in a lifetime."

"How come you know so much about it?"

"Well, I am a bookseller. Those on high want us to know in advance this isn't your average first novel. Let me cudgel the old brains and I'll give you his name."

I'm about to tell him not to bother when he grins. "Don't know how I could forget a name like that, except it puts you in mind of the Kray brothers, if you're not too young to remember their reign of terror. The last thing he sounds like is a criminal. Jess Kray, that's the phenomenon."

I'd say I knew him if I could be sure of convincing this caricature that he isn't worth knowing. I bite my tongue until it feels as if my teeth are meeting, then I realise the driver has noticed the tears that have got away from me, and I could scream. He says no more until he stops to let me out of the car. "You ought to tell your people about this Kray. Sounds as if he has some ideas that bear thinking about."

The last thing I'll do is tell anyone about Kray, particularly when I remember him saying I should. I wait in my hotel room for my headache to let me see, then I go down to the dealers' room. Instead of books a lot of the tables are selling virtual reality viewers or pocket CD-ROM players, I can't find anything by Kray, and some of the dealers watch me as if I'm planning to steal from them, which makes me feel like throwing their tables over. Then the fat one who always wears a sombrero says "Can I do something for you?"

"Not by the look of it." That doesn't make him go away, and all I can think of is to confuse him. "You haven't got *The Word*?"

"No, but Jess sent us each a copy of the cover," he says, and props up a piece of cardboard with letters in the middle of its right-hand side.

JESS KRAY
THE WORD

I can't tell if they're white on a black background or black on white, because as soon as I move an inch they turn into the opposite. I shut my eyes once I've seen it's going to be published by the dump that stopped sending me review copies. "What do you mean, he sent you it? He's just a writer."

"And he designed the cover, and he wants everyone to know what's coming, so he got the publisher to print enough cover proofs for us all in the business."

I'm not asking what Kray said about his book. When Fat in the Hat says "You can't keep your eyes shut forever" I want to shut his, especially when as soon as I open mine he says "Shall we put you down for a copy when it's published?"

"They'll send me one."

"I doubt it," he says, and he'll never know how close he came to losing the bone in his nose, except I have to take my head back to my room.

Maybe he wasn't just getting at me. Once I'm home I ring Kray's new publisher for a review copy. I call myself Jay Battis, the first name that comes into my head, and say I'm the editor of *Psychofant* and no friend of that total cynic Jeremy Bates. But the publicity girl says Kray's book isn't genre fiction, it's literature and they aren't sending it to fanzines.

So why should I care? Except I won't have her treating me as though I'm not good enough for Kray after I gave him more publicity than he deserved when he needed it most. And I remember him thanking me for helping—did he mean with this book? I ask the publicity bitch for his address, but she expects me to believe they don't know it. I could ask her who his agent is, but I've realised how I'd most like to get my free copy of his world-shaking masterpiece.

I don't go to Kath's shop, because I'd be noticed. On the day the book is supposed to come out I go to the biggest bookshop in Chelsea. There's a police car in front, and the police are making them move out of the window a placard that's a big version of the cover of *The Word*—I hear the police say it has been distracting drivers. I walk to a table with a pile of *The Word* on it and straight out with one in my hand, because the staff are busy with the police. Only I feel as if Kray's forgiving me for liberating his book, and it takes all my strength not to throw it away.

Even when I've locked my apartment door I feel watched. I hide the book under the bed while I fry some spaghetti and open a tin of salmon for dinner. Then I sit at the window and watch the police cars hunting and listen to the shouts and screams until it's dark. When I begin to feel as if the

headlights are searching for me I close the curtains, but then I can't think of anything to do except read the book.

Only the first few pages. Just the prospect of more than a thousand of them puts me off. I can't stand books where the dialogue isn't in quotes and paragraphs keep beginning with "And". And I'm getting the impression that the words are slipping into my head before I can grasp them. Reading the book makes me feel I'm hiding in my room, shutting myself off from the world. I stuff *The Word* down the side of the bed where I can't see the cover playing its tricks, and switch on the radio.

Kray's still in my head. I'm hoping that since it's publication day I'll hear someone tearing him to bits. There isn't a programme about books any longer on the radio, just one about what they call the arts. They're reviewing an Eskimo rock band and an exhibition of sculptures made out of used condoms and a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* where all the performers are women in wheelchairs, and I'm sneering at myself for imagining they would think Kray was worth their time and at the world for being generally idiotic when the presenter says "And now a young writer whose first novel has been described as a new kind of book. Jess Kray, what's the purpose behind *The Word*?"

"Well, I think it's in it rather than behind it if you look. And I'd say it may be the oldest kind of book, the one that's been forgotten."

At first I don't believe it's him, because he has no accent at all. I make my head throb trying to remember what accent he used to have, and when I give up the presenter is saying "Is the narrator meant to be God?"

"I think the narrator has to be different for everyone, like God."

"You seem to want to be mysterious."

"Don't you think mystery has always been the point? That isn't the same as trying to hide. We've all read books where the writer tries to hide behind the writing, though of course it can't be done, because hiding reveals what you thought you were hiding..."

"Can you quote an example?"

"I'd rather say that every book you've ever read has been a refuge, and I don't want mine to be."

"Every book? Even the Bible? The Koran?"

"They're attempts to say everything regardless of how much they contradict themselves, and I think they make a fundamental error. Maybe Shakespeare saw the problem, but he couldn't quite solve it. Now it's my turn."

I'm willing the presenter to lose her temper, and she says "So to sum up, you're trying to top Shakespeare and the Bible and the rest of the great books."

"My book is using up a lot of paper. I think that if you can't put more into the world than you take out of it you shouldn't be here at all."

"As you say somewhere in *The Word*. Jess Kray, thank you;"

Then she starts talking to a cretic—which is a cretin who thinks they're a critic, such as everyone who attacks my fanzines—about Kray and his book. When the cretic says she thinks the narrator might be Christ because of a scene where he sees the light beyond the mountain through the holes in his hands I start shouting at the radio for quite a time before I turn it off. I crawl into bed and can't stop feeling there's a light beside me to be seen if I open my eyes. I keep them closed all night and wake up with the impression that some of Kray's book is buried deep in my head.

For the first time since I can remember I'm looking forward to a day at the bank. I may even be able to stand the people on my side of the glass without grinding my teeth. But that afternoon Mag, one of the middle-aged girls, waddles in with an evening paper and nearly slaps me in the face with it as though it's my fault. "Will you look at this. Where will it stop. I don't know what the world is coming to."

CALL FOR BAN ON 'BLASPHEMOUS' BOOK. I don't want to read any more, yet I grab the paper. It says that on the radio programme I heard, Kray said his book was better than the Bible and people should read it instead. A bishop is calling for the police to prosecute, and some mob named Christ Will Rise is telling Christians to destroy *The Word* wherever they find it. So I can't help walking past the shop my copy came from, even though it isn't on my way home. And on the third day half a dozen Earnests with placards saying CHRIST NOT KRAY are picketing the shop.

The police apparently don't think they're worth more than cruising past, and I hope they'll get discouraged, because they're giving Kray publicity. But the next day there are eight of them, and twelve the day after, and at the

weekend several Kray fans start reading *The Word* to the pickets to show them how they're wrong. And I feel as though I've had no time to breathe before there's hardly a shop in the country without clowns outside it reading *The Word* and the Bible or the Koran at one another. And then Kray starts touring all the shops and talking to the pickets.

I keep switching on the news to check if he's been scoffed into oblivion, but no such luck. All the time in my room I'm aware of his book in there with me. I'd throw it away except someone might end up reading it—I'd tear it up and burn it except then I'd be like the Christ Will Risers. The day everyone at the bank is talking about Kray being in town during my lunch hour I scrape my brains for something else to do, anything rather than be one of the mob. Only suppose this is the one that stops him? That's a spectacle I'd enjoy watching, so off I limp.

There must be at least a hundred people outside the bookshop. Someone's given Kray a chair to stand on, but Sod knows who's arranged for a beam of sunlight to shine on him. He's answering a question, saying "If you heard the repeats of my interview you'll know I didn't say my book was better than the Bible. I'm not sure what better means in that context. I hope my book contains all the great books."

And he grins, and I wait for someone to attack him, but nobody does, not even verbally. I feel my voice forcing its way out of my mouth, and all I can think of is the question vacuumheads ask writers at conventions. "Where did you get your ideas?"

So many people stare at me I think I've asked the question he didn't want asked. I feel as if he's using more eyes than a spider to watch me, more than a whole nest of spiders—more than there are people holding copies of his drivel. Kray himself is only looking in my general direction, trying to make me think he hasn't recognised me or I'm not worth recognising. "They're in my book."

I want to ask why he's pretending not to know me, except I can't be sure it'll sound like an accusation, and the alternative makes me cringe with loathing. But I'm not having any of his glib answers, and I shout "Who are?"

The nearest Kray fan stops filming him with a steadycam video and turns on me. "His ideas, he means. You're supposed to be talking about his ideas."

I won't be told what I'm supposed to be saying, especially not by a never-was who can't comb her hair or keep her lips still, and I wonder if she's trying to stop me asking the question I hadn't realised I was stumbling on. "Who did you meet in Florida?" I shout.

Kray looks straight at me, and it's as if his grin is carving up my head. "Some old people with some old ideas that were about to be lost. They're in my book. Everyone is in any book that matters."

Maybe he sees me sucking in my breath to ask about the three books he wants us to forget he wrote, because he goes on. "As I was about to say, all I'm asking is that we should respect one another. Do me the honour of not criticising *The Word* until you've read it. If anyone feels harmed by it, I want to know."

I might have vanished or never been there at all. When he pauses for a response I feel as if his grin has got stuck in my mouth. The mob murmurs, but nobody seems to want to speak up. Any protest is being swallowed by vagueness. Then two minders appear from the crowd and escort Kray to a limo that's crept up behind me. I want to reach out to him and—I don't know what I want, and one of the minders pushes me out of the way. I see Kray's back, then the limo is speeding away and all the mob are talking to one another, and I have to take the afternoon off because I can't see the money at the bank.

Whenever the ache falters my head fills up with thoughts of Kray and his book. When I sense his book by me in the dark I can't help wishing on it—wishing him and it to a hell as everlasting as my headache feels. Its the first time I've wanted to believe in hell. Not that I'm so far gone I believe wishes work, but I feel better when the radio says his plan's gone wrong. Some Muslim leaders are accusing him of seducing their herd away from Islam.

I keep looking in the papers and listening in the night in case an ayatollah has put a price on his head. Some bookshops in cities that are overrun with Muslims are either hiding their copies of *The Word* or sending them back, and I wish on it that the panic will spread. But the next headline says he'll meet the Muslim leaders in public and discuss *The Word* with them.

A late-night so-called arts programme is to broadcast the discussion live. I don't watch it, because I don't know anyone who would let me watch their television, but when it's on I switch out my light and sit at my window. More and more of the windows out there start to flicker as if the city is

riddled with people watching to see what will happen to Kray. I open my window and listen for shouting Muslims and maybe Kray screaming, but I've never heard so much quiet. When it starts letting my head fill up with thoughts I don't want to have, I go to bed and dream of Kray on a cross. But in the morning everyone at the bank is talking about how the Muslims ended up on Kray's side and how one of them from a university is going to translate *The Word* into whatever language Muslims use.

And everyone, even Mag who didn't know what the world was coming to with Kray, is saying how they admire him or how they've fallen in love with him and the way he handled himself, and wish they'd gone to see him when he was in town. When I say I've got *The Word* and can't read it they all look as though they pity me. Three of them ask to borrow it, and I tell them to buy their own because I never paid for mine, which at least means nobody speaks to me much after that. I can still hear them talking about Kray and feel them thinking about him, and in the lunch hour two of them buy *The Word* and the rest, even the manager, want a read. I'm surrounded by Kray, choked by a mass of him. I'm beginning to wonder if anyone in the world besides me knows what he's really like. The bank shuts at last, and when I leave the building two Christ Will Risers are waiting for me.

Both of them wear suits like civil servants and look as though they spend half their lives scrubbing their faces and polishing the crosses at their throats. They both step forward as the sunlight grabs me, and the girl says "You knew him."

"Me, no, who? Knew who?"

Her boyfriend or whatever touches my arm likes a secret sign. "We saw you making him confess who he'd met."

"Let's sit down and talk," says the girl.

Every time they move, their crosses flash until my eyes feel like a whole graveyard of burnt crosses. At least the couple haven't swallowed *The Word*, and talking to them may be better than staying in my room. We find a bench that isn't full of unemployed and clear the McDonald's cartons off it, and the Risers sit on either side of me even though I've sat almost at the end of the bench. "Was he a friend of yours?" the girl says.

"Seems like he wants to be everyone's friend," I say.

"Not God's."

It doesn't matter which of them said that, it could have come from either, "So how much do you know about what happened in Florida?"

"As much as he said when I asked him."

"You must be honest with us. We can't do anything about him if we don't put our faith in the truth."

"Why not?"

That throws them, because they're obviously not used to thinking. Then they say "We need to know everything we can find out about him."

"Who's we?"

"We think you could be one of us. You're of like mind, we can tell."

That's one thing I'll never be with anyone. I nearly jump up and lean on their shining shampooed heads so they won't fellow me, but I want to know what they know about Kray that I don't. "Then that must be why I asked him about Florida. All I know is that last time I met him he was going there and he wrote *The Word* when he came back. So what happened?"

They look at each other across me and then swivel their eyes to me. "There are people who came down a mountain almost a hundred years ago. We know he met them or someone connected with them. That has to be the source of his power. Nothing else could have let him win over Islam."

I wouldn't have believed anyone could talk less sense than Kray. "He was like that when he was just a fantasy fan. He's got a genius for charming everyone he meets and promoting himself."

"That must be how he learned the secret that came down the mountain. What else can you tell us?"

I don't mind making them more suspicious of Kray, but I won't have them thinking I tried to help them. "Nothing," I say, and get up.

They both reach inside their jackets for pamphlets. "Please take these. Our address is on the back whenever you want to get in touch."

I could tell them that's never and stuff their pamphlets in their faces, but at least while I've the pamphlets in my fist nobody can take me for a Jess Kray fan. At home I glance at them to see they're as stupid as I knew they would be, full of drone out of the Bible about the Apocalypse and the Antichrist and the Antifreeze and Sod knows what else. I shove them down the side of

the bed and try to believe that I've helped the Risers get Kray. And I keep hoping until I see *Time* magazine with him on the cover.

By then half the bank has read *The Word*. I've seen them laughing or crying or going very still when they read it in their breaks, and when they finish it they look as if they have a secret they wish they could tell everyone else. I won't ask, I nearly chew my tongue off. Anyone who asks them about the book gets told "Read it" or "You have to find out for yourself", and I wonder if the book tells you to make as many people read it as you can, like they used to tell you on posters not to give away the end of films. I won't touch my copy of *The Word*, but one day I sneak into a bookshop to read the last page. Obviously it makes no sense, only I feel that if I read the page before it I'll begin to understand, because maybe it can be read backwards as well as forwards. I throw the book on the table and run out of the shop.

At least they've taken *The Word* out of the window to make room for another pound of fat in a jacket, but I keep seeing people reading it in the streets. Whenever I see anything flash in a crowd I'm afraid it's another copy drawing attention to itself. At home I feel it beginning to surround me in the night out there, and I tell myself I've one copy nobody is reading. But I have to take train rides into the country for walks to get away from it—they're the only way I can be certain I'm nowhere near anyone who's read it. And coming back from one of those rides, I see him watching me from the station bookstall.

He looks like a recruiting poster for himself that doesn't need to point a finger. While I'm pretending to flip through the magazine I knock all the copies of *Time* onto the floor of the booking hall, except for the one I shove down the front of my trousers. All the way home I feel my peter wiping itself on his mouth, and in my room I have a good laugh at my stain on his face before I turn to the pages about him.

The headline says WHAT IS THE WORD? in the same typeface as the cover of his book. Maybe the article will tell me what I need to put him out of my mind for good. But it says how he bought his parents a place in Florida with part of his advances, and how *The Word* is already being translated into thirteen languages, and I'm starting to puke. Then the hack tries to explain what makes *The Word* such a publishing phenomenon, as she calls it. And by the time I've finished nearly going blind with reading what she wrote I think it's another of Kray's tricks.

It says too much and nothing at all. She doesn't know if the word is the book or the narrator or the words that keep looking as if they've been put in by mistake. Kray told her that if a book wasn't language it was nothing. "So perhaps we should take him at his, you should forgive it, word." He said he just put the words on paper and it's for each reader to decide what they add up to. So she collected a gaggle of cretics and fakes who profess and that old joke "leading writers" and got them to discuss *The Word*.

If I'd been there I'd have mashed all their faces together. It was the funniest book someone had ever read, and the most moving someone else had, and everyone agreed with both of them. One woman thought it was like *The Canterbury Tales*, and then there's a discussion about whether it's told by one character or several or whether all the characters might be the same one in some sort of mental state or it's showing a new kind of relationship between them all. A professor points out that the Bible was written by a crowd of people but when you read it in translation you can't tell, whereas she thinks you can identify to the word where Kray's voices change, "as many voices as there are people who understand the book." That starts them talking about the idea in *The Word* that people in Biblical times lived longer because they were closer in time to the source, as if that explains why some people are living longer now and the rest of what's happening to us, the universe drifting closer to the state it was in before it formed. And there's crap about people sinning more so their sins will reach back to the Crucifixion because otherwise Christ won't come back, or maybe the book says people have to know when to stop before they have the opposite effect and throw everything off balance, only by now I'm having to run my finger under the words and read them out loud, though my voice makes my head worse. There are still columns to go, the experts saying how if you read *The Word* aloud it's poetry and how you'll find passages almost turning into music, and how there are developments of ideas from Sufism and the Upanishads and Buddhism and Baha'i and the Cabbala and Gnosticism, and Greek and Roman and older myths, and I scrape my fingernail over all this until I reach the end, someone saying "I think the core of this book may be the necessary myth for our time." And everyone agrees, and I tear up the magazine and try to sleep.

I can still hear them all jabbering as if Kray is using their voices to make people read his book to discover what they were raving about. I hear them in the morning on my way to the bank, and I wonder how many of them his

publisher will quote on the paperback, and that's when I realise I'm dreading the paperback because so many more people will be able to afford it. I'm dreading being surrounded by people with Kray in their heads, because then the world will feel even more like somewhere I've wandered into by mistake. It almost makes me laugh to find I didn't want to be shown that people are as stupid as I've always thought they were.

When posters for the paperback start appearing on bus shelters and hoardings I have to walk about with my eyes half shut. The posters don't use the trick the cover did, but that must mean the publishers think that just the title and his name will sell the book. At the bank I keep being asked if I don't feel well, until I say I'm not getting my Sunday dinner any more since my mother had a heart attack and died in hospital, not that it's anyone's business, but as well as that I can hardly eat for waiting for the paperback.

The day I catch sight of one there's a march of lunatics demanding that the hospitals they've been thrown out of get reopened, and in the middle of all this a woman's sitting on a bench reading *The Word* as though she can't see or hear what's going on around her for the book. And then the man she's waiting for sits down by her and squashes his wet mouth on her cheek, and leans over to see what she's reading, and I see him start to read as if it doesn't matter where you open the book, you'll be drawn in. And when I run to the bank one of the girls asks me if I know when the paperback is coming out, and saying I don't know makes me feel I'm trying to stop something that can't be stopped.

Or am I the only one who can? I spend the day trying to remember where I put the interview with him. Despite whoever stole all the copies of *PotMaM* at Contamination, I should still have the tape. I look under my clothes and the plates and the tins and in the tins as well, and under the pages of the magazine I tore up, and under the towels on the floor in the corner, and among the bits of glasses I've smashed in the sink. It isn't anywhere. My mother must have thrown it out one of the days she came to clean my room. I start screaming at her until I lose my voice, by which time I've thrown just about everything movable out of the window. They're demolishing the houses opposite, so some more rubbish in the street won't make any difference, and my fellow rats in the building must be too scared to ask what I'm doing, unless they're too busy reading *The Word*.

By the end of the week, two of the slaves at the bank have the paperback and will lend it to anyone who asks. And I don't know when they start surrounding me with Kray's words. Most of the time—Sod, all the time—l know they're saying things they've heard someone else say, but after a while I notice they've begun speaking in a way that's meant to show they're quoting. Like the girl at the window by mine would start talking about a murder mystery on television and the one next to her would say "The mystery is around you and in you" and they'd laugh as if they were sharing a secret. Or one would ask the time and her partner in the comedy team would say "Time is as soon as you make it." And all sorts of other crap: "Look behind the world" or "You're the shadow of the infinite," which the manager says once as if he's topping everyone else's quotes. And before I know it at least half the slaves don't say "Good morning" any more, they say "What's the word?"

That makes the world feel like a headache. People say it in the street too, and when they come up to my window, until I wonder if I was wrong to blame my mother for losing the tape, if someone else might have got into my room. By the time the next catch phrase takes root in the dirt in people's heads I can't control myself—when I hear one of the girls respond to another "As Kray would say."

"Is there anything he doesn't have something to say about?"

I think I'm speaking normally enough, but they cover their ears before they shake their heads and look sad for me and chorus "No."

"Sod, listening to you is like listening to him."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe he will."

"Maybe everyone will."

"Maybe is the future."

"As Kray would say."

"Do you know you're the only one who hasn't read him, Jeremy?"

"Thank Sod if it keeps me different."

"Unless we find ourselves in everybody else..."

"As fucking Kray would say."

A woman writing a cheque gasps, and another customer clicks his tongue like a parrot, and I'm sure they're objecting to me daring to utter a bad word about their idol. None of the slaves speaks to me all day, which would be more of a relief if I couldn't feel them thinking Kray's words even when they don't speak them. I assume the manager didn't hear me, since he was in his office telling someone the bank is going to repossess their house. But on Monday morning he calls me in and says "You'll have been aware that there's been talk of further rationalisation."

He was talking before that, only I was trying to see where he's hidden *The Word*. At least he doesn't sound like Kray. "Excuse me, Mr Bates, but are there any difficulties you feel I should know about?"

"With what?"

"I'd like to give you a chance to explain your behaviour. You're aware that the bank expects its staff to be smart and generally presentable."

I hug myself in case that hides whatever he's complaining about and hear my armpits squelch, and me saying "I thought you were supposed to see yourself in me."

"That was never meant to be used as an excuse. Have you really nothing more to say?"

I can't believe I tried to defend myself by quoting Kray. I chew my tongue until it hurts so much I have to stick it out. "I should advise you to seek some advice, Mr Bates," says the manager. "I had hoped to break this to you more gently, but I must say I can see no reason to. Due to the economic climate I've been asked to propose further cuts in staff, and you will appreciate that your attitude has aided my decision."

"Doesn't Kray have anything to say about fixing the economy?"

"I believe he does in world terms, but I fail to see how that helps our immediate situation."

The manager's beginning to look reluctantly sympathetic—he must think I've turned out to be one of them after all, and I won't have him thinking that. "If he tried I'd shove his book back where it came from."

The manager looks as if I've insulted him personally. "I can see no profit in prolonging this conversation. If you wish to work your notice I must ask

you to take more care with your appearance and, forgive my bluntness, to treat yourself to a bath,"

"How often does he say I've got to have one?" I mean that as a sneer, but suppose it sounds like a serious question. "Not that I give a shit," I say, which isn't nearly enough. "And when I do I can use his book to wipe my arse on? And that goes for your notice as well, because I don't want to see any of you again or anyone else who's got room in their head for that, that..." I can't think of a word bad enough for Kray, but it doesn't matter, because by now I'm backing out of the office. "Just so everyone knows I know I'm being fired because of what I say about him," I add, raising my voice so they'll hear me through their hands over their ears. Then I manage to find my way home, and the locks to stick the keys in, and my bed.

There's almost nothing else in my room except me and *The Word*. So I still have a job, to stay here to make sure it's the copy nobody reads. I do that until the bank sends me a cheque for the money they must wish they didn't owe me, and I remember all my money I forgot to take with me when I escaped from the bank.

I'm waiting when they open. At first I think the slaves are pretending not to know me, then I wonder if they're too busy thinking Kray's thoughts. A slave takes my cheque and my withdrawal slip and goes away for longer than I can believe it would take even her to think about it, then I see the manager poke his head out of his office to spy on me while I'm tearing up a glossy brochure about how customers can help the bank to help the Third World. I see him tell the clerk to give me what I want, then he pulls in his head like a tortoise that's been kicked, and it almost blinds me to realise he's afraid of what I am. Only what am I?

The slave stuffs all my money in an envelope and drops it in the trough under the window, the trough that always made me wonder which side the pigs were on. I shove the envelope into my armpit and leave behind years of my life. I'm walking home as fast as I can, through the streets where every shop either has a sale on or is closing down or both, when I see Kray's face.

It's a drawing on the cover of just about the only magazine that is still about books. I have to find out what he's up to, but with the money like a cancer under my arm I can't be sure of liberating the magazine without people noticing. I go into the bookshop and grab it off the rack, and people backing away make me feel stronger. I've only read how *The Word* is

shaping up to outsell the Bible worldwide, and how some campus cult is saying there's a different personal message in it for everybody and anyone who can't read it should have it read to them, when a bouncer trying to look like a policeman tells me to buy the rag or leave. I've read all I need to, and I have all I need. The money is to give me time to do what I have to do.

Only I'm not sure what that is. The longer I stay in my room, the more I'm tempted to look in *The Word* for a clue. It's trying to trick me into believing there's no help outside its pages, but I've something else to read. I find the Christ Will Rise pamphlets that *The Word* has done its best to tear up and shove out of my reach, and when I've dragged them and my face out of the dust under the bed I manage to smooth out the address.

It's down where most of the fires in the streets are and the police drive round in armoured cars when they go there at all, and no cameras are keeping watch, and hardly any helicopters. By now it's dark. People are doing things to each other standing up in doorways if they aren't prowling the streets in dozens searching for less than themselves. I'm afraid they may set fire to me, because I see dogs pulling apart something charred that looks as if it used to be someone, but nobody seems to think I'm worth bothering with, which is their loss.

The Risers' sanctuary is in the middle of a block of hundred year-old houses, some of which have roofs. Children are running into one house holding a cat by all its legs, but I can't see anyone else. I feel the front steps tilt and crunch together as I climb to the Risers' door, and I hold onto the knocker to steady myself, though it makes my fingers feel as if they're crumbling. I'm about to slam the knocker against the rusty plate when a fire in a ruin across the street lights up the room inside the window next to me.

It's full of chairs around a table with pamphlets on it. Then the fire jerks higher, and I see they aren't piles of pamphlets, they're two copies of *The Word*. The books start to wobble like two blocks of gelatin across the table towards me, and I nearly wrench the knocker off the door with trying to let go of it. I fall down the steps and don't stop running until I'm locked in my room.

I watch all night in case I've been followed. Even after the last television goes out I can't sleep. And when the dawn brings the wagons to clean up the blood and vomit and empty cartridges I don't want to sleep, because I've

remembered that the Risers aren't the only other people who know what Kray was.

I go out when the streets won't be crawling—when the taken care of have gone to work and the beggars are counting their pennies. When I reach Everybody's Fantasy it looks as if the books in the window and the Everything Half Price sign have been there for months. The rainy dirt on the window stops me reading the spines on the shelf where Kray would be. I'm across the road in a burned-out house, waiting for a woman with three Dobermans to pass so I can smash my way into the shop with a brick, when Kath arrives in a car with bits of it scraping the road. He doesn't look interested in why I'm there or in anything else, especially selling books, so I say "You're my last hope."

"Yeah, okay." It takes him a good few seconds to get around to saying "What?"

"You've got some books I want to buy."

"Yeah?" He comes to as much life as he's got and wanders into the shop to pick up books strewn over the floor. "There they are."

I think he's figured out which books I want and why until I realise he means everything in the shop. I'm heading for the shelf when I see *The Word, The Word, The Word, The Word*... "Where's *A Touch of Other*?" I nearly scream.

"Don't know it."

"Of course you do. Jess Kray's first novel and the two that go with it. He signed them all when you didn't want him to. You can't have sold them, crap like them."

"Can't I?" Kath scratches his head as if he's digging up thoughts. "No, I remember. He bought the lot. Must have been just about when *The Word* was due."

"You realise what he was up to, don't you?"

"Being kind. Felt guilty about leaving us with all those books after nobody came, so he bought them back when he could afford to. Wish we still had them. I've never even seen them offered for sale."

"That's because he doesn't want anyone to know he wrote them, don't you see? Otherwise even the world might wonder how someone like that could

have written the thing he wants everyone to buy."

"You can't have read *The Word* if you say that. It doesn't matter what came before it, only what what will happen when everyone's learned from it."

He must have stoned whatever brains he had out of his head. "I felt like you do about him," he's saying now, "but then I got to know him."

"You know him? You know where I can find him?"

"Got to know him in his book."

"But you've got the address where you sent him his books."

"Care of his publishers."

"He didn't even give you his address and you think he's your friend?"

"He was moving. He's got nothing to hide, you have to believe that." Having to give me so many answers so fast seems to have used Kath up, then his face rouses itself. "If you want to get to know him as he is, he's supposed to be at Consummation."

"I've given up on fans. The people I meet every day are bad enough."

Kath's turning over magazines on the counter like a cat trying to cover its turds. "There'll be readings from *The Word* for charity and a panel about it, and he's meant to be there. We'd go, only we've not long had a kid."

"Don't tell me there'll be someone growing up without *The Word*."

"No, we'd like her to see him one day. I was just telling you we can't afford to go." He shakes two handfuls of fanzines until a flyer drops out of one. "See, there he is."

The flyer is for Consummation, which is two weeks away in Birmingham, and it says the Sunday will be Jess Kray Day. I manage not to crumple much of it up. "Can I have this?"

"I thought you didn't want to know him."

"You've sold me." I shove the flyer into my pocket. "Thanks for giving me what I was looking for," I say, and leave him fading with his books.

I don't believe a whole sigh fie convention can be taken in by Kray. Fen are stupid, Sod knows, but in a different way—thinking they're less stupid than everyone else is. I'll know what to do when I see them and him. The two weeks seem not so much to pass as not to be there at all. On the Friday morning I have a bath so I won't draw attention to myself until I want to.

For the first time ever I don't hitch to a convention, I go by train to be in time to spy out the situation. Once I'm in my seat I stay there, because I've seen one woman reading *The Word* and I don't want to see how many other passengers are. I stare at streets of houses with steel shutters over the windows and rivers covered with chemicals and forests that children keep setting fire to, but I can feel Kray's words hatching in all the nodding heads around me.

The convention hotel is five minutes' walk from the station. After about ten beggars I pretend I'm alone in the street. The hotel is booked solid as a fan's cranium, and the hotel next to it, and I have to put up with one where the stairs lurch as if I'm drunk and my room smells of someone's raincoat and old cigarettes. It won't matter, because I'll be spending as much time with the fen as I can bear. I go to the convention hotel while it's daylight and there are police out of their vehicles. And the first thing the girl at the registration desk with a ring in her nose and six more in her ears says is "Have you got *The Word*?" My face goes hard, but I manage to say "It's at home."

"If you'd like one to have with you, they're free with membership." It'll be another nobody else can read. I tell her my name's Jay Batt and pin my badge on when she's written it, and squeeze the book in my right hand so hard I can almost feel the words mashing together. "Is he here yet?"

"He won't be."

"But he's why I'm here. I was promised he was coming." She must think I sound the same kind of disappointed as her. "He said he would be when we wrote to him, only now he has to be in the film about him they'll be televising next month. Shall I tell you what he said? That now we've got *The Word* we don't need him."

I know that's garbage, but I'm not sure why. I bite my tongue so I won't yell, and when I see her sympathising with the tears in my eyes I limp off to the bar. It's already full of more people than seats, and I know most of them —I've written about them in my fanzines. I'm wondering how I can get close enough to find out what they really think about *The Word* when they start greeting me like an old friend. Two people have offered to buy me a drink before I realise why they're behaving like this—because I've got *The Word*.

I down the drinks, and more when they're offered, and make sure everyone knows I won't buy a round. I'm trying to infuriate someone as much as their forgiveness infuriates me, because then maybe they'll argue about Kray. But whatever I say about him and his lies they just look more understanding and wait patiently for me to understand. The room gets darker as my eyes fill up with the dirt and smoke in the air, and faces start to melt as if *The Word* has turned them into putty. Then I'm screaming at the committee members and digging my nails into the cover of the book. "Why would anyone be making a film about him? More likely he was afraid he'd meet someone here who knows what he wants us to forget he wrote."

"You mustn't say that. He sent us this, look, all about the film." The chairman takes a glossy brochure out of his briefcase. The sight of Kray grinning on the cover almost blinds me with rage, but I manage to read the name of the production company. "And they're going to do a live discussion with him after the broadcast," the chairman says.

I run after my balance back to my hotel. I can hear machine guns somewhere, and I have to ring the bell three times before the armed night porter lets me in, but they can't stop me now. I haul myself up to my room, snapping a banister in the process, and fall on the bed to let my headache come. Whenever it lessens I think of another bit of the letter I'm going to write. The night and the sounds of gunfire falter at last, and the room fades into some kind of reality. It's like being part of the cover of a book nobody wants to take out of a window, but they won't be able to ignore me much longer.

I write the letter and check out of the hotel, telling the receptionist I've been called away urgently, and fight my way through the pickpockets to the nearest post office, where I get the address of the television channel. Posting the letter reminds me of going to church when I had to live with my parents, where they used to put things in your mouth in front of the altar. As soon as the letter is out of my hands I don't know if I feel empty or unburdened, and I can't remember exactly what I wrote.

I spend Sunday at home trying to remember. Did I really claim I was the first to spread the word about Kray? Did I really call myself Jude Carrot because I was afraid he'd remember the interview and tell the producer not to let me anywhere near? Won't he just say he's never heard of me? I can't think how that idea makes me feel I left the other copy of The Word in my

hotel room as if it was the Bible, and I have to stop myself from throwing the one under the bed out of the window to give them something to fight over besides the trash in the street.

On Monday I know the letter has arrived. Maybe it'll take a few hours to reach the producer of the discussion programme, since I didn't know his name. By Tuesday it must have got to him, and by Wednesday he should have written to me. But Thursday comes, and I watch the postman dodging in and out of his van while his partner rides shotgun, and there's no letter for me.

Twice I hear the phone in the hall start to ring, but it could just be army trucks shaking the house. I start trying to think of a letter I could write under another name, saying I know things about Kray nobody else does, only I can't think of a letter that's different enough. I go to bed to think, then I get up to, and keeping doing those is Thursday and Friday morning. Then I hear the van screech to a halt just long enough for the postman to stick a letter through the door without getting out of his cabin, because presumably they can't afford to pay his partner any more, then it screeches away along the sidewalk. And when I look down the stairs I see the logo of the television company on the envelope.

I'd open it in the hall except I find I'm afraid to read what it says. I remember I'm naked and cover my peter with it while I run upstairs, though everyone in the house is scared to open their door if they hear anyone else. I lock all my locks and hook up the chains and wipe my hands on my behind so the envelope won't slip out of them, then I tear it almost in half and shake the letter flat.

Dear Mr "Carrot"
Jess Kray says

Suddenly my hands feel like gloves someone's just pulled their hands out of, and when I can see again I have to fetch the letter from under the bed. I'm already struggling to think of a different name to sign on the next letter I send, though since now I'll know who the producer is, should I phone them? I poke at my eyes until they focus enough that I can see her name is Tildy Bacon, then I make them see what she wrote.

Dear Mr "Carrot"
Jess Kray says he will look forward to seeing
you and including you in our discussion on the 25th.

There's more about how they'll pay my expenses and where I'm to go, but I fall on the bed, because I've just discovered I don't know what to do after all. It doesn't matter, I'll know what to say when the cameras are on and the country's watching me. Only something's missing from that idea and the absence keeps pecking at my head. It feels like an intruder in my room, one I can't see that won't leave me alone. Maybe I know what I'm trying not to think, but a week goes by before I realise: I can't be certain of exposing Kray unless I read *The Word*.

I spend a day telling myself I have to, and the next day I drag the book out of its hiding place and claw off the dusty cobwebs. I stare at the cover until it feels as if it's stuck behind my eyes, then I scream at myself to make me open it. As soon as I can see the print I start reading, but it feels as if Kray's words and the noises of marching drums and sirens and gunfire are merging into a substance that's filling up my head before I can stop it, and I have to shut the book. There's less than a week before I'm on television, and all I can think of that may work is being as far away from people as I can get when I read the book.

The next day is Sunday, which makes no difference, since there are as many people wandering around the countryside with nothing else to do any day of the week. I tear the covers off a Christ Will Rise pamphlet and wrap them round *The Word* before I head for Kings Cross, and I'm sure some of the people I avoid look at it to see if it's *The Word*. I thump on the steel shutter until the booking clerk sells me a ticket. While I'm waiting for the train I see through the reinforced glass of the bookstall that most of the newspapers are announcing a war that's just begun in Africa. I catch myself wondering if *The Word* has been translated in those countries yet, and then I imagine a world where there are no wars because everyone's too busy reading *The Word* and thinking about it and talking about it, and my fingernails start aching from gripping the book so I won't throw it under a train.

When my train leaves I'm almost alone on it, but I see more people than I expect in the streets. Quite a few seem to be gathering in a demolished church, and I see a whole crowd scattered over a park, being read to from a book—I can't decide whether it's black or white. All their faces are turned to the sun as if they don't know they're being blinded. As the city falls away I'm sure I can feel all those minds clogged with Kray trying to drag mine

back and having to let go like old tasteless chewing gum being pulled out of my head. Then there are only fields made up of lines waiting to be written on, and hedges blossoming with litter, and hours later mountains hack their way up through fields and forests as if the world is still crystallising. In the midst of the mountains I get off at a station that's no more than two empty platforms, and climb until I'm deep in a forest and nearly can't breathe for climbing. I sit on a fallen tree, and there's nothing to do except read. And I make myself open *The Word* and read as fast as I can.

I won't look up until I've finished. I can feel his words crowding into my head and breeding there, but I have to understand what he's put into the world before I confront him. The only sound is of me turning pages and ripping each one out as I finish it, but I sense the trees coming to read over my shoulder, and moss oozing down them to be closer to the book, and creatures running along branches until they're above my head. I won't look; I only read faster, so fast that the book is in my head before I know. However much there is of it, I'm stronger—out here it's just me and the book. I wonder suddenly if the pages may be impregnated with some kind of drug, but if they are I've beaten it by throwing away the pages, because you must have to be holding the whole book for the drug to work. I've no idea how long I've been reading the book aloud, but it doesn't matter if it helps me see what Kray is up to. Though my throat is aching by the time I've finished, I manage a laugh that makes the trees back away. I fall back with my face to the clouds and try to think what the book has told me that he wouldn't want anyone to know.

My body's shaking inside and out, and I feel as if my brain is too. There was something about panic in *The Word*, but if I think of it, will that show me how the book is causing it, or won't I be able to resist swallowing *The Word* as the cure? I'm already remembering, and digging my fingernails into my temples can't crush the thought. Kray says we'll all experience a taste of the panic Christ experienced as we approach the time when the world is changed. I feel the idea cracking open in my brain, and as I fight it I see in a flash what he was trying not to admit by phrasing it that way. He wanted nobody to know that he is panicking—that he has something to be afraid of.

I sit up and crouch around myself until I stop shaking, then I go down through the forest. The glade papered with *The Word* seems to have a meaning I no longer need to understand. Some of the pages look as if

they're reverting to wood. The night comes down the forest with me, and in a while a train crawls out of it. I go home and lock myself in.

Now it takes me all my time to hold *The Word* still in my head. The only other thing I need to be aware of is when the television company sends me my train ticket, but everything around me seems on the point of making a move. Whenever I hear a car it sounds about to reveal it's a mail van. At least that helps me ignore my impression that all I can see of the world is poised to betray itself. If this is how having read *The Word* feels...

The next day the mail van screeches past my building, and the day after that. Suppose the letter to me has been stolen, or someone at the television company has stopped it from being sent? I'll pay my own fare and get into the discussion somehow. But the ticket finally arrives, which may mean they'll try and steal it from my room.

I sit with the ticket between my teeth and watch the street and listen for them setting up whatever they may use to smash my door in. Suppose the room itself is the trap? Or am I being made to think that so I'll be driven out of it? I wrap the ticket in some of a Christ Will Rise pamphlet so that the ink won't run when I take it with me to the bathroom, and on the last morning I have a long bath that feels like some kind of ritual. That would be a good time for them to come for me, but they don't, nor on my way to the station, though I'm sure I notice people looking at me as if they know something about me. For the first time since I can remember there are no sounds of violence in the streets, and that makes me feel there are about to be.

On the train I sit where I can watch the whole compartment, and see the other passengers pretending not to watch me. All the way to Hyde Park Corner I expect to be headed off. I'm trudging up the slope to the hotel when a limo pulls up in front of the glass doors and two minders climb out before Kray does. As he unbends he looks like a snake standing on its tail. I pretend to be interested in the window of a religious bookshop in case he tries to work on me before the world is watching. I see copies of *The Word* next to the Bible and the Koran, and Kray's reflection merging with his book as he goes into the hotel. He must have noticed me, so why is he leaving me alone? Because passiveness is the trick he's been playing on me ever since I read *The Word*—doing nothing so I'll be drawn towards him and his words. It's the trick he's been playing on the world.

Knowing that makes me impatient to finish. I wait until I see him arrive in the penthouse suite, then I check in. My room is more than twice the size of the one I left at home. The world is taking notice of me at last. I drink the liquor in the refrigerator while I have another bath, and ignore the ringing of the phone until I think there's only just time to get to the studio before the discussion starts.

A girl's face on the phone screen tells me my taxi's waiting. As soon as we're in it she wants to know everything about me, but I won't let her make me feel I don't know what I am. I shrug at her until she shuts up. There are no other cars on the road, and I wonder if there's a curfew or everyone's at home waiting for Kray and me.

Five minutes later the taxi races into the forecourt of the television studios. The girl with not much breath rushes me past a guard at the door and another one at a desk and down a corridor that looks as if it never ends. I think that's the trick they were keeping in store for me, but then she steers me left into a room, and I'm surrounded by voices and face to face with Kray.

There are about a dozen other people in the room. The remains of a buffet are on a table and scattered around on paper plates. A woman with eyes too big for her face says she's Tildy Bacon and hands me a glass of wine while a girl combs my hair and powders my face, and I feel as if they're acting out some ritual from *The Word.* Kray watches me as he talks and grins at some of his cronies, and once the girl has finished with me he puts a piece of cake on a plate and brings it over. "You must have something, Jeremy. You look as as you've been fasting for the occasion."

So does he. He looks thinner and older, as if he's put almost all of himself into his book, or is he trying to trick me into thinking he'll be easy to deal with? I take the plate and wash a bite of the cake down with some wine, and he gives me the grin. "It's nearly time."

Is he talking about the programme I can see behind him on a monitor next to a fax machine? Someone who might be a professor or a student is saying that nobody he's met has been unchanged by *The Word* and that he thinks it promises every reader the essential experience of their life. Kray's watching my face, but I won't let him see I know how much crap the screen is talking until we're on the air. Then Tildy Bacon says to everyone "Shall we go up? Bring your drinks."

As the girl who ought to learn how to breathe ushers people towards the corridor, Tildy Bacon steps in front of me and looks me in the face. So they've saved stopping me until the last possible moment. I'll wait until everyone else is out of the room, then I'll do whatever needs to be done to make certain she can't follow me and throw me off the air. But she says "We had to ask Jess how to bill you on screen since you weren't here."

If she thinks I'm going to ask what he said I was, she can go on thinking. "I'm sure he knows best," I tell her with a grin that may look like his for all I care, and dodge around her before she can delay me any further, and follow the procession along the corridor.

At first the set-up in the studio looks perfect. The seven of us, including Kray, will sit on couches around a low table with glasses and a jug of water on while Kray's minders have to stay on the far side of a window. Only I haven't managed to overtake the procession, so how can I get close to him? Then he says "Sit next to me, Jeremy," and pats a leather cushion, and before I have time to wonder what he's up to I've joined him.

Everyone else sitting down sounds like something leathery stirring in its sleep. The programme about Kray is on a monitor in a corner of the studio. A priest says he believes the secret of *The Word* needs to be understood, then the credits are rolling, and a woman who I hadn't even realised was going to run the discussion leans across the table and waits for a red light to signal her. Then she says "So, Jess Kray, what's your secret?"

He grins at her and the world, "If I have one it must be in my book."

A man with holes in his purple face where spots were says "In other words, if you revealed the secret it wouldn't sell."

Is there actually someone here besides me who doesn't believe in *The Word*? Kray grins at him. "No, I'm saying the secret must be different for everyone. It isn't a question of commerce. In some parts of the world I'm giving the book away."

The holey man seems satisfied, but a woman with almost more hair on her upper lip than on her scalp says "To achieve what?"

"Peace?"

Good god, Kray really does believe his book can put a stop to wars. Or does he mean he won't be peaceful until the whole world has *The Word* inside them? The woman who was given the signal leans across the table

again, reaching for Kray with her perfume and her glittering hands and her hair swaying like oil on water. She means to turn the show into a discussion, which will give him the chance not to be watched all the time by the camera. I'll say anything to bother him, even before I know what. "It's supposed to be..."

That heads her off, and everyone looks at me. Then I hear what I'm going to say—that the secret of *The Word* is supposed to be some kind of eternal life. But there is no secret in *The Word*, that's why I'm here. "Jeremy?" Kray says.

I'm wondering if *The Word* has got inside me without my knowing—if it was making me say what I nearly said and that's why he is encouraging me. He wants me to say that for him, and he's talking about peace, which I already knew was his weapon, and suddenly I'll see what everything has been about. It's as if a light is shining straight into my eyes, and I don't care if it blinds me. "He's supposed to be Christ," I shout.

There's some leathery movement, then someone I don't need to see says "All the characters are clearly aspects of him."

"We're talking about the narrator of *The Word*," the television woman explains to the camera, and joins in. "I took him to be some kind of prophet."

"Christ was a prophet," says a man who I can just about see is wearing a turban.

"Are we saying—" the television woman begins, but she can't protect Kray from me like that. "He knows I didn't mean anyone in his book," I shout. "I mean him."

The words are coming out faster than I can think, but they feel right. "If people don't believe in him they won't believe in his book. And they won't believe in him unless he can save himself."

Ideas are fighting in my head as if *The Word* is trying to come clear. If Christ came back now he'd have to die to make way for a religion that works better than his did, or would it be the opposite of Christ who'd try to stop all the violence and changes in the world? Either way... I'm going blind with panic, because I can feel Kray close to me, willing me to... He wants me to go on speaking while my words are out of control—because they're his, or because I won't be able to direct them at him? Then I realise how

long he's been silent, and I think he wants me to speak to him so he can speak to me. Is the panic I'm suffering his? He's afraid—afraid of me, because I'm...

"I think it's time we moved on," the television woman says, but she can't make anything happen now. I turn and look at him. He's waiting for me. His grin is telling me to speak—to say whatever I have to say, because then he'll answer and all that the world will remember hearing is him. It's been that way ever since the world heard of him. I see that now, but he's let me come too close. As I open my mouth I duck my head towards him.

For a moment it seems I'm going to kiss him, I see his lips parting, and his tongue feeling his teeth, and the blood in his eyes, and the fear there at last. I duck lower and go for his throat. I know how to do it from biting my tongue, and now I don't need to restrain myself or let go. Someone is screaming, it sounds as if the world is, but it can't be Kray, because I've torn out his voice. I lift my head and spit it back into his face.

It doesn't blot out his eyes. They meet mine, and there's forgiveness in them, or something even worse—fulfilment? Then his head falls back, opening his throat so I'm afraid he'll try and talk through it, and he throws his arms wide for the cameras. That's all I see, because there's nothing in my eyes now except light. But it isn't over, because I can still taste his voice like iron in my mouth.

Words are struggling to burst out of my head, and I don't know what they are. Any moment Kray's minders or someone will get hold of me, but if I can just... I bang my knees against the table to find it, and hear the glasses clash against the jug. I throw myself forwards and find one, and a hand grabs my arm, but I wrench myself free and shove the glass against my teeth until it breaks. Now the light feels as if it's turning into pain that is turning into the world, but whose pain is it—Kray's or mine? Hands are pulling at me, and I've no more time to think. As I make myself chew and swallow, at least I'm sure I'll never say another word.

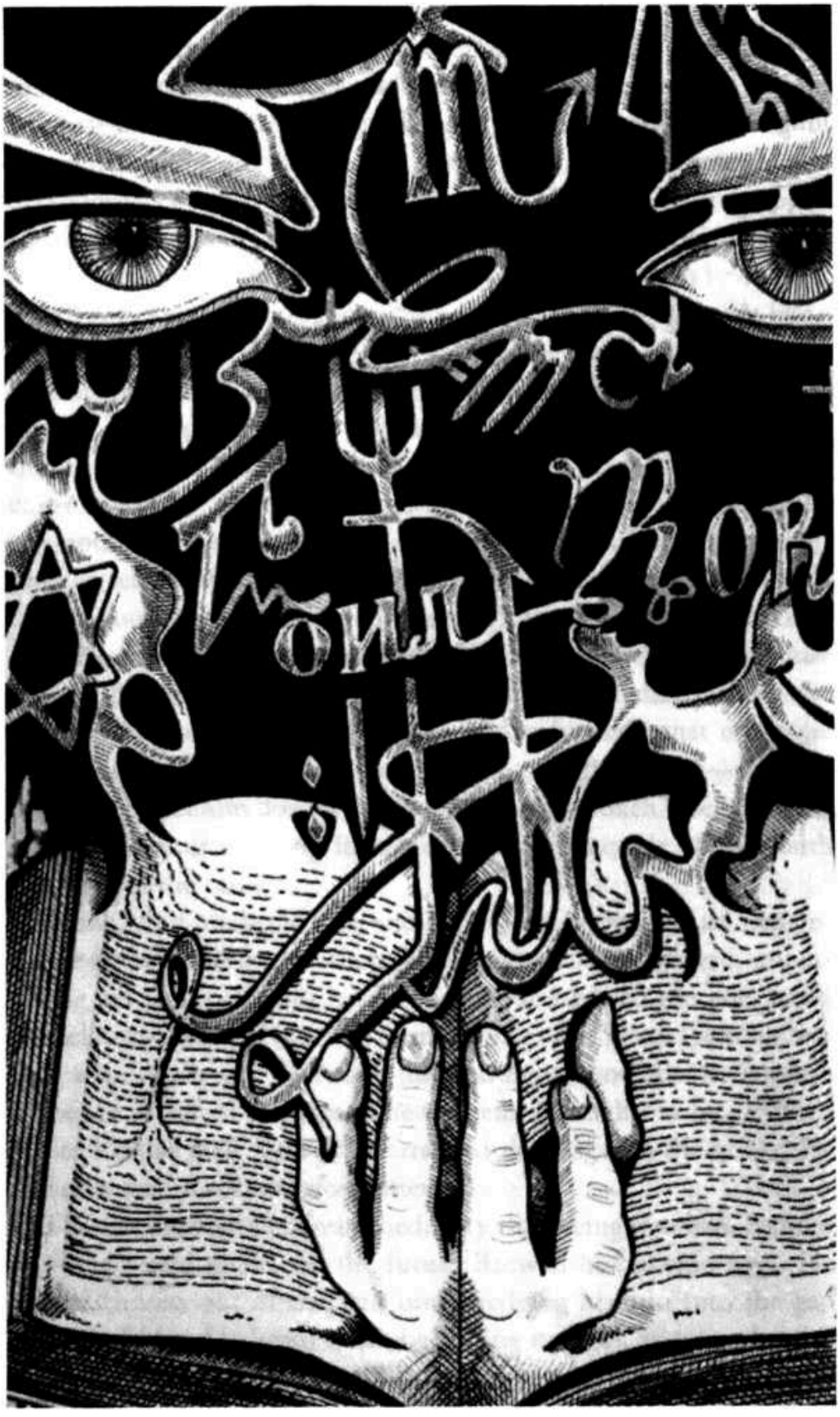

Illustration by Richard Lamb, taken from Told By The Dead, 2003.

1994

Going Under

"*Going Under* was done for Nancy Collins' book *Dark Love*. I know it doesn't fit her title very well. I'd somehow convinced myself she was editing an anthology about obsessions, and the tale can claim that preoccupation, I think. Around the time I planned to write it one of the Mersey Tunnels was closed to traffic for a day so that the public could celebrate its anniversary by walking through. I intended to research the experience, but the story grew impatient to be written, and so I saved myself the walk."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

"I confess that I've long regretted that [first] sentence—unnecessarily ambiguous, I think. It should be 'Blythe had shuffled almost to the ticket booth when he knew he should have sent Lydia the money.' As it stands it appears to refer to the booth."—Ramsey Campbell, *Knibbworld* Ramsey Campbell Discussion Board, 2009

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Blythe had shuffled almost to the ticket booth when he knew he should have sent the money. Beyond the line of booths another phalanx of walkers, some of them wearing slogans and some not a great deal else, advanced toward the tunnel under the river. While he'd failed to pocket the envelope, he never left his phone at home, and given the pace at which walkers were being admitted to the tunnel, which was closed to traffic for its anniversary, he should have plenty of time to complete a call before he reached the wide semicircular concrete mouth, rendered whiter by the July sun. As he unfolded the phone and tapped his home number on the keyboard, the men on either side of him began jogging on the spot, an action which the left-hand man accompanied with a series of low hollow panting hoots. The phone rang five times and addressed Blythe in his own voice.

"Valerie Mason and Steve Blythe. Whatever we're doing, it's keeping us away from the phone, so please leave your name and number and the date and time, and we'll tell you what we were up to when we call you back..." Though the message was less than six months old, it and Valerie's giggle at the end of it sounded worn by too much playback. Once the beep had stuttered four times on the way to uttering its longer tone, he spoke.

"Val? Valerie? It's me. I'm just about to start the tunnel walk. Sorry we had a bit of a tiff, but I'm glad you didn't come after all. You were right, I should send her the maintenance and then object. Let them have to explain to the

court instead of me. Are you in the darkroom? Come and find out who this is, will you? Don't just listen if you're hearing me. Be fair."

Quite a pack jogged between the booths at that moment, the man to his immediate left taking time to emit a triumphal hoot before announcing to the ticket seller "Aids for AIDS." Blythe turned his head and the phone to motion the woman behind him to pass, because if he stopped talking for more than a couple of seconds the machine would take him to have rung off, but the official in the booth ahead of him poked out his head, which looked squashed flat by his peaked cap. "Quick as you can. Thousands more behind you."

The woman began jogging to encourage Blythe, shaking both filled bags of her ample red singlet. "Get a move on, lover. Give your stocks and shares a rest."

Her companion, who seemed to have donned a dwarf's T-shirt by mistake, entered the jogging competition, her rampant stomach bobbing up and down more than the rest of her. "Put that back in your trousers or you'll be having a heart attack."

At least their voices were keeping the tape activated. "Hold on if you're there, Val. I hope you'll say you are," Blythe said, using two fingers to extract a fiver from the other pocket of his slacks. "I'm just going through the booth."

The official frowned in disagreement, and Blythe breathed hard into the phone while he selected a charity to favour with his entrance fee. "Are you sure you're fit?" the official said.

Blythe imagined being banned on the grounds of ill health from the walk when it was by far his quickest route home. "Fitter than you sitting in a booth all day," he said, not as lightly as he'd meant to, and smoothed the fiver on the counter. "Families in Need will do me."

The official wrote the amount and the recipient on a clipboard with a slowness which suggested he was still considering whether to let Blythe pass, and Blythe breathed harder. When the official tore most of a ticket off a roll and slapped it on the counter, Blythe felt released, but the man stayed him with a parting shot. "You won't get far with that, chum."

The phone had worked wherever Blythe had taken it, just as the salesman had promised. In any case, he was still two hundred yards short of the

tunnel entrance, into which officials with megaphones were directing the crowd. "Just had to get my ticket, Val. Listen, you've plenty of time to post the cheque, you've almost an hour. Only call me back as soon as you hear this so I know you have, will you? Heard it, I mean. That's if you don't pick it up before I ring off, which I hope you will, answer, that's to say, that's why I'm droning on. I should tell you the envelope's inside my blue visiting suit, not the office suit, the one that says here's your accountant making a special effort so why haven't you got your accounts together. Can you really not hear it's me? You haven't gone out, have you?"

By now his awareness was concentrated in his head, so he didn't notice that his pace had been influenced by the urgency of his speech until the upper lip of the tunnel swayed to a halt above him. Hot bare arms brushed his in passing as the megaphones began to harangue him. "Keep it moving, please," one crackled, prompting its mate to declare "No stopping now till the far side." An elderly couple faltered and conferred before returning to the booths, but Blythe didn't have that option. "That's you with the phone," a third megaphone blared.

"I know it's me. I don't see anybody else with one." This was meant to amuse Blythe's new neighbours, none of whom betrayed any such response. Not by any means for the first time, though less often since he'd met Valerie, he wished he'd kept some words to himself. "I'm starting the walk now. Please, I'm serious, ring me back the moment you hear this, all right? I'm ringing off now. If I haven't heard from you in fifteen minutes I'll call back," he said, and was in the tunnel.

Its shadow was a solid chill at which his body was uncertain whether to shiver, considering the heat which was building up in the tunnel. At least he felt cool enough to itemise his surroundings, something he liked to do whenever he was confronted by anywhere unfamiliar, though he'd driven through the tunnel several times a week for most of twenty years. Its two lanes accommodated five people abreast now, more or less comfortably if you discounted their body heat. Six feet above them on either side was a railed-off walkway for the use of workmen, with no steps up to either that Blythe had ever been able to locate. Twenty feet overhead was the peak of the arched roof, inset with yard-long slabs of light. No doubt he could count them if he wanted to calculate how far he'd gone or had still to go, but just now the sight of several hundred heads bobbing very slowly toward the first

curve summed up the prospect vividly enough. Apart from the not quite synchronised drumming of a multitude of soles on concrete and their echoes, the tunnel was almost silent except for the squawks of the megaphones beyond the entrance and the occasional audible breath.

The two women who'd addressed Blythe at the booths were ahead of him, bouncing variously. Maybe they'd once been as slim as his wife, Lydia, used to be, he thought, not that there was much left of the man she'd married either, or if there was it was buried under all the layers of the person he'd become. The presence of the women, their abundant sunlamped flesh and determined perfume and their wagging buttocks wrapped in satin, reminded him of too much it would do him no good to remember, and he might have let more walkers overtake him if it hadn't been for the pressure looming at his back. That drove him to step up his pace, and he'd established a regular rhythm when his trousers began to chirp.

More people than he was prepared for stared at him, and he felt bound to say "Just my phone" twice. So much for the ticket seller's notion that it wouldn't work in the tunnel. Blythe drew it from his pocket without breaking his stride and ducked one ear to it as he unfolded it. "Hello, love. Thanks for saving my—"

"Less of the slop, Stephen. It's a long time since that worked."

"Ah." He faltered, and had to think which foot he was next putting forward. "Lydia. Apologies. My mistake. I thought—"

"I had enough of your mistakes when we were together, and your apologies, and what you think."

"That pretty well covers it, doesn't it? Were you calling to share anything else with me, or was that it?"

"I wouldn't take that tone with me, particularly now."

"Don't, then," Blythe said, a form of response he remembered as having once amused her. "If you've something to say, spit it out. I'm waiting for a call."

"Up to your old tricks, are you? Can't she stand you never going anywhere without that thing either? Where are you, in the pub as usual trying to calm yourself down?"

"I'm perfectly calm. I couldn't be calmer," Blythe said as though that might counteract the effect she was having on him. "And I may tell you I'm on the charity walk."

Was that a chorus of ironic cheers behind him? Surely they weren't aimed at him, even if they sounded as unimpressed as Lydia, who said, "Never did begin at home for you, did it? Has your fancy woman found that out yet?"

He could have pounced on Lydia's syntax again, except that there were more important issues. "I take it you've just spoken to her."

"I haven't and I've no wish to. She's welcome to you and all the joy you bring, but she won't hear me sympathising. I didn't need to speak to her to know where you'd be."

"Then you were wrong, weren't you? And as long as we're discussing Valerie, maybe you and your solicitor friend ought to be aware she makes a lot less than he does now he's a partner in his firm."

"Watch it, big boy."

That was the broader-buttocked of the women. He'd almost trodden on her heels, his aggressiveness having communicated itself to his stride. "Sorry," he said, and without enough thought, "Not you, Lyd."

"Don't you dare start calling me that again. Who've you been talking to about his firm? So that's why I haven't had my cheque this month, is it? Let me tell you this from him. Unless that cheque is postmarked today, you'll find yourself in prison for nonpayment, and that's a promise from both of us."

"Well, that's the first—" Her rising fury had already borne her off, leaving him with a drone in his ear and hot plastic stuck to his cheek. He cleared the line as he tramped around more of the prolonged curve, which showed him thousands of heads and shoulders bobbing down a slope to the point almost a mile away from which, packed closer and closer together, they streamed sluggishly upward. On some days that midpoint was hazy with exhaust fumes, but the squashed crowd there looked distinct except for a slight wavering which must be an effect of the heat; he wasn't really smelling a faint trace of gas through the wake of perfume. He bent a fingernail against the keys on the receiver, and backhanded his forehead as drops of sweat full of a fluorescent glare swelled the numbers on the keypad. His home phone

had just rung when a man's voice said loudly, "They're all the same, these buggers with their gadgets. Can't be doing with them, me."

There was surely no reason for Blythe to feel referred to. "Pick it up, Val," he muttered. "I said I'd ring you back. It's been nearly fifteen minutes. You can't still be doing whatever you were doing. Come out, there's a love." But his voice greeted him again and unspooled its message, followed by Valerie's giggle, which under the circumstances he couldn't help feeling he'd heard once too often. "Are you really not there? I've just had Lydia on, ranting about her maintenance. Says if it isn't posted today her boyfriend the solicitor, who gives new meaning to the word solicit, will have me locked up. I suppose technically he might be able to, so if you can make absolutely certain you, I know I should have, I know you said, but if you can do that for me, for both of us, nip round the corner and get that bloody envelope in the shit."

The last word came out loudest, and three ranks in front of him glanced back. Of them, only the woman whose T-shirt ended halfway up her midriff retained any concern once she saw him. "Are you all right, old feller?"

"Yes, I'm... No, I'm... Yes, yes." He shook his free hand so extravagantly he saw sweat flying off it, his intention being to wave away his confusion more than her solicitude, but she advanced her lips in a fierce grimace before presenting her substantial rear view to him. He hadn't time to care if she was offended, though she was using the set of her buttocks to convey that she was, exactly as Lydia used to. The ticket seller had been right after all. The tunnel had cut Blythe off, emptying the receiver except for a faint distant moan.

It could be a temporary interruption. He pressed the recall button so hard it felt embedded in his thumb and was attempting to waft people past him when a not unfamiliar voice protested, "Don't go standing. There's folk back here who aren't as spry as some."

"When you're my dad's age, maybe you won't be so fond of stopping and starting."

Either might be the disliker of gadgets, though both appeared to have devoted a good deal of time and presumably machinery to the production of muscles, not only beneath shoulder level. Blythe tilted his head vigorously, almost losing the bell, which was repeating its enfeebled note at his ear. "Don't mind me, just go round me. Just go, will you?"

"Put that bloody thing away and get on with what we're here for," the senior bruiser advised him. "We don't want to be having to carry you. We had his mother conk out on us once through not keeping the pace up."

"Don't mind me. Don't bother about me."

"We're bothered about all the folks you're holding up and putting the strain on."

"We'll be your trainers till we all finish," the expanded youth said.

"Then I ought to stick my feet in you," Blythe mumbled as those very feet gave in to the compulsion to walk. The phone was still ringing, and now it produced his voice. "Valerie Mason and Steve Blythe," it said, and at once had had enough of him.

All the heat of the tunnel rushed into him. He felt his head waver before steadying in a dangerously fragile version of itself, raw with a smell which surely wasn't of exhaust fumes, despite the haze into which the distant walkers were descending. He had to go back beyond the point at which his previous call had lost its hold. He peeled the soggy receiver away from his face and swung around, to be confronted by a mass of flesh as wide and as long as the protracted curve of the tunnel. He could hear more of it being tamped into the unseen mouth by the jabbing of the megaphones. Of the countless heads it was wagging at him, every one that he managed to focus on looked prepared to see him trampled underfoot if he didn't keep moving. He could no more force his way back through it than through the concrete wall, but there was no need. He would use a walkway as soon as he found some steps up.

Another wave of heat, which felt like the threat of being overwhelmed by the tide of flesh, found him, sending him after the rhythmically quivering women. As far ahead as he could see there were no steps onto the walkways, but his never having noticed them while driving needn't mean steps didn't exist; surely a trick of perspective was hiding them from him. He narrowed his eyes until he felt the lids twitch against the eyeballs and his head ache more than his feet were aching. He poked the recall button and lifted the receiver above his head in case that might allow him to hook a call, but the phone at home hadn't even doubled its first ring when his handful of technology went dead as though suffocated by the heat or drowned in the sweat of his fist. As he let it sink past his face, a phone shrilled farther down the tunnel.

"They're bloody breeding," the old man growled behind him, but Blythe didn't care what he said. About three hundred yards ahead he saw an aerial extend itself above a woman's scalp as blond as Lydia's. Whatever had been interfering with his calls, it apparently wasn't present in that stretch of the tunnel. He saw the aerial wag a little with her conversation as she walked at least a hundred yards. As he tramped toward the point where she'd started talking, he counted the slabs of light overhead, some of which appeared to be growing unstable with the heat. He had only half as far to go now, however much the saturated heat might weigh him down. It must be his eyes which were flickering: not as many of the lights as seemed to be. He needn't wait until he arrived at the exact point in the tunnel. He only wanted reassurance that Valerie had picked up his message. He thumbed the button and flattened his ear with the receiver. The tone had barely invited him to dial when it was cut off.

He mustn't panic. He hadn't reached where phones worked, that was all. On, trying to ignore the sluggishly retreating haze of body heat which smelled increasingly like exhaust fumes, reminding himself to match the pace of the crowd, though the pair of walkers on each side of him made him feel plagued by double vision. Now he was where the woman's phone had rung, beneath two dead fluorescents separated by one which looked as though it had stolen its glare from both. All three were bumped backward by their fellows as he jabbed the button, bruised his ear with the earpiece, snatched the receiver away and cleared it, supported it with his other hand before it could slide out of his sweaty grip, split a fingernail against the button, bruised his ear again... Nothing he did raised the dialling tone for longer than it took to mock him.

It couldn't be the phone itself. The woman's had worked, and his was the latest model. He could only think the obstruction was moving, which meant it had to be the crowd that was preventing him from acting. If Lydia's replacement for him took him to court, he would lose business because of it, probably the confidence of many of his clients too because they wouldn't understand he took more care with their affairs than he did with his own, and if he went to prison... He'd closed both fists around the phone, because the plastic and his hands were aggravating one another's slippiness, and tried not to imagine battering his way through the crowd. There were still the walkways, and by the time he found the entrance to one it might make sense to head for the far end of the tunnel. He was trudging forward, each

step a dull ache which bypassed his hot swollen body wrapped in far too much sodden material and searched for a sympathetic ache in his hollowed-out head, when the phone rang.

It was so muffled by his grip that he thought for a moment it wasn't his. Ignoring the groans of the muscled duo, he nailed the button and jammed the wet plastic against his cheek. "Steve Blythe. Can you make it quick? I don't know how long this will work."

"It's all right, Steve. I only called to see how you were surviving. Sounds as if you're deep in it. So long as you're giving your brain a few hours off for once. You can tell me all about it when you come home."

"Val. Val, wait. Val, are you there?" Blythe felt a mass of heat which was nearly flesh lurch at him from behind as he missed a step. "Speak to me, Val."

"Calm down, Steve. I'll still be here when you get back. Save your energy. You sound as though you need it."

"I'll be fine. Just tell me you got the message."

"Which message?"

The heat came for him again—he couldn't tell from which direction, or how fast he was stumbling. "Mine. The one I left while you were doing whatever you were doing."

"I had to go out for some black and white. The machine can't be working properly. There weren't any messages on the tape when I came in just now."

That halted Blythe as if the phone had reached the end of an invisible cord. The vista of walkers wavered into a single flat mass, then steadied and regained some of its perspective. "Never mind. Plenty of time," he said rapidly. "All I wanted—"

A shoulder much more solid than a human body had any right to be rammed his protruding elbow. The impact jerked his arm up, and the shooting pain opened his fist. He saw the phone describe a graceful arc before it clanged against the railing of the right-hand walkway and flew into the crowd some thirty yards ahead. Arms flailed at it as though it was an insect, then it disappeared. "What was that for?" he screamed into the old man's face as it bobbed alongside his. "What are you trying to do to me?"

The son's face crowded Blythe's from the other side, so forcefully it sprayed Blythe's cheek with sweat. "Don't you yell at him, he's got a bad ear. Lucky you weren't knocked down, stopping like that. Better believe you will be if you mix it with my dad."

"Can someone pick up my phone, please?" Blythe called at the top of his voice.

The women directly in front of him added winces to their quivering and covered their ears, but nobody else acknowledged him. "My phone," he pleaded. "Don't step on it. Who can see it? Look for it, can you all? Please pass it back."

"I said about my dad's ear," the man to his left rumbled, lifting a hammer of a fist which for the present he used only to mop his forehead. Blythe fell silent, having seen a hand raised some yards ahead of him to point a finger downward where the phone must be. At least it was in the middle of the road, in Blythe's immediate path. A few raw steps brought him a glimpse of the aerial, miraculously intact, between the thighs of the singleted woman. He stooped without breaking his stride, and his scalp brushed her left buttock. His finger and thumb closed on the aerial and drew it toward him —only the aerial. He was staggering forward in his crouch when he saw most of the keypad being kicked away to his left, and several other plastic fragments skittering ahead.

As he straightened up, a grasp as hot and soft as flesh yet rough as concrete seemed to close around his skull. The singleted woman had turned on him. "Whose bum do you think you're biting?"

Any number of hysterical replies occurred to him, but he managed to restrain himself. "I'm not after any of that, I'm after this." The words sounded less than ideally chosen once they were out, especially since the aerial in his hand was rising between her legs as though magnetised by her crotch. He whipped it back, the grip on his skull threatening to blind him, and heard himself shouting. "Look at it. Who did this? Who smashed my phone? Where are your brains?"

"Don't look at us," said the woman with the increasingly bare and moist midriff, while the son leaned his dripping face into Blythe's. "Keep the row up if you're after an ear like my dad's." All at once they were irrelevant, and he let the aerial slip from his hand. There was at least one working phone in the tunnel.

As soon as he attempted to edge forward, the crowd swung its nearest heads toward him, its eyes blinking away sweat, its mouths panting hotly at him, and started to mutter and grumble. "What's the panic? Wait your turn. We all want to get there. Keep your distance. There's people here, you know," it warned him in several voices, and raised one behind him. "Now where's he scuttling off to? Must be afraid I'll report him for going for my bum."

The obstruction to his calls was about to turn physical if he couldn't find a way to fend it off. "Emergency," he murmured urgently in the nearest unmatched pair of ears, which after hesitating for a second parted their bodies to let him through. "Excuse me. Emergency. Excuse," he repeated, stepping up the intensity, and was able to overtake enough people that he must be close to the phone. Which of the clump of blond heads belonged to it? Only one looked real. "Excuse me," he said, and realising that sounded as if he wanted to get by, took hold of its unexpectedly thin and angular shoulder. "You had the phone just now, didn't you? I mean, you have—"

"Let go."

"Yes. What I'm saying is, you've got—"

"Let go."

"There. I have. Excuse me. My hand's in my pocket, look. What I'm trying to say—"

The woman turned away as much of her sharp face as she'd bothered to incline toward him. "Not me."

"I'm sure it was. Not my phone, not the one that was trodden on, but weren't you talking on the phone before? If it wasn't yours—"

She was surrounded by female heads, he saw, all of them preserving a defiant blankness. Without warning she snapped her head around, her hair lashing his right eye. "Who let you out? Which madhouse have they closed down now?"

"Excuse me. I didn't mean to..." That covered more than he had time to put into words, not least the inadvertent winks which his right eye must appear to be sharing with her. "It's an emergency, you see. If it wasn't you, you must have seen who it was with the phone. She was somewhere round here."

All the heads in her clump jeered practically in unison, then used her head to speak. "It's an emergency, all right, an emergency that you need locking up. Just you wait till we get out of here and talk to someone."

That made Blythe peer at his watch. Sweat or a tear from his stinging eye bloated the digits, and he had to shake his wrist twice before he was able to distinguish that he would never reach the tunnel exit in time to find a phone outside. The crowd had beaten him—or perhaps not yet, unless he'd failed to notice it sending a message ahead that he was to be stopped. "Emergency. Emergency," he said in a voice whose edge the heat seemed determined to blunt, and when he thought he'd sidled far enough away from the woman who wanted to persuade him he was going mad, he let his desperation grow louder. "Emergency. Need to phone. Has anyone a phone? Emergency." A shake or a wave of the heat passed through bunch after bunch of heads, and each time it did so his right eye blinked and smarted. He was trying to sound more official and peremptory when his voice trailed off. At the limit of his vision the packed flesh beneath the unsteady lights had come to a complete stop.

He could only watch the stasis creeping toward him, wavering into place in layer after layer of flesh. It was his worst possible future racing to meet him, and the crowd had been on its side all along. As he heard a murmur advancing down the tunnel from the direction of the unseen exit, he strained his ears to hear what it was saying about him. He was feeling almost calm —for how long, he couldn't predict—when words in an assortment of voices grew distinct. The message was past him before he succeeded in piecing it together. "Someone's collapsed in the middle of the tunnel. They're clearing the way for an ambulance."

"Bastard," Blythe snarled, not knowing if he meant the casualty or the crowd or the ambulance—and instantly knew he should mean none of them, because he was saved from the future he'd almost wished on himself. He began to shoulder his way forward. "Emergency. Make way, please. Make way," he was able to say more officiously, and when that failed to clear his route fast enough, "Let me through. I'm a doctor."

He mustn't let himself feel guilty. The ambulance was coming—he could see the far end of the tunnel beginning to turn blue and shiver—and so he was hardly putting the patient at risk. The ambulance was his only hope. Once he was close enough he would be injured, he would be however

disabled he needed to seem in order to persuade the crew to take him out of the crowd. "I'm a doctor," he said louder, wishing he was and unmarried too, except that his life was controllable again, everything was under control. "I'm the doctor," he said, better yet, strong enough to part the flesh before him and to blot out the voices that were discussing him. Were they trying to confuse him by dodging ahead of him? They had to be echoes, because he identified the voice of the woman who'd pretended she had no phone. "What's he babbling about now?"

"He's telling everyone he's a doctor."

"I knew it. That's what they do when they're mad."

He needn't let her bother him; nobody around him seemed to hear her—maybe she was fishing for him with her voice. "I'm the doctor," he shouted, seeing the ambulance crawling toward him at the end of the visible stretch of tunnel. For a moment he thought it was crushing bruised people, exhaust fumes turning their pulse blue, against the walls, but of course they were edging out alongside it, making way. His shout had dislodged several voices from beneath the bleary sweat-stained lights. "What did she say he's saying, he's a doctor?"

"Maybe he wanted to examine your bum."

"I know the kind of consultation I'd like to have with him. It was a quack made my dad's ear worse."

Could the crowd around Blythe really not hear them, or was it pretending ignorance until it had him where it wanted him? Wasn't it parting for him more slowly than it should, and weren't its heads only just concealing its contempt for his imposture? The mocking voices settled toward him, thickening the heat which was putting on flesh all around him. He had to use one of the walkways. Now that he had to reach the ambulance as speedily as possible, he was entitled to use them. "I'm the doctor," he repeated fiercely, daring anyone to challenge him, and felt his left shoulder cleaving the saturated air. He'd almost reached the left-hand walkway when a leotarded woman whose muscles struck him as no more likely than her deep voice moved into his path. "Where are you trying to get to, dear?"

"Up behind you. Give me a hand, would you?" Even if she was a psychiatric nurse or warder, he had seniority. "I'm needed. I'm the doctor."

Only her mouth moved, and not much of that. "Nobody's allowed up there unless they work for the tunnel."

He had to climb up before the heat turned into sweaty voices again and trapped him. "I do. I am. There's been a collapse, the tunnel's made them collapse, and they need me."

He'd seen ventriloquists open their mouths wider. Her eyes weren't moving at all, though a drop of sweat was growing on her right eyelashes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's all right, nurse. You aren't required to. Just give me a hand. Give me a leg up," Blythe said, and saw the drop swelling on her untroubled eyelid, swelling until he could see nothing else. If she was real she would blink, she wouldn't stare at him like that. The mass of flesh had made her out of itself to block his plan, but it had miscalculated. He flung himself at her, dug his fingers into her bristly scalp, and heaved himself up with all the force his arms could muster.

His heels almost caught her shoulders. They scraped down to her breasts, which gave them enough leverage for him to vault over her. His hands grabbed at the railing, caught it, held on. His feet found the edge of the walkway, and he hauled one leg over the railing, then the other. Below him the nurse was clutching her breasts and emitting a sound which, if it was intended as a cry of pain, failed to impress him. Perhaps it was a signal, because he'd taken only a few steps along the way to freedom when hands commenced trying to seize him.

At first he thought they meant to injure him so that the ambulance would take him, and then he saw how wrong he was. He had an unobstructed view of the ambulance as it rammed its way through the crowd, its blue light pounding like his head, the white arch flaring blue above it as he felt the inside of his skull flaring. There was no sign of anyone collapsed ahead. The ambulance had been sent for Blythe, of course; the message had been passed along that they'd succeeded in driving him crazy. But they couldn't conceal their opinion of him, hot oppressive breathless waves of which rose toward him and would have felt like shame if he hadn't realised how they'd given themselves away: they couldn't hold him in such contempt unless they knew more about him than they feigned to know. He kicked at the grasping fingers and glared about in search of a last hope. It was behind

him. The woman with Lydia's hair had abandoned her pretence of having no phone, and he had only to grab the aerial.

He dashed back along the walkway, hanging onto the rail and kicking out at anyone within reach, though his feet so seldom made contact that he couldn't tell how many of the hands and heads were real. The woman who was still trying to convince him he'd injured her breasts flinched, which gratified him. She and the rest of the mob could move when they wanted to, they just hadn't done so for him. The beckoning aerial led his gaze to the face dangling from it. She was staring at him and talking so hard her mouth shaped every syllable. "Here he comes now," she mouthed.

She must be talking to the ambulance. Of course, she'd used the phone before to summon it, because she was another of the nurses. She'd better hand over the phone if she didn't want worse than he was supposed to have done to her colleague. "Here I come, all right," he yelled, and heard what sounded like the entire crowd, though perhaps only the tunnel that was his head, echoing him. As he ran the tunnel widened, carrying her farther from the walkway, too far for him to grab the aerial over the crowd. They thought they'd beaten him, but they were going to help him again. He vaulted the railing and ran across the mass of flesh.

It wasn't quite as solid as he had assumed, but it would do. The heat of its contempt streamed up at him, rebounding from the dank concrete of his skull. Was it contemptuous of what he was doing or of his failure to act when he could have? He had a sudden notion, so terrible it almost caused him to lose his footing, that when he raised the phone to his ear he would discover the woman had been talking to Valerie. It wasn't true, and only the heat was making him think it. Stepping stones turned up to him and gave way underfoot—there went some teeth and there, to judge by its yielding, an eye—but he could still trample his way to the phone, however many hands snatched at him.

Then the aerial whipped out of his reach like a rod that had caught a fish. The hands were pulling him down into their contempt, but they weren't entitled to condemn him: he hadn't done anything they weren't about to do. "I'm you," he screamed, and felt the shoulders on which he'd perched move apart farther than his legs could stretch. He whirled his arms, but this wasn't a dream in which he could fly away from everything he was. Too late he saw why the woman had called the ambulance for him. He might have

screamed his thanks to her, but he could make no words out of the sounds which countless hands were dragging from his mouth.

The Horror Under Warrendown

"Scott David Aniolowski's anthology *Made in Goatswood* [was] composed of stories set in the Cotswold area I'd made peculiarly my own—and I do mean peculiarly. Scott asked if I would provide an introduction, but it occurred to me that here was the perfect excuse for me to develop one of the Lovecraftian ideas lurking in the pit I call my brain. I wrote it in time for the book to be launched at the convention, and read it aloud there, to the unstoppable accompaniment of a New Orleans jazz band in the nearby restaurant. Despite that, it was gravely received. When I performed it later for the Preston SF Group, however, some Lovecraftian tittering was audible from Bryan Talbot, most recently famous—deservedly so—as the creator of *The Tale of One Bad Rat*. Can he have glimpsed some dark secret of my tale?"—Ramsey Campbell, introduction to the story in *Dark Terrors 3*, 1997

Written in: 1994
First published in *Made In Goatswood: New Tales Of Horror In The Severn Valley*, 1995

You ask me at least to hint why I refuse ever to open a children's book. Once I made my living from such material. While the imitations of reality hawked by my colleagues in the trade grew grubbier, and the fantasies more shameful, I carried innocence from shop to shop, or so I was proud to think. Now the sight of a children's classic in a bookshop window sends me fleeing. The more apparently innocent the book, the more unspeakable the truth it may conceal, and there are books the mere thought of which revives memories I had prayed were buried for ever.

It was when I worked from Birmingham, and Warrendown was only a name on a signpost on a road to Brichester—a road I avoided, not least because it contained no bookshops. Nor did I care for the route it followed a few miles beyond the Warrendown sign through Clotton, a small settlement which appeared to be largely abandoned, its few occupied houses huddling together on each side of a river, beside which stood a concrete monument whose carvings were blurred by moss and weather. I had never been fond of the countryside, regarding it at best as a way of getting from town to town, and now the stagnant almost reptilian smell and chilly haze which surrounded Clotton seemed to attach itself to my car. This unwelcome presence helped to render the Cotswold landscape yet more forbidding to me, the farmland and green fields a disguise for the ancient stone of the hills, and I resolved to drive south of Brichester on the motorway in future and double back, even though this added half an hour to my journey. Had it

not been for Graham Crawley I would never again have gone near the Warrendown road.

In those days I drank to be sociable, not to attempt to forget or to sleep. Once or twice a month I met colleagues in the trade, some of whom I fancied would have preferred to represent a children's publisher too, for a balti and as many lagers as we could stay seated for. Saturdays would find me in my local pub, the Sutton Arms in Kings Heath. Ending my week among people who didn't need to be persuaded of the excellence of my latest batch of titles was enough to set me up for the next week. But it was in the Sutton Arms that Crawley made himself, I suppose, something like a friend.

I don't recall the early stages of the process, in his case or with any of the folk I used to know. I grew used to looking for him in the small bare taproom, where the stools and tables and low ceiling were the colour of ash mixed with ale. He would raise his broad round stubbled face from his tankard, twitching his nose and upper lip in greeting, and as I joined him he would duck as though he expected me either to pat him on the head or hit him when he'd emitted his inevitable quip. 'What was she up to in the woods with seven little men, eh?' he would mutter, or 'There's only one kind of horn you'd blow up that I know of. No wonder he was going after sheep,' or some other reference to the kind of book in which I travelled. There was a constant undercurrent of ingratiating nervousness in his voice, an apology for whatever he said as he said it, which was one reason I was never at my ease with him. While we talked about our week, mine on the road and his behind the counter of a local greengrocer's, I was bracing myself for his latest sexual bulletin. I never knew what so many women could see in him, and hardly any of them lasted for more than an encounter. My curiosity about the kind of girl who could find him attractive may have left me open to doing him the favour he asked of me.

At first he only asked which route I took to Brichester, and then which one I would follow if the motorway was closed, by which point I'd had enough of the way he skulked around a subject as if he was ready to dart into hiding at the first hint of trouble. 'Are you after a lift?' I demanded.

He ducked his head so that his long hair hid even more of his ears and peered up at me. 'Well, a lift, you know, I suppose, really, yes.'

'Where to?'

'You won't know it, cos it's not much of a place. Only it's not far, not much out of your way, I mean, if you happened to be going that way anyway sometime.'

When at last he released the name of Warrendown like a question he didn't expect to be answered, his irritating tentativeness provoked me to retort 'I'll be in that square of the map next week.'

'Next week, that's next week, you mean.' His face twitched so hard it exposed his teeth. 'I wasn't thinking quite that soon...'

'I'll forgive you if you've given up on the idea.'

'Given up—no, you're right. I'm going, cos I should go,' he said, fiercely for him.

Nevertheless I arrived at his flat the next day not really expecting to collect him. When I rang his bell, however, he poked his nose under the drawn curtains and said he would be down in five minutes; which, to my continuing surprise, he was, nibbling the last of his presumably raw breakfast and dressed in the only suit I'd ever seen him wear. He sat clutching a small case which smelled of vegetables while I concentrated on driving through the rush hour and into the tangle of motorways, and so we were irrevocably on our way before I observed that he was gripping his luggage with all the determination I'd heard in his voice in the pub. 'Are you expecting some kind of trouble?' I said.

'Trouble.' He added a grunt which bared his teeth and which seemed to be saying I'd understood so much that no further questions were necessary, and I nearly lost my temper. 'Care to tell me what kind?' I suggested.

'What would you expect?'

'Not a woman.'

'See, you knew. Be tricks. The trouble's what I got her into, as if you hadn't guessed. Cos she got me going so fast I hadn't time to wear anything. Can't beat a hairy woman.'

This was a great deal more intimate than I welcomed. 'When did you last see her?' I said as curtly as I could.

'Last year. She was having it then. Should have gone down after, but I, you know. You know me.'

He was hugging his baggage so hard he appeared to be squeezing out the senseless vegetable smell. 'Afraid of her family?' I said with very little sympathy.

He pressed his chin against his chest, but I managed to distinguish what he muttered. 'Afraid of the whole bloody place.'

That was clearly worth pursuing, and an excuse for me to stay on my usual route, except that ahead I saw all three lanes of traffic halted as far as the horizon, and police cars racing along the hard shoulder towards the problem. I left the motorway at the exit which immediately presented itself.

Framilode, Saul, Fretherne, Whitminster... Old names announced themselves on signposts, and then a narrow devious road enclosed the car with hedges, blotting out the motorway at once. Beneath a sky clogged with dark clouds the gloomy foliage appeared to smoulder; the humped backs of the hills glowed a lurid green. When I opened my window to let out the vegetable smell, it admitted a breeze, unexpectedly chill for September, which felt like my passenger's nervousness rendered palpable. He was crouching over his luggage and blinking at the high spiky hedges as if they were a trap into which I'd led him. 'Can I ask what your plans are?' I said to break the silence which was growing as relentless as the ancient landscape.

'See her. Find out what she's got, what she wants me to.' His voice didn't so much trail off as come to a complete stop. I wasn't sure I wanted to know where his thoughts had found themselves. 'What took you there to begin with?' was as much as I cared to ask.

'Beat ricks.'

This time I grasped it, despite his pronouncing it as though unconvinced it was a name. 'She's the young lady in question.'

'Met her in the Cabbage Patch, you know, the caff. She'd just finished university but she stayed over at my place.' I was afraid this might be the preamble to further intimate details, but he continued with increasing reluctance 'Kept writing to me after she went home, wanting me to go down there, cos she said I'd feel at home.'

'And did you?'

He raised his head as though sniffing the air and froze in that position. The sign for Warrendown, drooping a little on its post, had swung into view

along the hedge. His half-admitted feelings had affected me so much that my foot on the accelerator wavered. 'If you'd prefer not to do this...'

Only his mouth moved, barely opening. 'No choice.'

No reply could have angered me more. He'd no more will than one of his own vegetables, I thought, and sent the car screeching into the Warrendown road. As we left behind the sign which appeared to be trying to point into the earth, I had an impression of movement beyond the hedge on both sides of the road, several figures which had been standing absolutely still leaping to follow the car. I told myself I was mistaking at least their speed, and when ragged gaps in the hedges afforded me a view of oppressively green fields weighed down by the stagnant sky, nobody was to be seen, not that anyone could have kept pace with the car. I hadn't time to ponder any of this, because from the way Crawley was inching his face forward I could tell that the sight a mile ahead among the riotous fields surrounded by hunched dark hills must indeed be Warrendown.

At that distance I saw it was one of the elements of the countryside I most disliked, an insignificant huddle of buildings miles from anywhere, but I'd never experienced such immediate revulsion. The clump of thatched roofs put me in mind of dunes surmounted by dry grass, evidence less of human habitation than of the mindless actions of nature. As the sloping road led me down towards them, I saw that the thatch overhung the cottages, like hair dangling over idiot brows. Where the road descended to the level of the village, it showed me that the outermost cottages were so squat they appeared to have collapsed or to be sinking into the earth of the unpaved road. Thatch obscured their squinting windows, and I gave in to an irrational hope that the village might prove to be abandoned. Then the door of the foremost cottage sank inwards, and as I braked, a head poked out of the doorway to watch our arrival.

It was a female head. So much I distinguished before it was snatched back. I glanced at Crawley in case he had recognised it, but he was wrinkling his face at some aspect of the village which had disconcerted him. As the car coasted into Warrendown, the woman reappeared, having draped a scarf over her head to cover even more of her than her dress did. I thought she was holding a baby, then decided it must be some kind of pet, because as she emerged into the road with an odd abrupt lurch the small object sprang from her arms into the dimness within the cottage. She knotted the scarf and

thrust her plump yet flattish face out of it to stare swollen-eyed at my passenger. I was willing to turn the vehicle around and race for the main road, but he was lowering his window, and so I slowed the car. I saw their heads lean towards each other as though the underside of the sky was pressing them down and forcing them together. Their movements seemed obscurely reminiscent, but I'd failed to identify of what when she spoke. 'You're back.'

Though her low voice wasn't in itself threatening, I sensed he was disconcerted that someone he clearly couldn't put a name to had recognised him. All he said, however, was 'You know Beatrix.'

'Us all know one another.'

She hadn't once glanced at me, but I was unable to look away from her. A few coarse hairs sprouted from her reddish face; I had the unpleasant notion that her cheeks were raw from being shaved. 'Do you know where she is?' Crawley said.

'Her'll be with the young ones.'

His head sank as his face turned up further. 'How many?'

'All that's awake. Can't you hear them? I should reckon even he could.'

As that apparently meant me I dutifully strained my ears, although I wasn't anxious to heighten another sense: our entry into Warrendown seemed to have intensified the vegetable stench. After a few moments I made out a series of high regular sounds—childish voices chanting some formula—and experienced almost as much relief as my passenger audibly did. 'She's at the school,' he said.

'That's her. Back where her was always meant for.' The woman glanced over her shoulder into the cottage, and part of a disconcertingly large ear twitched out of her headscarf. 'Feeding time,' she said, and began unbuttoning the front of her dress as she stepped back through the doorway, beyond which I seemed to glimpse something hopping about a bare earth floor. 'See you down there later,' she told Crawley, and shut the door.

I threw the car into gear and drove as fast through the village as I reasonably could. Faces peered through the thick fringes over the low windows of the stunted cottages, and I told myself it was the dimness within that made those faces seem so fat and so blurred in their outlines, and the nervousness with which Crawley had infected me that caused their

eyes to appear so large. At the centre of Warrendown the cottages, some of which I took to be shops without signs, crowded towards the road as if forced forward by the mounds behind them, mounds as broad as the cottages but lower, covered with thatch or grass. Past the centre the buildings were more sunken; more than one had collapsed, while others were so overgrown that only glimpses through the half-obscured unglazed windows of movements, ill-defined and sluggish, suggested that they were inhabited. I felt as though the rotten vegetable sweetness in the air was somehow dragging them all down as it was threatening to do to me, and had to restrain my foot from tramping on the accelerator. Now the car was almost out of Warrendown, which was scarcely half a mile long, and the high voices had fallen silent before I was able to distinguish what they had been chanting—a hymn, my instincts told me, even though the language had seemed wholly unfamiliar. I was wondering whether I'd passed the school, and preparing to tell Crawley I hadn't time to retrace the route, when Crawley mumbled 'This is it.'

'If you say so.' I now saw that the last fifty or so yards of the left-hand side of Warrendown were occupied by one long mound fattened by a pelt of thatch and grass and moss. I stopped the car but poised my foot on the accelerator. 'What do you want to do?'

His blank eyes turned to me. Perhaps it was the strain on them which made them appear to be almost starting out of his head. 'Why do you have to ask?'

I'd had enough. I reached across him to let him out, and the door of the school wobbled open as though I'd given it a cue. Beyond it stood a young woman of whom I could distinguish little except a long-sleeved ankle-length brown dress, my attention having been caught by the spectacle behind her—at least half a dozen small bodies in a restless heap on the bare floor of the dark corridor. As some of them raised their heads lethargically to blink big-eyed at me before subsiding again, Crawley clambered out of the vehicle, blocking my view. 'Thanks for, you know,' he muttered. 'You'll be coming back this way, will you?'

'Does that mean you'll be ready to leave?'

'I'll know better when you come.'

'I'll be back before dark and you'd better be out here on the road,' I told him, and sped off.

I kept him in view in the mirror until the hedges hid Warrendown. The mirror shook with the unevenness of the road, but I saw him wave his free hand after me, stretching his torso towards the car as though he was about to drop to all fours and give chase. Behind him a figure leapt out of the doorway, and as he swung round she caught him. I could distinguish no more about her than I already had, except that the outline of her large face looked furry, no doubt framed by hair. She and Crawley embraced—all her limbs clasped him, at any rate—and as I looked away from this intimacy I noticed that the building of which the school was an extension had once possessed a tower, the overgrown stones of which were scattered beyond the edge of the village. It was none of my business whether they took care of their church, nor why anyone who'd attended university should have allowed herself to be reduced to teaching in a village school, nor what hold the place seemed to have over Crawley as well. They deserved each other, I told myself, and not only because they looked so similar. Once they were out of sight I lowered the windows and drove fast to rid the car of the stagnant mindless smell of Warrendown.

Before long the track brought me to an unmarked junction with the main road. I wound the windows tight and sped through the remains of Clotton, which felt drowned by the murky sky and the insidious chill of the dark river, and didn't slow until I saw Brichester ahead, raising its hospital and graveyard above its multiplying streets. In those streets I felt more at ease; nothing untoward had ever befallen me in a city such as Brichester, and nothing seemed likely to do so, especially in a bookshop. I parked my car in a multi-storey at the edge of Lower Brichester and walked through the crowds to the first of my appointments.

My Christmas titles went down well—in the last shop of the day, perhaps too well. Not only did the new manager, previously second in command, order more copies than any of her competitors, but in a prematurely festive mood insisted on my helping her celebrate her promotion. One drink led to several, not least because I must have been trying to douse the nervousness with which Crawley and Warrendown had left me. Too late I realised my need for plenty of coffee and something to eat, and by the time I felt fit to drive the afternoon was well over.

Twilight had gathered like soot in cobwebs as wide as the sky. From the car park I saw lights fleeing upwards all over Brichester, vanishing home. The

hospital was a glimmering misshapen skull beside which lay acres of bones. Even the fluorescent glare of the car park appeared unnatural, and I sat in my car wondering how much worse the places I had to drive back through would seem. I'd told Crawley I would collect him before dark, but wasn't it already dark? Might he not have decided I wasn't coming for him, and have made his own arrangements? This was almost enough to persuade me I needn't return to Warrendown, but a stirring of guilt at my cowardice shamed me into heading for that morning's route.

The glow of the city sank out of view. A few headlights came to meet me, and then there were only my beams probing the dim road that writhed between the hills, which rose as though in the dark they no longer needed to pretend to slumber. The bends of the road swung back and forth, unable to avoid my meagre light, and once a pair of horned heads stared over a gate, rolling their eyes as they chewed and chewed, rolling them mindlessly as they would when they went to be slaughtered. I remembered how Crawley's eyes had protruded as he prepared to quit my car.

Well outside Clotton I was seized by the chill of the river. Though my windows were shut tight, as I reached the first abandoned house I heard the water, splashing more loudly than could be accounted for unless some large object was obstructing it. I drove so fast across the narrow bridge and between the eyeless buildings that by the time I was able to overcome my inexplicable panic I was miles up the road, past the unmarked lane to Warrendown.

I told myself I mustn't use this as an excuse to break my word, and when I reached the Warrendown signpost, which looked as though the weight of the growing blackness was helping the earth drag it down, I steered the car off the main road. Even with my headlight beams full on, I had to drive at a speed which made me feel the vehicle was burrowing into the thick dark, which by now could just as well have been the night it was anticipating. The contortions of the road suggested it was doing its utmost never to reach Warrendown. The thorns of the hedges tore at the air, and a gap in the tortured mass of vegetation let me see the cottages crouching furtively, heads down, in the midst of the smudged fields. Despite the darkness, not a light was to be seen.

It could have been a power failure—I assumed those might be common in so isolated and insignificant a village—but why was nobody in

Warrendown using candles or flashlights? Perhaps they were, invisibly at that distance, I reassured myself. The hedges intervened without allowing me a second look. The road sloped down, giving me the unwelcome notion that Warrendown had snared it, and the hedges ended as though they had been chewed off. As my headlights found the outermost cottages, their long-haired skulls seemed to rear out of the earth. Apart from that, there was no movement all the way along the road to the half-ruined church.

The insidious vegetable stench had already begun to seep into the car. It cost me an effort to drive slowly enough through the village to look for the reason I was here. The thatched fringes were full of shadows which shifted as I passed as though each cottage was turning its idiot head towards me. Though every window was empty and dark, I felt observed, increasingly so as the car followed its wobbling beams along the deserted lane, until I found it hard to breathe. I seemed to hear a faint irregular thumping—surely my own unsteady pulse, not a drumming under the earth. I came abreast of the church and the school, and thought the thumping quickened and then ceased. Now I was out of Warrendown, but the knowledge that I would be returning to the main road whichever direction I chose persuaded me to make a last search. I turned the car, almost backing it into one of the overgrown blocks of the fallen tower, and sounded my horn twice.

The second blare followed the first into the silent dark. Nothing moved, not a single strand of thatch on the cottages within the congealed splash of light cast by my headlamps, but I was suddenly nervous of what response I might have invited. I eased the car away from the ruins of the tower and began to drive once more through Warrendown, my foot trembling on the accelerator as I made myself restrain my speed. I was past the school when a dim shape lurched into my mirror and in pursuit of the car.

Only my feeling relatively secure inside the vehicle allowed me to brake long enough to see the face. The figure flared red as though it was being skinned from head to foot, and in the moment before its hands jerked up to paw at its eyes I saw it was Crawley. Had his eyes always been so sensitive to sudden light? I released the brake pedal and fumbled the gears into neutral, and saw him let his hands fall but otherwise not move. It took some determination on my part to lower the window in order to call to him. 'Come on if you're coming.'

I barely heard his answer; his voice was indistinct—clogged. 'I can't.'

I would have reversed alongside him, except there wasn't room to pass him if he stayed put in the middle of the road. I flung myself out of the car in a rage and slammed the door furiously, a sound that seemed to provoke a renewed outbreak of muffled drumming, which I might have remarked had I not been intent on trying to wave away the suffocating vegetable smell. 'Why not?' I demanded, staying by the car.

'Come and see.'

I wasn't anxious to see more of Warrendown, or indeed of him. In the backwash of the car's lights his face appeared swollen with more stubble than an ordinary day could produce, and his eyes seemed dismayingly enlarged, soaking up the dimness. 'See what?' I said. 'Is it your young lady?'

'My what?'

I couldn't judge whether his tone was of hysterical amusement or panic or both. 'Beatrix,' I said, more loudly than I liked to in the abnormal silence and darkness. 'Is it your child?'

'There isn't one.'

'I'm sorry,' I murmured, uncertain whether I should be. 'You mean Beatrix...'

I was loath to put into words what I assumed she must have done, but he shook his blurred head and took an uncertain step towards me. I had the impression, which disturbed me so much I was distracted from the word he'd inched closer to mutter, that he couldn't quite remember how to walk. 'What are you saying?' I shouted before my voice flinched from the silence. 'What's absurd? Never mind. Tell me when you're in the car.'

He'd halted, hands dangling in front of his chest. His protruding teeth glinted, and I saw that he was chewing—seemed to glimpse a greenishness about his mouth and fattened cheeks. 'Can't do that,' he mumbled.

Did he mean neither of us would be able to return to the car? 'Why not?' I cried.

'Come and see.'

At that moment no prospect appealed to me less—but before I could refuse he turned his back and leapt into the dark. Two strides, or at least two convulsive movements, carried him to the doorless entrance to the church. The next moment he vanished into the lightless interior, and I heard a rapid

padding over whatever served for a floor; then, so far as the throbbing of my ears allowed me to distinguish, there was silence.

I ran to the church doorway, which was as far as the faintest glow from my headlights reached. 'Crawley,' I called with an urgency meant to warn him I had no intention of lingering, but the only response from the dark was a feeble echo of my call, followed by a surge of the omnipresent vegetable stench. I called once more and then, enraged almost beyond the ability to think, I dashed to my car. If I had still been rational—if the influence of Warrendown had not already fastened on my mind—I would surely have left my acquaintance to his chosen fate and driven for my life. Instead I fetched my flashlight from under the dashboard and having switched off the headlamps and locked the car, returned to the rotting church.

As the flashlight beam wavered through the doorway I saw that the place was worse than abandoned. The dozen or so pews on either side of the aisle, each pew broad enough to accommodate a large family, were only bloated green with moss and weeds; but the altar before them had been levered up, leaning its back against the rear wall of the church and exposing the underside of its stone. I swung the beam through the desecrated interior and glimpsed crude drawings on the mottled greenish walls as shadows of pews pranced across them. There was no trace of Crawley, and nowhere for him to hide unless he was crouching behind the altar. I stalked along the aisle to look, and almost fell headlong into a blackness that was more than dark. Just in time the flashlight beam plunged into the tunnel which had been dug where the altar ought to have stood.

The passage sloped quite gently into the earth, further than my light could reach. It was as wide as a burly man, but not as tall as I. Now I realised what my mind had been reluctant to accept as I'd heard Crawley disappear into the church—that his footfalls had seemed to recede to a greater distance than the building could contain. I let the beam stray across the pews in a last desperate search for him, and was unable to avoid glimpsing the images scrawled on the walls, an impious dance of clownish figures with ears and feet so disproportionately large they must surely be false. Then Crawley spoke from the tunnel beyond the curve which my light barely touched. 'Come down. Come and see.'

A wave of the stench like a huge vegetable breath rose from the tunnel and enveloped me. I staggered and almost dropped the flashlight—and then I

lowered myself into the earth and stumbled in a crouch towards the summons. The somnolence audible in Crawley's voice had overtaken me too, and there seemed no reason why I should not obey, nor anything untoward about my behaviour or my surroundings. Even the vegetable stench was to my taste, because I had inhaled so much of it since venturing back to Warrendown. Indeed, I was beginning to want nothing more than to be led to its source.

I stooped as far as the bend in the tunnel, just in time to see Crawley's heels vanishing around a curve perhaps fifty yards ahead. I saw now, as I had resisted hearing, that his feet were unshod—bare, at any rate, though the glimpse I had of them seemed hairier than any man's feet should be. He was muttering to me or to himself, and phrases drifted back: '...the revelations of the leaf... the food twice consumed... the paws in the dark... the womb that eats...' I thought only my unsteady light was making the passage gulp narrower, but before I gained the second bend I had to drop to all fours. Far ahead down the increasingly steep tunnel the drumming I'd heard earlier had recommenced, and I imagined that the models for the figures depicted on the church walls were producing the sound, drumming their malformed feet as they danced in some vast subterranean cavern. That prospect gave me cause to falter, but another vegetable exhalation from below coaxed me onwards, to the further bend around which Crawley's heels had withdrawn. I was crawling now, content as a worm in the earth, the flashlight in my outstretched hands making the tunnel swallow in anticipation of me each time my knees bumped forward. The drumming of feet on earth filled my ears, and I saw Crawley's furred soles disappear a last time at the limit of the flashlight beam, not around a curve but into an underground darkness too large for my light to begin to define. His muttering had ceased as though silenced by whatever had met him, but I heard at last the answer he had given me when I'd enquired after the child: not 'absurd' at all. He'd told me that the child had been absorbed. Even this was no longer enough to break through the influence of whatever awaited me at the end of the tunnel, and I crawled rapidly forward to the subterranean mouth.

The flashlight beam sprawled out ahead of me, doing its best to illuminate a vast space beneath a ceiling too high even to glimpse. At first the dimness, together with shock or the torpor which had overcome my brain, allowed me to avoid seeing too much: only a horde of unclothed figures hopping and leaping and twisting in the air around an idol which towered from the

moist earth, an idol not unlike a greenish Easter Island statue overgrown almost to featurelessness, its apex lost in the darkness overhead. Then I saw that one of the worshipping horde was Crawley, and began to make out faces less able to pass for human than his, their great eyes bulging in the dimness, their bestial teeth gleaming in misshapen mouths. The graffiti on the church walls had not exaggerated their shapes, I saw, nor were they in costume. The earth around the idol swarmed with their young, a scuttling mass of countless bodies which nothing human could have acknowledged as offspring. I gazed numbly down on the ancient rite, which no sunlight could have tolerated—and then the idol moved.

It unfurled part of itself towards me, a glimmering green appendage which might have been a gigantic wing emerging from a cocoon, and as it reached for me it whispered seductively with no mouth. Even this failed to appal me in my stupor; but when Crawley pranced towards me, a blasphemous priest offering me the unholy sacrament which would bind me to the buried secrets of Warrendown, some last vestige of wholesomeness and sanity within me revolted, and I backed gibbering along the tunnel, leaving the flashlight to blind anything which might follow.

All the way to the tunnel entrance I was terrified of being seized from behind. Every inhabitant of Warrendown must have been at the bestial rite, however, because I had encountered no hindrance except for the passage itself when I scrambled out beneath the altar and reeled through the lightless church to my car. The lowered heads of the cottages twitched their scalps at me as I sped recklessly out of Warrendown, the hedges beside the road clawed the air as though they were determined to close their thorns about me, but somehow in my stupor I managed to arrive at the main road, from where instincts which must have been wholly automatic enabled me to drive to the motorway, and so home, where I collapsed into bed.

I slept for a night and a day, such was my torpor. Even nightmares failed to waken me, and when eventually I struggled out of bed I half believed that the horror under Warrendown had been one of them. I avoided Crawley and the pub, however, and so it was more than a week later I learned that he had disappeared—that his landlord had entered his room and found no bed in there, only a mound of overgrown earth hollowed out to accommodate a body—at which point my mind came close to giving way beneath an onslaught of more truth than any human mind should be required to suffer.

Is that why nobody will hear me out? How can they not understand that there may be other places like Warrendown, where monstrous gods older than humanity still hold sway? For a time I thought some children's books might be trying to hint at these secrets, until I came to wonder whether instead they are traps laid to lure children to such places, and I could no longer bear to do my job. Now I watch and wait, and stay close to lights that will blind the great eyes of the inhabitants of Warrendown, and avoid anywhere that sells vegetables, which I can smell at a hundred yards. Suppose there are others like Crawley, the hybrid spawn of some unspeakable congress, at large in our streets? Suppose they are feeding the unsuspecting mass of humanity some part of the horror I saw at the last under Warrendown?

What sane words can describe it? Partly virescent, partly glaucous—pullulating—internodally stunted—otiose—angiospermous—multifoliate—Nothing can convey the dreadfulness of that final revelation, when I saw how it had overcome the last traces of humanity in its worshippers, who in some lost generation must have descended from imitating the denizens of the underworld to mating with them. For as the living idol unfurled a sluggish portion of itself towards me, Crawley tore off that living member of his brainless god, sinking his teeth into it to gnaw a mouthful before he proffered it, glistening and writhing with hideous life, to me.

The Body In The Window

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Back at the hotel on the Rembrandtsplein, Woodcock wanted only to phone his wife. He let himself into his room, which was glowing with all the colours of tulips rendered lurid. Once he switched on the light the tinges of neon retreated outside the window, leaving the walls of the small neat room full of twining tulips which were also pressed under the glass of the dressing table mirror. He straightened his tie in the mirror and brushed his thinning hair before lowering himself, one hand on the fat floral quilt of the double bed, into the single chair.

The pinkish phone seemed to be doing its best to deny its nature, the receiver was flattened so thin. He'd barely typed his home number, however, when it trilled in his ear and produced his wife's voice. "Please do help yourself to a refill," she said, and into the mouthpiece "Brian and Belinda Woodcock."

"I didn't realise you had company. What's the occasion?"

"Does there have to be one?" She'd heard a rebuke, a choice which these days he tended to leave up to her. "I'm no less of a hostess because you're away," she said, then her voice softened. "You're home tomorrow, aren't you? Have you seen all you wanted to see?"

"I didn't want to see anything."

"If you say so, Brian. I still think I should have come so you'd have had a female view."

"I've seen things today no decent woman could even dream of."

"You'd be surprised." Before he had a chance to decide what that could possibly mean, Belinda went on "Anyway, here's Stan Chataway. He'd like a word."

No wonder she was being hospitable if the guest was the deputy mayor, though Woodcock couldn't help reflecting that he himself hadn't even

touched the free champagne on the flight over. He squared his shoulders and adopted a crouch not unlike a boxer's on the edge of the chair as he heard the phone being handed over. "What's this I'm getting from your good lady, Brian?" Chataway boomed in his ear. "You're never really in Amsterdam."

"Not for much longer."

"But you didn't want to make the trip with the rest of us last month."

"Quite a few of my constituents have been saying what I said they'd say, that they don't pay their council tax for us to go on junkets. And you only saw what you were supposed to see, from what I hear."

"I wonder who you heard that from." When the implied threat failed to scare out a response, Chataway sighed. "It's about time you gave up looking after the rest of us so much."

"I thought that was our job."

"Part of the job is forging foreign links, Brian, and most of the people who matter seem to think twinning Alton with Amsterdam is a step forward for our town."

"Maybe they won't when they hear what I have to describe at the next council meeting."

Chataway's loudness had been causing the earpiece to vibrate, but when he spoke again his voice was quieter. "Your lady wife may have something, you know."

"Kindly keep her out of it. What are you implying, may I ask?"

"Just that the papers could make quite a lot of your jaunt, Brian, you cruising the sex joints and whatever else you've been taking in all on your lonesome. If I were you I'd be having a word with my better half before I opened my mouth."

"I'll be speaking to my wife at length, thank you, but in private." Woodcock was so enraged that he could barely articulate the words. "Please assure her I'll be home tomorrow evening," he managed to grind out, and slammed the phone down before it could crack in his grip.

He was sweating—drenched. He felt even grubbier than his tour of inspection had made him feel. He squeezed the sodden armpits of his shirt in his hands, then sprang out of the chair and tore off the shirt and the rest

of his clothes before tramping into the bathroom. As he clambered into the bath, the swollen head of the shower released a drop of liquid which shattered on the back of his hand. He twisted the taps open until he could hardly bear the heat and force of the water, and drove his face into it, blinding himself. It was little use; it didn't scour away his thoughts.

What had Belinda meant about dreaming? Could she have intended to imply that he was no longer discharging his marital duty as he should? His performance had seemed to be enough for her throughout their more than twenty years together, and certainly for him. Sex was supposed to be a secret you kept, either to yourself or sharing it with just your partner, and he'd always thought he did both, kissing Belinda's mouth and then her breasts and finally her navel in a pattern which he sometimes caught himself envisioning as a sign of the cross. Wasn't that naughty enough for her? Wasn't it sufficient foreplay? What did she want them to do, perform the weekly exercise in a window with the curtains open wide?

He knuckled his stinging eyes and groped around the sink for the shampoo. Surely he was being unfair to her: she couldn't really have meant herself. He fished the sachet through the plastic curtains and gnawed off a corner, and tried to spit out the acrid soapy taste. He squeezed the sachet, which squirted a whitish fluid onto his palm. A blob of the fluid oozed down his wrist, and he flung the sachet away, spattering the tiles above the taps as he lurched out of the bath to towel himself as roughly as he could. If he couldn't rub away his disgust, at least he could put it to use. He was going to find something that would convince Belinda he'd had reason to protect her from the place—that no reporter would dare accuse him of enjoying—that would appal the council so much there would be no further talk of implicating Alton with Amsterdam.

He wasn't prepared for the revulsion he experienced at the sight of his clothes scattered across the floor, the kind of trail it seemed half the films on television followed to the inevitable bedroom activity or, on the television in this room, much worse, to judge by the single moist closeup of no longer secret flesh he'd glimpsed before switching it off. He dumped the clothes in his suitcase where no chambermaid would see them. Having dressed himself afresh, he grabbed the key and killed the lights, and saw the room instantly become suffused with colours like bruised and excited flesh

—made himself stare at it until his gorge rose, because as long as he kept his revulsion intact, nothing could touch him.

He thrust the key across the counter at the blond blue-eyed receptionist before managing to rein in his aggression. "I'm going out," he confided.

"Enjoy our city."

Woodcock forced himself to lean across the counter, and lowered his voice. "I'm looking for, surely I don't need to tell you, we're both men of the world. Something special."

"Involving girls or boys, sir?"

The calm blue eyes were hinting that these weren't the only possibilities, and Woodcock had to overcome an impulse to cosh him with the brass bludgeon attached to the key of his room. "Girls, of course," he snarled, and was barely able to hear or believe what he said next. "A girl doing the worst you can think of."

"To you, would that be, sir?"

"What do you think I—" The man's opinion of him couldn't be allowed to matter, not if that interfered with his mission, Woodcock made himself think. "A girl who'll do anything," he mumbled. "Anything at all."

The receptionist nodded, keeping his gaze level with Woodcock's, and his face became a tolerant mask. "I recommend you go behind the Oude Kerk. If you would like."

Woodcock liked nothing about the situation, let alone any further aid the receptionist might offer. "Thank you," he said through his clenched teeth, and shoved himself away from the counter. Seizing the luxuriant handles of the twin glass doors, he launched himself out of the hotel.

The riot of multicoloured neon, and the July sultriness, and the noise of the crowd strolling through the square and seated in their dozens outside every café, hit him softly in the face. Losing himself among so many people who didn't know what he'd just asked came as a relief until he recalled that he had to find out where he'd been advised to go. When he noticed a man sitting not quite at a table, a guidebook in one hand and an extravagantly tall glass of lager in the other, Woodcock sidled up to him and pointed at the book. "Excuse me, could you tell me wh—" He almost asked where, but that was too much of an admission. "—what the Oude Kerk is?"

"Come?"

He'd expended his effort on a tourist who didn't speak English. The nearest of a group of young blonde women at the table did, however. "The Old Church? You should cross the Amstel, and then—"

"Appreciated," Woodcock snapped, and strode away. One of his fellow councillors had told him about the church in the depths of the red light district. She'd come close to suggesting that its location justified or even sanctified the place. It was further into that district than Woodcock had ventured earlier. He had to find whatever would revolt his colleagues, and so he sent himself into the night, where at least nobody knew him.

A squealing tram led him to the Muntplien, a junction where headlights competed with neon, from where a hairpin bend doubled back alongside the river. He was halfway across a bridge over the Amstel when a cyclist sped to meet him, a long-legged young woman in denim shorts and a T-shirt printed with the slogan MARY WANNA MARY JANE. He didn't understand that, nor why she was holding her breath after taking a long drag at a scrawny cigarette, until she gasped as she came abreast of him and expelled a cloud of smoke into his face. "Sor-ree," she sang, and pedalled onwards.

The shock had made him suck in his breath, and he couldn't speak for coughing. He made a grab at her to detain her, but as he swung round, the smoke he'd inhaled seemed to balloon inside his skull. He clung to the fat stone parapet and watched her long bare legs and trim buttocks pumping her away out of his reach. The sight reminded him of his daughter, when she had still been living at home—reminded him of his unease with her as she grew into a young woman. The cyclist vanished into the Muntplien, beyond which a street organ had commenced to toot and jingle. The wriggling of neon in the river appeared to brighten and become deliberate, a spectacle which dismayed him, so that his legs carried him across the bridge before he was aware of having instructed them.

The far side promised to be quieter. The canal alongside which a narrow road led was less agitated than the river, and was overlooked by tall houses unstained by neon. Few of the windows, which were arranged in formal trios on both storeys of each house, were curtained even by net, and those interiors into which he could see might have been roped-off rooms in a museum; nobody was to be seen in them, not that anyone who saw him pass

could be sure where he was going. Only the elaborate white gables above the restrained façades looked at all out of control, especially when he observed that their reflections in the canal weren't as stable as he would have liked. They were opening and closing their triangular lips which increasingly, as he tried to avoid seeing them, appeared to be composed of pale swollen flesh. A square dominated by a medieval castle interrupted the visible progress of the canal. In front of the castle trees were rustling, rather too much like an amplified sound of clothes being removed for his taste. A bridge extended from the far corner of the square, and across it he saw windows with figures waiting in them.

He had to see the worst, or his stay would have been wasted; he might even lay himself open to the accusation of having made the trip for pleasure. His nervous legs were already carrying him to the bridge. His hand found the parapet and recoiled, because the stone felt warm and muscular, as though the prospect ahead was infiltrating everything around itself. Even the roundness of the cobblestones underfoot seemed to be hinting at some sly comparison. But now he was across the bridge, and hints went by the board.

Every ground floor window beside the canal was lit, and each of them contained a woman on display, unless she was standing in her doorway instead, clad only in underwear. Closest to the bridge was a sex shop flaunting pictures of young women lifting their skirts or even baring their buttocks for a variety of punishments. Worse still, a young couple were emerging hand in hand from the shop, and the female reminded Woodcock far too much of his daughter. Snarling incoherently, he shoved past them into a lane which ought to lead to the old church.

The lane catered for specialised tastes. A woman fingering a vibrator in a window tried to catch his eye, a woman caressing a whip winked at him as he tried to keep his gaze and himself to the middle of the road, because straying to either side brought him within reach of the women in doorways. His mind had begun to chant "How much is that body in the window?" to the tune of a childhood song. Other men were strolling through the lane, surveying the wares, and he sensed they took him for one of themselves, however fiercely he glowered at them. One bumped into him, and he brushed against another, and felt in danger of being engulfed by lustful flesh. He dodged, and found himself heading straight for a doorway occupied by a woman who was covered almost from head to foot in black

leather. As she creaked forward he veered across the lane, and an enormous old woman whose wrinkled belly overhung her red panties and garter belt held out her doughy arms to him. "Oude Kerk," he gabbled, and floundered past three sailors who had stopped to watch him. Ahead, across a square at the end of the lane, he could see the church.

The sight reassured him until he saw bare flesh in windows flanking the church. A whiff of marijuana from a doorway fastened on the traces of smoke in his head. The street tilted underfoot, propelling him across the softened cobblestones until he came to a swaying halt in the midst of the small square. Above him the bell tower of the Oude Kerk reared higher against a black sky streaked with white clouds, one of which appeared to be streaming out of the tip of the tower. The district had transformed everything it contained into emblems of lust, even the church. Revulsion and dizziness merged within him, but he hadn't time to indulge his feelings. He had to see what was behind the church.

He drew a breath so deep it made his head swim, then he walked around the left-hand corner of the building. The nearest windows on this side of the square were curtained, but what activities might the curtains be concealing? He hurried past and stopped with his back to the church.

By the standards of the area, nothing out of the ordinary was to be seen. Some of the windows that were glowing pink as lipstick exposed women, others were draped for however long they had to be. Woodcock ventured a few paces away from the church before a suspicion too unspeakable to put into words caused him to glance at its backside. That was just a church wall, and he let his gaze drift over the houses in search of whatever he'd glimpsed as he'd turned.

It hadn't been in any of the windows. A gap between two houses snagged his attention. The opening looked hardly wide enough to admit him, but at the far end, which presumably gave onto an adjacent street, he made out the contours of a thin female body, which looked to be pinned against a wall.

He paced closer, staying within the faint ambiguous multiple shadow of the church. Now he could distinguish that all her limbs were stretched wide, and in the dimness which wasn't quite dim enough, it became clear that she was naked. Another reluctant step, and he saw the glint of manacles at her wrists and ankles, and the curve of the wheel to which she was bound. Her face was a smudged blur.

Woodcock stared about, desperate to find someone to whom he could appeal on her behalf. Even if a policeman came in sight, what would be the use? Woodcock had seen policemen strolling through the red light district as if it was of no concern to them. The thought concentrated his revulsion, and he lunged at the gap.

It was so much broader than it had previously seemed that he had to suppress an impression of its having widened at his approach. He pressed his arms against his sides, his fingers shifting with each movement of his thighs, a sensation preferable to discovering that the walls felt as fleshy as the bridges and cobblestones had. That possibility was driven out of his mind once he was surrounded by darkness and could see the girl's face. It looked far too young—as young as his daughter had been when she'd stopped obeying him—and terrified of him.

"It's all right," he protested. "I only want..." The warm walls pressed close to him, confronting him with his voice, which sounded harsher than he'd meant it to sound. Her mouth dragged itself into a grimace as though the corners of her lips were flinching from him. As he crept down the alley, trying to show by his approach that he was nothing like whoever her helplessness was intended to attract, her large eyes, which were the colour of the night sky, began to flicker, trapped in their sockets. "Don't," he said more sharply. "I'm not like that, don't you understand?"

Perhaps she didn't speak English, or couldn't hear him through the pane of glass. She was shaking her head, flailing her cropped hair, which shone as darkly as the tuft at the parting of her legs. He knew teenagers liked to be thin, but she looked half starved. Had that been done to her? What else? He stepped out of the alley and stretched his upturned empty hands towards her, almost pleading.

He couldn't tell whether he was in a square or a street, if either. The only light came between the glistening walls of the gap between the houses and cast his shadow over the manacled girl. Her mouth was less distorted now, possibly because the grimace was too painful to sustain, but her eyes were rolling. They'd done so several times before he realised they were indicating a door to the left of the window; her left hand was attempting to jerk in that direction too. He wavered and then darted at the heavy panelled door.

He'd fitted his hand around the nippled brass doorknob when he caught himself hoping the door would be locked. But the knob turned easily, and

the door drew him forward. Beyond it was a cramped cell which was in fact the entrance to a cell, although it reminded him of his own toolshed, with metal items glinting on the wall in front of him. There was an outsize pair of pliers, there was what appeared to be a small vise; there were other instruments whose use, despite his commitment to seeing the worst, he didn't want to begin to imagine. He lifted the pliers off their supports and paced to the door into the cell.

Despite his attempts to sound gentle, the floorboards turned his slow footsteps menacing. Through the grille he saw the girl staring at the door and straining as much of her body away from it as she could, an effort which only rendered her small firm breasts and bristling pubis more prominent. "No need for that, no need to be afraid," Woodcock muttered, so low that he might have been talking to himself. Grasping the twin of the outside doorknob, he twisted it and admitted himself to the cell.

The door screeched like a bird of prey, and the girl tried to jerk away from him, so violently that the wooden disc shifted, raising her left hand as though to beckon him. When she saw the pliers, however, her body grew still as a dummy in a shop window, and she squeezed her eyes tight shut, and then her lips. "These aren't what you think. That's to say, I'm not," Woodcock pleaded, and raised the pliers as he took a heavy resonating step towards her.

They were within inches of her left hand when her eyes quivered open. She clenched her hand into the tightest fist he'd ever seen, all the knuckles paling with the effort to protect her fingernails from him. There wasn't much more she could do, and he had a sudden overwhelming sense of her helplessness and, worse, of the effect that was capable of having on him. The pliers drooped in his grasp as though, like his crotch, they were putting on weight as if one might be needed to deal with the other. "Don't," he cried and, gripping the pliers in both hands, dug them behind her manacle where it was fastened to the disc.

The wood was as thick as his hands pressed together. When he levered at the manacle with all his strength, he was expecting this first effort to have little if any effect, particularly since he was standing on tiptoe. But wood splintered, and the girl's arm sprang free, the manacle and its metal bolt jangling at her wrist. The force he'd used, or her sudden release, spun the

wheel. Before he could prevent it she was upside down, offering him her defenceless crotch.

He felt as though he'd never seen that sight before—a woman's secret lips, thick and pink and swollen, bearing an expression which seemed almost smug in its mysteriousness. "Mustn't," he cried in a voice he hardly recognised, younger than he could remember ever having been, and grabbed the rim of the wheel to turn it until her face swung up to meet his. Her mouth had opened, and her eyes were also wide and inviting. As they met his she clasped her freed arm around his neck.

"No, no. Mustn't," he said, sounding like his father now. He had to take hold of her wrist next to the manacle in order to pull her arm away from him. Although her wrist was thin as a stick, he had to exert almost as much strength to move her arm as he had to lever out the manacle. Her eyes never left his. The manacle clanged on the wood beside his hip, and he thrust his knees against the wheel between her legs, to keep it still while he released her other arm. He couldn't bear the prospect of her being upturned to him again. Forcing the jaws of the pliers behind the second manacle and bruising his elbows against the wheel on either side of her arm, he heaved at the handles.

He felt the jaws dig into the wood, which groaned, but that was all. His heart was pounding, the handles were slipping out of his sweaty grasp. Renewing his grip, he levered savagely at the manacle. All at once the wood cracked, and the manacle jangled free, so abruptly that the pliers flew out of his hand and thudded on the floor. Only then did he become aware of the activity in the region of his penis, which was throbbing so unmanageably that he had been doing his best to blot it from his consciousness. While he was intent on releasing her arm, the girl had unbuttoned his trousers at the belt and unzipped his fly. As his trousers slithered down his legs she closed her hand around his penis and inserted it deftly into herself.

"No," Woodcock cried. "What are you—what do you think I—" She'd wrapped her arms around his waist, tight as a vise. She didn't need to; he was swollen larger than he'd been for many years, swollen inside the warm slickness of her beyond any hope of withdrawing. Once, early in their marriage, that had happened to him with Belinda, and it had terrified him. There was only one way he could free himself. He closed his eyes and gritted an inarticulate prayer through his teeth, and made a convulsive thrust

with his hips. The manacles at her ankles jangled, her body strained upwards, and her arms around his waist lifted him onto his toes. Perhaps it was this shift of weight which set the wheel spinning.

As his feet left the ground he lost all self-control. He was a child on a carnival ride, discovering too late that he wanted to be anywhere but there. When he tried to pull away from the girl the movement intensified the aching of the whole length of his penis, and his reaction embedded him even deeper in her. He groped blindly for handholds as he swung head downward and then up again, and managed to locate the splintered holes left by the manacles. He pumped his hips, frantic to be done and out of her, but the sensations of each thrust contradicted his dismay, and he squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to deny where he was and what he was doing. The jangling of the manacles had taken on the rhythm of the girl's cries intermixed with panting in his ear. The wheel spun faster, twirling him and his partner head over heels, until the only sense of stability he had was focused on the motions of his hips and penis. Were the girl's cries growing faster and more musical, or was he hearing a street organ playing a carnival tune? He was beyond being able to wonder; the sensations in his penis were mushrooming. As he strained his head back and gave vent to a roar as much of despair as of pleasure, light blazed into his eyes. He could do nothing but thrust and thrust as the vortex in which he was helplessly whirling seemed to empty itself through his penis as though it might never stop.

At last it did, and the girl's arms slackened around his waist as his penis dwindled within her. He kept his eyes shut and tried to calm his breathing as the wheel wavered to a stop. When he was sure he was upright he lowered himself until his toecaps found the boards, and let go of the holes in the wood, and fumbled to pull his trousers up and zip them shut. His eyes were still closed; from what he could hear, he thought he might not be able to bear what he would see when he opened them. After a good many harsh deep breaths he turned and looked.

The window-frame was ablaze with coloured lightbulbs. Speakers at each corner of the window were emitting a street organ's merry tune. In the street which the lights had revealed outside the window, dozens of people had gathered to watch: sailors, young couples and some much older, even a brace of policemen in the local uniform. Woodcock stared appalled at the latter, then he stalked out of the cell, wrenching both doors as wide as they

would go. Even here the law surely couldn't allow what had just been done to him, and nobody was going to walk away with the idea that he'd been anything other than a victim.

When the audience, policemen included, began to applaud him, however, he forced his way to the gap between the houses and took to his heels. "Bad, bad. The worst," he heard himself declaring—he had no idea how loudly. From the far end of the gap he looked back and saw the girl raising her manacled wrists to the position in which he'd first seen them. As the lights which framed her started to dim, he gripped the corners of the walls as though he could pull the gap shut; then he flung himself away and dashed through the streets choked with flesh to his hotel.

In the morning he almost went back, having spent a sleepless night in trying to decide how much of the encounter could have been real. He felt emptied out, robbed of himself. As the searchlight of the sun crept over the roofs, turning the luminous neon tulips on the walls of his room back into paper, he sneaked downstairs and out of the hotel, averting his face from the receptionist, gripping the brass club in his pocket rather than relinquish that defence.

He left the whines of early trams and the brushing of street cleaners behind as he crossed the river, on which neon lay like a trace of petrol. He followed the canal as far as the lane to the Oude Kerk. Under his hands the parapets were as cold and solid as the cobblestones underfoot. He strode hastily past the occupied windows and halted in sight of the church.

He could see the gap between the houses but not, without venturing closer, how wide it was. One step further, and he froze. The question wasn't simply whether he had encountered the girl or imagined some if it not all of the incident, but rather which would be worse? That such things could actually happen, or that he was capable of inventing them?

A movement beside the church caught his eye. One of the women in the windows was nibbling breakfast and sipping tea from a tray on her lap. An aching homesickness overwhelmed him, but how could he go back now? He turned away from the church and trudged in the direction of the canal, with no sense of where he was going or coming from.

Then his walk grew purposeful before he quite knew why. There was something he ought to remember, something that had to help. The face of the girl on the wheel: no, her eyes... Hadn't he seen at least a hint of all

those expressions before, at home? It had to be true, he couldn't have imagined them. The bell tower of the Oude Kerk burst into peals, and he quickened his pace, eager to be packed and out of the hotel and on the plane. As never before that he could remember, he was anxious to be home.

Out Of The Woods

"The editor of a Belgian journal approached me to write a story about wood or paper or a Finnish legend for a magazine he was to edit in English to be sold to Finns worldwide. I assure you that I don't invent these anecdotes. He tempted me to fit the project into my schedule by offering a handsome sum, but when he received the story his offer turned out to be less than forthcoming, and I haven't heard from him since."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

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The glass of Scotch gnashed its ice cubes as Thirsk set it down on his desk. "I don't care where it comes from, I just want the best price. Are you certain you won't have a drink?"

The visitor shook his head once while the rest of him stayed unmoved. "Not unless you have natural water."

"Been treated, I'm afraid. One of the many prices of civilisation. You won't object if I have another, will you? I don't work or see people this late as a rule."

When the other shook his head again, agitating his hair, which climbed the back of his neck and was entangled like a bristling brownish nest above his skull, Thirsk crossed to the mahogany cabinet to pour himself what he hoped might prove to be some peace of mind. While he served himself he peered at his visitor, little of whom was to be seen outside the heavy brown ankle-length overcoat except a wrinkled knotted face and gnarled hands, which ornamented the ends of the arms of the chair. Thirsk could think of no reason why any of this should bother him, but—together with the smell of the office, which was no longer quite or only that of new books—it did, so that he fed himself a harsh gulp of Scotch before marching around his desk to plant himself in his extravagant leather chair. It wasn't too late for him to declare that he didn't see salesmen without an appointment, but instead he heard himself demanding. "So tell me why we should do business."

"For you to say, Mr Thirsk."

"No reason unless you're offering me a better deal than the bunch who printed all these books."

That was intended to make the other at least glance at the shelves which occupied most of the wall space, but his gaze didn't waver; he seemed not to have blinked since Thirsk had opened the door to his knock. "Do you know where they get their paper?" he said, more softly than ever.

"I already told you that's immaterial. All I know is it's better and cheaper than that recycled stuff."

"Perhaps your readers would care if they knew."

"I doubt it. They're children." The insinuating softness of the other's speech, together with the dark wistful depths of his eyes, seemed to represent an insubstantial adversary with which Thirsk had to struggle, and he raised his voice. "They won't care unless they're put up to it. If you ask me there's a movement not to let children be children any more, but plenty of them still want fairy tales or they wouldn't buy the books I publish."

The ice scraped the glass as he drained his Scotch and stood up, steadying himself with one hand on the desk. "Anyway, I'm not arguing with you. If you want to send me samples of your work and a breakdown of the costs then maybe we can talk."

His tone was meant to make it clear that would never happen, but the other remained seated, pointing at his own torso with one stiff hand. "This is for you to consider."

He wasn't pointing at himself but rather at a book which was propped like a rectangular stone in his lap. He must have been carrying it all the time, its binding camouflaged against his overcoat. He reared up from the chair as if the coat had stiffened and was raising him, and Thirsk couldn't help recoiling from the small gargoyle face immobile as a growth on a tree, the blackened slit of a mouth like a fissure in old bark. When the hands lowered the volume towards him he accepted it, but as soon as he felt the weight he said. "You're joking."

"We seldom do that, Mr Thirsk."

"I couldn't afford this kind of production even if I wanted to. I publish fairy tales, I don't live in them. The public don't care if books fall to bits so long as they're cheap, and that goes double for children."

"Perhaps you should help them to care."

"Here, take your book back."

The other held up his hands, displaying knobbly palms. "It is our gift to you," he said in a voice which, soft as it was, seemed to penetrate every corner of the room.

"Then don't look so glum about it." As Thirsk planted the book on his desk he glimpsed a word embossed on the heavy wooden binding. "Tapioca, is that some kind of pudding cookbook?"

Whatever filled his visitor's eyes grew deeper. They struck Thirsk as being altogether too large and dark, and for a moment he had the impression of gazing into the gloomy depths of something quite unlike a face. He strode to the door, more quickly than steadily, and threw it open.

The avenue of pines interspersed with rhododendrons stretched a hundred yards to the deserted road into town. For once the sight didn't appeal to him as peaceful. Surely it would when he'd rid himself of his visitor, who he was beginning to suspect was mad; a leaf and maybe other vegetation was tangled in his hair, and wasn't there a mossy tinge to his cracked cheeks? Thirsk stood aside as the other stalked out of the door, overcoat creaking. Too much to drink or not enough, he thought, because as the figure passed along the avenue, beneath clouds which were helping the twilight gather, it appeared to grow taller. A sound behind him—paper rustling—made him glance around the room. The next second he turned back to the avenue, which was as deserted as the road.

Had his visitor dodged into the bushes? They and the trees were as still as fossils. "Get off my property," Thirsk warned, and cleared his throat so as to shout. "or I'll call the police."

By now it was apparent to him that the man hadn't been a printer. He was tempted to hurl the book after him, except that might bring him back. As he stared at the avenue until the trees seemed to inch in unison towards him, he found he was unwilling to search the grounds when it was growing so rapidly dark. "Go back where you came from," he yelled, and slammed the door so hard the floorboards shook.

A chill had accompanied his visitor into the office, and now it felt even colder. Had one of Thirsk's assistants left a window open in the warehouse? Thirsk hurried to the stout door in the back wall of the room. The door

opened with an unexpected creak which lingered in his ears as he reached a hand into the dark. The fluorescent tubes stuttered into life, except for one which left the far end of the central aisle unlit. Though all the windows crammed into the space above the shelves were closed tight, the fifty-yard-long room was certainly colder than usual, and there was more of a smell of old paper than he remembered. In the morning he would have to fix the lights: not now, when at least two of the tubes were growing fitful, so that the flickering contents of the shelves kept resembling supine logs multicoloured with lichen, the spines of the dust jackets. He thumbed the light switch, a block of plastic so cold it felt moist, and as the dark lurched forward, shut it in. For the first time ever he was wishing he could go home from work.

He was already home. The third door of the office led to the rest of his bungalow. When he opened the door, the cold was waiting for him. The heating hadn't failed; he had to snatch his hand away as soon as he touched the nearest radiator. He poured himself an even larger Scotch, and once he'd fired up his throat and his stomach, dumped himself in the chair behind the desk. The unwelcome visit had left him so on edge that all he could do was work.

The late afternoon mail had brought him an armful of packages which he hadn't had time to open. The topmost padded envelope proved to contain the typescript of a children's book by Hundey Dunkley, who sounded familiar. In his present mood, just the title—The Smog Goblin and the Last Forest—was enough to put him off. "Send your bloody propaganda somewhere it's wanted," he snarled, grabbing a copy of the Hamelin Books rejection letter. "Fit only for recycling," he pronounced, and scrawled that as a postscript.

Usually one of his assistants would see to the outgoing mail, but he couldn't stand the sight of the typescript a moment longer. Having clipped the letter to it, he stuffed it into a padded envelope and slung it on the desk next to his, and glared at the discarded packing as it tried to climb out of the waste-bin. Presumably the silence of the room emphasised its movements, though he could have imagined it wasn't alone in making a slow deliberate papery sound, an impression sufficiently persuasive that he glanced out of the window.

The light from the office lay on the strip of grass outside but fell short of the trees, which were embedded in a darkness that had sneaked up on him. He knuckled the switch for the security light. The fierce illumination caught hold of the trees and bushes, and he felt an irrational desire to see them shrink back from the blaze which he could summon at the touch of a finger. Instead they stepped almost imperceptibly forward as though urged by their shadows, a mass of secret blackness interrupted by the drive. Just now the bright bare gravel looked as though it was inviting someone or something to emerge on to it, and he turned away so furiously that he almost tripped over an object on the floor.

It was the discarded envelope, writhing slowly on the carpet and extending a torn brown strip of itself like the remains of a finger towards him. He closed one fist on it, squeezing its pulpy innards, and punched it into the bin before grinding it down with his heel. "That's enough," he shouted, not knowing what he was addressing until his gaze fell on the book his visitor had brought him. "Let's see what you are," he said through his teeth, and flung the book open, wood striking wood. Then he let out a gasp that would have been a word if he'd known how he was feeling.

The thick untrimmed pages weren't composed of paper; each was a single almost rectangular dead leaf. For a moment he thought words were printed on the uppermost, and then he saw the marks were scattered twigs, formed into patterns which he could imagine someone more susceptible than himself assuming to be words in a forgotten language. "If this is a joke," he yelled, ignoring how small his voice sounded in the empty room. "you can take it back," and hoisting the book off the desk, ran to the door.

As the cover banged shut like a coffin lid, the tilting of the book rearranged the twigs into a different pattern—into words he was able to read. He fumbled the door open and raised the volume in both hands. By the glare of the security light he saw the title wasn't Tapioca but Tapiola. What difference did one letter make. "Come and get it," he roared, hurling the book from him.

It struck the grass with a thud which seemed to crush his shout. The cover raised itself an inch and fell shut, and then the book was as still as the trees and their shadows. Beyond the unlit road, and around his property, the forest stretched for miles. The words he'd glimpsed were growing clearer, embedding themselves in his mind. YOU TURNED AWAY ONE

MESSENGER. The night sky seemed to lean towards the patch of light which contained him and the book, as though the sky was the forehead of the blackness behind the mass of trees, in which he heard a sudden gust of wind. Its chill found him while he waited to see the trees move, and he was continuing to wait when it subsided. It might have been a huge icy breath.

"Not likely," he said in a voice which the darkness shrank almost to nothing. He backed away and closed the door. The breath of the night had smelled of decaying vegetation, and now the room did. He thought he saw a trace of his own breath in the air. Hugging himself and rubbing his upper arms, he went to his desk for a mouthful of Scotch. As the ice cubes clashed against his teeth, he almost bit through the glass. Beyond the window the lawn was bare. The book had gone, and there wasn't so much as a hint of a footmark on the grass.

"I bet you think that's clever. Let me introduce you to someone who's cleverer." He was speaking aloud so that his voice would keep him company, he realised, but he wouldn't have to feel alone for long. Without glancing away from the window he groped for the phone on his desk, detached the receiver from its housing and jabbed the talk button. He was already keying the number for the police as he brought the receiver to his face.

A sound came to find him. Though the earpiece was emitting it, it wasn't the dialling tone. It could have been a gale passing through a forest, but it seemed close to articulate. He clawed at the button to clear the line and listened to the welcome silence; then he poked the talk button again, and again. The phone was dead.

And there was movement among the trees. High on the trunks, branches sprang up and waved at him, a series of them rapidly approaching the house. A branch of a tree at the edge of the grass drooped before gesturing triumphantly at him, and then a severed length of the telephone cable which they had all been supporting plummeted on to the grass.

"Having fun, are you?" Thirsk demanded, though his throat was so constricted he barely heard himself. "Time I joined in." He dropped the useless receiver on top of a pile of typescripts and dashed kitchenwards, switching on lights as he went. His bedroom lit up, the bathroom and toilet next to it, the large room in which he dined and watched television and listened to music, and finally the kitchen, where he lifted the largest and

sharpest knife from the rack on the wall. Outside the window he saw an image of himself almost erased by the forest—an image which grew fainter, then was wiped out entirely as his breath appeared in front of him and condensed on the window.

He saw himself being engulfed by fog in the reflection of a room which had been invaded by trees. The glint of the knife looked feeble as a lantern lost in a forest. "I'm still here," he snarled. Driven by a defiance which he felt more than understood, he stormed back into his office.

He was still there, and for a while, since he couldn't call a taxi. He laid the knife within reach on the desk and drafted a letter to his printer... *looking forward to the Christmas consignment... any way you keep costs down is fine...* His words seemed insufficiently defiant until he scribbled *It's only paper, only pulp*. Of course he would never send such a letter, and he was about to tear off the page and bin it when he realised how like taking back a challenge that would seem. He drove the knife through the pad, pinning the letter to the desk like a declaration nailed to a door.

At first there was no apparent response. The only visible movement in the room was of his breath. It took him some minutes to be certain that the smell of decaying vegetation had intensified—that the source was in the room with him. Did the colours on the jackets of the new books resemble stains more than they should? His chair trundled backwards and collided with the wall as he reached the shelves, where he dug a finger into the top of the spine of the nearest book.

It came off the shelf at once—the spine did. The cheap glue had failed, exposing bunches of pages which looked aged or worse. His hand swung wildly, hooking another spine at random. That fell away, bearing a patch of its rotten jacket, and his finger poked deep into the pages, which were a solid lump of pulp. He dragged his finger out of it, dislodging both adjacent spines. Their undersides were crawling with insects. He staggered backwards just as sounds began in the warehouse: a ponderous creaking followed by a crash that shook the office.

"Leave my property alone," Thirsk screamed. He ripped the knife out of the pad and, pounding across the office, hauled open the door to the warehouse. The bookcases that weren't attached to the walls had fallen together, forming an arched passage, in the darkness of which piles of books were strewn like jagged chunks of chopped timber. Not only books

were in that darkness, and his hand clutched at the light switch before he knew he didn't want to see.

As soon as his hand found the switch, the block came away like a rotten fungus from the wall. The surviving fluorescents lit for an instant before failing in unison with a loud sharp glassy ping, and he glimpsed a shape stalking up the passage of the bookcases towards him. It resembled a totem, carved or rather shaped out of a tree, walking stiffly as a puppet, though it was considerably taller than any puppet had a right to be. It grew as it advanced on him, as if whatever feet it had were picking up or absorbing the books on which they trod. Its disproportionately large head was featureless and unstable as a mass of foliage, and its arms, which were reaching for him, were at least half the length of the warehouse. So much he distinguished before he threw the door in its face. Twisting the key, he wrenched it out of the lock and shied it across the room.

There was silence then, a silence like the quiet at the secret heart of a forest. He heard his pulse and his harsh unsteady breaths. Gripping the knife two-handed, he glared about. Half a dozen spines sagged away from books, spilling grubs, as the telephone let out a hollow exhalation and began to speak in the voice of the wind.

Thirsk shouted louder, drowning out its words. "In here too, are you? Not for long. This is my house, and one of us is leaving." But he wasn't sure why he was rushing to the front door—to eject an intruder, or to confront the source of all the intrusions?

The trees were out there, and the darkness behind them. Neither appeared to have moved. "I know it's you," he yelled. "I know you're out there." He saw his shadow jerking towards the trees before he was aware of heading for them. As he reached the nearest, he slashed at the trunk, slicing off bark. "You're my property and I can do what I like with you," he ranted. "If you don't like it try and stop me, you and your big friend."

He felt his feet leave the gravel for the plushy floor of fallen leaves and pine needles. He was well into the woods, hacking at every tree within reach, when all the lights of the house were extinguished. He whirled around, then discovered he was able to see by the faint glow of the sky, which no longer felt like a presence looming over him. "Is that the best you can do?" he cried, reeling deeper into the woods, no longer knowing or caring where he was. "That's for you, and so's that." When the trees around

him began to creak he chopped more savagely at them, daring them to move towards him; when the mounded earth seemed to quiver underfoot he trampled on it, ignoring how the forest had begun to smell as if the earth was being dug up. He might have been miles into the lightless forest when the hand whose enormous fingers he'd just slashed raised itself with an explosive creak, soil and undergrowth and decaying vegetation spilling from its palm, and closed around him.

The Maze

"Call me a control freak if you like; collaboration has never appealed much to me. The notion of collaborating with my children did sound like fun, however, and so it mostly proved to be—for them as well, I hope.

Matt comments: "Since the idea of writing with my father sank in, I've played an active role in writing this story. At first I was undecided about the setup. These feelings brought new dimensions into the story."

And Tammy says: "Our story began life when Matt and I collaborated on the first couple of pages to get things going, then handed them over to our dad. He altered them and wrote a version of the rest of the piece. After going back and forth and being torn to pieces, the story was finally completed. In writing it, we drew largely on the real life interaction of my brother and me. Realising your companion is not your sibling (as they are too nice!) is a situation we could envisage—as social pleasantries tend to be rare between me and Matt!"

Indeed, and at first I wondered if I might have to be a referee rather than a collaborator, but we got on together perfectly well. Much that is best in this story belongs to Tammy and Matt, and it was a pleasure to work with them."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to the story in *Great Writers And Kids Write Spooky Stories*

Written in: 1994
First published in *Great Writers And Kids Write Spooky Stories*, 1995.

Naomi awoke in a four-poster bed and felt as though she were still asleep. She was watching the dawn paint its canopy pink when the door slowly opened.

"Are you awake, Name?" her little brother, Nick, asked.

"No, and don't call me that."

"Yes, you are, Name. This is really some hotel, isn't it? Want to explore?"

"Get off my bed or I'll kick you off. Go and bother Mom and Dad."

"They said to stay away till breakfast. What'll we do?"

Naomi remembered what she'd seen last night from the balcony before going to bed. She kicked off the quilt and padded across a carpet that felt as soft and thick as sand on a beach. She pushed back the heavy curtains. Outside the window, under half a moon, a lawn stretched away into a mist that blurred the English farmland in the distance. At the near edge of the mist, a hedge maze sprouted from the grass.

She saw the pale scalps of two statues beside a stone bench at the centre of the maze, and she thought she could trace the way to them just by looking. Then Nick started jumping up and down in his annoying way, distracting her. "I'm going to get dressed," he said, "and then I'll beat you to the middle."

"You'll try. You'll get lost and have to cry for Mom and Dad."

Their parents might be asleep for a while yet; they hadn't slept much on the flight from New York. After Nick had stomped away, she pulled on a tracksuit and went into the panelled corridor to find him. Outside his room her attention was caught by an oil painting on the wall.

The painting showed a boy and a girl holding hands and wearing old-fashioned clothes. The boy was about Nick's age—eight—and the girl looked two years older, like Naomi herself. Their blond hair was almost white. Their eyes, as green as the hedge maze behind them, seemed to follow her as she tried to move out of their reach. She couldn't help touching the canvas to prove to herself they were only images in a picture—but then she snatched her hand back with a gasp. It must have been the central heating that made the painted girl feel warm as flesh.

Nick came to his door and giggled. "What are you scared of?" he asked Naomi. He poked the chest of the boy in the picture then darted off down the hall.

Naomi wondered whether his quick retreat was due only to his eagerness to be in the maze. Before she raced to the wide staircase, she noticed a plaque below the painting. The children had died at the ages she and Nick were now. The idea made her shiver, and she ran after her brother, out the back door of the hotel.

The early morning smelled of wet grass. The dampness seeped through her sneakers and chilled her feet as she trod on the lawn. Nick was almost at the entrance to the maze. The moon above reminded Naomi of a half-closed eye that was pretending not to watch their every move. When she joined her brother, he pulled his wraparound sunglasses out of his track suit and stuck them over his eyes.

"You don't look cool—you look stupid," she told him. "I'm not staying with you if you wear those."

"I don't want you with me. Whoever gets to the middle first wins," he gabbled, and darted into the mouth of the maze. She saw him dodge left, and then he was gone.

Naomi smiled to herself. She was almost certain that you had to turn right first to reach the centre. She'd seen the proper way from her window. Her brother was likely heading for a dead end. Naomi stepped hurriedly through the maze's entrance—an archway cut into a fat hedge that stood a head taller than her parents. She turned right before Nick could come back and catch sight of her.

The space between the hedges was as wide as her arms could reach. When the mist had retreated into the maze, it had left behind millions of dewdrops. They glittered on the leaves and beaded the grass underfoot. At the end of the first hedge she had to double back on herself, then turn right again almost at once. Now she felt she was really in the maze, where there was nothing but greenery, and it was so quiet she couldn't even hear Nick. "You're going the wrong way, you know," she called, trying to discover where he was.

"You mean you are."

His voice came from somewhere to her left. It must have been all the hedges between the two of them that made him sound so far away. Or was he making himself sound distant to trick her? Had that been Nick she'd glimpsed through a leafless patch of the hedge to her left, a small figure running silently along the lane next to hers? Maybe she and Nick weren't the only children staying at the hotel and exploring the maze.

"I'm not coming to find you if you get lost," she called louder.

"Bet you can't even find yourself."

It hadn't been Nick on the other side of the hedge; he was definitely too far away. She almost told him that they might not be alone in the maze, but he sounded unbearably smug, as if he knew she was following a route that led nowhere. She decided to let him find out for himself.

It did look as though a hedge blocked the way ahead. But when she marched to it, she found it was a T-junction. She swung right at once, and then she stopped, her feet skidding on the grass. A face as pale as the moon—a girl's face, with green eyes—was watching her through a gap in the hedge at the next turn.

Naomi felt she couldn't move until the other girl did. Then the back of her hand brushed the hedge. The wet leaves spilled cold drops down her wrist, and she took a step toward the utterly still figure. She saw at once that it was a statue, almost overgrown by the hedge. The stone girl looked as though she were hiding, lying in wait.

The statue's eyes were covered with bright green moss, but the rest of her face, as far as Naomi could see through the hedge, was bare. She stuck out her tongue at the statue for scaring her, then she stalked past it. "Don't look back," she muttered to herself.

Naomi was halfway to the maze's next junction when she heard the hedge rustling behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, but she could no longer see the statue, only the leaves shivering where its face had been.

The face had been very like that of the girl in the painting, thought Naomi, particularly the way its eyes seemed to follow her. She wanted to call out to Nick, just to reassure herself that he was there, but she wasn't going to let her little brother think that she was scared. Instead, she ran ahead to the next junction—and found that it led to a dead end. She had to go back. She had to pass that place where the statue was waiting.

Or had it been a statue? She'd seen its face for only a moment, its green eyes watching her. She clenched her fists and forced herself to hurry along the path. She was almost at the bend that hid the pale-faced figure—in another moment, she was past it. There was no sign of the figure at all.

She dashed to the T-junction where she'd turned the wrong way. She was about to flee back to the maze's entrance when she heard Nick shout, "You can't scare me, Name! I know that's you behind there."

He was much nearer the centre. He might be a pain, but she couldn't just leave him. "There's someone besides us in here, Nick," she called at the top of her voice. "Don't let them bother you. Go to the middle and I'll meet you there."

"You'll try, you mean."

Was he as unconcerned as he sounded or only pretending?

Naomi didn't know which she'd rather be true. She hurried left, in the direction of his voice, then had to turn right, then left, then right again. She felt as though the maze were taunting her, pretending to lead her to her brother only to force her away from him. But the next bend took her onto a

long path. This had to be heading straight for the centre, she thought, even if she couldn't see the end of it for the mist.

"I'm coming, Nick!" she called, and began to run.

She expected the mist to fall back as she moved forward, but it stayed where it was. She felt its chill reaching for her. Twigs were creaking and snapping somewhere behind her; but when she turned, all she could see was the mist creeping up. The hedges seemed to be closing in, leaning toward her.

As she ran, she hugged herself to stop the cold wet leaves from licking her hands. She slipped on the grass, and her elbow poked into a prickly hedge. The leaves sprayed her face with icy water. She sucked in a breath to shout to Nick again, but stopped herself.

The mist ahead seemed to be withdrawing, and she saw another junction appear. She sprinted toward it, but the path simply doubled back. There was nowhere else to go.

As she skidded around the bend, she thought a face peered through the hedge at her—a face as white as a skull, with green eyes. She ran, and suddenly there was no path. She had been certain that she was heading away from the centre, but now she was there.

She stood on a patch of lawn about twenty feet square, with nothing on it except a stone bench carved with some words and numbers. At first she didn't know why the sight of the place made her shiver, but then she remembered. She'd seen two statues from her window:

She realised now that they hadn't been statues. They'd been white-haired figures standing absolutely still, and now they were stalking through the maze. She saw movement on the path opposite her, and she screamed as the figure stepped out of the mist.

"It's me, Name," he said.

The appearance of Nick was such a relief that she almost didn't say, "Don't call me that or I'll call you Blue Eyes."

Blue Eyes was their parents' nickname for him. For once, though, he didn't seem annoyed at her for using it. "What shall I call you, then?" he asked politely.

"Try Naomi," she snapped. "How did you get over there?"

"I can show you the way," he said, and held out a hand to her.

The gesture seemed odd to Naomi. They hadn't held hands for years. "I told you before," she said, ignoring his outstretched hand, "I'm not walking with you unless you take those stupid glasses off."

"I will, when I've taken you," he said.

"And you can stop talking in that stupid way as well. What do you think you sound like?" She'd had enough of his trying to sound old-fashioned; he must be pretending to be a character in some old film he'd seen. For some reason it did more than irritate Naomi. It made her nervous.

"I'm going back the way I know," she declared and turned to go.

"If you prefer, Naomi."

Naomi now realised that she would have to go back past the junction where that green-eyed face had been. She was glad that Nick was following her. She slowed her steps, letting him almost catch up before she ventured onto the path.

The tops of the hedges were beginning to glitter as the sun climbed above the invisible hills. Naomi had to squeeze her eyelids to a thin slit to see that there was no face behind the leaves at the corner. After she turned, the straight path appeared. It was clear of mist now, but too narrow for her and Nick to walk side by side. She could hear him just behind her. Then she heard something else: a boy's voice calling, somewhere deep in the maze.

"Name," the voice pleaded. "Naomi."

She shivered and spun around. "Did you hear that, Nick?"

"It's nobody, Naomi."

Nick was giving her a wide smile, but she would have been more reassured if she had been able to see his eyes instead of two miniature portraits of herself in those wraparound sunglasses. "You did hear it, though," she said over her shoulder as she walked faster along the path.

"It's only a voice. It can't do any harm now."

"Did you see him?"

"Who, Naomi?"

"The boy." She wished she hadn't started talking about this until they were out of the maze. But for once she wanted to know what Nick thought about

something. "I think I saw the girl."

"Which girl?"

It frightened her to say it, but she had to. "The one from the painting."

"Clarissa. And Henry was her brother."

He'd read their names under the painting, of course. "So what?" Naomi demanded.

"What else do you know about them?"

Naomi didn't like this. Suppose talking about the dead children brought them closer? But before she could change the subject, the voice in the maze called to her again. "Name, where are you? It's me. It's Nick."

"No, you aren't!" she cried out. "You only know our names because you heard us using them. You don't even sound like my brother!"

At least the voice sounded further away, thought Naomi. But she knew it wouldn't be far enough until she and her brother were out of the maze.

"That's right, Naomi," said Nick from behind her. "We know who he really is, don't we? He may just as well give up."

She didn't tell Nick to talk about something else, because she knew he'd likely refuse to talk about anything at all. As long as Nick kept talking, she wouldn't have to look back to reassure herself that he was behind her. Any second now, she thought to herself, she ought to be able to see the bend in the path. But the mist had gathered ahead of them again.

Naomi narrowed her eyes. She was almost blinded by the sunlight on the hedges and on the mist.

"Shall I tell you what happened?" asked Nick.

At last, the mist drifted backward, and she saw the first bend. "Happened when?" she asked, to keep him talking.

"To Henry and Clarissa."

How could he know? Maybe he'd read it in the brochure, which was left in each of the hotel rooms, or perhaps he was going to make up a story. She followed the path left and waited until he joined her on that stretch. "They died," she said.

"And they were buried here in the maze."

She remembered the carvings on the stone bench—names and dates. She dodged right around the next turn; not many more turns now. "Why would they be buried here?"

"Because they used to play together here. It was their favourite place, until one day when there was a storm. By the time they found their way out of the maze, they were so cold and wet that they caught pneumonia. They knew they were dying, so they made a vow to come back again and be together and live the rest of their lives."

Another left turn, another right, and she was back at the T-junction. The mist was waiting in both directions, and she had to remember which to take. She'd turned left here on the way in. "Right," she muttered to herself, and veered that way, then spoke to Nick. "That doesn't make sense."

"Why not, Naomi?"

Why was he continuing to be so polite? Usually Nick would say anything rather than admit he was wrong. She hurried left, telling herself they were almost out. She felt as though the green of the maze and its chill were closing in around her to slow her down. Then she heard that voice in the depths of the maze. "Don't leave me, Name," it cried. "It *is* me. It's Nick, it's, you know—it's Blue Eyes."

Her brother would never call himself that unless he was desperate, she thought. She swung around as she reached the last bend. The boy she'd been leading out of the maze was just behind her. Before he could move, she snatched off his glasses. His eyes were bright green.

In another moment, the boy's eyes turned blue, but it was too late to fool her. She tried to push past him, but she couldn't bear to touch him, this intruder in her brother's body. She would race around the outside of the maze to find Nick.

She skidded around the bend and saw the hotel. Just as she lunged toward the archway in the hedge that marked the exit from the maze, a girl's white fingers reached through the leaves and closed around her hand.

The fingers were icy as mist. The chill flooded through Naomi, sucked her in, and suddenly she was on the other side of the hedge, watching herself run onto the open lawn and call to the boy who looked like Nick.

"Come back," cried Naomi furiously, but the two children wouldn't listen. They clasped their hands together, skipped across the grass, and vanished

into the hotel. Then the hedge around Naomi seemed to thicken before her eyes, and she could see nothing but the maze.

She looked down at herself, at her pale skin and her old-fashioned clothing. Was she trapped forever? If only her parents knew she was here—if she and her brother could make themselves heard before their parents drove away to tonight's destination...

She turned, calling to Nick as she ran back into the maze.

Illustration by Gahan Wilson, taken from Great Writers And Kids Write Spooky Stories, 1997.

Authors' photograph, same source.

Authors' signatures, same source.

1996

The House On Nazareth Hill - Chapter Six (First Draft)

"An exclusive first draft extract from chapter six of the author's 'haunted place novel'.—*Cold Print 1*, Spring 1996

Written in: 1996
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Many of the windows on the way out of Sheffield were alive with rainbow trees. A tree ivied with lights stood in a garden where the houses began to grow fewer and larger, and soon there were only trees beside the road, their branches gleaming dully with dead branches left behind by a fog. Now and then a bulb fell to shatter on the tarmac, and Dominic had drifted into watching for the next fall when several revellers staggered out of an unexpected pub. Singing *'God rest ye jerry mentalmen,'* they reeled straight in front of the car.

Dominic stamped on the brake and swerved, unable to think which was right. A smell of smouldering rubber caught at his throat as the Toyota skidded across the narrow winding unfenced road. His mirror exhibited the men flayed by the brake-lights while they shouted encouragement and performed an impromptu dance as a chunk of limestone several times the size of the car reared up in the headlights and rushed towards him. 'Release,' he snarled at himself, unable to act without having spoken, and managed to lift his foot from the brake as the right rear wheel slewed into the ditch. The men toppled out of the mirror; the limestone hulk sailed into the darkness; the wheel bumped onto the road again, where the rest of the car had miraculously remained. Before he could think to change the gears the car shuddered to a halt in the middle of the road, and he pressed his forehead against the windscreen until his sweat fogged the glass in front of him.

"Crazy. Shouldn't be let out," he mumbled, when two cars roared out of a concealed entrance and beeped in chorus at him before speeding forwards. He switched on the engine and then the radio, where he located a

programme of carols in the hope they would calm him. At last he drove to the motorway, braking at every curve of the deserted road.

Apart from the occasional midnight lorry, he had the motorway almost to himself. Once he reached a lit stretch that he knew went on for miles he allowed his speed to build up. He was shaking his head at the spectacle of a white saloon coming up fast behind him—he was exceeding the speed limit himself, but the other driver's speed was insane—when its roof began to flash like a multicoloured Christmas light, and he saw it was a police car. As he braked, it raced past him and down a slip road, leaving him gasping for breath. As the siren howled into the dark a radio choir announced a silent night, which struck Dominic as a bad joke, especially since he was anything but calm and bright. He had to force himself to increase speed so as not to appear as suspect as he felt all the way to the Partington turn-off.

Five minutes off the motorway an orange glow became visible beyond the rocky slopes, as though there was a fire above the town. When the Toyota reached the top of a long curve of road Dominic saw the entire town, its chain of light trailing down from Nazarill. The light drew him in like a fire he couldn't feel. As he drove up through the streets decorated with trees it made all the ground floor windows of Nazarill appear dimly lit, welcoming him. He couldn't quite persuade himself that wasn't the case until he reached Nazareth Row and saw that the whole of the ground floor, and indeed the rest of the building, was dark.

Some animal—it must have been a cat—dodged away from his headlights as they swung through the gates. The radio began to sing *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*, but had uttered only those words when the tuning strayed awry, substituting a shrill mutter for the rest of the carol. Whatever the voices were chanting was in a language foreign to him, one he didn't like the sound of, and he switched off the radio as the gateposts crept together in his mirror. The voices seemed reluctant to depart, but surely that was the noise of gravel beneath the wheels. The cat went scrabbling up a tree and was lost in the tangle of branches, from which Dominic thought for a moment more than one rope was swinging. Of course there were no ropes, just broken branches, and he ignored them as he cruised around the opposite corner of the building into the car park.

The slam of his door sounded flattened, boxed in. The building had sensed him as he drove up, and its walls looked drained of colour by the harsh

light, which coated the windows, turning them blank and dead. If anyone was stirring beyond the double panes, they would be as inaudible to him as the slam would have been to them. Perhaps. It was the opaqueness of the windows, or the glare he'd triggered, or the gravelly sound of his tread in the midst of so much stillness that made him feel watched as he headed for the entrance. "It came upon a midnight clear," he tried singing, but couldn't remember any more words—it felt uneasily as if the incomprehensible chant on the radio had been a confirmation of the carol rather than an interruption of it. He pulled out his keys with a jangle shriller than the clash of gravel and admitted himself to Nazarill.

The external glare stopped short of the lobby. As the glass doors closed behind him, the glow of the interior gathered around him. It should have been soothing, but just now it felt rather too much like a medium designed to subdue anyone who entered it. The close stagnant heat was making him sweat, and he unbuttoned his coat as he twisted the key in the lock. The door fell away from him, pulling him into the hall, and he slapped the light switch.

"What are you lot up to in the dark?" he said.

None of those addressed answered him. Of course he'd taken them unawares; that was their constant state. There was a bridegroom stumbling over his wife's train as he lunged in pursuit of his windblown top hat, and next to them a mother making to strangle her five year old who wouldn't sit still for the camera; opposite these groups were a violinist whose musicality was summed up by the grimace of the pianist behind her, and the hotelier who insisted on rearranging himself and his Great Danes for so long that one of the dogs was cocking its leg against his seventeenth century chair... Usually talking to all these and their counterparts in the various rooms relaxed him in proportion to the trouble the various sitters had given him, but tonight it didn't quite work, perhaps because even when he'd tugged the chains of the tubular lights above the framed photographs the hall seemed unduly dark. "Too much to drink, that's what it is. Anybody gonna tell me off? I thought not," he said and stumbled into the bathroom. A young woman who'd fidgeted so much during her coming-of-age portrait session that she almost came out of her dress was waiting for him. "I should avert your eyes if I were you," Dominic told her. "Not that there's much to see." He took out the little he had and emptied the great deal for which it was the

solitary exit. Zipping himself up without looking, or wanting to look, he sent himself to the kitchen for the blackest coffee he could make.

"No need to look at me as if I'm mad," he said to a retired headmaster whose wife's attempt to adjust his waistcoat had released his bearded stomach to pucker its round lips at the lens. "I've a job to do, and I can't sleep until its done." He almost thought his restlessness had communicated itself to the figures in the photograph, but of course no part of them had actually stirred; it was the reflection of something behind him. He swung round so fast that the room took longer to stop turning than he did. Nothing moved on the clinically white surfaces, but outside the window branches were swaying as if some creature was leaping about in the oak. He leaned his elbows on the thick stone sill, and peered over a swelling and dwindling patch of his breath until the percolator summoned him with a peremptory click. "The hell with you, whatever you are. You can't get in." he declared, and poured himself a mug full of coffee to accompany him to the dark room.

He'd known there was a place for him in Nazarill the moment he'd seen he would have a windowless room. He switched on the safe light, which lit up the interior, just. The amber glow seemed not so much to illuminate the room as to stick like honey to the contents: the enlarger poking its single eye at its base board, the plastic tray lining up opaque jars of chemicals for him beside the tray which isolated the developing tank. He stood the mug in the space between the tanks on the bench and leaned into the hall to switch off the light. "Don't get up to anything while I can't see," he murmured at the photographs, and wished he hadn't spoken—wished he hadn't behaved as if someone could hear him. Nobody could, he told himself, and the appeal of living alone was still that there was nobody to interrupt him when he had a job to do. "Here comes the dark," he said loudly, to convince himself he had no reason to speak, and punched the switch and closed the door hard, rustling the long envelopes that protected negatives. "Let's get on with it." he said.

His voice sounded very close to him, as though there was no space for it to move. It made him uncomfortably aware of talking to himself and he sucked in a breath which a trace of chemicals rendered sharp as disinfectant to shut himself up. He gulped a mouthful of the orange medicine into which the safe light had transformed the coffee, and went to a smaller bench to

fetch the negatives of the Nazarill session. He slipped them out of the envelope and into the negative carrier, and was holding them under the enlarger lamp to examine them for dust before he realised he was holding a school photograph. Nobody could have used the envelope. He'd selected the wrong one, that was all. Of course, the negatives he wanted were in the left hand envelope, not at the end he'd fetched these from. Nevertheless, he had to restrain himself from mopping his forehead with the hand that held the carrier, because he couldn't help wondering whether he'd been unconsciously trying to avoid developing the photographs of Nazarill. "Don't be so damn stupid," he muttered, and slipping the wrong negatives back in their envelope, slid the Nazarill strip into the carrier and held it at an angle beneath the enlarger lamp.

The line of tiny black-faced figures stretched along the front of the building, their eyes and their hair albino white. Behind them the windows—thirteen on the upper floors, twelve on the ground floor—were, like the glass doors, black as granite slabs set in the bony façade. Except one window wasn't quite so black, because it contained a blurred slightly paler mark, roughly oval. It was his bedroom window. Perhaps the mark was the reflection of the back of someone's head, though he couldn't see how this was possible when none of the other windows displayed anything similar. Perhaps it was simply, though annoyingly, a flaw in the negative; he wouldn't know until he made the print how bad it was going to look. He inserted the carrier in the lamp housing and focused the image on the base board. Someone's head was reflected in the window, he was certain. It was a head. "Let's be seeing you," he growled, and switched off the enlarger lamp while he set up the easel on the base board and arranged a sheet of printing paper in it. He made a final finicky reduction to the lens as he always did, and switched on the lamp.

Often he would expose the first print in strips to judge how much time it needed, but he wanted to see what precisely was there. He gave the sheet the full twenty-five seconds before extinguishing the lamp and preparing the plastic trays: developer in the first, stop bath in its neighbour. "Now we'll see who you were," he said, but fed himself another gulp of coffee first, in an attempt to stave off the chill which seemed to have invaded the room. He raised the frame of the easel and picked up the exposed sheet by one corner of its border to float it in the developer.

This was the stage of the process which he most enjoyed—seeing the picture at last—yet as he stooped over the tray he felt as though the thick dimness was weighing on him, helping the drowned images to drag his head down. He held onto the corner of the print with the developer tongs and shook the sheet gently in the fluid, and had never been so conscious of performing a ritual. The lined up faces grew darker as the walls of Nazarill did, and wisps of cloud sprang up like unkempt hair above the roof. For a moment the window from which he was peering uneasily appeared to swallow whatever it was framing, and then the glass paled and the shape within it darkened. "Dear God, look at this," he blurted, hardly aware of speaking, and crouched forward in case a closer look might refute the evidence of his eyes.

There was a face in his bedroom, not the reflection of anybody's head. It was nobody he had ever seen or would have wished to see. Though it was bald he couldn't tell if it was male or female, or how old. It had been wrenched into a grimace that seemed barely human, its jaw gaping wider than any mouth should be required to suffer, stretching what little flesh the face had so that he could almost see the bones breaking through it, could unquestionably see the eyes bulging, miniscule though they were. The head was thrown back on a neck as thin as a child's wrist, but he couldn't tell whether it was laughing or screaming, or both. He gripped the edge of the bench so hard his fingers trembled, and just as the print started to disappear, having lain too long in the developer, he saw from the position of the head and neck that their owner was being dragged back into the room. He fumbled for the stop-bath tongs to move the print into the second tray before the image could darken further, and at that moment heard the door open behind him. He was twisting his head and upper body towards it when the whole of his spine seemed to lock. The door opened about a foot, and all the darkness of the flat seemed to have massed beyond it, but that wasn't why he felt unable to move. He hadn't meant what he'd said, he pleaded so desperately it was like speaking aloud; he hadn't meant how the words sounded. He'd said "Look at this," but surely nothing had responded to his invitation, which hadn't been an invitation at all.

He didn't realise he was holding his breath until his chest began to throb. If he didn't move, he thought he might die, but if he moved he was terrified that would attract attention to him. Then he heard the sound of something

creeping over the carpet, and saw the door edge further open. Beyond it was a dim round object, hovering some inches above the floor.

The plastic tongs fell out of his hands, clattered on the bench. His fingernails dug into the wooden surface, and the jabs of pain freed him. He straightened up so violently that for a moment he was afraid he'd damaged his spine, and then he recognised how helpless he was. The nearest light switch was next to the rectangle of darkness, not even separated from it by the door.

He'd started to back away when he realised he was only trapping himself in the room. He sucked in a breath which seemed to fill his head with fumes, and grabbed the enlarger. Snatching out the negative carrier, he wrenched at the lamp housing until its top clanged against the column, and scrabbled at the switch for the lamp, and seized the column with both hands to tilt the heavy enlarger and direct the beam across the room.

That wouldn't work, he saw at once. By the time it reached the doorway the light was so diffused that its glow on the carpet was barely visible. Yet it did work—altogether too well. As though the latent contents of the darkness had been enabled to develop, the dim round object wavered upwards until he could see its face, the face from the window in the photograph. Its grinning mouth gaped as the fleshless body scuttled on hands and knees into the room.

Though it was naked, its sex was past judging. Not only remnants of flesh hung from its ribs. Near where its left breast might have been, a black glistening cylinder as long as Dominic's hand dangled and writhed, and it seemed to him that it was suckling. The figure had halted a yard or so inside the door and raised itself on arms like dead branches, twisted and scrawny and peeling, as though to locate him. It cocked its yawning, almost noseless head and turned it back and forth, and he thought that whatever was left in the puckered eye sockets was unable to see him. The sight would have paralysed him, except that the prospect of waiting to be found was worse. It wasn't really there, he thought over and over; it was like a photograph which the building had somehow taken. The thought allowed him to lower the base of the enlarger stealthily onto bench, although his pulse made his fingers seem swollen and unstable, barely able to grip the metal column. The base met the wood with a faint thump hardly audible through the pounding of his heart, but loud enough to send a surge of panic boiling

through him. He launched himself at the hall, extending one arm which felt as though it was wrapped in thick rubber to fling the door wide. The lockjawed head turned blindly away from him and the heel of his hand thumped the edge of the door. Then something like a bunch of bones closed around his ankle, and another claw dug into the tendons of his calf. As he kicked the leg frantically and tried to find breath for a scream, the figure dragged itself up his body, growing more substantial as it came, crushing between them something that writhed. The dead face rose level with his. The shrivelled eyes found him, and the tattered stump of a tongue moved within the broken jaw. What it might have tried to say he never knew, but the eyes were telling him a secret worse than death.

The Other Names

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They were past the top of Brichester and nearly at the twisted house when Arnold started. "What's the sign say, Sylly? What's it say?"

"It says BEWARE OF KILLER DOG," Bruce suggested, raising his fists as he did whenever he spoke.

"No, it says TRESPASSERS. WILL. BE. CASTARATED," Denzil said, pointing the fattest finger of his right hand at each bunch of marks on the signboard.

"Shut up, you. And you and all. I'll tell you what it says," Arnold said, and rubbed his scalp as if to conjure hair out of the grey shaved skin. "It says SYLLY'S TURN NOW WE'VE ALL BEEN IN OR HE'S A WIMP."

"Don't call me that," Sylvester told him. "It doesn't, either."

"Go on then." Arnold shoved his blotchy face and broken eleven-year-old nose at him. "You say what it says."

A wind blustered down from the dark Cotswold hills and tried to find its way under Sylvester's leather jacket. While he didn't shiver, everything around the abandoned house did: the tall scrawny trees like charred bones hanging from the black sky, the knee-high grass and shrivelled weeds that sprawled over the cracked mossy path beyond the fallen gate, the segments of rotted fence leaning away from one another on top of the crumbling wall. Even the board shook as though impatient, but the marks on it conveyed no more to him. "It says JUST AN OLD HOUSE WITH NOTHING IN," he muttered.

If that was true, it hadn't been. He remembered the items the others had brought back to show they'd gone all the way in. Bruce had run out carrying a mask that couldn't have been meant to be worn, since it had only one eye-hole and far too big a grinning face—he'd run so fast that he'd dropped it to smash on the path. Denzil had found a bowl that seemed to have been used to grow fungus in, but when he'd felt underneath it he'd thought it was

somebody's skull cut in half down the middle and had thrown it over the fence. And Arnold had returned with a screw-topped jar so grimy it had been impossible to tell whether its contents were a little hand or a spider with not enough legs, particularly once he'd tipped it out and they had all trampled on it when it had appeared to try to crawl away. Perhaps Arnold was recalling this as he said into Sylvester's face "If there's nothing in it, why aren't you going?"

"Give us the light and I will."

Arnold handed him the club of a flashlight so readily that Sylvester demanded "Have you messed with it?"

"You'll find out," Arnold said in a tone that left him no other choice.

Sylvester poked the beam of Bruce's stolen flashlight through the gateway with dried-up rasping weeds for gates. The light found the mouldering front of the house, but that was as far as it reached. Six windows showed him darkness which appeared to go back farther than it should. The way the pairs of windows shrank as they went higher was not the only reason why he saw the house tilting backwards, tipping the unhinged front door into the dark. As he and the others had swaggered along the lane with no other houses in it he'd seen how the rear of the building was at least a foot lower than the front, and twisted to the left as though it was trying to drag the rest of the house with it. Now that the wind was holding its breath he saw that all the grass and weeds leaned towards the house, suggesting that it was stronger than sunlight. He fancied that the path was sloping downwards underfoot, though his eyes told him otherwise. He slashed at weeds with the flashlight and wished he could feel like an explorer in the jungle as the dark beyond the windows lurched at him.

It was only a house that was falling down, and it wasn't going to fall on him. The owner who'd died in it while it was starting to collapse had just been a crazy old man who used to shout and sing at night in a language nobody could understand. No wonder the people who lived nearest had told stories about him when he'd kept wakening them at all hours—how on the night he died they'd heard a voice joining in with his, and then the old man trying to shout it down, maybe because it had been much bigger than his and had seemed not to need to breathe, until his voice had come apart as if the other one had been tearing him open. Could his mouth really have been wider than the hands with which he'd tried to shut it? Only the police who

had found him would know. Sylvester was a very few steps from the house now, yet the flashlight was making no appreciable difference to the dark beyond the fallen door. "Don't come out till you've got something," Arnold called along the path, so that Sylvester couldn't hesitate for being watched, even though the doorstep seemed to tilt slyly inwards as he trod on it and aimed the flashlight beam into the house.

At first the light slid over the darkness, which only gradually admitted to containing walls and bare floorboards and, when he raised the beam, the lofty ceiling of a hall. Every surface was as black as the sky between the stars. Although doors were open in both walls, the darkness of the openings was virtually indistinguishable from the walls themselves. "There's nothing left down there," Bruce advised from the safety of the pavement. "You'll have to go up."

Sylvester showed him a vicious finger and stepped over the skewed door, and felt himself being tilted down into the house. Perhaps it was the way the light seemed unable to keep hold of the surfaces of the interior—crept over them even when he gripped the flashlight with both hands—that made him feel in danger of sliding all the way down the hall, past a fallen chandelier like a translucent stranded deep-sea creature, to the point where the house was most warped. A spasm of panic sent him onto the stairs which the darkness to his left had abruptly produced. At least their angles caught more of the light than the hall did. He'd go as far as the first window from which he would be visible, and then the others would have to admit he'd ventured farther than they had.

The creak of each stair echoed into the distance, enlarging the darkness and sounding as though the house was continuing to warp. He had to believe that the black underside of the roof was coming closer only because he was climbing towards it, not lowering itself, but he was beginning to feel as though he was being trapped under a stone with whatever might live there unseen. He was wishing he'd hidden some object in a pocket before leaving home so that he could say he'd found it in the house when all at once there were no more stairs between him and the middle floor.

At least he was able to see outside the house. Beyond a doorway to his left the hole of a window showed him the highest streetlamps of Mercy Hill leading down into Brichester. He took a step towards the room, and was unable to halt. Whatever had taken place in the house had warped this

corridor even more steeply than the ground floor, and he seemed to have no option other than to stagger into the room, flailing the air with his fists and the cone of light, unless he wanted to be carried helplessly deeper into the house.

The room was almost bare. A bedstead off which a mattress lolled had been dragged away from the window, leaving deep scratches in the floorboards. The mattress had been torn open, and its dangling innards were unpleasantly suggestive of withered dusty entrails. Protruding from beneath the heap of them as though it had been concealed within the mattress was a book whose covers were as black as the inside of the house. His sense of how useless a book would be to him was so overwhelming that he almost forgot he could take it to show. He ran across the room, pursued by footsteps that must be his, and grabbing the book by a corner, snatched it out of the clinging mass. The cover fell open, and he saw the first page.

Except the book, which was bound like a real one but had lines ruled on its pages, didn't just fall open. It twisted in his hand, and he had an impression of its warping exactly as the house had, a notion which overwhelmed him so powerfully he thought he felt his mind change shape. Before he could grasp the impression it vanished, and the book was straightened out. It was just a book, yet he couldn't take his eyes off it, and nothing else mattered. He could read the page.

> Charles Horus, his book so long as he shall live. Copied under the protection of Nyarlathotep, Stalker in the Shadows. Written from memory of the Necronomicon, British Museum, 1985-1995...

Each shakily handwritten word in the midst of the shrinking island of light seemed to be forming itself especially for him. He squatted to turn the page, then considered perching on the edge of the bedstead, at which point his awareness of his surroundings returned to him. That didn't cow him, not when he suddenly had so much more of a mind. He ran to the window and saw the three boys throwing chunks of the wall at streetlamps, having lost interest in watching for him. He'd show them a prize that was worth all of theirs, one they wouldn't believe until he proved it. Hugging the book with both arms, he bore it from the room.

The tilted corridor didn't bother him. He only had to walk uphill to the stairs, and he did. The stairs themselves were worse—as he clattered down them he had a sense of climbing towards the secretive darkness beneath the

roof, and grabbing the banister was like trying to hold onto a dead eel—but by telling himself he was on his way out he managed to keep going. His heels struck the canted floor of the hall at last. Three upward strides took him past the torn-off door and onto the path, whose roughness prevented him from sliding back. He was almost at the gateway before the others saw him.

Denzil pointed so wildly that Sylvester thought there was something at his back until he realised the subject of the gesture was himself. "Look at him," Denzil scoffed, and when he'd finished laughing at that: "Look what he's got."

Bruce told the joke a different way. "Sylly's got a book."

"Let's see it," Arnold demanded as if the sight of it wasn't convincing enough.

Sylvester thrust the flashlight into his hand before opening the middle of the book. "It's only wrote in," Bruce complained.

Denzil gave the pages twice as much of a look while he dragged his finger along the air in front of them. "Isn't even a diary," he decided as soon as he could.

"Give us a look, I said." Arnold shoved the flashlight under his arm and slammed his hands on top of Sylvester's on the edges of the book. When Sylvester refused to let go, Arnold wrested the book towards the light of a surviving streetlamp. "Thought so," he said. "It's just mad stuff. Let's tear it up."

"Don't." Sylvester backed away, taking the book with him, and could have imagined he felt it helping him, nudging its edges into his grip like a creature settling into its lair. "I found it. I want to keep it. It's mine."

"Reckon he's going to try and make out he can read."

"Bet his dad'll give him a kicking if he does," Bruce exulted.

"Couldn't even read that sign," said Denzil.

Sylvester closed the book and clutched it to himself, and looked at the signboard above the fence. "Well, I can," he said as the letters instantly fitted themselves to his mind. "It says BUILDING PLOT FOR SALE."

"He's guessing," said Arnold, then glared at the others. "Or somebody told him."

"I never," Bruce said, shaking his fists at the idea.

"Wasn't me," protested Denzil.

Sylvester wished he hadn't revealed his new ability until he'd seen what he could do by hiding it. "Wasn't any of you," he said, "but I'm not saying who."

"See, I told you someone did," said Arnold, and considered punching him in the face, but contented himself with leading a fresh bout of derision. "Let's do something down the hill," he said at last and strutted off, pausing only to shatter the undamaged lamp.

Sylvester looked back from the slope. The twisted house was sinking out of view beyond the crest of the hill, as if it was collapsing for want of a support he'd taken away with him. He had little time to reflect on this, because once they'd marched down the steeply terraced street he was too busy trying to outdo the others in causing a row outside the hospital, playing the railings with a bit of someone's fence and yelling the worst words he knew. He couldn't let on that he knew the sign said PLEASE BE QUIET NEAR HOSPITAL. Soon a guard with a truncheon that whooped through the air chased the boys down past the graveyard, and Sylvester glimpsed a few of the inscriptions on the stones. He would have liked to read more until he grasped how the reduction of lives to hyphenated dates affected him. Shortly, however, he and his companions were in central Brichester, and there was much to read.

The pedestrianised streets were plates of neon, and the night crowds were out—children sharing bottles they'd persuaded someone to buy or to sell them, young couples pretending they could afford everything they wanted, people buying commodities in doorways, gangs in search of a pub and a fight—but all Sylvester could see were signs. LATEST FASHIONS. 20 KING SIZE. INSTANT PRIZES. SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. BEER OF THE MONTH. ALL DAMAGE MUST BE PAID FOR. EVERYTHING HALF PRICE OR LESS. 24 HOUR SECURITY. ADULT BOOKS... In particular his understanding that the sign he'd always thought said SHOP in nearly every window was SALE came as a revelation, yet the more he deciphered, the more he seemed to sense the yearning of the book in his embrace to be read. When his companions began looking for burglar alarms to set off or better still, that were already triggered so that the boys could break in, he said "I have to go now."

"He's going home to read," shouted Denzil, jabbing the book with his favourite finger.

"Going to show his book to his dad," Bruce crowed between his fists.

"Hide it from him, more like," Arnold said, and lowered his head in case it was required for butting.

Sylvester hurried to the bus station full of sleeping people being woken up by guards. A bus not much larger than his father's van was about to leave for Lower Brichester. It smelled at the very least of booze and tobacco, but he hardly noticed once he turned to the book. Perhaps it was the lurch of the bus as it raced to overtake one from a different company which made the book open itself.

> Daoloth is truth. Before the eyes and minds of men shrank from all about them and within themselves was Daoloth. Daoloth knows all names and is all names, and all names are Its name. All things within the universe, and all which are beyond and so are part thereof, must yield their true names to the power of Daoloth. He who utters the name of Daoloth shall hear Its voice in all things and so learn their names. As those names are called in Its name, so must those called shed the cloak which men have draped about them and reveal their veritable aspect in Daoloth...

Though Sylvester couldn't have paraphrased any of this, he felt it settling into the depths of himself. He seemed hardly to have started reading when he grew aware that he was about to be carried past his stop. Ordinarily he would have seen how far he could travel beyond his fare before he was thrown off, but now he wanted to give himself up to the miracle of reading. He depressed the bell until the infuriated driver stopped the bus and came for him, at which point Sylvester dodged around him to haul on the lever that released the doors and sprint into the nearest back alley which led home.

His father's van, which he saw at last said BENNY BENTLEY BUILDER, was parked mostly on the pavement in front of the house, and casting its shadow across the sliver of a garden as though to cover up some of the work his father had done—the yellow paint outlines too large for the windows, the plastic gutter sagging from the roof, the cracked pebbledash. The bespectacled old woman who always complained about any children in sight was dragging her wheezing tartan-lagged dog out of the house

opposite. "Don't you be looking at me, Sylvester Bentley," she said at once, "or I'll set him on you."

Sylvester turned away without speaking, which gave her a reason to start an extended complaint, and let himself into the house. He was hoping to sneak upstairs now that the front door didn't stick, since his father had been at too much of it with a plane. Besides, in the front room he could hear a video making the kinds of noises his parents sometimes emitted when they thought he was asleep. He was halfway up the stairs, and just had time to sit on the book, when his father came out glowering and stuffing his shirt into his jeans. "Where've you been? How long have you been hanging round there?"

"He's not been pinching," Sylvester's mother called or groaned.

"You heard your ma. Have you?"

"I've just been with Arn and them."

"I hope you didn't let them take advantage of you," his invisible mother said.

"You want to get yourself some decent mates." Having dealt with that, his father withdrew. "Don't come in here," he said, and slammed the door.

Sylvester might have listened outside if he hadn't been eager to return to his book. He ran up the stairs, above which the highest of a trio of plaster ducks had begun an inadvertent nose-dive, and into his room, where he set the book down on the bed while he leafed through his computer manual. Although he could read it at last, it told him nothing he hadn't been shown at school. He threw it on top of the bookcase stuffed with computer games and sat down with the book from the twisted house.

It skewed itself open at the page he'd read. He went through the sentences again and felt them slither between his thoughts. Perhaps he wouldn't understand them until he had obeyed them. He carried the book to the window and stared along the concertinaed terrace, and had an inkling of how long the book had occupied him when he saw the old woman already dragging her dog homeward from its lavatorial quest. "Miss Whittle," he whispered, and added what the book seemed to want him to say. "Day oh loth."

The dog insisted on halting at the streetlamp closest to home, and the old woman saw Sylvester. He almost flinched back as she raised her face into

the white glare of the lamp, but she couldn't know what he'd done when he didn't know himself. Despite the promise of the book, he didn't quite hear a voice, unless that included the one in his head. It was more as though he glimpsed, or had a memory of glimpsing, shapes that were hidden by Miss Whittle and her dog—that were hiding either behind or within them or, somehow, both. However nearly indefinable it was, the glimpse suggested words to him, words that would help him see it.

"Old Bones That Crawl," he said like answering at school. "Day oh loth says."

The dog lowered its leg, and the old woman's spectacles aimed the glare at Sylvester's window as if her eyes had grown white and blind before she and the dog waddled up their path. It seemed to him that a bit of the world had twisted in the instant he'd ceased to speak. He wasn't sure that he wanted to see the outcome, but he watched while Miss Whittle appeared to have some trouble with wielding her key in her door. As the dog yanked her into the unlit house the door swung closed, so that Sylvester couldn't be certain whether he saw her fall or be pulled to all fours, and her spectacles fly off. Perhaps it was only the darkness that made her seem to shrink. He observed how the house remained dark, and listened until he began to nod, which put him in danger of dropping the book. He slid it under his quilt for safety while he prepared to join it in bed.

Sleep was unwilling to come near him. Whenever he drifted towards it he was pulled up short by a fear of talking in it, not that he was aware of ever having done so. The possibility that he might change things without knowing, or of dreaming he had only to find it was true, unnerved him. When at last he slept he dreamed of going to the window to shout "Old Bones That Crawl". He watched Miss Whittle's door falter open, and a crouched shape begin to grope into the light before he managed to awaken. He had to venture to the window to confirm her door was shut and her house dark, at which point he realised that he hadn't heard the wheezy yapping of the dog since they'd vanished into her house.

In bed again, he was awakened by his mother's morning screech. "What do you think you're up to, Sylvester?" He thought she'd found him out until she added "Never mind trying to be late for school." While he was in the bathroom she shouted upstairs three times that his breakfast was going cold, though he knew it wouldn't be on the table yet, and when he stumbled

downstairs she kept telling him not to eat so fast or he would make himself ill. His father confined himself to saying to do as she said. No wonder Sylvester was glad to leave the house, though not for school. Nevertheless he headed for it, to confirm what he already knew.

The narrow streets lined with failed trees were full of second-hand cars and people to go with them, and puddles doubling both. All the activity around him was infinitely less meaningful than the words of the book in his bed. Opposite the school he hid in the bus shelter, or rather under it since its glass sides had been smashed. He saw some of his classmates being led into the schoolyard by their parents, and expelling the noises they were supposed to try not to make in class: Kevin sounding like a seal, Jimmy like a megaphone forgetting how to talk. Their special teacher was representing order in the yard, and greeted them in his tone of telling a joke at which nobody was expected to laugh. "And how are we this inclement day?" Mr Westle said, and Sylvester saw the joke was on the teacher—felt as though the words he had read in his book were sharing this secret with him. By including himself with the people he addressed Mr Westle meant to appear sympathetic, but in truth there wasn't much to choose between their minds and his, which was smaller than his head. Before Sylvester could be noticed he turned away from the school and all its Mr Westles for ever. He wanted to be where he could read as much as he liked without having to explain his ability.

The central library was one of the largest buildings in Brichester, and so heavy with books it needed six pillars to hold up its front. Once he'd climbed the wide steps and passed beyond the giant doors, he felt as he imagined you were supposed to feel in church. Everybody kept their voices down, yet the murmurs rose to have their own mysterious conversations under the dome where the sun was starting to appear. He walked beneath the echoes of his footsteps to the History section and pulled an armful of thick volumes off a shelf to set down gently on a table. At last he was going to learn what books had to offer.

Those he'd selected were histories of the world, and they didn't detain him for long. He had a go at the Religion shelves, then went to Science, his reading of which only affected him the same way. The more he read, the more he knew that the secret which the book from the twisted house had lodged in his brain rendered every other book untrue. Books were lies the

world told about itself, he saw, and went to the window in case the spectacle beyond it might seem more real.

Groups of people were crossing the pedestrianised street from every direction. Their only function appeared to be to form meaningless patterns, just as the rain drying on the pavement had to. He watched until a librarian tapped him on the shoulder. "Shouldn't you be at school, son? If you don't want to read, you're distracting folk who are, and we'll have to ask you to make yourself scarce."

"I'm not doing anything," Sylvester said to her fat reflection infested by the herd.

"Then go and do your nothing somewhere else like a good boy before I have to call security."

She was trying to patronise him into insignificance, but he knew whom to call to demonstrate his power. "Daoloth says," he muttered, and trailed off before words for her had time to suggest themselves; he wasn't certain that he wanted all the readers to see what would happen then, especially if he got the blame. He shouldered his way through her heavy perfume, which he couldn't help thinking was meant to disguise her true nature that he had almost revealed, and let the clamour of his footsteps crowd him out. He was trying to escape the words he'd muttered, but they came with him.

They paced him as he wandered home. They lurked behind everyone he met and everything he passed, so that all this seemed to be trying to hold onto its appearance for fear that by completing his sentence he would change it into its true self. "Faces that slide over the earth... cells that store the night... hands that swarm... eyes worming in the earth... leaves that suck the dead... windows of the buried... rotting brains..." He had no idea where all this came from; he was afraid that simply thinking it might cause it to emerge from the concealment of itself. Once he was home he could read his book, which perhaps would calm his thoughts down. But as he returned to his street he couldn't avoid realising that he'd spent the day so far in staying clear of seeing what he might have done to the old woman.

He shut the front door and fled to his room. His father was out damaging somebody's property with a view to mending it, and his mother had gone to call Bingo for the afternoon, leaving a premonitory smell of her stew which never tasted as good as that promise. He could do what he wanted, but he discovered that wasn't reading the book while he didn't know how the old

woman had lived up to his words. He stood at his window and gazed at her silent darkening house.

The sight focused his sense of a presence hidden by the world, and he no longer felt urged to finish his sentence; in her case, after all, he already had. He was prompting himself to call her when people began to appear in the street, mothers wheeling babies home or rather couples that looked like that and then, as the streetlamps produced their flutter, older children walking. Sylvester had become preoccupied with the gathering of darkness in the old woman's house when he saw his mother at the end of the street. He retreated and sat on the bed, clutching his book, but all too soon she and his father summoned him down for dinner. He hadn't taken a mouthful from the plate that had been laden to await him when the questions began with his father pointing a fork at him. "Good day at school?"

"Fair."

That was usually sufficient, and Sylvester tried to say it in his habitual manner, but his father persisted in staring at him. Sylvester would have been grateful to his mother for interrupting except for her question. "Have you seen Miss Whittle today?"

"Who," Sylvester blurted, "me?"

"Why, what's up with her?" his father said.

Sylvester fed himself a mouthful of stew while he braced himself for the reply. "That's what I want to know," his mother said, however. "She wasn't in her seat at the Bingo where she always is."

"Maybe the kids have scared her off the streets at last."

"So long as it wasn't you, Sylvester."

"It wouldn't be him, would it? He's not capable of anything."

That sounded as patronising as the librarian had, and Sylvester was keeping his mouth full so as to be unable to disprove the statement when his mother said "When we've finished I'll go over and see how she is."

Sylvester almost emptied the tasteless mouthful outward before he could swallow. "No," he spluttered. "I mean, she's gone away to stay. I heard."

"What did you hear?"

"Heard her saying to some friend of hers about going away for a week. When I was going to school. And," he gabbled once the necessity occurred

to him, "taking her dog."

His mother gazed at him for so long he thought his haste had betrayed him. "Peculiar nobody at the Bingo said," she eventually revealed herself to have been thinking. "What's the matter, don't you like my stew any more? It's the same stew you've always had."

That aggravated his sudden fear of how the food might taste if he even thought of words for it. "I'm a bit sick," he wailed.

"Maybe he'd better go up and lie down," his father said.

"He can have it tomorrow if you don't finish it."

Sylvester didn't know which of them that was intended to threaten, but managed to stifle the idea of food as he hurried to his room—to his window. The house in the midst of the terrace opposite was unlit, and seemed to be holding itself still in anticipation of his voice. He eased the wobbly sash up and poked his head out to survey the deserted street, and drew a breath which tasted of the chilly night, and spoke. "Daoloth says you have to come out now, Old Bones That Crawl."

In the white glare of the streetlamp the door of the house resembled the entrance to a tomb—a marble entrance which he realised he was dreading to see opened from within. When it appeared to shift, he thought that was became his eyes were nervous. Then the glare slid off the door as it faltered ajar, revealing darkness and a dim shape that was hunched within it.

Just as he guessed that the door was moving awkwardly because its opener was, the tenant of the house sidled into the pitiless light, and Sylvester saw its difficulty in managing so many limbs. It raised its face, or more accurately the front of its head, towards him, and he ground his elbows against the windowsill as if the pain could anchor him in the world whose reality he used to take for granted. Then the misshapen figure robbed of flesh crouched even lower, veiling its head with the material that sprouted from it, and scuttled into the concealment of the garden wall. The hedge between the wall and the house quivered, and Sylvester understood that the thing had writhed through.

He wanted to see where it went and what it did. It couldn't touch him or come closer than he liked if he told it Daoloth said not to; in any case, it seemed anxious to conceal itself from view. He leaned on the sash to lower it and rubbed his bruised elbows; then, pausing only to hide the book in his

bed and grab a jacket, he tiptoed quickly downstairs. He might as well not have bothered with stealth, since as he reached the hall his mother turned from pegging her rubber gloves above the gargling kitchen sink. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Out."

"I can see that all by myself. I thought you were meant to be ill."

"I'm better," Sylvester said, and felt it—no longer needing to eat, filled up and energised by the words from the book.

"Your mother still wants to know where you're going," his father said, draping a dish towel next to the gloves.

"To see—" Sylvester was suddenly afraid that if he didn't escape at once he would give in to the temptation to release himself by using his secret on his parents, not least because their banality felt like a weight they were loading onto his head. "To see Arn and them," he blurted.

"Just you make sure you're back by ten. By half past nine." As Sylvester sprinted for freedom, having agreed to both of her stipulations, he heard her say rather defensively "Fresh air ought to do him good if anything will."

Sylvester dashed across the whitened glaring road and slammed the door of Miss Whittle's house before anyone could wonder why it was open. His haste was such that only then did he think to peer at the hedge, beneath which he made out a dim twisted shape. By straining his eyes he was able to distinguish that it was a tangle of roots and branches which looked not unlike the object he was searching for. He raised his eyes to the rest of the blocks of stained marble foliage dividing the cramped gardens, and saw the farthest hedge shudder as though with loathing of whatever had just crawled through it. "I see you," he cried, and ran to the corner.

Fewer houses were occupied in the cross street, which was even narrower than his. Some of the windows had been walled up, and quite a number of the cars parked on the pavement between the destroyed streetlamps looked abandoned. All the same, the street wasn't as deserted as Sylvester would have wished. He was watching hedges twitch and creak one after the other along the left side of the road when the three boys emerged jostling and yelling from Bruce's house on the right. They saw Sylvester, but not the surreptitious activity that had passed beyond them. "Look who it isn't," Denzil shouted.

"It isn't Sylly," Bruce agreed, and looked to Arnold to top his wit, which Arnold did: "It's Building Plot For Sale."

"Read us something if you're not Sylly," Bruce yelled, raising his fists while he scowled around him in search of an appropriate task for Sylvester.

"Read us that," said Denzil, jabbing a finger at the plaque on the wall at the alley entrance halfway down the street.

"You heard, let's see you read it. Arnold said and rubbed his scalp as if to increase its baldness.

Sylvester was tired of skulking inside himself and besides, he needed to distract them from the movements that had nearly reached the alley. "It says DOMESTIC ACCESS ONLY and NO CYCLING OR TIPPING."

"Does not," Denzil scoffed, then jerked his finger along the first line of the plaque across the street, and frowned hard. "Doesn't, does it?"

"If it does someone told him," Bruce said, readying his fists for the culprit.

"This time you just tell us who did," Arnold warned Sylvester, and led the advance towards him.

Sylvester glimpsed movement in the nearer of the gardens bordering the alley—a shape that clambered rapidly over the low wall between the garden and its neighbour and huddled in the shadows, awaiting its chance. "Nobody," he said. "I read it myself."

By the time the others had done jeering at him they were around him, so that he could smell their sweat and their breaths. Arnold took hold of his left upper arm and began to roll the flesh and muscles of it in his grip. "Thinks we're stupid."

"Stupid like him," said Denzil, and poked him in the chest.

"Must be stupid to think that," Bruce said, and was in the process of selecting which area of him to punch first when there was a clatter in the alley, and a dustbin fell out, spilling its meagre contents. "Hey," Bruce threatened, spinning round so fast that he almost punched Arnold.

"Cat," said Denzil, though his finger seemed less sure of it.

"Dog," Arnold said without looking, and intensified his treatment of Sylvester's arm.

Sylvester kept his gaze on the passage leading to the dark between the back yards. "Wasn't either."

"Who says?" Arnold demanded, and when that produced no response, pinched Sylvester's muscle. "What was it then, eh, Sylly?"

"Ow. Something you'd be scared of."

"Me, right." Arnold let go in order to rub his scalp, kindling the glower in his eyes. "Like you were scared to go in the house up the hill. You'll be dead before you see me scared."

"Go on then, go and look."

"Right, so you can get away." Arnold grabbed his arm again, but only while he said "You two hold him and I'll look. And tell him he'd better be scared of me when I come back."

"You'd better be scared," said Bruce, having seized Sylvester's bruised arm. and dug his knuckles into it. Denzil contented himself with digging Sylvester in various ribs. The boy succeeded in ignoring the discomfort, which after all would soon be over. He watched as Arnold stalked into the passage and stared both ways into the dark at the end. "Can't see a thing," Arnold declared.

It would try to hide from him unless it was called, Sylvester realised. "Daoloth says go to him, Old Bones That Crawl."

Denzil pointed violently at him. "What'd he say?"

"Sounded like he was telling something something," Bruce said, and shoved his face at Sylvester. Before he could enact the proffered butt, Arnold disappeared into the alley. "Hang on, there's..."

Sylvester couldn't quite contain a grin. Denzil stared at it, then at the entrance to the alley. "What's he done?" he muttered, and raised his voice. "Arn, wait. He—"

Arnold's response, or at least the noise he uttered, cut him off. It sounded as though Arnold was trying to scream while being sick. Deeply satisfying though Sylvester found it, he couldn't have it attracting attention. "Daoloth says you're not Arn now," he murmured. "Daoloth says you're Scalp For A Face."

He felt the world twist a little more, and his mind too. Arnold's noise ceased instantly as if a gag had been applied to its source. Denzil was at the

mouth of the passage, having shouted to Arnold that he was coming. He wavered there and glanced back furiously at the other boys, and fished in the air for them with his finger as he dared another step. It was time, thought Sylvester, to continue what he'd started. "Daoloth says stop being Denzil, Worms For Bones."

He didn't see the result—he was busy dodging a punch Bruce threw at him—but Bruce did. His face clenched like a fist, then opened to release a howl as Bruce fled along the street, waving his splayed fingers to ward off everything around him. Sylvester let him almost reach the crossroads before addressing him. "Daoloth says goodbye to Bruce and hello to Living Inside Out."

He had to look away at once, and to turn his back as he heard the new thing flounder through the shadows of the walls to join its companions. The sounds they made in the alley, blundering and slithering and slopping about, were enough for now, in fact rather too much before long. "Daoloth says go to the house on the hill where the book was," he called. "Daoloth says not to let anyone see you and when you get there go under the floor."

He was able to bear the ungainly confusion of their retreat. Quite soon with distance they sounded more like insects than anything else remotely familiar, and then they were gone. He'd done enough for one night. Tomorrow he would go to the twisted house and call them out and have some fun. As he turned homeward, it occurred to him that he mightn't live there for much longer. Perhaps soon he would know, and call himself by, his name.

Ra*e

"And so to [...] *Ra*e*. It was another tale written to an order that proved less firm than it had promised to be. Jeff Gelb and Lonn Friend, editors of the *Hot Blood* series of anthologies, asked various people to write a long story about one of the seven deadly sins. You will have guessed which attracted me. Alas, for whatever reason, the project failed to find a publisher, and so although I completed the first draft of the tale in early 1996, I saw little point in revising such a lengthy piece to be touted elsewhere. For a while a second volume of *Dark Love* seemed imminent, and apparently both Nancy Collins and her publishers wanted me in it, but it too faded and vanished. Now here is a place for *Ra*e*, in final draft at last."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to *Ghosts And Grisly Things*

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"You're joking, Laura. You're just doing your best to madden your mother and me. You're not going out like that either."

"Dad, I've already changed once."

"And not for the better, but it was better than this. Toddle off to your room again and don't come back down until you've finished trying to provoke us."

"I'll be late. I am already. There isn't another bus for an hour unless I go across the golf course."

"You know that's not an option, so don't give your mother more to worry about than she already has. You shouldn't have wasted all that time arguing."

"Wilf—"

"See how your mother is now. Perhaps she can be permitted a chance to speak before you have your next say. What is it, Claire?"

"I think she can probably go like that rather than be waiting in the dark. I know you'd give her a lift if you weren't on patrol. I only wish I could."

"Well, Laura, you've succeeded in getting round your mother and made her feel guilty for not being able to drive into the bargain. I'm sorry, Claire, that's how it seems to me, but then I'm just the man round here. Since my feelings aren't to be allowed for, I'll have to try and keep them to myself."

"Thanks, mum," Laura said swiftly, and presented her with a quick hug and kiss. Claire had a momentary closeup of her small pale face garnished with

freckles above the pert snub nose, of large dark eyes with extravagant lashes which always reminded her how Laura used to gaze up at her from the pram. Then the fourteen-year-old darted out of the room, her sleek straight hair as red as Claire's five years ago swaying across the nape of her slim neck as her abbreviated skirt whirled around the inches of bare thigh above her black stockings. "Thanks, dad," she called, and was out of the front door, admitting a snatch of the whir of a lawnmower and a whiff of the scented May evening.

Wilf had turned his back as she'd swung away from her mother. He sat down heavily in the armchair beside the Welsh dresser on which ranks of photographs of Laura as a baby and a toddler and a little girl were drawn up. He tugged at the knees of his jogging pants as he subsided, and dragged a hand across his bristling eyebrows before using it to smooth his greying hair. "Better now?" said Claire in the hope of dislodging his mood.

He raised his lined wide face until his Adam's apple was almost as prominent as the two knuckles of his chin. "I was serious."

"Oh, now, Wilf, I really don't think you can say your feelings are swept under the carpet all that much. But do remember you aren't the only—"

"About how she dresses, and don't bother telling me you used to dress that way."

"I could again if you like."

"I'm still serious. You were older, old enough your parents couldn't stop us marrying. Besides which, girls weren't in the kind of danger they are these days."

"That's why we have folk like you patrolling. Most people are as decent as they used to be, and three of them live in this house."

He lowered his head as if his thoughts had weighed it down, and peered at her beneath his eyebrows. "Never mind hiding in there," she said with the laugh she had increasingly to use on him. "Instead of thinking whatever you're thinking, why don't you start your patrol early if you're so worried and see her onto the bus.

"By God, you two are alike," he said, slapping his thighs so hard she winced, and pushed himself to his feet.

"That's us women for you."

The front door thumped shut, and Claire expelled a long breath through her nose. If only he wouldn't disapprove quite so openly and automatically of all that Laura was becoming—"What's wrong?" she blurted, because he had tramped back in.

"Nothing you've spotted." He played the xylophone of the stripped pine banisters as he climbed the stairs to the parental bedroom. She'd begun to wonder what was taking him so long when he reappeared, drumming his fingernails on his neighbourhood patrol badge, which he'd pinned to his black top over his heart. "Found it in with your baubles," he said. "Now maybe I've some chance of being taken notice of."

In the photograph he seemed determined to look younger, hence threatening. It still made her want to smile, and to prevent herself she asked "Who's out there at the moment, do you know?"

"Your friend Mr Gummer for one."

"No friend of mine. He'd better not come hanging round here if he sees you're away."

"You'd hope putting on one of these badges would make him into a pillar," Wilf said as he let himself out of the house.

Claire followed to close the filigreed gate at the end of their cobbled path after him, and watched him trot along the street of large twinned houses and garages nestling against them. Perhaps she was being unfair, but Duncan Gummer was the kind of person—no, the only person—who made her wish that those who offered to patrol had to be vetted rather than merely to live in the small suburb. Abruptly she wanted him to show himself and loiter outside her house as he often found an excuse to do while he was on patrol: she could tell him she'd sent Wilf away and see how he reacted. She had a vision of his moist lower lip exposing itself, his clasped hands dangling over his stomach, their inverted prayer indicating his crotch. She wriggled her shoulders to shrug off the image and sent herself into the house to finish icing Laura's cake.

She was halfway through piping the pink letters onto the snow-white disc when she faltered, unable to think how to cross the t of "Happy Birthday" without breaking her script. How had she done it twelve months ago and all the times before? She particularly wanted this cake to be special, because she knew she wouldn't be decorating many more. Perhaps it was the

shrilling of an alarm somewhere beyond the long back garden with its borders illuminated by flowers that was putting her off, a rapid bleeping like an engaged tone speeded up. She imagined trying to place a call only to meet such a response—a sound that panic seemed to be rendering frantic. Nervousness was gaining control of her hands now that Wilf had aggravated the anxiety she experienced just about whenever Laura left the house.

She'd spent some time in flexing her fingers and laying down the plastic tool again for fear of spoiling the inscription—long enough for the back garden to fill up with the shadow of the house—before she decided to go out and look for him. Laura would be fine at the school disco, and on the bus home with her friends, so long as she'd caught the bus there. Having set the alarm—she needn't program the lights to switch themselves on, she would only be out for a few minutes—Claire draped a linen jacket over her shoulders and walked to the end of the road.

The Chung boys were sluicing the family Lancia with buckets of soapy water and a great deal of Cantonese chatter. Several mowers were rehearsing a drowsy chorus against the improvised percussion of at least two pairs of shears. The most intrusive sound, though not the loudest, was the unanswered plea of the alarm. When Claire reached the junction she saw that the convulsive light that accompanied the noise was several hundred yards away along the cross street, close to the pole of the deserted bus stop at the far end, against the baize humps of the golf course. As she saw all this, the alarm gave up. She turned from it and caught sight of Wilf.

He mustn't have seen her, she thought, because he was striding away. Shrunken by distance, and obviously unaware that his trousers were a little lower than they might be—more like a building worker's than any outfit of the architect he was—he looked unexpectedly vulnerable. She couldn't imagine his tackling anyone with more than words, but then members of the patrol weren't supposed to use force, only to alert the police. She felt a surge of the old affection, however determined he seemed these days to give it no purchase on his stiff exterior, as she cupped her hands about her mouth. "Wilf."

At first she thought he hadn't heard her. Two mowers had travelled the length of their lawns before he swung round and marched towards her, his face drawn into a mask of concern. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I hope. I just wanted to know if you saw her onto the bus."

"She wasn't there."

"Are you sure?" Claire couldn't help asking. "She'd have been in time for it, wouldn't she?"

"If it came."

"Don't say that. How else could she have gone?"

"Maybe she got herself picked up."

"She'd never have gone in anybody's car she didn't know, not Laura."

"You'd hope not. That's what I meant, a lift from a friend who was going, their parents, rather."

The trouble was that none of Laura's friends would have needed to be driven past the bus stop. Perhaps this had occurred to Wilf, who was staring down the street past Claire. A glance showed her that the streetlamp by the bus stop had acknowledged the growing darkness. The isolated metal flag gleamed like a knife against the secretive mounds of the golf course. "She should be there by now," Claire said.

"You'd imagine so."

It was only a turn of phrase, but it made her suspect herself of being less anxious than he felt there was reason to be. "She won't like it, but she'll have to put up with it," she declared.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm going to phone to make sure she's arrived."

"That's—yes, I should."

"Are you coming to hear? You aren't due on the street for a few minutes yet."

"I thought I'd send your favourite man Mr Gummer home early. You're right, though, I ought to be with you for the peace of mind."

If he had just the average share, she reflected, she might have more herself. It took her several minutes to reach the phone, as a preamble to doing which she had to walk home not unduly fast and unbutton the alarm, by which time there was surely no point in calling except to assure herself there wasn't. The phone at the disco went unanswered long enough for Wilf to turn away and rub his face twice; then a girl's voice younger than Claire

was expecting, and backed by music loud enough to distort it, said "Sin Tans."

"Hello, St Anne's. This is Laura Maynard's mother. Could I have a quick word with her?"

"Who? Oh, Lor." As Claire deduced this wasn't a mild oath but a version of Laura's name, the girl said "I'll just see."

She was gone at once, presumably laying the receiver down with the mouth toward the music, so that it amplified itself like a dramatic soundtrack in a film. Claire had thought of a question to justify the call and no doubt to annoy Laura—they'd established when she must be home, but not with whom or how—when the girl returned. "Mrs Maynard," she shouted over an upsurge of the music, "she's not here yet, her friend Hannah says."

"You obviously wouldn't know if her bus happened to run."

"Yes, Hannah was on it, but it was early at Lor's stop."

"I understand," said Claire, compelled to sound more like a grown-up than she felt. "Could you ask her to ring home the moment she gets there? The moment you see her, I mean."

"I will, Mrs Maynard."

"Thanks. You're very—" The line went dead, and Claire hung up the receiver beside the stairs, next to the oval mirror in which Wilf was raising his hunched head. Two steps like the heaviness of his expression rendered palpable brought him round to face her. "She's not there, then," he said.

"Not yet."

"Not much we can do, is there? Not till she gets home, and then I'll be having a good few words."

"Don't work yourself up till we know what happened. You always assume it's her fault. I may just nip out to see..."

"I can look if you like while you're waiting for her to call. See what?"

"She'll speak to the machine if we aren't here. I know she wouldn't go across the golf course by herself, but maybe someone she knew went with her if they missed the bus too. If anyone's still playing I can ask if they saw her. It's better than sitting at home thinking things there's no need to think."

"I'll come with you, shall I? If there are any golfers they may be miles apart."

He so visibly welcomed being motivated that she couldn't have refused him. "You set the lights and everything while I go on ahead," she told him.

The twilight was quieter, and almost dark. The mowers had gone to bed. Though she could hear no sound of play from the golf course she made for it, having glanced back to see that Wilf was following, far enough behind that she had a moment of hoping a call from Laura had delayed him. By the time he emerged from their street Claire was nearly at the bus stop.

Smaller flags led away from it, starting at the first hole. The clubhouse was nearby, though screened by one of the thick lines of trees that had been grown to complicate the golf. Claire heard the whop of a club across the miles of grass and sandy hollows, and the approach of a bus, reminding her that it was at least an hour since Laura had left the house. "Come on, Wilf," she urged, and stepped off the concrete onto the turf.

Tines of light from the clubhouse protruded through the trees; one thin beam pricked the corner of her eye. A stroke that sounded muffled by a divot echoed out of the gloom. "I'll find them," she called, pointing towards the invisible game, "while you see if anyone at the clubhouse can help. Show them your badge."

Her last words jerked as she began to jog up a slope towards a copse. Having panted as far as the clump, she glanced at Wilf. "Get a move on," she exhorted, but her words only made him turn to her. She waved him onward and lurched down the far side of the slope.

Her cry brought Wilf stumbling towards her, halting when she regained her balance. "What now?" he demanded, his nervousness crowding into his voice. "What have you—"

"Nearly fell in a bunker, that's all," she said, grateful to have an excuse for even a forced laugh. She took a step which placed the bulk of the copse between her and Wilf and cut off the light from the clubhouse, and looked down.

This time she didn't cry out. "Wilf," she said with the suddenly unfamiliar object she used for speech; then she raised her voice until it became part of the agony she was experiencing. "Wilf," she repeated, and slid down into the bunker.

The slope gave way beneath her feet, and she felt as if the world had done so. The darkness that rose to meet her was the end of the lights of the world. It couldn't blind her to the sight below her, though her mind was doing its best to think that the figure in the depths of the sandpit wasn't Laura—was the child of some poor mother who would scream or faint or go mad when she saw. None of this happened, and in a moment Laura was close enough to touch.

She was lying face down in the hollow. Her skirt had been pulled above her waist, and her legs forced so wide that her panties cut into her stockinged legs just above the knees. The patch of sand between her thighs was stained dark red, and the top of her right leg glistened as if a large snail had crawled down it. Her fists were pressed together above her head in a flurry of sand.

Claire fell to her knees, sand grinding against them, and took hold of Laura's shoulders. She had never known them feel so thin and delicate; she seemed unable to be gentle enough. As Laura's face reluctantly ceased nestling in the slope, Claire heard the whisper of a breath. It was only sand rustling out of Laura's hair—more of the sand which filled her nostrils and her gaping mouth and even her open eyes.

Claire was brushing sand out of Laura's eyelashes, to give herself a moment before the glare of her emotions set about shrivelling her brain—she was remembering Laura at four years old on a day at the seaside, her small sunlit face releasing a tear as Claire dabbed a grain of sand out of her eye—when she heard Wilf above the bunker. "Where are—" he said, then "Oh, you're—What—"

She shrank into herself while she awaited his reaction. When it came, his wordless roar expressed outrage and grief enough for her as well. She looked up to see him clutching at his heart, and heard cloth tear. He was twisting the badge, digging the pin into his chest. "Don't," she pleaded. "That won't help."

He wavered at the top of the bunker as if he might fall, then he trudged down the outside of the hollow to slither in and kneel beside her. She felt his arms tremble about her and Laura before gripping them in a hug whose fierceness summed up his helplessness. "Be careful of her," she hardly knew she said.

"I did it."

She almost wrenched herself free of him, his words were so ill-chosen. "What are you saying?"

"If I hadn't made her miss her bus by going on at her..."

"Oh, Wilf." She could think of nothing more to say, because she agreed with him. His arms slackened as though he felt unworthy to hold her and Laura; she couldn't tell if he was even touching her. One of them would have to get up and fetch someone—he would, because she found she couldn't bear the thought of leaving Laura to grow cold as the night was growing. But there was no need for him to go. Someone was observing them from above the bunker.

The emotion this set off started her eyes burning, and she might have scrambled up the slope to launch herself at the intruder if he hadn't spoken. "What are you people up to in there? This is private property. Please take your—" His voice faltered as he peered down. "Dear Christ, what's happened here?" he said, and was irrelevant to her fury—had been as soon as she'd grasped he wasn't the culprit. Nothing but finding them might bring to an end the blaze of rage which had begun to consume every feeling she would otherwise have had.

* * *

"Mrs Maynard."

She could pretend she hadn't heard, Claire thought, and carry on plodding. But a supermarket assistant who was loading the shelves with bottles of Scotch and gin nodded his head at her. "There's a lady wants to speak to you."

"Mrs Maynard, it is you, isn't it? It's Daisy Gummer."

Claire knew that. She was considering speeding her trolley out of the aisle when her exit was blocked by a trolley with a little girl hanging onto one side—a six- or seven-year-old in the school uniform Laura had worn at that age. Claire's hands clenched, and she swung her trolley round to point at her summoner.

Mrs Gummer was in her wheelchair, a wire basket on her lap. The jacket and trousers of her orange suit seemed designed to betray as little of her shape as possible. Her silver curls were beginning to unwind and grow dull. Her large pale puffed-up face made to crumple as her eyes met Claire's,

then rendered itself into an emblem of strength. "Has to be done, eh?" she declared with a surplus of heartiness. "It's not the men who go out hunting any longer."

The little this meant to Claire included the possibility that the old woman's son wasn't with her, not that his absence was any reason to linger. Before Claire could devise a reply that would double as a farewell, Mrs Gummer said "Still fixing up people's affairs for them, are you? Still tidying up after them?"

"If that's what you want to say accountants do."

"Nothing wrong with using any tricks you know," Mrs Gummer said, performing a wink that involved pinching her right eye with most of that side of her face. "Duncan's done a few with my money at his bank." As though preparing to reveal some of them, she leaned over her lapful of tins. "What I was going to say was you keep working. Keep your mind occupied. I wished I'd had a job when we lost his father."

"That would have helped you forget, would it?"

"I don't know about forget. Come to terms would be about the size of it."

"And what sort of terms would you suggest I come to?" Claire heard herself being unpleasant, perhaps unreasonable, but these were merely hints of the feelings that constantly lay in wait for her. "Please. Do tell me whatever you think I should know."

The old woman's gaze wavered and focused beyond her, and Claire had an excuse to move out of the way of whoever was there. Then she heard him say "Here's the soap you like, mother, that's gentle on your skin. Who's your friend you've been talking to?"

"You know Mrs Maynard. We were just talking about..." Apparently emboldened by the presence of her son, Mrs Gummer brought her gaze to bear on the other woman. "How long has it been now, you poor thing?"

"Three months and a week and two days."

"Have they found the swine yet?"

"They say not."

"I know what I'd do to him if I got hold of him, chair or no chair." Mrs Gummer dealt its arms a blow each with her fists, perhaps reflecting on the difficulties involved in her proposal, before refraining from some of another

wink as she said "They'll be testing the men round here soon though, won't they? It isn't just fingerprints and blood these days, is it?"

The possibility that the old woman was taking a secret delight in this sickened Claire, who was gripping her trolley to steer it away when Duncan Gummer said "I shouldn't imagine they think he's from our neighbourhood, mother."

He'd taken his position behind the wheelchair and was regarding Claire, his eyes even moister than his display of lower lip. "They've told you that, have they?" she demanded. "That's the latest bulletin for the patrol."

"Not officially, no, Mrs Maynard. I'm sure Mr Maynard would have told you if they had. I was just thinking myself that this evil maniac would surely have had enough sense, not that I'm suggesting he has sense like ordinary folk unless he does and that's part of how he's evil, he'd have kept his, his activities well away from home, would you not think?" He looked away from her silence as a load of bottles jangled onto a shelf, and let his lip sag further. "What I've been meaning to say to you," he muttered, "I can't blame myself enough for not being out that night when I was meant to be on patrol."

"Don't listen to him. It's not true."

"Mother, you mustn't—"

"It was my fault for being such a worn-out old crock."

"That's what I meant. You weren't to know. You mustn't take it on yourself."

"He thought I was turning my toes up when all I was was passed out from finishing the bottle."

"Can't be helped," Claire said for the Gummers to take how they liked, and turned away, to be confronted by the liquor shelves and her inability to recall how much gin was left at home. She was letting her hand stray along the relevant shelf when Mrs Gummer said "You grab it if that's what you need. I know I did when his father left us."

Claire snatched her hand back and drove her trolley to the checkout as fast as the shoppers she encountered would allow. She couldn't risk growing like Mrs Gummer while Laura went unavenged. Time enough when the law had taken its course for her to collapse into herself. She arranged her face to

signify that she was too preoccupied to talk to the checkout girl, and imitated smiling at her before wheeling out the trolley onto the sunlit concrete field of the car park.

Tasks helped advance the process of continuing to be alive, but tasks came to an end. At least riding on the free bus from the supermarket to the stop by the golf course was followed by having to drag her wheeled basket home. She might have waited for Wilf to drive her if waiting in the empty house hadn't proved too much for her. His need to go back to work had forced her to do so herself, and on the whole she was glad of it, as long as she could do the computations and the paperwork while leaving her colleagues to deal face to face with clients. She didn't want people sympathising with her, softening the feelings she was determined to hoard.

As she let herself into the house the alarm cried to be silenced before it could raise its voice. Once that would have meant Laura wasn't home from school, and Claire would have been anxious unless she knew why. She wouldn't have believed the removal of that anxiety would have left such a wound in her, too deep to touch. She quelled the alarm and hugged the lumpy basket to her while she laboured to transport it over the expensive carpet of the suddenly muggy hall to the kitchen, where she set about loading the refrigerator. She left the freezer until last, because as soon as she opened it, all she could see was Laura's birthday cake.

She'd thought of serving it after the funeral, but she would have felt bound to scrape off the inscription. That still ended at the unfinished letter—the cross she had never made. She'd considered burying the cake in the back garden, but that would have been too final too soon; keeping it seemed to promise that in time she would be able to celebrate the fate of Laura's destroyer. She reached into its icy nest and moved it gently to the back of the freezer so as to wall it in with packages. While Wilf rarely opened the freezer, she could do without having to explain to him.

He ought to be home soon. She might have made a start on the work she'd brought home from the office, except that she knew she would become aware of trying to distract herself from the emptiness of the house. She wandered through the front room, past the black chunks of silence that were the hi-fi and video-recorder and television, and the shelves of bound classics she'd hoped might encourage Laura to read more, and stood at the window. The street was deserted, but she felt compelled to watch—to

remember. Remember what, for pity's sake? She'd lost patience with herself, and was stepping back to prove she had some control, when she saw what she should have realised in the supermarket, and grew still as a cat which had seen a mouse.

* * *

"Wilf?"

"Love?"

"What would you do..."

"Carry on. We've never had secrets from each other, have we? Whatever it is, you can say."

"What would you do if you knew who'd, who it was who did that to Laura?"

"Tell the police."

"Suppose you hadn't any proof they'd think was proof?"

"Still tell them. They'll sort out if there's proof or not. If you tell them they'll have to follow it up, won't they? That's what we pay them for, those that do, that you haven't fixed up not to pay tax."

"I'd be best phoning and not saying who I am, wouldn't I? That way they can't find out how much I really know."

"Whatever you say, love."

He had to agree with her, since he wasn't there: he'd left home an hour ago to be early at a building site. She couldn't really have had such a conversation with him when he would have insisted on learning why she was suspicious, and then at the very least would have thought she was taking umbrage which in fact she was too old and used up to take. She knew better, however. If Duncan Gummer had been as obsessed with her as she'd assumed him to be, how could be have needed his mother to identify her at the supermarket? Now Claire knew he'd used his patrolling as an excuse to loiter near the house because he'd been obsessed with Laura, a thought which turned her hands into claws. She had to force them to relax before she was able to program the alarm.

The suburb was well awake. All the surviving children were on their way to school; a few were even walking. The neighbourhood's postman for the last four months had stopped for a chat with a group of mothers being tugged at by small children. Less than a week ago Claire would have been instantly suspicious of him—of any man in the suburb and probably beyond it too—but now there was only room in her mind for one. She even managed a smile at the postman as she headed for the golf course.

The old footpath, bare as a strip of skin amid the turf, led past the first bunker, and she made herself glance in. It was unmarked, unstained. "We're going to get him," she whispered to the virgin sand, and strode along the path to the main road.

A phone box stood next to the golf course, presenting its single opaque side to a bus stop. Claire pulled the reluctant door shut after her and took out her handkerchief, which she wadded over the mouthpiece of the receiver. Having typed the digits that would prevent her call from being traced, she rang the police. As soon as a female voice, more efficient than welcoming, announced itself she said "I want to talk about the Laura Maynard case."

"Hold on, madam, I'll put you through to—"

"No, you listen." Now that she was past the most difficult utterance—describing Laura as a case—Claire was in control. "I know who did it. I saw him."

"Madam, if I can ask you just to—"

"Write this down, or if you can't do that, remember it. It's his name and address." Claire gave the information twice and immediately cut off the call, which brought her plan of action to so definite an end that she almost forgot to pocket her handkerchief before hanging the phone up. She stepped out beneath a sky which seemed enlarged and brightened, and had only to walk to the stop to be in time for an approaching bus. As she grasped the metal pole and swung herself onto the platform of the bus she was reminded how it felt to step onto a fairground ride. "All the way," she said, and rode to the office.

* * *

"Claire? I'm back."

"I was wondering where on earth you'd got to. Come and sit and have a drink. I've something I've been wanting to—"

"I'm with someone, so—"

"Who?"

"No need to sound like that. Someone you know. Detective Inspector Bairns."

"Come in too, Inspector, if you don't mind me leaving off your first bit. I don't suppose you'll have a drink."

"I won't, thanks, Mrs Maynard, not in the course of the job. Thank you for asking."

She wasn't sure she had—she was too aware of the policeman he'd made of himself. His tread was light for such a stocky fellow; the features huddled between his high forehead and potato chin were slow to betray any expression, never including a smile in her limited experience, but his eyes were constantly searching. "Do have one yourselves," he said.

"I'll get them, Claire. I can see you're ready for a refill."

"You'll have the Inspector thinking I've turned to the bottle."

"Nobody would blame you, Mrs Maynard, or at any rate I wouldn't." Bairns lowered himself into the twin of her massive leather armchair and glanced at Wilf. "Nothing soft either, thanks," he responded before settling his attention on Claire.

She smiled and raised her eyebrows and leaned forward, none of which brought her an answer. "So you'll have some news for me," she risked saying.

"Unfortunately, Mrs Maynard, I have to—"

Wilf came between them to hand Claire her drink on his way to the couch, and in that moment she wished she could see the policeman's eyes. "Sorry," she said for Wilf as he moved on, and had a sudden piercing sense that she might be expected to apologise for herself. "You were saying, please, go on."

"Only that regrettably we still have nothing definite."

"You haven't. Nothing at all."

"I do understand how these things seem, believe me. If we can't make an immediate arrest then as far as the victim's family is concerned the investigation may as well be taking forever."

"When you say not immediate you mean..."

"I appreciate it's been the best part of four months."

"No, what I'm getting at, you mean you've an idea of who it is and you're working on having a reason to show for arresting him."

"I wish I could tell you that."

"Tell me the reason. Us, not just me, obviously, but that's what you mean about telling."

"Sadly not, Mrs Maynard. I meant that so far, and I do stress it's only so far, we've had no useful leads. But you have my word we don't give up on a case like this."

"No leads at all." Claire fed herself a gulp of gin, and shivered as the ice-cubes knocked a chill into her teeth. "I can't believe you've had none."

"We and our colleagues elsewhere questioned everyone with a recorded history of even remotely similar behaviour, I do assure you." The policeman looked at his hands piled on his stomach, then met her eyes again, his face having absorbed any hint of expression. "I may as well mention we received an anonymous tip last week."

"You did." Claire almost raised her glass again, but wasn't sure what the action might seem to imply. "I suppose you need time to get ready to follow something like that up."

"It's been dealt with, Mrs Maynard."

"Oh." There was no question that she needed a drink before saying "Good. And..."

"We're sure it was a vindictive call. The informant was a woman who must bear some kind of grudge against the chap. Felt rebuffed by him in some way, most likely. She didn't offer anything in the way of evidence, just his name and address."

"So that's enough of an excuse not to bother with anything she said."

"I understand your anger, but please don't let it make you feel we would be less than thorough. Of course we interviewed him, and the person who

provided his alibi, and we've no reason to doubt either."

Claire had—Mrs Gummer had admitted to having been asleep—but how could she introduce that point or discover the story the old woman was telling now? "So if there's no news," she said to release some of her anger before her words got out of control, "why are you here?"

"I was wondering if either of you might have remembered anything further to tell me. Anything at all, no matter how minor it may seem. Sometimes that's all that's needed to start us filling in the picture."

"I've told you all I can. Don't you think I'd have told you more if I could?"

"Mr Maynard?"

"I'd have to say the same as my wife."

"I'll leave you then if you'll excuse me. Perhaps it might be worth your discussing what I asked when I'm gone. I hope, Mrs Maynard..." Bairns was out of his chair and had one foot in the hall before he said "I hope at least you can accept we're doing everything the law allows."

She did, and her rage focused itself again, letting her accompany him to the gate and send him on his way. The closing of his car door sounded like a single decisive blow of a weapon, and was followed by the reddening of the rear lights. The car was shrinking along the road when she saw Duncan Gummer at the junction—saw him wave to Bairns as if he was giving him a comradely sign. The next moment his patrolling took him out of view, but she could still see him, as close and clear in her mind as her rage.

* * *

"Who is this? Hello?"

"It's Claire Maynard."

"It wasn't you that kept ringing off when my mother answered, was it?"

"Why would I have done that, Mr Gummer?"

"No reason at all, of course. My apologies. It's got us both a little, well, not her any longer, she's sound asleep. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to discuss an idea I had which I think might be profitable."

"I don't normally talk business outside business hours, but with you I'm happy to make an exception. Would you like to meet now?"

"Why don't you come here and keep me company. We can talk over a couple of drinks."

"That sounds ideal. Give me ten minutes."

"No more than that, I hope. And I shouldn't bother troubling your mother if she needs her sleep."

"Don't worry, I'm with you. Softly does it. I'm all in favour of not disturbing anyone who doesn't have to be."

"I'll be waiting," Claire said with a sweetness she imagined she could taste. It made her sick. She heard him terminate the call, and listened to the contented purring of the receiver, the sound of a cat which had trapped its prey. When she became aware of holding the receiver for something to do while she risked growing unhelpfully tense she hooked it and went to pour herself a necessary drink.

She loaded ice into the tumbler, the silver teeth of the tongs grating on the cubes, then filled the remaining two-thirds of the glass almost to the top. More room needed to be made for tonic, and she saw the best way to do that. The tumbler was nearly at her lips when she opened the gin bottle and returned the contents to it. She mustn't lose control now. To prove she had it, she crunched the ice cubes one by one, each of them sending an intensified chill through her jaw into her skull until her brain felt composed of impregnable metal. She had just popped the last cube into her mouth when she saw Gummer's glossy black Rover draw up outside the house. She bit the cube into three chunks which she was just able to swallow, bringing tears to her eyes. They were going to be the last tears Gummer would cause her to shed, and her knuckles dealt with them as she went to let him in before he could ring the bell.

Whether his grin was meant to express surprise or pleasure at her apparent scramble to greet him, it bared even more of his lower lip than usual until he produced a sympathetic look. "I'm glad you felt able to call," he said.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, indeed," he said as though to compliment her on being reasonable, and she had to turn away in order to clench her teeth. "Close the door," she said once she could.

The finality of the slam gave her strength, and by the time he followed her into the front room she was able to gaze steadily at him. "What's your

taste?" she said, indicating the bottles on the sideboard.

"The same as you'll be having."

"I'm sure you'll have a large one," she told him, and managed to hitch up one corner of her mouth.

"You've found me out."

Whatever answer that might have provoked she trapped behind her teeth as she busied herself at the sideboard. Perhaps after all she would have a real drink instead of pretending a tonic was gin; his presence was even harder to bear than she'd anticipated. Already the room smelled as though it was steeped in the aftershave he must have slapped on for her benefit. When she moved away from the sideboard with a glass of gin and tonic in each hand she found him at the window through which she didn't know how many times he might have spied on Laura. "Please do sit down," she said, masking her face with a gulp of her drink.

"Where will you have me?"

"Wherever you're comfortable," said Claire, retreating to the armchair closest to the door. As she'd handed him his glass she'd touched his fingertips, which were hot and hardly less moist than his underlip. The thought of them on Laura almost flung her at him. She forced herself to sit back and watch him perch on the edge of the nearer end of the couch.

"Strong stuff," he said, having sipped his drink, and put it on the floor between his wide legs. "So it's a financial discussion you're after, was that what I understood you to say?"

"I said profitable. Maybe beneficial would have covered it better."

"Happy to be of benefit wherever I can," Gummer said and showed her the underside of his lip, which put her in mind of a brimming gutter. "Do I recall the word company came up?"

"Nothing wrong with your memory."

"I wouldn't like to think so. Not like my mother's," he said, and glanced down between his legs while he retrieved his glass. Once he'd taken another sip he seemed uncertain how to continue. She wanted him in a state to betray himself by the time Wilf came back. "So what kind of company do you prefer?" she said.

"Various. Depends."

"Whatever takes your fancy, eh?"

"You could say that if the feeling's mutual."

"Suppose it isn't reciprocated? What happens then?"

"Sometimes it is when you dig a bit deeper. You think there's nothing, but if you don't let yourself be put off too soon you find what the other person's feelings really are."

Claire brought her glass to her mouth so fast that ice clashed against her teeth. "Suppose you find you're wrong?" she said, and drank.

"To tell you the truth, and I hope you won't think I've got too big a head, so far I don't believe I ever have."

"Would you know?"

"I'm sorry?"

Claire lowered her glass with as much care as she was exerting over her face. "I said, would you know?"

"I hope so this far."

His gaze was holding hers. He still thought they were discussing a possible relationship. While she swallowed an enraged mirthless laugh she won the struggle to form her expression into an ambiguous smile. "So what are your limits?"

"There's always one way to find out," he said, and revealed his wet lip.

"You don't think you should have any."

"As long as one takes care, and we know to do that these days. It isn't as though one's committed."

"Wouldn't it come down to not being found out even if you had a partner? I know you're good at not being."

"As good as I need to be, right enough."

That was almost too much for Claire, especially when, having planted her glass on the carpet to distract herself, she looked up to be met by the sight of his dormant crotch. Wilf ought to be home in a few minutes, she reminded herself. "And what age do you like best?" she managed to ask.

"Nothing wrong with a mature woman. A good deal right with her, as a matter of fact, and if I may say so—"

"Nothing wrong about younger ones either if you're honest, is that fair?"

"I won't deny it. Teaching them a thing or two, that's pretty special. There again, and you'll tell me if I'm flattering myself, sometimes even when it's a lady of our generation—"

"You bastard."

"Forgive me if I expressed myself badly. It wasn't meant as any kind of insult, I do assure you. Mature was what I meant, not so much in years as —"

"You swine."

"I think that's a little much, Claire, may I call you Claire? I'm sorry if you're touchy on the subject, but if you'll allow me to say this, to my eyes you —"

"I remind you of a younger woman."

"My feelings exactly."

"A young girl, in fact."

"Ah." He faltered, and she saw him realise what he could no longer fail to acknowledge. "In some ways that's absolutely true, the best ways, may I say, only I suppose I thought that under the circumstances —"

"You loathsome filthy stinking slimy pervert."

She saw his lip draw itself up haughtily, and was reminded of a snail retreating into its shell. "I fear there's been some misunderstanding, Mrs Maynard," he said, and rose stiffly to his feet. "I understand your being so upset still, but my mother will be wondering where I am, so if you'll excuse me—"

Claire was faster. She swung herself around her chair with the arm she'd used to shove herself out of it, and trundled the heavy piece of furniture into the doorway. Having wedged it there, she sat in it and folded her arms. "I won't," she said.

"I really must insist." He held out his hands as if to demonstrate how, once he crossed the yards of carpet, he would grasp her or the chair. "I'm truly sorry for any error."

"You think that should make up for it, do you?"

"To be truthful, I don't know what more you could expect."

He didn't believe he had been found out, she saw—perhaps the idea hadn't even occurred to him. "Maybe you will when you see your mistake," she said and made her arms relax, because her breasts were aching as they hadn't since they were last full of milk.

"It'll be easiest if you tell me."

"You think I should make it easy for you, do you?" Her mouth had begun to taste as foul as her thoughts of him, and she would have swallowed more than the taste if her glass had been within reach. "Try this for a hint. Maybe you should have kept your mother out of my way."

"You've drifted away from me altogether. Let me suggest in your interest as much as mine—"

"Or found a way to stop her talking. You're good at that, aren't you?"

"Some understanding can usually be reached if it has to be. I assume that when you decide to let me go you won't be telling—"

"Like Laura never did."

"Well, really, Mrs Maynard, I must say that seems rather an unfortunate—"

"Unfortunate!" Claire ground her shoulders against the chair rather than fly at him—ground them so hard that either the chair or the doorway creaked. "That's your word for it, is it? How unfortunate would you say she looked the last time you saw her?"

He took a breath to give Claire yet another swift response; then his mouth sagged before clamping shut. He rubbed the side of one hand across his lips, and she imagined how he might have wiped his mouth as he sneaked away from the golf bunker. She stared at his face to see what would come out of it next, until he spoke. "It was you."

This was far less than the response she wanted, in fact nothing like it, and she continued to stare at him. "It was you who kept ringing off, wasn't it, till I was there to answer. What didn't you want my mother to hear?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have rung off. For all I know she's good at keeping secrets, especially if she thinks she's protecting her son."

"Why should she think—" His eyes wobbled and then steadied as though Claire's gaze had impaled them. "My God, that was you as well. You didn't just call us."

"Seems as though I might as well have."

"You tried to put the police onto me."

"If only they'd done their job properly. You wouldn't be here now. You'd be somewhere, but I'd have to put up with that being less than you deserved, I suppose. Only you are here, just the two of us for the moment, so—"

Gummer turned to the window as if he'd observed someone—Wilf? The street was quiet, however, and it occurred to her that he was considering a means of escape. She lurched out of the chair and grabbed the bottle of gin by its neck. "Don't bother looking there. You're going nowhere till I've finished with you," she said.

"Mrs Maynard, I want you to listen to me. I know you must—" He was almost facing her when he stopped and rubbed his lip and gave her a sidelong look. "Finished what exactly?"

"Guess."

"I don't believe I have to. Profitable was what you said this was going to be when you rang, wasn't it? If I may say so, God forgive you."

"You mayn't. You'd better—"

"Whatever you think about me, you were her mother, for heaven's sake. You're expecting me to pay you to keep quiet, aren't you? You're trying to make money out of the death of your own child," he said, and let his mouth droop open.

It was expressing disgust. He was daring to feel contemptuous of her. His wet mouth was all she could see, and she meant to damage it beyond repair. She seemed less to be raising the weapon in her hand than to be borne forward by it as it sailed into the air. His eyes flinched as he saw it coming, but his mouth stayed stupidly open. She had both hands on the weapon now, and swung it with all the force of all the rage that had been gathering for months. "Claire," he cried, and tried to dodge, lowering his head.

For a moment she thought the bottle had smashed—that she would see it explode into smithereens, as bottles in films always did when they hit someone on the head. Certainly she'd heard an object splintering. When his mouth slackened further and his eyes rolled up like boiled eggs turning in a pan she thought he was acting. Then he fell to a knee which failed to support him, and collapsed on his side with a second heavy thud. As if the position had been necessary for pouring, a great deal of dark red welled out of his left temple.

When it began to stain the carpet she thought of moving him or placing towels under his head, but she didn't want to touch him. He was taken care of. She peered at the bottle, and having found no trace of him on it, replaced it on the sideboard before returning to her chair. She supposed she ought to move the chair out of the doorway, not least to bring her within reach of her drink, but the slowness that had overtaken her since the night she'd found Laura's body was becoming absolute, and so she watched the steady accumulation of the twilight.

In time she had a few thoughts. If Mrs Gummer was awake she must be wondering where her son was. She'd had decades more of him than Laura had lived, and soon enough she would learn he was only a lump on the floor. Claire considered drawing the curtains, but nobody would be able to see him from the pavement, and in any case there was no point in delaying the discovery of him. The discoverer was most likely to be Wilf, who would still have to live here once she was taken away, and she oughtn't to leave him the job of cleaning up after her, though perhaps the carpet was past cleaning. When she narrowed her eyes at the blind mound of rubbish dumped in her front room, she couldn't determine how far the stain had spread. It annoyed her on Wilf's behalf, and she was attempting to organise and speed up her thinking sufficiently to deal with it when she saw him appear at the gate.

It wasn't guilt which pierced her then, it was his unsuspecting look—the look of someone expecting to enjoy the refuge of home at the end of a long day. He couldn't see her for the dimness. He wasn't as keen-eyed as a patrolman should be, Claire found herself thinking as she stumbled to face the chair and drag it out of the doorway. That was as much as she achieved before he admitted himself to the house. "Claire?" he called. "Sorry I was longer than I said. Some old dear thought a chap was acting suspicious, but when I tracked him down would you believe he was one of our patrol. Where are you?"

"In here."

"I'll put the light on, shall I? No need for you to sit in the dark, love." He came into the room and reached for the switch, but faltered. "Good Lord, what's... who..."

Claire found his hand with one of hers and used them to press the switch down. "My God, that's Duncan Gummer, isn't it?" he gasped, and his hand

squirmed free. "Claire, what have you done?"

"I hope I've killed him."

Wilf stared at her as if he no longer knew what he was seeing, then ventured to stand over the body. He'd hardly begun to stoop to it when he recoiled and hurried to draw the curtains. He held onto them for some seconds, releasing them only when their rail started to groan. "Why, Claire? What could—"

"It wasn't half of what he did to Laura."

"He—" Wilf's face convulsed so violently it appeared to jerk his head down as he took a step towards Gummer. Claire thought he meant to kick the corpse, but he controlled himself enough to raise his head. "How do you know?"

"His mother lied about his alibi. Either she said she was awake when she was asleep or she knew he wasn't at home when he said he was, when—when he..."

"All right, love. It's all right." Wilf veered around the body and offered her his hands, though not quite close enough for her to touch. "How did you find that out?"

"She let it slip one day and he tried to shut her up."

"Why couldn't you have told the police?"

"I did."

"You—oh, I get you." He was silent while he dealt with this, and Claire took the opportunity to retrieve her glass, not to finish her drink but to place it out of danger on the sideboard. Gummer's body seemed such a fixture of the room that she was practically unaware of blotting out her sense of it as she picked up the glass. The clunk of the tumbler on wood recalled Wilf from his thoughts, and he said almost pleadingly "Why didn't you tell me?"

"What would you have done?"

He stepped forward and took her hands at last. "What do you think? When the police didn't listen, probably the same as you. Only I wouldn't have done it here where it can't be hidden."

"It's done now. It can't be helped, and I don't want it to be."

"I wish to God you'd left it to me." He stared around the room, so that she thought he was desperate for a change of subject until he said "What did you use?"

"The gin. The bottle, I mean. It did some good for a change."

"I won't argue with that."

Nevertheless he relinquished one of her hands. Before she knew what he intended, he was hefting the bottle as though to convince himself it had been the weapon. "Don't," she protested, then saw her concern was misplaced. "It doesn't matter," she said. "Your fingerprints would be on it anyway."

"So would yours."

"What are you getting—"

"Just listen while I think. We haven't much time. The longer we wait before we call the police, the worse this is going to look."

"Wilf, it can't look any worse than it is."

"Listen, will you. We can't have you going to prison. You'd never survive."

"I'll have to do my best. When everyone knows the truth—"

"Maybe they won't. You used to think he was sniffing round you. Suppose that got out somehow? I know how lawyers think. They'll twist anything they can."

"He wasn't interested in me. It was Laura."

"You say that, but how can you prove it in court? Your instincts are enough for you, I know that, for me too if I even need to tell you. But they won't be enough if his mother sticks to her story, and if your lawyer tried to break her down too much think how that would look, them harassing an old woman with nobody left in the world."

"All right, you've shown me how wrong I am," Claire said, feeling not far short of betrayed. "Any suggestions?"

"More than a suggestion."

He reached out and drew his hand down her cheek in a slow caress as he used to when they hadn't long been married, then patted her face before sidling around her into the hall. She had no idea of his intentions until he unhooked the phone. "Wilf—"

"It's all right. I'm going to make it all right. Hello." Though he was gazing so hard at her it stopped her in the doorway, the last word wasn't addressed to her. "Detective Inspector Bairns, please."

"Wilf, wait a minute. Ring off before he can tell who you are. Don't stay anything till we've—"

"Inspector? It's Wilfred Maynard. I've killed the man who took our daughter from us."

Claire grabbed the doorframe as her knees began to shake. She would have snatched the phone from him if it hadn't been too late. Instead she sent herself into the room as soon as she felt safe to walk. She could hardly believe it, but she was hoping she hadn't killed Gummer after all. She fastened her fingertips on the wrist of the sprawled empty flesh. She held it longer than made sense, she even said a prayer, but it was no use. The lump of flesh and muscle was already growing cold, and there wasn't the faintest stirring of life within.

"I'll be staying here, Inspector. I give you my word. I wouldn't have called you otherwise," she heard Wilf say. She walked on her unwieldy brittle legs into the hall in time to see him hang the receiver. "Wilf," she pleaded, "what have you done?"

"Saved as much that we've got as I could. I know I can take prison better than you can. Quick now, before they come. Help me get my tale straight. How did you bring him here? Was he just passing or what?"

She thought of refusing to answer so that Wilf couldn't prepare a story, but the possibility that their last few minutes together might be wasted in arguing was unbearable. "I called him at home."

"Will Mrs Gummer know?"

"He said she'd be wondering where he'd got to."

"You hadn't long come in from gardening, had you? Did anyone see him arrive?"

"Not that I noticed."

"Just say he stopped when he saw you gardening and you invited him in. And when you'd both had a drink you accused him over Laura, and I came home just in time to hear him say what?"

"I don't know. Wilf—"

"'You can't prove anything.' That's as good as a confession, isn't it, or it was for me at any rate. He was shouting, so he didn't hear me, because I let myself in quietly to find out what the row was. How many times did you hit him?"

"Do you have to be so calculating about it? I feel as if I'm already in court."

"I have to know, don't I? How many times?"

"It just took the once."

"That's fine, Claire. Really it is." He offered her his hands again, and finding no response, let them sink. "It'll be manslaughter. I heard Laura's name and him saying you couldn't prove it, and that was enough. There was a moment when I lost control, and then it was done and there was no turning back. That's how it must have been for you, am I right? They'll believe me because that's how these things happen."

He must be trying to live through her experience, but she felt no less alone. "Do they, Wilf?"

"Wait, I've got it. They'll believe me because I couldn't have had any other reason to kill him. It's not as though I could have imagined anything was going on between you two, even if you did imagine he fancied you."

Even in the midst of their situation, that felt cruel to her. "Thank you, Wilf."

"I have to say it, haven't I? Otherwise they might get the wrong idea. Look, there's a good chance the court will be lenient, and if it isn't I wouldn't be surprised if there's a public outcry. And I can't imagine I'll have too bad a time of it in jail. It's his kind that suffer the worst in there, not the ones who've dealt with them."

"You sound as though you're looking forward to being locked up."

"What a thing to say, Claire. How could anyone feel like that?"

As she'd spoken she'd known the remark was absurd, yet his need to persuade her it was made it seem less so. "Why would I want anything that's going to take me away from you?" he said.

Claire had a sense of hearing words that didn't quite go with the movements of his mouth. No, not with those—with his thoughts. Before she

could ponder this, she heard several cars braking sharply outside the house, and a rapid slamming of at least six doors. "Here they are," Wilf said.

The latch of the gate clicked, and then it sounded as though not much less than an army marched up the path. The doorbell rang once, twice. The Maynards looked at each other with a deference that felt to Claire like prolonging the last moment of their marriage as it had been. Then Wilf moved to open the door.

Bairns was on the step, and came in at once. Five of his colleagues followed, trying to equal his expressionlessness, and Claire didn't know when the house had felt so crowded. "He's in the front room, Inspector," Wilf said.

"If you and Mrs Maynard would stay here." Bairns' gaze had already turned to his colleagues, and a nod sent two of them to stand close to the Maynards. He paced into the front room and lingered just inside, hands behind his back, as a prelude to squatting by Gummer's body. He hardly touched it before standing up, and Claire felt as if he'd confirmed her loathing of it. "I must ask you to accompany us to the police station, Mr Maynard," he said.

"I'm ready."

"You too, Mrs Maynard, if you will. You'll understand if I ask you not to travel in the same car."

"In that case do you mind if I give my wife a cuddle, Inspector? I expect it may be her last for a while."

The policeman's impassiveness almost wavered as he gave a weighty nod. Wilf took hold of Claire's shoulders and drew her to him. For a moment she was afraid to hug him with all the fierceness in her, and couldn't quite think why. Of course, he'd scratched himself with his patrolman's badge that night on the golf course. The scratches would have healed by now, not that she had seen his bare chest for years. When he put his arms around her she responded, and felt him trying to lend her strength, and telling her silently to support his version of events. They remained embraced for a few seconds after Bairns cleared his throat, then Wilf patted her back and pushed her away gently. "We'd best get this over and done with then, Inspector."

Bairns had been delegating men to drive the Maynards. He directed an unambiguously sympathetic glance at Claire before turning a more

purposeful look on Wilf. Wilf was going to convince him, she thought—had already convinced him. She had never realised her husband could be so persuasive when he had to be. She saw him start towards the front door, matching his pace to that of his escort as though he was taking his first steps to his cell. Her sense of his persuasiveness spread through her mind, and in that instant she knew everything.

"I'll drive you whenever you're ready, Mrs Maynard," a youngish policeman murmured, but Claire was unable to move. She knew why Wilf had seemed relieved at the prospect of the sentence he was courting—because he'd been afraid he might be jailed for worse. Everything made its real sense now. Nobody had been more obsessed with the way Laura dressed and was developing than Wilf. Claire remembered accusing Gummer of being attracted to a girl as a preferred version of an older woman she resembled. The accusation had been right, but not the man.

"Mrs Maynard?"

She saw Wilf's back jerking rhythmically away from her, and imagined its performing such a movement in the bunker. For a moment she was certain she could emerge from her paralysis only by flying at him—but she was surrounded by police who would stop her before she could finish him off, and she had no proof. She'd nursed her rage until tonight, she had hidden it from the world, and she could do so again. She felt pregnant with its twin, which would have years to develop. "I'm ready now," she said, and took her first step as her new self.

Wilf was being handed into the nearest police car as she emerged from the house. Shut him away, she thought, keep him safe for me. His door slammed, then the driver's, but apart from a stirring of net curtains the activity went unacknowledged by the suburb. As Claire lowered herself stiffly into the next car, Wilf was driven off. One thing he needn't worry about was her confirming his tale. She would be waiting when he came out of prison, and she could take all that time to imagine what she would do then. Perhaps she would have a chance to practise. While she was waiting she might find other men like him.

1997

Little Ones

"Little Ones was written in collaboration with Jenny; that is, for once the shared authorship was made plain. My writing from 1969 onwards owes an increasing amount to her and eventually to Tammy and Matt as well. Of course not only the writing does; much of the best of me comes from them. When Little Ones appeared in print in an anthology of collaborations between partners it was preceded by our comments, and here they are.

"When Ramsey spoke of a collaboration, my mind went back to when I had a provisional licence previous to passing my driving test, and needed a qualified driver to sit in with me. I'm glad to say that this experience was a much better one than that.

"It brought home to me the sheer professionalism of Ramsey—his ability to return to a story and hone it over an extended period of time as opposed to ray short period of concentrated effort followed by a triumphant 'It's done!'

"On the debit side some changes he made to my original I would have argued against if time and the pressure of work had allowed. Maybe next time..."

"As so often, Jenny overrates me and underrates herself. I'd say we have collaborated on virtually all the fiction I've written since we met twenty-eight years ago. She's my first editor, the person who reads my initial drafts and makes suggestions and criticisms. Only she could, because she's the only person who can read the handwriting. Mind you, hers is as bad as mine. She had to tell me that Gill's mysterious possession in our story, a plonte quane, was in fact a plaster gnome.

"Jenny's teaching background often figures in my stuff, and even if I wrote some of the details about teaching in the present tale, they're really all hers. I used her story as a first draft and worked at the motivations until I believed in them. Our readers can play at deciding which of us wrote which scenes and which sentences. Jenny and I are so close that I'll bet we fool you. That's love and marriage."

—Ramsey Campbell and Jenny Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The Dead*

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Also published in: *Told By The Dead*.

Gill awoke with a cold half of bed next to her. As she groped for the alarm clock to shut it up she heard Brian in the kitchen, whistling a bit of opera until he had to stay in tune by singing some words he'd made up. She grabbed the frosty dial and closed the handful of clock into the box that was its base, and changed her sigh into a quick smile as Brian brought through the breakfast tray. "I have to get up for school, you know," she said.

"I thought I was saving you time," he protested, and put on his hurt look. "Thought we'd have some of it for other things."

"Drop that, I don't mean drop it before you make out I did, and come here." She raised her face to meet his with a kiss and draped her arms around his shoulders. When his hand found the hem of her nightdress and began to glide it over her knees, however, she captured his wrist. "We haven't time now, truly."

"We hadn't last night either."

"You saw all the paperwork I had to do, as if teaching my class wasn't tiring enough."

"How about Sunday?"

"How about it?"

"You didn't seem to have much of a wad to get through then."

"We wouldn't have wanted the landlord banging on the door, would we? Nearly being caught by him once is quite enough, thank you, until we can afford to buy somewhere together. You know how he comes around hunting for sinners after he's been to church."

"You're right. You're absolutely right. You're right as always," Brian said, and straightened himself until she had to let go. "I may as well be off. I don't want any breakfast."

"Stay and we'll talk."

"No, they want us at the shop before the crowds arrive. We've the biggest tape and seedy sale ever starting today, until the next one. It'll be wall-to-wall teenagers as soon as whoever unlucky opens the doors."

"Just you make sure you stay on the far side of the counter, then."

"If I can," he said with a smile that was rather too close to a swift grimace. He was already on his way into the short narrow rectangle that passed for the hall of the apartment. She heard the hallstand from the Oxfam shop wobble and rattle its prongs as he grabbed his coat. He reappeared in the bedroom doorway, shoving his hand through the sheepskin sleeve to grant her a wave. Before she could finish responding to it he was pulling both bolts on the door to the landing with a single clank. The door slammed, and she heard him skipping down the stairs, and whistling as he reached the street.

She could only hope he wasn't as happy to leave as he sounded. She knew there was one sure way to keep him, but she wasn't ready for that—no risk

of children until she and Brian were married, not a single one of her pills missed. Brian stayed over at her flat most nights, but very often he'd spend the evening out with his mates while she slogged through the forms that had come as such a shock to her this year. When he got in he had his way, though by then she was almost always half asleep, exhausted by the strain of her first year's teaching. There must be better years to come, she told herself as she saw her toast off with four quick munches and took her mug of coffee to the bathroom.

The shower clanked and stuttered as she persuaded it to stay hot, and then she had to keep wiping the mirror while she brushed her hair and pinned it up to keep it out of the way of the mites at school. By the time she'd put on a white blouse and one of her dark suits it was almost time for her bus, if it came. She had to leave her breakfast things next to the crumbs Brian had scattered by the sink. "Stay in your holes," she told the mice she kept thinking she heard, and ran down the mostly carpeted stairs into a rain that seemed to have been waiting for the cue of her appearance.

She was just in time for the bus at the end of her road. Clutching her guitar with one hand and her bag stuffed with papers in the other, she struggled to the end of the aisle, where the only free seat was. Three twelve-year-olds preparing to light up made just about enough room for her and wished they hadn't when she gave their cigarettes a grimace each to keep them unlit. By now the bus was out of the streets full of weather-beaten houses that were several times as full of flats. As it passed a rank of new red bungalows which always seemed to Gill to be trying to huddle out of sight of the high-rise blocks that hulked over them, she peered through the window grey with recycled breaths for a peek at Mrs Lavelle's bungalow.

There it was, in the middle of the row, and by now she knew where to look for Mr Lavelle. One of the children rubbed a swathe of glass clear as the bus passed the house. Through the thick net curtains of the front room Gill could just distinguish a man's hunched figure, seated as always no more than a yard from the television. She saw the gleam of his balding bent head, and thought she glimpsed a movement of his face, or perhaps that was only the flickering from the screen. Then the bungalow swam away in the rain, leaving Gill dismayed by the thought of someone sitting all day in front of the television while he waited for his wife to come home. Ten minutes later the bus lumbered to a halt by the school, a long two-storey building behind

bars. Like the houses packed around it, it was the colour of rain even when the sun was out. Gill staggered off the platform of the bus, her shoulder bag swinging unprotected in a district where this was tempting fate. Where's a child when you want one? she thought irritably as rain streamed down her hair into her face as fast as the children were pelting into the school. At the sound of footsteps behind her she instinctively made to secure her bag until she heard Lee Smith's voice. "Hi, miss. Can I carry your guitar?"

"Lee, I thought no-one was going to ask. Yes please, that would be super." She kept her smile steady as she looked at him. His torn jacket had no zip, and he was wetter than anyone should be on this cold morning. "Then if you help me with this lot into my room I've got a couple of jobs that need doing, if you wouldn't mind, and you could put your coat and maybe your jumper on the radiator to dry while you're being such a help."

It was her good deed more than his, she thought—continued to think as Mrs Lavelle rewarded him with a frown as he bore the guitar past her in the corridor. "Be careful if you're carrying Miss Dowson's instrument, Lee Smith," she said.

Lee visibly wondered how there could be any doubt that he was. "He's a useful little chap given a bit of encouragement," said Gill.

"I suppose he'll do by today's standards," Mrs Lavelle said, only to start taking it back, "I remember him from kindergarten. I'm afraid he wouldn't be able to compete with any of my little ones."

By now Gill knew that meant the Lavelle children, however long ago they'd been little—knew that none of the children at the school was ever going to measure up to them. She gave Mrs Lavelle a polite smile and squelched after Lee into the Year One classroom. Once as many of his clothes as he could be persuaded to part with had been draped on the radiator Gill fabricated some emergency pencil-sharpening and book sorting while they dried at least partially. "How come you haven't got a car like all the other teachers, miss?" he asked. "Mr Ingles says his is a Rolls Canardly. Rolls downhill and can hardly get back up."

"I've decided that I'd like a house before a car," Gill said, keeping to herself the thought that neither seemed imminent while she was saving so much more than Brian. "Anyway, I'm going to grab a quick cup of coffee. When the bell goes, head straight for Mr Ingles' room. Don't go out to line up and get wet again. And thanks for your help."

The staffroom was even muggier than the bus had been. Beyond an assortment of chairs that would have looked haphazard in a junk shop, a sweating metal urn stewed its water and befogged the cracked sash window. "Morning," said Pete Ingles as she stepped demurely over his legs to make something like coffee of the powder in her mug. "Did I see my little treasure Lee acting as your enthusiastic donkey just now?"

"I was very pleased with him."

Pete looked embarrassed. "It's good you're getting on with kids from further up the school as well as your own mob, but I shouldn't make a habit of leaving Lee in your room unattended. Things tend to sprout legs around him."

"There's not one of them worth the space they take up, the Smiths." This was Mrs Lavelle from the depths of her personal armchair, where nobody else would have even dared to think of sitting. "Sandra's plying her trade with her mother by the docks already, and Lord knows where Lee goes pinching while they're out. You wouldn't find any of my little ones out of the house by themselves, I promise you."

"Hasn't Lee a father?"

"A Norwegian sailor was the likely candidate." Mrs Lavelle shuddered extravagantly, shivering her china teacup in its saucer. "As if just one man wasn't—well, it isn't a fit subject for young ears."

This had to refer to Gill, who said "I'm quite a big girl really."

"You won't hear me arguing," Pete agreed with a wink. "Just don't tell my wife."

Mrs Lavelle included both of them in a lingering look of reproof. "I'm afraid the kind of understanding I came to with my husband is out of fashion these days."

Gill wasn't anxious to clarify that. "How is Mr Lavelle? I see him most days on the bus."

"On the—" Mrs Lavelle steadied her cup as it almost toppled out of the saucer. "From it, you mean, I see. One should always try and be precise in one's language if one wants to teach. Mr Lavelle has been housebound since he retired from the hairdressing business. Instead of dealing with people in chairs he had to learn to deal with one himself. Has to sit still for me now,"

she said, and dabbed at her pale lips with a lace handkerchief as if to wipe away the cackle she'd emitted.

"So long as you're happy," Pete said.

"Indeed, and I speak for both of us. You're courting, aren't you, Miss Dowson? Please don't be shy if you ever want a private word."

Gill felt Pete giving her an amused look which, if the assembly bell hadn't rung just then, might have put paid to her determined sobriety. "Thank you, Mrs Lavelle," she called after her as the oldest teacher turned the corners of her mouth down at the sight of children in the corridor.

Gill's morning was what she'd learned to expect: haphazard and noisy if she let it be, all too frequently frustrating but with enough minor achievements—major, considering some of the tiny minds she had to work with—to make her glad she'd struggled to work. She heard children read, sometimes a whole paragraph. She helped them paint, wiped noses, called a halt to fights before they could get started, worked a bit of history and what geography would fit into the lesson, and gave the children and herself a reward for it all by leading a song with her guitar. It was all as different as it could be from Mrs Lavelle's classes, where the children had to sit silent in rows and in what Gill could only assume was old-fashioned terror. But she would have been much happier with her morning if it hadn't started with a shamefaced appearance by Lee Smith, bearing a bagful of her classroom erasers, sharpeners and a little plaster gnome that had been presented to her by one of her pupils. Worse still, Mrs Lavelle across the corridor had seen him.

Gill didn't think she would be able to bear having Mrs Lavelle resurrect the incident in the staffroom at lunch. She felt stupid, but the only person she wanted to admit that to just now was Brian, who wouldn't dare agree or patronise her. Besides, their unsatisfactory parting at the flat had begun to nag at her. Walking to the shop and back would take less than half her lunch time, and since hers coincided with his there would be time for a drink. It had been weeks since he'd suggested they meet in the pub by the shop.

Five minutes' walk from the school took her out of reach of any traffic. Another five, and a city centre shopping mall shut out the town and the rain. A tape was filling the mall with a song about favourite things as she came abreast of the pub. She was making to hurry past the fountain of Venus with

its mock-marble feet in a bowl full of drowned coins when she caught sight of Brian. He was talking to a young woman at a table in the pub.

Gill had seen her behind the counter with Brian; why shouldn't he have a drink with a colleague now and then? She was blonder than Gill, and slimmer, and if she wasn't younger she was doing her best to look it. None of these was a reason for Gill to feel out of place, no matter how friendly a chat they appeared to be having. She edged the pub door open and advanced on the booth where Brian and his friend were ensconced.

She heard them over the top of the booth before they were in sight. "It's the same with me exactly," Brian was saying. "After being brought up in a big family I'm never happy without a few people around."

"But being an only child she just wants you to herself, not that I blame her."

"That's part of it, only she always seems uncomfortable when we visit my folks, as if she can't cope with a lot of people at a time."

"She has to when she's teaching, doesn't she?"

"They're kids. Maybe that's her trying to compensate."

"Trying to compensate for what you don't seem in a hurry to give me, you mean."

Both heads poked over the booth at the sound of Gill's voice. The woman looked at least as caught out as Brian did, and shut her mouth with her knuckles while he said "Gill, we were just—"

"Such as a place we could both call home so we could have a family in it. Quite a big family. You might have realised I'd like that if you'd occasionally listened to me."

"Gill, do you think we'd better save it for—"

"Oh, am I still not supposed to talk about myself? It's only you and your friend who are allowed to discuss me in here, is it? I'm surprised you didn't say that dealing with other people's children is easier than having some of my own."

The woman tried to intervene. "Gill, if I can call you Gill, I'm on your side. I was only trying—"

"I've a good idea what you were trying. Now if you'll both excuse me I'd better be off back to the only crowd I seem to be able to cope with."

"Gill," Brian pleaded, but she was on her way to the door. As it shut behind her she glanced fiercely over her shoulder to see that he hadn't left the booth. Through the window she saw him beginning to stand up, having no doubt told the woman that he ought to; Gill showed him her clawed hands to deter him from following and let the rain stream over her eyes as she marched blindly back to the school.

She had to forget him in order to work. She was especially attentive and tolerant all afternoon, not just in class but in the staffroom, where Mrs Lavelle seemed to think better of mentioning Lee Smith. Or might the glance she aimed at Gill, so secret and preoccupied it was virtually blank, have meant she was thinking of something quite different? Gill had no time to ponder that either; no time for anybody except her children until she was on the bus home.

She'd acted the martinet at the bus stop, so impressively that the children lined up and even made way for her before piling on after her, and for once she had a seat upstairs. It had stopped raining, but it was almost dark, and the twilight and the dregs of rain had merged to turn the windows grey. As the bus cruised past Mrs Lavelle's house Gill saw the teacher drawing the curtains of the front room. Over the net curtains, and through the closing gap, Gill had a glimpse of more than one figure seated in the room. Neither of them was Mr Lavelle, she thought; they were too small, even if her viewpoint was foreshortening them—she would have taken them for children if she hadn't been almost certain that their hair was grey. Or was that an effect of the grime on the bus window? Before she had finished deciding how likely it was that Mrs Lavelle would have any children to visit, the house had retreated into the dark, and it was nearly time for Gill to struggle downstairs.

She didn't let herself think much about Brian. Even on a good night, he was never at the flat within an hour of her. She liberated enough cartons of food from the old vibrating refrigerator to feed two people, and then she devoted herself to the evening's heap of paperwork. Two hours later she microwaved enough dinner for herself, and left nearly all of it. Two more hours later she finished watching a comedy film. She hadn't laughed at once, and set about getting ready for bed. There was a limit to the amount of time she could spend doing that, after which she lay in bed and told herself to go to sleep.

If Brian had decided not to come round or even to phone, she certainly wasn't going to phone him. It was up to him to make the next move.

The empty half of bed seemed colder every time she wakened beside it. Once she had to pull her arm back fiercely from reaching across it and hugged herself instead. She was glad when the alarm announced it was time for her to stalk about the flat. If he wanted to sulk, let him. If their altercation, or its having been overheard by his blonde friend, seemed enough of an excuse for him to ditch Gill, that just showed how shallow he was. Thoughts such as these kept her going all the way to school—kept her so deep in herself that she didn't think to glance at Mrs Lavelle's house. But they deserted her once she learned that Lee Smith had been arrested for shoplifting.

"He'll be back next week," Pete Ingles assured her at their morning break. "Like as not with a social worker in tow, and a probation officer when he gets older."

"It's time people like the Smith woman were sterilised," Mrs Lavelle declared. "I'd go further and say anyone who starts having children they aren't fit to keep."

"People who are nothing like you, you mean."

"If I may say so, Mr Ingles, you know not the least thing about it," Mrs Lavelle said, and took her time about looking away from him. "You're very quiet today, Miss Dowson. Lee Smith wasn't your responsibility, after all."

"I don't feel as if I've anything to offer," Gill said, not sure how sarcastic she meant to be. "It doesn't look as if I'll be having any children of my own to learn from, not when my used to be boyfriend likes to talk about them to everyone but me."

"I'll bet there's another lucky feller along soon," Pete said. Mrs Lavelle turned her back on him and gave Gill a blankly secretive look. Gill had even less idea than yesterday what it was supposed to communicate. Perhaps it meant that Mrs Lavelle was continuing to speculate about her, because at the end of the afternoon, as Gill was presenting her two most helpful pupils with items to carry for her, Mrs Lavelle stalked into the classroom as though she'd made a difficult decision. "Forgive me if I guard my words in front of big ears, Miss Dowson, but were you implying earlier that you wanted a private word with someone about children?"

For a moment all the pressures Gill had undergone recently seemed certain to explode, and then she remembered last night's glimpse of Mrs Lavelle's front room. Suddenly it struck her as mysterious enough to need investigating. "I wouldn't mind," she made herself say. 'Only I don't think here is private enough, do you? I expect your husband will need you to get home, so shall I come with you?"

This time there was no question that Mrs Lavelle's look was speculative. "You're a discreet enough girl. We'll be friends." She might have been speaking purely for her own benefit. "Take Miss Dowson's things out to my car," she said, so sharply and abruptly that not only the children but Gill jumped.

Mrs Lavelle's car was an ancient three-wheeler that had been the butt of quite a few staffroom quips, but it hadn't previously occurred to Gill to wonder how comfortable Mr Lavelle could find the passenger seat now he was disabled. There was just room in the back for her guitar and both the teachers' bags. As soon as the car was loaded the children fled, leaving Gill with a pitying glance they might have given one of themselves.

The car lurched out of the schoolyard with a series of oily hiccups and veered straight into the road without a care for the oncoming traffic. Though it took less than ten minutes to reach Mrs Lavelle's bungalow, Gill had a good deal of time to wish she'd caught the bus. Her colleague jumped out with unexpected sprightliness to unlatch the gates of her drive, and didn't return to the car until she'd unlocked the front door of the house and pushed it wide open. If Mr Lavelle complained of the draught, she ignored him as she ran back to sprint the car through the gates.

Gill was climbing out when Mrs Lavelle grabbed both bags and the guitar and bore them into the house. She was stronger than she looked, thought Gill, and saw something else for the first time: there were two layers of net curtain at the front window. No wonder it was so hard to see in. She stepped into the boxy spotless panelled hall, which led past three closed doors to the kitchen in which Mrs Lavelle was divesting herself of her burdens. "Tea for two?" Mrs Lavelle said.

"Isn't your husband having one?"

"Mr Lavelle hasn't much to do with liquids these days." As Gill ventured into the kitchen, the other woman sidled past her, gripping her shoulders in

passing. "Would you make a pot while I see how things are? There's a good girl."

Gill would have felt more patronised if she hadn't been so busy shivering. She had never known a colder house. Perhaps Mrs Lavelle was trying to save her pay, but how did her husband react to the temperature? As she filled and switched on the chipped electric kettle she heard Mrs Lavelle drawing the curtains in the front room, and her murmur "We'll be in the kitchen."

It didn't sound like an invitation so much as a warning to someone to stay where they were—at least, that was Gill's interpretation while she listened to the closing of the front-room door. Then she heard the teacher open the next door, which must lead to the only bedroom, and mutter exactly the same words. Was she talking to herself? If so, in which case? Gill found herself edging towards her guitar and her bag. Whatever was going on, she was starting to think she might prefer not to be alone with it. She hadn't reached her belongings when Mrs Lavelle reappeared, still wearing her overcoat. "Won't be long," she said with a lop-sided smile she presumably meant to look hospitable. "Good old thing."

Even when Gill realised she was referring to the kettle, that wasn't much of a relief. Mrs Lavelle had sat down on a pine bench that faced its twin across a matching table, all of them between Gill and the door. For a few moments she watched Gill as if waiting for a waitress in a restaurant to serve her, and then she said "It hasn't turned you against having children, then."

Gill was too nervous to refrain from sounding rude. "What?"

"Why, our job that used to be a vocation when I took it up."

"It hasn't yet. I hope it never does. Why do you think it should? It didn't put you off."

"Did it not, Miss Dowson? Where do you obtain your information about me?"

"From you. Things you've said."

"Oh, those. Sometimes I find it advisable to say what's expected of me." Mrs Lavelle let her gaze stray beyond Gill's shoulder, where she appeared to see some presence silently raising itself. "Do make the kind of tea you like. I always think one can judge character from the strength of the brew."

She was watching the steam from the kettle, of course. Gill grasped it by its handle and felt as though she would be found wanting if she used a towel to protect her hand. She did so anyway, and threw a third teabag into the pot for luck or her image, and stirred the contents before she turned round with the pot, to find that Mrs Lavelle had set two cups and saucers, not to mention spoons and a sugar bowl and milk jug, on the table without making any noise that Gill had noticed. "Pour, there's an angel," Mrs Lavelle said.

Gill was sure she was going to miss the cups and flood the saucers, but her job had taught her not to seem nervous after all. Mrs Lavelle watched expressionlessly, then sipped her tea, and sipped again. "Not too weak," she said.

Gill decided to take that as a compliment, and as encouragement too. She fed herself a gulp of milkless tea, having blown on it, and dared to ask the question that was clamouring to be asked. "Who were the children I saw yesterday?"

"You're being careless of your words again, Miss Dowson. Where would these children have been?"

"In here."

Mrs Lavelle replaced her cup minutely on the saucer without glancing away from Gill's face. A brownish thread began to trickle down a wrinkle at the right corner of her mouth. "And how did you contrive to see in my kitchen?" she said.

"In the front room, I mean. I saw in it from the bus last night."

"Did you indeed." Mrs Lavelle dabbed at the trickle of tea with her handkerchief and continued not to blink. "I shall be dealing with that," she said.

This sounded not like just a declaration of secrecy but a warning, and Gill was tempted to take it as such and finish her tea or not even finish it before fleeing. Except the older woman's stare wasn't leaving her alone, and if she had to say something, what else was there? "So who—" she said, and broke off, telling herself she'd been stupid, promiscuously imaginative as any child. "Of course, you don't need to tell me. They were your grandchildren, weren't they."

"Most unlikely, Miss Dowson, I'm afraid."

The speculative expression had resurfaced. It was the look of a teacher trying to coax a child to see the obvious, Gill thought—or was it the look of someone wondering how much they could get away with? "Why's that?" she blurted.

"I thought I had made myself clear. Before we were married Mr Lavelle and I agreed we would be sufficient companionship for one another. In those days if anyone thought that odd they kept their opinions to themselves."

"You mean you never—" Once again Gill silenced herself, not only from embarrassment. "Then—"

"Not our nieces, no, nor our nephews." Mrs Lavelle buried a cackle in the stained handkerchief. "What else might there be, do you think? You're my first visitor for nearly a year, you know. Would you like to see?"

At once Gill was sure she wouldn't, not at night and by herself. "Actually, Mrs Lavelle, I should be going. Thanks so much for the tea. I've so much work to do when I get home, I'd better make a start."

The older woman seemed not to have heard her. "They're my companions now. They're quiet as can be, they're what children ought to be. They take after Mr Lavelle, one might say. Come along and you shall meet the family."

Gill stood up and bent to retrieve her belongings, but the older woman was off the bench and swiftly round the table and grasping her by the arm. "Leave those for now. You don't want to drop your guitar and break it, do you?" Her voice had all the reasonableness of a teacher elucidating a requirement to a pupil, and her grip was quite as firm. By the time she'd finished speaking she was at the door to the front room, and blocking the hall between it and escape. She didn't let go of Gill's arm until she had twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open. "It used to be polite to say hello," she said.

Apart from the flickering of the silenced television, the room was dark. As Gill took one reluctant step towards the doorway, a smell of peardrops met her. She had to advance one more step, then another, before she could see in. Three small figures with their backs to her were sitting motionless on a sofa that faced the television. There was something odd about their heads, she knew. "Do go in," said Mrs Lavelle. "There's nothing you can't see."

Gill reached around the doorway and fumbled at the wall. "I can't find the light switch."

"Go in, dear." Mrs Lavelle might have been addressing a small niece, to reassure her or to prepare her for a treat. "Nobody will trip you up."

Suddenly furious with herself for being made to feel like a child, Gill stalked into the room. "Hello," she said, more fiercely than she wanted to, but there was no response from the trio on the sofa. The fluttering light tugged the walls closer to her. The smell of peardrops grew sharper in her nostrils, and all at once she knew she wasn't smelling sweets but a kind of glue. She dodged around the sofa, which was lit by the blaze of an explosion in a cartoon, and saw what she'd spoken to. They were three old-fashioned baby dolls, naked and sexless.

Their unblinking fish-eyes seemed to light up as they saw her, their peeling lips shifted. Those were only effects of the glow from the television; they weren't why Gill almost cried out. None of the dolls was bald, as they should have been. Their scalps were spiky with lumps of grey hair.

"Shall I put the light on, dear," Mrs Lavelle said, "or are you happy as you are?"

She was about to shut the door, Gill thought—about to shut her in with the little ones. It must have been her dash for the door that caused two of the dolls to nod their heads together as if they were discussing how to stop her. She shoved Mrs Lavelle aside and ran: not for the front door, since the older woman was cutting off that route, but for the back. Only that door was locked, and the key was nowhere to be seen.

"Finishing your tea?" said Mrs Lavelle. "You'll want to see Mr Lavelle now, I expect. I'll wheel him out to you. Try not to be too surprised by how he is."

Gill made herself sit down on the bench with her back to the hall. Reflected in the window she could see Mrs Lavelle approaching, halting within what looked like arm's length of her, opening the bedroom door. "It's a bit of a miracle, you know," Mrs Lavelle said, "the way his hair keeps growing,"

Gill saw her move out of the reflection of the hall. In an instant she was on her feet and grabbing her bag and her unwieldy guitar. The instrument in its case swung in her hand and almost scraped one wall, then the other. She

hugged it one-armed to her and tiptoed swiftly past the bedroom, which was lit only from the hall. She nearly didn't look, and then she did. The next moment she was sprinting for the front door, no longer caring how much noise she made. She had to remember to put the guitar down in order to turn the latch. The rain slashed at her face as she seized the guitar by its neck and fled down the drive, through the gate.

She was afraid to hear Mrs Lavelle run after her, but the only sound was of the front door being closed with a discreetness that went with the house. Gill struggled home, nearly blind with rain and with the memories that seemed to have lodged in her eyes. She couldn't be sure how much she had glimpsed in the bedroom—in the wheelchair Mrs Lavelle had been turning towards the hall. Not much had appeared to be sitting in the chair, but its grey locks had been longer than Gill's, at least on one side of its head. The left side had been bald except for a few curls like the first new growth in a vegetable patch. She didn't know if she could tell anyone, nor what she would do tomorrow, but she knew her life could never be the same. She knew that when she came close enough to her flat to be certain her window was lit, it was the most welcome sight she'd ever seen.

Kill Me Hideously

Written in: 1997
First published in *Dark Of The Night*, 1997
Also published in: *Scared Stiff*

"I don't read this kind of stuff myself, but could you sign it for my son?"

As Lisette clenched her fists on his behalf, Willy Bantam raised his heavy eyelids and gave the man ahead of her a full-lipped smile almost as wide as his plump face. "What's his name?" he said.

The man told him, and Bantam sent the son his best wishes on the title page of *The Smallest Trace of Fear*. Lisette swung her tapestry bag off her shoulder as the man retrieved the book, and the volumes in the bag nudged him none too gently at the base of his spine. She made sure he saw her place them in front of their author, who greeted her and them with exactly the smile he'd produced for her predecessor. "Sins of my youth," he remarked.

"They're not sins, and you aren't so old. I don't want them for anyone but me."

"Shall I sign them to..."

"Lisette."

"That's a pretty unusual name."

"Thank you," she breathed, and managed not to simper as she watched him begin to inscribe the title page of *Ravage!*. She took a breath that tasted of saliva. "Would you put it in..."

"I am, look."

"I don't mean that. I mean, do sign them for me, I'll hold them even dearer then, but when you've finished, Willy can I call you that..."

"That's who I was before I was William."

"You were when you wrote these, so will you be for me?"

"Anything for an old supporter."

He meant old in the sense of faithful, Lisette thought as he signed his original name. She was certain his pen was moving more fluently, happy to

rediscover what it used to write. She waited for him to open *Writhe!* before she said "The thing I was going to ask you—when you write another book like these, will you put me in it?"

He didn't look up until he'd finished wishing her the best above his zippy signature, and then he gave her a straightened smile. "I'll see if I can find somebody called Lisette a role in one of the kind I write now."

"Don't be insulted, but that's no good. Shall I tell you why?"

"There are people behind you, but please."

"Because in this new one you never describe what happens to the girls who disappear."

"There's the scene where the policewoman has to try and say what she found."

"She doesn't even say three whole sentences. You used to write at least a chapter. The first girl in *Writhe!* got thirteen pages in the hardcover and sixteen in the paperback."

"My agent and my editor persuaded me you could imagine worse than I could ever describe."

Lisette saw the manager of Book Yourself frown at the queue behind her and direct more of the expression at her. "I'm not paying to imagine, I'm paying you to," she said.

"Then I hope these old excesses of mine give you your money's worth."

"I've read them. Thanks for them," Lisette said, and once they were nestling safely in her bag, hugged it to her as she marched out of the shop.

Beyond her Renault, which she'd had to park several hundred yards away, the lights of the department stores and fast-food eateries were padded with November fog. The street was deserted except for a man in a dark raincoat whose length and looseness put her in mind of a slaughterhouse. The lights lent his stiff expressionless face all the colours of a lurid paperback. As she stooped to unlock the car he arrived behind her, and she sensed a cold presence at the back of her neck: his breath as chill as his intentions, the imminent clutch of his hand? It was only the fog.

Five minutes' driving through the blurred streets of the city took her home. She lived in the middle of a row of youthful houses, each of them little wider than the garage that occupied most of the ground floor—no more than a slice

of a house, she often thought, but all she needed. Having let herself into and closed the garage with the remote control, she unlocked the door that led from the garage into the house.

A narrow staircase lit by bulbs in cut-glass flowers ascended to the middle floor, half of it a kitchen and dining area, the rest solemnly described by the estate agent as a compact living space. In Lisette's case it was a library, its walls hidden by shelves stuffed with books. She crossed it to the farther staircase and climbed to the solitary bedroom.

She gave her secrets time to glimmer before she fingered the switch. The light seemed to draw the contents of the wall beyond the foot of the bed into a pattern she alone might sometime be able to interpret. The wall was covered with jackets of second-hand Willy Bantam novels and pages torn from them, framed by two female mouths stretched wide by screams, posters for *Ravage!* and *Writhe!* which Lisette had saved from a bookshop bin. She loved the mouth from *Writhe!* most—you could see the tongue starting to grow bigger and longer and harder.

She hung her coat on the back of the door and lay on the bed, her shoulders against the headboard. She placed one of the autographed books on either side of her on the fat quilt, then she opened *Ravage!* and read the inscription, running her fingers over the back of the page to feel how it was embossed by his signature. She was making herself wait, causing all her lips to tingle with anticipation, before she turned to her favourite scene.

> "...Sally had never known why he called them his ghoulies until she kicked him there. When he went into a crouch she thought she had put him out of action long enough for her to run, and then he jerked his head up, gleefully licking his lips. His hands came for her, except they were no longer just hands. His thumbs had stiffened and swelled huge. One moist throbbing thumb forced her mouth open, and the member slid over her tongue. The shock was so intense it was beyond shock, it was an experience she wouldn't have dared admit even to herself she'd dreamed of. She felt his other hand push her skirt above her waist and slide her panties down her helpless legs, and then the pulsing erection that was his other thumb slid deep into her. She would have gasped if she'd been able, and not only because of that—because a slick lengthening finger had found her nether orifice and wormed its

way in. The rhythmic penetration was reaching for her deepest self from too many directions to withstand, and as wave after wave of forbidden ecstasy swept away the last of her control she fell back on the bed. When his face above hers began to change there was nothing she could do..."

There was plenty Lisette could if she put her mind to it. She pushed one thumb in and out of her mouth, she bit down on it as the other stroked her clitoris and forged deeper while a finger poked between her buttocks. She moaned, she gasped, she writhed on the bed, raising her knees high and flinging her legs wide. She came within an inch of convincing herself.

When she was too exhausted to counterfeit any more pleasure she let all her muscles sag. For just a moment that state considered feeling like the release she'd laboured to achieve, and then the dead weight of frustration settled on her. It was waiting in the night whenever she lurched awake, and she was hardly aware of having slept when the bedside clock began to squeak at her to get ready for work.

Her car felt like a helmet not a great deal more metallic than her head. It gave her only just enough protection from the traffic, cars and lorries battling to be first past holes in the roads. All the workers crowding into the city were of a single mind that compelled them to rush along the pavements and bunch at crossings and flock across the roadways whenever lights summoned them. She parked as close to the glass doors of the Civic Coordination building as she could, then she buzzed to be let in.

A blank-walled lift carried her to the fifth floor. The switchboard room might as well have been windowless, since supervisor Bertha insisted on pulling down the blind as soon as the sun appeared in the window. Though the lines weren't due to open for five minutes, the girls were at their boards. "Here's Lisette," Vi said, blowing on her nails. "Bet she doesn't care if Tommo lives or dies."

"Double bet she's never seen him in her life," said Doris, appraising her face in a pocket mirror.

Bertha held up a hand as if to check it was as pale as the unsunned sky. "Hush now, ladies. She may not even know who our favourite gentleman is."

"Of course I do. He's one of your soapy people who's on every night. I wouldn't be watching him even if I had a television," Lisette said, and once

the chorus of incredulity had passed its crescendo "I've a date with a man at a bookshop."

"I thought you saw him last night," protested Doris.

"That's why I am tonight."

"Is he one of your horrors?"

"He's the best there's ever been or will be," said Lisette, switching on her computer terminal as her board winked at her.

The caller was desperate for the times of a bus that had changed its route, the sort of call she and her colleagues dealt with every day. The world was full of people trying to catch up with it, and everybody had to find their own way of coping. Perhaps her workmates managed by doing away with their imaginations, she thought, and had to pity them for their need to care about someone who didn't exist. The point was to find out all you could about yourself, to store up that secret until you were alone with it, the prize you gave yourself at the end of the day—except that tonight she meant to win herself a bonus.

She dined swiftly at a Bunny Burger opposite the car park, then she drove to the next town. She was able to park almost outside another branch of Book Yourself that appeared to have brought many of its neighbours with it from her town for company. She let herself into the shop, and Willy Bantam saw her at once.

He didn't look at her again until the dozen people ahead of her had taken turns to linger. A fat man with a stammer moved aside at last, leaving her the aroma of his armpits, and the author met her eyes. "Back again," she said.

He was producing his smile when he saw the books she'd brought. "That's right, I signed these for you."

"Are you truly not going to write any more like them?"

"Nothing's changed since yesterday."

"Then I shouldn't make you. I've thought what you can do for me instead."

"What's that?"

She opened *Ravage!* at her chapter and turned it towards him. "Put me in this one."

"Put you... How..."

"Cross Sally out and put my name instead. The way you describe her you could have been thinking of me. Here, use my pen."

When he didn't take it she planted it between his thumb and forefinger, and pressed her thighs together to contain an inadvertent stirring. "You only use her name five times. It won't take long," she said to enliven him. "She's Nell in *Writhe!* too, isn't she? Could she be your girlfriend?"

"It doesn't work like that."

"Here I am, then. Just this one," Lisette said, nudging the book towards him. "Don't worry, I won't sue."

He raised the pen, but only to level it at her. "For what?"

"Using me for the worst you could think of."

He laid the pen at the very edge of the table and pulled his hand back. "That's yours."

"Can't you use that kind of pen?"

"I can't use any for what you want."

"No, you don't understand. I said I wouldn't sue you, as if I could when it's me who asked for it. I won't be any trouble, I promise."

"Then please don't be," the author said, and looked past her.

"Are you embarrassed? Hasn't anyone ever told you why they read your books? All us girls want to be his victims," Lisette said, turning to the next in line, "don't we?"

The girl seemed in danger of blushing, even though that would upset her colour scheme—face white as bone and not much meatier, spiky hair the black of her gloves and boots and long tube of an overcoat—but managed to respond with no more than a series of alarmed blinks. "We do even if we won't say," Lisette told the author, and had to regain her voice, because he'd closed her book and was sliding it towards her with his fingertips. "Couldn't you just..."

"Your name's in it. You can't ask more than that."

"Oh, thank you." It seemed hardly possible that he could have substituted her name five times while she was busy with the other girl, but it would be worse than ungrateful of her to inspect the book in his presence. One acknowledgement of herself had to be all the magic Lisette needed. She bore her broad smile past the queue and smiled all the way home.

The garage closed itself behind her, the stairs lit the way to her bedroom. She took her time over removing her coat and unbuttoning the front of her dress, enjoying the delicious tension. She lay on the bed and took out *Ravage!*, which parted its pages at her chapter as though it was as eager to open as her body. Then her mouth widened, but no longer in a smile. Sally; Sally; Sally; Sally; Sally. Not a single use of the name had been changed to hers.

He'd lied to her, she thought shrilly as a scream, and then she saw he might only have told her he'd already signed the book. If he'd taken advantage of her willingness to trust him, that was worse than lying. Everything of importance in her room—the Willy Bantam books, the fragments of them on the walls—seemed implicated in the betrayal; the mouths were jeering at her. She flung herself off the bed and was on her way to the stairs before she realised the bookshop would be shut by the time she drove back.

She'd been made to look enough of a fool. That wasn't her kind of victim. When she felt calm enough she reopened the book and read the description of herself—long slim legs, trim waist, full breasts, blond hair halfway down her back. Only the name was false. "Not for long," she promised, and kept repeating it as she lay at the edge of sleep.

Next morning she was at the office twenty minutes ahead of Bertha and the girls. She might as well not have bothered: at that hour Bassinet Press was represented only by an answering machine. She left a message for someone who was privy to Willy Bantam's movements to call her at the inquiry office by name, then waited most of the morning while nobody did. No doubt whoever should have called would be going for an extended lunch as Lisette understood everyone in publishing did, and so she had to contact them before they turned into a machine. The moment Bertha wasn't there to see her phoning out Lisette dialled Bassinet Press and spoke low. "I left a message for Willy Bantam's person. Can I have them now?"

"I'll give you publicity," the receptionist said, which struck Lisette as a generous offer until another voice announced "Publicity."

"Are you Willy Bantam's girl?"

"Mr Bantam's publicist is on the road with him. Can she call you next week?"

"What road are they on? Where is he tonight?"

"Nowhere, I believe. May I ask who's calling?"

"I'm an old friend he used in one of his books. Where's he on next?"

"I think he's reading at a library tomorrow afternoon."

"Have you got the address? I want to surprise him."

There was a pause that might have denoted reluctance, so that Lisette was searching the depths of herself for some further persuasiveness when her informant returned with the address, followed by a question: "Can I just take your—"

"Don't spoil the surprise," Lisette said as she saw Bertha returning from her customary five-minute visit to the toilet. "Thank you for calling," she added, she hoped not too suspiciously loud.

She had apparently fooled the supervisor, but perhaps not Vi or Doris. She didn't say a word to any of her colleagues until she'd had lunch amid the tinny clattering of the basement canteen, followed by several strolls around the car park in pursuit of her clouds of breath to use up the rest of her lunch break. As soon as she was back at her desk, releasing Vi from hers, she said to Bertha "I know it's short notice, but could I have tomorrow afternoon off?"

Bertha turned from adjusting the blind, an irregularity of which had dared to admit a scrap of muffled sunlight. "Is it an emergency?"

Lisette grew aware that Doris was idle and listening. "It wouldn't seem like one to everybody, but—"

"Then we can't treat it as one, can we?" Bertha said with what might even have been a hint of genuine regret. "You know the rules as well as anyone. Forty-eight hours notice of leave except in cases of absolute emergency."

This had never made sense to Lisette—it wasn't as though a substitute worker would be brought in. "I know you wouldn't want to be made an exception of and cause bad feeling," Bertha said, at which Doris gave a nod of agreement so meaningful it might well have contained a threat of telling tales.

Lisette pressed her headphones to her ears as an inquiry summoned her. Her professional voice sounded detached from her, entering her head from outside, but that wasn't new. A worse impression was, however, a sense that instead of being the role she played in order to afford her real life, this empty unfulfilled automaton serving a faceless public would soon be the whole of

herself. It wouldn't be while she had any imagination left, she vowed, and remembered Willy Bantam's novels waiting on her bed. Her imagination wouldn't let her down so long as she refrained from wasting it on trying to concoct excuses she didn't need.

She'd hardly reached her bedroom and thrown off her coat when she opened *Ravage!* on her lap, its hard rounded spine digging into her crotch. From her bag she took the pen Willy Bantam had held. It felt cold, but grew warmer as she ran a finger up and down it while she used it to cross out the name that had supplanted hers in *Ravage!* Once she had written her own name everywhere it belonged she found the description of her in *Writhe!* and made it hers too, then she hugged the books to her and rocked back and forth on the edge of the bed.

That night her sleep was uninterrupted, even by dreams. The clock had to repeat its squeak to rouse her. She dressed at her leisure and strolled to the phone box at the end of the road, where she told Doris she was too ill to go to work. Back home she sat on her bed and stroked the Willy Bantam books until it was time to go to him.

She would have left earlier except for not wanting to be conspicuous when she arrived, but the two hours she gave herself proved not to be enough. Winds like tastes of a blizzard threw her car about the motorway and thwarted her even approaching the speed she would have risked. When at last she found the library, she was twenty minutes late.

It was one of several concrete segments surrounding a circular parking area, a plate that might have held a cake the segments had been part of. Besides the library there was a church, a police station, a fraud investigation office. Though the plate was several hundred yards around, it was almost covered with cars, so that Lisette was growing sweaty with desperation when she saw a space outside the library. It was reserved for the Disability Advisement Executive, but Lisette felt her need was greater. She parked as straight as she had time for and dashed into the library, where a notice board tried to confuse her with a list of the day's events: a sale of videocassettes, a meeting of a writers' group, a demonstration of origami, a seminar for teenage parents, a course called "The Koran Can Be Fun"... The guest of the writers' group was William Bantam. Far better, the girl at Bassinet Press had misinformed Lisette. He wasn't due to start for five minutes.

Lisette hurried to the end of a corridor papered with posters for counselling services and found herself a seat in the midst of the large loud audience. She squeezed her bag of books between her thighs as a murmur of appreciation greeted the appearance of their author. He wasn't even bothering to look for her: he must believe she was either satisfied with his autograph or overcome by his trick. Then he rounded the table at the end of the room and saw her.

His jaw didn't quite drop, but his lips parted audibly before they snapped together. He poured himself a glass of water and downed half of it, then he set about reading from *The Smallest Trace of Fear*. He read the scene in which a willowy brunette became obsessed with the idea that she was being followed by the same car with different license plates and was pitifully grateful to be picked up by her new boyfriend until she heard the rattle of several metal rectangles from behind her seat... "Dot dot dot is about the size of it," Lisette muttered, convinced he'd selected the chapter as a gibe at her. "Drip drip drip, more like." That everyone else present seemed impressed struck her as not merely a joke but a bad influence on him. She listened while people praised his subtlety and restraint and went on about his technique, all of them presumably writers so unsuccessful they had nothing better to do than sit at his new clay feet. Soon she was waving her hand, but Bantam and the librarian who was choosing questioners ignored her. As the author finished telling a woman that he didn't think publishers were biased against her or her class or her gender, Lisette sprang to her feet. "Can I speak now?"

Dozens of heads turned to find her wanting. "Are you a writer?" a long-faced shaky bald man demanded on behalf of all of them.

"Yes I am, and I wouldn't be except for Willy Bantam."

Bantam was searching for somebody else to recognise, but all the hands except hers had gone down. "What's your question?" the librarian said.

"I want to read you how it ought to be." Lisette pulled out the book: not her favourite—she was keeping that all for herself—but *Writhe!* "Lisette had been dreaming Frank was still alive," she read, raising her voice as people who could see the book began to murmur. "When she felt her calf being stroked she thought he had come back, and in a way he had. As the caress passed over her knee she parted her thighs. The long soft object squirmed between them, and that was when she knew something was wrong. But the

worm that had crawled into her bed had stiffened, and as she gasped it thrust deep into her, spattering her with graveyard earth..."

The murmur of the audience had grown louder and more defined—tuts, throat-clearings, embarrassed coughs—and at this point it produced a voice. "You should save that kind of thing for reading when you're by yourself."

A girl brandished a copy of *Writhe!* "That's Mr Bantam's story, only she's not called that in it."

"She should be," Lisette said.

The girl gaped at her. "Is she supposed to be you?"

"Do you need to ask when you've read the book?"

The girl looked away, and so did everyone else. Lisette might have borne that much disbelief, but then she heard a muffled titter. "She's me all right. She always was," Lisette declared. "Willy put me in even if he didn't know he did. You heard him say he doesn't know where some of his ideas come from. You can't deny it's me when everyone can see me, Willy Bantam."

The bald man, shaking more than ever, broke the silence. "Did you have anyone in mind as your victim, Mr Bantam?"

"I'm glad you asked me that. There's only one person an author ever really writes about, and that's himself."

"That's stupid. How can he make out any of the girls are him?" Lisette protested, attempting to provoke a laugh with hers. "He's a Willy, not a Connie. Not a Cunty. Not a Pussy," she said, louder as the librarian gestured urgently at a uniformed guard. "Don't bother, I'm going," she said, grinning at the pairs of knees that flinched out of her way as she made for the aisle. "Just you remember everybody here knows I was in your books when you were Willy Bantam. I'll always be in them now."

She'd marched only a few yards out of the room when she heard hoots of incredulous laughter. What was he saying about her? She might have gone back to find out if the guard hadn't been following her, his face a doleful warning. She strode away, hugging her bagful of books so tightly they seemed to throb in time with her heart, to be transforming themselves into her flesh.

Long before she arrived home the fog was beckoning the night. The lights in her garage and upstairs were harsher than she was expecting. The one in her bedroom spotlighted her on the bed, naked except for *Ravage!* between

her legs. "I'm there now, Willy Bantam," she murmured, and rubbed herself against the book as she crouched forward to read her scene. She didn't know how many times she read it before she had to acknowledge it was no use. He'd intervened between her and the book—his smug indifferent face and his words in public had, and the jeering of his audience.

It wasn't until the binding gave an injured creak that she observed she was about to rip the book in half. Instead she closed it slowly as though it, or some thought it was capable of prompting, would tell her how to proceed. The notion kept her company in bed, and as the night settled into the depths of itself she saw what she must do.

The alarm had to make several efforts to waken her. Since the staff at Bassinet Press started work later than she did, her tardiness hardly mattered. She reached the office at least a minute before the switchboards were due to open, but Bertha frowned hard enough to darken her sunless face. "We'd given up on you. Are you better?"

"Getting there."

"We didn't think it was like you to have to stay off with a case of the girlies."

"Maybe I'm becoming a woman," Lisette said, and closed herself in with her headphones, ignoring the looks Vi and Doris exchanged. She dealt with inquiries until Bertha waddled off to relieve herself and remake her makeup, at which point Lisette suffered the next call to carry on twitching its light on her board while she rang Bassinet Press. "Will you put me through to William Bantam's editor, please."

"May I have a name?"

"Someone they'll want to speak to."

Quite soon a deeper female voice said "Mel Daunton."

"Are you the editor Mr Bantam has to talk to?"

"I'm the one he does. Sorry, can I ask who's calling?"

"You ought to be sorry. You should know who I am. He talked to you about me."

"You'll forgive me if I don't—"

"You and his agent and him got together to talk about what I could imagine before he wrote his new book."

"I don't know where you could have got that impression, Miss, Mrs—"

"He said it in front of witnesses at the bookshop here in town, so don't bother trying to tell me it isn't true. You can't take advantage of me any more than he can. Do you know what he wanted me to believe when I saw him yesterday? That the description of me in his books isn't me."

"I did hear something about that. If I can—"

"I'll bet he didn't tell you he said he was me. Even I haven't got the imagination to believe that."

"I'm glad to hear it. Can I ask what you actually—"

"I want compensation for the way he used me and then said he never did. I'm not talking about money. As long as you and his agent tell him what to write, I want us all to agree how he can put me in his next book."

"That might take some arranging. Give me your number and I'll call you back."

"It doesn't matter when we all have to meet, I'll come," said Lisette, ignoring Vi and Doris, both of whom were staring at her. It wasn't until they turned to gaze past her that she realised what was wrong, not that she cared. A glance over her shoulder revealed Bertha in the doorway, hands on hips. "I'll call you tomorrow," Lisette said into the mouthpiece.

"I may not be here then, so if you could give me your—"

"I know what you're up to. Never mind trying to send someone to shut me up. I'll be there when you're discussing his next book," Lisette said, and cut her off.

She waited for Bertha to move into her view. The supervisor looked so unhappy and reluctant to speak that Lisette stood up at once. "You needn't say it. I'm fired," she cried, flinging the earphones at the switchboard. "Don't worry, I'm going to a better place," she said, snatching her coat off its hook, and stamped on whatever Bertha attempted to say to her back.

She was out of the only job she'd ever had, and already forgetting it. She knew who she really was, and before long everybody would. On her way home she parked in a side street she would previously have found too unpatrolled to brave and bought a tape recorder in a pawnbroker's. One of several men who were huddled under sacks in the doorway of a derelict pub erected his bottle at her for lack of anything more manageable. "I'll have worse in me than that," she told him.

It was almost noon, but it might as well have been dusk. Swollen lumps of light hovered above the pavements, thick glowing veils hung before the shops. The world had grown soft and remote from her, and the interior of her house seemed as distant: the closing of the garage, the climbing of the stairs, the crossing of the room full of redundant books. Only her bedroom was alive for her, and once she was naked she pressed herself against the wall that was papered with samples of Willy Bantam. She ran her fingertips around the screaming lips, she licked the pages of *Ravage!*. The faint taste of ink seemed more nourishing than any meal. When she felt entirely ready she switched on the tape recorder and held in her hand the pen he'd touched, and widened her legs on the bed.

"Willy? Willy Bantam? I know you're going to hear this. I'm not angry with you any more. I can't be angry when we're going to collaborate. This is how I'll die in your next book. You won't be able to resist me. Are you listening?"

When she saw the flare of red that indicated the machine was, she closed her eyes. "Lisette pulled the cap off the famous horror writer's pen. No protection for her. She traced the contours of her full breasts with the tip, she ran it over her flat trim stomach and up and down her long slim thighs, oh, and then she thrust it deep, ah..."

Before too long she was able to form words again, and meanwhile her other sounds kept the tape recorder working. "She felt it penetrate her virginity," she gasped, and steadied her voice. "She felt the ink that was his essence flow into her, tingling through her body. She felt herself starting to imagine like him, see into the depths of him, see things he would never have dared to see by himself. Now if she could just... just put them into words..."

"That's as much as she managed to say," the policeman said, and switched off the tape. "By the sound of it she passed out shortly after."

"And then..." Bantam prompted.

"And then she lay there for weeks before anyone found her. She hadn't any friends or family, just books."

"I hope nobody's going to blame me for that."

"Most of them weren't yours," said the policeman, and paused long enough for his gaze to become heavily ambiguous. "We shouldn't need to trouble you further. Nobody can say you encouraged her."

"They better hadn't try." For an instant the author saw the woman as the sound of her taped voice had conjured her up—an unwelcome presence in the midst of his audience, at least middle-aged and already grey, flat-chested, thick-limbed, less than five feet tall and almost half as broad. "I wish someone else had," he said.

The policeman pushed himself out of the only chair and held up the tape recorder. "Will you want this when we've finished with it?"

"For what? No thanks."

"You won't be doing what she wanted."

"Writing about her? Too many of the papers already have."

"I can see you wouldn't want to get yourself a worse reputation," the policeman said.

Bantam saw him out of the apartment and out of his mind. He'd survived remarks more pointed than that in the course of his career. The woman on the tape was harder to forget, but a large glass of brandy helped, and put him in a working mood. Working cured anything. He sat on the bed with his laptop word processor and reached out to turn towards him the photograph of his ex-wife, faded by years of sunlight and dust. He could almost feel her breasts filling his hands, feel her slim waist, long slim legs. "Bitch," he said almost affectionately, and began to write.

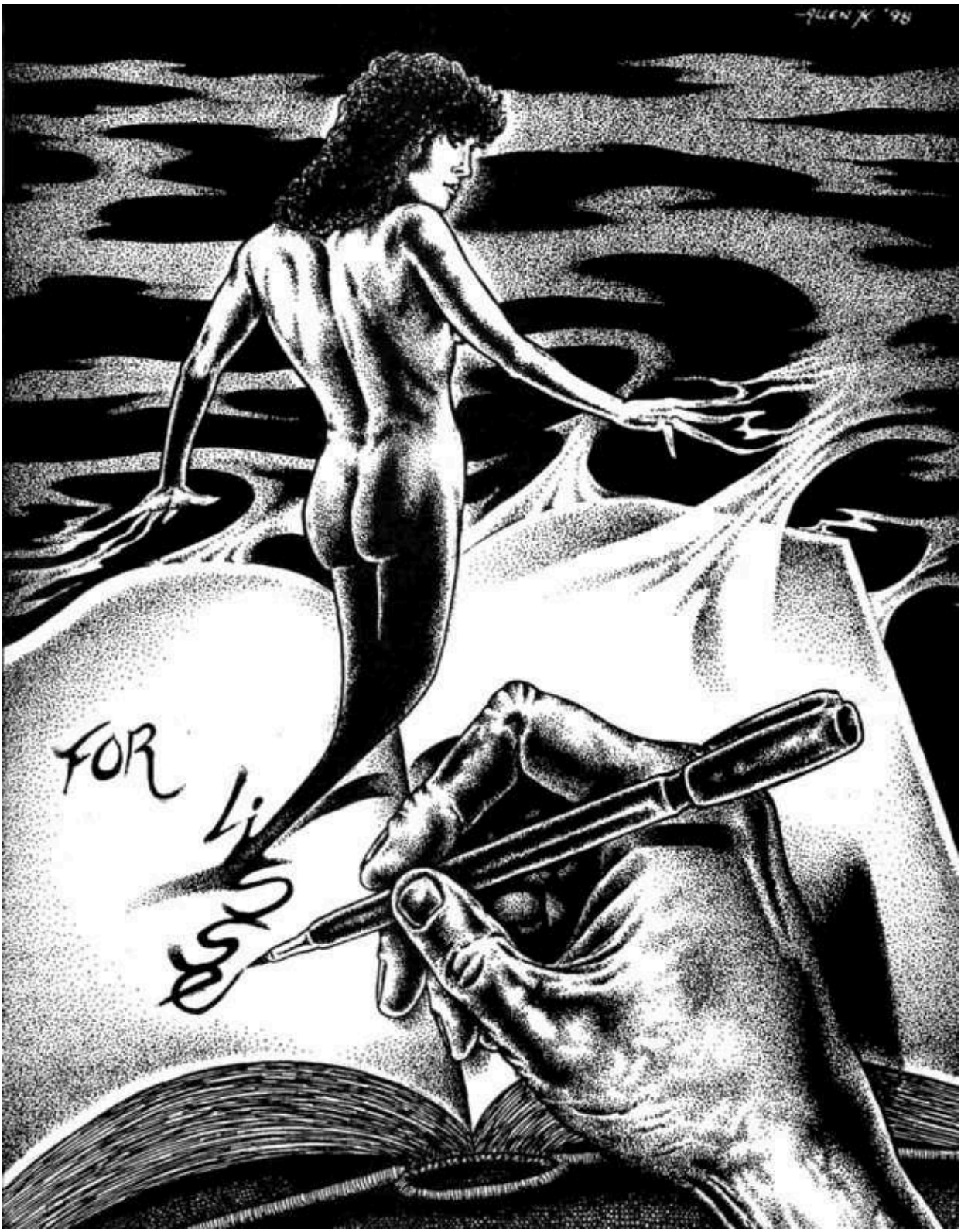

Illustration by Allen Koszowski, taken from Weird Tales, Spring 1999.

Twice By Fire

"*Twice by Fire* was commissioned for an anthology of tales about James O'Barr's creation, the Crow. I see now that it's a sufficiently universal concept that I didn't need to set it in America."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The dead*

Written in: 1997
First published in *The Crow: Shattered Lives and Broken Dreams*, 1997
Also published in: *Told By The Dead*

It's like being unable to sleep because of a fever, but it's infinitely worse. It feels as though I may never again be still. I can't tell if I'm cold as naked bones or hot as the heart of a furnace. My skin is crawling like a heap of ash on my body, which is twisted around itself as if to squeeze to death the last of my consciousness. A flickering of flames won't let my awareness take refuge in the dark. Now I'm conscious of the ache of lying on a surface as hard as my bones. The ache feels like the merest hint of worse, but it's clear I can't retreat from it. I open the charred lumps my eyes feel like and admit the light that's snatching at them.

It comes not from flames but from neon, through a gap between two black plastic bags almost as tall as a man. Several bags of garbage loll around me like a drunkard's friends, shaking their heads in a night wind. That must have been the flapping which is the first thing I remember hearing. The bags block the alley in which I'm lying and conceal me. I've hidden here once before. The idea brings me to my feet. My body is readier than I imagined it might be, and I move to the mouth of the alley in the hope of knowing where I ought to go.

The street extends almost straight for miles. Far down it I hear microscopic shouts and screams and a tinkle of glass. A long black car crosses it, so distantly I can't tell whether its lights are on, and vanishes fast as a snake. Above the street the city jabs the sky with towers, some of them clawed or tipped with giant needles, some perforated with light. Beyond the city, on a horizon bandaged with a strip of cloud, is the silhouette of a hill. Some aspect of it fills me with loneliness, so that I feel emptier than the night. I can't make for the hill yet—I have to know why I was here, I cross the street to the bar whose neon sign brought me back to myself.

The signature of a brand of beer glows in the window. The rear edge of the glow sketches booths and tables in the unlit room. Last time I was here I hid in the alley until it was time to go into the bar. The memory feels if if my consciousness is gliding ahead of me on black wings. I close a hand around the chilly doorknob, and the door swings inwards.

As I venture across the bare floorboards a silhouette jerks forward to greet me from behind the bar. It's my reflection in the long mirror against which vampire bottles rest, heads down. My face borrows light from the mirror, and gradually there I am: dark deep eyes, pale cheeks pinched hollow, thin lips weighed down at the corners. I turn away from it and see an object protruding from the shadow in the booth farthest from the door. It could be the thumb of someone lurking in the booth, except that not only the shadow has cut it off. It's a fat half-smoked cigar—one so ostentatious it ought to have a band around it. As I pick it up, its acrid stench is overwhelmed by a memory of smells so vivid that I sway as if I've just inhaled them: carbonised wood, seared brick. Some grief I shrink from confronting is shrivelling my mind into a useless lump of blackness. I stare at the cigar stub, and it tells me nothing at all. I raise my eyes and catch sight of my reflection. "What does it mean?" I hear myself pleading and see myself mouth.

Except that as I repeat the question I see my lips aren't saying it. I think they're struggling to do so until I realise they are forming other words. As they drown in the dimness under the glass they're dredging up the answer. "Look on"—I peer so hard my lips appear to blacken and wither—"the desk."

"Which desk?" Now my face mocks me by mouthing the question every time I ask it, and I'm reaching for a heavy ashtray on the bar to smash the mirror when I understand that some part of me already knows the answer. It feels like blackness and sorrow as sharp and hard as a beak, and I only have to follow where it leads. I drop the stub into a pocket of my coat, a garment so nondescript it tells me nothing about myself. I slip out of the bar and turn towards the hill.

I can't go there yet, I'm certain of that much. It sinks out of view as I leave the bar behind. Half the streetlamps as tall as the four-storey blocks are shot out, and most of the properties are boarded up. Beyond more than one nailed-over window I hear sobbing or remains of voices. Some of the

boards have been ripped away, and in a shop littered with smashed dusty television sets I make out several figures huddled under newspapers and sacks. A woman mumbles in her sleep, trying to fit her mouth around somebody's name. An empty bottle trundles across the floor, and a shape much smaller than the woman—a baby or a rat—retreats into the darkest corner. I'm not sorry when I reach the end of the prolonged abandoned block and cross an intersection where the prosperous stores begin.

A department store occupies most of the next block. Legs wearing shoes stand in a window, torsos without limbs expose their underwear beside an arrangement of half a dozen heads whose lidless eyes are turned inwards, fixed on their nightmares. Light as pale as a mortuary, and rendered meaningless by the desertion of the street, freezes all these objects as though preserving evidence. Beside them are windows that display furniture, and I've passed several when an item snags my attention. Why am I faltering? It's just a double bed with black sheets and pillows and panelled black headboard. Then a fragment of material rises from the foot of the bed and drifts towards me.

It settles on the inside of the plate glass and sticks there, trembling. It might be a black feather, but it looks more like a flake of oily ash—a flake of the substance to which the entire bed has been reduced. I stretch out my hands as if they can take me through the glass to ascertain the truth of what I'm seeing, and stub my fingers on the window. I'm unable to move for the notion that the bed may be about to collapse before my eyes when down the street a car starts out of a side road, howling and flashing its crown of lights.

Its cry fades along the cross street and is lost in the stone maze of the city. It has reminded me where I have to go. I move so fast I remember nothing of the blocks I leave behind except the glitter of used needles in the alleys. In no time that I'm aware of I arrive at the intersection where the car appeared. There's the police station to the left. It's where my desk is.

The long white building set back from the street glares under spotlights. Several police vehicles are parked outside the glass front doors, beyond which the duty sergeant is reading a self-help book and scratching his head. Preferring for some reason not to attract his attention, I make for the side entrance.

It can only be unlocked by typing the correct digits on a keypad. The combination must bypass my thoughts, because it seems I've hardly touched the first key when I hear the lock yield with a muffled click. I twist the icy handle and step into the bare white concrete corridor that leads past the cells. I recall sliding back the cover of each spyhole as I passed them. One isn't quite shut, and a glance into the cell shows me that a suspect has shed all his clothes and is urinating at the door with a penis as bald and ruddy as his head. I pass by unnoticed and merge with the shadows in the office at the end of the corridor.

The large square room contains twelve desks, most of them strewn with papers. A single fluorescent tube on the far side of the room is lit, isolating a desk next to the door. I know it isn't my desk, yet my photograph is on it, propped against an hourglass whose lower half is full of red liquid. The face in the picture isn't nearly as haggard or haunted as my face was in the mirror behind the bar. I barely glimpse the difference, because the picture isn't alone on the desk. Beside it is a photograph of a young woman and her little girl.

Lisabeth and her daughter Jodie. Lisabeth's blond hair frames the depths of her brown eyes, cups her freckled cheeks and small nose, points with the end of its fringe at her delicate pink lips. Jodie has an eight-year-old version of all these features except for her hair, which is curly and black. I want to reach out to them—them, not their images—but I can only fold myself around an ache at the centre of me. I'm crouched in the darkest corner, and might as well be hiding there, when two detectives enter the room.

The swarthy sharp-faced man is Fortuna; his graceful, deceptively slight partner is Chau. Neither of them sees me. They lift their coats from pegs on the wall and gaze at the photographs on Fortuna's desk. "You could take his apartment while I see if she's talking yet," he says to Chau.

I feel in danger of being torn apart by my inability to follow both of them. "Go together," I mouth.

Fortuna shrugs his shoulders into the heavy coat that's only just wide enough for them, then lifts his head as if he heard something. "Or maybe we should both check the apartment so nothing gets missed," he says.

Chau lingers over thumbing each of the buttons on his raincoat into the buttonhole and pulls his belt just exactly tight enough before he speaks. "We should go to the hospital first."

"Got you," says Fortuna, and for no reason except that's what he does at his desk, upturns the hourglass as Chau switches off the light, leaving the red fluid to drip in the dark.

As soon as they're out of sight I follow. By the time I reach the duty sergeant's desk he has grunted at them and returned to his book. He doesn't hear me pass. The doors are swinging together after the detectives, who are heading for a car. "Want to drive?" Fortuna says.

"Walk," I mouth, slipping through the gap between the doors.

"Not this time of night," says Chau to his partner. "Only time the streets are clean."

"Don't get any cleaner," Fortuna agrees, if he's agreeing, and paces Chau out of the car park.

I don't move until they're around the corner and I judge they've walked half a block. They don't seem to feel any need to look back. I trail them alongside a mile of mud-coloured tenements pierced by thousands of windows not much larger than the portholes of a battleship. One street-level window hisses with bright static from a dead television channel, and in another apartment I hear a raw voice ranting at an all-night phone-in show —a voice whose owner may be talking to the presenter or only imagining he is—but otherwise there's nothing to observe except entrance after entrance repeating a view of the foot of a bare stone staircase. I'd rather let that occupy my mind than try to define my grief before I'm confronted with its source. Then an ambulance screeches out of a side road and races into the city, and the detectives turn along the road it came from.

The hospital is close to the main street that leads to the hill I can no longer see. Beyond two parked ambulances a pair of automatic doors are deferring to Fortuna and Chau. I dodge between the ambulances in time for the doors not to need to reopen themselves on my behalf. The detectives are at the reception counter across the lobby, and the receptionist doesn't have to be told what they want. "Jodie Nelson" she says. "Better hustle."

It isn't encouragement I hear in her voice. As the detectives head for the corridor leading to Intensive Care I'm close behind them. They shove each pair of fire doors wide enough to let me pass through a few paces after them. They still haven't noticed me when they veer into a short side corridor that leads to a ward. The ward sister behind her desk raises her eyes to

them, and I will her not to say what her eyes are already saying—but though I may be able to make people speak, I can't silence them. "She's gone," the sister says.

"Shit," says Fortuna, and lifts an apologetic hand to his mouth.

Chau curves his little finger to wipe his left eye. "Did she ever come round?"

"No." After a pause the sister adds "Thank God."

"Never said anything either?"

"Hardly breathed."

Fortuna breaks the silence. "Poor little bitch."

None of them is looking into the ward, but I am. Beyond a gap in the screen around the bed nearest the doors a male nurse is loading a small figure onto a trolley. His body almost blocks my view as he covers the contents of the trolley from head to foot with a sheet, but I glimpse the girl's hand. Only it isn't much of a hand any more—it looks as though somebody has tried to make the fingers out of melted wax.

The nurse eases the screen open and uses the trolley to nudge the doors gently aside. He ignores me, and I feel as if he's expressing a contempt I deserve. When he wheels the trolley towards a lift I ant to follow, but I need to stay with the detectives. I wait until they return to the main corridor, their backs to me. They're silent as far as the hospital entrance, outside which Fortuna says "They must have known Lee was on to them."

"Maybe they meant to scare him off."

"Do we give a shit if that's all they meant?"

"We do not."

"Maybe we'll find something at his place to show he was investigating them."

"That wouldn't surprise me at all."

I'm Lee. They're going to lead me home. I stay well behind them as they tramp deeper into the tenement district—I feel as if the weight of my grief is slowing me down. Their footsteps are the only sounds in this part of the city, so that I wonder if the way their advance rings through the streets has driven into hiding anyone who prefers not to be observed. When they come

in sight of my tenement I know it at once, though I can't see how anyone except a detective would be able to distinguish it. Fortuna is first through the doorless entrance. When I hear his and Chau's footsteps leave the stairs I follow.

The graffiti in the lobby, initials and words of one syllable, crowd halfway up the stairs, where someone has smashed the light at the corner. Concrete dust sifts down where the handrail has been wrenched almost out of the wall. Fortuna is at the top of the flight of stairs, unlocking my door. He uses another of my keys to turn off the alarm just inside, then Chau shuts the door behind himself and his partner.

I don't need a key to open it. No sooner has it admitted me than it's shut as though it hasn't moved. Bedroom, toilet, kitchen. My old colleagues have already opened those doors, exposing how little is beyond them, and are in the main room, where the television is hardly big enough for a solitary person to watch. Some chairs that don't look as if they have ever been introduced squat in front of it. Next to the chair that's sagging from use, charred cork filters without a gap between them ring a glass ashtray. Not many yards away across the threadbare carpet, three straight chairs press against a bare dining table, the only company they have apart from the photographs on a brick mantelpiece with an electric fire in its hearth.

One is a close-up of Jodie's grinning face that makes me have to struggle not to imagine how her face must look now. In the other Lisabeth is showing the camera the diamond on her ring finger. I was behind the camera, and I'm close to remembering too much too soon, more than I can bear all at once. It's a relief when the detectives start talking about me. "So this is how he ended up," Chau says.

"All he thought he could afford, maybe."

"More likely all he thought he was going to be able to."

Are they blaming Lisabeth for that? It would be so unjust that I'm about to declare myself when Fortuna says "He was still a better cop than most."

"Too good not to leave us something if he thought he wasn't going to be able to follow it through."

"Just in case he wasn't, even," says Fortuna, staring around the room.

There's nowhere much for them to search. Chau pulls out kitchen drawers while Fortuna tries the bedroom. I watch him from the darkness of the

bathroom, and as he opens the wardrobe I know what he'll find. He has only to reach in the breast pocket of the first of my very few suits to produce a photograph he bares his teeth at before calling his partner. "Like we figured," he says, and holds up the photograph as Chau joins him. "Price and Bilder."

"The old firm."

Though they sound like a partnership of architects, that's far from their trade. The photograph shows them about to dodge into the bar next to the alley where I came back to myself. The more than well-fed man in an expensive Italian suit with a cigar making his small fat mouth round is Price, and his thin swift companion thrusting his narrow-eyed face forward like a fist as if to scare off any watchers is Bilder. I see their faces for barely a moment before Fortuna stows them in his coat pocket, but now I can't stop seeing them. "Enough for a warrant, would you say?" Chau muses.

"No point, the way they cover themselves. Maybe enough for a tap."

"Are you thinking there's a judge who might figure he owes us a favour?"

"When the whole department and some people higher up would appreciate it."

"Let's talk to the chief and then we can buy our judge the kind of breakfast he drinks."

That's too slow for me. As the detectives head back along the corridor to switch off the lights I slip out of the door. I don't need to wait for them to lead me. I never had to: I simply followed them to prevent myself from learning too much too unbearably quickly. Now I want to finish.

I leave the street at the first intersection. Behind the tenements the buildings shrink away from one another and crouch low, dreaming of violence. In front of the lawns, which are a mass of weeds and litter, the streetlamps have lowered themselves so as to be easier to smash. Empty cartridge cases glint on a lawn, and in the darkness on the next there's a sprawled body—an animal's, I hope. Once I hear a clash of machetes, but by the time I reach the place the sound came from there is only a trickle of blood leading into a house. All the doors will be reinforced, because the windows are—more than one is cobwebbed with the impact of a missile, and two sides of a corner house have been decorated with the spray of a machine gun. A girl too young and undernourished and scantily clad to be

waiting alone in the night shivers under an intermittently lit streetlamp. A limousine with windows as black as its body and hers glides alongside her, and she stoops towards it as though she's flinching away from a whip. Seconds after its back door creeps open, she's inside.

As the car turns uphill I follow. The houses grow larger and farther apart, fending off the road with spiked railings and brick walls crested with barbed wire. I round a wide curve in time to see a pair of electrified gates meeting behind the limousine as it vanishes along a tree-lined drive. I can't pursue it, I'm not here for it. My destination is too close to ignore—the night has gathered itself overhead to point to it, spreading black wings over me. The road curves back on itself, and at the top of the curve is Price's house.

It's a turreted two-storey Mediterranean castle that gleams white as a false smile. A notice on the railings that are more than twice my height says they're lethal, another warns there are dogs in the grounds. One window on the top floor is lit as if somebody has put a light in it for me. The night above me seems to shrink, to fly over the railings and perch above the window, folding its wings. Its black eyes gleam as I press the button on the left-hand granite column of the filigreed wrought-iron gates.

The camera squatting on top of the opposite column lowers in lens to peer at me as the grille above the button spits out static "Who is it?"

Despite its metallic croaking, I recognise Bilder's voice; I turn to the camera and stretch my arms wide, and in case that isn't enough, I jam the stub of Price's abandoned cigar between my teeth. "Who does it look like?" I say through the taste of stale smoke.

The camera surveys the road before Bilder speaks again, not to me. "It's Lee. Seems like he's by himself."

"How surprising," says Price across the room. "So why the hesitation, Mr Bilder? Let him in."

Bilder starts to utter what sounds like a protest before the intercom cuts him off. A few seconds later the gates swing open with a whisper of oiled hinges. The camera keeps me in view as I move forward, and I've hardly set foot on the drive, which is so wide and devious it is clearly meant only for cars, when the gates shut again with a clang. It's answered at once by a chorus of snarling, and a Doberman runs out from behind an elaborate shrubbery on either side of the drive.

There's nowhere I can flee, nor any need. As the dogs race to the gates I poise a hand above each glossy slavering head. The animals hesitate, their eyes clouding, their wet lips closing over their teeth, and then they move beneath my hands towards the house. Their claws click on the white gravel, their pelt blackens with shadows of orchids and shines like oil as they trot past lights half buried in the borders of the drive. When I reach the marble steps leading up to the front door I fling the cigar butt across the lawn as green and moist as a swamp. The dogs bolt after their prize, and I go to the door.

In less time than a breath would take I'm past it and it's shut. I'm in an extravagantly wide lobby from which a staircase of the kind a movie star would use for her grand entrance curves upwards. At the foot of the banister, doing duty as a post, is a model of the Statue of Liberty, and I'm tempted to wrench off the torch-bearing arm for a weapon. I've no time, and apparently no need. My rage sends me up the stairs to find my quarry, and I haven't reached the top when I see them.

Price is reclining naked on almost half of a king-sized mahogany bed. The enormous hairy balloon of his stomach has his tiny penis for a mouthpiece. He's gazing out of the window, from which Bilder, dressed in boxer shorts twice as wide as his scrawny thighs, is watching the city. Price's penis inches out of its nest of grey hair at the sight of me—it tries to point at me as the small neat automatic in his pudgy fist is doing. "We've company, Mr Bilder," he says in his high soft voice. "He can be thoughtless sometimes, Mr Lee. He can get a little too full of himself."

Bilder turns only his head and touches his temple with a finger, which he then aims at me. "He's not arguing."

"Forgive our not having come down to admit you, Mr Lee, but our door doesn't seem to have taxed your professional skills. Perhaps you'll tell us how you dealt with it after you've indulged me for a few moments. Do make yourself comfortable," Price says, and waves his free hand above the expanse of empty bed. "You're just in time to watch a spectacle arranged by Mr Bilder."

I don't know if he's mocking me or convinced he has some power over me that is capable of persuading me to join him on the bed. I take hold of a cushioned antique stool in front of the dressing-table laden with cosmetics facing the army of them in the extravagantly framed mirror. The stool is

heavy enough to knock the gun out of Price's hand and smash his head and Bilder's, but I need to see what's about to happen so that I'll know everything. I plant the stool at the end of the bed and sit on it with my back to Price.

I can see his reflection in the window against which Bilder is pressing himself, sweat flaring on the glass around his hands. The pane shuts out the sounds of the city, and I realise how it lets Price and Bilder observe the poverty and despair and crime down there as though it's a movie being projected for their benefit, however much of it they're responsible for. Just now it seems there's nothing to watch, until Bilder closes his fingers and thumbs one by one, their sweat fading from the window as he counts off the seconds. At the moment when he makes another fist, a flame blooms in the shadow of the tenements. "Ah," says Price.

Another flame appears, and another. The windows of a house are blowing out. The blaze spreads around each of them and streams towards the roof, which starts to expose its blackened skeleton before it collapses into the box of fire the house now is. Fire engines as small and ineffectual as toys race across the city to add the blinking of their lights to the glow of the fire. "Exquisite as always, Mr Bilder," Price says, his hand straying towards his swollen penis. As that dwindles he levels the gun almost casually at me, laying the barrel along his thigh. "Mr Lee, we've neglected you long enough. We never expected you to honour our little shack."

The fire flickers next to the reflection of his penis, from which a molten jet of liquid appears to be arcing. "Whose house did you burn down?" I say through my teeth.

"Nobody but someone who owed us more than they were worth. I don't need to tell you what thieves are like. Are you still looking out for the underdog?" Price enquires, and gives me back a grin that squeezes out a fat tongue. "I find concern so fascinating."

"Maybe he's here because he's concerned," says Bilder.

"Is that the case, Mr Lee? Is that your tale?"

Rage twists me as though I'm at the heart of a fire. I step back from the stool and face both men. "I've come from the hospital."

"You had the measure of him, Mr Bilder. Concerned till the last."

"No stopping him."

"What tidings of the injured, Mr Lee? What are you here to report?"

"She's dead," I say, so viciously that Bilder swings around from watching the engines struggle to control his fire. "Eight years old and you killed her."

"A regrettable oversight, would you accept, or shall we say a surplus of enthusiasm? Mr Bilder has been known to express the view that a property with nobody in it is only half a fire." Price folds three fingers around his renewed erection as if to determine its length. "A craftsman ought to love his work, don't you agree?"

"Not just do a job because your father did," says Bilder.

He's talking about me. They're both gazing at me with a mixture of contempt and, even worse, of something not too far from sympathy.

"Did you think that meant I'd give up?" I demand. "Did you think you'd scared me off?"

"At least that, didn't we surmise, Mr Bilder?"

"I don't scare," I tell them, taking hold of a leg of the stool. "Let's see if you do."

"Crude, Mr Lee. An abuse of hospitality." Price looks regretful, perhaps because his penis is drooping again, as he trains the gun on my chest. "If there's to be unpleasantness, you might have the grace to tell me first how you managed to penetrate this house."

"Nothing could have kept me out when I'm here for Jodie," I say, raising the stool with both hands. "I don't think you want to use that. You like to keep your killing away from your home."

"I believe we can rely on Mr Bilder's talent for disposing of the unwanted."

"Good job one of us knows how to hide stuff," says Bilder.

Is he comparing himself with Price or with me? I've no time to wonder. I'm poised to throw the stool at the gun. Even if Price fires, the upholstery will either absorb the shot or reduce its impact before it reaches me. I can take that and more: my fury that cares only for revenge has made me feel invulnerable, and so I fling.

The stool hasn't left my hands when the first bullet rips through upholstery and wood. My arms begin to shudder as the bullet thuds into my chest. The piece of furniture sags in my weakening grasp and then, somewhere far away, falls on the floor with its helpless legs in the air. It seems

considerably less present than the plaintive caw of a bird that greeted the shot. How could I have heard that through the soundproofed window? Price looks as if he's considering that question, but he must be contemplating how much he has injured me, since with hardly a pause he fires twice.

A punch that thrusts deep into my body slams me against the wall. The third bullet pins me there like a dead insect. Still pointing the gun at me, Price reaches across himself to an ornate bedside table and plants a cigar between his lips. Instead of a band the cigar is wearing the diamond ring I last saw on Lisabeth's finger.

My rage is a physical force that jerks me away from the wall. I hear another caw outside, but now it's a cry of triumph. The power that has entered me focuses on the lumps of metal lodged in my body. I feel them soften and begin to trickle out of the holes they made. The pain feels like the start of purification. "Take your best shot," I say, framing my chest with my spread hands as I advance on Price.

He fires again, and again. I scarcely feel the bullets as they pass through me, melting as they go, and spatter the wall. I move slowly only because I want him to see his death approaching. At last he shies the empty gun at me, and I bat it aside with a forearm. "Bilder," he screams.

Bilder is dashing for the stairs, and I ignore him. I'm at the service of the power within me. I stoop like a blaze in a gale and take hold of Price's feet. He shrieks, much louder as they catch fire. There's so much fuel in him that his legs and two wide swathes of the bed are ablaze in seconds. A stain spreads to meet the flames, but they acknowledge it only with a terse hiss as they merge at his crotch. As his torso squirms wildly back and forth, flailing its arms as if to beckon the eager fire, I leave him. I hear his cries give way to a bubbling as I race downstairs after Bilder.

Though the front door is open, he hasn't got far. He's trying to talk his way past the dogs—his running must have made them think he's an intruder. He doesn't hear me behind him; he's unaware of my presence when I lay a hand on his head. His scalp goes up at once, but I don't withdraw my blessing until more than his hair is on fire. His brain must be for him to perform such a grotesque dance, dodging from side to side of the drive and kicking up the gravel as he clutches at his head while it and then his arms drip flames. Well after there seems to be too little of him to stand up he prances about, and

then what's left of him sprawls in the middle of the drive, still kicking. As his heels exert a last convulsive shove I make for the gates.

Bilder must have opened them from the house. Once I'm through them I look back. The dogs stand over Bilder's smouldering remains, guarding them or about to tear at them. Flames pour from the bedroom window, and smoke in a shape that appears to be pecking at the window and spreading its wings over the roof. Its outline flutters, and the sight loses its hold on me. I have to find Lisabeth and tell her I've done everything I can.

Shouldn't I be heading down towards the hospital? Instead my instincts are leading me uphill, where trees close around houses that gleam like tombs. The foliage cuts off the leaping glow of Price's house and later a howling of fire engines. A willow by a dormant fountain imitates the shape the water will take; a mournful statue averts her face from me and draws her marble robe about herself. The slope of the hill flattens towards the summit, the houses grow smaller. I remember thinking they're like servants' quarters for the mansions below them, except Lisabeth was never anybody's servant.

I can't see the city when I reach the house I recognise. Like its neighbours, it's a wooden bungalow. A child has painted big bright flowers on the fence —Jodie painted them, and that's her swing with a toy rabbit slumped on it in the concrete front yard, though her favourite place was a little clearing in the bushes behind the house, where she used to lie at night and watch the stars. The memories sharpen my grief, so that I know I haven't begun to deal with it, but how? I unlatch the waist-high gate and cross the yard to the lit porch.

Lisabeth is sitting in the middle of the bulky leather sofa in the front room. She's gazing at a painting propped against the wall, the only painting she ever kept for herself—the portrait of her with five-year-old Jodie hovering above her hands. I never knew if that meant she'd just thrown Jodie into the air or if she was suggesting that the child was coming down to her from somewhere else. I'm afraid to move, because there's a stillness about everything—the quiet room, Lisabeth's steady gaze and her fingertips touching her lips as if to hold in a thought or a sound, the house itself—that feels intensely vulnerable, protected only by the black wings of the night overhead. Then Lisabeth turns her head and looks at me.

The sorrow in her eyes is beyond words. I'm hopelessly unequal to it, but where can I go except to her? The door swings inwards, though I'm

unaware of having touched it. I move towards her and stretch out my hands, but her expression and the utter stillness halt me well short of her. "I'm sorry," I say, and my hands sag.

Precisely because her face doesn't alter I understand at least part of its message for me: my words and my grief aren't enough. I'm opening my mouth to ask what more I can do, though the words seem too stupid to utter, when I see movement in a bedroom off the main room—Jodie s bedroom. In a moment Jodie comes out and sits beside her mother and takes her hand.

There isn't a mark on her, nor on the T-shirt and jeans and sneakers she loved to wear. She gazes at me with the same wordless sorrow as her mother. They're waiting for me to understand. If she looks uninjured when I saw how she was at the hospital—if she can hold Lisabeth's hand like that, it means not just Jodie but also her mother must be—

Only there's worse than that to grasp, and in a moment I see what I've misunderstood. Their sorrow isn't for each other. It's for me.

At last I remember why I had to come back. The knowledge wrenches my mouth as wide as it will go, but crying and grimacing won't help. I have to speak—I have to confess everything, to Lisabeth and Jodie and myself. "I hired Price and Bilder," I say in a voice that tries not to be heard. "I told them I'd leave them alone if they did this job. It was me."

Their faces don't change, though the faintest hint of red like a reminiscence of a fire glimmers in their eyes. The approach of dawn is beginning to tint the sky above the city, and some instinct tells me I've very little time. "I thought I'd made sure nobody was here. I called you, Lis. You said you were on your way out with Jodie to meet me. I shouldn't have waited so long at the restaurant. I did come to find you, but I got here too late."

The memory blinds me with itself: my fists punching through the block of fire the front door had become, my glimpse of two bodies on the sofa in the midst of the house, the entire roof collapsing as I ran to them... "Bilder came when you were leaving, didn't he? What did he do, tie you both up?"

I'm hardly entitled to rage at the thought of him. In the glow before dawn the bushes behind the house are starting to be visible through the wall, and through Lisabeth and Jodie. Is my slowness in owning up causing them to fade, to withdraw from me? "The insurance would have been for us," I plead. "We'd have gone across the border. I couldn't touch the money I

stole. A crack dealer's money we found on a raid, and me and my partner took half. More than one dealer. It got easier after the first time, and I got careless. The department was waiting for me to go for it and they'd have had me. I must have been insane. I just wanted us to be together. I wanted you to have to come with me."

They're grieving for everything I destroyed. I've told them nothing they didn't know, but I had to recognise it. I can see the leaves of the bushes through them now, leaves red as flames. "I finished Price and Bilder," I say, "but I realise that isn't enough. What has to happen to me?"

My voice falters, because Jodie huddles closer to her mother at the thought. Lisabeth strokes her hair with a hand no more substantial than smoke and gazes at me. Her eyes brighten, perhaps only with the dawn, and her lips part "We still—" she says, and then the dawn streams through the house, which vanishes instantly like mist, taking her and Jodie back where they came from. I'm left standing in the midst of the sketch of a charred foundation on burned earth.

What was Lisabeth about to say? They came back, they waited for me, and mustn't that mean they still care for me, however undeserving I am? The dawn focuses itself on me, and I prepare to vanish—and then I understand what I must go through if I'm ever to have a chance of finding Lisabeth and Jodie again. Their sorrow wasn't only for my past, it was for now. I can feel the fire of which I was the vessel beginning to consume me from within.

I know what it felt like to be buried under the roof, but that was over in seconds. This fire will take all day to spread through the whole of me, as long as there's sunlight to stoke it. I crouch over the blaze at the centre of myself and stumble through the scorched bushes, and fall down in Jodie's clearing. It won't protect me from the fire that's being raised within me, but perhaps it will help me think of her and Lisabeth. I draw my legs up and wrap my arms around myself and close my eyes. I taste dust and ash, singed earth, parched grass. I would try to breathe deeply for calm, but of course I have no breath. I can only wait until at last the day is over and the crow of night bears me away to rest.

Never To Be Heard

"*Never to be Heard* was another commission, based on a painting by Alan M. Clark. His image helped focus my ambition to write a decent story about music. I was indeed in the choir at grammar school and had to mouth rather than sing when we performed Borodin."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The dead*

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As the coach swung into the drive that led to the Church of the Blessed Trinity, Fergal jumped up. He would have reached Brother Cox before the coach gasped to a halt except for tripping over lanky Kilfoyle's ankles in the aisle. Boys of all sizes crowded to the doors ahead of him, waving their hands in exaggerated disgust and denying they'd farted and blaming red-faced O'Hagan as usual, so that by the time Fergal struggled down onto the gravel Brother Cox was playing doorman outside the arched stone porch, ushering in each of his favourite choirboys with a pat in the small of the back. "Sir?' Fergal said.

The choirmaster gave him a dignified frown, rather spoiled by an April wind that, having ruffled the trees around the church, disordered the wreath of red hair that encircled his bald freckled scalp. "Shea, is it, now? O'Shea?"

"Shaw, sir. Sir, is it true Harry's mum and dad won't let him sing at the concert?"

"I believe that may turn out to be the truth of it, Shaw, yes."

Fergal found his eyes wanting to roll up, away from the choirmaster's inability to talk to him straight that was bad even by the standards of most adults, even of most teachers. If he looked above him he would see the pointed arch that reminded him uncomfortably of the naked women in the magazines making the rounds of the dormitory. "Sir, so if they're stopping him—"

"I'm not about to discuss the rights or otherwise of their decision with a choirboy, Shaw."

Fergal didn't care about their decision, let alone their objections to the music. "No, sir, what I meant was we'll be a tenor short, won't we? Sir, can I be him? My voice keeps—"

"Don't be so eager to lose your purity." Brother Cox was no longer speaking just to Fergal, who felt as though he'd been made to stand up in front of the whole of the choir. "You'll grow up soon enough," said the choirmaster with a blink of disapproval at the single hair Fergal's chin was boasting. "Sing high and sweet while you can."

"But sir, I keep not being—"

"March yourself along now. You're holding up half my flock."

Fergal bent sideways in case the choirmaster found his back worth patting, and dodged into the church. More than one window was a picture of Christ in his nightie, a notion Fergal wouldn't have dared admit to his mind until recently for fear of dying on the spot. Not only was the building full of pointed arches to inflame Fergal's thoughts, the broad stone aisle was an avenue of fat cylindrical pillars altogether too reminiscent of the part of himself that seemed determined to play tricks on him whenever and wherever it felt inclined. Choirboys were streaming down the aisle as their echoes searched for a way out through the roof. In front of the choir stalls on either side of the altar, a conductor was pointing his wand at members of an orchestra to conjure a note from them. Between him and the orchestra a woman was typing on a computer keyboard, and Fergal's interest nearly roused itself until he remembered why she was there—the stupidest aspect of the entire boring exercise. The computer was going to produce sounds nobody could hear.

When the Reverend Simon Clay had written the music there had been no computers: no way of creating the basser than bass line he wanted for the final movement. The score had been lost for almost a century and rediscovered just over a year ago, not by any means to Fergal's delight. Even its title—*The Balance of the Spheres: A Symphony for Chorus and Large Orchestra*—was, like the music, too long to endure. Last year, when the choir had won a choral competition, some of the boys had sneaked away afterwards for a night in Soho, but now that Fergal felt old enough to join them, everyone was confined to quarters overnight and too far out of London to risk disobeying. He'd given up on that—he only wished he were anywhere else, listening to Unlikely Orifices or some other favourite band

—but all he could do was take his place among the choirboys with hairless baby chins and wait for the orchestra to be ready. At last, though not to his relief, it was time to rehearse.

Brother Cox insisted on announcing the title of each movement, no matter how high the conductor raised his eyebrows. "The Voice of the Face That Speaks," said the choirmaster, all but miming the capital letters, as the stout radiators along the walls hissed and gurgled to themselves, and the choir had to sing a whole page of the Bible while the orchestra did its best to sound like chaos and very gradually decided that it knew some music after all. "The Voice of the Face That Dreams," Brother Cox declared at last, after he and the conductor had made the choir and orchestra repeat various bits that had only sounded worse to Fergal. Now the choir was required to compete with the orchestra by yelling about seals—not the sort that ate fish, but some kind only an angel was supposed to be able to open. The row calmed down as the number of seals increased, and once the seventh had been sung about the brass section had the music to itself. The trumpeting faded away into a silence that didn't feel quite like silence, and Fergal realised the computer had been switched on. "We shall carry on," the conductor said in an Eastern European accent almost as hard to grasp as his name.

"Best take it in stages, Mr..." said Brother Cox, and left addressing him at that. "This is the hardest movement for my boys. Quite a challenge, singing in tongues."

Fergal had already had enough. Even if he'd wanted to sing, his voice kept letting him down an octave, and singing in the language the Revolting Clay had apparently made up struck him as yet another of the stupid unjustifiable things adults expected him to do. Brother Cox had acknowledged how unreasonable it was by giving each choirboy a page with the words of *The Voice of the Face That Will Awaken* to use at the rehearsal. Whenever Fergal's voice had threatened to subside during the first two movements he'd resorted to mouthing, and he was tempted to treat all of the Reverend's babble that way rather than feel even stupider.

It looked as though that was how he was going to feel whatever he did. Keeping a straight face at the sight of Brother Cox as he opened and closed his mouth like a fish gobbling the gibberish was hard enough. The choir commenced singing what appeared to have been every kind of church

music the Reverend could think of, the orchestra performed a search of its own, and Fergal was unable to concentrate for straining to hear a sound he couldn't quite hear.

He felt as though it was trying to invade everything around him. Whenever the choir and orchestra commenced another round, more than their echoes seemed to gather above them—perhaps the wind that flapped around the church and fumbled at the trees. Shadows of branches laden with foliage trailed across the windows, dragging at the stained-glass outlines, blurring them with gloom. Once Fergal thought the figure of Christ above the choir stalls opposite had turned its head to gaze at him, but of course it was already facing him. His momentary inattention earned him a scowl from Brother Cox. Then the choir climbed a series of notes so tiny it felt like forever before they arrived at the highest they could reach, while the orchestra contented itself with a single sustained chord and the computer carried on with whatever it was doing. Well before the top note Fergal did nothing but keep his mouth open. The conductor trembled his stick and his free hand at them all, and when at last there came a silence that appeared to quell the trees outside, he let the baton sink and wiped his eyes. "I believe we have done it, Brother," he murmured.

"If you say so."

Either the choirmaster objected to being addressed like a comrade or resented not having had his well-nigh incomparably straightforward name pronounced. His dissatisfaction was plain as he gestured boys out of the stalls row by row. Fergal was among the last to be marched past the amused orchestra, who were within earshot when Brother Cox caught up with him. "O'Shea," the choirmaster demanded, and even louder 'Shea."

"It's Shaw, sir."

"Never mind that now. You've little enough reason to want anyone knowing who you are when you can't keep your eyes where you're told. Maybe you were dreaming you'll be singing low tomorrow, so let me tell you a boy from this very church will be taking Harty's place. A prize soloist, so don't you go thinking you're the equal of him."

On the coach he renewed his disapproval. "I want every boy's eye on me tomorrow from the instant he opens his mouth. There'll be no sheets for you to be consulting. After your dinners we'll spend all the time that's needed till every single one of you is letter perfect."

The choir groaned as much as they dared, and some of the boys who'd heard Fergal being told off glared at him as if he'd brought this further burden on them. The coach wound its way through the narrow Surrey lanes to the school where the choir was suffering a second night. The boys who ordinarily put up with it had gone home for Easter, but the monks they'd got away from had remained, prowling the stony corridors with their hands muffled in their black sleeves while they spied out sinful boys or boys about to sin or capable of thinking of it. The choir had hardly taken refuge in the dormitories when they were summoned to dinner, a plateful each of lumps of stringy mutton that several mounds of almost indistinguishable vegetables applied themselves to hiding. The lucky vegetarians were served the same without the lumps but with the gravy. Some of the resident monks waved loaded forks to encourage their guests to eat, and the oldest monk emitted sounds of what must have passed in his case for pleasure. After the meal, even the prospect of rehearsal came as almost a relief.

Brother Cox made the choir sit on benches in the draughty bare school hall and repeat the stream of nonsense Simon Clay deserved to be cursed for, and then he collected the pages with the words on and mimed trying to lift an invisible object with the palms of his hands to urge the choir to chant the whole thing again, and yet again. He mustn't have believed they could have learned it so perfectly, because he tried requiring each boy to speak it by himself. When it came to Fergal's turn the boy felt as though all the echoes of the repetitions were swooping about inside his head, describing the patterns of the absent music, and he only had to let them become audible through his mouth. "Nac rofup taif gnicam tuss snid..." He didn't even realise he'd finished until Brother Cox gave him a curt nod.

By the time Brother Cox dismissed the choir they were so exhausted that hardly anyone could be bothered with horseplay in the communal bathroom. As Fergal crawled under the blankets of the hard narrow bed halfway down the dormitory, a long room with dark green glossy walls as naked as its light bulbs, he wondered if anyone else was continuing to hear the echoes of the last rehearsal.

There was only one kind of dream he wanted to have in the intimate warmth of the blankets, but the echoes wouldn't let it begin to take shape. They seemed to gather themselves as he sank into sleep—seemed to focus into just three voices, one to either side of him and one ahead. That in front

of him began to lead him forwards while the others were left behind. Soon he was outside time and deep in a dream.

He was trudging towards a mountain range across a white desert that felt more like salt than sand. He'd been in the wilderness, his instincts told him, for three times thirteen days. He was bound for the highest mountain, a peak so lofty that the river which rushed down its glittering sheer slopes appeared to be streaming out of the bright clouds that crowned it. He thought he might never reach the water that would quench his thirst and lead him to the mystery veiled by the shining clouds, but in a breath the dream brought him to the river. It darkened as he drank from it and bathed in it, because he was following it downwards through a cavern he knew was the mountain turned inside out and upside down. Surely it was only in a dream that a river could run to the centre of the world, which would show him the centre of the universe, the revelation he'd journeyed so far and fasted so long to reach. Now, at the end of a descent too prolonged and frightful to remember, he was there, and the blackness was glowing with an illumination only his eyes could see. Around him the walls of the cavern were fretted like jaws piled on jaws, ridged as if the rock might be the skeleton of the world. Ahead was a pool so deep and dark he knew it was no longer water—knew the river was feeding a hole so black it could swallow the universe. A figure was rising from it, robed in rock that flowed like water. Was the universe creating it just as it had created the universe? Its eyes glinted at him, more than twice too many of them, and he struggled to awaken, to avoid seeing more. But he could hear its voices too, and didn't know whether his mind was translating them or trying to fend them off. In its image, he found himself repeating, in its image—

Brother Cox wakened him. "Get up now. Sluggards, every one of you. Rising bright and early is a praise to God."

He sounded so enraged that at first, bewildered by apparently having dreamed all night, Fergal thought the choirmaster was berating him for the dream. At breakfast, chunks of porridge drowning in salt water, it became clearer why he was infuriated, as the head monk flourished a newspaper at him while trying to placate him. "I just wanted to be certain you're aware what you and your charges will be involved with, Brother Cox."

"I'm aware right enough, aware as God can make me. Aware of how the godless media love to stain the reputations of the saints and anybody with a

bit of holiness about them." Brother Cox said no more until he'd gulped every chunk of his porridge, and then he sprang off the bench. "If you'll excuse me now, I've a coach driver needs phoning to be sure he presents himself on time."

After a few moments of staring at the abandoned newspaper Kilfoyle ventured to say "Sir, can I read it?"

The head monk pursed his thin pale lips. "Perhaps you should."

Since Kilfoyle was by no means a speedy reader, when he didn't take long over it Fergal knew he'd given up. The newspaper was passed along the table, making increasingly brief stops, until it arrived in front of Fergal. Of course the article was about Simon Clay—all the stuff Harty's parents had objected to. Fergal was making to pass the paper to O'Hagan when the headline stopped him. *Clay's First Symphony: What Kind of Pilgrimage?* The question reminded him of his dream, and he read on.

It was mostly information he couldn't have cared less about. Simon Clay had revived the classical church symphony, starting with his Second... He'd composed nothing but religious music... During his lifetime he'd maintained that his first symphony was lost... Before he was ordained a priest he'd been a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, and the original score had recently been discovered among the papers of a fellow occultist, Peter Grace... It hadn't previously been identified as Clay's work because he had signed it with his occult name, Indigator Fontis, Seeker of the Source... Grace had scrawled a comment on the first page: 'fruit of the secret pilgrimage'... One wonders (wrote the critic) whether Clay's subsequent output was a prolonged attempt to repudiate this score and its implications. Yet the issues are less simple than has been stridently suggested by some members of the press. Underlying Clay's determination to outdo his contemporary Scriabin in terms of passion and ecstasy writ large and loud (Fergal no longer knew why he was bothering to read) is a radical attempt, so harmonically daring as almost to engage with atonality, to create a musical structure expressive of the cosmic balance to which the title alludes, a structure to which the sub-audible line of the third movement is crucial. Given that Clay wrote above this line the comment 'Never to be heard'—

The newspaper was snatched away from Fergal. "Heavy reading, is it?" roared Brother Cox. "Let's try the weight of it." When he eventually

finished slapping Fergal about the head with the paper truncheon he turned on the rest of the choir. "Eat up your breakfasts, all of you, that our hosts were so kind they provided us. And just you keep your minds on what you have to sing today instead of filling them with nonsense."

Fergal might have retorted, if only to himself, that nonsense was the word for what they'd learned, except that he was no longer sure it was. The ache Brother Cox had beaten into his head prevented him from thinking as he trudged away from breakfast and eventually to the coach, which threw his head about as it rewound yesterday's journey. Amid the chatter of his schoolmates he kept thinking somebody was practising the words of the last movement on either side of him. His mind was trying to retrieve the sentences he'd glimpsed as Brother Cox had snatched the newspaper. Had Simon Clay meant that the symphony never would be heard, or that it never should be? A more insistent question was why Fergal should care, especially when attempting to think sharpened his headache.

Cars were parked along the quarter-mile of lane nearest the church. Members of the audience for the world premiere that would be broadcast live at noon that Saturday were strolling up the drive while a small group of protesters flourished placards at them over the heads of several policemen who would clearly have preferred to be elsewhere. GIVE EASTER BACK TO GOD... KEEP THE DEVIL'S MUSIC OUT OF GOD'S HOUSE... RAISE YOUR VOICE TO GOD, DON'T LOWER IT TO SATAN... As the coach drew up beside the porch a man stalked out, pulling at his hair to show that he worked for the BBC. He wasn't happy with the cawing of rooks in the trees, nor the noises the doves made that put Fergal in mind of old women around a pram. He was especially distressed by the chorus of 'Onward Christian Soldiers' outside the gates, and flounced off to speak to the police.

Fergal was trapped in the choir stalls when he heard the protesters being moved on. As a verse of 'Nearer My God to Thee' trailed into the distance, his urge to giggle faltered, and he realised he'd been assuming the protesters would ensure that the premiere didn't take place. There was plenty to be nervous of: the audience and the conductor and Brother Cox, all of whom were expecting too much of him; the BBC producer darting about in search of dissatisfaction; the microphones standing guard in front of the performers; his sense that the church and himself were liable to change,

perhaps not in ways to which he'd begun to grow used; the imminence of an occasion he was being made to feel the world was waiting for? As the conductor and Brother Cox took up their positions, Fergal gave the stained-glass window opposite him a look not far short of pleading. What might his old beliefs have been protecting him from? "It doesn't look like a nightie really," he almost mouthed, and then he heard a bell start to toll.

It was noon, even if the sky beyond the stained glass appeared to be getting ready for the night. The twelfth peal dwindled into silence not even broken by the hissing of the radiators, which had been turned off, and then the echoes of the footsteps of an announcer dressed like a waiter in an old film accompanied him to a microphone. "We are proud to present the world premiere of Simon Clay's *The Balance of the Spheres*. Despite the controversy it has engendered, we believe it is a profoundly religious and ultimately optimistic work." All too soon the conductor raised his baton and Brother Cox, as though gesturing in prayer or outrage, his hands, to let the music loose.

Fergal managed to sing about the creation without dropping any notes, and could hear Harty's replacement was equal to the task. If Fergal started to be less than that he could always mouth—except the notion of leaving the choir short of a voice made him unexpectedly nervous, and he sang with such enthusiasm that Brother Cox didn't glare at him once during the first movement. He felt pleased with himself until he wondered if he was using up too much of his voice too soon.

Why should it be crucial to preserve it for the final movement—above all, for the last and highest note? He set about appearing to sing with all his vigour while employing only half. The display seemed to fool Brother Cox, but was it the choirmaster he had to deceive, and if not, wasn't his attempt to play a trick worse than ill-advised? As the last seal was opened he sang as hard as he could, and was able to rest his voice while the trumpets blared. They fell silent one by one, and as the seventh prolonged its top note he saw the woman at the computer reach for the keyboard. The incongruity made him want to giggle: how could they broadcast a sound nobody could hear? Then the fragile brass note gave way to that sound, which crept beneath him.

He might have thought he was imagining the sensation—it made him feel he was standing on a thin surface over a void—if all the birds hadn't flown

out of the trees with a clatter that was audible throughout the church. The conductor held his baton high and stared hard at the windows as the computer sustained its note. Was he waiting for the branches to stop toying with the stained-glass outlines? Freeing himself from a paralysis that suggested the sound under everything had caught him like quicksand, he waved his wand at the forces he controlled.

The words of the last movement filled Fergal's head and started to burst from his mouth. Even if he didn't understand them, they were part of him, and he felt close to comprehending them or at least to dreaming what they meant. He had to sing them all or he might never be free of them. He had to reach the highest note, and then everything would be over.

He had to sing to overcome the sound that was never to be heard.

Or could the choir be singing in some obscure harmony with it? He was beginning to feel as if each note he uttered drew the secret sound a little further into him. He tried not even to blink as he watched Brother Cox, whose scowl of concentration or of less than total contentment was in its predictability the nearest to a reassurance he could see. His breaths kept appearing before him like the unknown words attempting to take shape, and he told himself the church was growing colder only because the heating was off. He tried to ignore the windows, at which the darkening foliage had still not ceased groping minutes after the birds had flown, unless the trees had stilled themselves and the glass was on the move. The thought made the robed figure at the edge of his vision seem to turn a second face to him, and then another. He almost sang too loud in case that could blot out the impression, and felt his voice tremble on the edge of giving way, dropping towards the cold dark hollow sound that underlay everything, that was perhaps not being performed so much as revealed at last, giving voice to a revelation Simon Clay had spent his life trying to deny he'd ever glimpsed. Fergal didn't know where these thoughts were coming from unless they were somehow in the music. The choir and the orchestra had begun to converge, but they had minutes to go before they reached the final note that was surely meant to overcome the other sound. If he was failing to understand, he didn't want to—didn't want to see the stealthy movements in the window opposite. The choir had arrived at the foot of the ladder of microscopic notes, and he had only to sing and watch Brother Cox for encouragement—not even encouragement, just somewhere to look while he

sang and drew breaths that felt as if he was sucking them out of a deep stony place, precisely enough breath each time not to interrupt his voice, which wasn't going to falter, wasn't going to let him down, wasn't going to join the sound that was invading every inch of him—

When Brother Cox's face twisted with rage and disbelief Fergal thought the problem was some fault of his until he saw movement beyond the choirmaster. A man had darted out of the audience. With a shout of "Grant us peace" he seized two power cables that lay near the broadcasting console and heaved at them. The next moment he tried to fling them away while, it seemed to Fergal, he set about executing a grotesque ritual dance. Then the computer toppled over and smashed on the stone floor, and every light in the church was extinguished.

The orchestra trailed into silence before the choir did. Fergal was continuing to sing, desperate to gain the final note, when a cello or a double bass fell over with a resonant thud. He was singing not to fend off the darkness that filled the church but the sight it had isolated opposite him. That was no longer an image in stained glass. The window had become a lens exhibiting the figure that was approaching while yet staying utterly still, its three faces grim as the infinity it had lived and had yet to live, its eyes indifferent as outer space, the locks of its multiple scalp twisted like black ice on the brink of a lake so deep no light could touch it. The figure hadn't moved in any sense he could grasp when it entered the church.

In the instant before the last glimmer of light through the windows went out, Fergal saw the three faces turn to one another, sharing an expression he almost understood. It was more than triumph. Then he was alone in the blind dark with the presence, and he struggled to hold every inch of himself immobile so as not to be noticed. But the presence was already far more than aware of him. For a moment that was like dying and being reborn he experienced how he was composed of the stuff of stars and the void that had produced them, and of something else that was the opposite of both—experienced how he might be capable of partaking of their vastness. He hadn't begun to comprehend that when his mind shrank and renewed its attempt to hide, because the presence had unfinished business in the church. Even if it had taken the man's dance of death as a tribute, that wasn't enough. Fergal felt it draw a breath much larger than the building so as to use every mouth within the walls to give itself a voice.

"I want to praise the choir for their self-control and their presence of mind at the concert on Easter Saturday. As the rest of you boys may be aware, a gentleman under the mistaken impression that the music was sacrilegious interrupted the performance but was unfortunately electrocuted. Some of the orchestra and some members of the public were injured in the panic, but our school can be proud that its choir kept their seats and their heads. It is regrettable that the building was apparently damaged by the effects of the technology used at the concert. I believe that is all that requires to be said on the matter, and I shall deal harshly with anyone who is caught circulating the superstitious rumours that have been invented by some of the gutter press. Let your minds remain unpolluted by such rubbish as we start the summer term."

As the headmaster's complexion began to fade from purple to its customary red, Fergal glanced at the choirboys seated near him. None of them seemed inclined to disagree with the headmaster's pronouncements. Perhaps they were cowed, or perhaps they preferred to forget the events at the church; perhaps, like all the members of the audience Fergal had seen interviewed on television, they actually believed that nothing more had taken place than the headmaster had said. For the moment Fergal was content to pretend he agreed. As the row of boys including him filed out of the school hall under the frowns of the staff, his fingertips traced like a secret sign the outline of the folded page hidden in the pocket against his heart.

It was from the newspaper the headmaster had condemned. Fergal didn't care what it said, only what it showed: the lopsided church in the process of twisting itself into a shape that seemed designed to squirm into the earth; the distorted stained-glass figure of Christ, an expression hiding in its eyes, a broken oval gaping above each shoulder. Fergal shuffled after the rest of the procession into the classroom and cramped himself onto the seat behind his desk, and put on his face that looked eager to learn. Of course he was, but not at school. The weeks to the next holiday seemed less than a breath he'd already expelled, because then he would return to the church to discover what was waiting, not just there but within himself. If Simon Clay had been unable to cope with it, he must have been too old—but Fergal had been through the fear, and he vowed to devote the rest of his life to finding out what lay beyond it. As the first teacher of the day stalked into the room,

Fergal was on his feet a moment before the rest of the class. Pretending only promised a future reward. "Good morning, sir," he said, and sensed his other voices holding their tongues until he was alone with them in the dark.

Agatha's Ghost

"I'm dismayed to have to report that I didn't invent the advice Agatha is offered on the air; I heard a lady much like her being told on a Radio Merseyside phone-in to try those solutions—hence the tale."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The dead*

"Was she merely haunted by her own mind?"—Teaser line from *Weird Tales*, Winter 1999

Written in: 1997
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Also published in: *Told By The Dead*

He'd done his best to hide her radio, but he'd forgotten to switch it off. That was the voice like someone speaking with a hand over their mouth she heard as she awoke. She was seated at the dining table, on which he'd turned all four plates over and crossed the knives and forks on top of them to show that crosses were no use against him. She didn't know if it was daytime or the middle of the night, what with the glare of the overhead bulb and the grime on the windows, until she recognised the voice somewhere upstairs. It was Barbara Day, presenter of the lunchtime phone-in show.

Agatha eased her aching joints off the chair and lifted her handbag from between her ankles so that she could stalk into the hall. Was he lurking under the stairs? That had been his favourite hiding place when he was little, and now, with most of the doors shut, it was darker than ever. She stamped hard on every tread as she made her slow way up to find the radio.

It was in the bathroom, next to a bath full almost to the brim. When she poked the water, a chill cramped her arm. Now she remembered: she'd been about to have her bath when the phone had rung, and she'd laboured downstairs just in time to miss the call, after which she'd had to sit down for a rest and dozed off. He'd got her into that state with his pranks—what might he try next? Then she heard Barbara Day repeat the phone number, and at once Agatha knew why he was so anxious to distract her. He was trying not to let her realise where she could find help.

She clutched her bag and the radio to her with both hands all the way downstairs. She sat on the next to bottom stair and trapped the bag between her thighs and the radio between her ankles before she leaned forward, dragging agony up her spine, to topple the phone off its rickety bow-legged

table onto her lap. She pronounced each digit as she lugged the holes around the dial, but she was beginning to wonder if he'd distracted her so much she had dialled the wrong number when the bell in her ear became a woman's voice. "Daytime with Day," it announced.

"Barbara Day?"

"No, madam—just her researcher. Barbara is—"

"I'm quite aware you aren't she. I can hear her at this moment on the radio. May I speak to her, please?"

"Have you a story for us?"

"Not a story, no. The truth."

"I get you, and it's about..."

"I prefer to explain that to Miss Day herself."

"It's Ms, or you can call her Barbara if you like, but I need to have an idea what you want to talk about so I know if I can put you through."

Agatha had dealt with many secretaries when she was selling advertising for the newspaper, but never one like this. "I'm being haunted. Haunted by a wicked spirit. Is that sufficient? Is that worthy of your superior's time?"

"We'll always go for the unusual. Anything that makes people special. Can I take your name and number?"

"Agatha Derwent," Agatha began, then shook her fist. The paper disc had been removed from the centre of the dial. "My number," she cried, not having given it to anyone since she could remember, "my number," and grinned so violently the teeth almost came loose from her gums. "It's may I please go to the party."

"I'm sorry, I'm lost. Did you just say—"

"My number is may I please—" Since even talking at half speed seemed unlikely to communicate the message, Agatha made the effort to translate it. "It's three one six—"

"Double two three five. Got you. If you put your phone down now, Agatha, and switch your radio off we'll call you back."

Agatha planted the receiver on its stand and held them together. She wasn't about to switch off the radio when it might refer to her. She was listening to Barbara Day's conversation with a retired policeman who built dinosaur

skeletons out of used toothbrushes, and staring at the darkest corner of the hall in case the twitch of spindly legs she'd glimpsed there meant that her persecutor was about to show himself, when the phone rang, almost flinging itself out of her startled grasp. "Agatha Derwent," she called at the top of her voice as she grappled with the receiver and found her cheek with it. "Agatha—"

"Agatha. We're putting you on air now, so can you switch us off and not say anything till Barbara speaks to you."

The minion's voice gave way to the policeman's, requesting listeners to send him all their old toothbrushes, and Agatha's sense of his being in two places simultaneously was so disconcerting that she nearly kicked the radio over in her haste to toe its switch. Then Barbara Day said in her ear "Next we have Agatha, and I believe you want to tell us about a ghost, don't you, Agatha?"

"I want everyone who's listening to know about him."

"I'm holding my breath. I'm sure we all are. Where did you have this experience, Agatha?"

"Here in my house. He's always here. I'm sure he'll be somewhere close to me at this very moment," Agatha said, raising her voice and watching the corner next to the hinges of the front door grow secretively darker, "to make certain he hears everything I say about him."

"You sound a brave lady, Agatha. You aren't afraid of him, are you? Can you tell us what he looks like?"

"I could, but there'd be no point. He never lets me see him."

"He doesn't. Then excuse me for asking, only I know the listeners would expect me to, but how do you know it's a he?"

"Because I know who it is. It's my nephew Kenneth that died last year."

"Did you see a lot of him? That's to say, were you fond of each other?"

"I'd have liked him a great deal more if he'd acted even half his age."

"Will he now, do you think? I've often thought if there's life after death it ought to be our last stage of growing up."

"There's life after death all right, don't you wonder about that, but it's done him no good. It's more like a second childhood. He always liked to joke and

play the fool with me, but then he started stealing from me, and now I can't see him he does it all the time."

"That must be awful for you. What sort of—"

"Clothes and jewellery and photographs and old letters that wouldn't mean a sausage to anyone but me. He had my keys more than once till I made certain my bag never left me, and now he's started putting things in it that aren't mine to show me it isn't safe."

"How old is he, Agatha? I mean, how old was—"

"Far too old to behave as he's behaving," Agatha said loud enough to be heard throughout the house. "Forty-seven next month."

"And forgive me for asking, but as one lady to another, how old would that make—"

"I'm retired from a very responsible job, maybe even more responsible than yours if you'll forgive my saying so. What are you trying to imply, that I'm growing forgetful? I'd know if I owned a brass candlestick, wouldn't I? Do you think anybody would be in the habit of keeping one of those in their bag? Or a mousetrap, or a tin of dog food when I've never owned an animal in my life because my father told me how you caught diseases from them, or a plastic harmonica, or a tin of lighter fuel when all I ever use are matches?"

"I was only wondering if you might have picked up any of these items somewhere and—"

"That would be a clever trick for me to play, cleverer than any of his, since I haven't stirred out of this house for weeks. I bought enough tins to last me the rest of the year, and I've been waiting to catch him at his wickedness, but he thinks it's a fine game keeping me on edge every moment of the day and night. Do you know he whispers in my ear when I'm trying to get to sleep? I thought I could deal with him all by myself, but I won't have him wearing me down. One thing I'll tell you he's wishing I wouldn't: he doesn't want me to get help. He hid the phone directory, and he even tried to take away my radio so I wouldn't have your number. He doesn't want anyone to know about him."

"Well, all of us certainly do now, so I hope you feel less alone, Agatha. What kind of help—"

"Whatever has to be done to send him away."

"Do you think you ought to have a priest in?"

"I went to the one up the road, and shall I tell you what he said?"

"Do share it with us, please."

"He told me they don't—" Agatha made her voice high-pitched and supercilious. "—believe in such things as ghosts any more."

"Good heavens, Agatha, I'd have thought that was what they were supposed to be all about, wouldn't you? I'm sure some of our listeners must believe, and I hope they'll phone in with ideas. That was Agatha from the city centre, and let me just remind you if you need reminding of our number..."

At the start of this sentence Barbara Day's voice had recoiled from Agatha, who felt abandoned until the researcher came between them. "Thanks for calling. You can turn your radio on now," she said.

Agatha found the switch on the radio with one of the toes poking out of her winter tights before she fumbled the receiver into place. She returned the phone to its table as she levered herself to her feet with the arm that wasn't hugging her bag, in which she rummaged for her keys to unlock the front room. None of them fitted the lock, he'd stolen her keys and substituted someone else's—and then she saw that she was trying to use them upside down. He'd nearly succeeded in confusing her, but she threw the door triumphantly wide and grabbed the radio to carry it to her armchair.

When she lowered herself into the depression shaped like herself the chair emitted a piteous creak. It was the only one he hadn't damaged so that her friends would have nowhere to sit. He'd made the television cease to work, and she suspected he'd rendered the windows the same colour as the dead screen, to put into her head the notion that the world outside had been switched off. She knew that wasn't the case, because people who were on her side had started talking about her on the radio, Ben, who sounded like a black man, wanted Agatha to keep stirring a tablespoonful of salt in a glass of water while she walked through the entire house—that ought to get rid of any ghosts, he said. Then there was a lady of about her age who sounded the type she would have liked to have had for a friend and who advised her to keep candles burning for a night and a day in every room and corridor. That sounded just the ticket to Agatha, not least because she'd bought

dozens of candles the last time she'd felt safe to leave the house. She'd stored them in—She'd bought them in case he started making lights go out again and pulling at the kitchen chair she had to stand on to replace the bulbs. She'd put them—The candlestick he'd planted in her bag would come in useful after all. The candles, they were in, they were in the kitchen cupboard where she'd hidden them, unless he'd moved them, unless he'd heard the lady tell her how to use them and was moving them at that very moment. Agatha grasped the arm of her chair, avoiding holes her nails had gouged in the upholstery, and was about to heave herself to her feet when Barbara Day said in a tone she hadn't previously employed "I hope Agatha is still listening. Go ahead. You're—"

"Kenneth Derwent. The nephew of Agatha Derwent who you had on."

The kick Agatha gave the radio sent it sprawling on its back as she did in the chair. Was there nowhere he couldn't go, no trick he was incapable of playing? He'd clearly fooled Barbara Day, who responded "We can take it you aren't dead."

"Not according to my wife. Just my aunt, and that's the kind of thing she's been making out lately. I must say I think—"

"Just to interrupt for a moment, does that mean everything your aunt said was happening to her—"

"She's doing it to herself."

Only Agatha's determination to be aware of whatever lies he told kept her from stamping on the radio. "I did wonder," Barbara Day said, "only she seemed so clear about it, so sure of herself."

"She always has been. That's part of her problem, that she can't bear not to be. And I'm sorry, but you didn't help by talking to her as though it was all real, never mind letting your callers encourage her."

"We don't censor people unless they say something that's against the law. I expect you'll be going to see your aunt, will you, to try and put things right?"

"She hasn't let me in since she started accusing me of stealing all the stuff she hides herself. She won't let anybody in, and now you've had someone telling her to put lighted candles all round the place, for God's sake."

"I can see that mightn't be such a good idea, so Agatha, if you're listening —"

Agatha wasn't about to, not for another second. She threw herself out of the chair, kicking the radio across the room. It smashed against the wall, under the mirror he'd draped at some point with an antimacassar, and fell silent. She stalked at it and trampled on the fragments before snatching the cloth off the mirror in case he was spying on her from beneath it. She was glaring at the wild spectacle he'd driven her to make of herself when the phone rang.

She marched into the hall and seized the receiver, not letting go of her bag. "Who is it now? What do you want?"

"Agatha Derwent? This is the producer of Daytime with Day. I don't know if you heard some of our listeners who phoned in with suggestions for you."

"I heard them all right, and they aren't all I heard."

"Yes, well, I just wanted to say we don't think it would be such a good idea to put candles in your house. It could be very dangerous, and I'd hate to think we were in any way responsible, so if I could ask you—"

"I'm perfectly responsible for myself, thank you, whatever impression somebody has been trying to give. I hope you'll agree as one professional lady to another that's how I sound," Agatha said in a voice that tasted like syrup thick with sugar, and cut her off. She pinched the receiver between finger and thumb and replaced it delicately as a way of controlling her rage at the way she'd been made to appear. No sooner had she let go of it than the phone rang again.

She knew before she lifted the receiver who it had to be. The only trick he hadn't played so far was this. She ground the receiver against her cheekbone and held her breath to discover how long he could stand to pretend not to be there. In almost no time he said, "Aunt Agatha?"

"Are you afraid it mightn't be? Afraid I might have got someone in to listen to you?"

"I wish you would have people in. I wish you wouldn't stay all by yourself. Look, I'm going to come round as soon as the bank shuts, so will you let me in?"

"There's nobody but me to hear your lies now, so stop pretending. Haven't you done enough for one day, making everybody think—" Suddenly, as if she had already lit the candles, the house seemed to brighten with the realisation she'd had. "You are clever, aren't you. You've excelled yourself. All the things you've been doing are meant to make me look mad if I tell anyone about them."

"Listen to what you've just said, Aunt Agatha. Can't you see—"

"Don't waste your energy. You've confused me for the last time, Kenneth," she said, and immediately knew what he was attempting to distract her from. "You got out by going on the radio, and now you can't come back in unless I let you, is that it? You won't get in through my phone, I promise you," she cried, pounding the receiver against the wall. She heard him start to panic, and then his voice was in black fragments that she pulverised under her heel.

She knew he hadn't finished trying to return. She drew all the downstairs curtains in case he might peer in, she hauled herself upstairs along the banister to fetch a blanket that she managed to stuff into the tops of the sashes of the kitchen windows. Once the glass was covered she crouched to the cupboard under the sink.

He hadn't got back in yet—the candles were still there. She had to put her bag down and grip it between her wobbly legs each time she lit a candle with a match from the box that wasn't going to rattle her no matter how much it did so to itself. She stuck a candle on a saucer on the kitchen table, and found another saucer on which to bear a lit candle into the dining-room. The candle for the front room had to make do with a cup, because he'd hidden the rest of her dozens of saucers. Her resourcefulness must be angering him, she thought, for as she carried another cup with a flickering candle in it along the hall he began to ring the bell and pound the front door with the rusty knocker.

"Aunt Agatha," he called, "Aunt Agatha," in a voice that didn't stay coaxing for long. He tried sounding apologetic, plaintive, commanding, worse of all concerned, but she gritted her teeth until he started prowling around the outside of the house and thumping on the windows. "Go away," she cried at the blotch that dragged itself over the curtains, searching for a crack between them. "You won't get in."

He did his best to distress her by shaking the handle of the back door while he made his knuckles sound so hard against the wood that she was afraid he might punch his way through. The illusion must have been his latest trick, because all at once she heard his footsteps growing childishly small on the front path, and the clang of the garden gate.

She held onto the banisters for a few moments, enjoying the peace, though not once she became aware of his having made her smash the phone. If she hadn't, might he have been trapped in it for ever? Suppose he'd angered her so as to trick her into releasing him? She hugged the bag while she stooped painfully to retrieve the cup with the candle in it from the floor.

She was less than halfway up the stairs when the flame began to flutter. She took another laborious step and knew he was in the house. All his play-acting outside had been nothing but an attempt to befuddle her. "Stop your puffing," she cried as the flame dipped and jittered, "don't you puff me." It shook, it bent double and set the wax flaring, and now she was in no doubt that he wasn't just in the house; he'd crept up behind her—he was waiting for her to be unable to bear not to look. She swung around without warning and thrust the candle into his face. "See how you like—"

But he'd snatched his face away as though it had never been there. Nothing was in front of her except the air into which the cup and its candle thrust, too far. The shock loosened her grip on her bag. She tried to catch it and keep hold of the cup as the latter pulled her off her feet. The bag fell, then the candle, and she could only follow them.

She didn't know if the candle went out as she did. She didn't know anything for she didn't know how long. When she grew aware of darkness, she found she was afraid to discover how much pain she might be in. Then she understood that she was fully conscious, and there was no pain, nor anything to feel it. He'd got the best of her in every way he could. He'd stolen her bag, and her house, and her body as well.

She was in the midst of the remains of the house, a few charred fragments of wall protruding from the sodden earth. All around her were houses, but she couldn't go to her neighbours; she wouldn't have them see her like this, if they could see her at all. None of them had believed her when she'd tried to tell them about Kenneth. For a moment she thought he'd left her with nowhere to go, and then she realised who would believe in her: those who already had.

She heard their voices as they'd sounded on the radio. They weren't just memories, they were more like beacons of sound, and her sense of them reached across the night, urging her to venture out and find them. She felt as she had when she was very young and on the edge of sleep—that she could go anywhere and do anything. She was free of Kenneth at last, that was why; and yet now that he was gone she was tempted to play a few of his tricks, in memory of him and to prove she still existed. Maybe this was her second childhood, she thought as she scurried like the shadow of a spider across the city to seek out her new friends.

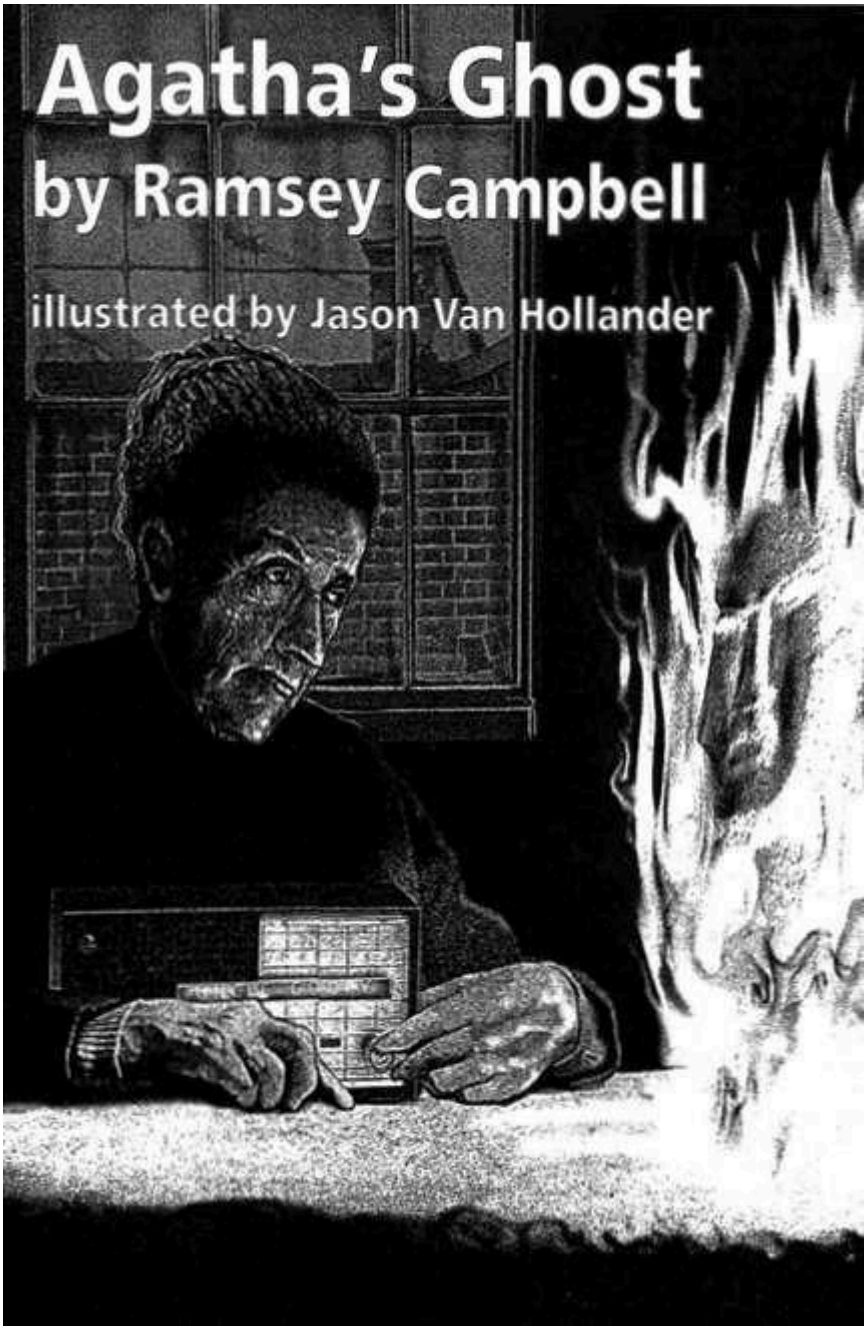

Illustration by Jason Van Hollander, taken from Weird Tales, Winter 1999.

1998

Return Journey

"*Return Journey* was suggested by a trip to Llangollen, North Wales, where the vintage railway had been dressed up to recall World War II, sandbags and all. My imagination didn't need much prompting after that, especially once the train went slowly into a tunnel..."—Ramsey Campbell, Foreword to the story in *Haunts: Reliquaries Of The Dead*

Written in: 1998
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Also published in: *Told By The Dead*

As the old train puffed out of the station, past the sandbags on the platform and the men dressed up as soldiers and a wartime poster with its finger to its lips, the three children who were managing to occupy the whole compartment apart from Hilda's seat began to demonstrate their knowledge of history. "I'm Hitteler," announced the girl with orange turf for hair, and shot up an arm.

"I'm Gobble," said the girl whose bright pink lipstick didn't quite fit her mouth.

Hilda didn't know if she was meant to be offended. When Hitler and Goebbels were alive they'd been just a couple of the many things her parents never discussed in front of her. It was left to the third girl to react, clicking all her ringed fingers at her friends and declaring "You'd get shot for that if we was in the war."

"We're not."

"They don't have wars any more."

"You'd get shot or you'd get hung," the ringed girl insisted. "Hung by your neck till you was dead."

They must have learned some history to use phrases such as that. Perhaps they remembered only the unpleasant parts, the opposite of Hilda. She was turning to the window in search of nostalgia when the ringed girl appealed to her. "They would, wouldn't they?"

"Did you know anyone that was?"

"Did you ever see any spies being hung?"

"I don't look that old, do I? I wasn't in the war, just in the wars."

They regarded her as though she'd started speaking in a dead language, and then they crowned themselves with headphones and switched on the black boxes attached to them. If they intended to shut up so much of their awareness, Hilda wondered why they were on the train at all—but she wasn't far from wondering that about herself.

She'd seen the poster on the outside wall of the car park of the telephone exchange where she worked. Since none of her colleagues had seen it, she'd felt it was aimed just at her. OLD TIME LINE, it had said, with a train timetable and the name of a town pretty well as distant as her hot and bothered Mini could reach for one of her Sunday jaunts. If she hadn't been aware of having settled into never driving anywhere that wasn't already part of her past, she mightn't have taken the chance.

The town had proved to be even more Lancashire than hers: steep hills climbed by red concertina terraces, factories flourishing pennants of grey smoke, streets so narrow and entangled they might have been designed to exclude any relative of the shopping mall that had taken over the view from her floor of the small house she shared with two pensioners whose rooms always smelled of strong tea. She would have liked to explore, but by the time she'd found a car park where the Mini could recover from its labours she'd thought it best to head for the next train. When she'd stumbled panting into the two-platformed station she'd had to sprint for the train the moment she'd bought her ticket, scarcely noticing until she'd boarded that the railway preservation company had gone wartime for the weekend, and at a loss to understand why that should make her wish she'd been less eager to catch the train.

She rather hoped she wouldn't need to understand while she was on it. The station and whatever it contained that she hadn't quite liked were gone now, and trees were accompanying the train, first strolling backwards and then trotting as a preamble to breaking into a run as the last houses stayed in town. The land sank beside the track, and a river streamed beneath to the horizon, where a glittering curve of water hooked the sun from behind frowning clouds to rediscover the colours of the grassy slopes. This was more like the journey she'd wanted: it even smelled of the past—sunlight on old upholstery, wafts of smoke that reminded her of her very first sight of a train, bursting out like a travelling bonfire from under a bridge. The tinny rhythmic whispers of the headphones were subsumed into the busy clicking

of the wheels, and she was close to losing herself in reminiscences as large and gentle as the landscape when a guard in a peaked cap slid open the door to the corridor. "All tickets, please."

He frowned the children's feet off the seats and scrutinised their tickets thoroughly before warning "Just behave yourselves in the tunnel."

That took Hilda off guard, as did her unexpectedly high voice. "When is there a tunnel?"

"There has been ever since the line was built, madam."

"No, I mean when do we come to it? How long is it?"

"Just under a mile, madam. We'll be through it in less than a minute, and not much more than that when we come back uphill. We'll be there in a few puffs."

As he withdrew along the corridor the girls dropped their headphones round their necks so as to murmur together, and Hilda urged herself not to be nervous. She'd never been frightened of tunnels, and if the children misbehaved, she could deal with them. She heard the guard slide back a door at the far end of the carriage, and then darkness closed around the windows with a roar.

Not only the noise made her flinch. The girls had jumped up as though the darkness had released them. She was about to remonstrate with them when they dodged into the next compartment, presumably in order to get up to mischief unobserved. Excerpts of their voices strayed from their window into hers, making her feel more alone than she found she wanted to be. The tunnel itself wasn't the problem: the glow that spread itself dimmer than candlelight was, and the sense of going downwards into a place that threatened to grow darker, and something else—something possibly related to the shadow that loomed in the corridor as the girls fell abruptly silent. When the guard followed his shadow to Hilda's door she gasped, mostly for breath. "Nearly out," he said.

As he spoke they were. Black clouds had sagged over the sun, and the hills were steeped in gloom. In the fields cows had sunk beneath its weight, and sheep that should be white were lumps of dust. It wouldn't be night for hours yet; nobody was going to be able to stage a blackout, and so she was able to wonder if that was the root of her fear. "Thank you," she called, but the guard had gone.

She remembered little of the blackout. The war had been over before she started school. The few memories she could recall just now seemed close to flickering out—her parents leading her past the extinguished houses and deadened lamps of streets that had no longer been at all familiar, the bones of her father's fingers silhouetted by the flashlight he was muffling, the insect humming of a distant swarm of bombers, the steps leading down to the bomb shelter, to the neighbours' voices as muted as their lights. She'd been safe there—she had always been safe with her parents—so why did the idea of seeking refuge make her yearn to be in the open? It was no excuse for her to pull the communication cord, and so she did her best to sit still for ten minutes, only to be brought back to the war.

The temporarily nameless station was even smaller than the one she'd started from. The closer of the pair of platforms was crowded with people in army uniform smoking cigarettes as though to celebrate an era when nobody had minded. The three girls were beating the few other passengers to a refreshment room that had labelled itself a NAAFI for the weekend, and Hilda might have considered staying on the train if the guard hadn't reappeared, shouting "End of the line. All change for nowhere. Next train back in half an hour."

The carriage shook as the engine was uncoupled, and Hilda grabbed the doorway as she stepped down onto the platform, which displayed all it had to offer at a glance. Most of the female passengers were queueing for the grey stone hut behind the ticket office. The waiting room smelled of cigarette smoke harsh enough for Woodbines. The refreshment room had to be preferable, and she was heading for it when a pig's face turned to watch her through the window. For as long as it took her to confront it she had the grotesque notion that the building had become not a NAAFI but a pigsty, and then she saw the snout was on a human head.

Of course it was a gas mask, modelled by one of the girls from the train. Three empty masks were rooting at the inside of the window. By the time Hilda grasped all this she was fleeing up the steps onto the bridge over the tracks, and the realisation by no means slowed her down. She walked very fast until she was out of sight of anything reminiscent of the war—out of sight of the station. She saw the smoke of the engine duck under the bridge and rear up on the other side, where the rails used to lead to the next county—presumably the engine would turn so as to manoeuvre to the far end of

the train—and then she was around a bend of the narrow road bordered by sprawling grass, and the flank of the hill intervened between her and the railway. She didn't stop until she came to a hollow in the side of the hill, where she not so much sat as huddled while she tried to breathe calmly enough to believe she might grow calm.

Breezes and sunlight through a succession of shutters of cloud took turns to caress her face. The grass on the hills that crouched to the horizon hiding the town where she'd joined the train blazed green and dulled, shivered and subsided. She didn't know whether she closed her eyes to shut out the spectacle of the agitated landscape or in an attempt to share the stillness it briefly achieved. While she gave herself up to the sensations on her face she was able not to think—was aware only of them, and then not of them either.

She wouldn't have expected to be capable of sleeping, but some kind of exhaustion had left her capable of nothing else. She didn't dream, and she was grateful for it. Instead, as her mind began to struggle out of a black swamp of unconsciousness, she found herself remembering. Perhaps her stupor was helping her to do so, or perhaps, she thought as she strove to waken, it was leaving her unable not to remember.

Her parents had kept her safe from everything about the war, but there had been just one occasion when she'd had to shelter without them. She'd spent a Saturday at her aunt's and uncle's across town, which meant her teenage cousin Ellen had been required to play with her. Long before it was time for Ellen to see her home the older girl had tired of her. Perhaps she'd intended to be more quickly rid of her, or perhaps she'd planned to scare Hilda as a sly revenge for all the trouble she'd been, by using the short cut through a graveyard.

They hadn't progressed halfway across it when it had begun to seem to Hilda as vast as the world. Crosses had tottered towards her, handless arms as white as maggots had reached for her, trees like tall thin cowled heads without faces had whispered about her as she'd scampered after Ellen into the massing darkness, and she'd been unable to see the end of any path. Ellen had to look after her, she'd reassured herself; Ellen was too old to be frightened—except that as the sirens had started to howl, a sound so all-encompassing Hilda had imagined a chorus of ghosts surrounding the graveyard, it had become apparent that Ellen was terrified. She'd run so fast she'd almost lost Hilda at the crossing of two paths dark as trenches, and

when she'd halted, her voice had betrayed she'd done so largely out of panic. "Down here," she'd cried. "Quick, and don't fall."

At first Hilda hadn't understood that the refuge itself was one source of her cousin's distress. She'd thought it was a shelter for whoever worked in the graveyard, and she'd groped her way down the steps after her into the stone room. Then Ellen had unwrapped her flashlight, and as its muffled glow brightened with each layer of the scarf she removed from it, her breaths had begun to sound more like whimpers. The walls had been full of boxes collapsing out of their long holes and losing their hold on any of their lids that hadn't caved in. For a moment Hilda had thought someone was looking at her out of the box with the loosest lid, and then she'd seen it was a gas mask resting on the gap between box and lid. Gas masks were supposed to protect you, and so she'd run to pick it up in the hope that would make her braver. "Don't touch it," Ellen had not much less than screamed, but Hilda had pulled the mask off—

She didn't know if she had screamed then; certainly she did now. The cry rose to the surface of her sleep and carried her with it, and her eyes jerked open. The view that met them could have been more reassuring. The sun was considerably lower than last time she'd looked, and its rays streamed up like searchlights from behind black clouds above the town past the horizon. One beam spotlighted a solitary oval cloud, so regular she had to convince herself it wasn't a barrage balloon. She hadn't quite succeeded when she became aware not just of the lateness but of the silence. Had the last train departed? Long before she could walk back to town it would be dark, if she managed to find the right road.

As she shoved herself to her feet her fingers dug into the soil, and she remembered thinking in the graveyard vault that when you went down so far you were beneath the earth. She did her best to gnaw her nails clean as she dashed to the bridge.

The platforms were deserted. The ticket office and all the doors were shut. A train stood alongside the platform, the engine pointing towards the distant town. The train looked abandoned for the night, and she was about to despair when the stack gave vent to a smoky gasp. "Wait," she cried, and clattered down the steps. She hadn't reached the platform when the train moved off.

"Please wait," she tried to call at the top of her voice. Her dash had left her scarcely enough breath for one word. Nevertheless the rearmost door of the last of the three carriages swung ajar. She flung herself after it, overtook it, seized the inner handle and with a final effort launched herself into the corridor. Three gas masks pressed their snouts against the window of the refreshment room, their blank eyepieces watching her as though the darkness was. She shut them out with a violent slam and retreated into the nearest compartment, sliding the door closed with both hands and falling across a seat to fetch up by the window.

The station sailed backwards, and the humped countryside set about following. She was glad the masks were gone, but she wished the view would demonstrate the past had gone too. There wasn't a vehicle to be seen, and the animals strewn about the darkened fields were so still they might have been stuffed. She was trying to content herself with the rewinding of the panorama when she remembered that it would return her to the tunnel.

She didn't want to enter it by herself, especially since the lights of the carriage appeared to be dimmer than ever. She would put up with children so long as they didn't try to make anything of the dark. If there were any in her carriage she would have heard them by now, but perhaps there were quieter passengers. She stood up, though the movement of the train was against it, and hauled herself around the door into the corridor.

She was alone in the carriage. The empty compartments looked even less inviting than hers: the long narrow outlines of the seats reminded her too much of objects she was anxious to forget, the choked brown light seemed determined to resemble the wary glow of her memories. Surely there must be a guard on the train. She hurried to the end of the corridor and peered across the gap into the next one, down which she heard a door slide open. "Hello?" she called. "Who's here besides me?"

The carriage tossed, sending her off balance. She floundered towards the gap above the speeding tracks, and had to step across it into the middle carriage. It was swaying so vigorously that the lamps looked close to being shaken out, and she had to reassure herself that the sound like a nail scraping glass was the repeated impact of a blind against the window of the first compartment. If someone had drawn the blinds down for privacy, Hilda was loath to disturb them. Instead she ventured past in search of the door she'd heard opening.

Was the carriage out of service? The insides of the window of the next compartment were so grimy they might have been coated with soil. Through a patch that a hand must have cleared she saw movement—a stump jerking up and down—the movable arm of a seat, keeping time with the rhythm of the wheels. It must be a shadow, not a large black insect, that kept creeping out from beneath the arm and recoiling, though there were certainly insects in the adjacent compartment: fat blue flies, altogether too many of them crawling over those few sections of the windows that weren't opaque, more of them blundering against the rest of the glass, thumping it like soft limp fingers. She was trying to nerve herself to dodge past all that, because next to it was the door she'd heard, when she saw what was wedging the door open. She wanted to believe it had slid open with the lurching of the carriage, which had also thrown an item of lost property off one of the seats to be trapped by the bottom corner of the door—a glove with its fingers twisted into claws and as brown as shrivelled skin. Even if it was only a glove, it didn't look quite empty enough.

Perhaps she didn't see it stir, or perhaps the careening of the train made the fingers twitch. She only knew she was backing down the corridor, leaning against the outer wall for fear of being hurled against or into a compartment, her hands sliding almost as fast over the grimy windows as the twilit hills and fields were regressing outside them. She had to force herself to look behind her rather than retreat blindly over the gap. As she executed a faltering stride into the rear carriage, her lips formed words before she knew where she remembered them from, and then while she attempted not to remember. "It wasn't me," she mouthed as she fled along the carriage, and as she slid the door shut on the corridor that had turned too dim for her to see the end of it and clung to the handle. "I didn't do anything."

She hadn't broken into the vault or vandalised the contents, true enough. Days later she'd overheard her father telling her mother that some children had, and she'd realised they must have left the gas mask. "Pity they weren't old enough to be called up," her father had said for her mother to agree with, "and learn a bit of respect," and Hilda had felt his comments could have been aimed at her, particularly since Ellen had persuaded her never to mention they'd been in the graveyard. After that, every time she'd had to go to the shelter with her parents—down into the earth and the dimness full of

shapes her vision took far too long to distinguish—she'd repeated her denial under her breath like a prayer.

"I didn't do anything"—but she had. She'd lifted the mask from the open end of the box—from the head poking through the gap. Whoever had pulled out the box must have used the mask to cover up the head. It seemed to Hilda that some of the face might have come away with the mask, because the vacant eyes had been so large and deep that shadows had crawled in them, and the clenched grin had exposed too much besides teeth. Then the light had fled with Ellen up the steps, and as Hilda scrambled after her, shying away the mask and its contents, a steady siren had sounded the All Clear like a cruel joke. As though summoned by the memory of her having had the light snatched away, darkness erased the countryside outside the train with a stony shout of triumph.

She doubled her grip on the handle until the hot thick stale exhalations of the engine began to invade the compartment through the open window. Now that the journey was uphill the smoke was being channelled backwards, and she felt in danger of suffocating. She lunged across the seat to grab the handles of the transom and slide the halves together. They stuck in the grooves while her hands grew as hot and grubby as the smoke, then the halves stuttered together and met with a clunk. She fell on the seat and masked her face with her cupped hands, but when she saw her blurred reflection against the rushing darkness on both sides of her she uncovered her face. At least she'd shut out much of the uproar as well as the smoke, and the relative silence allowed her to hear something approaching down the tunnel.

No, not the tunnel: the corridor. She heard an object being dragged, followed by a silence, then a closer version of the sound. She was well-nigh deaf from straining her ears when another repetition of the noise let her grasp what it was. Somebody was sliding open the compartment doors.

It could be the guard—perhaps he was responding to her call from before they had entered the tunnel—except that the staggery advance sounded rather as though somebody was hauling himself from door to door. She strove to focus her awareness on the knowledge that the train wasn't supposed to stay in the tunnel much more than a minute. Not much more, her mind was pleading, not much more—and then she heard the door of the neighbouring compartment falter open. Her gaze flew to the communication

cord above the entrance to her compartment just as two bunches of fingers that seemed able only to be claws hooked the edge of the window onto the corridor. The carriage jerked, and a figure pranced puppet-like to her door.

It might have been wearing a camouflage outfit, unless the dark irregularities on the greenish suit were stains. It was too gaunt for its clothes or for the little of its discoloured skin she could see. Above the knobbed brownish stick of a neck its face was hidden by a gas mask that had fallen askew. With each sway of the carriage the mask looked in danger of slipping off.

For the duration of a breath she was incapable of taking, Hilda couldn't move. She had to squeeze her eyes shut in order to dive across the compartment and throw all her weight against the handle of the door while she jammed her heels under the seat opposite her. As long as the door and the glass were between her and the presence in the corridor it surely couldn't harm her. But her sense of its nearness forced her eyes open, and the figure that was dancing on the spot in time with the clacking of the wheels must have been waiting for her to watch, because it lifted both distorted hands to fumble with the mask.

Hilda heaved herself up to seize the communication cord, and only just refrained from pulling it. If she used it too soon, the train would halt in the tunnel. Her mouth was yearning to cry out, but to whom? Her parents couldn't keep her safe now; they had never appeared when she'd called out to them in the night to prove they were still somewhere. Her fist shook on the rusty chain above the door and almost yanked it down as the fingers stiff as twigs dislodged the mask.

Whatever face she'd been terrified to see wasn't there. Lolling on the scrawny neck around which the mask had fallen was nothing but a lumpy blackened sack not unlike a depleted sandbag from which, far too irregularly, stuffing sprouted, or hair. All the same, the lumps began to shift as if the contents of the sack were eager to be recognised. Then light flared through the carriage, and Hilda tugged the cord with all her strength.

The brakes screeched, but the train had yet to halt when the lights, having flared, died. The train shuddered to a stop, leaving her carriage deep in the tunnel. She had to hold the door shut until help arrived, she told herself, whatever she heard beyond it, whatever she imagined her fellow traveller might be growing to resemble. But when the handle commenced jerking,

feebly and then less so, she rushed across the invisible compartment and wrenched the halves of the transom apart and started to scream into the darkness thick as earth.

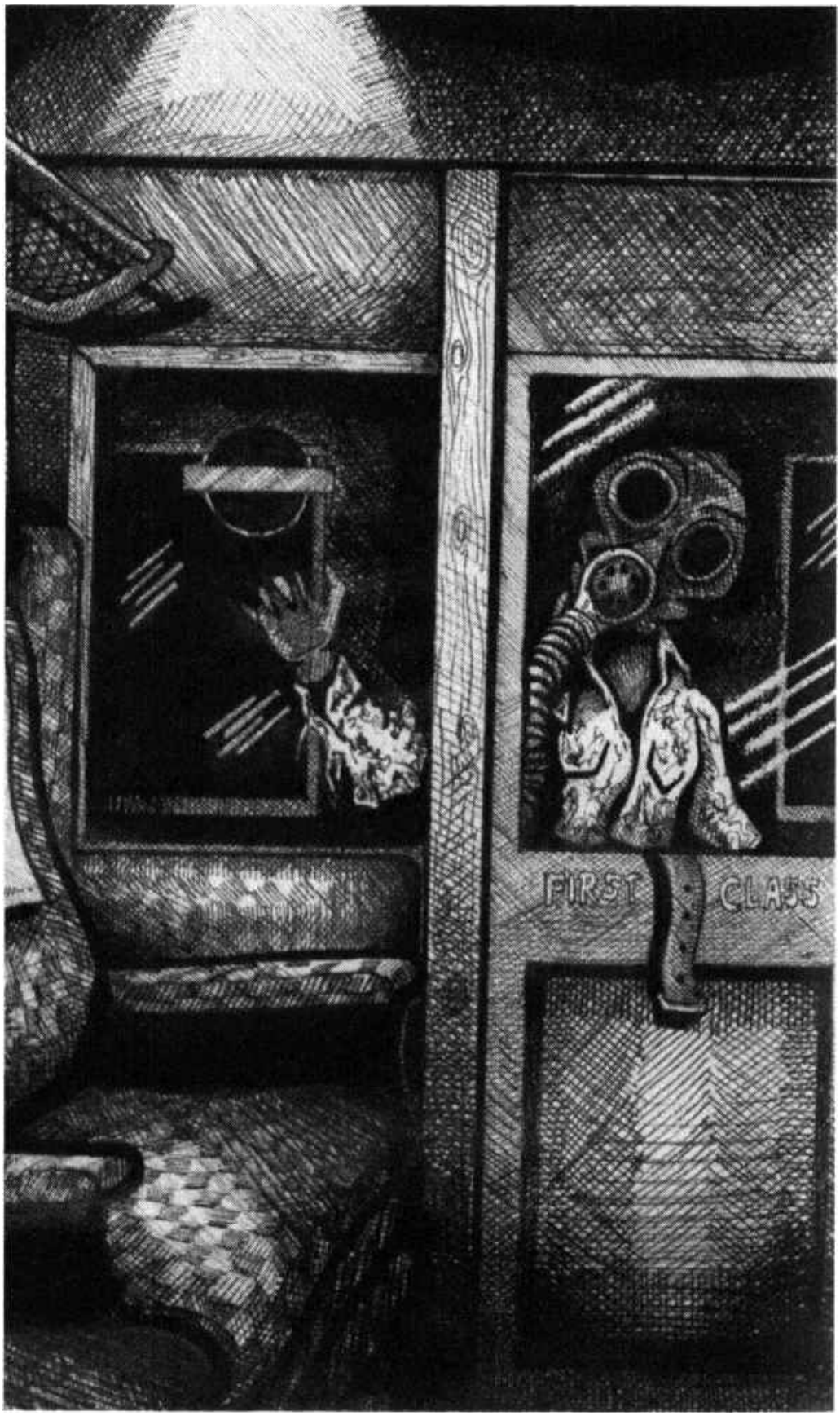
FIRST CLASS

Illustration by Richard Lamb, taken from Told By The Dead, 2003.

The Entertainment

"*The Entertainment* contains echoes of Robert Aickman's *The Hospice* but is its own tale, I hope, not least in its knockabout and its nervousness about growing old."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to *Told By The dead*

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By the time Shone found himself back in Westingsea he was able to distinguish only snatches of the road as the wipers strove to fend off the downpour. The promenade where he'd seen pensioners wheeled out for an early dose of sunshine, and backpackers piling into coaches that would take them inland to the Lakes, was waving isolated trees that looked too young to be out by themselves at a grey sea baring hundreds of edges of foam. Through a mixture of static and the hiss on the windscreen a local radio station advised drivers to stay off the roads, and he felt he was being offered a chance. Once he had a room he could phone Ruth. At the end of the promenade he swung the Cavalier around an old stone soldier drenched almost black and coasted alongside the seafront hotels.

There wasn't a welcome in sight. A sign in front of the largest and whitest hotel said NO, apparently having lost the patience to light up its second word. He turned along the first of the narrow streets of boarding houses, in an unidentifiable one of which he'd stayed with his parents most of fifty years ago, but the placards in the windows were just as uninviting. Some of the streets he remembered having been composed of small hotels had fewer buildings now, all of them care homes for the elderly. He had to lower his window to read the signs across the roads, and before he'd finished his right side was soaked. He needed a room for the night—he hadn't the energy to drive back to London. Half an hour would take him to the motorway, near which he was bound to find a hotel. But he had only reached the edge of town, and was braking at a junction, when he saw hands adjusting a notice in the window of a broad three-storey house.

He squinted in the mirror to confirm he wasn't in anyone's way, then inched his window down. The notice had either fallen or been removed, but the

parking area at the end of the short drive was unoccupied, and above the high thick streaming wall a signboard that frantic bushes were doing their best to obscure appeared to say most of HOTEL. He veered between the gateposts and came close to touching the right breast of the house.

He couldn't distinguish much through the bay window. At least one layer of net curtains was keeping the room to itself. Beyond heavy purple curtains trapping moisture against the glass, a light was suddenly extinguished. He grabbed his overnight bag from the rear seat and dashed for the open porch.

The rain kept him company as he poked the round brass bellpush next to the tall front door. There was no longer a button, only a socket harbouring a large bedraggled spider that recoiled almost as violently as his finger did. He hadn't laid hold of the rusty knocker above the neutral grimace of the letter slot when a woman called a warning or a salutation as she hauled the door open. "Here's someone now."

She was in her seventies but wore a dress that failed to cover her mottled toadstools of knees. She stooped as though the weight of her loose throat was bringing her face, which was almost as white as her hair, to meet his. "Are you the entertainment?" she said.

Behind her a hall more than twice his height and darkly papered with a pattern of embossed vines not unlike arteries led to a central staircase that vanished under the next floor up. Beside her a long-legged table was strewn with crumpled brochures for local attractions; above it a pay telephone with no number in the middle of its dial clung to the wall. Shone was trying to decide if this was indeed a hotel when the question caught up with him. "Am I..."

"Don't worry, there's a room waiting." She scowled past him and shook her head like a wet dog. "And there'd be dinner and a breakfast for anyone who settles them down."

He assumed this referred to the argument that had started or recommenced in the room where the light he'd seen switched off had been relit. Having lost count of the number of arguments he'd dealt with in the Hackney kindergarten where he worked, he didn't see why this should be any different. "I'll have a stab," he said, and marched into the room.

Despite its size, it was full of just two women—of the breaths of one at least as wide as her bright pink dress, who was struggling to lever herself up

from an armchair with a knuckly stick and collapsing red-faced, and of the antics of her companion, a lanky woman in the flapping jacket of a dark blue suit and the skirt of a greyer outfit, who'd bustled away from the light switch to flutter the pages of a television listings magazine before scurrying fast as the cartoon squirrel on the television to twitch the cord of the velvet curtains, an activity Shone took to have dislodged whatever notice had been in the window. Both women were at least as old as the person who'd admitted him, but he didn't let that daunt him. "What seems to be the problem?" he said, and immediately had to say "I can't hear you if you both talk at once."

"The light's in my eyes," the woman in the chair complained, though of the six bulbs in the chandelier one was dead, another missing. "Unity keeps putting it on when she knows I'm watching."

"Amelia's had her cartoons on all afternoon," Unity said, darting at the television, then drumming her knuckles on top of an armchair instead. "I want to see what's happening in the world."

"Shall we let Unity watch the news now, Amelia? If it isn't something you like watching you won't mind if the light's on."

Amelia glowered before delving into her cleavage for an object that she flung at him. Just in time to field it he identified it as the remote control. Unity ran to snatch it from him, and as a newsreader appeared with a war behind him Shone withdrew. He was lingering over closing the door while he attempted to judge whether the mountainous landscapes on the walls were vague with mist or dust when a man at his back murmured, "Come out, quick, and shut it."

He was a little too thin for his suit that was grey as his sparse hair. Though his pinkish eyes looked harassed, and he kept shrugging his shoulders as though to displace a shiver, he succeeded in producing enough of a grateful smile to part his teeth. "By gum, Daph said you'd sort them out, and you have. You can stay," he said.

Among the questions Shone was trying to resolve was why the man seemed familiar, but a gust of rain so fierce it strayed under the front door made the offer irresistible. "Overnight, you mean." He thought it best to check.

"That's the least," the manager presumably only began, and twisted round to find the stooped woman. "Daph will show you up, Mr..."

"Shone."

"Who is he?" Daph said as if preparing to announce him.

"Tom Shone," Shone told her.

"Mr. Thomson?"

"Tom Shone. First name Tom."

"Mr. Tom Thomson."

He might have suspected a joke if it hadn't been for her earnestness, and so he appealed to the manager. "Do you need my signature?"

"Later, don't you fret," the manager assured him, receding along the hall.

"And as for payment..."

"Just room and board. That's always the arrangement."

"You mean you want me to..."

"Enjoy yourself," the manager called, and disappeared beyond the stairs into somewhere that smelled of an imminent dinner.

Shone felt his overnight bag leave his shoulder. Daph had relieved him of the burden and was striding upstairs, turning in a crouch to see that he followed. "He's forever off somewhere, Mr. Snell," she said, and repeated, "Mr. Snell."

Shone wondered if he was being invited to reply with a joke until she added, "Don't worry, we know what it's like to forget your name."

She was saying he, not she, had been confused about it. If she hadn't cantered out of sight his response would have been as sharp as the rebukes he gave his pupils when they were too childish. Above the middle floor the staircase bent towards the front of the house, and he saw how unexpectedly far the place went back. Perhaps nobody was staying in that section, since the corridor was dark and smelled old. He grabbed the banister to speed himself up, only to discover it wasn't much less sticky than a sucked lollipop. By the time he arrived at the top of the house he was furious to find himself panting.

Daph had halted at the far end of a passage lit, if that was the word, by infrequent bulbs in glass flowers sprouting from the walls. Around them

shadows fattened the veins of the paper. "This'll be you," Daph said, and pushed open a door.

Beside a small window under a yellowing lightbulb the ceiling angled almost to the carpet, brown as mud. A narrow bed stood in the angle, opposite a wardrobe and dressing table and a sink beneath a dingy mirror. At least there was a phone on a shelf by the sink. Daph passed him his bag as he ventured into the room. "You'll be fetched when it's time," she told him.

"Time? Time..."

"For dinner and all the fun, silly," she said with a laugh so shrill his ears wanted to flinch.

She was halfway to the stairs when he thought to call after her. "Aren't I supposed to have a key?"

"Mr. Snell will have it. Mr. Snell," she reminded him, and was gone.

He had to phone Ruth as soon as he was dry and changed. There must be a bathroom somewhere near. He hooked his bag over his shoulder with a finger and stepped into the twilight of the corridor. He'd advanced only a few paces when Daph's head poked over the edge of the floor. "You're never leaving us."

He felt absurdly guilty. "Just after the bathroom."

"It's where you're going," she said, firmly enough to be commanding rather than advising him, and vanished down the hole that was the stairs.

She couldn't have meant the room next to his. When he succeeded in coaxing the sticky plastic knob to turn, using the tips of a finger and thumb, he found a room much like his, except that the window was in the angled roof. Seated on the bed in the dimness on its way to dark was a figure in a toddler's blue overall—a teddy bear with large black ragged eyes or perhaps none. The bed in the adjacent room was strewn with photographs so blurred that he could distinguish only the grin every one of them bore. Someone had been knitting in the next room, but had apparently lost concentration, since one arm of the mauve sweater was at least twice the size of the other. A knitting needle pinned each arm to the bed. Now Shone was at the stairs, beyond which the rear of the house was as dark as that section of the floor below. Surely Daph would have told him if he was on the wrong side of the corridor, and the area past the stairs wasn't as abandoned as it looked: he

could hear a high-pitched muttering from the dark, a voice gabbling a plea almost too fast for words, praying with such urgency the speaker seemed to have no time to pause for breath. Shone hurried past the banisters that enclosed three sides of the top of the stairs and pushed open the door immediately beyond them. There was the bath, and inside the plastic curtains that someone had left closed would be a shower. He elbowed the door wide, and the shower curtains shifted to acknowledge him.

Not only they had. As he tugged the frayed cord to kindle the bare bulb, he heard a muffled giggle from the region of the bath. He threw his bag onto the hook on the door and yanked the shower curtains apart. A naked woman so scrawny he could see not just her ribs but the shape of bones inside her buttocks was crouching on all fours in the bath. She peered wide-eyed over one splayed knobbly hand at him, then dropped the hand to reveal a nose half the width of her face and a gleeful mouth devoid of teeth as she sprang past him. She was out of the room before he could avoid seeing her shrunken disused breasts and pendulous grey-bearded stomach. He heard her run into a room at the dark end of the corridor, calling out "For it now" or perhaps "You're it now." He didn't know if the words were intended for him. He was too busy noticing that the door was boltless.

He wedged his shoes against the corner below the hinges and piled his sodden clothes on top, then padded across the sticky linoleum to the bath. It was cold as stone, and sank at least half an inch with a loud creak as he stepped into it under the blind brass eye of the shower. When he twisted the reluctant squeaky taps it felt at first as though the rain had got in, but swiftly grew so hot he backed into the clammy plastic. He had to press himself against the cold tiled wall to reach the taps, and had just reduced the temperature to bearable when he heard the doorknob rattle. "Taken," he shouted. "Someone's in here."

"My turn."

The voice was so close the speaker's mouth must be pressed against the door. When the rattling increased in vigour Shone yelled, "I won't be long. Ten minutes."

"My turn."

It wasn't the same voice. Either the speaker had deepened his pitch in an attempt to daunt Shone or there was more than one person at the door. Shone reached for the sliver of soap in the dish protruding from the tiles,

but contented himself with pivoting beneath the shower once he saw the soap was coated with grey hair. "Wait out there," he shouted. "I've nearly finished. No, don't wait. Come back in five minutes."

The rattling ceased, and at least one body dealt the door a large soft thump. Shone wrenched the curtains open in time to see his clothes spill across the linoleum. "Stop that," he roared, and heard someone retreat—either a spectacularly crippled person or two people bumping into the walls as they carried on a struggle down the corridor. A door slammed, then slammed again, unless there were two. By then he was out of the bath and grabbing the solitary bath towel from the shaky rack. A spider with legs like long grey hairs and a wobbling body as big as Shone's thumbnail scuttled out of the towel and hid under the bath.

He hadn't brought a towel with him. He would have been able to borrow one of Ruth's. He held the towel at arm's length by two corners and shook it over the bath. When nothing else emerged, he rubbed his hair and the rest of him as swiftly as he could. He unzipped his case and donned the clothes he would have sported for dining with Ruth. He hadn't brought a change of shoes, and when he tried on those he'd worn, they squelched. He gathered up his soaked clothes and heaped them with the shoes on his bag, and padded quickly to his room.

As he kneed the door open he heard sounds beyond it: a gasp, another, and then voices spilling into the dark. Before he crossed the room, having dumped his soggy clothes and bag in the wardrobe that, like the rest of the furniture, was secured to a wall and the floor, he heard the voices stream into the house. They must belong to a coach party—brakes and doors had been the sources of the gasps. On the basis of his experiences so far, the influx of residents lacked appeal for him and made him all the more anxious to speak to Ruth. Propping his shoes against the ribs of the tepid radiator, he sat on the underfed pillow and lifted the sticky receiver.

As soon as he obtained a tone he began to dial. He was more than halfway through Ruth's eleven digits when Snell's voice interrupted. "Who do you want?"

"Long distance."

"You can't get out from the rooms, I'm afraid. There's a phone down here in the hall. Everything else as you want it, Mr. Thomson? Only I've got people coming in."

Shone heard some of them outside his room. They were silent except for an unsteady shuffling and the hushed sounds of a number of doors. He could only assume they had been told not to disturb him. "There were people playing games up here," he said.

"They'll be getting ready for tonight. They do work themselves up, some of them. Everything else satisfactory?"

"There's nobody hiding in my room, if that's what you mean."

"Nobody but you."

That struck Shone as well past enough, and he was about to make his feelings clear while asking for his key when the manager said, "We'll see you down shortly, then." The line died at once, leaving Shone to attempt an incredulous grin at the events so far. He intended to share it with his reflection above the sink, but hadn't realised until now that the mirror was covered with cracks or a cobweb. The lines appeared to pinch his face thin, to discolour his flesh and add wrinkles. When he leaned closer to persuade himself that was merely an illusion, he saw movement in the sink. An object he'd taken to be a long grey hair was snatched into the plughole, and he glimpsed the body it belonged to squeezing itself out of sight down the pipe. He had to remind himself to transfer his wallet and loose coins and keys from his wet clothes to his current pockets before he hastened out of the room.

The carpet in the passage was damp with footprints, more of which he would have avoided if he hadn't been distracted by sounds in the rooms. Where he'd seen the teddy bear someone was murmuring "Up you come to Mummy. Gummy gum." Next door a voice was crooning "There you all are," presumably to the photographs, and Shone was glad to hear no words from the site of the lopsided knitting, only a clicking so rapid it sounded mechanical. Rather than attempt to interpret any of the muffled noises from the rooms off the darker section of the corridor, he padded downstairs so fast he almost missed his footing twice.

Nothing was moving in the hall except rain under the front door. Several conversations were ignoring one another in the television lounge. He picked up the receiver and thrust coins into the box, and his finger faltered over the zero on the dial. Perhaps because he was distracted by the sudden hush, he couldn't remember Ruth's number.

He dragged the hole of the zero around the dial as far as it would go in case that brought him the rest of the number, and as the hole whirred back to its starting point, it did. Ten more turns of the dial won him a ringing padded with static, and he felt as if the entire house was waiting for Ruth to answer. It took six pairs of rings—longer than she needed to cross her flat—to make her say "Ruth Lawson."

"It's me, Ruth." When there was silence he tried reviving their joke. "Old Ruthless."

"What now, Tom?"

He'd let himself hope for at least a dutiful laugh, but its absence threw him less than the reaction from within the television lounge: a titter, then several. "I just wanted you to know—"

"You're mumbling again. I can't hear you."

He was only seeking to be inaudible to anyone but her. "I say, I wanted you to know I really did get the day wrong," he said louder. "I really thought I was supposed to be coming up today."

"Since when has your memory been that bad?"

"Since, I don't know, today, it seems like. No, fair enough, you'll be thinking of your birthday. I know I forgot that too."

A wave of mirth escaped past the ajar door across the hall. Surely however many residents were in there must be laughing at the television with the sound turned down, he told himself as Ruth retorted "If you can forget that you'll forget anything."

"I'm sorry.

"I'm sorrier."

"I'm sorriest," he risked saying, and immediately wished he hadn't completed their routine, not only since it no longer earned him the least response from her but because of the roars of laughter from the television lounge. "Look, I just wanted to be sure you knew I wasn't trying to catch you out, that's all."

"Tom."

All at once her voice was sympathetic, the way it might have sounded at an aged relative's bedside. "Ruth," he said, and almost as stupidly, "What?"

"You might as well have been."

"I might... you mean I might..."

"I mean you nearly did."

"Oh." After a pause as hollow as he felt he repeated the syllable, this time not with disappointment but with all the surprise he could summon up. He might have uttered yet another version of the sound, despite or even because of the latest outburst of amusement across the hall, if Ruth hadn't spoken. "I'm talking to him now."

"Talking to who?"

Before the words had finished leaving him Shone understood that she hadn't been speaking to him but about him, because he could hear a man's voice in her flat. Its tone was a good deal more than friendly to her, and it was significantly younger than his. "Good luck to you both," he said, less ironically and more maturely than he would have preferred, and snagged the hook with the receiver.

A single coin trickled down the chute and hit the carpet with a plop. Amidst hilarity in the television lounge several women were crying "To who, to who" like a flock of owls. "He's good, isn't he," someone else remarked, and Shone was trying to decide where to take his confusion bordering on panic when a bell began to toll as it advanced out of the dark part of the house.

It was a small but resonant gong wielded by the manager. Shone heard an eager rumble of footsteps in the television lounge, and more of the same overhead. As he hesitated, Daph dodged around the manager towards him. "Let's get you sat down before they start their fuss," she said.

"I'll just fetch my shoes from my room."

"You don't want to bump into the old lot up there. They'll be wet, won't they?"

"Who?" Shone demanded, then regained enough sense of himself to answer his own question with a weak laugh. "My shoes, you mean. They're the only ones I've brought with me."

"I'll find you something once you're in your place," she said, opening the door opposite the television lounge, and stooped lower to hurry him. As soon as he trailed after her she bustled the length of the dining room and

patted a small isolated table until he accepted its solitary straight chair. This faced the room and was boxed in by three long tables, each place at which was set like his with a plastic fork and spoon. Beyond the table opposite him velvet curtains shifted impotently as the windows trembled with rain. Signed photographs covered much of the walls—portraits of comedians he couldn't say he recognised, looking jolly or amusingly lugubrious. "We've had them all," Daph said. "They kept us going. It's having fun keeps the old lot alive." Some of this might have been addressed not just to him, because she was on her way out of the room. He barely had time to observe that the plates on the Welsh dresser to his left were painted on the wood, presumably to obviate breakage, before the residents crowded in.

A disagreement over the order of entry ceased at the sight of him. Some of the diners were scarcely able to locate their places for gazing at him rather more intently than he cared to reciprocate. Several of them were so inflated that he was unable to determine their gender except by their clothes, and not even thus in the case of the most generously trousered of them, whose face appeared to be sinking into a nest of flesh. Contrast was provided by a man so emaciated his handless wristwatch kept sliding down to his knuckles. Unity and Amelia sat facing Shone, and then, to his dismay, the last of the eighteen seats was occupied by the woman he'd found in the bath, presently covered from neck to ankles in a black sweater and slacks. When she regarded him with an expression of never having seen him before and delight at doing so now he tried to feel some relief, but he was mostly experiencing how all the diners seemed to be awaiting some action from him. Their attention had started to paralyse him when Daph and Mr. Snell reappeared through a door Shone hadn't noticed beside the Welsh dresser.

The manager set about serving the left-hand table with bowls of soup while Daph hurried over, brandishing an especially capacious pair of the white cloth slippers Shone saw all the residents were wearing. "We've only these," she said, dropping them at his feet. "They're dry, that's the main thing. See how they feel."

Shone could almost have inserted both feet into either of them. "I'll feel a bit of a clown, to tell you the truth."

"Never mind, you won't be going anywhere."

Shone poked his feet into the slippers and lifted them to discover whether the footwear had any chance of staying on. At once all the residents burst

out laughing. Some of them stamped as a form of applause, and even Snell produced a fleeting grateful smile as he and Daph retreated to the kitchen. Shone let his feet drop, which was apparently worth another round of merriment. It faded as Daph and Snell came out with more soup, a bowl of which the manager brought Shone, lowering it over the guest's shoulder before spreading his fingers on either side of him. "Here's Tommy Thomson for you," he announced, and leaned down to murmur in Shone's ear. "That'll be all right, won't it? Sounds better."

At that moment Shone's name was among his lesser concerns. Instead he gestured at the plastic cutlery. "Do you think I could—"

Before he had time to ask for metal utensils with a knife among them, Snell moved away as though the applause and the coos of joy his announcement had drawn were propelling him. "Just be yourself," he mouthed at Shone.

The spoon was the size Shone would have used to stir tea if the doctor hadn't recently forbidden him sugar. As he picked it up there was instant silence. He lowered it into the thin broth, where he failed to find anything solid, and raised it to his lips. The brownish liquid tasted of some unidentifiable meat with a rusty undertaste. He was too old to be finicky about food that had been served to everyone. He swallowed, and when his body raised to protest he set about spooning the broth into himself as fast as he could without spilling it, to finish the task.

He'd barely signalled his intentions when the residents began to cheer and stamp. Some of them imitated his style with the broth while others demonstrated how much more theatrically they could drink theirs; those closest to the hall emitted so much noise that he could have thought part of the slurping came from outside the room. When he frowned in that direction, the residents chortled as though he'd made another of the jokes he couldn't avoid making.

He dropped the spoon in the bowl at last, only to have Daph return it to the table with a briskness not far short of a rebuke. While she and Snell were in the kitchen everyone else gazed at Shone, who felt compelled to raise his eyebrows and hold out his hands. One of the expanded people nudged another, and both of them wobbled gleefully, and then all the residents were overcome by laughter that continued during the arrival of the main course, as if this was a joke they were eager for him to see. His plate proved to bear

three heaps of mush, white and pale green and a glistening brown. "What is it?" he dared to ask Daph.

"What we always have," she said as if to a child or to someone who'd reverted to that state. "It's what we need to keep us going."

The heaps were of potatoes and vegetables and some kind of mince with an increased flavour of the broth. He did his utmost to eat naturally, despite the round of applause this brought him. Once his innards began to feel heavy he lined up the utensils on his by no means clear plate, attracting Daph to stoop vigorously at him. "I've finished," he said.

"Not yet."

When she stuck out her hands he thought she was going to return the fork and spoon to either side of his plate. Instead she removed it and began to clear the next table. While he'd been concentrating on hiding his reaction to his food the residents had gobbled theirs, he saw. The plates were borne off to the kitchen, leaving an expectant silence broken only by a restless shuffling. Wherever he glanced, he could see nobody's feet moving, and he told himself the sounds had been Daph's as she emerged from the kitchen with a large cake iced white as a memorial. "Daph's done it again," the hugest resident piped.

Shone took that to refer to the portrait in icing of a clown on top of the cake. He couldn't share the general enthusiasm for it; the clown looked undernourished and blotchily red-faced, and not at all certain what shape his wide twisted gaping lips should form. Snell brought in a pile of plates on which Daph placed slices of cake, having cut it in half and removed the clown's head from his shoulders in the process, but the distribution of slices caused some debate. "Give Tommy Thomson my eye," a man with bleary bloodshot eyeballs said.

"He can have my nose," offered the woman he'd seen in the bath.

"I'm giving him the hat," Daph said, which met with hoots of approval. The piece of cake she gave him followed the outline almost precisely of the clown's sagging pointed cap. At least it would bring dinner to an end, he thought, and nothing much could be wrong with a cake. He didn't expect it to taste faintly of the flavour of the rest of the meal. Perhaps that was why, provoking a tumult of jollity, he began to cough and then choke on a crumb. Far too eventually Daph brought him a glass of water in which he thought

he detected the same taste. "Thanks," he gasped anyway, and as his coughs and the applause subsided, managed to say, "Thanks. All over now. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll take myself off to bed."

The noise the residents had made so far was nothing to the uproar with which they greeted this. "We haven't had the entertainment yet," Unity protested, jumping to her feet and looking more than ready to dart the length of the room. "Got to sing for your supper, Tommy Thomson."

"We don't want any songs and we don't want any speeches," Amelia declared. "We always have the show."

"The show," all the diners began to chant, and clapped and stamped in time with it, led by the thumping of Amelia's stick. "The show. The show."

The manager leaned across Shone's table. His eyes were pinker than ever, and blinking several times a second. "Better put it on for them or you'll get no rest," he muttered. "You won't need to be anything special."

Perhaps it was the way Snell was leaning down to him that let Shone see why he seemed familiar. Could he really have run the hotel where Shone had stayed with his parents nearly fifty years ago? How old would he have to be? Shone had no chance to wonder while the question was "What are you asking me to do?"

"Nothing much. Nothing someone of your age can't cope with. Come on and I'll show you before they start wanting to play their games."

It wasn't clear how much of a threat this was meant to be. Just now Shone was mostly grateful to be ushered away from the stamping and the chant. Retreating upstairs had ceased to tempt him, and fleeing to his car made no sense when he could hardly shuffle across the carpet for trying to keep his feet in the slippers. Instead he shambled after the manager to the doorway of the television lounge. "Go in there," Snell urged, and gave him a wincing smile. "Just stand in it. Here they come."

The room had been more than rearranged. The number of seats had been increased to eighteen by the addition of several folding chairs. All the seats faced the television, in front of which a small portable theatre not unlike the site of a Punch and Judy show had been erected. Above the deserted ledge of a stage rose a tall pointed roof that reminded Shone of the clown's hat. Whatever words had been inscribed across the base of the gable were as faded as the many colours of the frontage. He'd managed to decipher only

ENTER HERE when he found himself hobbling towards the theatre, driven by the chanting that had emerged into the hall.

The rear of the theatre was a heavy velvet curtain, black where it wasn't greenish. A slit had been cut in it up to a height of about four feet. As he ducked underneath, the mouldy velvet clung to the nape of his neck. A smell of damp and staleness enclosed him when he straightened up. His elbows knocked against the sides of the box, disturbing the two figures that lay on a shelf under the stage, their empty bodies sprawling, their faces nestling together upside down as though they had dragged themselves close for companionship. He turned the faces upwards and saw that the figures, whose fixed grins and eyes were almost too wide for amusement, were supposed to be a man and a woman, although only a few tufts of grey hair clung to each dusty skull. He was nerving himself to insert his hands in the gloves of the bodies when the residents stamped chanting into the room.

Unity ran to a chair and then, restless with excitement, to another. Amelia dumped herself in the middle of a sofa and inched groaning to one end. Several of the jumbo residents lowered themselves onto folding chairs that looked immediately endangered. At least the seating of the audience put an end to the chant, but everyone's gaze fastened on Shone until he seemed to feel it clinging to the nerves of his face. Beyond the residents, Snell mouthed, "Just slip them on."

Shone pulled the open ends of the puppets towards him and poked them gingerly wider, dreading the emergence of some denizen from inside one or both. They appeared to be uninhabited, however, and so he thrust his hands in, trying to think which of his kindergarten stories he might adapt for the occasion. The brownish material fitted itself easily over his hands, almost as snug as the skin it resembled, and before he was ready each thumb was a puppet's arm, the little fingers too, and three fingers were shakily raising each head as if the performers were being roused from sleep. The spectators were already cheering, a response that seemed to entice the tufted skulls above the stage. Their entrance was welcomed by a clamour in which requests gradually became audible. "Let's see them knock each other about like the young lot do these days."

"Football with the baby."

"Make them go like animals."

"Smash their heads together."

They must be thinking of Punch and Judy, Shone told himself—and then a wish succeeded in quelling the rest. "Let's have Old Ruthless."

"Old Ruthless" was the chant as the stamping renewed itself—as his hands sprang onto the stage to wag the puppets at each other. All at once everything he'd been through that day seemed to have concentrated itself in his hands, and perhaps that was the only way he could be rid of it. He nodded the man that was his right hand at the balding female and uttered a petulant croak. "What do you mean, it's not my day?"

He shook the woman and gave her a squeaky voice. "What day do you think it is?"

"It's Wednesday, isn't it? Thursday, rather. Hang on, it's Friday, of course. Saturday, I mean."

"It's Sunday. Can't you hear the bells?"

"I thought they were for us to be married. Hey, what are you hiding there? I didn't know you had a baby yet."

"That's no baby, that's my boyfriend."

Shone twisted the figures to face the audience. The puppets might have been waiting for guffaws or even groans at the echo of an old joke; certainly he was. The residents were staring at him with, at best, bemusement. Since he'd begun the performance the only noise had been the sidling of the puppets along the stage and the voices that caught harshly in his throat. The manager and Daph were gazing at him over the heads of the residents; both of them seemed to have forgotten how to blink or grin. Shone turned the puppets away from the spectators as he would have liked to turn himself. "What's up with us?" he squeaked, wagging the woman's head. "We aren't going down very well."

"Never mind, I still love you. Give us a kiss," he croaked, and made the other puppet totter a couple of steps before it fell on its face. The loud crack of the fall took him off guard, as did the way the impact trapped his fingers in the puppet's head. The figure's ungainly attempts to stand up weren't nearly as simulated as he would have preferred. "It's these clown's shoes. You can't expect anyone to walk in them," he grumbled. "Never mind looking as if I'm an embarrassment."

"You're nothing else, are you? You'll be forgetting your own name next."

"Don't be daft," he croaked, no longer understanding why he continued to perform, unless to fend off the silence that was dragging words and antics out of him. "We both know what my name is."

"Not after that crack you fetched your head. You won't be able to keep anything in there now."

"Well, that's where you couldn't be wronger. My name..." He meant the puppet's, not his own; that was why he was finding it hard to produce. "It's, you know, you know perfectly well. You know it as well as I do."

"See, it's gone."

"Tell me or I'll thump you till you can't stand up," Shone snarled in a rage that was no longer solely the puppet's, and brought the helplessly grinning heads together with a sound like the snapping of bone. The audience began to cheer at last, but he was scarcely aware of them. The collision had split the faces open, releasing the top joints of his fingers only to trap them in the splintered gaps. The clammy bodies of the puppets clung to him as his hands wrenched at each other. Abruptly something gave, and the female head flew off as the body tore open. His right elbow hit the wall of the theatre, and the structure lurched at him. As he tried to steady it, the head of the puppet rolled under his feet. He tumbled backwards into the mouldy curtains. The theatre reeled with him, and the room tipped up.

He was lying on his back, and his breath was somewhere else. In trying to prevent the front of the theatre from striking him he'd punched himself on the temple with the cracked male head. Through the proscenium he saw the ceiling high above him and heard the appreciation of the audience. More time passed than he thought necessary before several of them approached.

Either the theatre was heavier than he'd realised or his fall had weakened him. Even once he succeeded in peeling Old Ruthless off his hand he was unable to lift the theatre off himself as the puppet lay like a deflated baby on his chest. At last Amelia lowered herself towards him, and he was terrified that she intended to sit on him. Instead she thrust a hand that looked boiled almost into his face to grab the proscenium and haul the theatre off him. As someone else bore it away she seized his lapels and, despite the creaking of her stick, yanked him upright while several hands helped raise him from behind. "Are you fit?" she wheezed.

"I'll be fine," Shone said before he knew. All the chairs had been pushed back against the windows, he saw. "We'll show you one of our games now," Unity said behind him.

"You deserve it after all that," said Amelia, gathering the fragments of the puppets to hug them to her breasts.

"I think I'd like—"

"That's right, you will. We'll show you how we play. Who's got the hood?"

"Me," Unity cried. "Someone do it up for me."

Shone turned to see her flourishing a black cap. As she raised it over her head, he found he was again robbed of breath. When she tugged it down he realised that it was designed to cover the player's eyes, more like a magician's prop than an element of any game. The man with the handless watch dangling from his wrist pulled the cords of the hood tight behind her head and tied them in a bow, then twirled her round several times, each of which drew from her a squeal only just of pleasure. She wobbled around once more as, having released her, he tiptoed to join the other residents against the walls of the room.

She had her back to Shone, who had stayed by the chairs, beyond which the noise of rain had ceased. She darted away from him, her slippered feet patting the carpet, then lurched sideways towards nobody in particular and cocked her head. She was well out of the way of Shone's route to the door, where Daph and the manager looked poised to sneak out. He only had to avoid the blinded woman and he would be straight up to his room, either to barricade himself in or to retrieve his belongings and head for the car. He edged one foot forward into the toe of the slipper, and Unity swung towards him. "Caught you. I know who that is, Mr. Tommy Thomson."

"No you don't," Shone protested in a rage at everything that had led to the moment, but Unity swooped at him. She closed her bony hands around his cheeks and held on tight far longer than seemed reasonable before undoing the bow of the hood with her right hand while gripping and stroking his chin with the other. "Now it's your turn to go in the dark."

"I think I've had enough for one day, if you'll excuse—"

This brought a commotion of protests not far short of outrage. "You aren't done yet, a young thing like you." "She's older than you and she didn't make a fuss." "You've been caught, you have to play." "If you don't it won't be

fair." The manager had retreated into the doorway and was pushing air at Shone with his outstretched hands as Daph mouthed, "It's supposed to be the old lot's time." Her words and the rising chant of "Be fair" infected Shone with guilt, aggravated when Unity uncovered her reproachful eyes and held out the hood. He'd disappointed Ruth; he didn't need to let these old folk down too. "Fair enough, I'll play," he said. "Just don't twist me too hard."

He hadn't finished speaking when Unity planted the hood on his scalp and drew the material over his brows. It felt like the clammy bodies of the puppets. Before he had a chance to shudder it was dragging his eyelids down, and he could see nothing but darkness. The hood molded itself to his cheekbones as rapid fingers tied the cords behind his head. "Not too—" he gasped at whoever started twirling him across the room.

He felt as if he'd been caught by a vortex of cheering and hooting, but it included murmurs too. "He played with me in the bath." "He wouldn't let us in there." "He made me miss my cartoons." "That's right, and he tried to take the control off us." He was being whirled so fast he no longer knew where he was. "Enough," he cried, and was answered by an instant hush. Several hands shoved him staggering forward, and a door closed stealthily behind him.

At first he thought the room had grown colder and damper. Then, as his giddiness steadied, he understood that he was in a different room, farther towards the rear of the house. He felt the patchy lack of carpet through his slippers, though that seemed insufficient reason for the faint scraping of feet he could hear surrounding him to sound so harsh. He thought he heard a whisper or the rattling of some object within a hollow container level with his head. Suddenly, in a panic that flared like white blindness inside the hood, he knew Daph's last remark hadn't been addressed to him, nor had it referred to anyone he'd seen so far. His hands flew to untie the hood—not to see where he was and with whom, but which way to run.

He was so terrified to find the cord immovably knotted that it took him seconds to locate the loose ends of the bow. A tug at them released it. He was forcing his fingertips under the edge of the hood when he heard light dry footsteps scuttle towards him, and an article that he tried to think of as a hand groped at his face. He staggered backwards, blindly fending off whatever was there. His fingers encountered ribs barer than they ought to

be, and poked between them to meet the twitching contents of the bony cage. The whole of him convulsed as he snatched off the hood and flung it away.

The room was either too dark or not quite dark enough. It was at least the size of the one he'd left, and contained half a dozen sagging armchairs that glistened with moisture, and more than twice as many figures. Some were sprawled like loose bundles of sticks topped with grimacing masks on the chairs, but nonetheless doing their feeble best to clap their tattered hands. Even those that were swaying around him appeared to have left portions of themselves elsewhere. All of them were attached to strings or threads that glimmered in the murk and led his reluctant gaze to the darkest corner of the room. A restless mass crouched in it—a body with too many limbs, or a huddle of bodies that had grown inextricably entangled by the process of withering. Some of its movement, though not all, was of shapes that swarmed many-legged out of the midst of it, constructing parts of it or bearing away fragments or extending more threads to the other figures in the room. It took an effort that shrivelled his mind before he was able to distinguish anything else: a thin gap between curtains, a barred window beyond—to his left, the outline of a door to the hall. As the figure nearest to him bowed so close he saw the very little it had in the way of eyes peering through the hair it had stretched coquettishly over its face, Shone bolted for the hall.

The door veered aside as his dizziness swept it away. His slippers snagged a patch of carpet and almost threw him on his face. The doorknob refused to turn in his sweaty grasp, even when he gripped it with both hands. Then it yielded, and as the floor at his back resounded with a mass of uneven yet purposeful shuffling, the door juddered open. He hauled himself around it and fled awkwardly, slippers flapping, out of the dark part of the hall.

Every room was shut. Other than the scratching of nails or of the ends of fingers at the door behind him, there was silence. He dashed along the hall, striving to keep the slippers on, not knowing why, knowing only that he had to reach the front door. He seized the latch and flung the door wide and slammed it as he floundered out of the house.

The rain had ceased except for a dripping of foliage. The gravel glittered like the bottom of a stream. The coach he'd heard arriving—an old private coach spattered with mud—was parked across the rear of his car, so close it

practically touched the bumper. He could never manoeuvre out of that trap. He almost knocked on the window of the television lounge, but instead limped over the gravel and into the street, towards the quiet hotels. He had no idea where he was going except away from the house. He'd hobbled just a few paces, his slippers growing more sodden and his feet sorer at each step, when headlamps sped out of the town.

They belonged to a police car. It halted beside him, its hazard lights twitching, and a uniformed policeman was out of the passenger seat before Shone could speak. The man's slightly chubby concerned face was a wholesome pink beneath a street lamp. "Can you help me?" Shone pleaded. "I—"

"Don't get yourself in a state, old man. We saw where you came from."

"They boxed me in. My car, I mean, look. If you can just tell them to let me out—"

The driver moved to Shone's other side. He might have been trying to outdo his colleague's caring look. "Calm down now. We'll see to everything for you. What have you done to your head?"

"Banged it. Hit it with, you wouldn't believe me, it doesn't matter. I'll be fine. If I can just fetch my stuff—"

"What have you lost? Won't it be in the house?"

"That's right, at the top. My shoes are."

"Feet hurting, are they? No wonder with you wandering around like that on a night like this. Here, get his other arm." The driver had taken Shone's right elbow in a firm grip, and now he and his partner easily lifted Shone and bore him towards the house. "What's your name, sir?" the driver enquired.

"Not Thomson, whatever anyone says. Not Tommy Thomson or Tom either. Or rather, it's Tom all right, but Tom Shone. That doesn't sound like Thomson, does it? Shone as in shine. I used to know someone who said I still shone for her, you still shine for me, she'd say. Been to see her today as a matter of fact." He was aware of talking too much as the policemen kept nodding at him and the house with its two lit windows—the television lounge's and his—reared over him. "Anyway, the point is the name's Shone," he said. "Ess aitch, not haitch as some youngsters won't be told it isn't, oh en ee. Shone."

"We've got you." The driver reached for the empty bellpush, then pounded on the front door. It swung inwards almost at once, revealing the manager. "Is this gentleman a guest of yours, Mr. Snell?" the driver's colleague said.

"Mr. Thomson. We thought we'd lost you," Snell declared, and pushed the door wide. All the people from the television lounge were lining the hall like spectators at a parade. "Tommy Thomson," they chanted.

"That's not me," Shone protested, pedalling helplessly in the air until his slippers flew into the hall. "I told you—"

"You did, sir," the driver murmured, and his partner said even lower, "Where do you want us to take you?"

"To the top, just to—"

"We know," the driver said conspiratorially. The next moment Shone was sailing to the stairs and up them, with the briefest pause as the policemen retrieved a slipper each. The chant from the hall faded, giving way to a silence that seemed most breathlessly expectant in the darkest sections of the house. He had the police with him, Shone reassured himself. "I can walk now," he said, only to be borne faster to the termination of the stairs. "Where the door's open?" the driver suggested. "Where the light is?"

"That's me. Not me really, anything but, I mean—"

They swung him through the doorway by his elbows and deposited him on the carpet. "It couldn't be anybody else's room," the driver said, dropping the slippers in front of Shone. "See, you're already here."

Shone looked where the policemen were gazing with such sympathy it felt like a weight that was pressing him into the room. A photograph of himself and Ruth, arms around each other's shoulders with a distant mountain behind, had been removed from his drenched suit and propped on the shelf in place of the telephone. "I just brought that," he protested, "you can see how wet it was," and limped across the room to don his shoes. He hadn't reached them when he saw himself in the mirror.

He stood swaying a little, unable to retreat from the sight. He heard the policemen murmur together and withdraw, and their descent of the stairs, and eventually the dual slam of car doors and the departure of the vehicle. His reflection still hadn't allowed him to move. It was no use his telling himself that some of the tangle of wrinkles might be cobwebs, not when his

hair was no longer greying but white. "All right, I see it," he yelled—he had no idea at whom. "I'm old. I'm old."

"Soon," said a whisper like an escape of gas in the corridor, along which darkness was approaching as the lamps failed one by one. "You'll be plenty of fun yet," the remains of another voice said somewhere in his room. Before he could bring himself to look for its source, an item at the end of most of an arm fumbled around the door and switched out the light. The dark felt as though his vision was abandoning him, but he knew it was the start of another game. Soon he would know if it was worse than hide-and-seek—worse than the first sticky unseen touch of the web of the house on his face.

No Strings

"*No Strings* was written for Michele Slung's anthology about strangers, but she found it insufficiently strange. I'm not complaining - without her invitation the story would never have existed, and it has done well for itself."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

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"Good night till tomorrow," Phil Linford said, having faded the signature tune of Linford Till Midnight up under his voice, "and a special good night to anyone I've been alone with." As he removed his headphones, imitated by the reverse of himself in the dark beyond the inner window, he felt as if he was unburdening himself of all the voices he'd talked to during the previous two hours. They'd been discussing the homeless, whom most of the callers had insisted on describing as beggars or worse, until Linford had declared that he respected anyone who did their best to earn their keep, to feed themselves and their dependants. He hadn't intended to condemn those who only begged, if they were capable of nothing else, but several of his listeners did with increasing viciousness. After all that, the very last caller had hoped aloud that nobody homeless had been listening. Maybe Linford oughtn't to have responded that if they were homeless they wouldn't have anywhere to plug in a radio, but he always tried to end with a joke.

There was no point in leaving listeners depressed: that wasn't the responsibility he was paid for. If he'd given them a chance to have their say and something to carry on chewing over, he'd done what was expected of him. If he weren't doing a good job he wouldn't still be on the air. At least it wasn't television—at least he wasn't making people do no more than sit and gawk. As the second hand of the clock above the console fingered midnight he faded out his tune and gave up the station to the national network.

The news paced him as he walked through the station, killing lights. This year's second war, another famine, a seaboard devastated by a hurricane, a town buried by a volcano—no room for anything local, not even the people who'd been missing for weeks or months. In the deserted newsroom

computer terminals presented their blank bulging profiles to him. Beyond the unstaffed reception desk a solitary call was flashing like a warning on the switchboard. Its glow and its insect clicking died as he padded across the plump carpet of the reception area. He was reaching for the electronic latch to let him into the street when he faltered. Beyond the glass door, on the second of the three concrete steps to the pavement, a man was seated with his back to him.

Had he fallen asleep over the contents of his lap? He wore a black suit a size too large, above which peeked an inch of collar gleaming white as a vicar's beneath the neon streetlights, not an ensemble that benefited from being topped by a dark green baseball cap pulled as low as it would stretch on the bald neck. If he was waiting for anyone it surely couldn't be Linford, who nonetheless felt as if he had attracted the other somehow, perhaps by having left all the lights on while he was alone in the station. The news brought itself to an end with a droll anecdote about a music student who had almost managed to sell a forged manuscript before the buyer had noticed the composer's name was spelled Beathoven, and Linford eased the door open. He was on the way to opening enough of a gap to sidle through, into the stagnant July heat beneath the heavy clouds, when Early Morning Moods commenced with a rush of jaunty flourishes on a violin. At once the figure on the steps jerked to his feet as though tugged by invisible strings and joined in.

So he was a busker, and the contents of his lap had been a violin and its bow, but the discovery wasn't the only reason why Linford pulled the door wide. The violinist wasn't merely imitating the baroque solo from the radio; he was copying every nuance and intonation, an exact echo no more than a fraction of a second late. Linford felt as though he'd been selected to judge a talent show. "Hey, that's good," he said. "You ought—"

He had barely started speaking when the violinist dodged away with a movement that, whether intentionally or from inability, was less a dance than a series of head-to-toe wriggles that imparted a gypsy swaying to the violin and bow. Perhaps to blot out the interference Linford's voice represented, he began to play louder, though as sweetly as ever. He halted in the middle of the pedestrianised road, between the radio station and a department store lit up for the night. Linford stayed in the doorway until the

broadcast melody gave way to the presenter's voice, then closed the door behind him, feeling it lock. "Well done," he called. "Listen, I wonder—"

He could only assume the musician was unable to hear him for playing. No sooner had the melody ended than it recommenced while the player moved away as though guided by his bunch of faint shadows that gave him the appearance of not quite owning up to the possession of several extra limbs. Linford was growing frustrated with the behaviour of someone he only wanted to help. "Excuse me," he said, loud enough for the plate glass across the street to fling his voice back at him. "If it's an audition you need I can get you one. No strings. No commission."

The repetition of the melody didn't falter, but the violinist halted in front of a window scattered with wire skeletons sporting flimsy clothes. When the player didn't turn to face him, Linford followed. He knew talent when he heard it, and local talent was meant to be the point of local radio, but he also didn't mind feeling like the newsman he'd been until he'd found he was better at chatting between his choices of music too old to be broadcast by anyone except him. Years of that had landed him the late-night phone-in, where he sometimes felt he made less of a difference than he had in him. Now here was his chance to make one, and he wasn't about to object if putting the violinist on the air helped his reputation too, not when his contract was due for renewal. He was almost alongside the violinist—close enough to glimpse a twitching of the pale smooth cheek, apparently in time with a mouthing that accompanied the music—when the other danced, if it could be called a dance, away from him.

Unless he was mute—no, even if he was—Linford was determined to extract some sense from him. He supposed it was possible that the musician wasn't quite right in some way, but then it occurred to him that the man might already be employed and so not in need of being discovered. "Do you play with anyone?" he called at the top of his voice.

That seemed to earn him a response. The violinist gestured ahead with his bow, so tersely that Linford heard no break in the music. If the gesture hadn't demonstrated that the player was going Linford's way, he might have sought clarification of whatever he was meant to have understood. Instead he went after the musician, not running or even trotting, since he would have felt absurd, and so not managing to come within arm's length.

The green glow of a window display—clothed dummies exhibiting price tags or challenging the passer-by to guess their worth, their blank-eyed faces immobile and rudimentary as death masks moulded by a trainee—settled on the baseball cap as the player turned along the side street that led to the car park, and the cap appeared to glisten like moss. A quarter of a mile away down the main road, Linford saw a police car crested with lights speed across a junction, the closest that traffic was allowed to approach. Of course the police could drive anywhere they liked, and their cameras were perched on roofs: one of his late-night partners in conversation had declared that these days the cameras were the nearest things to God. While Linford felt no immediate need of them, there was surely nothing wrong with knowing you were watched. Waving a hand in front of his face to ward off a raw smell the side street had enclosed, he strode after the musician.

The street led directly into the car park, a patch of waste ground about two hundred yards square, strewn with minor chunks of rubble, empty bottles, squashed cans. Only the exit barrier and the solitary presence of Linford's Peugeot indicated that the square did any work. Department stores backed onto its near side, and to its right were restaurants whose bins must be responsible for the wafts of a raw smell. To the left a chain fence crowned with barbed wire protected a building site, while the far side was overlooked by three storeys of derelict offices. The musician was prancing straight for these beneath arc lights that set his intensified shadows scuttling around him.

He reached the building as Linford came abreast of the car. Without omitting so much as a quaver from the rapid eager melody, the violinist lifted one foot in a movement that suggested the climax of a dance and shoved the back door open. The long brownish stick of the bow jerked up as though to beckon Linford. Before he had time to call out, if indeed he felt obliged to, he saw the player vanish into a narrow oblong black as turned earth.

He rested a hand on the tepid roof of the car and told himself he'd done enough. If the musician was using the disused offices as a squat he was unlikely to be alone, and perhaps his thinness was a symptom of addiction. The prospect of encountering a roomful of drug addicts fell short of appealing to Linford. He was fishing out his keys when an abrupt silence filled the car park. The music, rendered hollow by the dark interior, had

ceased in the midst of a phrase, but it hadn't entirely obscured a shrill cry from within—a cry, Linford was too sure to be able to ignore it, for help.

Five minutes—less if he surprised himself by proving to be in a condition to run—would take him back to the radio station to call the police. The main street might even feature a phone booth that accepted coins rather than cards. Less than five minutes could be far too long for whoever needed help, and so Linford stalked across the car park, waving his arms at the offices as he raised his face to mouth for help at the featureless slate sky. He was hoping some policeman was observing him and would send reinforcements—he was hoping to hear a police car raise its voice on its way to him. He'd heard nothing but his own dwarfed isolated footsteps by the time he reached the ajar door.

Perhaps someone had planned to repaint it and given up early in the process. Those patches of old paint that weren't flaking were blistered. The largest blister had split open, and he saw an insect writhe into hiding inside the charred bulge as he dealt the door a slow kick to shove it wide. A short hall with two doors on each side led to a staircase that turned its back on itself halfway up. The widening glare from the car park pressed the darkness back towards the stairs, but only to thicken it on them and within the doorways. Since all the doors were open, he ventured as far as the nearest pair and peered quickly to either side of him.

Random shapes of light were stranded near the windows, all of which were broken. The floorboards of both rooms weren't much less rubbly than the car park. In the room to his left two rusty filing cabinets had been pulled fully open, though surely there could have been nothing to remove from them, let alone to put in. To his right a single office desk was leaning on a broken leg and grimacing with both the black rectangles that used to contain drawers. Perhaps it was his tension that rendered these sights unpleasant, or perhaps it was the raw smell. His will to intervene was failing as he began to wonder if he had really heard any sound except music—and then the cry was repeated above him. It could be a woman's voice or a man's grown shrill with terror, but there was no mistaking its words. "Help," it pleaded. "Oh God."

No more than a couple of streets away a nightclub emitted music and loud voices, followed by an outburst of the slamming of car doors. The noises made Linford feel less alone: there must be at least one bouncer outside the

nightclub, within earshot of a yell. Perhaps that wasn't as reassuring as he allowed it to seem, but it let him advance to the foot of the stairs and shout into the dimness that was after all not quite dark. "Hello? What's happening up there? What's wrong?"

His first word brought the others out with it. The more of them there were, the less sure he was how advisable they might be. They were met by utter silence except for a creak of the lowest stair, on which he'd tentatively stepped. He hadn't betrayed his presence, he told himself fiercely: whoever was above him had already been aware of him, or there would have been no point to the cry for help. Nevertheless once he seized the splintered banister it was on tiptoe that he ran upstairs. He was turning the bend when an object almost tripped him—the musician's baseball cap.

The banister emitted a groan not far short of vocal as he leaned on it to steady himself. The sound was answered by another cry of "Help," or most of it before the voice was muffled by a hand over the mouth. It came from a room at the far end of the corridor ahead. He was intensely aware of the moment, of scraps of light that clung like pale bats to the ceiling of the corridor, the rats' tails of the flexes that had held sockets for light bulbs, the blackness of the doorways that put him in mind of holes in the ground, the knowledge that this was his last chance to retreat. Instead he ran almost soundlessly up the stairs and past two rooms that a glance into each appeared to show were empty save for rubble and broken glass. Before he came abreast of the further left-hand room he knew it was where he had to go. For a moment he thought someone had hung a sign on the door.

It was a tattered office calendar dangling from a nail. Dates some weeks apart on it—the most recent almost a fortnight ago—were marked with ovals that in daytime might have looked more reddish. He was thinking that the marks couldn't be fingerprints, since they contained no lines, as he took a step into the room.

A shape lay on the area of the floor least visited by daylight, under the window amid shards of glass. A ragged curtain tied at the neck covered all of it except the head, which was so large and bald and swollen it reminded him of the moon. The features appeared to be sinking into it: the unreadably shadowed eyes and gaping whitish lips could have passed for craters, and its nostrils were doing without a nose. Despite its baldness, it was a woman's head, since Linford distinguished the outline of breasts under the

curtain—indeed, enough bulk for an extra pair. The head wobbled upright to greet him, its scalp springing alight with the glare from the car park, and large hands whose white flesh was loose as oversized gloves groped out from beneath the curtain. He could see no nails on them. The foot he wasn't conscious of holding in mid-air trod on a fragile object he'd failed to notice —a violinist's bow. It snapped and pitched him forward to see more of the room.

Four desk drawers had been brought into it, one to a corner. Each drawer contained a nest of newspapers and office scrap. Around the drawers were strewn crumpled sheets of music, stained dark as though—Linford thought and then tried not to—they had been employed to wipe mouths. Whatever had occurred had apparently involved the scattering about the bare floor of enough spare bows to equip a small string orchestra. By no means anxious to understand any of the contents of the room until he was well clear of it, Linford was backing away when the violin recommenced its dance behind him.

He swung around and at once saw far too much. The violinist was as bald as the figure under the window, but despite the oddly temporary nature of the bland smooth face, particularly around the nose, it was plain that the musician was female too. The long brown stick she was passing back and forth over the instrument had never been a bow—not that one would have made a difference, since the cracked violin was stringless. The perfect imitation of the broadcast melody was streaming out of her wide toothless mouth, the interior of which was at least as white as the rest of her face. Despite her task she managed a smile, though he sensed it wasn't for him but about him. She was blocking the doorway, and the idea of going closer to her—to the smell of rawness, some of which was certainly emerging from her mouth—almost crushed his mind to nothing. He had to entice her away from the doorway, and he was struggling to will himself to retreat into the room—struggling to keep his back to it—when a voice cried "Help."

It was the cry he'd come to find: exactly the cry, and it was behind him in the room. He twisted half around and saw the shape under the window begin to cover her mouth, then let her hand fall. She must have decided there was no longer any reason to cut the repetition short. "Oh God," she added, precisely as she had before, and rubbed her curtained stomach.

It wasn't just a trick, it was as much of an imitation as the music had been. He had to make more of an effort than he could remember ever having used to swallow the sound the realisation almost forced out of his mouth. For years he'd earned his living by not letting there be more than a second of silence, but could staying absolutely quiet now save him? He was unable to think what else to do, not that he was anything like sure of being capable of silence. "Help, oh God," the curtained shape repeated, more of a demand now, and rubbed her stomach harder. The player dropped the violin and the other item, and before their clatter faded she came at Linford with a writhing movement that might have been a jubilant dance—came just far enough to continue to block his escape.

His lips trembled, his teeth chattered, and he couldn't suppress his words, however idiotic they might be. "My mistake. I only—"

"My mistake. I only." Several voices took up his protest at once, but he could see no mouths uttering it, only an agitation of the lower half of the curtain. Then two small forms crawled out from underneath, immediately followed by two more, all undisguised by any kind of covering. Their plump white bodies seemed all the more wormlike for the incompleteness of the faces on the bald heads—no more than nostrils and greedily dilated mouths. Just the same they wriggled straight to him, grabbing pointed fragments of glass. He saw the violinist press her hands over her ears, and thought that she felt some sympathy for him until he grasped that she was ensuring she didn't have to imitate whatever sound he made. The window was his only chance now: if the creature beneath it was as helpless as she seemed, if he could bear to step over or on her so as to scream from the window for somebody out there to hear—But when he screamed it was from the floor where, having expertly tripped him, the young were swarming up his legs, and he found he had no interest in the words he was screaming, especially when they were repeated in chorus to him.

Becoming Visible

"*Becoming Visible* derives from an incident where I lost my temper with a salesman on the telephone, who did indeed make the mistake of enquiring why I didn't want to buy whatever product he wanted to sell. For some weeks after this he kept making deranged calls to the house, and alas, I couldn't remember the name of the firm he had originally identified. Eventually he went away, leaving me with a story idea. As you see, ideas can be the easy part—indeed, I've more of those in my notebooks than I'm likely to have time to develop."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

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"Dunbobbin."

"Is that Mr Dunbobbin?"

"Charles Dunbobbin."

"Good evening, Mr Dunbobbin. I'm calling on behalf of Clearview Windows. We're going to be in your area and we're looking for people who'd like to take part in—"

"No thank you."

"Why not?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You should."

"Sorry, what was, quiet a minute, everyone. What did you say?"

"I said why not?"

"Well, this is rich. Here's a prodigy. I've got a salesman on the phone demanding why I won't let him perform his routine."

"Bet his neighbours hide when they see him coming."

"That's it, drink up. Plenty more champagne. Does anyone think I'm being rude to our uninvited guest? Think I should let him gatecrash the party now he's got a foot in the door, so to speak?"

"You could see what he's offering, dad."

"You want me to give him a chance, do you, Amelia? Very generous of you. Hello there on the phone? Are you still with us?"

"Just try getting rid of me."

"Hush for a moment, you girls. I missed that. Hello? I didn't catch your name."

"You won't, either."

"Contain yourselves briefly, people. That passed me by too. Quell the revels while I attempt to be polite. Hello again? We're windowed, I'm afraid. We can see everything we want to see."

"You can't see me."

"Granted, but so?"

"You'll wish you could."

"I'm sorry?"

"Too late."

"What's wrong, Charles? What is he saying to you?"

"Nothing you'd believe, Jonquil. Quite funny, really, but more than a hint of the odd."

"That's me summed up, is it, Charlie? You think I'm a little queer."

"I've no idea what size you are, and no interest in your sexual preferences either. It's all right, everyone, my marbles are secure. Can't speak for our caller, though. Hello there for the last time. I think we've had enough amusement now."

"Not yet. Not by half."

"Very well then, let me have an estimate."

"I couldn't start."

"An estimate for what you're selling."

"You want someone to come for a look, do you?"

"That has to be the way you do business, hasn't it? What was the name of your firm again?"

"If you're as clever as you reckon, you tell me."

"I'll need to know the name if I'm to have the work done. You won't want to cheat yourself out of your commission."

"At least I won't be out of a job like you'd call up to make sure I was, but then I'd have to be brainless."

"Now why should you think I—"

"I'd have to be like you," I'm already saying as I poke the button to turn him into even more of a drone than his voice was, and straighten up at my desk. My mouth is full of the taste that started when he interrupted me, stale bacon fat and milk sour with acid. It's the flavour of hate, and it tastes good. I lick my lips before I swallow some of it and let my eyes creep from side to side, to be sure nobody heard anything I said.

Of course they didn't, not even the ones whose desks are closest to mine—Madge to my left, her acne growing redder now she's middle-aged and on the turn, Gordon to my right, still convinced the way he combs his hair leaves him less bald instead of only icing the shoulders of his shabby jackets with dandruff. He and Madge are too busy pleading into their own phones, wasting half their energy on not sounding desperate while they put the rest into trying to persuade another faceless voice to give a chance to the effluent we sell. We crouch behind our computer screens in the long broad room with its slick walls white as scum. I see the others bowing down to the customers while I lower myself to their level—the level of imagining you're worth something because you make enough to pay for an expensive house and stuff it with a family and all the junk they won't stop whining till they get. I've never lowered myself further than I did to reach Charles Dunbobbin, and I can't wait to do it again.

Only I've got to earn my feed, and so I make a few calls first. One woman agrees to have the window merchants visit so her neighbours will have a better view of how well off she is, and a man actually sounds grateful to have his house surveyed for an alarm, though he wouldn't need it if he didn't own too much. They bring the taste back to my mouth, and I duck lower once I've dialled Dunbobbin's number.

One ring, two gold rings, three with diamonds in "Dunbobbin." I can sound even posher than he can, and I do. "Mr Charles Dunbobbin?"

"The very same, and you are..."

"Please say if this isn't convenient, sir. I was ringing for a quick chat about wine."

"You sound like a man to know. What kind of wine?" I'm beginning to see him. He'll have blue eyes and all his teeth, and hair he's spent too much money on, and a big chin he sticks out whenever anybody disagrees with him. The cursor on the screen twitches like a nerve as I crouch lower and say "Have you much time for champagne?"

"We've quaffed a drop too much of that tonight if I'm to be truthful, old boy. Not much call for it at the restaurant, though."

"What was the occasion, sir?"

"Our younger daughter's results. We've had a few of her friends and a popping of corks."

"Who are you speaking to, Charles?"

That's his wife, bristling with jewels and doused in perfume to cover up her smell, her hair glossy as hot tar, the valley of her flesh bared in front of her. "Just a man about a bottle," he tells her.

"Odd hour to phone. Don't be long. The girls are dancing with anticipation of the fireworks."

I'm afraid he may cut me off before he learns how he's been tricked, and so as soon as his cheek presses against mine I say "Did you mention a restaurant, sir?"

"We own one. You may have heard of it. The Groaning Board."

Of course I haven't, since I've never eaten in a restaurant, not when my father showed me all the cuttings he'd collected about diseases people caught there, but I say "I know it has a reputation."

His chin edges forward. "What kind are you saying that would be?"

"Your kind, Mr Dunbobbin."

Maybe he thinks I said he was kind, because when he speaks it's only "You were going to talk to me about wine."

"Your kind."

"You keep saying that, and it signifies..."

"The kind you're going to make."

"I wonder if you've confused me. What sort of wine are you under the impression I make?"

"The sort whiners do."

"Who is this?" he demands, low but so fierce I hear his spit rattling the mouthpiece. "By God, you crazy lunatic, you've rung once already, haven't you?"

"That's me," I say, grinning down at him, but I'm about to tell him how his insult has worsened his situation when a fat hand with one finger bulging out of a ring plants itself on top of my computer monitor.

I lift my head slowly to give my grin time to straighten itself. Mr Maudlin is protruding his purple waistcoat at me as his donkey teeth force his sloppy lips apart. "Are you winning?" he inquires with the stupid heartiness I always think is meant to contradict his name.

"I'm not whining." I can't resist that answer, not when the voice I've crushed against my ear is snarling "You call this number once more and I'll have you traced." I kill it and let the corners of my mouth lift my face towards the supervisor.

"That's what I like to hear," he brays, but then "Are you ill?"

I dig my knuckles into my mouth until I've finished swallowing. "Just a taste."

"I should give it some medicine when you get it home. Shift's finished."

Sometimes I feel as if he put me at the end of the room the same way teachers used to sit me at the back of the class because I wouldn't waste my time with the drivel they had to teach to live, but my position means nobody can overhear me or watch me from behind. "See you tomorrow," I say, sounding enough like the rest of them to fool them, not that it takes much.

I let my bicycle off its chain on the cold sweaty pipe in the Gents and carry it down the worn concrete stairs and out of the side door. A puppy or a rat scuttles down the alley, away from the bins outside the Chinese restaurant, where the kitchen is full of jabbering not much more alien than the talk that surrounds me every day. Above the senseless assortment of roofs the clouds are a slab of grease, holding down the heat of all the drudges who tramp the streets at lunch time. They've gone home now to pretend they've lives worth living, only some have changed into this season's uniform and are swarming to the lights of clubs and pubs. I pedal past couples stuck together by their hands and imitating dummies in shop windows, past people who've given up pretending that a home is worth the effort and are nesting in the doorways of dead shops. Then there are buildings that are being mushed

and burned, and a park with a lake that litter is soaking up and trees that move about so much I have to keep my curtains shut. I cycle through, past two children undressing each other in a shelter, and then I'm where I try to live.

The faded stale three-storey house smells of stewed tea and charred vegetables. On the ground floor Mr Dunn and his parrot are screeching at each other to shut up. On the middle floor Mrs Venable is talking to a play on the radio as if she's got friends in. I haul my bicycle to the top, over the threadbare carpet narrower than the stairs under the grudging bulbs. I slip past my door and shove it closed with the back wheel.

The threads I tacked at ankle height between the skirting boards are undisturbed. I switch on the lights in the bathroom and kitchen and the room that's everything else and empty disinfectant into the bath I only hope is hot enough to kill the day's germs. When it finishes stinging and starts lulling me to sleep I dry myself and sit at my table. The first page of the book I'm going to write remains blank, and I find myself putting faces to the voices in the play under the floor. I'd rather do that to people who haven't been made up. I listen for the Dunbobbin phone to stop ringing as I crawl under my mother's old quilt on the couch.

A girl answers, not one I remember having heard. "Hi, it's Theodora."

"Theodora Dunbobbin?"

"That's me."

"Amelia's elder sister."

"Is it me you want?"

"Don't you worry, you'll do."

"No, I meant did you want her? I call her Me."

"You must be close. That's good. That's what I like to hear."

"Are you a friend of hers?"

"As much as I am of your father. She did well, I hear."

"At her exams? She did, but she nearly gave herself a breakdown. I keep telling mum and dad not to push her so hard."

"People survive breakdowns, take my word for it. Maybe it's the only way she can live up to your example."

"You're joking, aren't you? I didn't do half as well."

"Not a jealous inch in you though, is that right? Still looking after your little sister. Feeling a trifle unnoticed all the same, I can see."

"A bit."

"What do you do when you want to be noticed? What's your talent?"

"I don't know. I used to dance."

"You still can then, can't you? You never forget. It's like cycling. Go and fetch your father and we'll show him what you can do."

"I don't get this."

"You will, and so will Charles. I guarantee he'll be impressed."

I'm in control. No sooner have I drawn a breath that makes my chest throb than she's back.

"I've brought my dad."

"I don't want to speak to him this time, but give him a message."

"He wants me to give you a message, dad. Don't take the phone. He sounds serious."

"Tell him I can see you and if you don't do as I say he'll know I can."

She tells him, and I hear him gasp "It's him."

"That's who I am. That's who it's going to be whenever any of you picks up the phone. Tell Charles to lie on the floor. Do it now."

"Dad, he wants you to lie on the floor. You better had. I'm frightened."

"Is he down? Tell him to stay down till he's told he can get up. Now then, let's show him a routine he won't forget. Let's see you dance, Theodora. Dance on him."

"Dad, he wants—"

"Never mind telling him, show him. Dance all over him. Start on his face."

"Christ, Teddy, what are you—Oh, oh God, my—"

"Dad, I'm sorry. Don't try and get away, he can see you. I'm so sorry, dad."

The trouble is, I can't see her. That's so frustrating I wish I had a phone, except there's nobody I'd want to hear from. I unclench my hands on the quilt and roll over, away from the overhead light I can't sleep without, and pull the quilt over my face. I watch Dunbobbin being danced on until he has

too little of a face to keep me awake. In the morning I can't see him at all. I want to see him realise what he's brought on himself, but for that I need to hear him. I send some of the stale taste of hate down to the ache in my stomach with a glass of milk and force down the contents of a can of beans. My mother always said that if food wasn't in a can or wrapped in cellophane it would have germs. I move my chair around the table and rest my face on the blank page, which has nothing for me but a smell of paper. I spring to my feet and stalk between the threads and out to the phone box on the far side of the park.

There's no response from the Dunbobbin house. Charles and his girls are either out or sleeping off the party, in which case I hope he's dreaming about me. He will. I'm so eager to renew our acquaintance that I cycle early to work.

"Good to see a smiling face," Mr Maudlin chortles as I tramp to my desk and call Charles. Perhaps the happy family is at the restaurant, but when I find the number an answering machine is waiting, as if I'd ever be trapped like that. Now the drudges are at their desks, and I add my pleas to the mumble of the room. I've succeeded in netting two fools by the time Jonquil Dunbobbin's voice takes over the machine's job. "The Groaning Board."

"Are you the restaurant?"

"Part of it," she thinks she's quipping, with a flash of her teeth and her jewels as idiotically extravagant as her name. "What can we do for you?"

"Can you fit in a mob of twelve people tonight?"

"What time?"

"About eight?"

"That's our busiest, but let me look. We should be able to accommodate you."

"I ought to have said thirteen people. I nearly forgot myself. Can you cope with that number?"

"That many more the merrier, but we do like a deposit when it's a large party."

"I don't think I can get in before eight. You're where my daughter wants to celebrate passing her exams."

"We've had some festivities ourselves."

Shouldn't she be thinking I'm the same kind of creature she is, a victim of parasites called children? My mouth is filling with the taste as my skull begins to tingle with frustration when I hear Gordon on my right, and I'm inspired. "I'd be able to bring a deposit if I didn't need to be here for my daughter," I say into the secret place between my hands. "She's in a wheelchair, you see."

Jonquil Dunbobbin exhibits a caring smile that gleams like her necklace. "In that case there'll be no problem. We'll look forward to seeing you and your party at eight."

"I'm looking forward already," I assure her, and that's true for hours, so that I scarcely hear myself talking to the faceless, even the several we manage to snare. A few minutes before eight I call the restaurant and tell a waitress the party will be there in half an hour. Half an hour later I tell her we've broken down on the way. I let the Dunbobbins have a good stare at the thirteen empty places while I speak to three people as unimportant as Charles, and then I ring back. As soon as the waitress asks when I think we may arrive I hear Charlie shout "I'll speak to him."

I lower my head to meet him and see his chin stick up at me. "May we know what the problem is?" he says.

"It's you."

"You'll forgive me, but I don't follow."

"It's you, Chas. It's you."

"Sorry." He sounds as if he very slightly is. "You've the advantage of me. Should I know you?"

"Don't you wish you did?"

His chin tugs his lips so tight his voice can barely escape. "Have we spoken recently?"

"Chas, you remembered."

"It's you."

There's so little to him that he even has to steal my lines. "Are you always that quick?" I say through my tilted grin. "Maybe just in bed with Jonquil, eh?"

"Good God, what kind of—" He rubs his mouth to loosen it, and a different tone of voice comes out. "Look—"

"I'm doing that, believe me. Me and God."

"Look, if I offended you the first time you called I—I apologise. I know we've all got to make our living as best we can."

"Like you, you mean."

"There are worse ways, I should think."

"Like mine."

"I didn't say that, did I? I'm trying not to offend you. I just hope that if I did you feel you're even."

The taste of hate is bigger than my mouth, so that a pool of saliva appears on the desk. It froths as I say "You think I'd want to be even with you?"

"What do you want, then? What's this supposed to be about?"

"I'll tell you what I want," I say lower than ever, and the pool shivers like a lake under a storm. "I want you to know how worthless you are, and everything you've spent your money on. I want you to see how nothing you've got can protect you from someone like me."

"Well, that's intriguing. That's certainly ambitious. Are you in a mood to give me an idea of a few of the ways you might try to bring it off?"

My senses have almost closed around the sight of him when I hear Gordon repeating "Clearview Windows", and I know what Charlie's up to—he's using all the words he can in the hope of overhearing where I am. "You'll find out," I say between my hands. "Part of it's the waiting."

"If you—" he starts, but I've gone. I rub away the pool on my desk and come back into the room. My grin jerks my head up, and Mr Maudlin matches the expression. Anything he approves of doesn't deserve approval, and I see how petty I've been—how I've done nothing worth doing to Charlie so far.

In the morning my hatred has a new taste. The world tastes of it, a cold flavour of metal and ash. Leaves on the trees in the park wither as I glare at them. Water by the kerbs holds litter in its icy traps. It's my day off. I know I can call from the phone by the park, but I walk to where the houses have bigger ideas of themselves. I shut myself in a booth and dial Charlie's number while the taste spreads out of me and turns the mirror above the phone as grey as the end of the street that leads towards his house. Two glittering rings and a girl's voice says "Hello?"

"It's Theodora, isn't it? Theodora Dunbobbin."

That takes her off guard, and my face is gone before she says "How did you know?"

"Because I can see you." Which I can, skirt too short to have cost half as much as it did, and half a shirt that lets her stomach peer out one-eyed, and too much expensive makeup, and hair that's a costly mess. "Do you understand? I see you, and I'll see if you don't do exactly as you're told."

Her breaths and her voice shrink into themselves. "What do I have to do?"

"Answer this question first and don't do anything but answer it. Is your father there?"

Her lips pinch together, pulling up her big chin that I bet she blames him for. "He's in the next room."

"Don't make any fuss, but call him. I want him to be watching you as well."

"Dad." When that doesn't work her voice goes higher and louder. "Dad."

His chin is first into the room. "Is it... "

"I think so."

"You think you know me, do you, Theodora? You don't know a scrap of the worst." Presumably because her father's there, she doesn't sound nearly as apprehensive as she should. "When did Chas last see you with no clothes on?" I say, rubbing my grin clear in the mirror.

"Why are you asking me that?"

"Because it's going to be now, only this time there'll be someone else watching. Take that top off for a start."

"Dad, he wants—"

"Don't tell him, show him. Take it off or you'll find out I haven't even started doing what I can do to you and yours."

"It's coming off. You said you could see."

I can. Her bare breasts flop into the open, pink-nosed as newborn rats. My skull rises, throbbing with my talent. I've taken control of her—I've been able to ever since I dreamed her name! I feel my mind closing around the Dunbobbins, but I'm opening my mouth to have her remove her skirt when

the phone screams in my ear. "Who are you, you sick swine? What are you saying to my daughter?"

"Jonquil. Hello."

"Don't you dare talk like that to me. You leave my children alone or I'll find you and deal with you before the police do," she cries, jabbing and scratching at the air with the light on all her jewels, and tries to damage my ear by slamming down the expensive antique phone. It only makes the noise phones make when they're cut off, and I grin as I hang up its frustrated monotonous moan.

I could call them back at once, but they'll be expecting me. I want to see them when they don't know they're being watched. I walk to their house rather than cycle, since that would single me out as too thrifty for their district. The houses pale as they retreat and try to hide from me, but the cold makes me shiver. I detour to a store that sells clothes for people who don't want to be noticed. I buy a padded grey coat, and as I catch sight of myself in a mirror that bows to me I see I've another reason to grin.

By the time I reach Charlie's street I'm as hot as I was cold. I might feel closed into myself if I didn't see through the show the properties are putting on, stagecoach wheels leaning against them, old lamps sticking out of them, curtains tied back as if the front rooms are stages. I'm expecting Charlie's house to be called Dunbobbin, but it hasn't got a name. It's only as big as its neighbours, not nearly as impressive as he made it sound with his champagne party—it has to leave space for a Mercedes and a Toyota in the drive. I've pulled up the hood of my coat, and I don't grin until I've strolled by. But my grin doesn't last, because I couldn't see a single Dunbobbin. All the curtains are drawn.

Charlie and his sluts must be afraid I'm watching, but they're making their house look how I kept my parents' house until the landlord went and opened the curtains. My parents were the only people I ever met who were worth knowing, but however hard I thought, I couldn't stop them and their minds shrivelling and dying. My brain is stronger now, and I ought to feel pleased to have driven the Dunbobbins under cover, but I want to see them so that my thoughts can seize them. I walk to the end of the street and swing around a thin tree sprouting from the pavement and with half its branches snapped. I've just come abreast of Charlie's house when the front-room curtains twitch like an eye standing on end and pretending to be asleep.

I don't run, I only twist my hooded head aside. Once there's a tree between me and the house I walk faster, my clenched teeth aching with rage. I'm close to the end of the street when I hear a front door open, and at the corner when Charlie calls above his stuck-out chin "Excuse me..." I sidle around the corner, and then I do run, into an alley that leads behind his house. I try his back gate as I pass in case I can hide in his home—it would be like squatting in his mind. The gate is bolted, and I dash out of the alley and across another road where all the houses are infected with alarms and into an alley that takes me even further from where I live.

Most of an hour later I slam myself into my flat. The pretentious streets I had to detour through haven't driven away the smell of the waste in the alleys at the backsides of the houses; they've only turned it into more of a flavour of hatred. My skull is blazing with all the heat my flight trapped inside my coat—with fury at my having had to act like a coward, a criminal, a Dunbobbin. I fling myself on the couch and grab my eyes, and as soon as the light stops pounding enough to let me see I grope downstairs and find my way to the phone box.

When Charlie answers my lips peel back, because he doesn't sound nearly so sure of himself—he doesn't sound quite like himself. "Hello?"

"Can I help you?"

Just in time I understand that I'm seeing his chin deflate not because he's beaten but because it isn't Chas at all, and I'm seeing the real face. "Can I help you?" I say in as much of his voice as I can steal.

"Who is this, please?"

I'd repeat that too if it wouldn't make me almost as stupid as him. I can see his helmet now, and his uniform as dark as the clothes of the men who took away my parents. He wants me to talk long enough to be traced. "Nobody you'd like to know," I say and hang up. I'm halfway to my flat when I dash back and grab the receiver to wipe off my fingerprints.

I eat my dinner to keep the fear down, vegetable soup straight out of the can even though my mother said you should cook everything. Maybe I'm trying to make myself sick so that I can stay off work. The thought of the police arresting me in front of everyone—bringing me as low as them—glares in my eyes, harder when I try to sleep. I do my best to change the thought into a rage at it, which urges me off the couch in the morning, the

way my mother used to get me out of bed, saying this would be the day when everyone would see how special I was.

I'm so hungry to speak to Charles I do without breakfast. The chill ashen taste of the day is sufficient to fill my mouth. When I speed into the car park and vault off the bicycle, the way I used to make my mother gasp and cheer, a gust of paleness like my breath grown huge seems to sink into the concrete of the building. I'll make Charlie's house blanch like that, and him. I dig my nails into the seat of my bicycle while the lift raises us, then I wheel my companion to the Gents and chain it up. Once I've shaken the padlock hard I stride along the corridor, tasting some of what I'll say to Charles. But Gordon is already in the office.

His coat is, at any rate, the coat he always wears outside as soon as he begins to moan about the cold. Cycling has kept me hot enough, a heat that concentrates itself in my head. I'm wondering if I have time to focus it on Charlie when Gordon appears, heralded by the squeal of the door to the Gents. He must have been the grunting and complaining I could hear in there. He looks more harassed than ever, but if he's waiting for me to care he'll die of waiting. He mutters about the weather and his family and the ends they have to make meet, and I'd tell him to get rid of some of his problems, starting with the family, if they bother him so much except I'm saving my thoughts for Charles. I manage to agree with everything Gordon says until Mr Maudlin and his minions gather and I can stop feeling expected to talk to anyone in the room. "Good luck, everyone," Mr Maudlin chortles once the desks have trapped their drudges, and claps his fat hands to indicate it's time to start work.

How fast can the police trace a call they're waiting for? Maybe I should confine myself to phones away from the office, however furious having to hide among the drudges makes me. I'm ducking lower to hide my grimace at being forced to pretend I resemble them when someone sneaks into the room.

Before he stoops over Mr Maudlin's desk I see he has a small black moustache as straight as his face is lopsided, and temples eating away his hair. One of his shoulders jerks up and wags about, lifting his jacket to display more of his pale blue suit than is worth a look, as he talks rapidly and low. Mr Maudlin tries a smile, but not for long. "You called earlier," I see him whisper.

"Let's step outside," the man whispers back—challenging him to a fight? Mr Maudlin follows him into the corridor, and I'm forgetting the man's face when I hear Charlie's voice outside the door. The pool of froth that appears on the desk drags my head low so fast I feel as if I'm going to disappear into it. I can't grasp what he's saying until I realise only two men are talking out there. The bearded man is using Charlie's voice to say "Apparently he can't deal with rejection. He turned very nasty when I wouldn't buy his spiel." If that's meant to make me lose my temper, it almost does. I grind the dead phone against my jaw as Mr Maudlin says "That's not on at all. I tell all my people to always, whatever the response, not that I'm saying for a moment yours was anything but courteous, be polite."

"That wouldn't be anyone's word for him. When I wouldn't buy he accused me of whining, let me tell you, and then he rang up the restaurant my wife and I run and made a false booking. And yesterday he called my daughter and made suggestions I won't repeat."

"I can only offer you my deepest apologies, Mr Dunbobbin. hope you've informed the police."

"Not yet."

He's trying to throw me, I see that now. He's trying to convince me my talent is less than it is. Maybe he's talking while the bearded man keeps mum. "I wanted to remember the name of the firm he was calling for," he says. "I knew I'd heard it, and this morning it came to me."

"The trouble is, Clearview could be more than one of my chaps."

"I'll know him." In order to infuriate me even more than he and Mr Maudlin already have, Charlie dares to laugh. "Would you believe it, be thought my daughter was following his instructions when all she was doing was sticking out her tongue at him. He seemed to think she was someone else. Kept calling her by some stupid name we'd never have dreamed of burdening her with."

The pain of bone and flesh ground down beneath plastic spreads up my face to the white-hot core of my head. My body has grown stiff as metal, and I'm about to stalk to the door when Charlie says "All the same, it's no laughing matter. The man needs seeing to. He didn't only lose us business at the restaurant, he had the gall to claim the party was for his daughter who was in a wheelchair."

I hear a clatter to my right. Gordon has finished a call and dropped his phone. Though nearly all the drudges are talking, I hear a breathless silence underlying the murmur. It feels as if I'm poised to take control. Then Mr Maudlin, more subdued than I've ever heard him, says "If you wait here I'll have a word with someone."

"I'd rather come in, thank you. I told you I'd know him," Charlie says and marches into the office, or the bearded man does. His gaze starts at the front of the room and rises slowly as a gun to level itself at the back row of desks. It fixes them as he paces towards them, and I meet it with a blank stare behind which all my power is hiding. I'll betray nothing if I can just stop my legs from shivering under the desk as my power leaves the rest of my body for my skull. I'm about to lift the phone and place a call when Gordon steps away from his desk, having tangled with his chair, and grabs his fat grey hooded coat from the stand. The man is in the far aisle, and gestures at Mr Maudlin to cut Gordon off. "It's him."

Gordon shoves one arm into the coat and lurches towards the door. The coat snags on a computer monitor and almost tips it over. When Mr Maudlin trots at him, trying to look both sympathetic and reproving, Gordon shouts "Leave me alone." Mr Maudlin tries to catch his less fat arm, but Gordon shoves him away and dodges into the corridor. "Leave me alone, can't you," he yells as Mr Maudlin and the bearded man chase him. More of that fades down the stairs, and I stare at Madge as if I've no more idea of what's happening than she has. Eventually only Mr Maudlin reappears and watches everyone until they, we, go back to work.

Having to drone so as to go unnoticed is close to unbearable. I feel as if my talent is guttering somewhere in the dimness of my skull. I repeat the formulas over and over while I struggle to understand what happened, but I can't think for performing my idiotic toil. If Gordon has drawn the chase away from me, he has also taken the credit. At last I'm allowed to go home, but even when I stare at the blank page I'm unable to think. I hear my mother tell me "Always know you're better," and in my sleep too, what there is of it. In the morning she's alone, but the blank page stays ahead of me as my body cycles to work.

Mr Maudlin is waiting for me. When I try to head for my desk he beckons me over. The power starts to reach for my eyes until I hear what he wants—what he would have told whoever was first into the office. Gordon won't be

coming back. It seems he's heading for a breakdown. He was working at two jobs to buy things for his daughter in the wheelchair, but he'd only told the tax people about one. Charlie has taken pity on him and won't be calling the police.

"You think you know people," I say, and stroll to duck behind my screen. I can't have him wondering why I'm grinning as comprehension lights up the inside of my skull. My talent is as strong as I knew it was—it made Gordon take the blame. It wasn't as powerful when I called Charlie, which is why I saw him wrong, but now I know how he looks. I've only his word that his daughter isn't named Theodora or that she didn't do as I said. Soon I'll find out, when they least expect it, and there will be others. The world is my blank page. Before I'm finished its parasites will see me for what I am. I stroke the phone and wait for the drudges to gather, to give my voice somewhere to hide.

1999

No Story in It

"*No Story In It* was written around an Alan M. Clark painting—the image the luckless protagonist poses for his book cover. As with *Never To Be Heard*, the Clark image let me focus ideas I'd already scattered through my notebooks for possible development."—Ramsey Campbell, introduction to the story in *Dark Terrors 5*, 2000

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'Grandad.'

Boswell turned from locking the front door to see Gemima running up the garden path cracked by the late September heat. Her mother April was at the tipsy gate, and April's husband Rod was climbing out of their rusty crimson Nissan. 'Oh, Dad,' April cried, slapping her forehead hard enough to make him wince. 'You're off to London. How could we forget it was today, Rod?'

Rod pursed thick lips beneath a ginger moustache broader than his otherwise schoolboyish plump face. 'We must have had other things on our mind. It looks as if I'm joining you, Jack.'

'You'll tell me how,' Boswell said as Gemima's small hot five-year-old hand found his grasp.

'We've just learned I'm a cut-back.'

'More of a set-back, will it be? I'm sure there's a demand for teachers of your experience.'

'I'm afraid you're a bit out of touch with the present.'

Boswell saw his daughter willing him not to take the bait. 'Can we save the discussion for my return?' he said. 'I've a bus and then a train to catch.'

'We can run your father to the station, can't we? We want to tell him our proposal.' Rod bent the passenger seat forward. 'Let's keep the men together,' he said.

As Boswell hauled the reluctant belt across himself he glanced up. Usually Gemima reminded him poignantly of her mother at her age—large brown eyes with high startled eyebrows, inquisitive nose, pale prim lips—but in

the mirror April's face looked not much less small, just more lined. The car jerked forward, grating its innards, and the radio announced 'A renewed threat of war—' before Rod switched it off. Once the car was past the worst of the potholes in the main road, Boswell said 'So propose.'

'We wondered how you were finding life on your own,' Rod said. 'We thought it mightn't be the ideal situation for someone with your turn of mind.'

'Rod. Dad—'

Her husband gave the mirror a look he might have aimed at a child who'd spoken out of turn in class. 'Since we've all overextended ourselves, we think the solution is to pool our resources.'

'Which are those?'

'We wondered how the notion of our moving in with you might sound.'

'Sounds fun,' Gemima cried.

Rod's ability to imagine living with Boswell for any length of time showed how desperate he, if not April, was. 'What about your own house?' Boswell said.

'There are plenty of respectable couples eager to rent these days. We'd pay you rent, of course. Surely it makes sense for all of us.'

'Can I give you a decision when I'm back from London?' Boswell said, mostly to April's hopeful reflection. 'Maybe you won't have to give up your house. Maybe soon I'll be able to offer you financial help.'

'Christ,' Rod snarled, a sound like a gnashing of teeth.

To start with the noise the car made was hardly harsher. Boswell thought the rear bumper was dragging on the road until tenement blocks jerked up in the mirror as though to seize the vehicle, which ground loudly to a halt. 'Out,' Rod cried in a tone poised to pounce on nonsense.

'Is this like one of your stories, Grandad?' Gemima giggled as she followed Boswell out of the car.

'No,' her father said through his teeth and flung the boot open. 'This is real.'

Boswell responded only by going to look. The suspension had collapsed, thrusting the wheels up through the rusty arches. April took Gemima's hand, Boswell sensed not least to keep her quiet, and murmured 'Oh, Rod.'

Boswell was staring at the tenements. Those not boarded up were tattooed with graffiti inside and out, and he saw watchers at as many broken as unbroken windows. He thought of the parcel a fan had once given him with instructions not to open it until he was home, the present that had been one of Jean's excuses for divorcing him. 'Come with me to the station,' he urged, 'and you can phone whoever you need to phone.'

When the Aireys failed to move immediately he stretched out a hand to them and saw his shadow printed next to theirs on a wall, either half demolished or never completed, in front of the tenements. A small child holding a woman's hand, a man slouching beside them with a fist stuffed in his pocket, a second man gesturing empty-handed at them... The shadows seemed to blacken, the sunlight to brighten like inspiration, but that had taken no form when the approach of a taxi distracted him. His shadow roused itself as he dashed into the rubbly road to flag the taxi down. 'I'll pay,' he told Rod.

'Here's Jack Boswell, everyone,' Quentin Sedgwick shouted. 'Here's our star author. Come and meet him.'

It was going to be worth it, Boswell thought. Publishing had changed since all his books were in print—indeed, since any were. Sedgwick, a tall thin young but balding man with wiry veins exposed by a singlet and shorts, had met him at Waterloo, pausing barely long enough to deliver an intense handshake before treating him to a headlong ten-minute march and a stream of enthusiasm for his work. The journey ended at a house in the midst of a crush of them resting their fronts on the pavement. At least the polished nameplate of Cassandra Press had to be visible to anyone who passed. Beyond it a hall that smelled of curried vegetables was occupied by a double-parked pair of bicycles and a steep staircase not much wider than their handlebars. 'Amazing, isn't it?' Sedgwick declared. 'It's like one of your early things, being able to publish from home. Except in a story of yours the computers would take over and tell us what to write.'

'I don't remember writing that,' Boswell said with some unsureness.

'No, I just made it up. Not bad, was it?' Sedgwick said, running upstairs. 'Here's Jack Boswell, everyone...'

A young woman with a small pinched studded face and glistening black hair spiky as an armoured fist emerged from somewhere on the ground floor as Sedgwick threw open doors to reveal two cramped rooms, each featuring a computer terminal, at one of which an even younger woman with blonde hair the length of her filmy flowered blouse was composing an advertisement. 'Starts with C, ends with e,' Sedgwick said of her, and of the studded woman 'Bren, like the gun. Our troubleshooter.'

Boswell grinned, feeling someone should. 'Just the three of you?'

'Small is sneaky, I keep telling the girls. While the big houses are being dragged down by excess personnel, we move into the market they're too cumbersome to handle. Carole, show him his page.'

The publicist saved her work twice before displaying the Cassandra Press catalogue. She scrolled past the colophon, a C with a P hooked on it, and a parade of authors: Ferdy Thorn, ex-marine turned ecological warrior; Germaine Gossett, feminist fantasy writer; Torin Bergman, Scandinavia's leading magic realist... 'Forgive my ignorance,' Boswell said, 'but these are all new to me.'

'They're the future.' Sedgwick cleared his throat and grabbed Boswell's shoulder to lean him towards the computer. 'Here's someone we all know.'

BOSWELL'S BACK! the page announced in letters so large they left room only for a shout-line from, Boswell remembered, *The Observer* twenty years ago—'Britain's best SF writer since Wyndham and Wells'—and a scattering of titles: *The Future Just Began*, *Tomorrow Was Yesterday*, *Wave Goodbye To Earth*, *Terra Spells Terror*, *Science Lies In Wait*... 'It'll look better when we have covers to reproduce,' Carole said. 'I couldn't write much. I don't know your work.'

'That's because I've been devouring it all over again, Jack. You thought you might have copies for my fair helpers, didn't you?'

'So I have,' Boswell said, struggling to spring the catches of his aged briefcase.

'See what you think when you've read these. Some for you as well, Bren,' Sedgwick said, passing out Boswell's last remaining hardcovers of several of his books. 'Here's a Hugo winner and look, this one got the Prix du Fantastique Écologique. Will you girls excuse us now? I hear the call of lunch.'

They were in sight of Waterloo Station again when he seized Boswell's elbow to steer him into the Delphi, a tiny restaurant crammed with deserted tables spread with pink-and-white checked cloths. 'This is what one of our greatest authors looks like, Nikos,' Sedgwick announced. 'Let's have all we can eat and a litre of your red if that's your style, Jack, to be going on with.'

The massive dark-skinned variously hairy proprietor brought them a carafe without a stopper and a brace of glasses Boswell would have expected to hold water. Sedgwick filled them with wine and dealt Boswell's a vigorous clunk. 'Here's to us. Here's to your legendary unpublished books.'

'Not for much longer.'

'What a scoop for Cassandra. I don't know which I like best, *Don't Make Me Mad* or *Only We Are Left*. Listen to this, Nikos. There are going to be so many mentally ill people they have to be given the vote and everyone's made to have one as a lodger. And a father has to seduce his daughter or the human race dies out.'

'Very nice.'

'Ignore him, Jack. They couldn't be anyone else but you.'

'I'm glad you feel that way. You don't think they're a little too dark even for me?'

'Not a shade, and certainly not for Cassandra. Wait till you read our other books.'

Here Nikos brought meze, an oval plate splattered with varieties of goo. Sedgwick waited until Boswell had transferred a sample of each to his plate and tested them with a piece of lukewarm bread. 'Good?'

'Most authentic,' Boswell found it in himself to say.

Sedgwick emptied the carafe into their glasses and called for another. Blackened lamb chops arrived too, and prawns dried up by grilling, withered meatballs, slabs of smoked ham that could have been used to sole shoes... Boswell was working on a token mouthful of viciously spiced sausage when Sedgwick said 'Know how you could delight us even more?'

Boswell swallowed and had to salve his mouth with half a glassful of wine. 'Tell me,' he said tearfully.

'Have you enough unpublished stories for a collection?'

'I'd have to write another to bring it up to length.'

'Wait till I let the girls know. Don't think they aren't excited, they were just too overwhelmed by meeting you to show it. Can you call me as soon as you have an idea for the story or the cover?'

'I think I may have both.'

'You're an example to us all. Can I hear?'

'Shadows on a ruined wall. A man and woman and her child, and another man reaching out to them, I'd say in warning. Ruined tenements in the background. Everything overgrown. Even if the story isn't called *We Are Tomorrow*, the book can be.'

'Shall I give you a bit of advice? Go further than you ever have before. Imagine something you couldn't believe anyone would pay you to write.'

Despite the meal, Boswell felt too elated to imagine that just now. His capacity for observation seemed to have shut down too, and only an increase in the frequency of passers-by outside the window roused it. 'What time is it?' he wondered, fumbling his watch upwards on his thin wrist.

'Not much past five,' Sedgwick said, emptying the carafe yet again. 'Still lunchtime.'

'Good God, if I miss my train I'll have to pay double.'

'Next time we'll see about paying for your travel.' Sedgwick gulped the last of the wine as he threw a credit card on the table to be collected later. 'I wish you'd said you had to leave this early. I'll have Bren send copies of our books to you,' he promised as Boswell panted into Waterloo, and called after him down the steps into the Underground 'Don't forget, imagine the worst. That's what we're for.'

For three hours the worst surrounded Boswell.

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WOMEN'S GROUPS CHALLENGE ANTI-GUN RULING

RALLY AGAINST COMPUTER CHIPS IN CRIMINALS ENDS IN VIOLENCE: THREE DEAD, MANY INJURED

Far more commuters weren't reading the news than were: many wore headphones that leaked percussion like distant discos in the night, while the sole book to be seen was *Page Turner*, the latest Turner adventure from Midas Paperbacks, bound in either gold or silver depending, Boswell supposed, on the reader's standards. Sometimes drinking helped him create, but just now a bottle of wine from the buffet to stave off a hangover only froze in his mind the image of the present in ruins and overgrown by the future, of the shapes of a family and a figure poised to intervene printed on the remains of a wall by a flare of painful light. He had to move on from thinking of them as the Aireys and himself, or had he? One reason Jean had left him was that she'd found traces of themselves and April in nearly all his work, even where none was intended; she'd become convinced he was wishing the worst for her and her child when he'd only meant a warning, by no means mostly aimed at them. His attempts to invent characters wholly unlike them had never convinced her and hadn't improved his work either. He needn't consider her feelings now, he thought sadly. He had to write whatever felt true—the best story he had in him.

It was remaining stubbornly unformed when the train stammered into the terminus. A minibus strewn with drunks and defiant smokers deposited him at the end of his street. He assumed his house felt empty because of Rod's proposal. Jean had taken much of the furniture they hadn't passed on to April, but Boswell still had seats where he needed to sit and folding canvas chairs for visitors, and nearly all his books. He was in the kitchen, brewing coffee while he tore open the day's belated mail, when the phone rang.

He took the handful of bills and the airmail letter he'd saved for last into his workroom, where he sat on the chair April had loved spinning and picked up the receiver. 'Jack Boswell.'

'Jack? They're asleep.'

Presumably this explained why Rod's voice was low. 'Is that an event?' Boswell said.

'It is for April at the moment. She's been out all day looking for work, any work. She didn't want to tell you in case you already had too much on your mind.'

'But now you have.'

'I was hoping things had gone well for you today.'

'I think you can do more than that.'

'Believe me, I'm looking as hard as she is.'

'No, I mean you can assure her when she wakes that not only do I have a publisher for my two novels and eventually a good chunk of my backlist, but they've asked me to put together a new collection too.'

'Do you mind if I ask for her sake how much they're advancing you?'

'No pounds and no shillings or pence.'

'You're saying they'll pay you in euros?'

'I'm saying they don't pay an advance to me or any of their authors, but they pay royalties every three months.'

'I take it your agent has approved the deal.'

'It's a long time since I've had one of those, and now I'll be ten per cent better off. Do remember I've plenty of experience.'

'I could say the same. Unfortunately it isn't always enough.'

Boswell felt his son-in-law was trying to render him as insignificant as Rod believed science fiction writers ought to be. He tore open the airmail envelope with the little finger of the hand holding the receiver. 'What's that?' Rod demanded.

'No panic. I'm not destroying any of my work,' Boswell told him, and smoothed out the letter to read it again. 'Well, this is timely. The Saskatchewan Conference on Prophetic Literature is giving me the Wendigo Award for a career devoted to envisioning the future.'

'Congratulations. Will it help?'

'It certainly should, and so will the story I'm going to write. Maybe even you will be impressed. Tell April not to let things pull her down,' Boswell said as he rang off, and 'Such as you' only after he had.

Boswell wakened with a hangover and an uneasy sense of some act left unperformed. The image wakened with him: small child holding woman's hand, man beside them, second man gesturing. He groped for the mug of water by the bed, only to find he'd drained it during the night. He stumbled to the bathroom and emptied himself while the cold tap filled the mug. In time he felt equal to yet another breakfast of the kind his doctor had warned

him to be content with. Of course, he thought as the sound of chewed bran filled his skull, he should have called Sedgwick last night about the Wendigo Award. How early could he call? Best to wait until he'd worked on the new story. He tried as he washed up the breakfast things and the rest of the plates and utensils in the sink, but his mind seemed as paralysed as the shadows on the wall it kept showing him. Having sat at his desk for a while in front of the wordless screen, he dialled Cassandra Press.

'Hello? Yes?'

'Is that Carole?' Since that earned him no reply, he tried 'Bren?'

'It's Carole. Who is this?'

'Jack Boswell. I just wanted you to know—'

'You'll want to speak to Q. Q, it's your sci-fi man.'

Sedgwick came on almost immediately, preceded by a creak of bedsprings. 'Jack, you're never going to tell me you've written your story already.'

'Indeed I'm not. Best to take time to get it right, don't you think? I'm calling to report they've given me the Wendigo Award.'

'About time, and never more deserved. Who is it gives those again? Carole, you'll need to scribble this down. Bren, where's something to scribble with?'

'By the phone,' Bren said very close, and the springs creaked.

'Reel it off, Jack.'

As Boswell heard Sedgwick relay the information he grasped that he was meant to realise how close the Cassandra Press personnel were to one another. 'That's capital, Jack,' Sedgwick told him. 'Bren will be lumping some books to the mail for you, and I think I can say Carole's going to have good news for you.'

'Any clue what kind?'

'Wait and see, Jack, and we'll wait and see what your new story's about.'

Boswell spent half an hour trying to write an opening line that would trick him into having started the tale, but had to acknowledge that the technique no longer worked for him. He was near to being blocked by fearing he had lost all ability to write, and so he opened the carton of books the local paper had sent him to review. *Sci-Fi On The Net*, *Create Your Own Star Wars™ Character*, *1000 Best Sci-Fi Videos*, *Sci-Fi From Lucas To Spielberg*, *Star*

Wars™: The Bluffer's Guide... There wasn't a book he would have taken off a shelf, nor any appropriate to the history of science fiction in which he intended to incorporate a selection from his decades of reviews. Just now writing something other than his story might well be a trap. He donned sandals and shorts and unbuttoned his shirt as he ventured out beneath a sun that looked as fierce as the rim of a total eclipse.

All the seats of a dusty bus were occupied by pensioners, some of whom looked as bewildered as the young woman who spent the journey searching the pockets of the combat outfit she wore beneath a stained fur coat and muttering that everyone needed to be ready for the enemy. Boswell had to push his way off the bus past three grim scrawny youths bare from the waist up, who boarded the vehicle as if they planned to hijack it. He was at the end of the road where the wall had inspired him—but he hadn't reached the wall when he saw Rod's car.

It was identifiable solely by the charred number plate. The car itself was a blackened windowless hulk. He would have stalked away to call the Aireys if the vandalism hadn't made writing the new story more urgent than ever, and so he stared at the incomplete wall with a fierceness designed to revive his mind. When he no longer knew if he was staring at the bricks until the story formed or the shadows did, he turned quickly away. The shadows weren't simply cast on the wall, he thought; they were embedded in it, just as the image was embedded in his head.

He had to walk a mile homewards before the same bus showed up. Trudging the last yards to his house left him parched. He drank several glassfuls of water, and opened the drawer of his desk to gaze for reassurance or perhaps inspiration at his secret present from a fan before he dialled the Aireys' number.

'Hello?'

If it was April, something had driven her voice high. 'It's only me,' Boswell tentatively said.

'Grandad. Are you coming to see us?'

'Soon, I hope.'

'Oh.' Having done her best to hide her disappointment, she added 'Good.'

'What have you been doing today?'

'Reading. Dad says I have to get a head start.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Boswell said, though she didn't sound as if she wanted him to be. 'Is Mummy there?'

'Just Dad.'

After an interval Boswell tried 'Rod?'

'It's just me, right enough.'

'I'm sure she didn't mean—I don't know if you've seen your car.'

'I'm seeing nothing but. We still have to pay to have it scrapped.'

'No other developments?'

'Jobs, are you trying to say? Not unless April's so dumbstruck with good fortune she can't phone. I was meaning to call you, though. I wasn't clear last night what plans you had with regard to us.'

Rod sounded so reluctant to risk hoping that Boswell said 'There's a good chance I'll have a loan in me.'

'I won't ask how much.' After a pause presumably calculated to entice an answer Rod added 'I don't need to tell you how grateful we are. How's your new story developing?'

This unique display of interest in his work only increased the pressure inside Boswell's uninspired skull. 'I'm hard at work on it,' he said.

'I'll tell April,' Rod promised, and left Boswell with that—with hours before the screen and not a word of a tale, just shadows in searing light: child holding woman's hand, man beside, another gesturing... He fell asleep at his desk and jerked awake in a panic, afraid to know why his inspiration refused to take shape.

He seemed hardly to have slept in his bed when he was roused by a pounding of the front door knocker and an incessant shrilling of the doorbell. As he staggered downstairs he imagined a raid, the country having turned overnight into a dictatorship that had set the authorities the task of arresting all subversives, not least those who saw no cause for optimism. The man on the doorstep was uniformed and gloomy about his job, but brandished a clipboard and had a carton at his feet. 'Consignment for Boswell,' he grumbled.

'Books from my publishers.'

'Wouldn't know. Just need your autograph.'

Boswell scrawled a signature rendered illegible by decades of autographs, then bore the carton to the kitchen table, where he slit its layers of tape to reveal the first Cassandra Press books he'd seen. All the covers were black as coal in a closed pit except for bony white lettering not quite askew enough for the effect to be unquestionably intentional. GERMAINE GOSSETT, *Women Are The Wave*. TORIN BERGMAN, *Oracles Arise!* FERDY THORN, *Fight Them Fisheries*...Directly inside each was the title page, and on the back of that the copyright opposite the first page of text. Ecological frugality was fine, but not if it looked unprofessional, even in uncorrected proof copies. Proofreading should take care of the multitude of printer's errors, but what of the prose? Every book, not just Torin Bergman's, read like the work of a single apprentice translator.

He abandoned a paragraph of Ferdy Thorn's blunt chunky style and sprinted to his workroom to answer the phone. 'Boswell,' he panted.

'Jack. How are you today?'

'I've been worse, Quentin.'

'You'll be a lot better before you know. Did the books land?'

'The review copies, you mean.'

'We'd be delighted if you reviewed them. That would be wonderful, wouldn't it, if Jack reviewed the books?' When this received no audible answer he said 'Only you mustn't be kind just because they're ours, Jack. We're all in the truth business.'

'Let me read them and then we'll see what's best. What I meant, though, these aren't finished books.'

'They certainly should be. Sneak a glance at the last pages if you don't mind knowing the end.'

'Finished in the sense of the state that'll be on sale in the shops.'

'Well, yes. They're trade paperbacks. That's the book of the future.'

'I know what trade paperbacks are. These—'

'Don't worry, Jack, they're just our first attempts. Wait till you see the covers Carole's done for you. Nothing grabs the eye like naïve art, especially with messages like ours.'

'So,' Boswell said in some desperation, 'have I heard why you called?'

'You don't think we'd interrupt you at work without some real news.'

'How real?'

'We've got the figures for the advance orders of your books. All the girls had to do was phone with your name and the new titles till the batteries went flat, and I don't mind telling you you're our top seller.'

'What are the figures?' Boswell said, and took a deep breath.

'Nearly three hundred. Congratulations once again.'

'Three hundred thousand. It's I who should be congratulating you and your team. I only ever had one book up there before. Shows publishing needs people like yourselves to shake it up.' He became aware of speaking fast so that he could tell the Aireys his—no, their—good fortune, but he had to clarify one point before letting euphoria overtake him. 'Or is that, don't think for a second I'm complaining if it is, but is that the total for both titles or each?'

'Actually, Jack, can I just slow you down a moment?'

'Sorry. I'm babbling. That's what a happy author sounds like. You understand why.'

'I hope I do, but would you mind—I didn't quite catch what you thought I said.'

'Three hundred—'

'Can I stop you there? That's the total, or just under. As you say, publishing has changed. I expect a lot of the bigger houses are doing no better with some of their books.'

Boswell's innards grew hollow, then his skull. He felt his mouth drag itself into some kind of a grin as he said, 'Is that three hundred, sorry, nearly three hundred per title?'

'Overall, I'm afraid. We've still a few little independent shops to call, and sometimes they can surprise you.'

Boswell doubted he could cope with any more surprises, but heard himself say, unbelievably, hopefully 'Did you mention *We Are Tomorrow*?'

'How could we have forgotten it?' Sedgwick's enthusiasm relented at last as he said 'I see what you're asking. Yes, the total is for all three of your books.

Don't forget we've still the backlist to come, though,' he added with renewed vigour.

'Good luck to it.' Boswell had no idea how much bitterness was audible in that, nor in 'I'd best be getting back to work.'

'We all can't wait for the new story, can we?'

Boswell had no more of an answer than he heard from anyone else. Having replaced the receiver as if it had turned to heavy metal, he stared at the uninscribed slab of the computer screen. When he'd had enough of that he trudged to stare into the open rectangular hole of the Cassandra carton. Seized by an inspiration he would have preferred not to experience, he dashed upstairs to drag on yesterday's clothes and marched unshaven out of the house.

Though the library was less than ten minutes' walk away through sunbleached streets whose desert was relieved only by patches of scrub, he'd hardly visited it for the several years he had been too depressed to enter bookshops. The library was almost worse: it lacked not just his books but practically everyone's, except for paperbacks with injured spines. Some of the tables in the large white high-windowed room were occupied by newspaper readers.

MIDDLE EAST WAR DEADLINE EXPIRES

ONE IN TWO FAMILIES WILL BE VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE, STUDY SHOWS

FAMINES IMMINENT IN EUROPE

NO MEDICINE FOR FATAL VIRUSES

Most of the tables held Internet terminals, from one of which a youth whose face was red with more than pimples was being evicted by a librarian for calling up some text that had offended the black woman at the next screen. Boswell paid for an hour at the terminal and began his search.

The only listings of any kind for Torin Bergman were the publication details of the Cassandra Press books, and the same was true of Ferdy Thorn and Germaine Gossett. When the screen told him his time was up and began to flash like lightning to alert the staff, the message and the repeated explosion of light and the headlines around him seemed to merge into a

single inspiration he couldn't grasp. Only a hand laid on his shoulder made him jump up and lurch between the reluctantly automatic doors.

The sunlight took up the throbbing of the screen, or his head did. He remembered nothing of his tramp home other than that it tasted like bone. As he fumbled to unlock the front door the light grew audible, or the phone began to shrill. He managed not to snap the key and ran to snatch up the receiver. 'What now?'

'It's only me, Dad. I didn't mean to bother you.'

'You never could,' Boswell said, though she just had by sounding close to tears. 'How are you, April? How are things?'

'Not too wonderful.'

'Things aren't, you mean. I'd never say you weren't.'

'Both.' Yet more tonelessly she said 'I went looking for computer jobs. Didn't want all the time mummy spent showing me how things worked to go to waste. Only I didn't realise how much more there is to them now, and I even forgot what she taught me. So then I thought I'd go on a computer course to catch up.'

'I'm sure that's a sound idea.'

'It wasn't really. I forgot where I was going. I nearly forgot our number when I had to ring Rod to come and find me when he hasn't even got the car and leave Gemima all on her own.'

Boswell was reaching deep into himself for a response when she said 'Mummy's dead, isn't she?'

Rage at everything, not least April's state, made his answer harsh. 'Shot by the same freedom fighters she'd given the last of her money to in a country I'd never even heard of. She went off telling me one of us had to make a difference to the world.'

'Was it years ago?'

'Not long after you were married,' Boswell told her, swallowing grief.

'Oh.' She seemed to have nothing else to say but 'Rod.'

Boswell heard him murmuring at length before his voice attacked the phone. 'Why is April upset?'

'Don't you know?'

'Forgive me. Were you about to give her some good news?'

'If only.'

'You will soon, surely, once your books are selling. You know I'm no admirer of the kind of thing you write, but I'll be happy to hear of your success.'

'You don't know what I write, since you've never read any of it.' Aloud Boswell said only 'You won't.'

'I don't think I caught that.'

'Yes you did. This publisher prints as many books as there are orders, which turns out to be under three hundred.'

'Maybe you should try and write the kind of thing people will pay to read.'

Boswell placed the receiver with painfully controlled gentleness on the hook, then lifted it to redial. The distant bell had started to sound more like an alarm to him when it was interrupted. 'Quentin Sedgwick.'

'And Torin Bergman.'

'Jack.'

'As one fictioneer to another, are you Ferdy Thorn as well?'

Sedgwick attempted a laugh, but it didn't lighten his tone much. 'Germaine Gossett too, if you must know.'

'So you're nearly all of Cassandra Press.'

'Not any longer.'

'How's that?'

'Out,' Sedgwick said with gloomy humour. 'I am. The girls had all the money, and now they've seen our sales figures they've gone off to set up a gay romance publisher.'

'What lets them do that?' Boswell heard himself protest.

'Trust.'

Boswell could have made plenty of that, but was able to say merely 'So my books...'

'Must be somewhere in the future. Don't be more of a pessimist than you have to be, Jack. If I manage to revive Cassandra you know you'll be the first writer I'm in touch with,' Sedgwick said, and had the grace to leave

close to a minute's silence unbroken before ringing off. Boswell had no sense of how much the receiver weighed as he lowered it, no sense of anything except some rearrangement that was aching to occur inside his head. He had to know why the news about Cassandra Press felt like a completion so imminent the throbbing of light all but blinded him.

It came to him in the night, slowly. He had been unable to develop the new story because he'd understood instinctively there wasn't one. His sense of the future was sounder than ever: he'd foreseen the collapse of Cassandra Press without admitting it to himself. Ever since his last sight of the Aireys the point had been to save them—he simply hadn't understood how. Living together would only have delayed their fate. He'd needed time to interpret his vision of the shadows on the wall.

He was sure the light in the house was swifter and more intense than dawn used to be. He pushed himself away from the desk and worked aches out of his body before making his way to the bathroom. All the actions he performed there felt like stages of a purifying ritual. In the mid-morning sunlight the phone on his desk looked close to bursting into flame. He winced at the heat of it before, having grown cool in his hand, it ventured to mutter, 'Hello?'

'Good morning.'

'Dad? You sound happier. Are you?'

'As never. Is everyone up? Can we meet?'

'What's the occasion?'

'I want to fix an idea I had last time we met. I'll bring a camera if you can all meet me in the same place in let's say half an hour.'

'We could except we haven't got a car.'

'Take a cab. I'll reimburse you. It'll be worth it, I promise.'

He was on his way almost as soon as he rang off. Tenements reared above his solitary march, but couldn't hinder the sun in its climb towards unbearable brightness. He watched his shadow shrink in front of him like a stain on the dusty littered concrete, and heard footsteps attempting stealth not too far behind him. Someone must have seen the camera slung from his neck. A backwards glance as he crossed a deserted potholed junction

showed him a youth as thin as a puppet, who halted twitching until Boswell turned away, then came after him.

A taxi sped past Boswell as he reached the street he was bound for. The Aireys were in front of the wall, close to the sooty smudge like a lingering shadow that was the only trace of their car. Gemima clung to her mother's hand while Rod stood a little apart, one fist in his hip pocket. They looked posed and uncertain why. Before anything had time to change, Boswell held up his palm to keep them still and confronted the youth who was swaggering towards him while attempting to seem aimless. Boswell lifted the camera strap over his tingling scalp. 'Will you take us?' he said.

The youth faltered barely long enough to conceal an incredulous grin. He hung the camera on himself and snapped the carrying case open as Boswell moved into position, hand outstretched towards the Aireys. 'Use the flash,' Boswell said, suddenly afraid that otherwise there would be no shadows under the sun at the zenith—that the future might let him down after all. He'd hardly spoken when the flash went off, almost blinding its subjects to the spectacle of the youth fleeing with the camera.

Boswell had predicted this, and even that Gemima would step out a pace from beside her mother. 'It's all right,' he murmured, unbuttoning his jacket, 'there's no film in it,' and passed the gun across himself into the hand that had been waiting to be filled. Gemima was first, then April, and Rod took just another second. Boswell's peace deepened threefold as peace came to them. Nevertheless he preferred not to look at their faces as he arranged them against the bricks. He had only seen shadows before, after all.

Though the youth had vanished, they were being watched. Perhaps now the world could see the future Boswell had always seen. He clawed chunks out of the wall until wedging his arm into the gap supported him. He heard sirens beginning to howl, and wondered if the war had started. 'The end,' he said as best he could for the metal in his mouth. The last thing he saw was an explosion of brightness so intense he was sure it was printing their shadows on the bricks for as long as the wall stood. He even thought he smelled how green it would grow to be.

The Unbeheld

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On the first day of the autumn term the traffic seemed more reluctant than ever to acknowledge Leonard. Many drivers didn't slow even when he stepped into the road, raising his sign. As his hands on the metal pole grew slippery with anger, a silver Volvo with a rusty indentation in the driver's door added itself to the rank of cars parked opposite the school. He was stalking towards it when the driver dashed around the car to let a child out, leaving a furious terrier to yap. The woman led her daughter by the hand to Leonard. "Are you here all the time?" she asked him.

"As long as there are children. Would you mind—"

"May I have your name?"

"All the children call me Leonard."

"I see, and it's Mr..."

"Bailey. I was just going to say—"

"Polly, this is Mr. Bailey. You can always go to him if for any reason I'm not here."

"Hello, Mr. Bailey," the little girl said, taking his hand. She was about eight, with a plump face that looked uncertain whether to be pert, and large blue eyes adorned with the longest lashes he'd ever seen on a child. "Hello, Polly," he said. "Some people would pay for those eyelashes."

Apparently that failed to appeal to her or her mother. "I thought there was one like them on my pillow this morning," Leonard said, still hoping for a laugh.

"Shall we see if that's one of your teachers in the playground, Polly? She looks nice."

"A false one, I mean," Leonard insisted, since he was telling the truth, "but it was only an old dead spider."

Polly giggled and her fingers squirmed. "It was dead, Polly," her mother said—unnecessarily, Leonard thought. "Come along now. You don't want to be late on your first day or any other either."

Soon the long building the colour of the scabs on half a dozen of that morning's knees reduced the shrill uproar in the playground to a murmur before sucking it into a hush. While Leonard ushered latecomers across the road, the Volvo shook and yapped as the dog leapt within, all the more vigorously when Polly's mother returned. "Thank you for guarding my car," she said. She might have been speaking to, rather than over, the dog. Once she'd eased the car forward into a vacated space, however, she lowered her window. "I'm sorry I stopped where I shouldn't. I wanted to be sure she had time to settle in."

"So long as it was just this once. Have you moved far?"

"From London."

"That's a good way, isn't it? What brought you?"

"My job and my husband's. Social work."

"There's a lot of that about these days. I hope you won't find us Northerners too different. I've not long moved myself."

"Aren't you local?"

"Some wouldn't say so. They think if you were born the other side of town you're a foreigner."

"You're telling me about yourself."

"Born and lived there till the kids next door started keeping me awake half the night. Any road, I didn't need all that space without my mam and dad, and now I'm just up the street from the school."

"Is that the appeal? Quiet now, Sheba," Polly's mother said, twisting round to pat or slap the dog.

"She had her way with Polly, didn't she, Sheba?"

The woman pushed the dog down on the seat and frowned at Leonard. "Have you a pet, Mr. Bailey?"

"The landlord won't allow them. When I was Polly's age—"

"How old is that?"

"Eight, isn't it?"

"Seven." Having stared at him, Polly's mother said, "I should introduce myself. I'm Mrs. Marsh."

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

When the Volvo sped away as though powered by yapping he used his pole to make himself a gap in the relentless rush hour traffic. He felt like a knight issuing a challenge to anyone who tried to cross his path. He stored his pole and his fluorescent orange coat in the office where Miss Devine, the school secretary, leaned her lanky upper half over her strewn desk at him. "Off somewhere good now?" she inquired, and seemingly in case he hadn't understood her, "Off somewhere good?"

"Home to see who's written to me."

Only computers had. At the end of his walk through three increasingly narrow streets to the midmost of a clump of houses squeezed together, all the envelopes on the muddy cork doormat were brown. His name peeked out of two cellophane windows, another bill was for his deceased predecessor, and the last for Mr. Flanagan upstairs, whose cigarettes Leonard always smelled on entering the house. He thought he heard Mr. Flanagan panting on the stairs, but there was no sign of him, and the noise ceased as Leonard unlocked his apartment door.

He sipped tea at the table in the kitchen that was also the dining room and wrote letters contesting the utility bills. Even if he had to agree to the amounts eventually, his bank balance would have put on an extra few pence. At the post office the morose postmaster pretended to think Leonard was there for his pension, though he must know by now Leonard was a Monday man. Outside the post office Leonard caught a bus that delivered him as close to the nearest cinema as public transport was allowed.

Five minutes' walk past elephantine branches of a very few stores brought him to the cinema, only to find that little on the ten screens attracted him. "A fairy tale in another galaxy" sounded too childish, and he wasn't to be tricked by "A movie for anyone who's ever felt gay." Even less tempting were "The most grossest comedy ever," "A crime film to terrify us all," "A ninety-minute rollercoaster ride..." He had his suspicions about "A sensitive study of modern relationships," but at least nobody was heading for it armed with enormous tubs of popcorn. He displayed his bus pass to a regally indifferent ticket clerk who bestowed a ticket on him.

Perhaps the sensitivity of the film was meant to lie in how all the lovers were hugely overweight, but it only made him feel dwindled. It contained lashings of language he heard too many children use these days and masses of rampant flesh. The sly movement of the exit doors beside the screen was a welcome distraction until an usher appeared through the doors and clanked the bar into place. The man plodded up the aisle, and Leonard was reluctantly attending to a renewed surge of blubber on the screen when he glimpsed a shape making its four-legged way along the row of seats to him.

It wasn't *his* dog, he told himself—just a dog. He wished he could remember his dog's name and a good deal else. He leaned down to pat the animal's head. It flinched back, and his hand encountered its wet nose. He cried out with disgust as it did, too. "What are you doing with that child?" a grandma demanded behind him.

"What's a child doing in a film like this?" Leonard countered.

"I'm sure I don't know. I didn't bring them."

"I hope you aren't saying I did."

The lobby doors slammed behind the intruder. "Disgraceful. Shouldn't be allowed," the woman muttered to her companion, and Leonard was uncertain if she meant the film. She should. When the combination of her commentary and the film grew intolerable, he left the auditorium.

At least he had time to walk home, and not much else to do. As he admitted himself to his flat he heard panting, no doubt his own. He held his breath, then gripped his mouth with a hand that smelled of the brass doorknob. There was a sound—a scuttling, a stirring of claws—at the end of the hall.

He found the maker of the spasmodic noise on the kitchen table: half an earthworm. He scooped it into the dustpan with the orange plastic brush and shook it out of the couple of inches of kitchen window he always left open at the top, since the sash would budge no further. Could a bird have struggled in through the gap? Perhaps it was still in his rooms. Searching hadn't rid him of a sense that something was by the time he had to leave.

The day had grown hotter, or he had. He arrived at the school flapping the armpits of his shirt, and once he'd donned his orange coat, its too. He desisted when children began to run or skip or amble to the gates. "You'll want to be off and get changed," he said to some, and told others "I'll bet you'd like to go to the baths." When Polly's mother led her to the kerb,

having parked so far away the source of the incessant yapping was invisible, he said "How did you like Miss Jennings, Polly?"

"She was nice. She gave me a sweet for getting all my sums right," Polly said as her eyelashes rendered a blink more dramatic. "How did you know who my teacher is?"

"We know all about little girls, don't we, Mrs Marsh?" When that earned him the faintest of smiles he said "I know who teaches your year, that's all. I was saying to your mam, when I was your age I had a dog."

"About her age."

"Fair enough, about." Leonard was starting to find conversation with the woman rather a task. "They last longer than a year, most dogs."

"What was his name," Polly had already began to ask, "or was he a she?"

Leonard found he didn't know. "How about yours?"

"His name's Tiger."

"Because he's like a prawn, is that?"

Polly dealt him a pitying look. "Because he's striped."

Leonard supposed the dog was. "I should go to him before he does a mischief," he said, and had an impression too momentary to grasp that he was talking, or ought to be talking, about himself.

***

In the morning he was wakened by sunlight on his face. He should have been up by the time the sun reached his pillow. He twisted under the blankets to grope for the bedside clock, and dislodged an object from the foot of the bed. It struck the floor with a soft thud. As he clutched at the edge of the mattress and leaned out, he found he was expecting to see an old lost toy from his childhood. Lying on the shabby carpet, stiff legs outstretched and tiny claws splayed wide, was a dead sparrow.

At least that explained the worm, he thought. The bird must have dropped it and then become trapped in the apartment. He loaded the small corpse onto the dustpan and shovelled it onto the back doorstep for later burial, then hurried to do as little as he absolutely had to in the bathroom.

"Overslept," he panted at Miss Devine, not that she seemed eager to know. "Too fond of my bed," he told the first of the parents and children he escorted across the road. "Maybe I'm starting my second childhood. You can rely on me in future," he assured them, and was interrupted by a yapping that claimed all their attention. "Why, it's pretty Polly and her stripy friend," he cried. "Is he going to school as well?"

"I just want him to see where I go."

"He'll have plenty of chances, Polly," her mother said. "I'm sure he'll be with us longer than you're at this school."

Leonard wondered why that should be accompanied by a frown at him, then understood. "That's right, Polly. I didn't mean yesterday they live only a couple of years. They grow up with you, do dogs."

"Have you thought what yours was called yet?"

"Flea," he said, and with further inspiration, "because he was made of them."

"Not really."

"No, just seemed to be," Leonard said, increasingly unsure of the truth.

Polly's mother talked to Miss Jennings until the bell signalled the end of fun—that was how Leonard remembered it, at any rate—and then she and sloppily striped Tiger made for him. "No tears, then," he said.

"Should there be?"

"I'd never want any, if that's what you mean. I just thought, you know, new school and all that, having to make new friends.

"She's good at telling who her friends are."

"I'm sorry if I made her worried for her best one. I didn't think."

"It takes more than that to upset her. When she is, there's usually a very good reason."

"I'm glad. I was wrong about my dog, by the way. I called him Flea because he used to run away."

"Why would he do that, Mr. Bailey?"

He'd only said it hoping for a laugh. "Things do when you're my age," he said.

On returning home he found the doormat scattered with letters for Mr. Flanagan and a purple envelope addressed to himself. It contained a birthday card premature by a week. The card depicted an unbalanced man with crosses in his eyes and bubbles spiralling around his head, and was from Pat, Leonard's next-door neighbour from his life on the other side of town, whom he'd taken at first sight for a man. He propped it on the mantelpiece above the dusty gas fire and took the envelope to the kitchen bin—or rather, as far as the kitchen door, which stuck. A soft object was blocking it from the far side. He threw his weight against the door, which dragged the obstruction out of the way, all except one sodden feather. It was the dead sparrow.

How thin would anything have had to be in order to climb with the bird over the top of the sash? The corpse must have been flung into the room, and the only culprit who came to mind was Mr. Flanagan. Leonard grabbed the letters from the mat and bore them into the atmosphere of stale cheap smoke, but no amount of pounding on the unpainted door brought an answer. He tramped downstairs and shovelled the bird and its feather into a bin-liner, and scrubbed the linoleum before laying the package to rest in the weedy flower-bed alongside the concrete of the back yard. Having failed to close the sash, he stalked out of the house.

His anger fetched him up at the library where he used to work, a windowless white bunker guarded by the remains of young trees. A uniformed man stood reading a small newspaper outside the electronic arches that raised the alarm if anything was pilfered. While Leonard didn't recognise the guard, Mr Bloore was behind the counter. Leonard had grown to dislike the librarian as much as Mr Bloore had disliked him for chatting so much to the children rather than simply warning them to take care of books. There were considerably fewer of those than there had been in Leonard's time, not to mention bookcases, and no sign of Mr. Flanagan. Nevertheless the experience of being a member of Mr Bloore's public amused Leonard, and he sat down to wait for a newspaper.

Eventually someone even older than himself finished with the Telegraph. The government proposed a curfew not only for children convicted of wrongdoing, Leonard read, but also for their parents or guardians, who would have to stay home with them. If only all children were like Polly and his other favourites, he thought—not like the pair of boys no more than

twelve years old who were giggling at the display on an Internet terminal. He raised his head to tut at them, but the sound he unleashed was louder and less restrained. "You shouldn't be watching that," he protested hot-cheeked. "Nobody should."

Mr. Bloore limped over, every step sending quivers through his face, a fat, pink, egg hairless except for eyebrows. "What's all the noise about?" he demanded, and with very little less hostility, "It's Leonard Bailey, isn't it? What brings you here?"

"The same thing I'm paid to do, seems like," Leonard was provoked into retorting. "Seeing after kids. Those two ought to be at school, and don't you have to keep an eye on what they're looking at?"

"Please don't presume to tell me my job, Leonard." Mr. Bloore raised his voice for the last word as though reminding a child of its age. "These two young gentleman have a perfect right to be here, though I would ask them to be a trifle quieter. They're researching a wildlife project for their schoolwork."

"That's what they call it, is it?" Leonard said wildly, and saw that the screen was indeed now exhibiting only a dog. "There was a woman there before," he insisted, and whispered, "I'll tell you what they were up to if you like."

"You've said quite enough already, a good deal more than enough. If you continue in front of these children I'll have to ask you to leave."

"They're trying to trick you, can't you see that? Dogs aren't wildlife, they're pets. You wouldn't put books on dogs under wildlife."

"That's all. More than all," Mr. Bloore said and turned to the uniformed guard, who had mooched to him. "Will you remind Mr. Bailey where the door is, Harold? He's disturbing other people."

"They ought to be disturbed. You ought. Can't you see what they're up to?" Leonard was shouting by now, having shrugged away from the guard's descending grasp. When the boys began to giggle harder he lurched at them, then veered doorwards. He had to restrain himself from striking out at the electronic arch to trigger the alarm.

Some of his fury had its roots in the notion that Mr. Flanagan might be back at the house and up to more of his senile mischief. Leonard panted home and shouted his neighbour's name. It roused only an echo of the end

of itself, or did he hear a surreptitious movement? He followed his voice up the stairs, but even bruising his knuckles on the man's door brought no response. Wheezing with the threat of having to inhale smoke of which the air was giving him a taste, Leonard slammed his own door as if that could communicate his anger. As he found himself wondering if the little grave he'd dug had been tampered with, he strode along the hall. He was unlocking the back door when a kitten darted out from under the sink and across the yard to leap over the wall with a screech.

He hadn't time to see how much of its grey it owed to cobwebs, tatters of which had trailed from its hiding place almost to the door, he knew only that it had been terrified by whatever had been done to it. If it had squeezed through the gap above the sash it would have been able to clamber out again. It must have been shoved through by Mr. Flanagan in an attempt to make trouble for Leonard, just because Leonard had asked him not to smoke in the hall for the sake of other people's health. Leonard locked the back door and leaned in the doorway opposite the stairs to be sure of catching Mr. Flanagan when he came home.

All that earned him was an aching shoulder, and another, and an accumulation of rage. He waited until it was nearly time to set off for his patrol, then longer still, and had to fling himself out of the house in more of a fury than ever. He did his best to calm down before reaching the school, but the children's voices seemed painfully shrill even when they greeted him. How would Tiger's yapping sound? Leonard was close to wishing Polly's mother had already taken her away. But here they came across the schoolyard, and the dog was silenced by a chewed ball almost bigger than its mouth. "That's more like it," Leonard said as the seven-year-old smiled at him. "That's the Polly I want to see."

"How many have you got?"

"She's quick, isn't she?" Since her mother went no farther towards agreement than to raise her frown by a fraction of an inch, he said, "Just you. Just room for one."

"And your dog."

"Yes, I started to tell you about him, didn't I, only he wasn't called Flea." It took Leonard a moment to realise he'd somehow convinced himself he could leave it at that. "He was called," he said as it came to him, "Frog."

"Why?"

"Because he'd always give me a jump. Because he was always jumping up, I mean." Since that appeared not to have made an impression, he added, "And he used to bring me things like yours does. Slept with me as well."

"Can Tiger, Mummy?"

"Certainly not." Mrs. Marsh's frown spread to the skin around her eyes and wrinkled her lips as well. "That's a nasty idea. Dirty," she said so forcefully that Tiger almost neglected to retrieve the ball she'd made him drop.

Leonard told himself her vehemence hadn't been aimed at him, but now he was confused as well as furious. Having abandoned his regalia in the office, he marched home. The front door wasn't fully open when he released the shout that had been welling up in him. "Mr. Flanagan."

"I'm here in front of you," his burly red-faced neighbour complained, emitting a noseful of smoke that turned his extensive moustache even greyer. "What's more, I've a headache."

"Why would you have one of those?"

"The state of the world, for a start. They'll be telling us next we can't smoke in the street," Mr. Flanagan said, and scowled more fiercely at him. "What are you trying to get at?"

"I thought it might be yowling that made your head hurt."

"Not yowling, yelling. That was you. Why, what have you been hearing that I've not?"

"Someone's been putting creatures in my rooms, as maybe you might know."

"Have you been having a bit of a tipple?"

"I don't drink or smoke either."

"Maybe you should," Mr. Flanagan said and gave him a sly yellow-toothed grin. "Putting them in your rooms, eh? Even Mr. Taggart, who lived there before you didn't think up that excuse."

"For what?"

"For keeping a dog when he knew none of us was let. Silly bugger used to hide it when the landlord came, in his bed, or in a cupboard under the sink, or in his dirty washing, and God alone knows where else. Only it got to

keeping me awake, worse than a woman for yapping, so I had to tell on him. The landlord paid him a visit unexpected-like, and he still tried to hide the thing under some towels in the bath. Know what old Taggart did when he was told he'd have to go if the dog didn't? Kicked it to death and then had a heart attack that finished him off. That's what comes of losing your temper."

"Sounds more like it came of you telling tales out of school."

"You want to grow up, old boy. You aren't going to get me livid. There's a nag owes me some money," Mr. Flanagan said, and paused to light a cigarette from the one he threw out of the house and suck on it before pushing past him.

His nonchalance didn't fool Leonard. What might he have interrupted that Mr. Flanagan had been up to so close to Leonard's flat? Once the fading of his rage gave Leonard his sight back he fumbled the door open and searched the rooms. The absence of evidence that anyone or anything had sneaked, or been sneaked in didn't satisfy him. Not least because Mr. Flanagan had denied all knowledge, Leonard was certain that more was to come. He hurried to the nearest fish-and-chip shop to bring home a greasy dinner, and searched the rooms again before he ate it, one eye alert for the kitchen window, one for the hall.

Nothing had happened by the time the apartment set about growing dim. The thought of sitting all night in the kitchen enraged him further. He left the kitchen door wide open and sat opposite his birthday card, watching the television with the sound turned down. Mr. Flanagan's was louder, causing a slapstick comedian to utter a political speech, after which a newsreader broke into an Irish comic song. At least the noise overhead meant Mr. Flanagan was there—or could he have left the set on to cover up some surreptitious activity? Leonard kept lurching into the kitchen to surprise him, but vainly. Eventually he tired of that—tired enough for bed. He manhandled his mattress into the hall and, having wedged the kitchen door with it, dumped blankets and pillows on it, then himself.

The switch for the kitchen light was out of reach. He reared up and clawed at the switch as a preamble to stumbling over the pillow and twisting around like a dog before dropping to all fours and then none to drag the bedclothes over himself. He tried not to be aware of the floor through the mattress and the dim walls towering too high above him, but more than

these kept him sleepless. Hours seemed to ooze by while he listened for hints that he was about to be visited. Whenever sleep began to settle on him he jerked awake, seized by an impression that something had crawled to him so as to nuzzle or otherwise touch his face. In the depths of the night he was only half aware of floundering through the apartment to peer in the bath, and the washing bin, and the cupboard under the sink, and his improvised bed, into which he then subsided. It was even darker when he struggled free of the start of a nightmare that had required no more than an instant of sleep. "No more spiders. Don't bring me anything," he mouthed and to some extent said. "It's not my birthday till next week."

The words roused his nerves, and realising what he'd had in mind didn't help. He'd been about Polly's age when he'd wakened in the early hours to find his mother on her hands and knees beyond the bed, doing her best not to disturb him by leaving presents there, though it had been not his birthday but Christmas. If his mother were to creep now to the foot of the bed or to the pillow, what would the darkness be concealing? He wished he hadn't thought that—wished he hadn't let her see how upset the knowledge that there was no Santa Claus had left him. He tugged the sheet over his face to fend off a sensation that felt like the imminence of cobwebs or of a sprinkling of earth. His head was crawling with unwanted thoughts, and he found he was unable to close his eyes until the walls set about collecting the dawn.

A cold touch on his forehead wakened him. A tongue, he thought—a tongue too cold to be alive. He'd thrown off the bedclothes before he realised he'd felt merely a draught from the kitchen window. He bruised an elbow on the hardened mattress as he raised himself to blink. The sash was several inches wider open than he'd left it, and a pale, ungainly object was advancing across the kitchen floor towards him. When he found his eyes with the knuckles of his prop of an arm and rubbed his vision clear he saw that the intruder was a naked boy about a year old, trailing wisps of cobweb.

Leonard filled his lungs to yell at the floor overhead, but let the breath whisper out of him. Surely even Mr. Flanagan wasn't capable of this latest trick—couldn't have dropped the baby into the kitchen without making it scream. It looked healthy enough. Leonard staggered to his feet and backed away from it to search the rooms. Except for the baby he appeared to be on

his own. He had to get rid of it before anyone realised it had been there, but he was about to be late for work. He wrapped the baby in a towel and buttoned a raincoat around it and himself on the way to venturing unwashed and unshaven out of the house.

Every step bumped the baby against his chest. When he tried to put on speed his burden squirmed and wailed, and he had to rub it through the coat until it subsided. Though the parents and children in the streets weren't close enough to notice, they gave him no chance to leave the baby anywhere. He had to pass an empty push-chair outside an open door, because mothers were in conversation not a hundred yards away. There would be plenty of prams outside the school, he almost reassured himself aloud.

There were, but all the parents seemed unusually aware of him. Why couldn't they be lost in chat as usual? "I'll be out as soon I'm dressed," he told them, waving at the school to prove he had a free arm as well as the one that was clutching his chest. He was making his dainty way across the schoolyard when the front of his trousers grew warm and wet. He thought age and panic had ambushed him until he realised the moisture was trickling from higher up. He waddled splay legged into the school, desperate to be unobserved for just the few minutes that leaving the baby somewhere would take, but Miss Devine caught sight of him through her doorway at once. "Feeling the cold, Mr. Bailey?"

"Got a bit of one. A bit of a temperature," he babbled, unable to remember how hot the day was, incapable of glancing down at his coat for fear a stain was visible on him. He stared hot-eyed around the office and was suddenly inspired. "Someone's looking for you in the yard," he said.

"Didn't you tell them to come in?"

"They can't," he assured her, and rubbed his bulging chest as he tried to think why. The only reason he could manufacture was, "They said they can't."

After a pause that turned Leonard's chest and trousers wetter, the secretary sighed and stood up not too straight with a groan and trudged stooping out of the room. Leonard darted to the filing cabinet behind the desk and began to pull the drawers forth, only to slam them back in. He was close to despairing when the bottom drawer proved to be empty except for several erotic magazines, presumably confiscated. He snatched his coat open,

snapping off a button, and laid the baby on top of a glossy woman with gigantic breasts, then tucked the sodden towel around the wriggling limbs and slid the drawer shut. He dragged his orange uniform over the raincoat to hide his stained chest and crotch, and almost buttoned himself up wrong in his haste to be clear of the office before Miss Devine returned.

He'd barely stepped out of the building when she came at him, head low. "Who's supposed to be wanting me?"

"They must have gone." He surveyed the playground in an attempt to seem convincing, but she recoiled from him, wagging a hand in front of her face. "I know. Smelly old man," he said. "It's because I'm ill."

He raised his pole and strode across the playground, not sure whether to ignore or joke with the children who held their noses and giggled at him. He hadn't time to play with them, he was needed on the road. He dipped his pole almost as low as the oncoming windscreens until a car halted with a grudging screech. "Come along," he called to the mothers and children at the opposite kerb, "you're all safe while I'm here," and heard Tiger yapping close by and, further off, a baby's wail. Surely it wasn't the child he had stored in the office; how could it be so audible? He lingered in the middle of the road even though nobody was waiting to cross. Before long he was rewarded not just by the impatient blare of a car's horn but, better, by the arrival at the kerb of Mrs. Marsh and Polly, who was leading the dog. "That's it, hurry along," he called. "Bring him too. Show a leg, Polly Wolly Doodle."

"I'm not a wally."

"Of course you aren't," Leonard shouted in the hope that would drown the wailing somewhere behind him. "You're more of a delight every time I see you. Give me a closer look."

She and her mother stayed where they were, staring past him at the schoolyard. He mustn't let himself be distracted from his job. He had to strike the road with his staff before Mrs. Marsh said "Cross over quickly, Polly." Was it Tiger's tugging that made Polly dash past him to the school gates? He tried not to see Miss Devine advancing, stooped over a loud bundle, but she raised her voice above the clamour. "Did you leave this in my office, Mr. Bailey?"

He almost succeeded in laughing. "What would I be doing with a baby?"

A car honked and lurched forward an inch, urging him off the road. He didn't want to be seen to retreat from Miss Devine. He almost tripped as he stumbled onto the pavement alongside the schoolyard. "Go in, Polly. Leave Tiger here," Mrs. Marsh said far more briskly than usual, and bent to give the little girl a swift kiss before joining other parents and the secretary in staring hard at Leonard. "He took some children in to see a dirty film the other day," a mother said.

"And he got thrown out of the library for letting kids see porn on the Internet."

"I've had my doubts about the way he talks to Polly. He says he moved because of some children. I'm starting to wonder how he found them disturbing, if you know what I mean."

Their fights and their thumping stereo had kept him awake; they'd shoved rubbish through his letterbox and then denied they had. Before he could explain any of this the secretary turned towards the school, shooing away children and declaring over the wail of her burden, "I'm phoning the police."

Leonard knew at once he had no chance. If the mothers couldn't see him as he was, nobody would. He leaned his pole against the railings and removed his orange coat to hang it on a spike. He saw the mothers back away from him, and wasn't sure if he was smelling only the stain the baby had bestowed on him. "Nasty old man," he said, and called through the railings, "I never had a dog really. I wished I had. I just used to pretend." He didn't know if Polly heard him—didn't know if the further muttered accusations he thought he heard were issuing from the mothers or from the pal he'd nearly had, lurking somewhere close to see him off, behind a wall or a car. It was too late to matter. He pushed himself away from his abandoned uniform. "You can't see me," he said, and stepped into the traffic.

Illustration by Chris Roberts, taken from Spook Magazine, 2002.

One Copy Only

Written in: 1999
First published in *Shelf Life: Fantastic Stories Celebrating Bookstores*, 2002
Also published in: *Just Behind You*

Call it fantasy. Call it addiction if you like. At least its effects are more benign than those that bring criminals before me. Take today's case, though it could have been any of a hundred where a denizen of the estate beyond the hill crossed town to rob a homeowner. The thief loaded his pockets with jewels but left his victim's first editions, merely flinging them off the shelves to make sure none of them was a storage box and using a few pages to demonstrate how he'd been trained as a child. As for his victim, the old dear may not even need crutches for the whole of what's left of her life. Her assailant was doing his best to appear incapable of causing so much damage: he was thinner than last time I'd had him in court, and wearing a new suit to compensate. He still watched you sidelong, showing as little of his face as he could, and kept feeling his chin for stubble as if to signify how much he missed the decoration. His social worker spoke up for him, and his lawyer applied himself to casting doubt on the victim and the police, so that barely enough of the jury found against the culprit to let him be sent to stay with many of his friends from the estate, though not for as long as I would have wished and of course not as long as I announced. If that leaves me more resigned than enraged, it's at least partly because I have to persuade myself yet again that Ken Gregory and I didn't do worse for less—not that I would expect anyone to understand who wasn't a privileged customer of Books Forever.

I've no idea how many there may be—it's one of several questions I wouldn't presume to ask. Quite a number of the customers are postal and have never seen the shop. I learned of it ten years ago, when the bookshop chains had begun to devote themselves to fewer and fatter titles, no doubt fattening their authors in the process. I still leafed through any books that seemed at all promising, but the best they had to offer were imitations of greatness: even Clarence Colman Hope had abandoned his visions of dark worlds illuminated by magic and heroism, having thought up a protagonist

to my mind too criminal to be presented as a hero. I turned to spending my Saturday afternoons in the second-hand establishments, and in a Care For Children shop I was rewarded more than I immediately realised with a handful of issues of *Fantasy Magazine* the best part of forty years old. Not only did they cost me under a fiver, but when I sat down after dinner to them and a brandy, I found stamped on each contents page the address of Books Forever.

Some of the tales told of challenges met and wrongs righted, and I thought there might be more where they came from. The next day I walked across the city to the hill. A November wind was sweeping the thoroughfares that swarmed with litter, and bearing stenches of the pinched streets of pygmy houses past the hill, the reek of charred garbage and of buildings set on fire to terrify the occupants or bring an end to them. The hill was the edge of that territory, and I found it hard to believe it could support a bookshop.

From the foot of the narrow potholed street I managed to distinguish part of a sign at the summit. Boo, it cried, a kind of glimpse I'd known to lead me only to a chemist's or a bookmaker's. Nevertheless I toiled up the uneven pavement crowded with parked cars, past sullen huddles of neglected houses, past cramped front gardens that doubled as play areas and rubbish tips, until I gained the height. Books Forever stood in the custody of a wine store and a Pakistani corner shop daubed with swastikas. Its meagre window was so grimy I was barely able to discern shelves packed with books. Sunday had left it closed and lightless, and its sometime painted door displayed no opening hours, but the presence of so many books and the possibility that some might store up wonders brought me back. Indeed, I returned the very next day as soon as I was able to leave my chambers.

On the hill gangs of children stared as if I had mistaken my course, not they theirs. Several called out words and suggestions I should have hoped never to see admitted to print. Since they were too young for the law to apply, I could only soldier onward. The last of the sunset lingered on the hill, so that the window over the faded sign of Books Forever glowed as though the sun had found a haven above the stunted houses, while it was impossible to determine whether the lower window was lit from within. When I applied my shoulder, the door stumbled inward under the unwelcoming clunk of the bell.

The man seated at the venerable desk on the far side of the dim room crammed with books on shelves and on the floor barely raised his face from the task of slipping photocopied catalogues into envelopes, and I couldn't tell for the sunset in his eyes whether he was gazing at me or beyond. He had a high wide frowning forehead, a long wedge of a face, a sprawl of grey hair that rested on the shoulders of his shabby leather jacket. "Are you closing?" I felt bound to enquire.

He gazed at me as if hoping for better and fingered his forehead, adding more ink to its wrinkles. "Depends what you're after."

"A good book."

"I don't buy any other kind."

"I found your address in a magazine I bought in the Care For Children shop. Four issues from the fifties, the whole set."

"*Fantasy Magazine*?" he said as though answering a question almost too easy to be acknowledged. "Should have brought them back here."

"I will if you think I ought to."

"Not you. The old fellow who bought them and then turned in his ticket, or his family should have looked where they came from, more like. They're your style, are they?"

"Anything that lets me see past the horizon."

He seemed to focus on me at last. "Look around," he said. "There's a light if you need it."

The unstable brass switches were just inside the doorway, by a bookcase piled with volumes too tall or too crippled to stand. Three bare bulbs came alight above the cramped aisles. Perhaps shadows deepened the bookseller's frown, or perhaps he mistook for dislike my reaction to the spectacle of thousands of books arranged only by author. "This is how bookshops used to be," I hastened to remark.

"It's how you find what you didn't know you wanted," he said and turned back to his catalogues.

There was no lack of favourite names—Haggard, Hope, Malory, Tolkein—and nothing that I hadn't read by them. I looked into several novels that apparently promised to be fantastic, but the worlds they revealed were altogether too mundane. I was kneeling before the Vs when a fragile old

man in a tweed overcoat and matching hat clambered down the stairs behind the desk. From the glances both he and the bookseller threw in my direction as the old man hurried empty-handed out of the shop, I took him as some kind of private customer. In case the proprietor wanted to close for the night I called "Could you recommend something?"

"MacDonald," he responded without looking up.

A book under that name boasted a knight in armour on its spine, while the cover had him on horseback, surrounded by goblins. He and the price were enough to send me with the book to the desk. "If it's no good to you," the bookseller said as he consigned the volume to a supermarket bag, "bring it in."

At least I was being invited to return. I picked my way downhill to the nearest car park and drove to my apartment, the higher floor of a detached Victorian town house. After dinner, which would have been either half of last night's casserole or the first half of that day's, I entrusted myself to the book. The armoured horseman proved to be not a knight but the old king; the hero was a miner's son who rescued him and married the princess. After their deaths the city was destroyed by greedy mining of the gold beneath it. The novel was a children's book.

Rather than resent being thought childish, I appreciated the recommendation, not one any other bookseller I'd encountered would have been sufficiently imaginative to propose. It was my kind of tale, and would have been during my childhood if my parents hadn't confined me to improvingly prosaic fiction about the supposed deprivations of youngsters unluckier than the reader. At the end of a week of establishing at least a modicum of temporary protection for the public I returned to Books Forever.

The bookseller looked ready to be disappointed as he said "Had enough of it?"

"On the contrary, I've kept it to read again. Have you anything else as good?"

He fingered his inky forehead as if it contained a Braille message. "White," he said, and went back to securing a parcel with tape.

The name led me to a corner out of sight of his desk. I had barely touched the copy of *The Sword in the Stone* when he declared "That's the early

version, the best one."

He was clearly pleased that I trusted his advice. "We'll be seeing you again, shall we?" he asked as I paid for the book.

"I'll be in to see what's new or rather what's good."

"I'll keep an eye open for you," he said, and extended a hand of friendship. "Ken Gregory."

"Chris Miles," I confided over a handshake that faintly inked my fingers, and left him when the ageing phone rang or more accurately rattled on the desk. At home I discovered he had sold me another children's book.

While parts of it were wry, it did sound the note of heroism. Next he introduced me to the tales of Alan Garner at the rate of one a week. The fourth concerned itself too much with the brand of teenage awkwardness the defenders of young miscreants try to offer as an excuse, and it was the only volume I returned to the shop. Gregory met it with wide-eyed surprise that aggravated his frown. "Not your kind of myth?" he said.

"I'm more than happy reading adult books. Doesn't anybody write the sort of fantasy they used to?"

I remember my exact words and the way he gazed at me, as though attempting to peer deep into me or to decide whether I had given him a password. After quite a pause he said "Maybe you should have a session with my private stock."

On two further occasions I'd seen customers descend the stairs. Each had bought a book from the public shelves; I assumed the price included payment for whatever they'd concealed about them. "I didn't mean adult in that sense," I said as neutrally as I could.

"Nor me either. Just trying to make your dreams come true." He seemed honestly disappointed, but the impression remained that the contents of the upper room were somehow illegitimate. I took it as my duty to investigate. "Then I shouldn't turn you down," I said and stepped behind his desk.

"I ought to tell you I only keep reading copies upstairs."

"By which you're implying..."

"If you find anything you like you'll have to read it while you're there."

I found this yet more suspect, and felt uncomfortably conspiratorial as I set foot on the lowest stair. Once I began to climb I felt insecure as well. The

stairs were even steeper than they had appeared to be, and the wall seemed uncertain of its grip on the right-hand banister, while the left rail shifted as if all its crutches were about to prove inadequate. I had no doubt the bookseller could find himself in trouble for endangering his customers. By taking the stairs as a challenge I succeeded in reaching the top. Faced with a door that stood invitingly ajar, if only because it was unable quite to close, I pushed it wide.

The room beyond was smaller than I expected. Beneath a baggy ceiling webbed with cracks the stained walls were brown as aged pages. On either side of a burst armchair that squatted in front of the window a bookcase was less than full of books, none of which immediately looked objectionable. Through the dwarfish window, over the ridges of a few mean roofs, I could see the sky but no horizon. As I trod on the ragged carpet, to be greeted by a smell suggesting that the redolence of all the oldest books had gathered in the upper room, I glanced about for a switch but found none. "Is there a light?" I called.

"There'll be enough."

There was. Indeed, although the sun was nowhere to be seen, one hook appeared to stand out from the rest as if a sunbeam had fallen on it, illuminating the words on the spine: *The Glorious Brethren* by Clarence Colman Hope. I had never heard of it, and yet it sounded unblessed with his recent cynicism. I read the opening pages and was hardly conscious of sitting down to read the entire book, in the armchair that contrived to be unobtrusively accommodating. The story told of a band of almost invincible and practically deathless knights who intervened on the side of the just when summoned by faith, and well short of the end I recognised it as Hope's finest work. Having lingered over the final scene, in which after the victory over Hitler the knights withdraw into the mists and are heard by a wounded soldier to vow "Till the world has need of us again", I would gladly have reread the book from start to finish. I was making my way to the door when Gregory hurried upstairs. "I'm guessing you found something to your taste," his head remarked over the threshold.

"As you see. May I make you an offer? Whatever you think reasonable."

"It's the only copy, sorry," he said, staring up beneath his fiercest frown. "Not for sale."

I assumed he was waiting for its value to increase, even if that would be hindered by the absence of a jacket. As I reluctantly consigned the volume to a shelf I was tempted to wish there were books whose nature might make him eager to appreciate my overlooking them, but I saw that the room hid nothing of the kind. "If you want another read of it," he said, "you can always come back."

I felt obliged to buy some item to express my gratitude. I bought a Tolkein omnibus, another edition of which I already owned, and bade Gregory adieu until next week. I was surprised to meet twilight outside the shop so soon after the brightness of the upper room, but my mind was still brimming like a chalice with the book I'd read.

Despite Gregory's offer, I was loath to take advantage of him, especially at the end of a Monday spent in preventing wrongdoers from doing so to the law. That evening I stayed in town to visit More 'n' Books. Beyond the posters for signings by chefs and footballers and television actresses a few books had found space among a mob of snowmen in the window. I struggled through crowds of shoplifters or customers to the fantasy section, which was manned by a youth with a shaved pate at odds with his kaftan. "Can I put you together with anything?" he said.

I'd had conversations with him before despairing of the present trend in fiction, and had found him to be knowledgeable. "A book by Clarence Colman Hope," I told him.

"We've got him signing his new one next month, but you said you don't like them that gritty." He glanced around before murmuring "Nor me either."

"I'm looking for an early book. *The Glorious Brethren."*

He raised a hand as if to feel for a recrudescence of hair. "Would you know who by?"

"I just told you by whom."

"We've never had it. In fact I'm sure—" Instead of finishing his supposition he typed the title on a computer. "There, I was certain I'd have heard of it," he said. "Never published and not forthcoming."

"I assure you it has been published. I've not only seen it but read it."

"If you can get more details we'll try and order it for you," he said, though plainly more convinced by his machine than by me, and then gave in to asking "What was it like?"

"Altogether his best."

"If you're at the signing you'll have to tell him."

"You think that might put him back on the right path."

"Somebody should if they can."

Who was better qualified than I? But I'd forgotten Christmas. I delayed visiting Books Forever until the weekend, only to find the shop locked for a week. As I trudged downhill past houses sparkling like constellations of stars so false they had fallen to earth, I could almost have imagined I had merely dreamed of mounting to the upper room, where a light appeared to have been left burning for the benefit of some solitary reader, unless it was the glow of the smudged sun.

Christmas resurrected memories of peace. At Midnight Mass in the church opposite my apartment I was able to believe for an hour that the children in the choir might never descend from the heights of mystery, even once their voices did. I spent the quiet week reaffirming the community I shared with a few friends, and in my hours alone read Tolkein in the edition I'd recently bought, though it was corrupted by misprints of which my old copy was innocent. All too soon a New Year as wicked as its predecessor was upon us, bringing revelry that turned into violence, some of the perpetrators of which it was my burden to judge. I wearied of their lies and excuses long before the week was done, and that Saturday I climbed the hill in something like despair. But the shutters had gone.

Gregory glanced up as though the clenching of his frown had raised his head, then nodded to me. "May I go up?" I asked at once.

"There's nobody else."

I took this for assent and hauled myself upstairs as swiftly as was safe. I was unsurprised to find the upper room offered more light than the sullen shady sky. I retrieved *The Glorious Brethren* from the shelf and examined the spine, then both sides of the title page, before taking the book to the threshold. "Do you know who published this!"

"Wait there." Gregory was already more than halfway up the stairs. "Which is it?" he said, then didn't look. "It'll be a proof copy. That's why they don't have jackets and some other bits and pieces, and why I can't sell them."

"It's Clarence Colman Hope. They need to know the publisher at More 'n' Books so they can order it for me."

Gregory shrugged as if attempting to dislodge an encumbrance that had landed on his shoulders. "He's only ever had one publisher I know of," he said, and watched until I replaced the volume on the shelf. None of its companions displayed a publisher's name. I lowered myself down the stairs to find Gregory awaiting me, his frown pressing his eyes narrow. "What will you be telling them?" he said.

I couldn't see that he'd committed any offence, and so I cried to reassure him. "I won't mention where I found it if you'd rather I didn't."

"This was my father's shop. That was his room."

"I understand," I said, uncertain whether I did.

"He died up there. He said he wouldn't come down till he'd finished all the books he wanted to read."

"I imagine I know how he felt."

"He had the strongest mind I've ever come across. He didn't care about anything but books."

For a moment I had the dismaying impression that the son proposed to cite childhood neglect to extenuate some crime. "We all care about those," I said, and left him.

Outside it was darker than seemed reasonable for the hour or after the illumination of the upper room. The twitching of obsolescent Christmas lights urged me downhill. The bogus snowmen that stood guard in the window of More 'n' Books showed no sign of melting. The aisles were clogged with clots of youngsters demonstrating in various ways their hostility to books. In the fantasy section several children were leafing through pornographic comics while their cronies contented themselves with disarraying the alphabet. I should have expected the assistant with the grey pate to intervene, but perhaps he was abashed by his kaftan. He limited himself to telling me "I did a search for that title you asked after."

"May I look forward to having it soon?"

"I'm afraid that's all you'll be able to do." He took time to produce an apologetic smile before adding "It must have been some dream."

"Please make yourself clear."

"The book doesn't exist."

"You'll excuse me, but I've had a proof of it in my hands."

"Did it have a publisher?"

"None was shown."

"Then that's no proof."

Though he'd let his smile drop, I couldn't judge if he was mocking me. I was close to betraying Gregory's confidence, but instead I suggested "Perhaps you can trace another book for me."

"If our computer can't nothing can."

"*The Club of the Seven Dreamers* by H. P. Lovecraft."

He tapped the keyboard and sent an arrow darting about the screen. After some minutes he said "Never published."

"Then *The House of the Worm* by the same author."

It took him less time to decide to say "No sign of that either."

"Try *Last Dangerous Visions* by—"

"I know it," he said, smiling as if someone had winked at him. "You aren't going to say you've seen that too."

Of course I had seen all of them in Gregory's upper room, but I'd heard enough to indicate that the assistant was as lacking in imagination as the computer. "You mentioned you'd have Clarence Colman Hope here this month," I said.

"I did."

That sounded wary enough to be a question. "When may we meet him?" I enquired.

"Next week."

"More precisely, please."

"Saturday," the assistant was compelled to admit, and handed me from a stack on a counter a glossy sheet advertising Hope's appearance and *The Third Book of Shagrat the Sly.* As I turned away he watched me, visibly

regretting having given me the information, and I felt suspected of mischief. On the very few occasions when my parents had cause for that, they would fall silent enough to suggest I had done away with them—the first time for hours, the next for days, the last for nearly a week. I had learned not to plead and rage in my desperation to revive them, but now the injustice I was suffering and the sight of the children left unchecked among lewdness found the voice in which I pronounce sentence. "Perhaps someone in authority will see fit to escort these boys somewhere more suitable," I advocated, and as staff and loiterers gawped at me, went forth from the shop.

I might have sought solace in Books Forever, but my skull had begun to feel crushed, as it did when my parents' silence closed around it. For much of the rest of the weekend I lay on my bed, watched over by books that had been crowded out of the sitting room. This was scarcely enough preparation for the succeeding week, throughout which the jury seemed bent on flaunting its distrust of the law. More than determination to hear Hope acknowledge his best work drove me when the week was executed to return to More 'n' Books.

The snowmen had been ousted from the window by posters of Hope's strongly angular square-bearded face and by piles of his books. A few seconds' survey confirmed that *The Glorious Brethren* was nowhere in evidence, and so I followed the throng to the performance area. This was a large upstairs room, bare except for a table heaped with *Shagrat the Sly* and confronted by perhaps a hundred sketchy chairs. Most were occupied, and I seated myself on the back row, eyed by the assistant with the scraped pate, who had donned a suit in deference to the celebrity. I saw him resolve to accost me, only to be prevented by the arrival several minutes late of Clarence Colman Hope.

I might not have recognised him. His beard had vanished, exposing his chin as weaker than he'd made it appear, and he was grown plump as a stuffed goose. He was at least a head shorter than any of his characters, and shorter still when measured against myself. He left no doubt that he was meant to be the centre of attention by flourishing his fists above his head and roaring "Where's the applause?" Once that had subsided, and the assistant had stumbled through a redundant introduction during which his subject fed himself swigs of wine and mimed falling asleep, the author set

to reading aloud passages from *Shagrat the Sly* of which I struggled to believe he could never be proud. Even worse than the way Shagrat stole and lied and cheated to defeat his opponents was the presentation of their magical skills as a pretext for his behaviour, as if envy can ever be an excuse. Worst of all were Hope's knowing glances at his audience beneath a cocked eyebrow that incited them to share his esteem for his creation. I could only clamp my lips together and wish at least some of the laughter to be merely dutiful. Eventually the ordeal was brought to an end, and the assistant was inviting questions when Hope interrupted him. "I see some of you've got old books of mine. I'll sign them all so long as you buy the new one first."

Two people with laps heaped with books laboured to their feet and tramped out shamefaced, and I wondered if they had been the only others of my mind. I was heartened when the first questioner to be chosen, a young woman with waist-length hair surmounted by an ornate silver comb, ventured to ask "Will you be writing any more heroic fantasy?"

"Being a writer's heroic and all I write is fantasy."

"I meant will you ever write any more like—"

"You mean you want me to regress."

"No, just—"

"Just not letting anyone else get a word in, eh? I hope she quiets down when she's reading at least," the author said with a leap of one eyebrow that advised his audience they were expected to laugh, which a few did. "My turn for a question. How many of you would buy three hardcovers of it if I wrote some more old stuff?"

One girl's hand shot aloft, and two more wavered up elsewhere in the room. "Well, you're my kind of readers. I'll be putting special messages in yours," Hope told them. "Only you aren't enough. I'd need everyone here and the rest of my fans to buy themselves a trio to keep my sales up where they ought to be. In case some of you are better at fantasy than sums, that means Midas tried reissuing my dusty stuff and only shifted a third of what Shagrat does for them."

"Are you saying," a man with a senile pony-tail suggested, "you can't afford to write the kind of book you'd like to?"

Hope stared wordlessly at him for quite a pause, until the assistant mumbled red-faced "Another question. Yes—"

"Let's have someone more my age," Hope interrupted. "Big lady at the back."

"What can you tell us about *The Glorious Brethren*?"

"Give us a clue what you want to hear."

"When you wrote it and when it's to be published."

He looked as if he regretted having selected me. "Not one of mine," he declared. "Doesn't sound like it ever would be, either."

"I've seen it," I assured him.

"Then you must be even better at fantasy than me," Hope said, jerking up an eyebrow to ensure everyone else saw the joke.

I was about to inform him where the book was to be found until I realised that would put it at risk. Suppose it was indeed the only copy? I waved away any further dialogue, and the assistant was hastily choosing another questioner when someone in the middle of the room said "I've seen it too."

Before I'd finished willing that to have been elsewhere than Books Forever I recognised him as one of Gregory's privileged customers, a stooped shaggy greying man with an unnecessarily large head. "I can show you if you like," he said. "It's here in town."

"What is?" Hope demanded.

As I drew breath to head off the information, though I had little idea how, the crouched man said *"The Glorious Brethren.* It's got your name on it. It's in a shop."

Hope gazed at him and then at me, and I made the worst mistake of my life: I glanced aside as though from guilt. "You two can show me where once I've finished signing," Hope said, no longer amused. "We'll have a few more questions and then get to the books."

I thought of approaching my fellow customer in case I could dissuade him from escorting Hope, but I feared that would only waste time. As I hurried out I saw the author glower at my leaving and the assistant look relieved. Entangled in my urgency was the unhelpful realisation that secretly I'd started to believe *The Glorious Brethren* existed for myself alone. I dodged through the Saturday crowds and dashed up the hill, egged on by the

lascivious comments of children and by the flickering of laggard Christmas lights. I hoped Books Forever would be locked, but one thrust of my shoulder threw the door wide.

Ken Gregory was pencilling prices in books on his desk. He met me with the commencement of a smile that quickly sank. "Looks bad," he said.

"I'm afraid it may be. I'm dreadfully sorry."

"Long time since anyone's been that round here."

If he had asked me what was wrong it might have required less effort to say "Clarence Colman Hope's in town."

"I heard. Have you met him?"

"Sadly."

"A disappointment, was he? Writers can be. You're best off knowing just their books."

I cleared my throat hard to dislodge words. "I told him about *The Glorious Brethren."*

To add to my discomfort, Gregory's lips considered grinning. "How did he take it?"

"He's on his way here."

Gregory opened the next book to enter the price. "Can't blame him."

He seemed not be suggesting I was to be censured either, but it was shame that made me blurt "Aren't you going to do anything?"

"Such as?" Gregory said with some weariness.

"Shouldn't you hide it at least?"

"There's nowhere any of those books can go except where they are. I found that out the hard way once."

I was so distracted by his resignation that I might have asked him to elaborate if a car hadn't halted outside with a squall of brakes. It was black and slick as an eel, the Jaguar that disgorged Hope and his stooped admirer. The man barely had time to open the door for the author and sidle aside before Hope stalked in. As he saw me his face grew puce and petulant, but he addressed the bookseller. "I'm Clarence Colman Hope. I'm told you've got something you want people to believe is mine."

"We usually have you in stock."

Hope appeared to be taking that as a crafty insult when the stooped man strayed close to him. "It's upstairs," the man muttered, blushing with pride at having been of service, and indicated the route with a furtive thumb.

Hope strode to the gap beside the desk and planted his hands on his inflated hips. "Are you letting me go up?" he demanded of Gregory.

"I don't see anybody in your way."

The author advanced to the foot of the stairs and seized the banisters. As he set his weight on the first tread he looked suspicious of a trap. For the whole of his ascent the stairs performed a hoarse melody of protest. The stooped man was moving to follow when Gregory brandished an inky palm. "Not you, and don't ever come back."

The man averted his slumped face as he fled the shop, leaving the door ajar on the sight of a gang of children eyeing the Jaguar. I trudged in his wake, but Gregory called to me "Just shut the door."

I felt both pardoned and uneasy as I heard Hope plodding across the upper room. "Where's some bloody light?" he was complaining. Perhaps his eyes adjusted to whatever gloom he found or brought with him, because his footsteps halted where I knew bookshelves to be. "What's this?" he said in a voice subdued for him.

The silence endured longer than I was able to hold my breath. I glanced at Gregory, then away from his lack of an expression. At last Hope's footfalls thundered overhead, preceded to the doorway by his shout. "I don't know who faked this, but I'll be making sure the lawyers find out, and by God when they do—"

By this time he had set about descending with one hand on the banister. I caught myself wishing for an instant that he had missed his footing, but that wasn't why his shout became a savage gasp. *The Glorious Brethren* had slipped from his clutch, because there was suddenly too little of it to hold. What fluttered through the air was nothing but dust and scraps no larger than postage stamps, which crumbled as they settled to the floor. He glared down at the ruin of the book in baffled rage, then lurched back into the upper room. "All right then, I'll take something else," he vowed. "There's plenty here for the law to sort out."

The bookseller stood so abruptly that a heap of books tumbled across the desk as his chair clattered against the wall. He flung himself at the stairs

and scrambled up like a monkey. "What else are you going to destroy that you can't do yourself?" he cried as he ran overhead. "Here's *Edwin Drood* that Dickens finished after all. Here's *Arthur Gordon Pym* that Poe did. Or *The Castle of the Devil,* how about that? That's some Robert E. Howard you won't find anywhere else. And look here, Malcolm Lowry did complete his last novel, and Scott Fitzgerald got around to finishing *The Last Tycoon.* Hang on though, maybe this is rarer, *The Night of the Eye*..."

He named other books too, a flood of them. He must have meant Hope to be unable to choose from so many, but his voice fell like the final rumble of a storm. "It's going to be Dickens, is it? You think there's already enough of him in the world."

I heard Hope retreat from the shelves and saw him back out of the room, another book in his hand. I have no idea what I might have done, but by the time I darted past the desk it was too late. I never knew if they were only Gregory's feet that rushed across the upper room. I glimpsed the snatching of the book from Hope's grasp, but did I see him pushed? I know I saw him hurl himself thoughtlessly backwards as though to avoid some contact. His head was first to strike the floor, followed by his body at an angle that wrenched his mouth into an agonised grimace, unless it was the crunching of his neck that did. His heels dealt the leg of the desk a convulsive kick that threw several books on top of him, and then he was still.

As I dragged my gaze clear of Hope's distorted outraged face, Gregory leaned out of the upper room. His eyes weren't quite admitting to a question. Before I could acknowledge it and decide on my response, we heard a car draw up outside, and the window began to throb with light. The next moment a double slam of metal doors heralded the entrance of two policemen.

It was only later that I learned they had been summoned by a householder to deter children from breaking into Hope's car. I had to deal immediately with their presence. "There's been an accident," I told them. "This chap lost his footing on the stairs not a minute ago. He'd been drinking. I'm a witness if you need one. I'm a judge."

I may always remember the look of astonishment adjoining disbelief with which Gregory met that revelation. I waited until the ambulance had cleared Hope's remains away, and answered the few questions the police found it necessary to ask. Since then Gregory and I have never discussed the

incident, but I know he understands how deeply I value his shop. Without the treasures of the upper room I might despair not just of my calling but of life itself. I never leave Books Forever without having made a purchase, but for years the purpose of my visits has been to reread a solitary volume: *The Return of the Brethren* by Clarence Colman Hope.

Worse Than Bones

"As far as I'm concerned, inscriptions in second-hand books are a bonus."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

Written in: 1999
First published in *The Museum Of Horrors*, 2001
Also published in: *Told By The Dead*

As Hammond unpicked the staples of the padded envelope he'd been handed on his way to work, Mrs Middler arrived at her desk. "You'll break your nails if you aren't careful," she informed him, and frowned at the grey stuffing the envelope had begun to shed. "The cleaners won't thank you for that."

"What's someone sent you in a plain brown wrapper, Mr Hammond?" Charl expected to learn, though she wasn't even close to half his age.

"Maybe it's something to make you blush, Charl," Denny said, despite being younger still.

"I know you'd love to see that but you're never going to."

"Let's be polite," Mrs Middler said, Hammond wasn't sure to whom. "So may we see what all the fuss was about?"

Hammond refrained from pointing out that he'd made none of it. He lingered over relinquishing the book once he'd stripped it of its cerements of newspaper. Just enough of the dust jacket remained to show the title, *Tales of the Ghostly*, and the top of a wisp that might have been mist or a bit of a ghost. Mrs Middler's scent, which always led him to expect her to be wearing more makeup, met him as he handed her the book. She lowered her plump smug middle-aged face, presenting him with more of a display of her severely curled blonde hair. "I hope you didn't pay much for this," she said. "Why, it's been scribbled in."

"That's half the charm of old books for me. It makes a book seem lived in if whoever had it before leaves their mark."

Denny poked his thin permanently disappointed face at the book. Three small red spots led like the end of an unfinished sentence from the right-hand comer of his mouth. "Died in, more like," he remarked.

This book belongs to Hattie Close; so, if you've found it, please, return it to —Hammond read that and glimpsed an address down in Cornwall followed by a series of dates, and then Mrs Middler turned the page. "I won't pretend I'm a book person," she said, "but I wouldn't give you tuppence for this one."

Each title on the contents page was accompanied by a handwritten comment. "It's very rare," Hammond felt bound to protest. "The catalogue said it was only a reading copy."

Charl rested a hand on Denny's shoulder. Her hair was nearly the colour of her winter tan, and almost as short as his, both of them seeming eager for baldness. A grimace drew her small face tight. "I wouldn't be seen dead reading that," she declared.

Hammond had never seen her or her colleagues read anything but magazines composed mostly of advertisements. Mrs Middler shut the book and passed it to him, and he tried not to recoil from the sensation of inadvertently touching her hand. He had just grasped that he'd touched only the wrinkled cover when Charl said "Anyway, you can't call it that."

"Why can't I?"

"Not you," she told Hammond with a fragment of a giggle. "You can't just say tales of the ghostly. Tales of the ghostly what?"

Denny emitted a desiccated laugh of agreement and squeezed her arm until she pulled away from him. "It's a perfectly decent title," Hammond was saying meanwhile. "Back then they knew their grammar."

"I believe Charlotte's right," Mrs Middler said and stared past him at the clock beyond the dozens of occupied desks. "Put it away now, Mr Hammond. It's past time to start work."

He was being blamed for an argument of which he'd been simply the victim. He laid the book to rest among the paper-clips and rubber bands in his desk drawer, and didn't look up until his face had stopped burning. He often felt like a schoolboy who'd been given a desk near the teacher's for being unable to spell. More people knew the name of his condition than anyone had when he was at school, which meant that fewer thought he must be able to spell if he could read, but nobody had found a cure that worked for him. That was why he only checked arithmetic he would have been capable of doing, and fetched files so that people younger or much younger

than himself could send out yet more correspondence about tax, and replaced files and sorted them into the alphabetical order they seemed unable to retain.

The smell of the files made him hungry for his book long before Mrs Middler sent him to brew tea for the mid-morning break. As soon as he'd dropped the sodden tea bag in his metal bin he resurrected *Tales of the Ghostly* from the drawer. All by itself the contents page made up for the morning so far. Each title allowed him a glimpse of an era when people had the leisure to see ghosts, as did Hettie Close's comments and the painstaking script in which they were expressed. *The Gay Dancers* was judged to be "A-glitter with memories", *The Song in the Church* "Uplifting", *The Plea of a Child* "Good and tearful", *The Mummy's Voice* "Exotic and eerie,' The *Phantom Rail-way Signal* "An up-to-date ghost"... He was savouring the prospect of so many unfamiliar tales—*A Distant Melody* as well, and *The Keeper of the Light*, and *The Padlocked Door*—when Charl, having taken a daintier sip than her coiffure would have led him to predict, blinked at him. "Are you just going to read what they're called, Mr Hammond?"

"Read us a story," Denny presumably joked.

"I liked being read to when I was little," Charl said. "Will you, Mr Hammond?"

He and his parents had read to each other almost as long as he'd had any parents. The thought of reawakening Charl's love of books made him indifferent to Mrs Middler's frown. He was turning to the first tale when he grasped how inadvisable it would be to tell his present audience that a story was called *The Gay Dancers*. He leafed through the warm withered pages to the tale Hettie Close found "Haunting as only true ghosts can be". "This is called *The Path by the Churchyard*," he announced and, resting his hand on the blank page opposite, read:

"In the twilight of a winter's afternoon of the year 18—, a traveller encountered a countryman on approaching a village in the south-east of our island, where the trees stoop close to the flat land while the winds constantly moan. 'Well met,' says J— to the countryman. 'Pray tell, who is being mourned in yonder churchyard?'

" 'None as I knows of,' responds the countryman.

" 'Then how comes it,' J— enquires, 'that I hear sighs beyond the hedge that bounds it?'

" 'Naught but wind in the trees,' returns the countryman. "Tis thirteen years since yon churchyard was chained and locked.'

"Taking his leave of him, the traveller advanced and saw that it was so..."

Hammond became aware that everyone within earshot had hushed to listen to him. He felt as if he'd been discovered at last. He was drawing a breath to do justice to the next sentence when a phone rang, and Denny was the first to laugh. Meanwhile Hammond's flattened hand jerked so nervously he might have thought the page had grown restless beneath it. "They didn't know much about writing in the olden days, did they?" Denny said. "Didn't know what year it was or the poor twat's name."

Charl dealt him a reproachful blink, only to add "Excuse me, Mr Hammond, but I think you mixed up your tenses a bit."

"I never mix up what I read. Come and look if you don't believe me."

Mrs Middler cleared her throat with a sound shriller than the phones. "We've had our break now. Lots of work to be done."

Hammond kept his hot face low for some moments after the book was shut up, then trudged to kneel by Charl. The left-hand drawer of every desk but his contained boxfuls of cards twice the size of a page of his book, each card representing a taxpayer. Hammond carried the first of the boxes to his desk and set about checking the latest column of arithmetic on every card. Charl started at Abel and finished at Bogle, but Hammond had only reached Aycliffe when it was time for lunch.

He went out for as prolonged a walk as he could stand, among buildings much like the squat five-storey concrete office block, except that people lived in them. Plastic cartons dripping red, egged on by lidded cups that sprouted straws for antennae, pursued him through the wasteland relieved only by the twitching remains of young trees. He wished he were on a heath or a hill, where the wind could find something old to enliven. Before long it and its scuttling companions drove him back to the office.

He was about to sit down when his body stiffened, wakening all its aches. The drawer with the book in it, which he'd shut flush with the desk, was open at least an inch. The front cover of *Tales of the Ghostly* was no longer

closed but held ajar by a ballpoint pen. "Who's been in my drawer?" he demanded.

Everyone seemed to have agreed to meet him with silence until Charl admitted "I borrowed a paper-clip. I didn't think you'd mind."

"You didn't need to touch my book."

"I didn't," she said, looking hurt. "I was careful not to."

"Well, somebody did. There's a pen in it now."

"Maybe it wants more scribbling in," Denny said.

Hammond confined his response to examining the book for damage. After less of this than he felt entitled to, Mrs Middler said "I'm sure Charlotte would never have interfered with your property, and anyway I don't see anything to make a fuss about. There isn't much that could be done to it that hasn't been."

Hammond shut his lips and the drawer tight, and didn't speak to anyone for hours, even when Mrs Middler told him to make the tea. He was planting Charl's Majorca mug on her Ibiza beer-mat when Charl said "It ought to be called *Tales of Ghostly Things*."

Mrs Middler clearly thought that deserved more than the grunt he gave it. "Why do you want a book like that?" she apparently needed to know.

He could have said he would rather hold a book than a hand any day. Instead he told her "Most books are ghosts" as he opened his drawer to reassure himself that nothing else had befallen the book. He must have closed the drawer too hard last time; the pen was back under the cover. He transferred the pen to the top of the desk and eased the drawer shut, and would have apologised to Charl if there hadn't been an audience.

When it was time to go home he found that the cleaner had disposed of the padded bag. He slipped the book into a large brown Confidential envelope, challenging Mrs Middler to do more than frown at the use, and buttoned his coat over it. On the dwarfish bus he clung to a metal bar crowded with hands and clutched the package to his bosom with his other arm, much as a woman was holding her child on the seat below him. He couldn't help wondering if the little girl would ever read a book for pleasure. If he'd had both hands free he might have read to her from his book.

The wind rushed him from the bus stop by the park patrolled by litter and stray dogs to his house, a thin red-brick slice of a terrace. A smell of aged paper greeted him as he shut out all but the roar of the wind. He laid his prize on the balding carpet on the stairs while he draped his coat over the post at the foot of the rickety banisters, then shied the crumpled envelope into the splintered wicker wastepaper basket in the front room and sat the book erect in his father's sagging armchair.

Apart from the kitchen and the toilet, which was equally a bathroom, every room was rendered cosier by shelves of books. All his books were second-hand, and he hadn't bought an uninscribed one for years. He took down a few at random to remind himself how inscriptions brought them alive. Here was a volume of Grimm presented as a school prize in 1923, here was an Edwardian Everyday Reciter whose previous owner had indicated all the points at which he should take a breath; an espionage omnibus from a wife to her husband "so you'll remember I've got my eye on you", a dictionary of seashells from a father to his daughter "to answer all those questions you used to ask"... Hammond shelved the books and cooked himself two poached eggs on toast to accompany a bowl of cereal, quite enough of a dinner for him these days, especially when more would consume money better spent on books. Having washed up and dried the dinner things with the least tattered of the kitchen towels, he settled himself in the front room.

There must be a draught, and no wonder with the wind flinging its huge soft icy self against the house. *Tales of the Ghostly* had stooped forward on the armchair, propping itself on its open front cover. He glanced at the flyleaf as he retrieved the book. Hettie Close seemed to have needed to reconfirm her ownership every few years; the last date was nine years ago. He scanned the paragraphs he'd read aloud and leafed onward, each page trying to cling to his fingertips like another skin.

As J— walked through the village it began to look familiar, the buildings and the people too, though he had a sense that they were older than they should be. The only innkeeper told him there was no room and gave the impression of being afraid to have J— under his roof. As the night closed in, anyone J—approached fled into their houses and barred their doors against him. Sounds of mourning led him back to the churchyard, where he found a gap in the hedge through which he was able to pass. He followed the sounds to a gravestone, and as the sighs faded into silence, the

apparition of the moon through tattered clouds showed him the plot. Carved on the memorial was his own name.

Hammond had thought as much, but the confirmation was a pleasure in itself. It wasn't why he emitted a startled grunt, muffled by the books around him. On the contents page Hettie Close had described the story as "Haunting as only true ghosts can be", yet beneath its final paragraph she had written much less neatly "Falsehood and foolishness". She must have turned against the tale in her old age.

In *The Gay Dancers* a young woman on a visit to friends in a remote part of France was drawn by sounds of revelry to a chateau, where she danced with a mysterious aristocratic youth who promised that their dance and the night would never end. At the height of their waltz she cried out to him to keep her always, and was never seen again. In an epilogue her friends searched for her near a chateau that had been in ruins for a hundred years. Apparently Hettie Close had ceased to find the story "A-glitter with memories"; across the blank half of its last page she'd scrawled "Lies the living want to believe".

Hammond had bought the anthology because the bookseller's catalogue had listed it as extensively annotated by the previous owner, but he was starting to find the annotations disconcerting. He riffled through the book and saw that every tale was followed by a comment, which he might have read if that wouldn't have involved glimpsing the conclusions of the stories. Each final page looked faded, both the print and the progressively effortful scrawl. He'd had enough of Hettie Close's bitter afterthoughts for one night. He turned to the shelves for companionship.

His favourite books proved less congenial than usual, perhaps because he couldn't help wondering how the people who had written in them or been addressed had ended up. Before long the smell of old paper grew oppressive, almost cloying, so that for the first time in his life he was close to wishing he had a television. When a collection of Shelley kept drooping in his hands, he took himself upstairs. Since all the shelves except those in his room were full, *Tales of the Ghostly* accompanied him. As he lay in the dimness thick as dust he imagined the book had perceptibly added to the smell of old paper. In the depths of the night he was wakened by sounds he put down to a mouse—less than a scratching, just a faint buried restlessness all the more annoying because indefinable. He slapped the bed until the

activity ceased or at any rate passed beyond audibility. He had to tell himself it had intensified not the smell but his perception of it before he was able to sleep.

Was his memory as exhausted as he was? In the morning he saw the new book was half out of the shelf, though he seemed to remember pushing it all the way in. He lined it up with its neighbours and got hastily ready for work, having overslept for the first time in his life despite his parents' alarm clock that he'd transferred to his room, never needing it while they were present to waken him.

He was three sweaty panting minutes late for work. Mrs Middler said nothing to him until it was time for tea, and not much then. As he stood her Union Jack mug on the mat depicting a minute map of Britain she relented sufficiently to ask "Did you sort out the business with your book?"

He felt as though she'd noticed something he had overlooked.

"What business?"

"Weren't you going to get some money back at least for the condition it was in?"

"I told you yesterday," he said, and was disconcerted to realise he was about to lie. "It was what I expected."

"You'll have to forgive me for being surprised, Mr Hammond. Do you ever write in your books?"

It had never struck him before, but he didn't. "Not yet," he said.

"I hope you never reach that state."

"Pretty soon nobody will read books," Denny told Charl. "Everything worth having will be on the Internet. You'll just need to know how to use it."

"Just because it gives you a big head doesn't mean there's more in there."

Hammond had no wish to become entangled in their flirtation. It wasn't until the afternoon break that he asked Denny "Can you really find anything you want to on your computer?"

"Print it out as well. Go ahead, tell me something to bring you. If it's something Charl shouldn't see, just whisper."

Hammond would have liked to make his distaste clear, but couldn't risk offending Denny. "I'd like to know who lives at an address. I'll give you it tomorrow."

That was one reason why as soon as he reached home he tramped upstairs and took *Tales of the Ghostly* off the shelf. It came so readily it might have been waiting for him. He was sure the smell in the room was stronger. The book wasn't staying where he slept if it smelled that strong. In the kitchen he copied Hettie Close's address onto the message pad for which he never seemed to have any messages, then wrote his name and address on the flyleaf under hers and her trail of dates. He left the book in the front room while he fed himself his eggs and toast and cereal, wondering what second thoughts she might have in store for him. Once upon a time she'd found *The Song in the Church* "Uplifting", but how much had she changed her mind?

In the story a mother returned to churchgoing after the loss of her only child and came to believe that the highest voice in the choir was her daughter's. Having secreted herself in the church overnight, she heard the child alone. Next morning she was found dead, lying on a pew, smiling peacefully. "Smile while you can," Hettie Close had scrawled in ink almost as faded as the print above it. "Smile like the skull you'll be, you fool, before you're worse than bones."

Not only the sentiment dismayed Hammond. His memory must be succumbing to age, because he'd been convinced that each story was followed by far fewer handwritten words. Perhaps this one was the exception; he wasn't yielding to the urge to find out. He took down a shaky tome about ancient Greece, replacing it with *Tales of the Ghostly*, and tried to immerse himself in legends he'd loved to hear and then read as a child.

Tonight he found them too concerned with the underworld, with people who wouldn't stay dead. The idea struck him as both childish and distressing. He nodded over the book and jerked awake convinced he'd heard restlessness somewhere near. He left the book on the couch and climbed the stairs under the bulb that had taken on some of the colour of old paper. He tried to read himself to sleep with Dickens, and then just to sleep, but kept being roused by an impression that there was movement downstairs he couldn't quite hear. Even if only the smell of books was looming over him, in the dark that felt close to solid.

Next morning it was mostly the prospect of speaking to Denny that urged him out of bed and to the office. But Denny was late, and hid his face from Mrs Middler with a heap of files he tried to pretend he'd spent time selecting. Hammond barely waited until her scowl at Denny subsided. "Did you find out what I asked you?" he said low.

"Are you after an old girl, Mr Hammond?" Charl suggested.

"Close," Denny said.

Hammond forgot to keep his voice down. "What are you getting at? What do you mean?"

"The woman who lives there," Denny told him, "she's called Margaret Close."

Charl gave Hammond a secret grin while Mrs Middler's disapproval threatened not to remain mute. Once he was on his knees by Denny, Hammond risked whispering "Did you get a phone number?"

"Obviously," Denny muttered, yanking a folded slip of paper out of a pocket of his jeans along with a bony cigarette he quickly hid.

Nobody was supposed to make personal phone calls from the office, let alone long distance, and nobody as menial as Hammond had a phone at all. The nearest public phone was at least a mile away and unlikely to be intact. He willed Mrs Middler not to stay in the office at lunchtime, and almost sighed aloud when he saw her don her coat. He gave her five minutes away from the building and sat at her desk, ignoring Denny and Charl. As he dialled he feared Margaret Close would be out at work, but the distant bell was stilled before it had finished ringing thrice. "Hello?" a woman's voice said.

He had to take a deliberate breath. "Is that Mrs Close, or is it Ms?"

"I'm the only one there is. It's Ms."

She sounded far too young to have written any of the comments in the book. "Someone else of that name used to live there, didn't they?"

"Were you a friend of my mother's?"

"In, well, I suppose you might say in a kind of a sense," Hammond said, and immediately thought he shouldn't have.

"Are you the man she was always hoping would come back?"

"I never knew her."

"Not you, then. She carried on hoping to the end. Someone she thought she should have spent her life with. Maybe she found him waiting if that's possible. We can't know, can we?"

Hammond felt he wasn't expected to respond, but the next question was sharper. "So what's your interest in her?"

"I've got a book of hers."

"Which book is that? Don't tell me. She's in it, isn't she?"

"You could say that."

"All over it. I know the one. I sold all her books at the market. How much did you pay for it?" the daughter said, and interrupted any answer. "Forget it, I don't want to know."

He had no idea what else to say. After a pause the daughter said "I'm still not getting why you called."

"I suppose I just wondered if you could tell me anything about her or the book. As you say, it seems so full of her."

"That's how she was. You always knew when she was about or even on her way. She'd make sure you did."

"Knew," Hammond ventured to ask, "or know?"

"She's gone. She isn't here, anyway." With some briskness the daughter said "You wanted me to tell you about the book."

"If there's anything to tell."

"She died with it by her bed, if that's what you mean. Presumably realising he hardly could, Ms Close said "She thought the writers back then knew how it was going to be when you were dead, the Victorians with all their spirit stuff, you understand. I tried to make her see once they were just stories, and we had a bad argument even for us."

Hammond had thought of nothing he could say when the daughter admitted "I hope she found what she expected if there's any finding to be done."

"She didn't."

He hardly knew he'd spoken, the thought was so immediate. "I beg your pardon?" Ms Close said, not begging at all.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have—I've got to go," Hammond said and did, not soon enough. Mrs Middler had sailed into view under the clock, carrying a bag of lunch from a salad bar. He retreated to his desk and tried to look as if he'd been there all the time. As she dumped her lunch on her desk, however, her stare provoked him to say "Just borrowing a paper-clip."

Only her stare answered him, and could be avoided by lowering his head. He didn't speak to anyone throughout the afternoon—he was trying to decide whether he wanted to rush home or delay that as long as possible. The end of work was bearing down on him when Mrs Middler tapped on her desk with a pen. "Mr Hammond."

"I'm here."

"Better be over here unless you want everybody knowing what I have to say."

He watched her jab a stubby silver-varnished fingernail at a column of figures, then at another. "You passed these, Mr Hammond, and they're wrong. You'd have had this lady getting a refund she wasn't entitled to and this gentleman paying hundreds of pounds too much back tax. I hope you aren't too old to keep your mind on your job."

He might have kept his peace except for that. "There are more important things than money," he blurted.

"Perhaps you wouldn't think so if you weren't earning any." Apparently in case that wasn't enough of a threat, she added "And don't let me see you sniffing round my desk for stationery again without asking, never mind taking any home."

Another retort found its way to his lips. "I can think of a lot better uses for paper."

Denny had to snort and Charl to giggle under cover of her hand before he realised what he might have seemed to say. He no longer cared. He turned his back on Mrs Middler's incredulous glare and, having retrieved his coat from the hook by the tea urn, marched out of the office.

At least she'd made him eager to go home. In the act of opening the front door he almost called "Hello?" He wasn't surprised to find *Tales of the Ghostly* sprawled face down on the front-room carpet as though exhausted by its latest effort. It was more unexpected that the pages on which it lay open had nothing extra written on them. He was examining the book when

it seemed to waken in his hand. As he dropped it on the table and tried to rub off his fingertips the sensation of having touched flesh that ought not to have stirred, the front cover fell open. Unlike Hettie Close, he hadn't written a date after his name and address, but one was there now, in a script so large and clumsy as to suggest that the writer was no longer able to see or the writer's hand, if it was one still, to control the scrawl. The date was today's.

He stared until it appeared to writhe, and then he turned the pages with a fingernail. Soon he sucked in a breath and did his best to expel its musty rotten taste. The comment following *The Gay Dancers* had been expanded. After "Lies the living want to believe" words in a larger looser version of the handwriting occupied the rest of the page. "Lies you do, Thomas Hammond."

That was too personal, too aggressive, too close. He tugged the cuffs of his coat over his hands so as to carry the book to the kitchen table, where he used an old redundant knife and fork to turn the pages. The comment at the end of *The Path by the Churchyard* was no longer just "Falsehood and foolishness". The scribble that almost spilled over the margins added "The path leads to me, Tommy boy."

"Good luck to it," Hammond muttered, flicking pages over. Every tale was followed by an extra message now, and even those that didn't include a version of his name seemed aimed at him. The ink on those pages was faded as though drained in order to compose the scrawl. The message at the end of the last story was the most uncontrolled in both handwriting and content. "Don't keep me waiting here in the dark long, old Tom."

He slammed the book shut and stared at its tattered back cover. He didn't know if he was challenging some movement to take place or doing his best to prevent it. When his eyes began to twitch he saw to his dinner while continuing to watch the book. As he ate he grew aware that Hettie Close no longer could. A sense of her hunger sickened him, so that he scraped half his dinner into the bin and abandoned the utensils in the sink.

He'd forgotten to remove his coat, but the house felt too cold for him to do without. He trapped *Tales of the Ghostly* between his cuffs again to transfer the book to his father's armchair, where he could keep an eye on it while he read something else—except that all the favourites he attempted to read, and the inscriptions in them, seemed unreachably remote. Before long he returned to staring at the book propped on the chair.

As the hours passed he began to suspect it of restraining itself until it was unobserved. Once he lurched at it and thumbed through it, but nothing appeared to have changed, except that when he slumped back into his chair he thought the smell of more than ageing followed him. Did that herald another transformation? By the time he wondered that, he was as disinclined to stir as the book seemed to be. Only his eyelids could move, and only to droop. He tried to keep them up until he forgot to keep trying.

A secretive movement wakened him. Tales of the Ghostly had fallen on its face, and the back cover was wide open. As he wobbled to his feet he saw writing on the rear flyleaf. He was stumbling around his father's chair when the ungainly ill-proportioned scrawl grew clear. "Come to me now, old Hammy, or I'll come to you."

"No you won't," Hammond retorted, "and don't call me Hammy either." Nobody ever had. He seized the book by its rear board and snatched it up, its pages flapping. He was about to thrust it into the space on the shelf when he thought he felt it writhe like some part of a withered body not quite dead. "You won't do that to me again," he yelled, ripping the pages loose from the spine, crumpling them into a wad he pitched into the dusty fireplace. "Let's see you get up to any tricks now," he said, hurling the boards into the fireplace. When there was no response beyond a feeble restlessness of paper that subsided as he watched, he stumped upstairs to bed.

He left the bedroom door ajar in case he heard any mischief downstairs. He almost kept the light on until fury at his own childishness made him tug the cord. He lay listening for indications of stealth in the dark until sleep found him. He dreamed that far too old a woman—so old that she was doing without most of her face—had set about crawling up the stairs to him without employing any limbs. As he saw the ragged brownish lump of a head waver above the edge of a stair, then over the next higher, he struggled to waken before he could see it in more detail. He managed to produce a strangled cry, and the object, as misshapen as it was determined, vanished from within his eyelids. When he opened them, however, if was beside him on the pillow.

Even if it was composed of crumpled paper, it had a crooked tongueless grin that gaped wide as he shrank back in the tangle of blankets. He wasn't trying to escape only the mockery of a head. In the twilight before dawn he could just distinguish that the print was fading from the pages while a mist

as dark as ink seeped out of them. He hadn't disentangled himself from the bedclothes when the mist rushed into his eyes, filling them with blackness.

He'd hardly begun to cry out with the stinging of his eyes when it ceased. In another moment they cleared, and he tasted ink. On the pillow was nothing but a shapeless wad of paper. Its smell was in his nostrils and then deeper in him. He felt his hands tighten into claws and drag him upright against the headboard. He felt his lips part as the gap in the wad of paper had. "I'm alive," he said, or his mouth did, in a voice delighted to rediscover itself. "I'm alive."

2000

No End Of Fun

"2000 saw me complete just one short story, *No End of Fun*, a tribute to a J. K. Potter picture (the mirror, of course, though his image isn't of a mirror)."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

Written in: 2000
First published in *J. K. Potter's Embrace The Mutation*, 2002
Also published in: *Told By The Dead*

You don't mind, do you, Uncle Lionel? I've given you mother's old room."

"Why should I mind anything to do with Dorothy?"

"I expect you've got happy memories like us. Is it all right if Helen sees you up? Only we've got paying guests arriving any minute."

"You really ought to let me pay something towards my keep."

"You mustn't think I meant that. Mother never let you and I'm not about to start. Just keep Helen amused like always and that'll be more than enough. Helen, don't let my uncle lug that case."

"Are you helping with the luggage now, Helen? Will that be a bit much for you?"

"I've done bigger ones."

"That sounds a bit cheeky, doesn't it, Carol? The sort of thing the comics used to say at the Imperial. Is that old place still alive? That can be one of your treats then, Helen."

"Say thank you, Helen, and will you please take up that case. Here are the boarders now."

When the thirteen-year-old thrust her fingers through the handle, Lionel let it go. "You're a treasure," he murmured, but she was apparently too intent on stumping upstairs to give him his usual smile. Remarking "She's a credit to you" brought him no more than a straight-lipped nod from her mother. He had to admit to himself that Helen's new image—all her curls cropped into auburn turf, denim overalls so oversized he would have assumed they'd been handed down if she'd had an older sibling—had rather startled him. "So how have you been progressing at school?" he said as he caught up

with her, and in an attempt to sound less dusty, "You can call me Lionel if you like."

"Mum wouldn't let me."

"Better make it uncle, then, even if it's not quite right. Great-uncle is a mouthful, isn't it, though you liked it one year, didn't you? You said I was the greatest one you had, not that there was any competition."

All this, uttered slowly and with pauses inviting but obtaining no responses, brought them to the third floor, where he held onto the banister and regained his breath while Helen preceded him into the room. Dorothy's sheets had been replaced by a duvet as innocently white, but otherwise the place seemed hardly to have changed since her girlhood, when children weren't expected to personalise their rooms: the same hulking oaken wardrobe and chest of drawers she'd inherited at Helen's age along with Dorothy's grandmother's room, the view of boarding houses boasting of their fullness, the only mirror her grandmother's on the windowsill. As he stepped into the July sunlight that had gathered like an insubstantial faintly lavender-scented weight in the room, he thought he saw Dorothy in the mirror.

It was Helen, of course. She resembled Dorothy more than Carol ever had —elfin ears, full lower lip, nose as emphatic as an exclamation mark, eyes deep with secrets. As she dumped Lionel's suitcase by the bed, the mirror wobbled with the impact. The oval glass was supported by two pairs of marble hands, each brace joined at the wrists; the lower of the left hands was missing its little finger. He lurched forward to steady the mirror, and his arm brushed the front of Helen's overalls. He expected the material to yield, and the presence of two plump mounds of flesh came as more than a shock.

She twisted away from him, and her face reappeared in the mirror, grimacing. For a moment it exactly fitted the oval. The sight set his heart racing as though a knot of memories had squeezed it. "Sorry," he mumbled, and "I'll see you at dinner" as she slouched out of the room.

Laying his socks and underwear in Dorothy's chest of drawers and dressing her padded hangers in his shirts and suits made him wonder if that was more intimate than she would have liked. By the time he'd finished he was oppressively hot. He donned the bathrobe that was waiting for him every year and hurried to the attic bathroom, to be confronted by a crowd of

Carol's and Helen's tights pegged to a clothesline over the bath as though to demonstrate two stages of growth. Not caring to touch them, he retreated to his room and transferred the mirror to the chest of drawers so as to raise the sash as high as it would wobble. Hours of sunlight had left the marble hands not much less warm than flesh.

He might have imagined he heard the screams of people drowning if he hadn't recognised the waves as the swoops of a roller coaster. Soon he was able to hear the drowsing of the sea. Its long, slow breaths were soothing him when he saw a passerby remove her topmost head. She'd lifted her small daughter from her shoulders, but the realisation came too late to prevent Lionel from remembering a figure that had parted into prancing segments. He lay down hastily and made himself breathe in time with the sea until the summons of the dinner gong resounded through the house.

Even in their early teens he and his cousin had squabbled over who sounded the gong, until Dorothy's mother had kept the task for herself. While it was meant to call only the guests, it reminded him that he didn't know when he was expected for dinner. He was changing, having resprayed his armpits, when a rap at the door arrested him with trousers halfway up his greying thighs. "Would you mind taking dinner with the others?" Carol called. "We're not as organised as mother yet."

"I'd be happy to wait till you have yours."

"We eat on the trot at the moment. You'd be helping."

In the dining room a table in the corner farthest from the window was set for one. All his fellow diners were married couples at least his age. A few bade him a wary good evening, but otherwise none of the muted conversations came anywhere near him. He felt like a teacher attempting to ignore a murmurous classroom, not that he ever would have. As soon as he'd finished dinner—thin soup, cold ham and salad, brown bread and butter, a rotund teapot harbouring a single bag, a pair of cakes on a stand, everything Dorothy used to serve—he followed Helen into the kitchen. "Would you be terribly upset if we didn't go anywhere tonight?" he said.

"Don't suppose."

"Only driving up from London isn't the picnic it was."

"She wouldn't have been joining you anyway. It's dirty sheet night," Carol said, wrinkling her nose.

He did all the washing up he could grab, and would have helped Helen trudge to the machine in the basement with armfuls of bedclothes if Carol hadn't urged him to tell her his news. Now that he'd retired from teaching there wasn't much besides the occasional encounter with an ex-pupil, and so he encouraged Carol to talk. When her patient responses betrayed that she regarded his advice about the multitude of petty problems she'd inherited with the boarding house as at best uninformed, he pleaded tiredness and withdrew to his room.

At first exhaustion wouldn't let him sleep. Though he left the window open, the heat insisted on sharing his bed, Dorothy's ever since she was Helen's age. He found himself wishing he hadn't arrived for the funeral last December too late to see her. "We never said goodbye," he whispered into the pillow and wrapped his arms around himself, covering his flaccid hairy dugs.

He wakened in the middle of the night and also of the heat with the notion that Dorothy had grown an unreasonable number of legs. He raised himself on his elbows to peer sleepily about, and realised she was staring at him. Of course it was her oval photograph, except that there was no picture of her in the room. As he jerked upright he saw her face balanced on the marble hands, crammed into the mirror. She looked outraged, unable to believe her fate.

Lionel snatched at the overhead cord to drag light into the room. The mirror was deserted apart from a patch of wallpaper whose barely discernible pattern gave him the impression of gazing straight through the frame at the wall. When the illusion refused to be dispelled he turned the light off, trying not to feel he'd used it to drive Dorothy into the dark. She was gone wherever everyone would end up, that was all; how could dreaming summon her back? Nevertheless he felt as guilty as the only other time he'd seen her in the mirror.

It had been the year when she'd kept being late for dinner. One evening her mother had sent him to fetch her. He'd swaggered into Dorothy's room without knocking; they'd never knocked at each other's doors. Although it wasn't dark the curtains had been drawn, and at first he'd been unsure what he saw—Dorothy stooping to watch her face in the oval mirror as she'd squeezed her budding breasts. While she hadn't been naked, her white slip had let the muted light glow between her legs. The smile of pride and quiet

astonishment she had been sharing with herself had transformed itself into an accusing glare as she'd caught sight of him in the mirror. "Go away," she'd cried, "this is my room," as Lionel fled, his entire body pounding like an exposed heart. He hadn't dared venture downstairs until he'd heard her precede him.

The breakfast gong quieted his memories at last. In the bathroom he was relieved to find the tights had flown. He showered away most of his coating of mugginess. and thought he was ready for the day until he opened the kitchen door to hear Carol tell Helen "You're not to go anywhere near him, is that understood?"

Surely she couldn't mean Lionel, but he would have been tempted to sidle out of reach of the idea if she hadn't given him a wink behind Helen's eloquently sulky back. "A boyfriend she's too young to have," she said. "Do you mind sitting where you did again?"

Lionel had hoped they could have breakfast together, but tried to seem happy to head for the dining room. "Morning all," he declared, and when that stirred no more than muted echoes "I'm her uncle, should anyone be wondering."

Did explaining his presence only render it more questionable or suggest he thought it was? He restrained himself from explaining that Carol had divorced her husband once she'd resolved to move in with her ageing mother. He made rather shorter work of his breakfast than his innards found ideal so that he could escape to the kitchen. "Are we going for a roam?" he asked Helen as he set about washing up.

"Too many rooms to change," Carol said at once. "Maybe we can let her out this evening if you can think how to occupy her."

He strolled up to the elongated Victorian garden that was the promenade and clambered down a set of thick hot stone steps to the beach. The sand was beginning to sprout turrets around families who'd staked out their territories with buckets and spades the colours of lollipops. He paced alongside the subdued withdrawn waves until screams rose from the amusement park ahead, and then he laboured up another block of steps to the Imperial.

The theatre was displaying posters for the kind of summer show it always had: comedians, singers, dancers, a magician. It took the mostly blonde girl

in the ticket booth some moments to pause her chewing gum and see off a section of her handful of paperback, which was proportionately almost as stout as its reader. When she said "Can I help you?" she sounded close to refusing in advance.

"Could you tell me whether there are any, you won't take offence if I call them dwarfs?"

She met that with a grimace she supplemented by bulging her cheek with her tongue. "Any..."

"Small performers. You know, a troupe of dinky fellows. They used to perform here when I was a child. I don't know if you'd have anything like them these days." When she only tongued her cheek more fiercely he grew desperate. "Tiny Tumblers, one lot were called," he insisted. "Squat little chaps."

"The only little people we've got are Miss Merritt's Moppets."

"That's fine, then," Lionel said with an alacrity she appeared to find suspicious. "Any chance of a pair of your best seats for tomorrow night?"

"Best for what?"

For persuading Carol to give Helen an evening off, he hoped; she was working the child harder than Dorothy had ever worked her. "For watching, I should think," he said.

From the theatre he wandered inland. Behind the large hotels facing the sea a parallel row of bed and breakfast houses kept to themselves. Victorian shopping arcades led between them to the main street, which was clinging to its elegance. Among the tea shops and extravagant department stores, not a pub nor an amusement arcade was to be seen. Crowds of the superannuated were taking all the time they could to progress from one end of the street to the other, while those that were wheeling or being wheeled traversed the wide pavements more slowly still. When Lionel discovered that matching the speed of the walkers made him feel prematurely old, or perhaps not so prematurely, he turned aside into the park that stretched opposite half the shops.

Folding chairs could be hired from a spindly lugubrious youth decorated with a moustache like two transplanted eyebrows. Lionel plumped himself and the swelling that was breakfast onto a chair close to the bandstand. The afternoon concert was preceded by an open-air theatre of toddlers on the

lawns and secretaries with lunchboxes, a spectacle he found soporific. By the time the elderly musicians in their dinner jackets assembled on the bandstand, he was dozing off.

A medley of Viennese waltzes failed to rouse him, as did portions of Mozart and Mendelssohn. He was past being able to raise his head when the orchestra struck up a piece he would have thought too brash to win the applause, much of it gloved, of the pensioned audience. Though he couldn't name the opera responsible, he recognised the music. It was the Dance of the Tumblers. Far from wakening him, it let a memory at him.

A few days after he'd seen Dorothy at the mirror, her mother had taken her and Lionel to the Imperial. She'd made them sit together as if that might crush whatever had come between them, but Dorothy had sat aside from him, knees protruding into the aisle. She had seemed to take half the evening to eat a tub of ice cream, until the scraping of the wooden spoon had started to grate on his nerves. As she'd lifted yet another delicate mouthful to her lips, the master of ceremonies had announced the Tiny Tumblers, and then her spoon had halted in mid-air. Two giant women had waddled onstage from the wings.

He'd never known if Dorothy had cowered against her seat because of their size or from guessing what was imminent. The long-haired square-faced figures had swayed to the footlights before the flowered ankle-length dresses had split open, each of them disgorging a totem-pole composed of three dwarfs in babies' frilly outfits. The dwarfs had sprung from one another's shoulders, leaving the dresses to collapse under the weight of the wigs, and piled down the stairs that flanked the stage. "Who's coming for a tumble?" they'd croaked.

Lionel had felt Dorothy flinch away from the aisle, pressing against him. If she'd asked he would have changed places with her, but he'd thought he sensed how loath she was to touch him after his glimpse in her room. As two dwarfs had scurried towards her, swivelling their blocky heads and widening their eyes, he'd dealt her a covert shove. Her lurch and her squeak had attracted the attention of the foremost dwarf, who'd shambled fast at her. She'd jumped up, spilling ice cream over the lap of her skirt, and fled to the sanctuary of the Ladies'. Her mother had needed to ask Lionel more than once to let her past to follow, he remembered with dismay. Part of him had wanted to find out what would happen if the dwarfs caught his cousin.

He came back to himself before the thought could reach deeper. He'd grown unaware of the music in the park, and now there was only clapping. He was awakened less by the discreet peal than by a sense that his body was about to expel some element it was no longer able to contain. His midriff strained itself up from the chair as the secret escaped him—a protracted vibrant belch that the applause faded just in time to isolate.

He excused himself as quickly and as blindly as he could—he had a childish half-awake notion that if he didn't see he wouldn't be seen either—but not before he glimpsed couples staring as if he'd strayed from the Imperial, which they barely tolerated for its appeal to tourists. Several pensioners on the main street frowned at his excessively boisterous progress, but he was anxious to take refuge in his room. Since Carol and Helen were busy in the kitchen, only shortness of breath delayed him on the stairs. He manhandled the door open and slumped against it, but took just one step towards the bed.

Whoever had tidied up had returned the mirror to the windowsill. It must be himself he could see in the oval glass, even if the face appeared to recede faster than he stumbled forward. Presumably his having rushed back to the hotel made him see the face dwindle beyond sight, carried helplessly into a blackness that had no basis in the room. He rubbed his eyes hard, and once the fog cleared he saw nothing in the mirror except his own confused face.

The marble hands had stored up warmth. They brought back the touch of flesh, which he'd avoided since losing his parents, not that he'd encountered much of it while they were alive. He planted the hands on the chest of drawers and turned the glass to the wall, then lay on top of the duvet, trying harder and more unsuccessfully to relax than he ever had after a day's teaching, until the gong sent its vibrations through his nerves.

He didn't eat much. Besides being wary of conjuring another belch, he felt though someone who knew more about him than he realised was observing him. When he took the last of his plates into the kitchen, Carol gave him a harassed disappointed blink. "Dinner was excellent," he assured her, though it had been something of a repeat performance of last night's, with cold beef understudying ham. "I'm just not very peckish. I expect I'm too excited at the prospect of a date with my favourite young lady."

"Do you still want to go out with my uncle tonight?"

Helen had kept her back to his comment, but turned with a quick bright smile. "Yes please, Uncle Lionel."

That was more like the girl he remembered. It lasted as far as the street, where he said "Shall we just go for an amble?"

"To the rides."

"Best save those till I've been to the bank."

"I've got some money. If we aren't going to the rides I don't want to go."

He felt as if she knew he'd manufactured his excuse. "It's your treat," he said.

All the way along the promenade he had to remind himself that the screams from the tracks etched high on the glassy sunset expressed pleasure. The sight beyond the entrance to the amusement park of painted horses bobbing like flotsam on an ebb tide provided some relief. He halted by the old roundabout to regain his breath. "Shall we," he said, and "go on here?"

Helen squashed her lower lip flat with its twin. "That's for babies."

He might have retorted that she hadn't seemed to think so last year, but said "What shall it be, then?"

"The Cannonball."

"I thought you didn't care for roller coasters any more than I do."

"That was when I was little. I like it now, and the Plunge of Peril, and Annihilation."

"Will you be awfully offended if I watch?"

"No." The starkness of the word appeared to rouse her pity for him, since she added "You can win me something, Uncle Lionel."

He felt obliged to see her safely onto the roller coaster. Once she was installed in the middle carriage, next to a boy with an increasingly red face and the barest vestige of hair, Lionel headed for the sideshows. Too many of the prizes were composed of puffed-up rubber for his taste—he remembered a pink horse whose midriff had burst between his adolescent legs, dumping him in the sea—but they were out of reach of his skill. He had yet to ring a single bell or cast a quoit onto a hook when Helen indicated she was bound for the Plunge of Peril.

He was determined to win her a present. Eventually rolling several pounds' worth of balls down a chute towards holes intermittently exposed by a perforated strip of wood gained him an owl of shaggy orange cloth. He would have felt more triumphant if he hadn't realised he'd betrayed that he wouldn't have needed to go to the bank. He was just in time to see Helen leave the Plunge of Peril.

She glanced about but didn't notice him behind a bunch of teddy bears pegged by their cauliflower ears. As he watched through the tangle of legs she shared a swift kiss with her companion, the red-faced boy crowned with grey skin, and tugged him in the direction of a virtually vertical roller coaster. Lionel didn't intervene, not even when they staggered off the ride, though he was unsure whether he was being discreet or spying on them or at a loss how to approach them. He was pursuing them through the crowds when their way was blocked by two figures with the night gaping where their faces ought to be.

They were life-size cartoons of a man and a woman sufficiently ill-dressed to be homeless, painted on a flat with their faces cut out for the public to insert their own. Lionel saw Helen scamper to poke hers out above the woman's body. Her grimace was meant to be funny—she was protruding at the boy the tongue she'd recently shared with him—but Lionel realised that too late to keep quiet. "Don't," he cried.

For a moment Helen's face looked trapped by the oval. Perhaps her eyes were lolling leftward to send the boy that way, since that was the direction in which he absented himself. She emerged so innocently it angered Lionel. "I think it's time we went back to your mother," he said, and thrust the owl at Helen as she mooched after him. "This was for you."

"Thanks." On the promenade she lowered a mournful gaze to the dwarfish button-eyed rag-beaked soft-clawed orange lump, and then she risked saying, "Are you going to tell Mum?"

"Can you offer me any reason why I shouldn't?"

"Because she'd never let me see Brandon again."

"I thought that was already supposed to be the arrangement."

"But I love him," Helen protested, and began to weep.

"Good heavens now, no need for that. You can't be in love at your age." The trouble was that he had no idea when it was meant to start; it never had

for him. "Do stop it, there's a good girl," he pleaded as couples bound for the amusement park began to frown more at him than Helen, and applied himself to taking some control. "I really don't like being used when I haven't even been consulted."

"I won't ever again, I promise."

"I'll hold you to it. Now can we make that the end of the tears? I shouldn't think you'd like your mother wondering what the tragedy is."

"I'll stop if you promise not to tell."

"We'll see."

He was ashamed to recognise that he might have undertaken more if she hadn't dabbed her eyes dry with the owl, leaving a wet patch suggesting that the bird had disgraced itself; should Carol learn of Helen's subterfuge she would also know he'd neglected to supervise her. Carol proved to be so intent on her business accounts that she simply transferred her glance of surprise from the clock to him. "I've a job for you as long as you're here," she told Helen, and Lionel took his sudden weariness to his room.

As he fumbled for the light switch he heard a scream. It sounded muffled, presumably by glass—by the window. He couldn't tell whether it signified delight or dismay or a confusion of both, but he would have preferred not to be greeted by it. A memory was waiting to claim him once he huddled under the quilt in the dark.

Yet had he done anything so dreadful? Days after the incident at the Imperial, her mother had taken him and Dorothy to the amusement park. On the Ghost Train his cousin had sat as far from him as the bench would allow, though when the skull-faced car had blundered into the daylight they'd pretended to be chums for her mother's camera. For her benefit they'd lent their faces to the painted couple, ancestors of the pair behind which Helen had posed. Lionel had been growing impatient with the pretence and with Dorothy's covert hostility when he'd seen all six dwarfs, dapper in suits and disproportionately generous ties, strutting towards them.

He must have been too young to imagine how she might feel, otherwise he would surely have restrained himself. He'd grabbed her shoulders, wedging her head in the oval. "Look, Dorothy," he'd whispered hotly in her ear, "they're coming for you." In what had seemed to him mere seconds he'd released her, though not before her struggles had caused her dress to ride

up, exposing more of her thighs than he'd glimpsed in her room. As she'd dashed into the darkness behind the cartoon he'd heard her mother calling "Where's Lionel? Where are you going, Dorothy? What's up now?"

In time nothing much was, Lionel reassured himself: otherwise Dorothy wouldn't have invited him to spend summers at the boarding house after she'd inherited it. Or was it quite so straightforward? He'd always thought that, having forgotten their contentious summer, she had both taken pity on his solitariness and looked to him for company once Carol had married and Dorothy's husband had succumbed to an early heart attack, but now it occurred to him that she had kept him away from her daughter. He withdrew beneath the covers as if they could hide him from his undefined guilt, and eventually sleep joined him.

He thought walking by the sea might clear his head of whatever was troubling him. There was just one family on the beach. He assumed they were quite distant until he noticed the parents were dwarfs and the children pocket versions of them. They must work in a circus, for all of their faces were painted with grins wider than their mouths, even the face of the baby that was knocking down sandcastles as it crawled about. Lionel had to toil closer, dragging his inflated toy, before he understood that the family was laughing at him. When he followed their gazes he found he was clutching by one breast the life-size naked rubber woman he'd brought to the beach.

He writhed himself awake, feeling that his mind had only started to reveal its depths. As he tried to rediscover sleep he heard a scratching at the window. It must be a bird, though it sounded like fingernails on glass, not even in that part of the room. When it wasn't repeated he managed to find his way back to sleep.

He felt he hadn't by breakfast time. Being glanced at by more people than bade him good morning left him with the impression that he looked guilty of his dream. There wasn't much more of a welcome in the kitchen, where a disagreement had evidently occurred. When Carol met his eyes while Helen didn't, he said "She'll be all right for this evening, won't she?"

"Quite a few things aren't all right. I'm afraid. Torn serviettes, for a start, and tablecloths not clean that should be." She was aiming her voice upwards as if to have it fall more heavily on Helen. "We've standards to keep up," she said.

"I think they're as high as your mother's ever were, so don't drive yourself so hard. You deserve a night or two off. Is the show at the Imperial your kind of diversion?"

"More like my idea of hell."

"Then you won't be jealous if I take Helen tonight? I've got tickets."

"You might have said sooner."

"You were busy."

"Exactly."

"I think you could both benefit from taking it easier. You and your mother managed, didn't you?"

Carol unloaded a tray into the sink with a furious clatter and twisted to face him. "You've no idea what she was like when you weren't here. Used me harder than this one ever is, and my dad as well, poor little man. No wonder he had a heart attack."

Lionel had forgotten how diminutive Dorothy's husband had been, and hadn't time to brood about it now. "Let me hold the fort while you two have an evening out," he said.

"Thanks for the offer, but this place is our responsibility. Make that mine." Carol sighed at this or as a preamble to muttering "Take her as long as you've bought tickets. As you say, I'll just have to manage."

He thought it best to respond to that with no more than a sympathetic grimace and to keep clear of her and Helen for a while. He stayed in his room no longer than was necessary to determine he had nothing to wear that would establish a holiday mood. He bought a defiantly luxuriant shirt from a shop in a narrow back street to which the town seemed reluctant to own up, and wandered with the package to the park, where he found a bench well away from the bandstand in case any of the musicians identified him as yesterday's eructating spectator. The eventual concert repeated its predecessor, which might have allowed him to catch up on his sleep if he hadn't been nervous of dreaming—of learning what his mind required unconsciousness to acknowledge it contained.

It was close to dinner time when he ventured back to his room. Rather than examine his appearance, he left the mirror with its back to him. His new shirt raised eyebrows and lowered voices in the dining room. At least Carol

said "You're looking bright," which would have heartened him more if she hadn't rebuked Helen: "I hope you'll be dressing for the occasion as well."

Perhaps Helen had changed her black T-shirt and denim overalls and chubby shoes when he found her waiting on the pavement outside; he couldn't judge. He told her she looked a picture, and thought she was responding when she mumbled "Uncle Lionel?"

"At your service."

She peered sideways at him. "Will you be sad if I don't come with you?"

"I would indeed."

"I told Brandon last night I'd meet him. I wouldn't have if you'd said you'd got tickets."

"But you've known all day."

"I couldn't call him. Mum might have heard."

"You mustn't expect me to keep covering up for you." Lionel supposed he sounded unreasonable, having previously complained of not being let into the secret. "Very well, just this once," he said to forestall the moisture that had gathered in her eyes. "You two go and I'll meet you at the end of the performance."

"No, you. You like it."

It was clear she no longer did. "Where will you be?" he said, and immediately "Never mind. I don't want to know. Just make certain you're waiting at the end."

"I will."

She might have kissed him, but instead ran across the promenade to her boyfriend. Lionel watched them clasp hands and hurry down a ramp to the beach. He stayed on the far side of the road so as not to glimpse them as he made for the Imperial.

The stout girl in the booth seemed even more suspicious of his returning a ticket than she had been of the purchase. At last she allowed him to leave it in case it could be resold. In the auditorium he had to sidle past a family with three daughters, loud in inverse proportion to their size. He was flattening a hand beside his cheek to ward off some of the clamour of his neighbour, the youngest, when someone tapped him on the shoulder. Seated behind him were two of Carol's guests: a woman with a small face drawn

tight and pale by her sharp nose, her husband whose droopy empurpled features had yet more skin to spare underneath. "Will you be stopping this show too?" the woman said.

Could she have seen Dorothy chased by the dwarfs? "I don't," Lionel said warily, "ah..."

"We saw you at the concert yesterday."

"Heard me. you mean." When that fell short of earning him even a hint of a grin, Lionel said "I expect I'll be able to contain myself."

The man jabbed a stubby finger at the empty seat. "On your own?"

"Like yourselves."

"Our granddaughter's one of Miss Merritt's Moppets."

His tone was more accusing than Lionel cared to understand. "Good luck to her," he said, indifferent to whether he sounded sarcastic, and turned his back.

As the curtains parted, the child beside him turned her volume up. He put the empty seat between them, only to hear the sharp-nosed woman cough with displeasure and change seats with her husband. Before long Lionel's head began to ache with trying not to wonder how Helen and her boyfriend were behaving, and he couldn't enjoy the show. He squirmed in his seat as the moppets in their white tutus pranced onstage. At least they weren't dwarfs, he thought and squirmed again, growing red-faced as another cough was aimed at him.

He had no wish to face the couple at the end of the show. He remained seated until he realised they might see Helen outside and mention it to Carol. He struggled up the packed aisle and succeeded in leaving the theatre before they did. Helen was waiting on the chipped marble steps. She half turned, and he saw she was in tears. "Oh dear," he murmured, "what now?"

"We had a fight."

"An argument, I trust you mean." When she nodded or her head slumped, he said "I'm sure it'll turn out to be just a hiccup." She only turned away, leaving him to whisper "Shall we hurry home? We don't want anybody knowing you were meant to be with me."

They were opposite the ramp down which she'd vanished with her boyfriend when she began to sob. Lionel urged her over to the far corner of

her street while Carol's guests passed by. Once they'd had ample time to reach their room and Helen's sobs had faltered into silence he said "Will you be up to going in now, do you think?"

"I'll have to be, won't I?"

Her maturity both impressed and disconcerted him. Each of them pulled out a key, and he would have made a joke of it if he'd been sure she would respond. He let her open the front door and followed her in, only to flinch from bumping into her. Carol and the couple from the theatre were talking in the hall.

They fell silent and gazed at the newcomers. As Lionel struggled to decide whether he should hurry upstairs or think of a comment it would be crucial for him to make, the sharp-nosed woman said "I see you found yourself a young companion after all."

Her husband cleared his throat. Presumably he thought it helpful to tell Carol "My wife means he was on his own at the show."

Carol stared at Helen and then shifted her disapproval to Lionel. Her face grew blank before she told them "I think you should both go to bed. I'll have plenty to say in the morning."

"Mummy..."

"Don't," Carol said, even more harshly when Lionel tried to intervene.

"I think we'd better do as we're told," he advised Helen, and trudged upstairs ahead of her. Just now his room offered more asylum than anywhere else in the house., and he attempted to hide in his bed and the dark. His guilt was lying in wait for him—his realisation that rather than make up for anything he might have done to Dorothy, he'd let down both Carol and Helen. He heard Helen shut her door with a dull suppressed thud and listened apprehensively for her mother's footfall on the stairs. He'd heard nothing further when exhaustion allowed sleep to overtake him.

A muffled cry roused him. Heat and darkness made him feel afloat in a stagnant bath. As he strained his ears for a repetition of the cry he was afraid that it might have been Helen's—that he'd caused her mother to mistreat her in some way he winced from imagining. When he heard another sound he had to raise his shaky head before he could identify it. Some object was bumping rhythmically against glass.

He kicked off the quilt and stumbled to drag the curtains apart. There was nothing at the window, nothing to be seen through it except guest houses slumbering beyond a street lamp. He hauled the sash all the way up and leaned across the sill, but the street was deserted. He was peering along it when the muffled thumping recommenced behind him.

As he stalked towards it he refused to believe where it was coming from. He took hold of the mirror by its bunch of wrists, which not only felt unhealthily warm but also seemed to be vibrating slightly in time with the sound. He gripped them with both hands and turned the glass towards him. It was full of Dorothy's outraged face, glaring straight at him.

She was so intensely present that he could have thought there was no mirror, just her young woman's face balanced on the doubly-paralysed hands. More and worse than shock made his arms tremble, but he was unable to drop the mirror. In a moment Dorothy's forehead ceased thudding against the glass and shrank into it as though she was being hauled backwards. The ankle-length white dress she wore—the kind of garment in which he imagined she'd been buried—bulging vigorously in several places. He knew why before a dwarf's head poked up through the collar, ripping the fabric, to fasten on Dorothy's mouth. His outline made it clear that he'd shinnied up by holding onto her breasts. Her left sleeve tore, revealing the squarish foot of a dwarf who was inverted somewhere under the dress. Then she was borne away into darkness so complete she oughtn't to be visible, even for Lionel's benefit. He saw a confusion of feet scurrying beneath the hem. One pair vanished up the dress, and her body set about jerking in the rhythm of the dwarf who had clambered her back.

The worst thing was that Lionel recognised it all. It had lived in his mind for however many years, too deep for thought and so yet more powerful, and now Dorothy had become the puppet of his fantasy. He supposed that to be at his mercy the dwarfs were dead too. He didn't know if he was desperate to repudiate the spectacle or release the participants as he flung the mirror away from him.

It was toppling over the windowsill when he tried to snatch it back. He saw Dorothy's face plummeting out of reach as though he'd doubled her helplessness. As he craned over the sill, the button at the waist of his pyjamas snapped its thread. The mirror struck the roof of his Mini, which responded like a bass drum. One marble finger split off and skittered across

the dent the impact had produced. The mirror tottered on the metal roof, and Lionel dashed out of the room.

He was scrabbling at the front-door latch while he clutched his trousers shut when he heard the mirror slide off the car and shatter. The chill of the concrete seized his bare feet like a premonition of how cold they would end up. The marble hands had been smashed into elegant slivers surrounded by fragments of glass, but the oval that had contained the mirror was intact. He hardly knew why he stooped to collect the glass in it. When his trousers sagged around his ankles he had no means of holding them up. Not until lights blazed between curtains above him did he realise that several of Carol's guests were gazing down at him.

In the morning Carol said very little to him beyond "I'm sorry you're leaving, but I won't have anyone in my house going behind my back."

This reminded him of his last glimpse of Dorothy, and he had to repress a hysterical laugh. He bumped his suitcase all the way downstairs in the hope that would bring Helen out of her room, but to no avail. "Shall I just go up and say goodbye?" he almost pleaded.

"Madam isn't receiving visitors at the moment."

He couldn't tell if that was Helen's decision or her mother's. He lugged the suitcase to the Mini and dumped it in the boot. "You're sure you don't mind if I take the mirror," he said.

"If you want to try and mend it, be my guest. I've never had any use for it," Carol said, doling him a token wave to speed him on his way before she shut herself in the house.

As the Mini backed onto the street he muttered "Here you go, old bones," crouching his lanky frame lower so that the dent in the roof didn't touch his scalp. On the seat beside him shards of glass stirred in the marble frame, but he could see nothing other than the underside of the roof in even the largest piece of mirror. He scarcely knew why he was taking the mirror with him; could it somehow help him gain control of the depths of his mind and let Dorothy go? The boarding house swung away behind him, and he wondered what the people in it might be thinking about him—worse, what they might

be storing up about him unexamined in their minds. For the first time in all his years he dreaded living after death.

2001

Raised By The Moon

"*Raised by the Moon* was suggested by the boating lake at West Kirby. It's much like the area contained by the submerged wall in the story, although the town is nothing like the surroundings. Perhaps the creatures in the tale are distant cousins of the Deep Ones—we might call them the Shallowers."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the *Weird Shadows Over Innsmouth*

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It was the scenery that did for him. Having spent the afternoon in avoiding the motorway and enjoying the unhurried country route, Grant reached the foothills only to find the Cavalier refused to climb. He'd driven a mere few hundred yards up the first steep slope when the engine commenced groaning. He should have made time during the week to have it serviced, he thought, feeling like a child caught out by a teacher, except that teaching had shown him what was worse—to be a teacher caught out by a child. He dragged the lever into first gear and ground the accelerator under his heel. The car juddered less than a yard before helplessly backing towards its own smoke.

His surroundings grew derisively irrelevant: the hills quilted with fields, the mountains ridged with pines, the roundish moon trying out its whiteness in the otherwise blue sky. He managed to execute most of a turn as the car slithered backwards and sent it downhill past a Range Rover loaded with a family whose children turned to display their tongues to him. The July heat battered him as he swung the Cavalier onto a parched verge, where the engine hacked to itself while he glared at the map.

Half the page containing his location was crowded with the fingerprints of mountains. Only the coast was unhampered by their contours. He eased the car off the brown turf and nursed it several digressive miles to the coast road, where a signpost pointed left to Windhill, right to Baiting. Northward had looked as though it might bring him sooner inland to the motorway, and so he took the Baiting route.

He hadn't bargained for the hindrance of the wind. Along the jagged coastline all the trees leaned away from the jumpy sea as though desperate

to grasp the land. Before long the barren seaward fields gave way to rocks and stony beaches and there weren't even hedges to fend off the northwester. Whenever the gusts took a breath he smelled how overworked the engine was growing. Beside the road was evidence of the damage the wind could wreak: scattered planks of some construction which, to judge by a ruin a mile farther on, had been a fishmonger's stall. Then the doggedly spiky hedge to his right winced inland, revealing an arc of cottages as white as the moon would be when the sky went out. Perhaps someone in the village could repair the car or Grant would find a room for the night—preferably both.

The ends of the half-mile arc of cottages were joined across the inlet by a submerged wall or a path that divided the prancing sea from the less restless bay. The far end was marked by a lone block of colour, a red telephone box planted in the water by a trick of perspective. His glimpse of a glistening object crouched or heaped in front of it had to be another misperception; when he returned his attention to the view once he'd finished tussling with the wheel as a gust tried to shove the car across the road, he saw no sign of life.

The car was panting and shivering by the time he reached the first cottage. A vicious wind that smelled of fish stung his skin as he eased his rusty door shut and peered tearfully at the buildings opposite. He thought all the windows were curtained with net until he realised the whiteness was salt, which had also scoured the front doors pale. In the very first window a handwritten sign offered ROOM. The wind hustled him across the road, which was strewn with various conditions of seaweed, to the fish-faced knocker on a door that had once been black.

More of the salt that gritted under his fingers was lodged in the hinge. He had to dig his thumb into the gaping mouth to heave the fish head high and slam it against the metal plate. He heard the blow fall flat in not much of a passage and a woman's voice demanding shrilly "Who wants us now?"

The nearest to a response was an irregular series of slow footsteps that ended behind the door, which was dragged wide by a man who filled most of the opening. Grant couldn't tell how much of his volume he owed to his cable-knit jersey and loose trousers, but the bulk of his face drooped like perished rubber from his cheekbones. Salt might account for the redness of his small eyes, though perhaps anxiety had turned his sparse hair and dense

eyebrows white. He hugged himself and shivered and glanced past his visitor, presumably at the wind. Parting his thick lips with a tongue as ashen, he mumbled "Where have you come from?"

"Liverpool."

"Don't know it," the man said, and seemed ready to use that as an excuse to close the door.

A woman plodded out of the kitchen at the end of the cramped dingy hall. She looked as though marriage had transformed her into a version of the man, shorter but broader to compensate and with hair at least as white, not to mention clothes uncomfortably similar to his. "Bring him in," she urged.

"What are you looking for?" her husband muttered.

"Someone who can fix my car and a room if I'll need one."

"Twenty miles up the coast."

"I don't think it'll last that far. Won't they come here?"

"Of course they will if they're wanted, Tom. Let him in."

"You're staying, then."

"I expect I may have to. Can I phone first?"

"If you've the money you can give it a tackle."

"How much will it take?" When Tom's sole answer was a stare, Grant tried "How much do you want?"

"Me, nothing. Nor her either. Phone's up the road." Grant was turning away, not without relief, when the woman said "Won't he need the number? Tommy and his Fiona."

"I know that. Did you get it?" Tom challenged Grant.

"I don't think—"

"Better start, then. Five. Three. Three. Five," Tom said and shut the door.

Grant gave in to an incredulous laugh that politeness required him to muffle. Perhaps another cottage might be more welcoming, he thought with dwindling conviction as he progressed along the seafront. He could hardly see through any of the windows, and such furniture as he could distinguish, by no means in every room, looked encrusted with more than dimness. The few shops might have belonged to fishmongers; one window displayed a dusty plastic lobster on a marble slab also bearing stains suggestive of the

prints of large wet hands. The last shop must have been more general, given the debris scattered about the bare floor—distorted but unopened tins, a disordered newspaper whose single legible headline said FISH STOCKS DROP, and was there a dead cat in the darkest corner? Beyond two farther cottages was the refuge of the phone box.

Perhaps refuge was too strong a word. Slime on the floor must indicate that it hadn't been out of reach of the last high tide. A fishy smell that had accompanied him along the seafront was also present, presumably borne by the wind that kept lancing the trapped heat with chill. Vandalism appeared to have invaded even this little community; the phone directory was strewn across the metal shelf below the coin-box in fragments so sodden they looked chewed. Grant had to adjust the rakish handset on its hook to obtain a tone before he dragged the indisposed dial to the numbers he'd repeated all the way to the box. He was trying to distinguish whether he was hearing static or simply the waves when a man's brusque practically Scottish voice said "Beach."

"You aren't a garage, then."

"Who says I'm not? Beach's Garage."

"I'm with you now," Grant said, though feeling much as he had when Tom translated his wife's mnemonic. "And you fix cars."

"I'd be on the scrapheap if I didn't."

"Good," Grant blurted and to compensate "I mean, I've got one for you."

"Lucky me."

"It's a Cavalier that wouldn't go uphill."

"Can't say a word about it 'til I've seen it. All I want to know is where you are."

"Twenty miles south of you, they tell me."

"I don't need to ask who." After a pause during which Grant felt sought by the chill and the piscine smell, the repairman said "I can't be there before dark."

"You think I should take a room."

"I don't tell anybody what to do. Invited you in as well, did they?" The man's thriftiness with language was affecting Grant much as unresponsive pupils did.

"Shouldn't they have?" he retorted.

"They'll do their best for you, Tom and Fiona. They need the cash."

"How did you know who they were?"

"There's always some that won't be driven out of their homes. A couple, anyway."

"Driven."

When competing at brevity brought no answer, Grant was about to add to his words when the man said, "You won't see many fish round Baiting anymore."

Grant heard the basis of a geography lesson in this. "So they've had to adapt to living off tourists."

"And travellers and whatever else they catch." The repairman interrupted himself with a cough that might have been a mirthless laugh. "Anyway, that's their business. I'll be there first thing in the morning."

The phone commenced droning like a fly attracted by the fishy smell until Grant stubbed his thumb on the hook. He dug the crumpled number of the holiday cottage out of his jeans and dialled, rousing only a bell that repeated itself as insistently as the waves for surely longer than his fellow students could have disagreed over who should answer it, even if they sustained the argument with a drink and quite possibly a toke to boot. No doubt they were expecting him to arrive ahead of them and set about organising as usual. He dropped the receiver onto its prongs and forced open the arthritic door.

He might have returned to his car along the sea wall, the top of which was nearly two feet wide, if waves hadn't been spilling over much of its length. There appeared to be little else to describe to any class he would teach; rubble was piled so high in the occasional alleys between the cottages that he couldn't even see behind them. The bay within the wall swarmed with infant waves, obscuring his view of whatever he kept glimpsing beneath them: probably the tops of pillars reinforcing the wall, except that the objects were irregularly spaced—the tips of a natural rock formation the wall had followed, then, although the string of blurred shapes put him in mind of a series of reflections of the moon. He was no closer to identifying them by the time he reached the Cavalier.

He manhandled his suitcase through the gap the creaky boot vouchsafed him and tramped across the road. He was hesitating over reaching for the knocker when the cottage door sprang open. He was bracing himself to be confronted by the husband, which must be why the sight of the woman's upturned face was disconcerting. "Get in, then," she exhorted with what could have been intended as rough humour.

Perhaps she was eager to shut out the wind that was trying all the inner doors, unless she wanted to exclude the smell. More of that lingered once Grant slammed the door than he found inviting. "Let's have you up," the woman said.

She'd hardly set one shabbily slippered foot on the lowest of the narrow uncarpeted stairs that bisected the hall when she swung round to eye him. "First time away?"

"Nothing like."

"Just your case looks so new."

"My parents bought me a set of them when I started college."

"We never had any children. What's your name, anyway?" she added with a fierceness he hoped she was directing at herself. "You know ours."

"Bill Grant."

"Good and strong," she said, giving him a slow appreciative blink before stumping shapelessly upwards to thump the first door open with her buttocks. The rumpled sea widened beyond the small window as he followed her into the room. He'd passed a number of framed photographs on his way upstairs, and here above the sink was yet another grey image of a man, nondescript except for the fish he was measuring between his hands. As in the other pictures, he was her husband Tom. His presence helped the furniture—a barely even single bed, a barren dressing-table, a wardrobe no larger than a phone box—make the room feel yet more confined. "Anything like home?" Fiona said.

It did remind him somewhat of his bedroom when he was half his size. "Something," he admitted.

"You want to feel at home if you go anywhere. I know I would." Having stared at him as though to ensure some of her meaning remained, she reached up to grab his shoulders with her cold swollen hands as an aid to

squeezing past him. "We'll call you when it's time to put our snouts in the trough," she said.

He listened to the series of receding creaks her descent extracted from the stairs, and then he relieved his suitcase of the items he would need for an overnight stay, feeling absurdly as if he were preparing for a swift escape. Once he'd ventured across the tiny strident landing to the bathroom, a tiled white cell occupied by three dripping sweaters pegged on a rope above the bath and by a chilly damp that clung to him, he sat next to his pyjamas on the bed to scribble notes for a geography lesson based on Baiting, then sidled between the sink and the foot of the bed to the window.

It seemed his powers of observation needed work. The whitish rounded underwater blobs were closer together and to the middle of the sea wall than he remembered, unless any of them had indeed been a version of the moon, which was presently invisible above the roof. Perhaps he would soon be able to identify them, since the waves were progressing towards relative calm. He left his bulky bunch of keys on the windowsill before lying down to listen to the insistent susurration, which was occasionally interrupted by a plop that led him to believe the sea was less uninhabited than the repairman had said. He grew tired of craning to catch sight of whatever kept leaving ripples inside the sea wall, and by the time Fiona called "Ready" up the stairs, an invitation reminiscent of the beginning of a game, he was shelving towards sleep.

He must have been near to dreaming while awake, since he imagined that a face had edged out of hiding to watch him sit up. It might have been dour Tom's in the photograph or the moon that had crept into view above the bay, possibly appending at least one blob to the cluster along the sea wall. "I'll be down," Grant shouted loud enough, he hoped, to finish wakening himself.

He wasn't expecting to eat in the kitchen, on a table whose unfolding scarcely left room for three hard straight chairs and a stained black range crowned with bubbling saucepans and, beneath a small window that grudgingly twilighted the room, a massive stone sink. He'd thought a fishy smell that had kept him company upstairs was carried by the wind, but now he realised it might also have been seeping up from the kitchen. He was exerting himself to look entertained when Tom frowned across the table at him. "She ought to have asked you to pay in advance."

"Oh, Tom, he's nothing but a youngster." Grant was a little too much of one to appreciate being described that way.

"Can I give you a cheque and a card?"

"And your name and address."

"Let's have you sitting down first," Fiona cried, stirring a pan that aggravated the smell. Grant fumbled in the pocket of his jeans for the chequebook and card wallet. "How much am I going to owe you?" Tom glowered at his soup bowl as though ashamed to ask.

"Thirty if you're here for breakfast."

"Of course he will be, Tom."

"If he isn't sick of it by then."

Grant wrote a cheque in his best blackboard handwriting and slid it with his guarantee card and driving licence across the table. "Grant's the word, eh?" Tom grumbled, poking at the cards with a thick flabby forefinger whose nail was bitten raw. "She said you were a student, right enough."

"I teach as well," Grant was provoked into retorting. "That'll be my life."

"So what are you planning to fill their dim little heads with?"

"I wouldn't mind telling them the story of your village."

"Few years since it's been that." Tom finished scrutinising the cheque and folded it twice to slip into his trousers pocket, then stared at or through his guest. "On a night like this there'd be so many fish we'd have to bring the nets in before dawn or have them snapped."

"Nights like this make me want to swim," Fiona said, and perhaps more relevantly, "He used to like taking the boat out then."

She ladled soup into three decidedly various bowls and watched with Tom while Grant committed his stained spoon to the viscous milky liquid. It explained the smell in the kitchen and tasted just not too strongly of it to be palatable. "There are still fish, then," he said, and when his hosts met this with identical small-eyed stares, "Good. Good."

"We've given up the fishing. We've come to an arrangement," said Tom.

Grant sensed that was as much as he would say about it, presumably resenting the loss of his independence. Nobody spoke until the bowls were empty, nor indeed until Fiona had served three platefuls of flaccid whitish

meat accompanied by heaps of mush, apparently potatoes and some previously green vegetable. More of the meat finished gently quivering to itself in an indistinguishable lump on a platter. Grant thought rather than hoped it might be tripe, but unless the taste of the soup had lodged in his mouth, the main course wasn't mammalian. Having been watched throughout two rubbery mouthfuls, he felt expected to say at least, "That's good too. What is it?"

"All there is to eat round here," Tom said in a sudden dull rage.

"Now, Tom, it's not his fault."

"It's people's like his." Tom scowled at his dinner and then at the guest. "Want to know what you want to tell the sprats you're supposed to be teaching?"

"I believe I do, but if you'd like—"

"About time they were told to stop using cars for a start. And if the poor deprived mites can't live without them, tell them not to take them places they don't need to go."

"Saints, Tom, they're only youngsters."

"They'll grow up, won't they, if the world doesn't conk out first." With renewed ire he said to Grant, "They need to do without their fridges and their freezers and their microwaves and whatever else is upsetting things."

Grant felt both accused of too much urban living and uneasy about how the meat was stored. Since no refrigerator was visible, he hoped it was fresh. He fed himself mouthfuls to be done with it and dinner generally, but hadn't completed the labour when he swallowed in order to speak. "At least you aren't alone, then."

"It's in your cities people go off and leave each other," muttered Tom.

"No, I mean you aren't the only ones in your village. I got the idea from your friend Mr. Beach you were."

Tom looked ready to deny any friendship, but it seemed he was preparing to demand, "Calling him a liar, are you?"

"I wouldn't say a liar, just mistaken," Grant said, nodding at the wall the cottage shared with its neighbour. His hosts merely eyed him as though they couldn't hear the renewed sounds beyond the wall, a floundering and

shuffling that brought to mind someone old or otherwise incapacitated. "Rats?" he was compelled to assume.

"We've seen a few of those in our time," said Tom, continuing to regard him.

If that was meant for wit, Grant found it offered no more than the least of the children he'd had to teach. Some acoustic effect made the rat sound much larger as it scuffed along the far side of the wall before receding into the other cottage. Rather than risk stirring it or his hosts up further, Grant concentrated on downing enough of his meal to allow him to push away his plate and mime fullness. He was certainly full of a taste not altogether reminiscent of fish; he felt as though he were trying to swim through it, or it through him. When he drank a glass of the pitcher of water that had been the solitary accompaniment to the meal, he thought the taste was in there too.

Fiona cleared the plates into the sink, and that was the end of dinner. "Shall I help?" Grant had been brought up to offer.

"That's her work."

Since Fiona smiled indulgently at that, Grant didn't feel entitled to disagree. "I'd better go and phone, then."

He imagined he saw a pale shape lurch away from the window into the unspecific dimness—it must have been Fiona's reflection as she turned to blink at him. "He said you had."

"I ought to let my friends know I won't be seeing them tonight."

"They'll know when you don't, won't they? We don't want the waves carrying you off." Wiping her hands on a cloth that might have been part of someone's discarded garment, she pulled out a drawer beside the sink. "Stay in and we'll play a few games."

While the battered cardboard box she opened on the table was labelled Ludo, that wasn't quite what it contained. Rattling about on top of the familiar board inside the box were several fragments of a substance Grant told himself wasn't bone. "We make our own amusement round here," Fiona said. "We use whatever's sent us."

"He's not your lad."

"He could be." The scrape of Grant's chair on the stone floor went some way towards expressing his discomfort.

"I'll phone now," he said.

"Not driving, are you?" Tom enquired.

"Not at all." Grant couldn't be bothered resenting whatever the question implied. "I'm going to enjoy the walk."

"He'll be back soon for you to play with," Tom told his wife. She turned to gaze out at the dark while Tom's stare weighed on their visitor, who stood up.

"I won't need a key, will I?"

"We'll be waiting for you," Fiona mumbled.

Grant sensed tension as oppressive as a storm, and didn't thank the bare floorboards for amplifying his retreat along the hall. He seized the clammy latch and hauled the front door open. The night was almost stagnant. Subdued waves smoothed themselves out on the black water beyond the sea wall, inside which the bay chattered silently with whiteness beneath the incomplete mask of a moon a few days short of full. An odour he no longer thought it adequate to call fishy lingered in the humid air or inside him as he hurried towards the phone box.

The heat left over from the day more than kept pace with him. The infrequent jab of chill wind simply encouraged the smell. He wondered if an allergy to whatever he'd eaten was beginning to make itself felt in a recurrent sensation, expanding through him from his stomach, that his flesh was turning rubbery. The cottages had grown intensely present as chunks of moon fallen to earth, and seemed less deserted than he'd taken them to be: the moonlight showed that patches of some of the windows had been rubbed or breathed or even licked imperfectly clear. Once he thought faces rose like flotsam to watch him from the depths of three successive cottages, unless the same face was following him from house to ruined house. When he failed to restrain himself from looking, of course there was only moonlit dimness, and no dead cat in the general store. He did his best to scoff at himself as he reached the phone box.

Inside, the smell was lying in wait for him. He held the door open with his foot, though that admitted not only the infrequent wind but also more of the light that made his hand appear as pale as the receiver in it was black. His

clumsy swollen fingers found the number in his pocket and held the scrap of paper against the inside of a frame that had once contained a mirror above the phone. Having managed to dial, he returned the paper to its niche against his unreasonably flabby thigh and clutched the receiver to his face with both hands. The fourth twosome of rings was parted by a clatter that let sounds of revelry at him, and belatedly a voice. "Who's this?"

For longer than a breath Grant felt as if he was being forced to stand up in class for a question he couldn't answer, and had to turn it back on the questioner. "It's Ian, isn't it?"

"Bill," Ian said, and shouted it to their friends. "Where have you got to?" he eventually thought to ask.

"I've broken down on the coast. I'm getting the car fixed tomorrow."

"When are we seeing you?"

"I told you, tomorrow," Grant said, though the notion felt remote in more ways than he could name.

"Have a drink for us, then, and we will for you. Won't we, you crew?"

The enthusiasm this aroused fell short of Grant, not least because he'd been reminded of the water accompanying dinner, a memory that revived the taste of the meal. "Don't get too pissed to drive tomorrow," Ian advised and made way for a chorus of drunken encouragement followed by the hungry buzz of the receiver.

Grant planted the receiver on its hook and shoved himself out of the box. Even if Baiting had boasted a pub, he would have made straight for his room; just now, supine was the only position that appealed to him. As the phone box shut with a muted thud that emphasised the desertion of the seafront, he set out along the top of the submerged wall.

It was broad enough for him to feel safe even if he wobbled—luckily for his career, however distant that seemed, teachers didn't have to be able to swim. He wouldn't have minded being able to progress at more than a shuffle towards the landmark of his car blackened by the moonlight, but the unsynchronised restlessness flanking him made him feel less than stable, as if he was advancing through some unfamiliar medium. The luminous reflection of the arc of cottages hung beneath them, a lower jaw whose unrest suggested it was eager to become a knowing grin. The shape of the bay must be causing ripples to resemble large slow bubbles above the

huddle of round whitish shapes along the middle of the sea wall. He still couldn't make them out, nor how many images of the moon were tracking him on or just beneath the surface of the inlet. The closer he came to the halfway mark, the larger the bubbles appeared to grow. He was within a few yards of them and feeling mesmerised by his own pace and by the whispers of the sea, when he heard a protracted stealthy wallowing behind him. He turned to find he had company on the far end of the wall.

It must be a swimmer, he told himself. Its glistening suggested it was wearing a wet suit rendered pallid by the moon; surely it couldn't be naked. Was the crouched figure making a joke of his progress? As it began to drag its feet, which struck him as unnecessarily large, along the wall, it looked no more at home on the path than he felt. Its head was bent low, and yet he had the disconcerting impression that it was presenting its face to him. It had shuffled several paces before he was able to grasp that he would rather outdistance it than see it in greater detail. He swung around and faltered just one step in the direction of his car. While his attention had been snared, another figure as squat and pale and dripping had set out for him from the opposite end of the wall.

He was paralysed by the spectacle of the pair converging effortfully but inexorably on him, the faces on their lowered heads indisputably towards him, until a movement let him peer in desperation at the farthest cottage. The front door had opened, and over the car roof he saw Tom. "Can you come and help me?" Grant shouted, stumbling towards him along the wall.

The cottages flattened and shrank his voice and sent him Tom's across the bay. "No need for that."

"There is," Grant pleaded. "That's in my way."

"Rude bugger."

Grant had to struggle to understand this meant him. It added itself to the sight of the advancing figure pallid as the underside of a dead fish. The closer it shuffled, the less it appeared to have for a face. "What are they?" he cried.

"They're all the moon brings us these days," Tom said, audibly holding Grant or people like him responsible, and stepped out of the cottage. He was naked, like the figures on the wall. The revelation arrested Grant while Tom plodded to the car. Indeed, he watched Tom unlock it and climb in

before this sent him forward. "Stop that," he yelled. "What do you think you're doing? Get out of my car."

The Cavalier was no more likely to start first time for a naked driver than it ever did for him, he promised himself. Then it spluttered out a mass of fumes and performed a screeching U-turn. "Come back," Grant screamed. "You can't do that. You're polluting your environment."

No doubt his protests went unheard over the roaring of the engine. The sound took its time over dwindling once the coastline hid the car. The squat whitish shapes had halted once Grant had begun shouting. He strode at the figure crouched between him and the cottage and, since it didn't retreat, with as little effect at the other. He was repeating the manoeuvre, feeling like a puppet of his mounting panic, when that was aggravated by a burst of mirth. Fiona had appeared in the cottage doorway and was laughing at him. "Just jump in," she called across the water.

He didn't care how childish his answer sounded if she was capable of saving him. "I can't swim."

"What, a big strong lad like you?" Her heartiness increased as she declared "You can now. You can float, at any rate. Give it a try. We'll have to feed you up."

Beyond the spur of the coastline the sound of the car rose to a harsh note that was terminated by a massive splash. "That's the end of that," Fiona called. "You can be one of my big babies instead."

Grant's mind was refusing to encompass the implications of this when Tom came weltering like a half-submerged lump of the moon around the bay. Grant dashed along the sea wall, away from Fiona and Tom. He was almost at the middle section when he saw far too much in the water: not just the way that section could be opened as a gate, but the pallid roundish upturned faces that were clustered alongside. They must be holding their breath to have grown clear at last, their small flat unblinking eyes and, beneath the noseless nostrils, perfectly round mouths gaping in hunger that looked like surprise. As he wavered, terrified to pass above them, he had a final insight that he could have passed on to a classroom of pupils: the creatures must be waiting to open the gate and let in the tide and any fish it carried. "Don't mind them," Fiona shouted. "They don't mind we eat their dead. They even bring them now."

An upsurge of the fishy taste worse than nausea made Grant stagger along the wall. The waiting shape crouched forward, displaying the round-mouthed emotionless face altogether too high on its plump skull. Hands as whitish and as fat jerked up from the bay, snatching at Grant's feet. "That's the way, show him he's one of us," Fiona urged, casting off her clothes as she hurried to the water's edge.

She must have been encouraging Grant's tormentors to introduce him to the water. In a moment fingers caught his ankles and overbalanced him. His frantic instinctive response was to hurl himself away from them, into the open sea. Drowning seemed the most attractive prospect left to him.

The taste expanded through him, ousting the chill of the water with a sensation he was afraid to name. When he realised it was the experience of floating, he let out a howl that merely cleared his mouth of water. Too many pallid shapes for him to count were heaving themselves over the wall to surround him. He flailed his limbs and then tried holding them still, desperate to find a way of making himself sink. There was none. "Don't worry," Fiona shouted as she sloshed across the bay towards him, "you'll soon get used to our new member of the family," and, in what felt like the last of his sanity, Grant wondered if she was addressing his captors or Tom.

Tatters

"*Tatters* came from a reference on Radio 3 to satirical street ballads, and gave me some scope to joke."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

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"Perfect," Goldman said. The gentle dawn light lent the bricks of the warehouse apartments a glow as contented as a fire in a hearth. Across the river, which might have been holding itself still to be filmed, the faintly misted city waterfront was a dream of prosperity. Above the skyline that was scribbled with distant lines of trees interrupted by three church spires, a reddish sun was edging into view. "Mark," he called.

Simonette brandished the clapper board but kept its wooden jaws locked as she blinked over her shoulder. "What's that?"

A shadow was advancing faster than the sun along the alley between the warehouse they were about to film and its neighbour. Goldman held up a hand to delay Stephanie Maple beyond the black glass doors of the lobby, and the spectator halted out of sight. "Filming in progress, please," Goldman shouted. "Mark."

Simonette named the shot and clapped the board with a sound that drove only half the anxiety out of her small fragile face. Vanç shrugged the camera an inch higher and squinted through the viewfinder while Lezly planted her dungareed legs apart and waited to dangle the microphone over the actress, who swung open the glass doors, just failing to catch reflections of the film crew. She turned up her wide-lipped smile by fractions of an inch as she strode towards the camera. "Welcome to—"

For a breath Goldman was entranced by how graceful she seemed even at rest, her long pale face smooth as marble scarcely hinting at impatience while her blonde hair glinted in a breeze that left the rest of her tall slim lavender-suited form unmoved, and then he grew aware of the interruption, a voice almost tuneless enough to be merely speaking:

"They come down to the water
To buy themselves a flat.
They've got no room for thin ones here.
Just make way for the fat..."

The ballad and the shadow retreated down the alley as Simonette made for them so vigorously one of her pigtails began to unravel. She vanished into a silence that everyone watched until she reappeared. "I can't find anyone," she complained, blinking faster.

"I expect you chased them off," Goldman said, dismissing whatever fool it had been, and turned to his star. "Go again?"

"You're the director."

Simonette picked up her makeup box and was minutely restoring Stephanie Maple's face when Vanç shrugged his free shoulder. "Shot's gone. Too much sun."

"Could you talk us through your flat now, Stephanie, and we'll shoot you coming out same time tomorrow if we aren't putting you to too much trouble?"

The actress inserted her card in the lock to admit them to the lobby. Like the discreetly lit staircase and corridors, it was built of exposed bricks, as though the development was reverting to a past that had never quite existed. No doubt while the warehouses were derelict the walls had been too bare for anyone except the squatters, who would have had bottles and syringes to distract them.

Stephanie Maple led the camera up to her third-floor apartment, where the unplastered walls were adorned with Oriental paintings. Goldman thought those and the austerity with which she'd furnished the huge rooms—dining kitchen, social and recreational area, Jacuzzi and amenities room, twin identical bedrooms—ought to appeal to the Japanese developers. Vanç made the most of them while she enthused about them, declaring that they represented what was new and best about the town and vowing she would never abandon her roots despite the international success of her latest film, *Running Mummy*, in which she played an athlete coping with the demands of single motherhood. "And cut," Goldman called at last, close to being mesmerised by the sound of her musical voice in a film of his. "That's it except for the view."

He made his way between two low stark tables to the window even wider than the television. The wind had risen, shattering the track of sunlight on the water. A figure at the river's edge was silhouetted against the ripples, which made it look tattered from head to foot and too thin. It did nothing for the shot, thought Goldman. "We'll leave it till tomorrow," he said.

"Stephanie Maple seems to think I'm the genuine article."

"You'll have to come and talk to my film students."

"I will when I've made enough to impress them."

"You've already done that to me, Jonathan, but I'm only a lecturer."

"I'm not quite Hitchcock yet, Ruth. Once I've got more of a name in advertising, maybe I can make the kind of films I dream about."

"We don't need any hitches, and the rest of you is fine."

The germ of coyness in her voice and in her smile that held back from owning up to itself signified that she wanted to make love before dinner. Goldman followed her into their small bedroom that was cluttered mostly with her clothes, piled on the ironing board or waiting their turn for space in the solitary wardrobe or the stuffed chest of drawers. She stripped before he could offer to perform the ritual, and then she lay on the plump quilt, her round face framed by a spread of determinedly reddish tresses, her small breasts flattening themselves above sketched ribs, her wide lips and strong broad legs slightly parted. Goldman undressed and went to her with an urgency designed to convince his body as well as Ruth. They weren't overweight, he told himself. All the same, he kept remembering the uninvited ballad that had ruined his first shot of the day—kept almost hearing it and feeling he just had.

They gasped together and lay joined until Goldman's breathing began to lag behind Ruth's. A notion that he still ought to placate her inspired him to suggest dining out or bringing in, but she made it plain he should have known she'd prepared dinner. The vegetables were stubbornly tough, the lamb chops offered a choice of a blackened surface or a pinkish one. Goldman did his best to seem to have no difficulty, and only when the task was more than half complete risked saying "I'll have to be up before dawn again tomorrow."

Ruth pinched the lapels of her housecoat together over her bare breasts and gazed at him across the heavy unclothed secondhand table that occupied a

little too much of the room. "What is it this time?"

"More of the same, I'm afraid. Well, not afraid, but the same."

"Another session with your local performer, you mean."

"I think she's a bit more than that, do you? I'm lucky to have her. Don't you think it's good of her to give her services to the community that produced her?"

"I shouldn't imagine there's much of that left." Ruth worried a chop before dropping the bone on her plate. "I thought you were getting all you wanted today," she said.

"There were distractions."

"I'm sure."

They made room for each other while they washed up after dinner. When Ruth caught him glancing at the warehouses across the river, Goldman blurted "It shouldn't matter where you live, just who with." She suffered his hug, and so he ventured to admit "I wouldn't mind going to bed soon."

"I presume you won't object if I stay up and mark some essays."

"We've both got our jobs," said Goldman and sheltered in bed, though it had stored up a chill. Some light seeped in from the living room, along with the street noise of rowdies who might well have been rehoused from across the water, but he was most aware of how the inside of his throat felt scraped by the beginnings of a cold. He kept checking its ability to swallow until sleep swallowed him. After finding himself alone in bed a few times he began to be regurgitated next to Ruth, which eventually meant he could head off the alarm from rousing her. At least his throat felt no worse, and a hasty shower helped wake him up. He dressed and hurried through a medley of feline smells from the downstairs neighbour's menagerie to ensure Vanç had no excuse for sounding his horn.

In fact the van with PHOENIX PICTURES ON LOCATION on its sides didn't turn up for almost half an hour, by which time Goldman was shivering at the sight of his breath and failing to locate what sounded like someone attempting to carry a tune in their sleep. Simonette and Lezly were sprawled in the back of the van with their equipment between them, and mumbled as Goldman climbed into the front. "It'll be worth beating the dawn for," he felt required to promise.

From the heart of the business district a tunnel—an artery white as the monumental buildings—led under the river to emerge near a square mile of houses the council used to own. Newly made up, every street looked eager to be photographed, while the tenants had been sent across the water to make room for the young and increasingly prosperous employees of a Japanese electronics firm. The far side of the estate was overlooked by the warehouse apartments, where Stephanie Maple stepped out of the lobby as the film crew unloaded the van. Was that a shadow in the alley to her left, a shadow too long and thin even for the hour and very unsteadily outlined? A glance showed Goldman none, but he hurried to reassure himself that wasn't just because the sun had moved. "Whenever you're ready," he called from the alley, and withdrew out of range of the camera.

"Welcome to Riverhaven Apartments," the actress said, "city living for the new millennium, where good jobs and better leisure are just a stroll away from home." She came out of the building a third time to repeat herself in case there had been any problem, and then Vanç ran upstairs to film the last of the dawn from her window. Once the view was captured Goldman said, "We're truly grateful to you, Stephanie. I'd love to buy you dinner if you're free, if everyone is."

"It would have to be tonight," the actress said.

Vanç and Simonette proved to be meeting people together, Lezly by herself. After the briefest of silences Stephanie Maple raised her smile. "Shall we say the Japanese along the waterfront?"

Ruth had said more than once she would like to try that restaurant, which was why for the rest of the day Goldman was distracted from editing the film by rehearsing how he should approach her. It might have been too much rehearsal that produced "I don't suppose you'd want to go out for dinner."

"Any night except tonight. I still haven't caught up with my marking."

"Only Stephanie Maple, well, I think she'd like to celebrate successful teamwork."

"Then of course you must go. I'll see to myself, don't worry."

The kiss with which Stephanie Maple greeted him at her door, having remotely admitted him to the apartments, felt like a re-enactment of Ruth's token aloha. At least neither woman ought to catch the cold that was

massing like a storm of sneezes in his head. Though the apartment block threatened him with sweating, he could have lived without the enthusiastic compensation of the night air. "We'll stroll it, shall we?" the actress said with what he was surely mistaken to see as a disappointed glance at his Volkswagen.

The short walk along the riverside to the Western Dawn led them past warehouses yet to be renovated. From the depths of one hulk riddled with darkness Goldman thought he heard a mutter that might, given time, have settled on a melody. "Did you..."

"What's that, Jonathan?"

"I expect nothing. I mean, I expect it was either me or a tramp."

"No comparison," the actress said with almost too instant a smile.

He tried to open the door of the restaurant for her, but a waiter was ahead of him. Goldman hoped he hadn't offended the man by holding onto the door. The waiter betrayed no emotion as he showed them to the corner of an extensive metal-topped table and, having given them ample time to appreciate the view of the lit city founded on its own bright inversion, brought them menus swarming with ideograms interspersed with translations. "This is kind," Stephanie Maple murmured.

"It's my pleasure," Goldman assured her, largely to suppress his terror at the prices, and was uncontrollably prompted to urge her to order the most expensive items on the menu, then couldn't draw attention to this by ordering more cheaply for himself. As the waiter chopped ingredients in front of them between juggling food and knives Goldman grew aware of having remarked "Lots of tossing, eh?"

"Most people like a bit of spectacle," Stephanie Maple told him.

After that he felt bound to applaud the performance. Having sampled his dwarfish dinner, which seemed reluctant to admit to much taste, he had to say "Good?"

"All I expected."

"Good enough. I'm really pleased we got together." He hoped that was sufficient excuse for him to add "I'd really like to work with you again on something more substantial."

"I prefer younger directors."

"Even younger than me, you mean?"

Her look might have been a rebuke for denigrating himself if it wasn't for the reverse. Once she'd finished a delicate mouthful she said, "There could be a chance for you on my next film."

"That would be great," he said, but too much of his attention was entangled in the faint hovering Japanese music or rather in its background. Beneath the tinny plucking and the undercurrent of conversation, most of it Japanese, he heard a discordant voice:

"They chuck your food up in the air
And throw it on the table.
You smile at everything they serve
And swallow if you're able..."

Goldman managed to prove to himself that he could before demanding "Can you hear that?"

"I was hearing you."

He had to assume it was a symptom of fever, a thought that seemed to gather most of the heat of the restaurant under his arms. Rather than dab his forehead with his napkin, he excused himself and headed for the toilets identified by a plaque of a samurai warrior. Several Japanese businessmen in suits as dark as the tiles were conversing across the wide room. Goldman stooped to the nearest sink and was splashing cold water on his face when a stupendous sneeze overwhelmed him. A mirror showed him his face dripping not only with water. "Sorry," he choked, snatching a wad of toilet paper out of a cubicle to blow his nose. Once the prolonged routine was completed he went back to the actress, explaining "Just a sneeze and a blow, that was all."

"Not in front of anyone, I hope."

"Why not?" he said, almost remembering.

"It's a terrible insult to blow your nose around Japanese people."

He didn't dare look away from her. "Tell me about this film of yours," he came close to pleading.

"It's about a young couple who move into apartments where all the other tenants are criminals. They want to kill the couple for finding out too much

but a hit man's mother tries to protect them. *Hitting It Off*, that's the working title. We may film some of it round here. That's why I thought of you."

"Sounds like a hit. I'm happy I impressed you so much." When she laid her cool hand on his clammy one he asked, "Is there someone I should contact?"

"I'll see to that."

Goldman felt it would be ungracious to enquire further. He was relieved to be eventually outside despite the onslaught of night air. "Shall we?" he said.

He meant only to encourage her to move, but she turned from admiring the slow dance of the dim capsized city to give him a look he thought reminiscent of her touch. "We might," she said, and as her card protruded like a coy tongue from the slot beside the lobby entrance "Will you come up?"

"If you'd—Don't say that."

"I didn't mean to confuse you."

"You haven't," he declared without the least sense whether it was true. "Am I all you're hearing?"

"You've got my attention," she said, demonstrating with a wide-eyed gaze that she was unaware of the muffled repetition of a tuneless song in the nearest empty warehouse or inside his equally lightless skull:

"You've got yourself into her life,
You've got into her head.
You'll be inside her body next
And maybe in her bed..."

"I won't tonight." Goldman didn't know if he was responding to the song or to the invitation until he added "You don't want my cold."

"Let me know what your backers think of our little film."

"I'm sure they'll fall in love with it even if they don't show it," Goldman said, "show what they feel, I mean," and left her with a kiss that barely made contact. Throughout the drive home his brain stayed clogged with the same inharmonious doggerel. When he admitted himself to the flat he barely heard Ruth's somnolent mumble from the bedroom. "Good evening," it was more likely she asked than said.

"Everything it should have been." Hearing her respond only with measured breaths he took to indicate she was asleep, Goldman retreated to the bathroom, where he could deal with the ballad or the feverish memory of it; he couldn't tell which. "That's a lie," he reiterated until he felt quiet enough to lie beside Ruth.

The morning before the films were to be screened for the developers, Goldman and the crew watched once again and agreed they'd done their best work: the most pointedly edited, the best paced, seductive in their simplicity, the equal of anything of the kind the team had seen... "I just want to glance at the footage we didn't use," he cleared his throat to croak.

"Don't you think we made the right choices?" Simonette said with as many blinks as words.

"I'm sure we did." While he was in charge of editing, he always consulted the others. "I think this is the start of our real careers. I only want to check why we didn't use a shot," he said, leading them out of the screening room, where a wide-screen television faced two rows of a few old cinema seats, and through the small office into the even smaller editing room.

He watched Stephanie Maple begin "Welcome to—" and fall silent, gazing at him. He ran the shot again and cocked his head so close to the screen he could feel heat rising from it, unless that was fever. "You didn't catch it, then," he said.

"She froze," Lezly retorted, fists on hips.

"No, I mean you didn't catch what stopped her."

"As I remember, you did."

"Only because we were being interrupted. You'll confirm that, Simonette. You went to find whoever it was."

"That's because you looked as if you thought there was somebody," Simonette told him, blinking yet faster.

"One of you must have heard them." When the crew only gazed at him as he coughed and finished coughing, Goldman grabbed the phone. Machines were answering at Stephanie Maple's apartment and on her mobile. He asked both to have her call him and looked up to find the crew watching him. "Would you like some of us to do the presentation?" Vanç said.

"That's still my job," said Goldman, nevertheless adding "Anyway, this will sell itself." He filled his briefcase with copies of the tape and its accompanying glossy brochure and hurried to his car, inside which the March day seemed unreasonably warm. He drove out of the business park beside the tunnel mouth on the renovated side of the river and through the streets of council houses rendered youthful, and left the Volkswagen just out of sight of Teshagihara Enterprises. It wasn't a first impression he cared to make.

The harbourmaster's old building had been turned into offices. A window broad as the reception area contemplated the mouth of the river. While the receptionist, who looked hardly older than school age, hurried to announce him, Goldman kept imagining that the attempts of the air conditioning to relieve the heat were the winds that stirred the waves. He remembered not to bow first to the young executive who came to usher him into the conference room.

It was panelled in pale wood and almost full of a long table and a dozen Japanese businessmen. Though Goldman was wearing his best dark suit, their unobtrusive elegance made him feel overheated because overdressed. "This is Mr. Teshagihara," his usher said, having introduced himself as Mr. Ichikawa. "I will translate."

Goldman bowed and mumbled an effusive greeting and did less of both to the rest of the men, most of whose names also sounded as if they contained a sneeze. Nor was only that why he kept fearing sternutation was about to ambush him. He was almost sure he recognised Mr. Teshagihara and several of his minions from the toilet at the Western Dawn, and couldn't tell whether their lack of expression confirmed it. He had to force himself not to allow a tickling in his throat to cut short his introduction to the film. He was slipping a tape into the projector when his briefcase shrilled.

Ought he to have switched his mobile off, or would it show he was in demand? "Excuse me," he said to Mr. Teshagihara with no visible effect, and extracted the phone. "Goldman."

"Jonathan? It's Stephanie. How did your presentation go?"

"I'm in it now."

"Sorry, I thought you might have called to let me know about it. Shall I leave you to wow them?"

"Just very quickly, and don't for a moment think it's a criticism, but can you remind me why you stopped in the middle of your first take?"

"I should think you'd know."

"As I say, remind me."

"I thought you were looking at me to stop. I like to have that kind of rapport with my director."

"But you heard something as well," Goldman insisted with a vigour that made his mouth and throat itch.

"Only your clapper girl running off where you were looking and saying there was nobody."

"That doesn't mean—" All the businessmen were gazing at him, he couldn't tell how patiently. "I'll ring you back when, afterwards," he said and switched the phone off. "That was my star. Let's let her do the talking."

He didn't trust himself to say more. His head was a clammy balloon filled with bewilderment and tickling. He started the tape and tried to admire its image on the wall-sized screen as much as he was sure his clients would. The several promotions were all introduced by Stephanie Maple, some exhibiting her apartment, others the surrounding amenities and growth of opportunity. He would have been happy to let them speak for themselves without the constant muffled accompaniment, a ballad less in any tune at every recurrence:

"You've captured their attention,
So show them what you've got.
Just remember you must never ever
Let them glimpse your snot..."

His audience couldn't hear it, he tried to reassure himself. It sounded as though it was skulking rat-like in the walls. He struggled to ignore it and the cold it was threatening to aggravate while Mr. Teshagihara discussed matters in Japanese with his subordinates. Eventually he addressed Goldman at length before Mr. Ichikawa said "Mr. Teshagihara is grateful to you for helping him see clearly."

"I'm glad." When a pause brought nothing further, Goldman asked "How?"

"He sees now the apartments are too large. It will be more efficient to build many smaller ones, Mr. Teshagihara says."

"In the warehouses you haven't done yet, you mean. You'll want us to film them when you have, then." Mr. Ichikawa's face remained impassive as he turned to his superior. After an exchange that gave Goldman time to hear the singer's voice grow hoarse with repetition, the executive said "Mr. Teshagihara will use your shortest film."

"Punchier, does he think?"

Mr. Ichikawa lowered his voice as though confiding a rebuke. "Mr. Teshagihara prefers not to see the Chinese rooms."

It became apparent to Goldman that it wasn't enough for Stephanie Maple's apartment to look Oriental—that he wasn't alone in committing a gaffe. "So you'll be using our film to be going on with," he said hastily, "and can you give me any idea when you'll want us to shoot the rest of the development?"

Mr. Teshagihara emitted a loud protracted sniff that Goldman told himself couldn't be a signal to his underling to say "Mr. Teshagihara will hire another company to do that. Your film will go on local television."

"All over the country, you mean?" Goldman said louder than the meeting appeared to like, but failed to blot out the ballad.

"Your local television."

"But it only reaches a few miles. That wasn't all you asked me for."

Mr. Ichikawa communicated some version of this to his superior, who reached stone-faced into a folder for papers that were handed along the table to Goldman. The succession of expressionless faces beneath which they passed made him feel trapped in a masked Japanese play about commerce. He was leafing in feverish search of a loophole through the contract that gave Teshagihara Enterprises sole choice of film and its exhibition when Mr. Teshagihara uttered a prolonged especially liquid sniff and then a sentence. "Mr. Teshagihara will honour what he signed," Mr. Ichikawa said.

Presumably he was translating the words rather than the sniff, but it was the latter that stayed with Goldman. "It's not about honour. It's about this," he said, jerking two fingers close to his packed nostrils, and when his voice fell short of obscuring the ballad, joined in. "It's about don't let them glimpse your snot. Never mind staring at me. It isn't as if you lot seem to know much about tunes either."

All the consonants of the last word were swept away by a Godzilla of a sneeze. The contents of his nose sprayed the air and spilled down his face. For an instant he felt withered by shame, and then he snatched back the hand that was flinching from finding a handkerchief. "We've got that in common at least," he said and, having wiped his face on the contract, used it to blow his nose. He crumpled the pages and shied them at a waste bin as he backed away from all the faces he'd provoked into showing emotion. "Don't forget honour," he said, shutting the door on the sight of them.

Had he placated his tormentor in some way? The only sound that met him outside the building was a rustle of unseen litter. "This is my car for anyone who'd like to know," he shouted, and drove home. He could think of nowhere he wanted to go except bed.

A phone was ringing as he let himself into the house, which no doubt persisted in smelling of cats. When he realised the phone was upstairs he dashed to unlock the flat and seize the receiver. "Goldman," he said as clearly as his head allowed.

"Tell us it didn't happen."

"Lezly. You'd rather it didn't, you're saying. You want to make real films."

"Why would we be saying any crap like that? We want to make films people see."

"I think we've just done that, haven't we?" Goldman said loud enough to be heard in the street, where a song seemed to have insinuated itself into a riot of children released from school:

"You've finished making things look good,
And all you made was trouble.
You might as well have given up
And lived among the rubble..."

"What do you know about it?" Goldman snarled, and was about to assure Lezly that wasn't aimed at her when she retorted, "Everything. The clients faxed us."

"And told us what exactly?" Goldman said, feeling as though he was adding a line to the song.

"They'll pay the contract minimum but they won't let any of the films be shown. Vanç rang to see if he could change their mind and got the feeling

you'd offended them somehow."

"I did my best. Forget them. I'd rather work with people more like us. Can you keep some news to yourselves till it breaks?"

"Let's find out."

"It looks as if I'll be directing Stephanie's next feature. You know I'll want you all involved. Forgive me, I ought to have told her you came with the deal."

"We'll need to discuss it."

"We will," Goldman said and pushed himself to his feet by replacing the receiver. The tuneless ballad felt like fog growing solid in his head. Sprinting hotly to the window, he dragged the sash up. Schoolchildren were dodging traffic and scattering litter. The song had trailed off, but for a moment Goldman thought a windblown assortment of papers was a bony figure crawling into an alley. Then he caught sight of Ruth.

She saw him, and her cheerful preoccupied march missed a step while she waved. Goldman was still at the window when she dumped her bag of papers on the creaky sofa. "You're home early," she said.

"Would you rather I weren't here?"

"What on earth makes you ask that?" She took his blazing face in her cool hands.

"You're in a strange mood," she said. "Aren't we celebrating?"

"Because I'm directing Stephanie's next film we can if you like, but today's lot don't want what we made for them."

"Oh, Jonathan." He saw her consider enquiring about it and put her questions on hold, instead hugging him and then, with some urgency, rather more than hugging. "We've still got us," she said.

"I don't think you want that much of me just now. I come with a cold, you'll have noticed."

"It's part of you. I expect I'll have caught whatever I'm going to catch."

He didn't feel equal to an argument or, worse, the postponement of one. He led her into the bedroom and, having undressed her as lingeringly as she liked, struggled free of his own humid clothes. The hint of ribs above the wider rest of her left him feeling hot and flabby by comparison, but little

else. He knelt between her legs and tried to think of words to murmur while caressing her, but had made little headway along either line when she said "What can you hear?"

"You," he said desperately, dealing her a kiss that felt close to a sneeze. He thought he was safe to mumble another response under cover of it, but Ruth twisted her head aside, crying "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"You didn't touch who?"

"Nobody," Goldman pleaded, not loud enough to blot out the repetition of the song beneath the window of the next room:

"Just tell her everything you did
Was only for your art.
You didn't take your actress out
And hope she was a tart..."

"I didn't and she isn't," he blustered. "Christ, can't you hear that, Ruth?"

"I've heard enough, I think," she said, drawing her legs together and away from him as if they might be needed to support her face, which had grown heavy and slack. "Maybe you were right after all."

"I am. You have to see I am." When she gazed sadly at him he demanded "How?"

"I think I'd rather you weren't here."

"Anything else you want to do to me?" he screamed, lurching into the next room to crane his top half out of the window. A gang of children jeered at him, and one improved on pointing at him by lobbing a plastic bottle in his direction. Its empty clatter failed to distract him from the song that was persisting somewhere up the street. He slammed the window and stumbled into the bedroom. "I wasn't talking about you just now," he tried to assure Ruth.

"Oh, I don't believe you've done that for a while."

"I haven't time for this," he muttered, pulling on his clothes and their clamminess. "I'm going to find—I'm going to." His inability to explain tethered him to Ruth, though she wasn't looking at him. "All right, goodbye," he blurted and ran downstairs.

The night air might have relieved the heat that made him smell like a tomcat, but he'd hardly set about chasing the unseen singer when he began to feel marinated in sweat. He was sure he knew where his tormentor was bound. Sprinting back to his car, he drove to the tunnel.

All the way through it he kept hearing the singer, though the words were indistinguishable amid the hubbub of the rush hour. Sometimes he thought the voice was in one or other of the vehicles surrounding him, and sometimes on his car radio, though that was switched off. When he emerged from the tunnel the voice fled towards the river, as he knew it would.

He still hadn't glimpsed the singer by the time he reached the warehouses. He parked in front of the derelict building nearest to Stephanie Maple's apartment and was straggling feebly out of his seat belt when a Mercedes drew up outside her block. He didn't know whether to greet her or hide as she was ushered out of the car by a tall wiry muscular man some years younger than her or Goldman. When she caught sight of him he raised a hand and followed it up. "Stephanie," he succeeded in croaking. "Not here for you just now, but looking forward to directing you again."

The man frowned at him as though at an especially unwelcome beggar, and at first the actress only frowned. "Jonathan?" she said. "When would that be?"

"Whenever your next film goes into production. The one about the bad guys living here. The one you want me for."

"As an assistant if I can fix it. I don't know if you'd be directing me."

It was still work, Goldman tried to tell himself, but couldn't help wondering if he might have been hired to direct if he'd accepted whatever had been offered at their last encounter. That seemed as remote and unreal as the future she had just snatched out of reach. He was holding in a shiver that felt like a threat of losing all control when she said "Are you worse, Jonathan? You ought to go home."

"Wherever that is."

She looked as if she hadn't quite heard something, possibly not him. It didn't prevent her from letting herself and her companion into the apartments—if anything, it sped her on her way. Goldman watched the lobby grow deserted and then dark while a song provided a soundtrack:

"It shouldn't matter where you live,
So crawl back in your hole.
It doesn't matter who you are.
You're just another soul..."

"Let's see what kind you are," Goldman croaked, and blundered across the parking area that was patterned with bones—with white lines. Under the scrawny floodlights that iced the concrete his car looked abandoned, exhausted of colour. A gathering of shadows fluttered underfoot, eager to drag him down to join them. They helped his legs feel depleted as he staggered to the nearest disused warehouse and peered through a window.

The song was somewhere in the stony dark. It sounded hushed now, almost trapped. "You aren't getting away from me this time," Goldman whispered. The warehouse doors were locked, but he hauled himself up into the glassless aperture and, with an effort that left him sodden and shivering, through.

He lowered himself on his wasted arms and leaned against damp brick while he tried to regather himself. The song had withered into silence, but he could just distinguish a tattered bony shape cowering in the far corner of the vast dark space, and heard the rustling of whatever it used for a bed. When he felt able to manage without the support of the wall he picked his way across the stone floor, avoiding chunks of rubble and drained bottles. Once he almost tripped over a squashed can that stank of lager. Nevertheless he kept his attention on the restless tenant of the dark.

The material in which the figure was attired was dismayingly tattered, he thought, or was that its nest? Surely none of the tremulous fragments could be part of the figure itself. Goldman faltered as he heard the wail of a police car, and as that receded, a last breath of song:

"There was a time when sirens
Didn't give you an alarm..."

Something with a mouth or at least a gaping cavity in it wobbled up to greet him, then fell back with a papery sound. At once the figure was indistinguishable from its bed and then not there in any form.

Goldman flattened a hand against the rough chill wall and stooped unsteadily to peer at the items that constituted the bed. They were crumpled pages, thousands of them. He had to wobble lower to lift one to his face. In

the glow from the city across the window, he could just make out that he was holding a song sheet. Every page he groped for and let drop was one, but he was unable to read any of the words.

When he tired of letting pages fall back on the mound he followed the last of them down. From so much bending and unbending he felt dizzy and hollow, robbed of substance, scarcely present. He just needed to lie down until he regained himself, he thought. He curled up in the nest, which seemed to have readied a hollow for him, and took a page in each hand as he closed his eyes. He settled into himself and the dark, thinking of Ruth, the Phoenix Pictures team, Stephanie Maple, Mr. Teshagihara and his acolytes. When he began to sing, at first it was only to himself.

The Retrospective

"*The Retrospective* grew from the idea of the museum in an unfamiliar town. It feels to me somewhat like my tribute to Thomas Ligotti."—Ramsey Campbell, afterword to the story in *Dark Terrors 6*, October, 2002

"*The Retrospective* felt rather like a tribute to the great Thomas Ligotti, though I'm certain he would handle the notion quite differently. Because of a misunderstanding the last three words were omitted from its original publication and replaced with an ellipsis, an effect I dislike as much as M. R. James did..."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

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Trent had no idea how long he was unable to think for rage. The guard kept out of sight while she announced the unscheduled stop, and didn't reappear until the trainload of passengers had crowded onto the narrow platform. As the train dragged itself away into a tunnel simulated by elderly trees and the low March afternoon sky that was plastered with layers of darkness, she poked her head out of the rearmost window to announce that the next train should be due in an hour. The resentful mutters of the crowd only aggravated Trent's frustration. He needed a leisurely evening and, if he could manage it for a change, a night's sleep in preparation for a working breakfast. If he'd known the journey would be broken, he could have reread his paperwork instead of contemplating scenery he couldn't even remember. No doubt the next train would already be laden with commuters—he doubted it would give him space to work. His skull was beginning to feel shrivelled and hollow when it occurred to him that if he caught a later train he would both ensure himself a seat and have time to drop in on his parents. When had he last been home to see them? All at once he felt so guilty that he preferred not to look anyone in the face as he excused his slow way to the ticket office.

It was closed—a board lent it the appearance of a frame divested of a photograph—but flanked by a timetable. Stoneby to London, Stoneby to London... There were trains on the hour, like the striking of a clock. He emerged from the short wooden passage into the somewhat less gloomy street, only to falter. Where was the sweet shop whose window used to

exhibit dozens of glass-stoppered jars full of colours he could taste? Where was the toyshop fronted by a headlong model train that had never stopped for the travellers paralysed on the platform? What had happened to the bakery displaying tiered white cakes elaborate as Gothic steeples, and the bridal shop next door, where the headless figures in their pale dresses had made him think of Anne Boleyn? Now the street was overrun with the same fast-food eateries and immature clothes shops that surrounded him whenever he left his present apartment, and he couldn't recall how much change he'd seen on his last visit, whenever that had been. He felt suddenly so desperate to be somewhere more like home that he almost didn't wait for twin green men to pipe up and usher him across the road.

The short cut was still there, in a sense. Instead of separating the toyshop from the wedding dresses, it squeezed between a window occupied by a regiment of boots and a hamburger outlet dogged by plastic cartons. Once he was in the alley the clamour of traffic relented, but the narrow passage through featureless discoloured concrete made him feel walled in by the unfamiliar. Then the concrete gave way to russet bricks and released him into a street he knew.

At least, it conformed to his memory until he looked closer. The building opposite, which had begun life as a music hall, had ceased to be a cinema. A pair of letters clung to the whitish border of the rusty iron marquee, two letters N so insecure they were on the way to being Zs. He was striving to remember if the cinema had been shut last time he'd seen it when he noticed that the boards on either side of the lobby contained posters too small for the frames. The neighbouring buildings were boarded up. As he crossed the deserted street, the posters grew legible. MEMORIES OF STONEBY, the amateurish printing said.

The two wide steps beneath the marquee were cracked and chipped and stained. The glass of the ticket booth in the middle of the marble door was too blackened to see through. Behind the booth the doors into the auditorium stood ajar. Uncertain what the gap was showing him, he ventured to peer in.

At first the dimness yielded up no more than a strip of carpet framed by floorboards just as grubby, and then he thought someone absolutely motionless was watching him from the dark. The watcher was roped off from him—the several indistinct figures were. He assumed they represented

elements of local history: there was certainly something familiar about them. That impression, and the blurred faces with their dully glinting eyes, might have transfixed him if he hadn't remembered that he was supposed to be seeing his parents. He left the echo of his footsteps dwindling in the lobby and hurried around the side of the museum.

Where the alley crossed another he turned left along the rear of the building. In the high wall to his right a series of solid wooden gates led to backyards, the third of which belonged to his old house. As a child he'd used the gate as a short cut to the cinema, clutching a coin in his fist, which had smelled of metal whenever he'd raised it to his face in the crowded restless dark. His parents had never bolted the gate until he was home again, but now the only effect of his trying the latch was to rouse a clatter of claws and the snarling of a neighbour's dog that sounded either muzzled or gagged with food, and so he made for the street his old house faced.

The sunless sky was bringing on a twilight murky as an unlit room. He could have taken the street for an aisle between two blocks of dimness so lacking in features they might have been identical. Presumably any children who lived in the terrace were home from school by now, though he couldn't see the flicker of a single television in the windows draped with dusk, while the breadwinners had yet to return. Trent picked his way over the broken upheaved slabs of the pavement, supporting himself on the roof of a lone parked car until it shifted rustily under his hand, to his parents' front gate.

The small plot of a garden was a mass of weeds that had spilled across the short path. He couldn't feel it underfoot as he tramped to the door, which was the colour of the oncoming dark. He was fumbling in his pocket and then with the catches of his briefcase when he realised he would hardly have brought his old keys with him. He rang the doorbell, or at least pressed the askew pallid button that set off a muffled rattle somewhere in the house.

For the duration of more breaths than he could recall taking, there was no response. He was about to revive the noise, though he found it somehow distressing, when he heard footsteps shuffling down the hall. Their slowness made it sound as long as it had seemed in his childhood, so that he had the odd notion that whoever opened the door would tower over him.

It was his mother, and smaller than ever—wrinkled and whitish as a figure composed of dough that had been left to collect dust, a wad of it on top of and behind her head. She wore a tweed coat over a garment he took to be a

nightdress, which exposed only her prominent ankles above a pair of unmatched slippers. Her head wavered upwards as the corners of her lips did. Once all these had steadied she murmured "Is it you, Nigel? Are you back again?"

"I thought it was past time I was."

"It's always too long." She shuffled in a tight circle to present her stooped back to him before calling "Guess who it is, Walter."

"Hess looking for a place to hide," Trent's father responded from some depth of the house.

"No, not old red-nosed Rudolph. Someone a bit younger and a bit more English."

"The Queen come to tea."

"He'll never change, will he?" Trent's mother muttered and raised what was left of her voice. "It's the boy. It's Nigel."

"About time. Let's see what he's managed to make of himself."

She made a gesture like a desultory grab at something in the air above her left shoulder, apparently to beckon Trent along the hall. "Be quick with the door, there's a good boy. We don't want the chill roosting in our old bones."

As soon as the door shut behind him he couldn't distinguish whether the stairs that narrowed the hall by half were carpeted only with dimness. He trudged after his mother past a door that seemed barely sketched on the crawling murk and, more immediately than he expected, another. His mother opened a third, beyond which was the kitchen, he recalled rather than saw. It smelled of damp he hoped was mostly tea. By straining his senses he was just able to discern his father seated in some of the dark. "Shall we have the light on?" Trent suggested.

"Can't you see? Thought you were supposed to be the young one round here." After a pause his father said "Come back for bunny, have you?"

Trent couldn't recall ever having owned a rabbit, toy or otherwise, yet the question seemed capable of reviving some aspect of his childhood. He was feeling surrounded by entirely too much darkness when his mother said "Now, Walter, don't be teasing" and clicked the switch.

The naked dusty bulb seemed to draw the contents of the room inwards—the blackened stove and stained metal sink, the venerable shelves and

cabinets and cupboards Trent's father had built, the glossy pallid walls. The old man was sunk in an armchair, the least appropriate of an assortment of seats surrounding the round table decorated with crumbs and unwashed plates. His pear-shaped variously reddish face appeared to have been given over to producing fat to merge with the rest of him. He used both shaky inflated hands to close the lapels of his faded dressing gown over his pendulous chest cobwebbed with grey hairs. "You've got your light," he said, "so take your place."

Lowering himself onto a chair that had once been straight, Trent lost sight of the entrance to the alley—of the impression that it was the only aspect of the yard the window managed to illuminate. "Will I make you some tea?" his mother said.

She wasn't asking him to predict the future, he reassured himself. "So long as you're both having some as well."

"Not much else to do these days."

"It won't be that bad really, will it?" Trent said, forcing a guilty laugh. "Aren't you still seeing..."

"What are we seeing?" his father prompted with some force.

"Your friends," Trent said, having discovered that he couldn't recall a single name. "They can't all have moved away."

"Nobody moves any longer."

Trent didn't know whether to take that as a veiled rebuke. "So what have you two been doing with yourselves lately?"

"Late's the word."

"Nigel's here now," Trent's mother said, perhaps relevantly, over the descending hollow drumroll of the kettle she was filling from the tap.

More time than was reasonable seemed to have passed since he'd entered the house. He was restraining himself from glancing even surreptitiously at his watch when his father quivered an impatient hand at him. "So what are you up to now?"

"He means your work."

"Same as always."

Trent hoped that would suffice until he was able to reclaim his memory from the darkness that had gathered in his skull, but his parents' stares were as blank as his mind. "And what's that?" his mother said.

He felt as though her forgetfulness had seized him. Desperate to be reminded what his briefcase contained, he nevertheless used reaching for it as a chance to glimpse his watch. The next train was due in less than half an hour. As Trent scrabbled at the catches of the briefcase, his father said "New buildings, isn't it? That's what you put up."

"Plan," Trent said, clutching the briefcase on his lap. "I draw them."

"Of course you do," said his mother. "That's what you always wanted."

It was partly so as not to feel minimised that Trent declared "I wouldn't want to be responsible for some of the changes in town."

"Then don't be."

"You won't see much else changing round here," Trent's mother said.

"Didn't anyone object?"

"You have to let the world move on," she said. "Leave it to the young ones."

Trent wasn't sure if he was included in that or only wanted to be. "How long have we had a museum?"

His father's eyes grew so blank Trent could have fancied they weren't in use. "Since I remember."

"No, that's not right," Trent objected as gently as his nerves permitted. "It was a cinema and before that a theatre. You took me to a show there once."

"Did we?" A glint surfaced in his mother's eyes. "We used to like shows, didn't we, Walter? Shows and dancing. Didn't we go on all night sometimes and they wondered where we'd got to?"

Her husband shook his head once slowly, whether to enliven memories or deny their existence Trent couldn't tell. "The show you took me to," he insisted, "I remember someone dancing with a stick. And there was a lady comedian, or maybe not a lady but dressed up."

Perhaps it was the strain of excavating the recollection that made it seem both lurid and encased in darkness—the outsize figure prancing sluggishly about the stage and turning towards him a sly greasy smile as crimson as a

wound, the ponderous slap on the boards of feet that sounded unshod, the onslaughts of laughter that followed comments Trent found so incomprehensible he feared they were about him, the shadow that kept swelling on whatever backdrop the performer had, an effect suggesting that the figure was about to grow yet more gigantic. Surely some or preferably most of that was a childhood nightmare rather than a memory. "Was there some tea?" Trent blurted.

At first it seemed his mother's eyes were past seeing through their own blankness. "In the show, do you mean?"

"Here." When that fell short of her he said more urgently "Now."

"Why, you should have reminded me," she protested and stood up. How long had she been seated opposite him? He was so anxious to remember that he didn't immediately grasp what she was doing. "Mother, don't," he nearly screamed, flinging himself off his chair.

"No rush. It isn't anything like ready." She took her hand out of the kettle on the stove—he wasn't sure if he glimpsed steam trailing from her fingers as she replaced the lid. "We haven't got much longer, have we?' she said. "We mustn't keep you from your duties."

"You won't do that again, will you?"

"What's that, son?"

He was dismayed to think she might already have forgotten. "You won't put yourself in danger."

"There's nothing we'd call that round here," his father said.

"You'll look after each other, won't you? I really ought to catch the next train. I'll be back to see you again soon, I promise, and next time it'll be longer."

"It will."

His parents said that not quite in chorus, apparently competing at slowness. "Till next time, then," he said and shook his father's hand before hugging his mother. Both felt disconcertingly cold and unyielding, as if the appearance of each had hardened into a carapace. He gripped the handle of his briefcase while he strove to twist the rusty key in the back door. "I'll go my old way, shall I? It's quicker."

When nobody answered he hauled open the door, which felt unhinged. Cobwebbed weeds sprawled over the doorstep into the kitchen at once. Weedy mounds of earth or rubble had overwhelmed the yard and the path. He picked his way to the gate and with an effort turned his head, but nobody was following to close the gate: his mother was still at her post by the stove, his father was deep in the armchair. He had to use both hands to wrench the bolt out of its socket, and almost forgot to retrieve his briefcase as he stumbled into the alley. The passage was unwelcomingly dark, not least because the light from the house failed to reach it—no, because the kitchen was unlit. He dragged the gate shut and took time to engage the latch before heading for the rear of the museum.

Damp must be stiffening his limbs. He hoped it was in the air, not in his parents' house. Was it affecting his vision as well? When he slogged to the end of the alley the street appeared to be composed of little but darkness, except for the museum. The doors to the old auditorium were further ajar, and as he crossed the road Trent saw figures miming in the dimness. He hadn't time to identify their faces before panting down the alley where brick was ousted by concrete.

Figures sat in the stark restaurants and modelled clothes in windows. Otherwise the street was deserted except for a man who dashed into the station too fast for Trent to see his face. The man let fly a wordless plea and waved his briefcase as he sprinted through the booking hall. Trent had just begun to precipitate himself across the road when he heard the slam of a carriage door. He staggered ahead of his breath onto the platform in time to see the last light of a train vanish into the trees, which looked more like a tunnel than ever.

His skull felt frail with rage again. Once he regained the ability to move he stumped to glower at the timetable next to the boarded-up office. His fiercest glare was unable to change the wait into less than an hour. He marched up and down a few times, but each end of the platform met him with increasing darkness. He had to keep moving to ward off a chill stiffness. He trudged into the street and frowned about him.

The fast-food outlets didn't appeal to him, neither their impersonal refreshments nor the way all the diners faced the street as though to watch him, not that doing so lent them any animation. He couldn't even see

anyone eating. Ignoring the raw red childishly-sketched men, he lurched across the road into the alley.

He oughtn't to go to his parents. So instant a return might well confuse them, and just now his own mind felt more than sufficiently unfocused. The only light, however tentative, in the next street came from the museum. He crossed the roadway, which was as lightless as the low sky, and climbed the faint steps.

Was the ticket booth lit? A patch of the blackened glass had been rubbed relatively clear from within. He was fumbling for money to plant on the sill under the gap at the foot of the window when he managed to discern that the figure in the booth was made of wax. While it resembled the middle-aged woman who had occupied the booth when the building was a cinema, it ought to look years—no, decades—older. Its left grey-cardiganed arm was raised to indicate the auditorium. He was unable to judge its expression for the gloom inside the booth. Tramping to the doors, he pushed them wide.

That seemed only to darken the auditorium, but he felt the need to keep on the move before his eyes had quite adjusted. The apparently sourceless twilight put him in mind of the glow doled out by the candle that used to stand in an encrusted saucer on the table by his childhood bed. As he advanced under the enormous unseen roof, he thought he was walking on the same carpet that had led into the cinema and indeed the theatre. He was abreast of the first of the figures on either side of the aisle before he recognised them.

He'd forgotten they were sisters, the two women who had run the bakery and the adjacent bridal shop. Had they really been twins? They were playing bridesmaids in identical white ankle-length dresses—whitish, rather, and trimmed with dust. Presumably it was muslin as well as dust that gloved their hands, which were pointing with all their digits along the aisle. The dull glints of their grimy eyes appeared to spy sidelong on him. He'd taken only a few steps when he stumbled to a halt and peered about him.

The next exhibits were disconcerting enough. No doubt the toyshop owner was meant to be introducing his model railway, but he looked as if he was crouching sideways to grab whatever sought refuge in the miniature tunnel. Opposite him the sweetshop man was enticing children to his counter, which was heaped with sweets powdered grey, by performing on a sugar

whistle not entirely distinguishable from his glimmering teeth. Trent hadn't time to ascertain what was odd about the children's wide round eyes, because he was growing aware of the extent of the museum.

Surely it must be a trick of the unreliable illumination, but the more he gazed around him, the further the dimness populated with unmoving figures seemed to stretch. If it actually extended so far ahead and to both sides, it would encompass at least the whole of the street that contained his parents' house. He wavered forward a couple of paces, which only encouraged figures to solidify out of that part of the murk. He swivelled as quickly as he was able and stalked out of the museum.

The echoes of his footsteps pursued him across the lobby like mocking applause. He could hear no other sound, and couldn't tell whether he was being watched from the ticket booth. He found his way down the marble steps and along the front of the museum. In a few seconds he was sidling crabwise along it in order to differentiate the alley from the unlit façade. He wandered further than he should have, and made his way back more slowly. Before long he was groping with his free hand at the wall as he ranged back and forth, but it was no use. There was no alley, just unbroken brick.

He was floundering in search of a crossroads, from which there surely had to be a route to his old house, when he realised he might as well be blind. He glanced back, praying wordlessly for any relief from the dark. There was only the glow from the museum lobby. It seemed as feeble as the candle flame had grown in the moment before it guttered into smoke, and so remote he thought his stiff limbs might be past carrying him to it. When he retreated towards it, at first he seemed not to be moving at all.

More time passed than he could grasp before he felt sure the light was closer. Later still he managed to distinguish the outstretched fingertips of his free hand. He clung to his briefcase as though it might be snatched from him. He was abreast of the lobby, and preparing to abandon its glow for the alley that led to the station, when he thought he heard a whisper from inside the museum. "Are you looking for us?"

It was either a whisper, or so distant that it might as well be one. "We're in here, son," it said, and its companion added "You'll have to come to us."

"Mother?" It was unquestionably her voice, however faint. He almost tripped over the steps as he sent himself into the lobby. For a moment, entangled in the clapping of his footsteps on the marble, he thought he

heard a large but muted sound, as of the surreptitious arrangement of a crowd. He blundered to the doors and peered into the auditorium.

Under the roof, which might well have been an extension of the low ponderous black sky, the aisle and its guardians were at least as dim as ever. Had things changed, or had he failed to notice details earlier? The bridal sisters were licking their lips, and he wasn't sure if they were dressed as bridesmaids or baked into giant tiered cakes from which they were trying to struggle free. Both of the toyshop owner's hands looked eager to seize the arrested train if it should try to reach the safety of the tunnel, and the bulging eyes of the children crowded around the man with the sugar whistle —were those sweets? Trent might have retreated if his mother's voice hadn't spoken to him. "That's it, son. Don't leave us this time."

"Have a thought for us. Don't start us wondering where you are again. We're past coming to find you."

"Where are you? I can't see."

"Just carry on straight," his parents' voices took it in turns to murmur.

He faltered before lurching between the first exhibits. Beyond them matters could hardly be said to improve. He did his best not to see too much of the milkman holding the reins of a horse while a cow followed the cart, but the man's left eye seemed large enough for the horse, the right for the cow. Opposite him stood a rag and bone collector whose trade was apparent from the companion that hung onto his arm, and Trent was almost glad of the flickering dimness. "How much further?" he cried in a voice that the place shrank almost to nothing.

"No more than you can walk at your age."

Trent hung onto the impression that his father sounded closer than before and hugged his briefcase while he made his legs carry him past a policeman who'd removed his helmet to reveal a bald-ridged head as pointed as a chrysalis, a priest whose smooth face was balanced on a collar of the same paleness as and no thicker than a child's wrist, a window cleaner with scrawny legs folded like a grasshopper's, a bus conductor choked by his tie that was caught in his ticket machine while at the front of the otherwise deserted vehicle the driver displayed exactly the same would-be comical strangled face and askew swollen tongue... They were nightmares, Trent told himself: some he remembered having suffered as a child, and the rest

he was afraid to remember in case they grew clearer. "I still can't see you," he all but wailed.

"Down here, son."

Did they mean ahead? He hoped he wasn't being told to use any of the side aisles, not least because they seemed capable of demonstrating that the place was even vaster than he feared. The sights they contained were more elaborate too. Off to the right was a brass band, not marching but frozen in the act of tiptoeing towards him: though all the players had lowered their instruments, their mouths were perfectly round. In the dimness to his left, and scarcely more luminous, was a reddish bonfire surrounded by figures that wore charred masks, unless those were their faces, and beyond that was a street party where children sat at trestle tables strewn with food and grimaced in imitation of the distorted versions of their faces borne by deflating balloons they held on strings... Trent twisted his stiff body around in case some form of reassurance was to be found behind him, but the exit to the lobby was so distant he could have mistaken it for the last of a flame. He half closed his eyes to blot out the sights he had to pass, only to find that made the shadows of the exhibits and the darkness into which the shadows trailed loom closer, as if the dimness was on the point of being finally extinguished. He was suddenly aware that if the building had still been a theatre, the aisle would have brought him to the stage by now. "Where are you?" he called but was afraid to raise his voice. "Can't you speak?"

"Right here."

His eyes sprang so wide they felt fitted into their sockets. His parents weren't just close, they were behind him. He turned with difficulty and saw why he'd strayed past them. His mother was wearing a top hat and tails and had finished twirling a cane that resembled a lengthening of one knobbly finger; his father was bulging out of a shabby flowered dress that failed to conceal several sections of a pinkish bra. They'd dressed up to cure Trent of his nightmare about the theatre performance, he remembered, but they had only brought it into his waking hours. He backed away from it—from their waxen faces greyish with down, their smiles as fixed as their eyes. His legs collided with an object that folded them up, and he tottered sideways to sit helplessly on it. "That's it, son," his mother succeeded in murmuring.

"That's your place," his father said with a last shifting of his lips.

Trent glared downwards and saw he was trapped by a school desk barely large enough to accommodate him. On either side of him sat motionless children as furred with grey as their desks, even their eyes. Between him and his parents a teacher in a gown and mortarboard was standing not quite still and sneering at him. "Mr Bunnie," Trent gasped, remembering how the teacher had always responded to being addressed by his name as though it was an insult. Then, in a moment of clarity that felt like a beacon in the dark, he realised he had some defence. "This isn't me," he tried to say calmly but firmly. "This is."

His fingers were almost too unmanageable to deal with the briefcase. He levered at the rusty metal buttons with his thumbs until at last the catches flew open and the contents spilled across the desk. For a breath, if he had any, Trent couldn't see them in the dimness, and then he made out that they were half a dozen infantile crayon drawings of houses. "I've done more than that," he struggled to protest, "I am more," but his mouth had finished working. He managed only to raise his head, and never knew which was worse: his paralysis, or his parents' doting smiles, or the sneer that the teacher's face seemed to have widened to encompass—the sneer that had always meant that once a child was inside the school gates, his parents could no longer protect him. It might have been an eternity before the failure of the dimness or of Trent's eyes brought the dark.

All For Sale

"As for *All for Sale*, a street market did indeed spring up overnight around the first hotel where the family and I stayed in Turkey, and a swarthy hi-fi dealer in Tottenham Court Road once palpated my tits and declared 'You are nice.' Everything can be material, you see."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in the 2003 reissue of *Told By The Dead*

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Once they were outside the Mediterranean Nights Barry could hear the girl's every word, starting with "What were you trying to tell me about a plane?"

"Just I, you know, noticed you on it."

"As I said if you heard, I saw you."

"I know. I mean, I did hear, just about." While he gazed at rather than into her dark moonlit eyes that might be glinting with eagerness for him to risk more, he made himself blurt "I hoped I'd see you again."

"Well, now you have." She raised her small face an inch closer to his and formed her pink lips into a prominent smile he couldn't quite take as an invitation to a kiss. Not long after his silence grew intolerable, unrelieved by the hushing of the waves that failed to distract him from the way the huge blurred scarcely muffled rhythm of the disco seemed determined to keep his heartbeat up to speed, she said "So you're called Baz."

"That's only what my friends call me, the guys I was with, I mean. I don't know if you saw them on the plane as well."

"I told you, I saw *you*."

Her gentle emphasis on the last word encouraged him to admit "I'm Barry really."

"Hello, Barry really," she said and held out a hand. "I'm Janet."

He wiped his hand on his trousers, but they were as clammy from dancing. Her grasp proved to be cool and firm. "So are you staying as long as us?" she said, having let go of him.

"Two weeks. It's our first time abroad."

"There must be worse places to get experience," she said and caught most of a yawn behind her hand as she stretched, pointing her breasts at him through her short thin black dress. "Well, I'm danced out. This girl's for bed."

He could think of plenty of responses, but none he dared utter. He was turning his attention to the jittering of neon on the water when Janet said "You could walk me back if you liked."

As her escort, should he take her hand or at least her arm or even slip his around her slim waist? He didn't feel confident enough along the seafront, where the signs of the clubs turned the faces of the noisy crowds outside into lurid unstable carnival masks. "We're up here," Janet eventually said.

The narrow crooked street also led uphill to his and Paul's and Derek's apartment. Once the pulsating neon and the throbbing competitive rhythms of the discos fell behind, Janet began resting her fingers on his bare arm at each erratically canted bend. He thought of laying a hand over hers, but suspected that would only make her aware of his feverish heat fuelled by alcohol. He became conscious of tasting of it, and was wondering what he could possibly offer her when she clutched at his wrist. "What's that?" she whispered.

He'd thought the trestle table propped against the rough white wall of one of the rudimentary houses that constricted the dim street was heaped with refuse until the heap lifted itself on one arm. Apparently the table served as a bed for an undernourished man wearing not even very many rags. He clawed his long hair aside to display a face rather too close to the skull beneath and thrust out the other hand. "He just wants money," Barry guessed aloud, and in case Janet assumed that was intended as a cue to her, declared "I've got some."

He didn't think he had much. Bony fingers snatched the notes and coins spider-like. At once, too fast for Barry to distinguish how, the man huddled back into resembling waste. "You didn't have to give him all that," Janet murmured as they hurried to the next bend. "You'll be seeing more like him."

Barry feared she thought he'd been trying to impress her with his generosity, which he supposed he might have been. "We like to share what

we've got, don't we, us Yorkshire folk."

Before he'd finished speaking he saw that she could think he was making a crude play for her along with emphasising her trace of an accent more than she might like. Her silence gave his thoughts time to grow hot and arid as the night while he trudged beside her up a steep few hundred yards—indeed, overtook her before she said "This is as far as I go."

She was opening her small black spangled handbag outside a door lit by a plastic rectangle that might as well have been a sliver of the moon. "I'm just up the road," he told her.

Did that sound like yet another unintentional suggestion? All she said was "Maybe I'll see you in the market."

"Which one's that?"

She gazed so long into the depths of her bag that he was starting to feel she thought his ignorance unworthy of an answer when she said "What are you going to think of me now."

He had to treat it as a question. "Well, I know we've only—"

"Denise and San have got the keys. I didn't realise I'd drunk that much. Back we go."

She was at the first corner before he'd finished saying "Shall I come with you?"

"No need."

"I will, though."

"Suit yourself," she said and quickened her pace.

He felt virtuous for not abandoning her to pass the man on the table by herself. In fact that stretch was as deserted as the rest of the slippery uneven variously sloping route. The seafront was still crowded, and she had to struggle past a haphazard queue outside the Mediterranean Nights. "I won't be long," she told him.

She was. Once he felt he'd waited longer than enough he tried to follow her, but the swarthy doorman who'd been happy to readmit her showed no such enthusiasm on Barry's behalf. Even if he'd had the money, Barry told himself, he wouldn't have paid to get back in. He supposed he could have said that Paul and Derek would vouch for him—that was assuming they weren't in an especially humorous mood—but he couldn't be bothered

arguing with the doorman. If Janet's friends had persuaded her to have another drink or two, or she'd met someone else, that had to be fine with him.

He did his best to look content as he tramped back along the seafront, and was trudging uphill before he indulged in muttering to himself. He fell silent as he passed Janet's lodgings, the Summer Breeze Apartments, on the way to swaying around several jagged unlit bends that hindered his arrival at his own quarters. Some amusement was to be derived from coaxing the key to find the lock of the street door and from reeling up the concrete stairs, two steps up, one back down. Further drunken fumbling was involved in admitting himself to the apartment, where most of the contents of his and Paul's and Derek's cases had yet to fight for space in the wardrobe and the bathroom. At the end of an interlude in the latter, more protracted than conclusive, he lurched through the room containing his friends' beds to the couch in the kitchen area. Without too many curses he succeeded in unfolding the couch and, having fallen over and onto it, dragging a sheet across himself.

Perhaps all he could hear in the street below the window were clubbers returning to their apartments, but they sounded more like a stealthy crowd that wasn't about to go away. He was thinking, if no more than that, of making for the balcony to look when the slam of the street door sent Paul's and Derek's voices up from the muted hubbub. Soon his friends fell into their room, switching on lights at random. "He's here. He's in bed," Paul announced.

"Thought you'd pulled some babe," Derek protested.

"She didn't have her key," Barry roused himself to attempt to pronounce. "You didn't see her coming back, then."

"You could have brought her up here as long as you let us know," Paul said.

"Put a notice on the door or something," said Derek.

"Next time," Barry told them, not that he thought there was much of a chance. Still, he could dream, or perhaps he could only sleep. He hadn't the energy to ask what was happening outside. The murmur from the street and the blundering of his friends about the apartment receded, bearing his awareness, which he was happy to relinquish.

Snoring wakened him—at first, only his own. The refrain was taken up by Derek, who was lying on his back, while Paul gave tongue into a pillow. The chorus was by no means equal to the noise from the street. Unable to make sense of it, Barry dragged the floor-length windows apart and groped between them into unwelcome sunlight. Leaning over the rudimentary concrete balustrade, he blinked his vision into focus. The street had disappeared.

Or rather, its surface had. From bend to bend it was hidden by the awnings of market stalls and by the crowd the stalls had drawn. Barry supported himself on his elbows, though the heat of the concrete was only just bearable, until he succeeded in dredging up some thoughts. His mouth was dry and yet oily with reminiscences of alcohol, his skull felt baked too thin, but shouldn't he wander down in case Janet was hoping to encounter him? Mightn't she have waited, not realising he'd given away the contents of his pocket, for him to rejoin her in the Mediterranean Nights? He picked his way to the bathroom and, having made space for it, drank as much water as he could stomach, then showered and dressed. "I'll be in the market," he said, receiving a mumble from one of his friends and an emphatic snore from the other.

In the lobby the owner of the apartments was crammed into a shabby armchair overlooked by a warren of compartments, some lodging keys, behind the reception counter. He wore a flower-bed of a shirt too large even for him, which framed enough chest hair to cover his bald head. He opened his eyes half an inch and used a forearm to wipe his heavily ruled brow as Barry took out his traveller's cheques. "You want pay?" the owner said.

"Please."

"How much you pay?"

"No, we paid in England. My friend Derek had to show you the voucher when we checked in, remember." When the man only scowled at the beads of sweat his tufted forearm had collected, Barry tried to simplify the point. "The paper said we paid."

"Now you pay for things go smash. Nothing smash, money back."

"Derek's in charge of booking and stuff like that. You'll need to speak to him," Barry said, knowing that with a hangover Derek would be even more combative than usual. "He's the man in charge."

"So why I talk to you?"

Barry pointed at the sign beside the pigeonholes: TRAVVLER'S' CHEKS CACHED. "It says you give money."

For a breath that threatened to pop his shirt buttons the man seemed inclined to misunderstand, and then he thrust a ballpoint bandaged with several thicknesses of inky plaster across the counter. "You put name."

Barry signed a cheque for a hundred pounds as quickly as possible—the pen felt unpleasantly clammy—and handed over both, together with his passport. After the merest blink at Barry's signature, the owner ran his gaze up and down him between several glances at the photograph. At last he leaned back, heaving his stomach high with his thighs, to unlock a drawer and count out a handful of large grubby notes. "You pay me nothing," he complained.

Presumably he meant there was no commission. Barry shoved the notes into his shirt pocket—they felt clammier than the pen had—and was holding out his hand when the man dropped the passport in the drawer. "What you want give me?" the owner said, leering at the hand.

I need my passport."

"I keep now," the owner said and locked the drawer. "You want more pay, you come me."

"I don't think so," Barry told him, but made for the street. Further argument could wait until Paul and Derek were there to join in—all right, and why not, to support him.

As he opened the door he was overwhelmed by heat that competed with the light for fierceness, by the sullen roar of the fire that was the crowd, by the smell of hot wallets, which were all the table nearest the apartments sold. Its immediate neighbour was devoted to leather goods too. The stalls were packed so close together that once he sidled between them he couldn't see the sign above the door—the Summit Apartments, though they were well short of the top of the hill.

Most of the crowd was making its sluggish way upwards, unlike him. Whenever he glanced about for possible souvenirs or presents, and often when he didn't, stallholders launched themselves and whatever English they had at him. "Good price," they persisted. "Special for you." Beyond the corner was a clump of stalls blue with denim, and past that a stretch of

trademarks, each of them almost as wide as the T-shirts and other clothes that bore them. Which stalls were likely to appeal to Janet? That was assuming she was even out of bed. He wasn't sure how either of them would have reacted to the other in sight of the next expanse of tables, which were bristling with phallic statues and orgiastic with couples, not to mention more than couples, carved from stone. He dodged the sellers as the hot crowd pressed around him, and struggled to the lower bend.

Had it brought him back to Janet's lodgings? He was trying to see past stalls heaped with electrical goods when a stall-holder, or surely an assistant, younger than himself stepped in front of him. "What you look?"

"Summer Breeze."

The boy made circles with his hands above the stall as if to conjure Barry's needs into view. "Say other."

Barry's head was so full of heat and light and clamour that he could think of nothing else. "Summer Breeze," he heard himself reiterate.

The boy's thin intense face gave up its frown. "Briefs," he said with a gesture of lowering his own and presumably his shorts as well.

"Breeze." Barry jabbed a finger at the building the stall hid, then waved one limp-wristed hand. "Wind," he said in case that could possibly help.

"Here."

As Barry grew aware that the exchange of gestures had made the nearest members of the crowd openly suspicious, he saw the boy pick up a pocket fan and switch it on. "No, that's not it," he said.

"You try," the boy insisted, thrusting it at him.

"No, it's all ow." Barry meant to wave away the offer, but the whirling blades caught his forefinger. "Watch out, you clumsy bugger," he cried.

The boy turned off the fan, which had developed an angry rattling buzz, and peered at it. "You break. You pay."

"Don't be daft," Barry mumbled, sucking his finger, which tasted like a coin. "Your fault, so forget it."

He'd hardly presented his back to the stall when the boy raised his voice. "Pay now. Pay," he called, and other words that Barry didn't comprehend.

Barry saw a scowl spread like an infection through the crowd, who seemed united in obstructing him. He was willing the commotion to attract Janet and her friends—anyone who would understand him—when the crowd parted downhill. Two policemen were heading for him.

They wore khaki shirts and shorts, and pistols in holsters on their right hips. Their dark moist faces bore identical black moustaches. "What is trouble?" the larger and if possible even less jovial officer said.

"He cut me," Barry blurted, displaying his injured finger, and at once felt guilty. "I'm sure it was an accident, but now he wants me to pay."

"You listen."

It was only when the policeman confined himself to glowering that Barry grasped he was required to observe the interview with the youth, which involved much gesturing besides contributions from nearby vendors and members of the crowd. The conference appeared to be reaching agreement, by no means in his favour, when Barry tried to head it off. "I'll pay something if that'll quiet things down. It oughtn't to be much."

The policeman who'd addressed him brushed a thumb and forefinger over his moustache, and Barry had a nervous urge to giggle at the notion that the man was checking the hair hadn't come unglued. He stared at Barry as if suspicious of his thoughts before growling "You go other place. No trouble."

"Thanks," Barry said, though his unpopularity was as clear from the policeman's face as from every other he risked observing. To retreat uphill to take refuge with his friends he would have had to struggle through hostility that looked capable of growing yet more solid. He swung around faster than his parched unstable skull appreciated to dodge and sidle and excuse himself down to the next bend, where he saw light through a shop. Once he was out of the back entrance he should be able to find his way to the rear of the Summit Apartments.

He launched himself between two stalls piled with footwear and into the building, only to waver to a halt as darkness pressed itself like coins onto his eyes. Outlines had only started to grow visible as he headed for the daylight, so that he was halfway through the interior before he realised where he was: not in a shop but in somebody's home. Nevertheless the contents of the trestle tables were unquestionably for sale, a jumble of

bedclothes, icons, cutlery, a religious tome with dislocated pages, dresses, spanners and other tools, toys including a life-size baby that the dimness rendered indistinguishable from a real one... He couldn't judge how many people were crouched in gloomy corners of the single room; of the one face he managed to discern, he saw only eyes and teeth. Their dull hungry gleam prompted him to fumble the topmost note off his wad and plant it between the baby's restless feet as he made for the open at a stumbling run. He barely glimpsed all the denizens of the room flinging themselves at the cash.

He'd emerged into more of the market. Only the space just outside the door was clear. Stallholders and their few potential customers swivelled their heads on scrawny necks to watch him. They looked as uninviting as the tables, which were strewn with goods like a rummage sale. Here were clothes he and his friends might have packed to slouch in, here were the contents of several bathrooms—shaving kits, deodorants, even unwrapped bars of soap. The stares he was receiving didn't encourage him to dawdle. He set off as fast up the narrow tortuous dusty street as his hung-over legs would bear.

He hoped any rear entrance to the Summit Apartments would be both accessible and open. Though there were alleys between the streets, all were blocked by stalls or vans or refuse. He kept catching sight of the crowd, not including anyone who'd witnessed his difference with the youth. He might have considered dodging through a house to reach his street, but the old people dressed like shadows who were sitting in every open doorway looked worse than inhospitable. At least there weren't many more stalls ahead.

The next offered an assortment of electrical goods: cameras, camcorders and battery chargers, a couple of personal stereos, whose rhythmic whispers reminded him that before he'd gone to university and after he'd left it as well, his parents had often complained the stereos weren't personal enough. Suddenly he yearned to be home and starting work at the computer warehouse, the best job he'd been able to sell himself to, or even not having come away on holiday with his old friends from school. He glanced past the stall into an alley and saw them.

"Paul," he shouted, "Derek," as their heads bobbed downhill, borne by the sluggish crowd. They'd looked preoccupied, perhaps with finding him. He

would have used the alley if the bulk of a van hadn't been parked mere inches short of both walls. "I'm here," he yelled, digging the heels of his hands into his chin and his fingertips into the bridge of his nose. "Over here," he pleaded at the top of his voice, and Paul turned towards him.

He would have seen Barry if he'd raised his eyes. Having surveyed the crowd between himself and the alley, he said something to Derek that caused him to glance about before vanishing downhill. The next moment, as Barry sucked in a breath that almost blinded him with the whiteness of the houses, Paul had gone too.

Barry bellowed their names and waved until his finger sprinkled the wall with a Morse phrase in blood. None of this was any use. Members of the crowd scowled along the alley at him while the vendors around him glared at him as if he was somehow giving them away. As he fell silent, the personal stereos renewed their bid for audibility. Wasn't the one at the front of the stall playing his favourite album? He could have taken it for the stereo he'd left in the apartment. He reached for the headphones, but the stall-holder, whose leathery face seemed to have been shrivelled in the course of producing an unkempt greyish beard, tapped his arm with a jagged fingernail. "Buy, you listen," he said.

Barry had no idea what he was being told, and suddenly no wish to linger. He might have enough of a problem at the apartments, since he hadn't brought a key with him. Best to save his energy in case he needed to persuade the owner to admit him to his room, he thought as he toiled past the final stall. It was heaped with suitcases, three of which reminded him of his and Paul's and Derek's. Of course there must be many like them, which was why he'd wrapped the handle of his case in bright green tape. Indeed, a greenish fragment adhered to the handle of the case that resembled his so much.

As he leaned forward to confirm what he could hardly believe, the stall-holder stepped in front of him. He wore a sack-like garment that hid none of the muscles and veins of his arms. His small dark thoroughly hairy face appeared to have been sun-dried almost to the bone, revealing a few haphazard blackened teeth. His eyes weren't much less pale and cracked and blank than the wall behind him. "You want?" he said.

"Where'd you get these?"

"Very cheap. Not much use."

The man was staring so hard at him he could have intended to deny Barry had spoken. Barry was about to repeat himself louder when he heard a faint sound above the awning, and raised his unsteady head to see the owner of the Summit Apartments watching him with a loose lopsided smile from an upper window. "What do you know about it?" Barry shouted.

If the man responded, it wasn't to him. He addressed at least a sentence to the stall-holder, whose gaze remained fixed on Barry while growing even blanker. Barry was about to retreat downhill in search of his friends when he noticed that the vendors he'd encountered in the lesser market had been drawn by the argument or, to judge by their purposeful lack of expression, by whatever the man at the window had said. "All right. Forget it. I will," Barry lied and moved away from them.

At first he only walked. He'd reached the first alley that led to the topmost section of the main market when the owner of the Summit Apartments blocked the far end. Sandalled footsteps clattered after Barry, who almost lost the remains of his balance as he twisted to see the vendors filling the width of the street. An understated trail of blood led through the dust to him. He sprinted then, but so did his pursuers with a clacking of their sandals, and the owner of the apartments managed to arrive at the next alley as he did. Above it there were only houses that scarcely looked entitled to the name, with rubbish piled against their closed doors, their windows either shuttered or boarded up. A few dizzy panting hundred yards took him beyond them to the top of the hill.

Two policemen were smoking on it. Though he saw nothing to hold their attention, they had their backs to him. Beyond the hill there was very little to the landscape, as if it had put all its effort into the tourist area. It was the colour of sun-bleached bone, and scattered with rubble and the occasional building, more like a chunk of rock with holes in. A few trees seemed hardly to have found the energy to raise themselves, let alone grow green. Closer to the hill, several goats waited to be fed or slaughtered. Barry was vaguely aware of all this as he hurried to the policemen. "Can you help?" he gasped.

They turned to bristle their moustaches at him. It didn't matter that they were the policemen he'd encountered earlier, he told himself, nor did their sharing a fat amateur cigarette. "All my stuff is in the market," he said. "I know who took it, and not just mine either."

The officer who'd previously spoken to him held up one large weathered palm. Barry kept going, since the gesture was directed at his pursuers. "You come," the man urged him.

Barry had almost reached him when the policemen moved apart, revealing a stout post, a larger version of those to which the goats were tethered. He saw the other officer nod at the small crowd—more than Barry had noticed were behind him. As the realisation swung him around, his hands were captured, handcuffed against his spine and hauled up so that the chain could be attached to a rusty hook on the post. "What are you doing?" Barry felt incredulous enough to waste time asking before he began to shout, partly in the hope that there were tourists close enough to hear him. "Not me. I haven't done anything. It was him from the Summit. It was them. Don't let them get away."

The stallholders from the cheapest region of the market were wandering downhill, leaving the owner of the apartments together with three other people as huge and glistening. The only woman looked pained by Barry's protests or at least the noise of them. The policemen deftly emptied his pockets, and while the man who'd spoken to him in the market pocketed his cash, the other folded the traveller's cheques in half and stuffed them in Barry's mouth. Barry could emit no more than a choked gurgle past the taste of cardboard as the Summit man waddled up to squeeze his chest in both hands and tweak his nipples. "You nice," he told Barry as he made way for the others to palpate Barry's shrinking genitals and in the woman's case to emit a motherly sound at his injured finger before sucking it so hard he felt the nail pull away from the quick. All this done, the four began to wave obese wads of money at the policemen and at one another. Barry was struggling both to spit out the gag and to disbelieve what was taking place when he saw three girls appear where the houses gave way to rubble.

The girl in the middle was Janet. Presumably she hadn't been to bed, since she was wearing the same clothes and supporting or being supported by her friends, or both. They looked as if they couldn't quite make out the events on top of the hill. Barry threw himself from side to side and did his utmost to produce a noise that would sound like an appeal for help, but succeeded only in further gagging himself. He saw Janet blink and let go of one of her friends in order to shade her eyes. For an instant she seemed to recognise

him. Then she stumbled backwards and grabbed at her companions. The three of them staggered around as one and swayed giggling downhill.

If he could believe anything now, he wanted to think she hadn't really seen him or had failed to understand. He watched the bidding come to an end, and felt as though it concerned someone other than himself or who had ceased to be. The woman plodded to scrutinise him afresh, pinching his face between a fat clammy finger and thumb that drove the gag deeper into his mouth. "Will do," she said, separating her wad into halves that the policemen stuffed into their pockets.

While she lumbered downhill the owner of the apartments handed Barry's passport to the policeman who had never spoken to him, and who clanked open a hulk of a lighter to melt it. The last flaming scrap curled up in the dust as the woman reappeared in a dilapidated truck. The policemen lifted Barry off the post and slung him into the back of the vehicle and slammed the tailgate.

The last he saw of them was their ironic dual salute as the truck jolted away. Sweat and insects swarmed over him while the animal smell of his predecessor occupied his nostrils and the traveller's cheques turned to pulp in his mouth as he was driven into the pitiless voracious land.

2002

Fear The Dead

"I was asked to write a new tale for an anthology of stories about fear. I still have some I haven't told yet. I've published a few recently that touch on the afterlife. We must hope they're fiction."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to the story in *The Mammoth Book Of Best New Horror 15*, 2003.

First published in *The Fear Within*, 2002
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Someone else he didn't think he'd ever seen before leaned down as if to let him count all her wrinkles. "I wish I'd had the chance to say goodbye to my grandmama, Jonathan."

Another lady dressed in at least as much black and holding her wineglass askew parted her pale lips, which looked as though they had once been stitched together. "Now you know she's at peace."

As he remembered how his grandmother's cheek had felt like a cold crumpled wad of paper he had to kiss, the winner of the wrinkle competition said "What a brave little soul. He's a credit to his mother."

"And his father."

"Careful or you'll drip."

The stitched lady straightened up her glass. "We don't want stains on your lovely carpet, do we, Jonathan? They don't make them like that any more."

He thought the elaborate carpet felt like the rest of the house—furtively chill and damp. "I can just hear her saying that, old Ire," his father joined him to remark.

"Her friends never called Iris that," the stitched mouth objected. "Oh, whatever's wrong, you poor little fellow?"

While Jonathan struggled to think of a reply that wouldn't be the truth, his mother hurried over to confront his father. "Are you upsetting him, Lawrence?"

"Only saying I could hear your mother pricing the contents of the house. Half of it Jonno wasn't supposed to touch," he confided to the wrinkled ladies. "You must have felt like you were living in a museum, did you, Jonno?"

Jonathan was yet more afraid to speak. The wineglass slouched again as its lady crooked her other thin arm around his shoulders and murmured "Don't worry, your daddy wasn't really hearing her. She's gone to Jesus and she'll be talking to him."

The mention of Jesus appeared to draw the priest, who smelled rather like an unlit candle wrapped in linen. He hoisted his tumbler of orange juice to acknowledge Jonathan's. "That's the right road. That's what real men drink."

"Is my grandma really talking to Jesus now?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised, but it won't do any harm to pray she is."

"How long do you think she'll be?" Jonathan pleaded.

"That's one of the things God's keeping as a surprise for us. We won't know till we see her again."

"The father means till we're with Jesus too," Jonathan's mother made haste to say.

"Isn't she supposed to be there for ever?"

"If you keep your faith up," the priest said with a smile that was less than wholly aimed at Jonathan, "I'm sure she will be. You know Jesus has time for everyone."

How could Jesus deal with all the dead? God was meant to be able to see everyone at once, and perhaps his son had inherited the trick, but that wasn't the same as talking to them. If Jonathan's grandmother thought she didn't have Jesus's full attention, Jonathan could imagine her stalking off in search of someone who would have to notice her. He might have put some of this into words if the priest hadn't moved away, leaving Jonathan's parents to argue. "What are you trying to make Jonathan think of my mother?"

"Whatever's the truth, Essie."

"You didn't stay around to see it."

"Jonno knows why, don't you, Jonno? It's nobody's fault Ire and I didn't get on. I expect there are people you don't with."

"Maybe it was up to you to make the effort, Lawrence, considering it was her house."

"Well, now it's yours, and I don't feel any more welcome."

"I don't know how you'd expect me to change that."

"It's sounding like time I absented myself."

Jonathan thought he might leave it at that, having loaded his voice with dignity, but then his father swayed at him as though its weight had unbalanced him. "I'm sorry this had to be our day this week, Jonno. I'll take you somewhere better next weekend."

Jonathan watched his father's untypically sombre back view merge with the blackness of the crowd, and then he had to undergo a succession of pats on the head and kisses that felt like dried fruit brushing his cheek as mourners took their leave of his mother. Before long there was only Trudy, who also taught at the college. She ran her small hand several times up and down his mother's hefty arm. "You need to talk, I can tell."

"I could bear to," his mother admitted, and gave him a smile beneath a frown. "Don't bother helping clear up, Jonathan. You've had a long day and made us proud of you. I should go to bed."

He never understood why people said they should do things when they meant him. "I'm hungry," he said, not least in case he might be, and covered a plate with some of the remains of the buffet before sitting on a chair that protested like all his grandmother's furniture. When he'd managed to clear almost half of the plate, his mother intervened. "Don't stuff yourself for the sake of it or you won't be able to sleep."

That was something else to dread. He could only climb the stairs that were wider than his arms could stretch, and too dim under the yellowish chandelier, and creaked one by one as if they were playing a funeral tune. Until now he hadn't minded that the bathroom, which was almost big enough to be public and just as whitely tiled, echoed all his noises as if someone thinner than himself was hiding in it. He rushed through a token version of everything he had to do and fled next door to his bedroom.

Why did it need to be so big? It was at least twice the size of his room in the house where he'd lived with his parents until his grandmother had to be looked after at night—sometimes she'd prayed without seeming to breathe, and sometimes she'd wanted his mother to remember everything they'd done together and agree there had never been any bad times. Jonathan tried to feel grateful for the room, though it shrank his bed to a cot and his desk to a toddler's surrounded at a distance by furniture so gloomy—dressing-table, wardrobe, chest of drawers—he imagined it was waiting for him to misbehave. The books his grandmother had given him because she'd

thought them suitable failed to welcome him; they just helped darken the room. The only one he could bring to mind concerned some children who made everyone believe an old lady was a witch, and it was too late for them to be sorry when she killed herself and couldn't go to heaven. He struggled to forget it as he inched under the bedclothes without pulling them free of the mattress, but already knew what the story brought back to him.

"Never speak ill of the dead," his grandmother used to warn him, "or they'll come back and haunt you." She'd gone into worse detail, especially during her last weeks. He would never say anything hurtful about her, and surely he needn't be afraid his mother had wanted him out of the way so that she could. She and Trudy were climbing the stairs now and saying nothing at all.

Trudy placed a moist kiss on top of the one his mother left on his forehead. The women moved to either side of the bed to tighten the sheets over him, then retreated to the door. "Sweet dreams or none at all," Trudy said, resting one black-varnished nail on the light switch. "Do we have the light out, Esther? I expect a big boy like Jonathan must."

"We won't be long. Trudy's staying over. I know," his mother said. "You have the light off and we'll come up and talk in my room."

He was afraid to aggravate her concern for him. "All right," he mumbled and turned his back.

The dark fell on him at once. He made himself wait until their footsteps began imitating one another on the stairs, then he twisted face up and jabbed his fingers together on his chest. What was he expected to say? He'd only started praying when his grandmother had assumed he did and asked him to on her behalf. Every night before he went to sleep he'd implored God not to take her away, but the idea of pleading for her to return terrified him. "Please God take care of my grandma," he muttered as he thought of it. "Please tell her she was the best grandma ever. And the best mum too," he felt compelled to blurt.

Surely that would make up for any criticisms his mother might let drop. She and Trudy were laughing in the kitchen, but that could hardly be about his grandmother. He was unable to think how long it was since he'd heard his mother laugh. He remembered the night his grandmother had emitted a snore so loud it had made him giggle in bed. "Mother?" his mother had called, though she was beside her, and more loudly "Mother?" suggesting

that his grandmother had been retreating into the distance of the room. Then there was silence until she'd said "Oh" as if what she was seeing had almost robbed her of breath.

She and Trudy had finished laughing, perhaps because the house made them sound too small and shrill. Now they were lowering their voices as they came upstairs. They weren't scared to be overheard by anyone who'd been up here with him, he told himself: they were showing respect for his grandmother or trying not to waken him. Creaks marked their progress to his mother's room. Her door hadn't quite closed when he heard Trudy murmur "You say whatever you need to, Esther. It's part of dealing with your loss."

He couldn't distinguish what his mother said, even once he dragged himself free of the bedclothes and crouched against the headboard. When he lowered one reluctant foot, it was greeted with a creak by the floor, which felt as chill as his grandmother's face had last time he'd touched her. More than a dozen hasty paces took him through the dimness thick as the musty curtains, past the audience of hulking half-seen furniture, to the door. He inched it ajar and was confronted by his grandmother's room.

Her door was shut. That managed to seem reassuring until he thought of the darkness beyond it, even vaster than the dark behind him. Suppose that as he'd ventured to his door, his grandmother had reached hers with far longer strides of her spidery legs and was pressing her face against an upper panel? He was trying to find his next breath when he heard his mother say "I hate to admit it, but Lawrence was right. She was never happy till you knew how much everything she had was worth."

Jonathan sucked in air so that he could whisper "You were just proud of it, weren't you, grandma? I expect you still are. You should be, because it's so nice."

He was frightened to raise his voice, but equally frightened by the possibility that she was close enough to hear his whisper. He didn't realise he'd flinched from the prospect that her door might jerk open until the floor creaked beneath him. "Is that you, Jonathan?" his mother called.

He hung onto the door while he closed it as swiftly as he could without making a sound, then had to let go and turn to the glimmering slab of his bed. "I didn't hear anything. Have a top up so you sleep as well," he heard Trudy say, and a clink of glass. The creaks of his retreat obscured what the

women said next, and once he was huddled in bed he couldn't understand them. "Please God don't let my grandma hear anything bad about her," he began to whisper, interspersed with words to her. "Mum thinks you were the best mum. She's just talking because she's upset like her friend said."

Soon the only word he was aware of uttering was mum. It must have lulled him to sleep, because he was awakened by his name creeping like a draught into his ear. A face was looming almost into his. He shrank across the mattress, dragging the bedclothes free, before he realised that daylight was showing him Trudy. "Shush now," she murmured. "We'll have to do something about those nerves of yours. Get up quietly and get ready and I'll run you to school. Esther's catching up on her sleep."

Once dressed, he found that Trudy had readied a bowl of cereal and some bread and jam, presumably because cookery might rouse his mother. Trudy watched with tentative fondness as he did his duty by the breakfast, then stopped just short of touching him while ushering him out to her car, which had front seats but no rear. Its smallness was a relief from the house, but drew the amusement of dozens of boys on the way to his school. The massive houses split amoeba-like along the route, and the school had undergone even more fission, separating into six unequal buildings that felt like a test the place was setting him. He was halfway through his first term, but the school still overwhelmed him. When Trudy left him at the gates with a wave of her fingertips that bore a kiss, he would have lost himself in the enormous crowded schoolyard if two boys a head taller than himself hadn't stopped him. "She your girlfriend?" said the one with a moustache or grime occupying sections of his upper lip.

"Could be his new ma," said his crony, the left side of whose chin boasted a single black curly hair.

"Gently now, gentlemen." This was Mr Foster, the long-faced English teacher who wore his greying hair in a ponytail. He pinched or massaged the backs of their necks until he'd finished saying "We don't harass our new fellows, do we? Especially when they've just lost a member of the family."

"Never mind touching us," one boy muttered as Mr Foster steered Jonathan away by an elbow to enquire "Are you fit to come back to school, Hastings?"

Being addressed by his surname was yet another aspect of the place Jonathan had still to accept. "I think so, sir," he said.

He'd hoped school would take his mind off his grandmother, but now he felt that anybody there might bring her up. Suppose she proved to be the theme of the morning assembly? Once the pupils had been herded into the main building, however, and the staff had taken their seats onstage in the assembly hall, the headmaster lectured about the football team and how their performance should inspire the other pupils to try harder. Jonathan was trying to keep that in mind when Mr Foster singled him out at the beginning of the English lesson. "Is there anything you'd like to share with us, Hastings?"

"Like what, sir?"

"Such as, I believe you mean. About your bereavement."

"Such as what, sir?" Jonathan wished he didn't feel bound to ask.

"Forgive me if you think I'm prying." The teacher's face had managed to lengthen itself, and looked capable of pouting when Jonathan failed to answer. "Recollect in tranquillity," Mr Foster told himself, and seemed inspired. "That can be your subject for homework, all of you. Write about a loss, whatever it may be."

Could Jonathan's grandmother read what he wrote about her? In at least one way writing was different from talking—it was even harder—but surely it would give him more to say aloud about her. The trouble was that the prospect of writing drove all his thoughts for it out of his head. His skull felt emptied throughout the English lesson and the other classes, interrupted by lunch and larking in the schoolyard, activities that came no nearer reaching him than the questions teachers aimed at him. He assumed they toned down their responses to his uselessness because they knew about his grandmother.

None of the boys he'd made any kind of friends with lived near him. Soon his route home left him alone with the November dark, which he could have imagined the houses were hauling down from the sky. The dark had moved into his grandmother's house. The faltering light of the streetlamp beyond the unreasonably long drive showed him the key in his hand. The jerky shadow of a branch of the tree that hid the house from passers-by clawed at his wrist as he unlocked the front door.

Like his grandmother, it was half as tall again as Jonathan. The dimmest stretch of the glow from the streetlamp twitched underfoot as he sprinted to

turn on the jangling chandelier. Its grudging illumination lent him the courage to shut himself in before dashing to switch on the kitchen light. He dropped his schoolbag on the table with a thump that seemed both too loud and dwarfed by the room, and hauled open the refrigerator to pour himself a drink. At once he knew what he could write.

He spread his books across the table and sat on the least creaky chair. "I'm going to say some nice things about you, grandma," he murmured. "I'll read you them when I've finished."

He wished he hadn't thought of that—it made him nervous of the silence around him and behind him. Having ceased its mousy scurrying across the page, the nib emitted a blot like an emphatic full stop. He crossed out the sentence that seemed eager to complete itself. Mr Foster said you had to show your first draft as well as your finished work, though Jonathan's grandmother had kept saying it looked untidy. The idea of her prowling soundlessly behind him to crane over his shoulder made him feel steeped in the lurking chill of the house. "I'll read you what I've written," he said as loudly as he dared.

He wanted to believe she was at least as distant as her room. He raised his voice so that it would be audible up there, and didn't realise it was deafening him to any sounds until he was asked "Have you brought someone home, Jonathan?"

"Just doing my homework," he found the breath to tell his mother as she and Trudy marched along the hall.

"Why, do you have to read it to your class?" She kissed his forehead before stooping to examine his homework while Trudy looked uncertain whether to do either. Eventually his mother straightened up and blinked at his forehead as though she had a mind to take back the kiss. "Well, if that's how you remember it, Jonathan."

"That's how grandma was."

"No need to shout. We're only here." He was hoping she would leave it at that when she said "I'd like to be home when you come in, you know, even if I mightn't give you snacks so close to dinner. Unfortunately I have to earn a living, particularly since my mother's attitudes got to be too much for your

father. And by the way, I don't think you need to upset yourself over the fridge. If you can open it she could. Most of the time she wasn't quite as feeble as she liked to pretend."

"Go on, Esther, let it all come out." To Jonathan Trudy said "People have different ways of grieving, and this is how your mother has to. Are you finding yours?"

"I've got to go upstairs now."

"You can work better there, I expect," his mother said. "We'll call you when it's dinner."

He could tell she wanted to believe she hadn't distressed him, while Trudy thought he was off to grieve. Neither was the case. He loaded his schoolbag and climbed into the dimness that hung around the chandelier. Even when he switched on the upstairs light, gloom seemed to cling to the landing and the corridor. He felt as if his grandmother's disapproval had been roused: she used to say you shouldn't have more than one light on at a time. She'd just been trying to save money for her family, he told himself. "Mum only meant she wished she could be more like you, grandma," he muttered. "I expect that means she will be."

His voice faltered as he saw his blurred shadow growing smaller on a lower panel of his grandmother's door. Either he was unaware of shrinking from the notion that she was within arm's reach of the other side or the door was creeping open. The voice that made him see it lurch backwards because he had was his mother's. "Is that Jonathan talking to himself? What's wrong with him?"

"Will it be his way of coping, do you think?"

He should have closed the kitchen door. He shut himself in his room and moved his desk away from the wall so that he could sit facing the room with surely no space for anyone, no matter how thin, to sidle behind him. He didn't need to finish his English homework until the weekend. Instead he applied himself to sums that he was supposed to call arithmetic now that he'd changed schools. He was feeling sure enough of his pencilled answers to commit ink to them when Trudy called "It's waiting for you, Jonathan."

He left his bedroom light on so that it would be there for him, his mother's phrase that finally conveyed some meaning, and hurried to the dining room. His mother was ladling out a lamb casserole as Trudy filled glasses with wine and his with juice while the sideboard and dresser kept their distance from the table yet helped it aggravate the disapproving sombreness. "Did you get much done?" his mother asked him.

"I won't do it about grandma after all."

"I hope that's not because of me." When he failed to think of a safe reply she said "What does your subject have to be?"

"Losing something."

"What else can you say you've lost beside your grandmother? Unless you're intending to tell your teacher how your father absconded."

Jonathan wasn't sure of the last word, but otherwise his thoughts seemed not to be hidden from anyone. "Are you still unhappy about him, Jonathan?" Trudy said, stroking his arm.

"Sometimes."

"Doesn't seeing him every week help?" Having watched until Jonathan repeated his nod, she said "Give it time and maybe there'll be someone extra in your life if that's what you'd like."

Just now he felt he had to concentrate all his liking on his grandmother. "I don't know," he mumbled.

Rather less than a look passed between Trudy and his mother. He could have done without the impression that another secret was at large in the house. Once dinner was finished he would have watched the Tuesday quiz shows with his mother, but their guest had to see a programme she'd told her history students to watch. The documentary about people being tortured by the Inquisition until they believed they were as bad as they were told only sharpened his unease. As soon as the credits began to crawl up the screen he retreated upstairs to talk to God and his grandmother.

He hadn't been in bed long when his mother came to give his forehead a lingering kiss, which she used to say was putting good dreams in. "Not asleep yet? I expect having the light off will help," she said. "Don't be surprised if you hear someone else upstairs."

"Who?" Jonathan gasped, scarcely a word.

"Trudy, of course. She'll be staying."

Since she would hardly be sleeping in his grandmother's old bed, presumably she would share his mother's—had shared it last night too. He wished he'd asked to sleep there instead of alone in the dark. Once his mother left him in it he found a solitary sentence to repeat. "Please God let my grandmother hear just nice things about her."

Shouldn't that settle everything? At last it let him sleep. He lurched awake, anxious not to be confronted by Trudy's face again, but only daylight had stolen into his room. While he was in the bathroom Trudy and his mother collaborated on breakfast before running him to school in his mother's car, which had space for all of them. Outside the school gates, as he leaned forward from the back seat to deliver a kiss he hoped would be too swift for his schoolfellows to see, both women turned to him. Their cheeks brushed together, and they exchanged smiles not unlike shy kisses, magnifying his awkwardness as he stumbled into the yard.

Yesterday's tormentors converged on him. "Found them yet?" said the boy with the tidemarked upper lip.

"What?" Jonathan was distracted enough to wonder.

"They're a what now, are they?" said the boy whose chin flourished a lone hair. "Thought it was a who you lost."

"She died," Jonathan said, hoping that would silence them. "My grandma."

"Was she old?" That sounded sympathetic until the greyish-lipped boy added "Did she smell?"

"Bet she does now," his friend said.

"He was right after all. She'll be a what by now."

"Like the dead cat we found with maggots for eyes."

"Looked like he was laughing about it."

"Those girls didn't laugh much when we threw—"

That was the last Jonathan heard as he dodged almost blindly through the crowd in search of somewhere he could be alone to talk to his grandmother. A smell of something like tobacco drifted out of the toilets, but even if they'd been deserted, how could he have invited her to follow him in there? He sneaked into the main school building by a side door and dashed along the overheated corridor to sit on the hard seat attached to his desk. "They

don't know anything about you, grandma," he murmured urgently. "You'll never be like that. They were just making it up."

He couldn't hear her voice, he reassured himself, but remembering was close to hearing. "Never speak ill of the dead or they'll come back and haunt you. They'll come back and show you how ugly you've made them." When the bell shrilled he bruised his knees on the underside of the desk. He reached the hall in time to mingle with the others so that the staff wouldn't realise he'd skulked into the school rather than being healthy in the yard. Throughout the headmaster's address, and intermittently in all the lessons, he kept hearing his grandmother's words and could only respond with last night's prayer. More boys giggled each time he had to mutter. The teachers must be restraining themselves because of his grandmother—he had no idea how he might have responded if they'd spoken rather than merely frowning at him.

Tattered clouds like cobwebs laden with grime raced to meet him as he hurried home. They left the sky behind them no less dark. He let himself into the house and switched on the dimness before venturing upstairs. "You didn't hear anything bad today, did you, grandma?" he whispered at her door. "God wouldn't let you. Please God don't."

There was no sound from her room. If she'd been listening, the floorboards would surely have made her presence as apparent as they were making his. He was suddenly convinced he had been talking to nobody at all—for how long, he didn't know. He grabbed the chilly scalloped brass knob and threw open the door.

The room looked yet more enormous for its emptiness. He could have imagined all the heavy mournful furniture was huddling against the walls. A wedge of murky twilight had managed to slip between the ponderous sombre curtains to emphasise the isolation of the bed, on which a fat faded patchwork quilt was drawn over a flattened stack of pillows. "Aren't you there, grandma?" Jonathan barely said.

Perhaps he glimpsed the shadow of a cloud that was drifting unseen past the window, but the quilt appeared to stir as if something it concealed was trying to take shape and draw breath. He peered into the dimness until he grasped how terrified he was to see. Flinging himself backwards, he dragged the door shut and fled downstairs. "I'm sorry, grandma. I didn't mean to—" he cried, and interrupted himself. "Please God don't let her," he

repeated while he spread his schoolbooks across the kitchen table and attempted to work.

He didn't know how his mother might react to his writing about his father. It could wait until the weekend, when Jonathan would be staying with him. The boy chanted his prayer as an accompaniment to copying a map of the world, and fell silent only when he heard Trudy and his mother at the front door.

Their wide smiles were virtually identical. "So how was your day?" Trudy asked.

It seemed safest not to be specific. "Just stuff."

"What did you learn, then?" said his mother.

All he could remember was praying. "More stuff."

"Never mind if you'd rather not tell us." Her smile drained into her face as she remarked to Trudy "I expect we'd hear it all if my mother was doing the asking."

Could his grandmother take that as a criticism? "I'm just..." Jonathan mumbled, and ran upstairs. "See, I said mum wants to be like you," he whispered from the top stair, and repeated his plea to God several times before descending to the kitchen.

"I didn't mean to upset you," his mother assured him. "Eat up your dinner and forget what I said."

He was able to achieve the first requirement and pretend the second was accomplished. Might she refrain from talking about his grandmother for fear of upsetting him? After dinner he finished his geography homework in the kitchen and then watched some of a television programme about how men were the cause of all conflict. He didn't mind if his mother and Trudy thought that included him so long as it drew blame away from his grandmother.

He still had to pray with every breath so as to fall asleep. He wakened in daylight to hear laughter downstairs—the night seemed to have renewed the women somehow. His tormentors didn't come to find him in the schoolyard, and his classmates had tired of giggling when he felt compelled to pray. He couldn't have predicted the question with which his mother greeted him that

night. "Jonathan," she said, sitting down at the table to clasp his hands. "Aren't you happy at this school?"

"Why?" he blurted in case that gave him time to think.

"Just tell me. Tell us, Trudy's your friend too. What's disturbing you?"

He could think of nothing his grandmother mightn't be blamed for. It was Trudy who said "Shouldn't you explain..."

"You're right, I've missed a step. Jonathan, your headmaster rang me. He says you keep talking to yourself in class."

Barely in time he saw how to tell something like the truth. "I was just trying to get things right."

"So that's why you were reading out your essay the other night. You'll have to stop doing it at school, though, or you'll have people thinking you're—You'll put them off their own work."

He thought he'd convinced her all was well. He was on his way to bed when he overheard her saying "It's my mother again. Living with her, that's what's made him so nervy, and no wonder."

He dashed into his room and huddled in the bed to pray. He had to stop when he heard Trudy and his mother on the stairs: if his mother overheard him she would think he was mad—she'd almost said so—while explaining his behaviour seemed capable of making the situation even worse. At last his prayers under the bedclothes gave way to sleep and then to muddy daylight that smelled of hot food.

His mother and Trudy insisted on kissing him before he could escape from the car. He hastened through the gates to find his tormentors awaiting him. "How many mothers have you got?" enquired the boy with the grubby upper lip.

His singularly hairy crony imitated his disgusted grin. "Do they both live at your house?"

"Why shouldn't they?" Jonathan was confused enough to ask.

"Bet your grandma wouldn't like it."

"Bet they're glad she's dead."

"Bet they wouldn't want to smell her now, though."

All Jonathan's dismay and bewilderment surged like bile into his mouth. "Maybe you will."

The boys looked as if he'd shocked them by going further than they dared. "What do you reckon you'll do?" the boy with the sole hair spluttered.

"Nothing. You've done it," Jonathan told them and hid in the crowd.

He wasn't going to pray to protect them. He didn't mutter once in class. He mustn't ask his mother about Trudy in case his grandmother might indeed have disapproved of her—in case that made his mother say things he would have to rectify. Instead he could tell her about his day, except that when she and Trudy came home, holding hands just long enough for him to see, she surprised him by asking "Would you like Lawrence to pick you up from school tomorrow?"

"Don't you mind?"

"Why would anyone mind? That way you can spend a long weekend with him to make up for the last one and Trudy and I will sort out the house."

Would that include his grandmother's room? Tonight he had no sense of her presence. If the room was cleared out, mightn't that mean she would stay with Jesus, since she would have nowhere to return to? He thought it best to continue praying once he was in bed. "Please God don't let her hear us saying anything bad about her," he repeated on the way to sleep.

He felt as if he'd hidden the implications of his words from himself until he was back at school. He couldn't see his tormentors when he braved the yard. He left his suitcase full of clothes and other weekend items in the secretary's office and hurried out to search, only to be found by Mr Foster, who was on yard duty. "There's a pensive young face."

"Sorry, sir."

"No need to apologise for thinking." As Jonathan wondered if that was necessarily true, the teacher said "Feeling more at home now?"

"I think so, sir."

"You can expect a respite from the comedy, at any rate."

Jonathan had noticed none. "Which is that, sir?"

"The comedians. The young teasers you encountered earlier in the week. The school will have to do without their routines for a while."

That almost robbed Jonathan of the breath it took to demand "Why?"

"They appear to have taken up slapstick." Mr Foster frowned at himself or at Jonathan's terseness. "They climbed up on a roof they should have known wouldn't support them, not that they ought to have been anywhere near it."

What might they have been fleeing? Jonathan's grandmother would have said they'd brought it on themselves. Having thanked Mr Foster, who seemed to wonder why, he found a gap between two school buildings to hide in. "Please God look after my grandma now. Don't let her hear anything else bad," he added, and "I expect those boys have learned their lesson."

He wouldn't have minded if they had returned to school in time to see his father collect him in the Land Rover. His father had finished work early, having designed enough houses for one week. He'd once said Jonathan's grandmother's house was too big for today and itself, which she'd taken as an insult. "We'll have a lively weekend, shall we?" he said, shaking Jonathan's hand.

Jonathan tried as hard as he could tell his father's lady did. She was called but not spelled Zoh, and kept attempting to make her face even smaller and prettier while she acted girlish with his father or motherly with Jonathan. She and his father took him to restaurants and films and a museum and a game where they had to dodge through a maze and shoot one another with lasers, Zoh emitting a coy reproachful squeal whenever she was hit. Between some of these events he spent time in their apartment, where the rooms were uncluttered and elegantly plain and unobtrusively warm. He was sure they were just the right size, not least his bedroom, but he felt as if the place wasn't quite reaching him. Perhaps it was the other way round, since he couldn't stop wondering what was happening at his grandmother's house.

Wondering overwhelmed his English homework. The harder he struggled to resolve his uncertainty or to write, the more the page and his brain competed at blankness. He had to welcome the sight of half a car on Sunday, though it was only Trudy who had come for him. He even wished he hadn't greeted her with "Where's mum?"

"Making a welcome-home dinner."

Given the looks Trudy was exchanging with Zoh and his father, Jonathan felt all the more anxious to return to his grandmother's. "See you next weekend," he said, dealing his father's hand a shake and disappointing Zoh with one before scrambling into the car.

The fairground neon of the city centre had faded beyond the old and in some cases unbroken lamps standing guard throughout the suburb when Trudy said "Had a good break?"

"What from? I don't need a break from my mum."

"Nor from me either, I hope."

He felt bound to be polite while he tried to think. "No," he mumbled.

"That's good. Esther and I have had a chance to get a few things clearer."

All at once he was certain he knew why they'd wanted him out of the way —knew what he'd failed to realise. "You've been talking about my grandma."

"Among other issues."

"What did you say about her?"

"Me, nothing to speak of."

"What did mum?"

"Quite a flood. Everything she had to. It wasn't all bad."

"How much was?"

"Best if you discuss it together. I expect she'd like to share your memories now."

She mustn't until he'd remembered enough to counteract hers. Why hadn't he written about his grandmother while he'd had the chance? As the car turned along her street he felt like a small animal trapped inside his own head, darting about in search of a way of escape. He would have to flee upstairs and pray his hardest without being heard by his mother, but how long would she leave before coming to find him?

His suitcase dragged his arm down as he followed Trudy to the house. The shadow of a branch clutched at her wrist when she inserted his grandmother's key in the lock. He wished he were seeing his grandmother catch hold of her as the door swung inwards, revealing the dark.

Why was the house unlit if his mother was home? It didn't feel deserted, and her car was in the drive. He hung back until Trudy switched on the chandelier, illuminating a note in his mother's handwriting on the third stair. Just run down the road for ingredients, it said.

So it wasn't his mother he sensed waiting in the house. At once he was sure what to do. His grandmother's condition was Trudy's fault—she'd encouraged his mother to say all she could. Had his mother even finished? Perhaps she might have more and worse to say if Trudy stayed. He used his luggage to push the front door shut and dumped his suitcase in the hall. "Come and see something," he said.

"Is it a surprise?" Trudy said, widening her eyes and raising half her mouth.

"You'll have to say," he told her and turned hastily to the stairs.

The house felt as breathless with anticipation as he was. The creak of stairs counted the seconds and confirmed Trudy was following. The chandelier seemed to lower itself like a huge murkily luminous spider while the door of his grandmother's room held itself still as a trap. On the landing he halted, uncertain whether he'd heard the faintest sound beyond her door—a shuffling that grew thinner, increasingly less suggestive of feet, as it approached. "What is it, Jonathan?" Trudy said.

"Your surprise. Come and look."

On the whole she seemed pleased he'd grabbed her hand. She accompanied him willingly enough, even when he seized the icy knob and flung open his grandmother's door. "You put the light on," he said.

"Of course, if you want me to." Making it clear that she was puzzled but determined, she stepped through the doorway and pressed down the switch with a fingertip. "What am I meant to be seeing, Jonathan? It's just a room."

"Have a better look," he said, though he was tempted to believe her: the room was emptier than last time he'd seen it—the bed had been stripped to its stale piebald mattress. His grandmother wouldn't want to lie on that; perhaps she was hiding in one of the massive wardrobes, though she'd disliked games she considered to be childish. He urged himself into the room and swung around to catch Trudy's hand again. "Let's look in—"

His voice froze in his throat as he saw what was crouched behind her in the dimmest corner of the room. It could almost have been a swollen bunch of sticks, except that it was patched with rags of clothes or skin. Lolling on top

of it was an object that looked pinched with chill and peeling with damp and distorted by worse than either. It hadn't much he would have liked to call a mouth or a nose, and was crowned with lumps of dust or hair. He might not have recognised it if his grandmother's eyes hadn't been glaring out of a section like an irregular piece of old toadstool. He hung onto Trudy and nodded at the corner. "There," he whispered.

She kept her gaze on him. "What now, Jonathan?"

"What you wanted. It's behind you, look."

"You mustn't do things like that. Even if you're still upset it isn't very pleasant, is it? You can tell me what's wrong. I'd like you to, it'd make me feel more like family. Just talk."

He saw his grandmother's eyes bulge in the remnant of a face while the rest of her crouched smaller and lower as if she was about to spring. He tried to drag Trudy to confront this—he was growing desperate enough to reach up for her head to twist it round. "I will if you look."

He felt her grow tense and make herself relax. She was beginning to turn her head when the shape in the corner unfolded itself and tottered to its full height. It jerked out a hand with little in the way of fingers, and he thought it was going to fasten on Trudy's shoulder. The next moment the light was gone, and Trudy clutched at him. "Did you—"

He wriggled free and dodged out of the room, snatching the door shut. If Trudy switched the light on she would come face to face with the thing she'd made of his grandmother, and otherwise she would be alone with it in the dark. It was suddenly apparent to him that his grandmother didn't want anyone to see her as she was now, and he wondered what she might do to gain control of the light switch. He was hanging onto the doorknob with both hands when the front door slammed. "I'm back again," his mother called. "Where's everyone?"

"Could you come up?" Trudy responded rather less than steadily. "I'm shut in and I can't seem to find..."

"Where are you? Hold on." Jonathan's mother ran upstairs and halted at the top. "Where's Trudy?" she asked him. "What are you—"

"I'm in here, Esther."

"What on earth do you think you're doing, Jonathan? Let go at once."

He was afraid that if she opened the door she would see his grandmother. She had to prise his fingers off the knob in order to let Trudy out. As Trudy fled onto the landing, he saw that the room was still unlit. "Trudy, I'm sorry," his mother cried. "Tell me what happened."

"Just an attempt to scare me off," Trudy said more or less evenly. "I'm afraid someone doesn't want me here."

"My grandma doesn't. She doesn't like you making mum say bad things about her."

"I think you'd better get ready for bed and stay in it," his mother told him.

The women followed him into the hall and watched him trudge, weighed down by injustice and luggage, to his room. Was Trudy staying? His grandmother wouldn't have to go far to find her, then. The thought failed to lessen his dismay at his grandmother's state. He raced through preparing for bed and took as much refuge in it as he could. Trudy and his mother were murmuring downstairs, largely incomprehensibly. "He'll have to get used to it," he heard his mother say.

Did she mean Trudy or her own criticisms of his grandmother? How much would he have to pray to compensate for whatever she'd said over the weekend? He set about chanting his plea, only to wonder if it was too late. He couldn't bring any other prayers to mind. Before long his mind gave up being awake.

He dreamed Trudy was inciting his mother to say worse and worse—at least, he hoped it was a dream. "That's right, keep pulling me to bits," he seemed to hear his grandmother complain. "Pull some more off me." She'd go to Trudy in the night, he thought, hoping she would. The idea transfixed him with panic. At first he couldn't understand why, even when he floundered awake—and then he realised how much of the fault was his. He'd willed his grandmother to look her worst for Trudy and his tormentors in the schoolyard.

He couldn't deny he was glad that Trudy had crept into his room and was stooping to rouse him. When he blinked his eyes wide, however, it wasn't Trudy's face he saw looming closer in the dimness. What the boys had said about his grandmother had overtaken her. Even if she couldn't see him, she could grope in search of him. He cowered under the bedclothes and tried to pray but could think of no words. Surely the noise he was making would

bring his mother, or Trudy would do. Perhaps they were punishing him, because all it attracted was the sensation of less than hands plucking at the bedclothes. The time until dawn felt like for ever, and dawn might only show him what was waiting to be seen.

Eyes End

A collaboration with John B. Ford.
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Once out of Chester, Kennedy stopped as soon as he could and consulted the map. Wales or Yorkshire? Mountains or mountains? He could go faster on the motorways that would take him into Yorkshire, to wherever he would spend the night and take a nap as soon as he'd checked in. Last night in Newark he'd hardly slept for the thundering of trucks past the hotel.

The motorway was full of trucks too, more so than the freeways at home. Of course there was less space in England for everything. The yellowed Cheshire fields stretched away into haze, the concrete hightway shimmered with exhausts and July heat and made him feel less than fully away, especially when he had to overtake vehicles several times the length of his. He kept to the inside lane as much as he could, and so he was able to examine the hitchhiker before drawing level with him.

He never even slowed for hikers back home, and the more he distinguished of this one, the less inclined he was to stop for him: a thin young man wearing dusty clothes and wraparound sunglasses. The glasses were too big for him, for he pushed them high on the bridge of his nose twice as Kennedy sped towards him. Kennedy hardly noticed the second time for staring at the placard the youth was holding.

Perhaps it was just the result of Kennedy's drive fatigue, but the names of hoped-for destinations on hikers placards seemed to have been growing odder. In Norfolk someone had held up a card marked 'Sleeping'; for a confused moment Kennedy had thought he was being accused of doing so. And the next day, on the way to Chester, he'd glimpsed a card for 'Weeping'. All the same, he had to slow in order to convince himself the dusty youth was displaying a sign for somewhere called 'Eyes End', and then it was a mixture of curiosity and guilt at the thought of having raised the hiker's hopes that made him swing the car onto the hard shoulder and wait.

The hiker took a minute or more to walk not even two hundred yards to the car. He seemed to find walking painful. At least this was something

Kennedy had in common with him. Watching him grow in the rear-view mirror of his Escort, Kennedy had a sudden urge not to get involved but he hadn't reached a decision when the hiker lurched alongside the car, stuffing the placard under one arm while he removed his glasses to peer at Kennedy as though he hoped to recognise him. Kennedy rolled the window down. "Eyes End," he said.

The hiker made no reply, only peered pink-eyed at him. Having decided he didn't know Kennedy, he seemed bewildered—not because Kennedy had never heard of the place, surely; perhaps by the left hand drive. All at once he limped fast around the car, almost into the path of a truck, and clambered into the passenger seat.

He might at least have asked for a ride, Kennedy thought, or said thank you. Perhaps he was too busy stowing the placard under his feet (there were holes in his shoes, and his feet were dusty) and snatching off his glasses, which he'd replaced on his nose to keep them out of the way. "You'll tell me when you want me to stop," Kennedy said, starting the car.

The motorway curved up towards the sun, which had the sky to itself. He wondered if his passenger disliked motorways or felt uneasy riding in the right-hand seat. The skinny hands with their bitten nails were turning the sunglasses over and over in the grubby denim lap. "Cool it," Kennedy muttered as trucks on either side of him started his adrenaline, and saw that the motorway was about to divide. "I'm taking the left fork," he said.

The bloodshot eyes narrowed. "Yes," said his passenger, sounding anything but hopeful.

At least he could talk in a high harsh voice, but said nothing further. As the motorway widened he narrowed his eyes and leaned forward to peer ahead, hands gripping the sunglasses, until Kennedy feared they would shatter. Junction 12 went by, a concrete ramp leading up to a bright blue route diagram, and the hiker sucked in a breath to mutter something monosyllabic. "Say again?" Kennedy said, turning from the empty motorway to smile faintly at him, and when the youth only slitted his eyes, explained, "I didn't hear you." But the youth was pressing his shoulders into the seat and pointing with one bloodily bitten finger.

"Here," he croaked.

Kennnedy just had time to glimpse a junction sign that looked blurred by the heat before the slip road was on him. Junction 13, it was, but he hadn't been quick enough to read the destination. Pity for the limping youth made him drive onto the ramp. Besides, off the motorway he could park for a nap.

The slip road sloped down quite steeply before it emerged into the open, where the hiker jammed his sunglasses onto his nose. Admittedly there wasn't much to see: colourless fields so blurred by low-lying haze that it was impossible to tell what grew there, fields stretching to the horizon; no sign of the nearby river, which must be higher than the road now. The road led almost straight to the horizon or rather to the edge of the haze, and Kennedy was damned if he'd let the hiker play dumb any longer: for one thing, he needed conversation to keep him awake. "Did you come far?" he said.

The youth looked at him and yet at the same time seemed to look straight through him. Still he offered nothing in the way of amiable conversation, just a barely audible "Yes." For the first time it occurred to Kennedy that the hiker may be some form of UK equivalent to the junkies found in many of the bigger cities back home; it was obvious to him that the youth was in both mental and physical distress—his mind was far from focused on actuality. This made the fact that he had been the one sharp enough to spot and read the junction sign seem quite peculiar.

Kennezy experienced the bizarre thought that perhaps the roles being played out were in fact much the reverse to what they appeared: wasn't it true that *he* was the one more akin to a desperate walker who had hitched a ride and now been diverted to some alternative destination? Perhaps he had already fallen asleep at the wheel and the hitchhiker was a dream figment, a corresponding image of circumstance which had entered his mind in some disguised form of Death. He looked at the youth's gaunt face, suddenly experiencing the arrival of humour when he pictured it fleshless and hooded inside a black cowl.

The lack of conversation served only to emphasise the hum of the car's engine. Kennedy compared it to the drone of some outdated aircraft; he imagined himself the pilot of a Boeing Flying Fortress which was high above Berlin, and his co-pilot, he was very high and up there with him! That's why they didn't communicate, he understood now—they had to keep total radio silence and not even speak to each other. They had to give their

full concentration to the mission. "We've got to concentrate and get these babies to fall on target!" he said to the youth. The hiker nodded and bit his finger nervously.

It was perhaps five minutes later when the youth showed he had enough intelligence to string a sentence together. "It's the next on your left, a very narrow lane." Kennedy was no longer surprised by the youth's assumption that he would be taken all the way to his destination, or by the fact that he now found himself obeying his will and taking the desired turn. The low-lying haze appeared blue-green in colour and also appeared to have thickened; there was an unearthly look about it which caused Kennedy some unaccountable apprehension. "Cloud's pretty thick today, I don't know if we'll be able to go in."

"Do you want to abort the mission?" asked a concerned voice. "Maybe it will be safer if you don't go through with this." Kennedy wasn't sure who had just spoken.

"I'll take her further in but if conditions worsen, we'll have to call a halt."

The lane they travelled along was a single-track road; if Kennedy wanted to turn around he would have to find a wider part. The heat of the sun seemed hotter because of its narrow confinement between the two hawthorn hedges which marked the lane's course. Kennedy yawned as another wave of fatigue swept over his body, infiltrating his brain. He wanted only to get this dangerous mission over and done with; just wanted to do what he had to do, and then return home safely. His anxiety caused him to press down harder on the accelerator pedal of the car... and once more he was propelled back through the years.

The spotlights searched the dark of the Berlin night for him, illuminating the cloud cover just as he entered it; then the big guns fired hopeful shells into the frenzied air and made to claim his life before he claimed the lives of others. Many times he had dispensed death upon this city, yet still he felt for all those seized by helpless panic down on the ground. Thus his anxiety was doubled: *he feared not only for himself but for those at his mercy*. The cloud was thick but he couldn't turn back now, maybe he still wasn't over the industrial region he'd hoped for, but he'd have to let his deadly cargo loose very soon.

The explosion came without the slightest warning. He felt intense pain in his right leg as fragments of flying metal cut into it. The youth beside him screamed in his high harsh voice, then Kennedy's eyes were focused on the present day once more. The car's windscreen had shattered and fallen away into a million tiny pieces, and through the space it had now vacated Kennedy saw the crunched-up bonnet and the oak tree which had halted his progress. Beside him, he heard the youth groaning in pain and was then able to watch him through blurry eyes as he unbuckled his seatbelt and staggered out of the car. His last vision before consciousness left him was of the youth climbing a stile and limping away across a field—towards the waiting haze. But surely it was only imagination when his clothing appeared to be the apparel of an American pilot, and when the wraparound sunglasses looked more like goggles...

Kennedy felt icy cold when he awoke. Darkness shrouded everything so thickly that not even the outline of the car or the oak tree was visible to his eyes. Despite the numbness of his body, he was still able to move. In fact he *was* moving, walking through the bitter cold and darkness, as though at some point he had managed to leave the car and somehow walk away in a state of trance. Suddenly he found himself standing in the field just opposite, staring towards the cloud of blue-green haze. It had now taken on a luminous quality to contrast against the dark. Also, the field about him no longer appeared bland, for it was populated throughout by a mass of crimson poppies, all of them standing as stiff and still as upright corpses. A thousand voices spoke simultaneously inside his head:

"Lest you should ever forget!"

As Kennedy walked onwards the haze thickened still more; it drifted towards him and circled around his body like the loving arms of a mother, or maybe those of a murderess intent on slow strangulation. After a while it retreated some little distance, building and reshaping itself; soon it had skilfully moulded into the shape of dome, then purposely it encompassed him within its airy walls. An explosion sounded and Kennedy saw thin streams of blood filtering upwards from the places where each ruddy flower had grown, these now spreading over the walls in the fashion of giant bloodstains.

Another explosion was followed by the sound of pain-filled screams. In synchronisation with this, the surrounding walls of the dome filled with visions of blood-smeared faces, each one gazing outward with accusing eyes of hatred fixed upon him. They began to spin in a vortex of nightmarish sights and sounds, rising upward in the shape of a cyclone which sought to launch him to the stars, *or drive him into the ground*. But in the fraction of one single second, darkness filled his eyes once more, then absolute silence reigned in his ears.

Kennedy knew he was no longer in the field. He could feel the presence of a dreadful tension which clung to the darkness; it was apparent throughout all the manufactured void of silence about him. It was the prelude to one moment of great terror, a form of terror which was then announced via the sudden wail of an air raid siren. All around him came the sound of running feet and panicked voices. Every voice spoke in German and was filled with fear, but after some seconds developed a more sinister quality, and he began... he began to understand what they were saying.

"You are an old man with blood on your hands!"

"You are an old man with blood on your hands!"

"You are an old man with blood on your hands!"

There was a sound of heavy droning in the sky above; an engine of death and destruction neared its target. He gazed upward through the night, focusing on the spotlights in order to try and locate the mindless murderer in the sky, yet still he could see nothing but the lights reflecting back off the thick cloudbank, that natural barrier referred to by all airmen as eye block, or Eyes End.

Very suddenly, a series of ear-splitting explosions knocked him from his feet, flames sprang up from buildings which before had been shrouded in darkness. And from deep inside Kennedy's lungs came a scream of anguish, it was a scream that had carried on throughout all the years of his life and had never ended. Because on that night back in 1944, he had of course failed to dispense one of the bombs he had carried. Silently it had ticked away through all the years, haunting him from his youth until this very day —the last day of his life. In his mind's eye he sat in a street in Berlin, the dead and dying all around him; his imagination had taken him to that place many times in the past. But now, finally, the last bomb had fallen and

exploded. It had detonated in the shape of one vast explosion of guilt and distortion inside Kennedy's head... and it had been fatal.

It was half an hour after the crash when the police patrol car found Kennedy slumped at the wheel of his Escort. Managing to force the buckled door open, the young constable who had just completed his medical training looked for sign of a pulse.

"No luck, sir. His body's still lukewarm but there's no sign of a pulse. Curious thing, though, his cheeks are wet with tears. It looks as though he must have been Weeping right up until he died. What do you think caused him to hit the tree, sir?"

"I don't know," came the reply. "At his age he was most probably Sleeping at the wheel or something."

2003

The Place Of Revelation

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At dinner Colin's parents do most of the talking. His mother starts by saying "Sit down," and as soon as he does his father says "Sit up." Auntie Dot lets Colin glimpse a sympathetic grin while Uncle Lucian gives him a secret one, neither of which helps him feel less nervous. They're eating off plates as expensive as the one he broke last time they visited, when his parents acted as if he'd meant to drop it even though the relatives insisted it didn't matter and at least his uncle thought so. "Delicious as always," his mother says when Auntie Dot asks yet again if Colin's food is all right, and his father offers "I expect he's just tired, Dorothy." At least that's an excuse, which Colin might welcome except it prompts his aunt to say "If you've had enough I should scamper off to bye-byes, Colin. For a treat you can leave us the washing up."

Everyone is waiting for him to go to his room. Even though his parents keep saying how well he does in English and how the art mistress said he should take up painting at secondary school, he's expected only to mumble agreement whenever he's told to speak up for himself. For the first time he tries arguing. "I'll do it. I don't mind."

"You've heard what's wanted," his father says in a voice that seems to weigh his mouth down.

"You catch up on your sleep," his mother says more gently, "then you'll be able to enjoy yourself tomorrow."

Beyond her Uncle Lucian is nodding eagerly, but nobody else sees. Everyone watches Colin trudge into the high wide hall. It offers him a light, and there's another above the stairs that smell of their new fat brown carpet, and one more in the upstairs corridor. They only put off the dark. Colin is taking time on each stair until his father lets him hear "Is he getting ready for bed yet?" For fear of having to explain his apprehensiveness he flees to the bathroom.

With its tiles white as a blizzard it's brighter than the hall, but its floral scent makes Colin feel it's only pretending to be a room. As he brushes his teeth the mirror shows him foaming at the mouth as though his nerves have given him a fit. When he heads for his room, the doorway opposite presents him with a view across his parents' bed of the hospital he can't help thinking is a front for the graveyard down the hill. It's lit up as pale as a tombstone, whereas his window that's edged with tendrils of frost is full of nothing but darkness, which he imagines rising massively from the fields to greet the black sky. Even if the curtains shut tight they wouldn't keep out his sense of it, nor does the flimsy furniture that's yellow as the wine they're drinking downstairs. He huddles under the plump quilt and leaves the light on while he listens to the kitchen clatter. All too soon it comes to an end, and he hears someone padding upstairs so softly they might almost not be there at all.

As the door inches open with a faint creak that puts him in mind of the lifting of a lid, he grabs the edge of the quilt and hauls it over his face. "You aren't asleep yet, then," his mother says. "I thought you might have drifted off."

Colin uncovers his face and bumps his shoulders against the bars behind the pillow. "I can't get to sleep, so can I come down?"

"No need for that, Colin. I expect you're trying too hard. Just think of nice times you've had and then you'll go off. You know there's nothing really to stop you."

She's making him feel so alone that he no longer cares if he gives away his secrets. "There is."

"Colin, you're not a baby any more. You didn't act like this when you were. Try not to upset people. Will you do that for us?"

"If you want."

She frowns at his reluctance. "I'm sure it's what you want as well. Just be as thoughtful as I know you are."

Everything she says reminds him how little she knows. She leans down to kiss each of his eyes shut, and as she straightens up, the cord above the bed turns the kisses into darkness with a click. Can he hold onto the feeling long enough to fall asleep? Once he hears the door close he burrows under the quilt and strives to be aware of nothing beyond the bed. He concentrates on

the faint scent of the quilt that nestles on his face, he listens to the silence that the pillow and the quilt press against his ears. The weight of the quilt is beginning to feel vague and soft as sleep when the darkness whispers his name. "I'm asleep," he tries complaining, however babyish and stupid it sounds.

"Not yet, Colin," Uncle Lucian says. "Story first. You can't have forgotten."

He hasn't, of course. He remembers every bedtime story since the first, when he didn't know it would lead to the next day's walk. "I thought we'd have finished," he protests.

"Quietly, son. We don't want anyone disturbed, do we? One last story."

Colin wants to stay where he can't see and yet he wants to know. He inches the quilt down from his face. The gap between the curtains has admitted a sliver of moonlight that turns the edges of objects a glimmering white. A sketch of his uncle's face the colour of bone hovers by the bed. His smile glints, and his eyes shine like stars so distant they remind Colin how limitless the dark is. That's one reason why he blurts "Can't we just go wherever it is tomorrow?"

"You need to get ready while you're asleep. You should know that's how it works." As Uncle Lucian leans closer, the light tinges his gaunt face except where it's hollowed out with shadows, and Colin is reminded of the moon looming from behind a cloud. "Wait now, here's an idea," his uncle murmurs. "That ought to help."

Colin realises he would rather not ask "What?"

"Tell the stories back to me. You'll find someone to tell one day, you know. You'll be like me."

The prospect fails to appeal to Colin, who pleads "I'm too tired."

"They'll wake you up. Your mother was saying how good you are at stories. That's thanks to me and mine. Go on before anyone comes up and hears."

A cork pops downstairs, and Colin knows there's little chance of being interrupted. "I don't know what to say."

"I can't tell you that, Colin. They're your stories now. They're part of you. You've got to find your own way to tell them."

As Uncle Lucian's eyes glitter like ice Colin hears himself say "Once..."

"That's the spirit. That's how it has to start."

"Once there was a boy.

"Called Colin. Sorry. You won't hear another breath out of me."

"Once there was a boy who went walking in the country on a day like it was today. The grass in the fields looked like feathers where all the birds in the world had been fighting, and all the fallen leaves were showing their bones. The sun was so low every crumb of frost had its own shadow, and his footprints had shadows in when he looked behind him, and walking felt like breaking little bones under his feet. The day was so cold he kept thinking the clouds were bits of ice that had cracked off the sky and dropped on the edge of the earth. The wind kept scratching his face and pulling the last few leaves off the trees, only if the leaves went back he knew they were birds. It was meant to be the shortest day, but it felt as if time had died because everything was too slippery or too empty for it to get hold of. So he thought he'd done everything there was to do and seen everything there was to see when he saw a hole like a gate through a hedge."

"That's the way." Uncle Lucian's eyes have begun to shine like fragments of the moon. "Make it your story."

"He wasn't sure if there was an old gate or the hedge had grown like one. He didn't know it was one of the places where the world is twisted. All he could see was more hedge at the sides of a bendy path. So he followed it round and round, and it felt like going inside a shell. Then he got dizzy with running to find the middle, because it seemed to take hours and the bends never got any smaller. But just when he was thinking he'd stop and turn back if the spiky hedges let him, he came to where the path led all round a pond that was covered with ice. Only the pond oughtn't to have been so big, all the path he'd run round should have squeezed it little. So he was walking round the pond to see if he could find the trick when the sun showed him the flat white faces everywhere under the ice.

"There were children and parents who'd come searching for them, and old people too. They were everyone the maze had brought to the pond, and they were all calling him. Their eyes were opening as slow as holes in the ice and growing too big, and their mouths were moving like fish mouths out of water, and the wind in the hedge was their cold rattly voice telling him he had to stay for ever, because he couldn't see the path away from the pond—

there was just hedge everywhere he looked. Only then he heard his uncle's voice somewhere in it, telling him he had to walk back in all his footprints like a witch dancing backwards and then he'd be able to escape."

This is the part Colin likes least, but his uncle murmurs eagerly "And was he?"

"He thought he never could till he remembered what his footprints looked like. When he turned round he could just see them with the frost creeping to swallow them up. So he started walking back in them, and he heard the ice on the pond start to crack to let all the bodies with the turned-up faces climb out. He saw thin white fingers pushing the edge of the ice up and digging their nails into the frosty path. His footprints led him back through the gap the place had tried to stop him finding in the hedge, but he could see hands flopping out of the pond like frogs. He still had to walk all the way back to the gate like that, and every step he took the hedges tried to catch him, and he heard more ice being pushed up and people crawling after him. It felt like the place had got hold of his middle and his neck and screwed them round so far he'd never be able to walk forward again. He came out of the gate at last, and then he had to walk round the fields till it was nearly dark to get back into walking in an ordinary way so his mother and father wouldn't notice there was something new about him and want to know what he'd been doing."

Colin doesn't mind if that makes his uncle feel at least a little guilty, but Uncle Lucian says "What happens next?"

Colin hears his parents and his aunt forgetting to keep their voices low downstairs. He still can't make out what they're saying, though they must think he's asleep. "The next year he went walking in the woods," he can't avoid admitting.

"What kind of a day would that have been, I wonder?"

"Sunny. Full of birds and squirrels and butterflies. So hot he felt like he was wearing the sun on his head, and the only place he could take it off was the woods, because if he went back to the house his mother and father would say he ought to be out walking. So he'd gone a long way under the trees when he felt them change."

"He could now. Most people wouldn't until it was too late, but he felt..."

"Something had crept up behind him. He was under some trees that put their branches together like hands with hundreds of fingers praying. And when he looked he saw the trees he'd already gone under were exactly the same as the ones he still had to, like he was looking in a mirror except he couldn't see himself in it. So he started to run but as soon as he moved, the half of the tunnel of trees he had to go through began to stretch itself till he couldn't see the far end, and when he looked behind him it had happened there as well."

"He knew what to do this time, didn't he? He hardly even needed to be told."

"He had to go forwards walking backwards and never look to see what was behind him. And as soon as he did he saw the way he'd come start to shrink. Only that wasn't all he saw, because leaves started running up and down the trees, except they weren't leaves. They were insects pretending to be them, or maybe they weren't insects. He could hear them scuttling about behind him, and he was afraid the way he had to go wasn't shrinking, it was growing as much longer as the way he'd come was getting shorter. Then all the scuttling things ran onto the branches over his head, and he thought they'd fall on him if he didn't stop trying to escape. But his body kept moving even though he wished it wouldn't, and he heard a great flapping as if he was in a cave and bats were flying off the roof, and then something landed on his head. It was just the sunlight, and he'd come out of the woods the same place he'd gone in. All the way back he felt he was walking away from the house, and his mother said he'd got a bit of sunstroke."

"He never told her otherwise, did he? He knew most people aren't ready to know what's behind the world."

"That's what his uncle kept telling him."

"He was proud to be chosen, wasn't he? He must have known it's the greatest privilege to be shown the old secrets."

Colin has begun to wish he could stop talking about himself as though he's someone else, but the tales won't let go of him—they've closed around him like the dark. "What was his next adventure?" it whispers with his uncle's moonlit smiling mouth.

"The next year his uncle took him walking in an older wood. Even his mother and father might have noticed there was something wrong with it

and told him not to go in far." When his uncle doesn't acknowledge any criticism but only smiles wider and more whitely Colin has to add "There was nothing except sun in the sky, but as soon as you went in the woods you had to step on shadows everywhere, and that was the only way you knew there was still a sun. And the day was so still it felt like the woods were pretending they never breathed, but the shadows kept moving whenever he wasn't looking—he kept nearly seeing very tall ones hide behind the trees. So he wanted to get through the woods as fast as he could, and that's why he ran straight onto the stepping stones when he came to a stream."

Colin would like to run fast through the story too, but his uncle wants to know "How many stones were there again?"

"Ten, and they looked so close together he didn't have to stretch to walk. Only he was on the middle two when he felt them start to move. And when he looked down he saw the stream was really as deep as the sky, and lying on the bottom was a giant made out of rocks and moss that was holding up its arms to him. They were longer than he didn't know how many trees stuck together, and their hands were as big as the roots of an old tree, and he was standing on top of two of the fingers. Then the giant's eyes began to open like boulders rolling about in the mud, and its mouth opened like a cave and sent up a laugh in a bubble that spattered the boy with mud, and the stones he was on started to move apart."

"His uncle was always with him though, wasn't he?"

"The boy couldn't see him," Colin says in case this lets his uncle realise how it felt, and then he knows his uncle already did. "He heard him saying you mustn't look down, because being seen was what woke up the god of the wood. So the boy kept looking straight ahead, though he could see the shadows that weren't shadows crowding behind the trees to wait for him. He could feel how even the water underneath him wanted him to slip on the slimy stones, and how the stones were ready to swim apart so he'd fall between them if he caught the smallest glimpse of them. Then he did, and the one he was standing on sank deep into the water, but he'd jumped on the bank of the stream. The shadows that must have been the bits that were left of people who'd looked down too long let him see his uncle, and they walked to the other side of the woods. Maybe he wouldn't have got there

without his uncle, because the shadows kept dancing around them to make them think there was no way between the trees."

"Brave boy, to see all that." Darkness has reclaimed the left side of Uncle Lucian's face; Colin is reminded of a moon that the night is squeezing out of shape. "Don't stop now, Colin," his uncle says. "Remember last year."

This is taking longer than his bedtime stories ever have. Colin feels as if the versions he's reciting may rob him of his whole night's sleep. Downstairs his parents and his aunt sound as if they need to talk for hours yet. "It was here in town," he says accusingly. "It was down in Lower Brichester."

He wants to communicate how betrayed he felt, by the city or his uncle or by both. He'd thought houses and people would keep away the old things, but now he knows that nobody who can't see can help. "It was where the boy's mother and father wouldn't have liked him to go," he says, but that simply makes him feel the way his uncle's stories do, frightened and excited and unable to separate the feelings. "Half the houses were shut up with boards but people were still using them, and there were men and ladies on the corners of the streets waiting for whoever wanted them or stuff they were selling. And in the middle of it all there were railway lines and passages to walk under them. Only the people who lived round there must have felt something, because there was one passage nobody walked through."

"But the boy did."

'A man sitting drinking with his legs in the road told him not to, but he did. His uncle went through another passage and said he'd meet him on the other side. Anyone could have seen something was wrong with the tunnel, because people had dropped needles all over the place except in there. But it looked like it'd just be a minute to walk through, less if you ran. So the boy started to hurry through, only he tried to be quiet because he didn't like how his feet made so much noise he kept thinking someone was following him, except it sounded more like lots of fingers tapping on the bricks behind him. When he managed to be quiet the noise didn't all go away, but he tried to think it was water dripping, because he felt it cold and wet on the top of his head. Then more of it touched the back of his neck, but he didn't want to look round, because the passage was getting darker behind him. He

was in the middle of the tunnel when the cold touch landed on his face and made him look."

His uncle's face is barely outlined, but his eyes take on an extra gleam. "And when he looked."

"He saw why the passage was so dark, with all the arms as thin as his poking out of the bricks. They could grow long enough to reach halfway down the passage and grope around till they found him with their fingers that were as wet as worms. Then he couldn't even see them, because the half of the passage he had to walk through was filling up with arms as well, so many he couldn't see out. And all he could do was what his uncle's story had said, stay absolutely still, because if he tried to run the hands would grab him and drag him through the walls into the earth, and he wouldn't even be able to die of how they did it. So he shut his eyes to be as blind as the things with the arms were, that's if there wasn't just one thing behind the walls. And after he nearly forgot how to breathe the hands stopped pawing at his head as if they were feeling how his brain showed him everything about them, maybe even brought them because he'd learned to see the old things. When he opened his eyes the arms were worming back into the walls, but he felt them all around him right to the end of the passage. And when he went outside he couldn't believe in the daylight any more. It was like a picture someone had put up to hide the dark."

"He could believe in his uncle though, couldn't he? He saw his uncle waiting for him and telling him well done. I hope he knew how much his uncle thought of him."

"Maybe."

"Well, now it's another year."

Uncle Lucian's voice is so low, and his face is so nearly invisible, that Colin isn't sure whether his words are meant to be comforting or to warn the boy that there's more. "Another story," Colin mumbles, inviting it or simply giving in.

"I don't think so any more. I think you're too old for that."

Colin doesn't know in what way he feels abandoned as he whispers "Have we finished?"

"Nothing like. Tomorrow, just go and lie down and look up."

"Where?"

'Anywhere you're by yourself."

Colin feels he is now. "Then what?" he pleads.

"You'll see. I can't begin to tell you. See for yourself."

That makes Colin more nervous than his uncle's stories ever did. He's struggling to think how to persuade his uncle to give him at least a hint when he realises he's alone in the darkness. He lies on his back and stares upwards in case that gets whatever has to happen over with, but all he sees are memories of the places his uncle has made him recall. Downstairs his parents and his aunt are still talking, and he attempts to use their voices to keep him with them, but feels as if they're dragging him down into the moonless dark. Then he's been asleep, because they're shutting their doors close to his. After that, whenever he twitches awake it's a little less dark. As soon as he's able to see he sneaks out of bed to avoid his parents and his aunt. Whatever is imminent, having to lie about where he's going would make his nerves feel even more like rusty wire about to snap.

He's as quick and as quiet in the bathroom as he can be. Once he's dressed he rolls up the quilt to lie on and slips out of the house. In the front garden he thinks moonlight has left a crust on the fallen leaves and the grass. Down the hill a train shakes itself awake while the city mutters in its sleep. He turns away and heads for the open country behind the house.

A few crows jab at the earth with their beaks and sail up as if they mean to peck the icy sky. The ground has turned into a single flattened greenish bone exactly as bright as the low vault of dull cloud. Colin walks until the fields bear the houses out of sight. That's as alone as he's likely to be. Flapping the quilt, he spreads it on the frozen ground. He throws himself on top of it and slaps his hands on it in case that starts whatever's meant to happen. He's already so cold he can't keep still.

At first he thinks that's the only reason he's shivering, and then he notices the sky isn't right. He feels as if all the stories he's had to act out have gathered in his head, or the way they've made him see has. That ability is letting him observe how thin the sky is growing, or perhaps it's leaving him unable not to. Is it also attracting whatever's looming down to peer at him from behind the sky? A shiver is drumming his heels on the ground through the quilt when the sky seems to vanish as though it has been clawed apart

above him, and he glimpses as much of a face as there's room for—an eye like a sea black as space with a moon for its pupil. It seems indifferent as death and yet it's watching him. An instant of seeing is all he can take before he twists onto his front and presses his face into the quilt as though it's a magic carpet that will transport him home to bed and, better still, unconsciousness.

He digs his fingers into the quilt until he recognises he can't burrow into the earth. He stops for fear of tearing his aunt's quilt and having to explain. He straightens up in a crouch to retrieve the quilt, which he hugs as he stumbles back across the field with his head down. The sky is pretending that it never faltered, but all the way to the house he's afraid it will part to expose more of a face.

While nobody is up yet, Colin senses that his uncle isn't in the house. He tiptoes upstairs to leave the quilt on his bed, and then he sends himself out again. There's no sign of his uncle on the way downhill. Colin dodges onto the path under the trees in case his uncle prefers not to be seen. "Uncle Lucian," he pleads.

"You found me."

He doesn't seem especially pleased, but Colin demands "What did I see?"

"Not much yet. Just as much as your mind could take. It's like our stories, do you understand? Your mind had to tell you a story about what you saw, but in time you won't need it. You'll see what's really there."

"Suppose I don't want to?" Colin blurts. "What's it all for?"

"Would you rather be like my sister and only see what everyone else sees? She was no fun when she was your age, your mother."

"I never had the choice."

"Well, I wouldn't ever have said that to my grandfather. I was nothing but grateful to him."

Though his uncle sounds not merely disappointed but offended, Colin says "Can't I stop now?"

"Everything will know you can see, son. If you don't greet the old things where you find them they'll come to find you."

Colin voices a last hope. "Has it stopped for you?"

"It never will. I'm part of it now. Do you want to see?"

"No."

Presumably Colin's cry offends his uncle, because there's a spidery rustle beyond the trees that conceal the end of the path and then silence. Time passes before Colin dares to venture forward. As he steps from beneath the trees he feels as if the sky has lowered itself towards him like a mask. He's almost blind with resentment of his uncle for making him aware of so much and for leaving him alone, afraid to see even Uncle Lucian. Though it doesn't help, Colin starts kicking the stone with his uncle's name on it and the pair of years ending with this one. When he's exhausted he turns away towards the rest of his life.

Feeling Remains

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I'm watching Mrs Hammond's empty house while I try to think of anything interesting about myself to write for my English homework when I see my mother. She's walking down the street with two people in tracksuits, a woman and a boy. I know my mother says you have to see the spirit inside everyone, but any time there are tracksuits in our part of town it means trouble. The other night a gang of girls in them kept jumping on the cars in our street, but by the time the police came and my parents finished discussing whose fault it was the girls behaved like that, they'd gone. I hope my mother's showing the people the way out of our suburb, but she holds the front gate open and the boy in roller boots clumps under the rosy arch. I save my homework on the screen and wait till she unlocks the front door and calls "Jeremy, come and say hello."

I go to the top of the stairs. When she gives me her look that says she trusts me not to disappoint her, I have to go down. "Jane and Brad, I told you about Jeremy. He'll be a friend for you, Brad," she says. "Jane's one of my students, Jeremy."

That needn't mean she's an addict like the women my mother brought home from the refuge where she used to work. I thought Brad was bald and my mother would expect me to be sorry about that, but he's only shaved so he'll have even less hair than his mother. Mine is saying "I should take off your boots in the house, Brad. I expect we can find you some old Christmas slippers of Jeremy's."

Brad makes his mouth thinner, but Jane grabs his shoulder when he starts clumping out of the porch into the hall. "Do what Willa tells you. Act like you deserve to be let in a house like this."

"You'll have to pay for new ones if they're nicked," he tells my mother.

"We promise they'll be safe, don't we, Jeremy? We understand if people who haven't been as lucky as us value what they have. Of course you're making your own luck now, Jane, by coming to night class."

"They should have made me stay at school when I was these ones' ages. The advice centre says I should be able to sue the education."

"Will you look after your new friend, Jeremy, while Jane and I work out what schedule's best for her?"

"I was doing my English."

"I'm certain Brad wishes he had homework. You don't want him and Jane to think we've no time for people who need us."

I can't see why they'd think that or feel entitled either. Brad sits on the doormat and yanks his boots off and jumps up to shove past me and sprint upstairs. "Show him your room, Jeremy," my mother says. "Perhaps he can give you some ideas to write."

At least he isn't wearing any shoes. When he's finished using the toilet without shutting the door or flushing he steps in the bath and the bidet and then the shower stall in the guest room. He looks around my parents' room as if he's memorising everything and runs into mine. I knew he'd head for the computer, but he sticks two fingers up at it when he sees there's only writing on the screen. He holds onto my desk to poke his face at the window. "There's the house your mam said some old twat lived in."

"It's where an old lady used to live."

"Where's she now?"

"Gone."

"Where? She live by herself?" Brad says and starts typing on my keyboard. All the words have four letters, and some of them are spelt right. "Leave it alone," I shout, hoping they can hear me downstairs. "That's for school."

"Your mam said you had to let me do some." He rests a thumb on the power button and watches me nearly get to him before he switches the computer off. He dodges me and runs downstairs yelling "He won't tell me about the old woman and he won't let me go on his pee see."

I switch it back on and wait for it to scan the drives. I'd pray if I knew what to pray to. When the screen shows I haven't lost anything I shut down properly, because my mother's calling "Come and talk to us, Jeremy. We don't hide from our guests."

They're in the front room. Mother and Jane are drinking coffee out of Empowered Woman mugs while Brad wanders about picking things up.

"You'll break that," Jane keeps saying as if she wants him to prove she's right, and he nearly drops the carving of a goddess my father bought at the African craft shop.

"You're supposed to be paying attention to your guest, Jeremy. You're thirteen and he's not even at secondary school."

"He nearly wrecked my computer."

"Things are only things and we shouldn't get attached to them," my mother says, though she doesn't seem too happy with Brad handling her Muslim pictures on the mantelpiece. "People are what matters. Why wouldn't you tell Brad about Mrs Hammond? I'm sure he'd enjoy hearing how you took care of her."

"He likes to know about people," Jane said. "He never knew his dad before the scum went off and left us."

"Tell Brad how you were Mrs Hammond's little helper after Mr Hammond died."

Suddenly Brad's interested. "How'd he die?"

"Fluid retention," my mother tells Jane as if she's the only one that's listening. "His heart gave up."

"Too much booze, you mean? Sounds like a man."

I'm remembering how Mr Hammond's legs swelled up till they were twice as wide—I used to think they were like balloons and the ankles were knots you could untie to let everything out, "I don't think his wife ever recovered from," my mother stops saying, "it took him most of a year. But you did everything you could for her, didn't you, Jeremy?"

Brad is opening and shutting the doors of an icon as if he hopes it'll change into something better than a Greek saint with gold around his head. "Just you listen, you," Jane says. "This is how you're meant to behave. What did he do, Willa?"

My mother opens her eyes wide at me to make me answer and looks disappointed when I can't. "Shopping and housework and just sitting and talking to her," she says.

That was the worst part—listening to her and feeling how afraid she was. It felt as if all the dimness of her house had crawled inside my head and started filling up my chest as well. Maybe the dark was meant to help her

stop seeing herself, but I thought it made things worse. I'm willing my mother not to go on about Mrs Hammond, and surely Jane and Brad have to leave soon, because I can smell dinner, lentils again. But my mother says "Our guests are dining with us, Jeremy, and then I said you'd keep Brad with you while Jane and I go to my class."

"I haven't finished my homework."

"You didn't seem too busy when we came along. You seemed to be concentrating on Mrs Hammond's house."

Maybe Brad will be so rude about dinner she won't want him to stay. He stares at his chunk of her lentil loaf and says he wants a burger. Jane isn't too impressed either when she hears how we never eat anything that injures the rainforest or puts us higher up the food chain than anybody else or with additives in. She tells Brad to be grateful and get on with eating, though she doesn't do too much of that herself. When he won't, my mother makes him a sandwich of the ham my father says he needs for a balanced diet, but Brad hasn't finished his first bite when he starts wanting to watch television and not sit at the table. My mother persuades him to take his plate with him and sends me after him without mine. I'm watching him spill crumbs from his plate and his mouth while he plays with the remote control and keeps asking why we've got no sex channels when my father comes in.

He gives Brad the kind of blink he's started giving anyone my mother brings home, the kind that says he's tired and now he'll be more so. She meets him in the hall and just about puts a kiss on his cheek, as if she doesn't want Jane to see. "Jane, this is Leslie," she says, and tells him "Plenty left for you in the oven. We're off to my class now and the boys are staying here."

"There aren't likely to be ructions, are there? Only I've brought home quite a wodge of work."

"I'm certain you're man enough for everything," she says with a wink at Jane. "Are we ready? The boys can wash up."

"You do what Leslie says since they've let you in their nice house," Jane tells Brad.

"What does Jane stand for?" my mother asks her as they walk arm in arm along the hall.

"I don't stand for anything."

"Darn right, and what does your name stand for?"

"Justice Against Naked Exploitation."

"That's what we need. I got all my students to empower their names," my mother tells my father as she leaves.

I wonder if he's thinking they're all women when he comes to frown at me and Brad at the kitchen sink. The second time Brad drops a plate in it to see how much noise it makes if it won't smash, my father hurries to him. "Please, allow me."

Brad flinches out of the way in case he's touched. "Willa said I could watch your telly."

"Then you must, of course," my father says and helps me finish washing up. By then Brad is turning the sound up and down and changing channels as fast as he can. My father goes in the office, where his desk is smaller than my mother's, but soon he opens the door and calls me. "Do you think you might take your friend along to the play area for a while?"

"I didn't want to stay here anyway," Brad shouts and runs out of the house.

"Go with him, Jeremy," my father says with even more of his usual worried look. "He's our responsibility."

I don't see why he has to be, but if I say I'll get a disappointed lecture and a worse one from my mother. I go after Brad as my father shuts himself in the office. Brad's across the road in Mrs Hammond's front garden. "You can't go in there," I tell him.

"You mean you can't, soft twat," he says and dodges round the back.

There's nothing to be afraid of, I try and think. There never really was for Mrs Hammond, so how can there be for me? I don't want Brad doing anything I'll be blamed for not stopping. I hurry down the path with weeds sticking out of all its cracks into the back garden, where the hedge hides me and Brad from the neighbours. He's trying to see into the kitchen. "Dirty cow, was she?" he says.

He means the way the windows look black with grime, though they aren't. He points at the top of the kitchen window, at a gap big enough for him to put his skinny arm through. "Give us a step up."

"You mustn't go inside."

"Give us one or I'll say your dad kept feeling me and that's why I ran off."

"Nobody'd believe you."

His face squashes itself thinner at me, and then he sees a lawnmower lying on its back in the long grass. He tips it up and drags it to the house and wedges the handle under the windowsill. There's a bar under the handle, and he stands one foot on that. "If I fall through the glass I'll say you pushed me," he says.

I'm almost sure nobody will believe him except maybe Jane, but being so close to Mrs Hammond's house is making me nervous. He levers himself up and grabs the top of the sash and plants his other grubby foot on the windowsill. He wobbles as he shoves his arm through the gap, and I wonder whether he'll say I felt him if I hold onto him. Then he twists the catch and the sash rattles down. He steps over and lands with a clang in the sink and pokes his head out of the window. "What are you going to do now, soft twat?"

There's nothing to be afraid of in there except what he might do. I know that's what I'm most afraid of when he jumps down onto the kitchen floor. "Wait," I plead. "I'll come."

I'm not as used to getting into other people's houses as him. I haul myself up to the sill from the bar of the mower and swing one leg through the window to try and stand in the sink. It's further down than I like, and when I drag my other leg over the sash I nearly lose my balance. I feel as if I'm falling into somewhere deep and dark. I manage to grab hold of the taps, and when I'm steady I shut the window and fix the catch. Brad is staring at the windows painted black inside as high as Mrs Hammond could reach. "Mad old bitch then, was she?" he says.

"Just didn't like seeing herself in anything."

"Mad old bitch," he says as though I agreed with him. He stares at the scratches she made all over the metal sink with a fork, and then I have to chase after him into the hall. He touches the switch for the jangly chandelier and leaves it alone in case people see he's in the house. He scowls at the walls—at the patches that look painted with how dark it'll be very soon. "Who got all her pictures?" he says as if it should have been him.

"They weren't pictures, they were mirrors. She took them down."

I remember them lying on their faces on one of her spare beds that was covered with broken glass. Brad's throwing all the doors open. The rooms

sound too big and empty, though they've still got furniture that looks fat and sagging out of shape with the dimness the black windows make. "Be a good fire," Brad mutters to himself, but then he runs upstairs.

The bathroom mirrors are smashed in the bath. "Said she was a dirty cow," Brad sniggers, and I can't tell him it was where she was most afraid to see herself. He probably wouldn't listen anyway. He's too busy heading for her room, where I used to hear her begging and praying when I had to let myself into the house with the keys she gave my parents. She wasn't answering the doorbell any more, and she didn't answer when I called up the stairs—maybe she didn't hear me for talking, or maybe she couldn't stop. "That's some sponge that's gone bad," I heard once. "That's a stick with some old rubber round it. That's a claw, I don't know what it belongs to. That's a nasty mask someone's wearing. It's not me. It's not me."

She hadn't smashed the bedroom mirrors then. She'd wedged the wardrobe door open with some shoes to hide the glass on it, and she'd covered up the dressing-table mirror with a dress. Now they're just bare wood that makes me think bits of a coffin have got into the room. "Feels squelchy," Brad says, and I think he's imitating Mrs Hammond somehow till I see he means the carpet under his bare feet. "Nothing worth a turd in here," he complains and runs to push up the painted-over window.

He kneels on the floor and squints through the slit at the backs of the houses across the garden. "Bet they've got stuff we ought to have," he mumbles. As he's getting up he points at the bed. "Is that her?"

I feel as if the dimness is a crawling lump of soot that fills my head. I'm not just afraid to look, I can't even see. Then Brad picks up what he was talking about—Mrs Hammond's photograph album that was shoved under the pillow. A photograph of her being not much older than me falls out and he treads on it while he turns the pages, not caring if he tears them. "It's just her old pictures," I say to make him stop.

I wish I hadn't said it. Surely Mrs Hammond couldn't hear me, but I feel guilty anyway, because it was the album she held onto when she was trying to hide from herself in the bed. "Which one do I look like?" she kept pleading the last time I let myself into the house. "Do I still look like this?" Now Brad picks up the photograph she was talking about and throws it in the album. "Got any matches?" he says.

"I never have any."

"Sad soft twat then, aren't you?" he says and runs downstairs.

I'd leave the album if I didn't think he might come back and use it to set fire to the house. I tuck it under my arm and go after him. When he sidles out of the front door I copy him and shut it so gently it feels as if it's turned into rubber. Brad sneaks out of the gate but waits to mutter "If you say we went in there I'll say you made me go in so you could have a feel of me."

I won't be saying we went in. I'd take Mrs Hammond's album to my room if I didn't have to follow him while he spies on houses. More than once he wants me to keep watch while he prowls into someone's garden or round the back of their house, but I won't do that however many names he calls me. We go through the whole suburb that way in the dark till we come round again to my house.

I let myself in and have to let Brad in as well. I'm glad he goes straight to the television, because it means he doesn't see me putting the album under my bed. I'm hurrying to tell him to turn the television down when mother and Jane come in. "Jane wrote nearly a whole paragraph," my mother tells anyone who's listening, "didn't you, Jane? You'll be wearing a white collar at your factory at this rate, if you even stay. I know you'll do everything you can for your workmates."

Jane doesn't seem to like being talked about so much. "Have you been behaving?" she shouts at Brad over the television. "Get home now and turn that off. You can't take it with you even if it's bigger than ours."

"He hasn't been much trouble, has he, Jeremy?" my father wants me to agree.

"He didn't stop you working."

"Luckier than me, then," Jane tells my father.

Brad switches off the television and sprints to pick his boots up. He's sitting on the doorstep to pull them on when my father says "Excuse me, young man, but could that be our remote control that's slipped into your pocket by mistake?"

"Give it here," Jane yells at Brad, and nearly hits him across the head with it except he ducks. She jabs it at my mother and says "I'm sorry that's all you get for helping."

"You've given me and more importantly yourself a lot more than that." As Jane drags Brad out of the gate my mother calls "Looking forward to next week."

My father makes a noise like humming a question and says "Bedtime for our youngest member unless he wants to finish his homework."

That's all they say till I'm out of the bathroom and in bed, but the silence feels like my mother getting ready to tramp into the office and start. "So the best you can offer one of my students is calling her child a thief."

"Well, hold on, I don't think we can honestly say I quite—"

"Diet's all that's wrong with him, the kind the multinationals won't be happy until everybody's eating. That and wanting to be a man. Couldn't you and Jeremy deal with him for even a couple of hours? His mother has to all the time."

"I wonder if we saw much evidence that she—"

"There's lots of evidence anybody but a man could see that she's as brave as every one of my mature students. They need to be, not having the gender advantage. They work as hard as I do, but perhaps you don't think that's hard enough..."

"Of course I do. I really wish you wouldn't teach at night if it leaves you on edge like this."

"You'd rather we both left all the people we've failed to sink further, would you?"

"I'm not sure you can say it's us who've failed—"

"Our whole class has," my mother cries, and a lot more as well. When my parents come upstairs at last I still can't sleep. My father says we always have to leave our bedroom windows open at night so the central heating doesn't make us vulnerable to all the germs that are developing or being developed. The gap must be letting a wind in my room, because there's a noise under the bed as if something's got hold of Mrs Hammond's album but can't quite open it. I'm not going to look. I'm almost asleep when I hear the fumbling creep away, and then I am.

In the morning my parents aren't speaking much to each other, more at me instead. I'm almost glad to head for the school I have to go to because everyone else is as deserving of an education as I am and it wouldn't be fair

to the others to put all the best children together. I don't think I'm one of them even if my dad does, just one of the few that go in uniform. Shaun's been sniffing glue again and starts dancing on his desk, and Cindy keeps screaming at people because she says they're staring at her, till they do to make her scream. Only those aren't the main reasons I can't do my work properly. Even when the teacher gets Shaun and Cindy taken off to the disruption room I can't stop trying to think what to do with Mrs Hammond's album.

I don't want to hear something moving in my room at night again. I never have before even when there was a wind. There's nowhere to put the album except back where I found it—if my parents see it they'll know I sneaked into Mrs Hammond's house. Only we gave her keys to her son after she died even though he hadn't been visiting her, so how can I get back in? I nearly think of asking Brad, though there are plenty of children at my school who'd be the same kind of help. I'll have to climb up to her bedroom window he left open at the bottom if I can carry the album and a ladder across the road without being seen. Maybe I can climb without a ladder. I'm trying to remember the back of her house as I walk home with the homework half the class never bothers doing. By the time I reach my street I'm sure there's a drainpipe close to her window. But there's no drainpipe—there isn't even a house.

All that's left is a huge lump of black smoke squirming every way as if it wants to dodge the water three fire engines are squirting at it. The house has fallen in with just some bricks of the ground floor and half a window left standing. It looks as if the house has been pulled out of shape by the smoke that's black as tonight will be. I'm watching it and feeling Mrs Hammond's nightmare is holding me there when my parents drive up in my mother's car.

When she climbs out her head goes up as if her open mouth is pulling it till her chin points at where the house was. "How on earth has that managed to happen?" she says as if whoever's responsible is listening, and I do my best not to.

"At least Mrs Hammond's gone, thank heaven," says my father.

"The late owner," my mother tells a fireman. "We did think she might cause a fire when there's so little care for the elderly in their own homes, but do you know what actually happened here?"

"The lady who reported it said some boys were seen going in there recently," the fireman says, rubbing some black onto his forehead with the back of his hand.

"That's the least we can expect when child care for single parents is so inadequate."

He gives her quite a look and says "You'll have to excuse me" as he strides off to his engine. Maybe he doesn't realise that leaves my mother with an argument still to have, or maybe that's what he's avoiding. I watch the smoke trying to stand up as if it's desperate to find the shape the house used to be. When my mother says "Come along, Jeremy, we don't stare" I hurry after her.

All the way through our Indian dinner that's mostly rice so we remember how other people have to eat, I'm afraid someone will ask me if the boys were me and Brad. Instead she talks about her students so hard I can tell my father doesn't dare to mention the children at his school. I wonder if she can't let herself believe I got into Mrs Hammond's house, but I think it's more she won't believe Brad did. As soon as all the dinner's eaten my father says to me "I'll see to the washing up and I should be about your homework."

I can't open my window in case the smoke that's left gets in. It feels as if its dark is trying to—I keep feeling its dark has crept behind me. Whenever I look round there's nothing I haven't always seen except Mrs Hammond's album lying under the bed. I push it further under to make sure my parents won't see it, but when I try and concentrate on my homework I can't help seeing bits of the smoke heaving themselves about and turning into the night. As soon as I've finished my work, which isn't much good, I go to the bathroom again and make myself switch off the light and get in bed.

I seem to wake up more often than I sleep, but I suppose I do some of that as well, because I keep thinking something wants to catch hold of me in the dark. I try to stay close to the side of the bed near the window, but that means the dark is behind me. Before I came to bed I must have pushed Mrs Hammond's album too hard, because in the morning I see a picture of her when she was a few years older than me has come out on the far side. It's crumpled up as if someone tried to get hold of it, and most of its yellow has turned black—it looks as if the blackness is turning her into a shape I'd

rather not see. I pinch the photograph between my nails and wriggle it into the album and drop the album in my schoolbag.

I just want the only thing that's left of Mrs Hammond's to go somewhere it'll be safe. I'd ask my parents to give it to her son if I wouldn't have to tell them I was keeping it away from Brad—I'd ask where the son lives if they wouldn't make me tell them why I want to know. I can't eat much breakfast for being afraid they'll see the album before I can leave, and my father has to eat what I don't or my mother would tell us how many people could live on it for a week. I try not to look as if I'm carrying anything I shouldn't in my bag when my mother puts her mouth on my forehead and my father shakes my hand before I can run out of the house.

I wonder if I'll have to keep the album away from people, but the girls and boys who might add it to the litter everybody drops at school are after anyone who doesn't look English because the papers say the country's letting too many asylum seekers in. At lunchtime I go upstairs to the library, where I often hide though there aren't many books I want to read or many I don't either. The librarian who's always blinking and patting her foggy hair as if she's making sure nothing has jumped into it off anyone is at the desk. "Hello, er," she says when I start taking out the album. "Did you enjoy it?"

"It's an old lady's photos I wondered if you'd want to have."

"Oh," she says the way people sigh at babies, "er. Is she your grandma?"

I haven't seen either of my grandmothers for years, because my mother argues with them about everything, which she says means they're victims of their class. "She was just a lady who lived near us," I say.

"And how did it come your way, er?"

"She died. She didn't want anything to happen to it," I say and wonder if that's true—I somehow think it is.

"I don't see it as material for us," the librarian says without even looking inside it. "I expect you should give it to a parent or whoever you live with to look after, er."

"Jeremy," I tell her, but she's at her hair again as if I might have brought her more than a book.

There's a history lesson after lunch, and I try to give the album to the teacher. "That's not the kind of history we teach," he says without looking in

it, and lifts his top lip with his bottom one as if he'd like to plug his nose up, "even if any of you little charmers wanted to learn." He oughtn't to mean me, and it's so unfair I don't think about the album for the rest of the afternoon. I don't start feeling nervous till I'm halfway home, but when I let myself in there's another reason. My mother's waiting with something to say and a blank face.

The longer she doesn't say it, the worse I think it's going to be. I'm sure I'm being blamed but I don't know for what. I hide in my room and try to work till my father comes home. At first she only sends him up to tell me dinner's ready. She ladles out her carrot casserole before she dumps herself on her chair. "Well, I hope everyone's satisfied," she says to the ceiling.

"It's quite tasty and filling, thank you, dear."

If I were my father I wouldn't have said that. I can tell she wasn't talking about dinner. She makes us wait for her to say "My student Jane's son has been arrested."

"No great surprise, perhaps. What's the offence?"

"Supposedly he was found in a house up the street, and the couple who live next door to it are claiming he robbed them. I don't know how someone his size would be capable of taking everything they say he took."

"Perhaps it was inevitable. You shouldn't blame yourself."

She lets her eyes and then her face down to him. "They're saying they saw him near their house the night before last. Presumably nobody who hasn't had their advantages is allowed near."

I see my father wants to think she's stopped accusing us, but he doesn't dare. "You were taking him to the park, weren't you, Jeremy?" he says.

"I said I would."

If she asks whether I did I'll tell them everything. Maybe that will stop me feeling that it's getting darker inside me than it is yet outside. But all my mother says is "I'm going to Jane's to see what I can do for her. I've no idea when I'll be back."

"I've got my parents' evening at school," my father tells me. "I'll try not to be too late. You won't mind being on your own, will you?"

"There's nothing round here to be scared of," my mother says. "You aren't a woman living by herself."

I know she means most of her students, but I feel as if she's talking about Mrs Hammond. I don't want to remember how being alone in her house filled Mrs Hammond up with fear. I pretend I don't mind being left by myself at night. I keep on trying to pretend once my parents leave.

I spend all the time I can at washing up the dinner things till the window shows me it'll soon be dark. I start watching television, but there's nothing on that can reach inside my head. Running through the channels twice makes me feel I'm trying to be like Brad, and I think how my mother would blame me but not him. I know I ought to be doing my homework, though when so many people at my school don't, sometimes I wonder why I should. My mother would make me feel guilty for wasting my advantages, that's mostly why. There's no reason for me to be scared of going in my room.

I switch on the light and the one on my desk as well before I take my books out of my bag and shut Mrs Hammond's album in it. Even when I turn the computer on I feel there isn't enough light in the room. Outside the window it looks as if the dark is spreading out of the black place where Mrs Hammond used to live. When I start thinking the blackness or something in it wants to get hold of me I pull the curtains together.

For history we have to write what it was like to live in England in the years leading up to the Second World War. I take everything I can find in my schoolbooks and type it on the screen, but it doesn't feel as if it was ever alive. Mrs Hammond would have been about my age at the beginning of the thirties, and I try to think if she told me about them. I can't remember anything she said, but my thoughts seem to start using her voice. I keep thinking I ought to look in her album.

I'm not sure I want to while I'm by myself, even if it helps me do the kind of homework my mother always says I can. I do my best to let the stuff I've copied tell me more to write, but trying makes the inside of my head feel as if it's turning black. I almost type the only thing that's in there, which is "See my pictures", even if it sounds like Mrs Hammond's voice that's left its mouth somewhere. I don't want to hear it. I jump up and pull the album out and put it on my desk.

It falls open, and a photograph tries to stand up. It's the one I found crumpled on the floor, which must be why it's moving, only it looks as if someone's trying to get hold of it without much of a hand. I squash it

between the cover and the first cardboardy page, which doesn't have strips cut out of it to hold photographs. I wish I'd shut the album instead, because I don't like the look of any of the photographs at all.

They're in the order of how old Mrs Hammond was. The baby ones are nearly black like fruit that's shrunk—all you can see are little eyes trying to peer out of the blackness. I start hoping they've all gone like that, because the bits of her as a girl that the blackness hasn't covered up look so thin I think it's taken their flesh off. But those aren't as bad as the ones where she's grown up. Maybe the blackness is some kind of mould, because the parts of her it's left white look swollen like toadstools that burst if you poke them. I get as far as a picture of her and Mr Hammond with their eyes staring out of two fat raw white blobs. I shut the album tight, which feels as if I'm not squashing only pictures. I don't want it in my room.

I don't even want it in the house, not when it's keeping Mrs Hammond's voice inside my head. "See the rest," I think she's pleading. "See all of me." I'd leave the album outside and wait till tomorrow to think what to do if I wasn't afraid it might rain. I find three plastic bags in a kitchen cupboard and put the album inside one and the others too. There's a wind, and if I leave the album behind the house my parents may hear the plastic rustling and find out what it is. I hurry out the front instead, across the road.

Half Mrs Hammond's front door is lying on its back beyond some coaly bricks. Bits of burnt wood flake off and grit under my nails when I lift the door enough to slide the album under.

Tomorrow I'll pretend to find the album on my way to school and give it to my parents to pass on to Mrs Hammond's son. I try to imagine her voice being muffled by the door when I drop it, except that's like imagining her trapped in her coffin, not able to see. The wind stirs up the patch where she lived, and the choking smell feels as if the dark is rising up to wall me in. I dash across the road into not enough light, but I'm only at the gate when I hear our phone ringing.

I have to get the key out of my pocket and push it in the lock the right way up and turn it, and all the while I'm afraid the phone will stop or won't. I shut the dark out and run to grab the phone out of its plastic nest on the wall. "Hello?" I call louder than the voice in my head.

"Are you there at last? I was starting to think you were doing a Brad. Don't tell Willa I said that. Were you asleep?"

"Not yet."

"Glad I didn't wake you, then, but time for bed all the same. I'm just in discussion with some colleagues."

I can hear the kind they're having and the other noises of the pub. "Will you be home soon?" I plead.

"Not while you're conscious, I shouldn't think. I do need to relax occasionally, you know. Just get your head on the pillow and before you know it you'll be gone. Willa and her women may have got themselves some strength, but that doesn't have to mean they've taken ours away." I don't think he meant me to hear the last part, or maybe he doesn't care. "See you in the morning, Jeremy," he says.

I ram the phone into its nest and run upstairs to the bathroom. I stay in there till I realise I'm staring at my face in the mirror. That reminds me how Mrs Hammond couldn't look in one. I'm afraid something like her face will wobble up over the edge, trying to see me instead of itself. I'd rather be in my room than think about that, and I dash across the landing.

There's too much of a mirror in my room. I keep my back to it while I undress for bed and hurry to the switch by the door. I turn the light off and on again at once. I've never seen my room so dark. 1 run over to the window and open the curtains without looking at the glass that might as well be a mirror. Either the streetlamp outside Mrs Hammond's garden isn't working—maybe somebody like Brad has broken it—or the blackness from where she lived has caught it somehow, because when I switch the light off it's as dark as it was. It's so dark I'm afraid switching the light back on won't make any difference. But it does, and I leave it on and hide in my bed.

At least I've stopped having thoughts that sound like Mrs Hammond. Maybe it's too light for her, that's if I ever really heard her. I don't mind when it starts getting dark inside my eyelids, since that means I'm falling asleep and I know it's light in the room. Then I'm asleep, and I don't like it, because I'm groping about in a place with no light till I stick my fingers in a toadstool. That feels so bad it jerks my eyes open and me awake.

I'm still in the dark, and my hand feels the same. I hope I've only dreamed I'm awake, but then I feel how I'm lying at the edge of the bed with one arm hanging nearly to the floor. I hear something dragging on the carpet, and

there's a tug at my arm. What I thought was a toadstool I'd poked my hand into are fingers holding mine.

My thoughts start talking in Mrs Hammond's voice. There's nothing in my head except them and terror, and I don't even know how much of that is hers. "Touch more of me," I think or hear. "I can't feel like this. This can't be me. It's just all this dark making me worse."

I'm desperate to get free, but I'm afraid if I tear myself loose her hand will come with me, or some of it will. I make myself roll closer to the edge and reach down with my other hand. I touch hers that's holding mine and run my fingers up her arm. "That's it," her voice says in my head. "Find my face."

I think I'd stop living if I did that. The rest is bad enough. Her hand is too big for the arm that feels thinner than its bones used to and made of spongy putty. There's just one thing I can think of to do if my mouth will work. I push my tongue between my lips to open them and oil them. "I can feel you're all right," I say, though my words don't want to leave my mouth. "You're like your favourite photo when you weren't much older than me."

"Am I really?" I think her voice is going away and then I hear it's only sunk. I stop touching her arm and inch back onto the bed and pray she'll let go of my hand before I have to pull it out of her squashy one. But I'm leaning off the edge of the bed as if I may fall instead of creeping out of reach when she says "See me, then" not in my head but in the room and not using much I'd call a voice.

I'm not sure what comes then. Maybe it isn't light even if I can see by it—maybe it's her hope. For however long it takes me to start seeing her I can't breathe. I see her arm first, then how it stretches all the way across the room to the rest of her. She's the lumpy white heap against the wall, because I can just make out a thing on top like a soft balloon with hardly any face. I don't know if she's lost her eyes or if what it's made of has swollen over them.

I feel a tug at my hand. There's a noise like a stuffed wet sack dragging along the wall as she tries to get up and come across the room to let me see her clearer. I wrench myself loose and press my back and my head against the wall above the pillow, and rub my hands together in case any of her has stuck to them. Squeezing my eyes shut doesn't feel safe enough, so I grip my hands over them. In case it helps keep her off I scream.

I'm doing all that when my parents get home. My mother must have picked my father up on the way, because I hear her car and then they both come into the house. "That's never Jeremy, is it?" my father doesn't quite shout.

"I hope you won't try to suggest it's my fault if it is."

They have a competition over who'll be upstairs first, and my father wins. "Whatever's the matter, Jeremy?" he says in his pub voice, and clicks the switch a few times. "Why is it so dark in here?"

I want to be taken out of the room into the light where Mrs Hammond will be afraid to come and see herself. "Too dark," I try to say. When hands take hold of me I scream louder till I'm sure they aren't hers. I keep mine over my eyes as my parents argue while they lead me out. I don't know when I'll dare to open my eyes again, and even if I do I know the darkest place will be inside my head. Maybe Mrs Hammond will wait in there for me to see her. Maybe I'll have to till I'm afraid to see myself, and then I'll be on my way to her place. Maybe till then I won't really know what screaming is.

2004

Direct Line

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As Sharpe strode into the passage under the railway he heard a woman talking to herself ahead. Since the last of the lights had been vandalised overnight, the tunnel was flooded with darkness. He wasn't about to be daunted by that or by her, even if she was homeless or mad. As he halved the distance to her, the train he'd just left passed overhead as though the July heat had congealed into an elongated clap of thunder, and he glimpsed her clutching at her face. "No," she cried, high-pitched as her footsteps and their echoes as she fled. An object clattered down the wall to join the rest of the litter. Sharpe was opening his mouth to ask her to retrieve it when he saw it was luminous.

An abandoned hypodermic to which it lent a poisonous green glow distracted him from immediately seeing that it was a mobile phone. Even he recognised that it was expensive, the kind of item his pupils at school boasted about. It weighed less than a tiny skull. When he brought it not too close to his ear, he was greeted by a rush of static that seemed for a moment to be trying to form words. The noise sank into the dark as the phone was extinguished, and he hurried to catch up with its owner. Wastefulness offended him as much as litter.

The tunnel opened onto the road to the school. The road was rowdy with schoolboys, some of whom nudged each other at the sight of him. Had the woman been intimidated by the mass of them? She could have taken refuge in any of dozens of grimy houses split into secretive flats or in one of the alleys strewn with refuse. He was holding up his find as if this might draw her out of hiding when behind him a boy said "Sharpy's got a mobile now. He can't say nothing about ours."

Sharpe swung around to confront the twelve-year-old's unnecessarily small face, which grew smoothly innocent. "Perhaps you saw the lady this belongs to, Lomax. She ran out of there not a minute ago."

The boy's stunted crony Latham peered up from under his brows as though out of a lair. "We thought she must of been raped."

"We looked for who done it and we seen you."

"I was attempting to return the property she dropped. I hope you would have done as much." When this provoked two identical disbelieving stares he said "You were asked to tell me where the lady went."

"Behind them houses like she couldn't wait to have a shit," Lomax said, pointing to the alley Sharpe had just passed.

"No, it was them like she had to piss," said Latham, indicating an alley beyond the exit from the pedestrian tunnel.

Sharpe hadn't time to rebuke the vulgarity, whether it was automatic or deliberate. He sidled down the nearer alley, past bulging waist-high plastic bags torn open by animals or kicked asunder by children. Halfway down he met a transverse alley overlooked by the backs of two streets. There was no sign of the woman, but another at an upper window turned her head to keep an offensively suspicious eye on him. When he called "I've lost property for someone" it neither assuaged her stare nor attracted the owner. He stowed the mobile inside his jacket as he left the alley, ignoring questions and suggestions about where he'd been and why.

Lomax and Latham were even less eager than usual to reach the school. He caught up with them at the entrance to the schoolyard packed with uproar and furtive misdeeds, those that bothered to be furtive. "Did you give it to her, sir?" Lomax enquired.

"Did she like it, sir?" said Latham.

Their untypical enthusiasm made their meaning clear, but he wasn't going to waste time on it. "I shouldn't have expected any sense from the terrible Ls," he said.

He was entering the school when the bell began to clang. He helped herd the scholars to the assembly hall and joined his colleagues on the stage, from which he fixed his stare on his class near the front of the long hot room. The general restlessness lessened as the headmaster marched to his lectern. Mr Thorn let his gaze roam until there was silence, which turned more inert as he addressed the question of self-sacrifice. Soon he was asking five hundred boys to think of items they could live without. He had just cited mobile phones when one rang.

For once it didn't belong to any of the boys, though it was set to the remains of a chorus from the Messiah with a disco beat: "Hal-lel-lu-jah, hal-lel-lu-jah, lu-jah, lu-jah, lu-jah—" As Sharpe glanced along the rank of his colleagues he realised that several were gazing at him. "Excuse me, head," he murmured, "not mine," only to demonstrate something like the opposite by retreating into the wings. He snatched out the mobile and thumbed the key that bore an icon of a vertical receiver. He was about to speak when the phone did so in a woman's voice so impatient it left politeness behind. "Got it?"

Sharpe responded in a whisper, if a loud one. "Yes" was all he said, since it seemed obvious.

"Can you bring it?"

"Where?"

"Usual place." As he concluded she had less language to her than the worst of his pupils she added "It's Sue."

His own terseness was designed to interfere as little as possible with Mr Thorn's speech. "Where again?"

"What?" Even more suspiciously she asked "Is this Janey?"

"If she's the lady who owns the phone she dropped it. Perhaps you could __"

"Wrong number. I don't know any Janey. I'm not Sue either."

Presumably she had run out of denials. A sound like a wind through a bone replaced her voice. He poked the button inscribed with a supine receiver and was putting the mobile away when it rang again. Mr Thorn faltered irritably in the middle of a word. Sharpe jabbed the first button and hissed "Yes?"

At first he heard nothing but static as the green glow of the mobile isolated him in the dimness. When it spoke, the voice was barely distinguishable from the mass of thin sound, and he had to strain to grasp the words. "Give it back."

"That'll be Jane, will it?"

"Give it back."

The shrill voice was so unsteady it seemed close to dissolving into the static. "You need to tell me where you are," he said.

"Don't."

"How else would you suggest I do as you asked?"

"Give it back."

"You may collect it this afternoon if you wish," Sharpe said and quelled the call.

He stayed offstage until Mr Thorn said "Use the day wisely" as usual. The folding seats and then their occupants produced sounds that might have accompanied the collapse of the roof. As Sharpe appended himself to the parade of teachers, the headmaster beckoned him. "Important calls, Kenneth?"

"I think the police may be interested."

Mr Thorn's bland chubby face twitched and underscored its receding hairline. "The more that can be resolved internally the better. We don't want to gain a reputation as a school that has to keep calling the police."

"It isn't any of the boys this time. I've a strong suspicion this belongs to somebody we'd want to keep away from them."

"By all means do so at your earliest convenience."

"I intend to," Sharpe said and applied some dignity to descending from the stage. He thought of entrusting the phone to Mr Thorn or the school secretary until lunchtime, but suppose either of them answered it and sent the owner into hiding? He hadn't time to explain the situation when his class was bound for the classroom. He strode in pursuit so fiercely that some of the boys in the corridor lowered their voices or even made way for him.

Too many of his pupils strewn about the classroom looked ready to be amused by him. It was clear that Lomax spoke for them all by enquiring "Did the woman you was chasing want you, sir?"

"Sit down. Sit down. Sit down now." Once a similar formula quietened them at last Sharpe said "She wants her phone. Who can tell me how to switch it off?"

No other question he had ever asked had brought a fraction of the enthusiasm. When he succeeded in hushing the uproar he gave the mobile to Latham, since the boy and his associate were on the front row. "It's off, sir," Latham said, fingering a button.

"Well done, Latham. Let's see if you can do as well with algebra."

Apparently the comment sounded like a joke. Sharpe returned the unlit mobile to his pocket and talked through the equations he'd chalked on the board after yesterday's last class so that he didn't have to turn his back.

The virtually uniform blankness that confronted him only stiffened when he asked if there was anything that anybody hadn't understood. "Heads down, then," he said wearily and watched them duck to their exercise books like cattle to sparse parched grass.

How could they fail to enjoy mathematics? It enshrined truths that had lasted and would last as long as the universe. It gave shape and stability to life, and everything depended on it. If they couldn't appreciate its beauty, how could they resist its excitement? It was the universal language and a system of belief immune to change. Rather than grow depressed by the sluggish ruminations or the pretence of them all around him, he strolled to look over the shoulder of one of the few budding algebraists. He was watching the solution to an equation appear on the page under small inky fingers—he thought life had no greater satisfaction to offer him—when an insect larger than it had any right to be came to life.

It buzzed silently as it writhed against his chest until he dragged it out to wriggle on his palm. "What have you done to this, Latham?"

"Means someone's trying to get you," Latham said over the general laughter.

"They may continue trying," Sharpe declared and shut the phone inside the teachers' desk, where it struggled on its back before growing dormant. In his hand it had felt unnaturally vigorous, desperate to move, and the possibility that it might recommence crawling about in the desk distracted him more than the other outbursts of restlessness he had to subdue. If the desk had locked he might have left the mobile there instead of taking it to the staffroom.

"That's not like you, Kenneth," the English master said with a flutter of his eyelids. "Expecting a date?"

"Most emphatically not," Sharpe said and covered the phone on the staffroom table with a teaching journal. The mobile had to accompany him to his other morning classes, however. In the last one it seemed to wriggle for an instant in his hand as though unwilling to be abandoned to the desk. He shut the lid and wished he could have nailed it down.

For once he was nearly as eager as his pupils for the lunchtime bell. He buried the mobile in an outer pocket, only to have to rest a hand on it in case any of the pickpockets tried to filch it as he hurried through the school. More boys than he suspected had permission were swaggering or sneaking out of the gates, but he hadn't time to interrogate them. Could Jane—he felt uncomfortable being on first-name terms with her—have trailed him to wait until he left the school? More than once he seemed to glimpse a tattered scrawny form pacing him more or less on all fours behind the houses on the way to the police station. It must be a dog draped in some of the trash it had scavenged.

The police station was at the far end of the street from the railway. Beyond the glass doors of the low concrete block, youths lounged against the enquiries counter while an old couple sat on straight chairs and looked nervously out of place. Two trills of the bell on the counter were required to bring a constable out of the office. "Can you wait a few minutes, sir?" she barely asked Sharpe.

"A lady dropped this."

"I'll get a lost property form," the policewoman said with visible relief, and reappeared with a clipboard. "Your name, sir?"

"Sharpe. Kenneth Sharpe, but I ought to say I think this may belong to one of our local drug dealers. I believe I was called by one of her customers earlier."

The policewoman let the clipboard fall. "Do you wish to make a formal complaint?"

"I don't think I've the evidence to do that. I couldn't identify the caller. I just thought you should be aware what kind of person may be reclaiming the phone."

"You think it's likely they'd come here for it if they're what you say."

One of the youths sniggered, and Sharpe recognised him from years ago: Latham's older and even less virtuous brother. "Not if you told them to come here," Sharpe confined himself to saying. "I thought if they rang, someone might arrange to meet them in plain clothes."

"Have you done much investigating yourself?"

"I'm a teacher," Sharpe said, meaning yes.

"You'll have checked the last number that called you, then."

"I must confess I haven't."

She tapped keys too swiftly for him to follow and raised the mobile to her face. "No last number. It might as well have been nobody."

"The boy I asked to switch it off for me must have done that." Sharpe restrained himself from glaring at Latham's brother and said "Can you really not learn anything?"

"Best if you keep it, sir. You can let us know if something significant comes up. You're at the school down the road, are you? We can always find you there if the lady gets in touch."

Did the policewoman think his find too negligible, or might she even disbelieve him? As he stalked out of the building he heard another snigger and almost swung around in case he caught her sharing the derision. She hadn't called him sir as often as she could have and, besides, he knew that many of the boys used the word as a gibe. Perhaps she had. He strode angrily back to the school, failing to overtake or identify a group of boys emitting smoke that he was almost sure wasn't tobacco, and left the mobile in the office.

The last period of the afternoon returned him to his own class for a geometry lesson. He was feeling close to conveying the beauty of a theorem when the school secretary knocked at the door. "Can you turn this off, Mr Sharpe? I haven't time to keep answering it."

"I thought it had been switched off." About to confront Latham, Sharpe realised the policewoman must have revived the mobile. "Not you, Latham," he nevertheless said and offered the task of killing the phone to the most numerate pupil. "Did you say you took some calls, Miss Dodd?"

"One. I didn't think it could be for you. They just kept saying they wanted something back."

"That will be the lady who lost it. Who can find me her number?"

All the boys began to clamour. It seemed safest to leave the job to the numerate boy, but he looked puzzled. "Says there wasn't anybody."

"Better stick to figures, Jarvis." Of course the woman had withheld her number. Sharpe collected the mobile and held it out to the secretary. "Anything amiss, Miss Dodd?"

She shook her head while the class giggled at his choice of words. She might have convinced him if she hadn't hesitated another second. As soon as the lesson petered out, having failed to recapture the communication he had thought he was establishing with more of the class than usual, he made for the office. "What exactly was the matter, Miss Dodd?"

"I just didn't like the feel of it."

"Which you're saying was?"

"Like it wanted to crawl out of my hand." With a laugh apparently intended as disparaging she added "I expect I was distracted. I nearly dropped it because I thought someone was hiding behind the railings."

She could do with an English lesson, he thought. The railings of the schoolyard were inches apart and less than an inch thick. He took the mobile to his classroom and set about marking homework. As he penned cross after dispiriting cross the green ink put him in mind of the glow that had led him to the phone in the tunnel. He couldn't help growing tense in case the mobile sprang to life, and once he seemed to glimpse a figure watching him between entirely too few railings. Miss Dodd's fancies must have impressed him more than they had any right to. When he glanced up, the street was deserted except for a momentary flurry of movement above a kerbside grid. Without doubt it was an effect of the heat, which also made him mop his forehead.

At least the street was still deserted when he left the school. Whatever his class might be up to was no longer his concern. Could the tunnel under the railway be where Jane met her customers? When he peered down it he saw nothing except litter. A low restless heap several feet long was scraping against a wall in the depths of the gloom.

More passengers than usual in his carriage on the train had mobile phones, unless he was more aware of them. The spectacle of so many people talking to nobody visible made him feel threatened with having to do so. He mustn't allow it to turn him against using the train; his car had been vandalised once at the school, and Mr Thorn's response had been so guarded that Sharpe had felt accused of bringing the place into disrepute. He did his best to ignore the voices all around him while he gazed out at the embankment strewn with litter that twitched and jerked with the passing of the train. He could almost have thought the disturbance was following him.

Most of the litter fell short of his station. The trees shading the streets were too mature for vandals to destroy but surely too slender for anyone to hide behind. He had glanced back only twice by the time he reached his neat two-bedroomed single-bedded house. Usually closing the door behind him felt like being sure of the rest of the day: a simple dinner with half a bottle of wine, the news on the radio, a browse among the comfortable old novels that occupied the spare bedroom, a book to take to bed. Now all this felt brittle with the possibility of an interruption. He planted the mobile on the kitchen table and watched it as he ate, and imagined it stirred furtively more than once before it started to writhe so vigorously it knocked against his plate. As he seized it and jabbed the appropriate button he thought of disguising his voice in case the caller wasn't the owner. Disgust with the situation provoked him to demand "Yes?" Static rushed at him, bearing but almost drowning a voice. "Give it back."

"We've already established I need to know where it should be taken."

The static rose to meet him, and he had the impression, all the more unpleasant because irrational, that the speaker was doing the same. "Give it back."

"Are you incapable of saying anything else?" All at once Sharpe's temper deserted him. "Is it the effect of your drugs?"

There was silence or rather worthlessness for so long that he knew he'd scored a point. At last a thin desiccated aspect of the static pronounced some of "Give it back."

"If you want your property I suggest you contact the police. I have."

Should he have added that? Wouldn't it make her afraid to reveal herself? Perhaps she was too brazen or too befuddled by drugs not to do so. When there was no response beyond a sluggish flurry of noises too shapeless for words, he ended the call. He felt he'd shown enough responsibility for one night, and tried to remember how Jarvis had switched the mobile off. He must have mistaken the formula, because halfway through the triumphal procession from Aida the mobile set about diminishing Handel.

Sharpe grabbed it from the low table it was sharing with Nicholas Nickelby and poked the rampant icon, then the prostrate one. This didn't earn him much of a respite. Verdi's procession was still on the march when the phone recommenced abridging Handel. He jabbed the keys again and thought of

flinging the insistent object in the dustbin. Instead he paused the compact disc while he tramped with the phone to his bedroom, the most distant room. He shoved the mobile under both his pillows and leaned on them as if it might give in to his hopes and suffocate.

Not even its ditty did. He heard it several times during the section of the opera he forced himself to appreciate. It persisted throughout the news, after which it refused to let him read so much as an uninterrupted page. Surely the battery must run down soon, but it had lost none of its vim by the time his eyes began to ache. He retrieved the mobile from its lair to bury it under a cushion in the front room and under Nickelby as well.

How often did it ring as he laboured to sleep? He couldn't tell when the tune reduced to idiocy was only in his head. He wished he hadn't let the phone into his bedroom. Once, as he started awake from almost no doze at all, he thought he felt it crawling under the pillows, unless somebody was groping in search of it or something it had left behind was coming to a kind of life. He reared up to seize the light cord, and as he uncovered the sheeted mattress he had the impression of turning over a stone. Was the patch of darkness on the sheet only the shadow of his head? Since no amount of rubbing the mark with the underside of a pillow had any visible result, he lowered his head into the dark.

He dreamed he slept more than he did. In the morning he stumbled down to glare at the phone, mockingly silent now. At least the day allowed him to put enough distance between them and, he hoped, to think how to dispose of his burden. On the train he felt trapped by ringtones, especially by the threat of hearing the one he'd grown to loathe. In the passage from the station he caught up with a trail of spicy smoke that none of his fellow commuters seemed to find worthy of remark. Was one of the boys in the street the culprit? Sharpe's eyes were smarting with his attempts at detection by the time he reached the school.

As he trudged to the assembly hall he met Mr Thorn. "No interruptions today, I trust," the headmaster murmured.

Sharpe thought this worse than unfair, not least because several boys had overheard, but restrained himself to saying "I hope so too."

He was able to continue until early in his first lesson. He thought he'd snagged the imagination of some of the class with the concept of infinity until a phone burst into the theme from a television horror series. "I thought

I'd switched it off," Lomax said, less an apology than a complaint that Sharpe couldn't help feeling was aimed at him, especially when the boy added with a fraction of a grin "It's for you, sir."

"Bring it to me."

Once the boy had finished sauntering up to him Sharpe managed to turn the phone off before shutting it in his desk. "Aren't you going to answer it, sir?" Lomax said.

"You may collect it from the office after school. Heads down to your work now. Silence. Heads down."

Sharpe's triumph was rather undermined by Miss Dodd, who looked wary of accepting a mobile from him when he detoured to the office on the way to his next class. He would have welcomed a mid-morning break and a longer one at lunchtime, but he was in charge of the yard. As he watched for misbehaviour and swooped to deal with miscreants, he kept being confused by the heat and his lack of sleep—kept glimpsing movements too large for a spider but otherwise as thin beyond the railings. Of course nothing was there whenever he gave in to the temptation to check.

Before lunchtime was over he knew he was the butt of a joke. In less than an hour three boys with mobiles told him they had a call for him. Their expressions were sullen or bewildered or both, which he put down to slyness if not to drugs. The first two exhausted his patience, and he sent the third to explain himself to the headmaster. Sharpe suspected that the hellish Ls were the instigators of the prank even before Latham's mobile interrupted the elucidation of a theorem in the final lesson. "It was off," Latham objected.

"Exactly like your friend's, no doubt. Do tell us all who's calling."

"Dunno," said Latham, having brought the rudimentary tune to an end. "It's for you, though."

"Unluckily for you I've heard that more than once too often. I'll have the truth this time."

"It is," the boy protested with an aggrieved air. "Maybe it's your dealer. My brother said—"

"All this tomfoolery was his idea, was it? I rather think if anybody's dealer is calling it will be yours. Let me speak to them at once."

"It's not. They never call me. I've not got none."

"Which means you have." With an odd sense of sleepwalking Sharpe darted to wrench the phone from the boy's grasp, only to be met by silence as flat as the earpiece. "Show me the number that rang," he ordered.

Latham dealt a key a resentful poke and displayed a blank screen. "See, I didn't know."

"Go and convince the headmaster of that if you can. The rest of you, heads down."

Should he have taken the boy to Mr Thorn? The class would have degenerated into chaos in his absence. Without order you had nothing, a point that Latham proved by not returning. Presumably he'd stolen home, unless he was meeting his dealer. The thought that Sharpe could be responsible for this lodged like hot ash behind his eyes. He was returning Lomax's phone at the end of the lesson when a thirteen-year-old brought the message that Mr Thorn wanted Mr Sharpe in his office.

"Yes, head."

"I've just had to deal with one of your boys." As if the name might be written there, the headmaster frowned at the papers arranged on his desk before saying "Latham."

"He did come to see you, then. We haven't lost all control."

"That may seem to be the question." Mr Thorn lifted his gaze, which appeared to hope to see more than it did. "He says you accused him of buying drugs in class. I take it you've some proof."

"I didn't quite say that to him, but I certainly wouldn't discount the possibility."

"Best kept to yourself unless there's evidence, Kenneth. And then he says you assaulted him."

"Assaulted, good heavens, I think not." Sharpe had a disconcerting sense of having dreamed the incident or of dreaming now. "I took a phone away from him," he said. "Phones in class are still against the rules, I believe."

"By force."

"No more than necessary. Really none at all."

"Would his classmates agree with you, do you think?" As Sharpe's sense of injustice stopped up his words, Mr Thorn said "I'm hopeful that I've persuaded him to accept your apology on Monday, but it will depend on what his parents choose to do, his guardian, rather. Try and forget about it over the weekend and relax. If you'll forgive my saying so, you seem a little drugged yourself."

He maintained a guardedly sympathetic expression until Sharpe turned away in disgust. By the time Sharpe reached the door Mr Thorn was intent on his paperwork. "Head down," Sharpe muttered, no longer caring if he was heard.

He was being sent home as a wrongdoer, was he? Let the school and the homework he had still to mark survive without him for a few days, then. He ignored all the boys and their activities, however villainous, as he made for the station. If intervening earned him more blame than the culprits, it wasn't worth the risk.

A dog was grubbing among the rubbish in the middle of the passage beneath the railway. He heard its surreptitious feeble movements and saw the dull glint of its eyes, if those weren't hypodermics it was shifting. He didn't need to venture in to confirm how unpleasantly skinny it was.

The train felt like a refuge from it until he remembered he would be surrounded by phones. When he saw a man in the next carriage take a call and look around in quest of someone, Sharpe couldn't help crouching out of view, however irrational that was. Surely the man wasn't shouting after him as Sharpe hurried away from the train.

As soon as he was home he dashed into the front room to discover what the choked sound was. The battery must be low; the mobile wasn't ringing so much as rattling. Even when he leaned on the cushion the ragged noise refused to be suffocated. When the cushion began to twitch as if the phone was struggling to reach him, he left the room and slammed the door.

He couldn't eat much. He couldn't concentrate on music or reading or even the news. It seemed impossible that he could hear the half-dead sound through both the cushion and the door, but wherever he was in the house, he did. Was lack of sleep inflaming his senses? When the words of a Victorian chapter grew as restless on the page as he heard the mobile was, he retreated to bed.

At last his ears gave up straining to listen for activity in the house. In the early hours he awoke and hastened downstairs to return the mobile where he'd found it. He used its glow to search the passage for the owner. It wasn't she, however, who wobbled upright in the gloom, raising a face so withered it was featureless except possibly for eyes and parting tattered greenish lips to mouth "Give it back." As some of a hand groped to catch hold of him he managed actually to waken. He wanted to think he was still asleep, because he heard a whisper somewhere near him.

He had to force himself to extend a hand into the dark. Once the light was on he identified the noise as the death rattle of the mobile. This wasn't reassuring; it sounded far too like a sluggish almost formless repetition of the phrase from his dream. As he struggled to believe he was imagining the similarity, he heard a feeble thumping downstairs—a knocking on a door.

He kicked away the bedclothes and stumbled onto the landing. The sound was in the front room. Something was bumping weakly but persistently against the far side of the door. He ran downstairs and flung the door wide, sweeping the object backwards. At once it began to crawl towards him in the midst of a dim flickering greenish stain that was the only illumination in the room.

He'd had enough. The police could deal with its antics however they liked. He dashed upstairs to drag yesterday's clothes on. Having picked up the mobile between finger and thumb, he dropped it in an outer pocket of his jacket and left the house. He mustn't be fully awake. He was making for the local police station before he remembered it had been closed last year.

The one by the school was the closest, half an hour's walk away. As he tramped in that direction, the houses shrank around their loudness. Beyond some of the open windows sleepless televisions flared, while other rooms were packed with discoloured silhouettes jigging to pile-driver music. Once a car screeched past him, full of boys who looked too young to be out so late and drawing behind it the smoke of a fat shared cigarette. He was glad not to recognise any of the boys, but shouldn't the police be dealing with them? If the absence of the law meant the police station was shut for the night he would leave the mobile outside.

The buildings closest to the railway were derelict but not untenanted. He had the impression that the district was as teeming with life in the heat as a corpse. The intermittent light of a single streetlamp apparently too tall to

smash plucked at the rooms beyond the broken windows and brought shapes that might be alive lurching forward, dodging back. It kept spilling into the tunnel and retreating from the dark. Whatever lay in there was almost asleep if not worse; he couldn't judge whether the scrawny form was twitching with the instability of the dimness or with a trace of life. Sharpe didn't know of any other route to the police station from this side of the track. He ran through the passage, almost colliding with the opposite wall in his eagerness to avoid the denizen. He was within inches of the exit when a whisper, or at least the fragments of one, halted him. "Give it back."

Had he really heard it? The mobile in his pocket hadn't rung or stirred. As he faltered at the end of the tunnel he heard footsteps wandering towards him. A woman whom he seemed to recognise was drifting from side to side of the street. He didn't move until he was certain, by which time she was mere yards away. "I believe this belongs to you," he said.

Her eyes glimmered dully with the light across the railway as she turned to look, first at him and then at the mobile. "I've got one," she mumbled.

"You wanted this. You've asked for it often enough."

"I've never."

"Then who's been calling," Sharpe demanded, "if not you?"

An uneasy glint began to surface in her drugged eyes. "She used to. She told me she was shooting up when she was meant to be at school."

"If it's your daughter you're talking about I rather think that's your responsibility." Sharpe was provoked into raising his voice over the approaching screech of wheels. "You can't expect us to keep children at school without the support of their parents."

"You're a teacher, are you? Maybe you're the kind that made her stay away." Just as accusingly the woman said "She called me when she OD'd. She didn't know where she was and I couldn't find her in time."

Sharpe was about to retort to all this when the woman's gaze strayed past him. Her eyes widened and her face sank inwards from the mouth as she staggered backwards. She grew aware of the car full of boys, and her expression changed. Sharpe didn't know whether she tripped on the kerb or deliberately stepped in front of the vehicle. She sprawled in the roadway in time for the front wheels to crush her legs and her head. Her body jerked as the rear wheels caught her, and then she was utterly still.

As the car put on speed Sharpe dashed into the road, then turned away hastily, clapping a hand over his mouth. When he was able to speak without choking he pulled out the mobile and dialled 999. "Woman run over," he gabbled. "Boys on drugs in a car." He gave the location and ended the call and fled into the tunnel.

He was suffering more guilt than he understood. He only knew he didn't want to be linked with the woman's death. The glow from the mobile tinged the walls green and made them quiver nervously as he ran towards the light at the far end. When he glimpsed movement at the foot of the wall midway through the passage, he was able to imagine it was caused by the shaky glimmer. Then the shape produced thin limbs like an awakening spider and floundered towards him. He didn't know whether it seized his ankles with fingernails or needles or the tips of bones. It sounded barely able to produce a whisper that rustled like litter. "Yours now," it said.

Illustration by Oliver James Crowther.

Laid Down

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Also published in: *Just Behind You*

Something wakes him in the dark. He knows not to move or even to open his mouth. If he makes a sound, someone may realise he's there. They may come down to find him, and anyone who does won't be his friend, unlike the dark. He stays on his back and keeps his arms crossed on his chest so that his elbows don't bump against the sides of the box, and tries to identify what roused him.

Traffic passes in the distance, muffled footsteps tramp overhead and climb to an upper room. He's sure they are retreating from the thought of him. Realising that makes him hungrier, and his mouth gapes until he remembers to keep it shut. He may have closed it only just in time; he feels a tickling on his cheek, and a plump object with quite a few legs scuttles across his lips. He's used to the creatures down here; he even wonders how this one would have tasted. So long as he doesn't utter a sound, there's surely no harm in opening his mouth like a trap, and he does.

He wishes he could see if anything worth feeding on has strayed near him. He can hear larger creatures scrabbling inside the cellar walls, but they never venture into his lair. Whenever the door at the top of the stairs is shut the darkness to complete; he might as well be buried in earth. Perhaps a dream lit up too bright in his head and made him wonder where he was—and then he recalls exactly what jarred him awake: the slam of a car door. Just as he grasps this, he hears footsteps approaching the house.

He flattens himself and presses his elbows like wings against his sides and digs his fingertips between his ribs as if all this may help conceal him. When the bell shrills upstairs he can't help jerking so violently that the container shifts and creaks. Surely nobody will answer the bell. It has clamoured three times before defiant footsteps march downstairs. The front door squeals open and a woman says "I was starting to think you weren't in."

"I was getting ready to go out," his mother tells her.

"You couldn't hear me, you mean." When this brings no audible response the intruder says "Can I come in for a few minutes anyway?"

"What for?"

"I haven't met your son yet."

"You wouldn't want to."

"I'm certain I would. He'll be here, won't he?"

His mother's voice takes on the tone that means she knows more than she says. "I'm having some time off from him."

"Could you tell me where he is?"

"He's being looked after, don't you worry. He's not far."

His lips draw back to grimace at the dark before the meddler says "May I come in, then?"

"Why do you need to do that now?"

"I'd appreciate a little chat. I'd like to clear up a few things."

There's a silence that makes the dark feel as breathless as he is. Then his mother says "You won't be hearing anything you haven't heard about already," and leads the invader into the house.

She has raised her voice just enough to warn him she means him. He jams his legs together like a winged insect trying to revert to a larva while he hears too many footsteps overhead. They hurry to the kitchen, and the door slams loud enough to suggest it will block off any sounds he makes. Certainly the women's voices are inaudible, but this simply gives time the consistency of tar. He has barely started to relax when the voices emerge into the hall. "Big house for just the two of you," the trespasser remarks, and then her footsteps halt. "What's down here?"

"Nothing worth your time," his mother says.

"It must be something," says the woman, and the door inches open.

As light crawls down the steps he tenses himself, opening his mouth. Her hand gropes along the wall for the light switch. She will have to descend two steps to reach it. Her silhouette moves forward, and behind it his mother's face turns grimmer than ever, and she lifts her hands to push. She drops them as the woman turns. "It's just a cellar," she says as if she has noticed nothing.

The front door shuts at least twice as hard as the car. Once the vehicle is out of hearing his mother switches on the cellar light and clatters down the steps. "How much more trouble are you going to make for me? She says she's coming back."

He can't see his mother for the glare of the naked bulb. Her voice is at least as harsh, and squeezing his eyes shut doesn't fend it off. "She won't be happy till she's met Dracula," she cries. "I nearly called you that to her."

It isn't his name, and he thinks his mother realises when she declares "I shouldn't call you it at all, should I? It isn't fair to Dracula. Even he wouldn't bite his mother when she was trying to feed him."

He doesn't know if it's the light or her stare he can feel on his face. He cowers away from both until her footfalls leave him. They have departed from the hall by the time his body dares to slacken. It stiffens again as she tramps out of the kitchen so furiously that he knows she's thinking of him. He's too afraid to shut his eyes as she stalks towards him. There's nowhere he can take refuge as she swings an object at him. "If you won't have me," she cries, "you'll have this."

It bruises his lips before he understands that he's meant to open his mouth. He sucks on the nipple, which doesn't writhe away from him as she did. When the bottle is empty she wheels his pram up and down the cellar until the dark takes him.

Breaking Up

"I'd already written one macabre tale about a mobile phone, and then it occurred to me that there could be another. I suspect all this is my mental preparation for owning one of the things."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to the story in *The Mammoth Book Of Best New Horror 16*

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As Kerry glanced through the display window at the street that was bony with frozen snow, a mobile rang. "Will that be him?" Harvey said.

At first she wasn't certain it was hers—more than one of the thousands of phones they sold might play that disco tune—and then she realised the sound was muffled by her handbag on the counter. It stayed a little indistinct when she slipped the phone out of the bag. She read the displayed number and terminated the call. "Not him," Harvey said as if she needed to be told.

"Just a customer," she almost said, remembering how Russell had waited for her to be free so that he could ask whether she thought he was too old for a mobile. "Just someone I used to know," she said.

"Never a stalker, is it? Would you like me to stick with you till Jason picks you up?"

"I'm sure he would have rung if he wasn't nearly here."

"I'd be happy to, all the same. Then if he doesn't show up I could run you wherever you like."

She suspected the manager had somewhere that he liked in mind. His hair was dyed a shade too black, and a sunbed and a gym also kept up his appearance, but his jowls were starting to bag his age. "I thought you had someone to go home to," she said.

"Nowt wrong with being friendly as well, is there?"

"I normally am, I think." His voice had taken on some of the edge he used for second warnings to staff, and she didn't want to be alone with that either. She gave her scarf another turn around her throat and tugged her gloves on before picking up her bag. "You lock up," she said. "I'll be fine."

The first thing she saw on stepping outside was her breath. The cold set about making a mask of her face at once. Along both sides of the deserted street the shop windows were dusty with frost, glass cases in an abandoned museum. The pale mounds with which the glittering pavements were heaped seemed to glow from within. A wind from somewhere even colder sent a shiver through her, which lent Harvey an excuse to look concerned as he withdrew the key from the door. "Really, I could—"

"Really, don't." She was about to put some distance between them when her mobile intervened. As soon as she extracted it she was able to say "This is him."

She keyed the phone but didn't speak until Harvey made for the car park, skidding as he reached the alley between the shops and righting himself with a penguinish flap of his arms. She heard his walled-in curse at a second tumble as she said "Where are you?"

"I'm bloody—" Jason paused to reclaim some of his temper. "I was on my way," he complained.

"Aren't you still?"

"Would I be talking to you if I was? You know what I think of these clowns that talk on their phones while they're driving."

"Not the ones that sell them, I hope."

"There ought to be a law that says you have to tell your customers how to use them. You know that's what I think. Save it, all right? I don't need an argument just now."

She could miss Russell's politeness after all. "You still haven't told me where you are."

"Some bloody place in the middle of nowhere. I've come off the road."

"Are you lost, do you mean?"

"Off the side. In a bloody snowdrift and a ditch. I'm waiting for a tow."

"You sound as if you're blaming me."

"I wouldn't have been going so fast if you didn't get in a panic whenever I'm a minute late."

"Hold on, I don't panic. I haven't been panicking now."

"A huff, then. You make me feel I've let you down and it's a major insult even if you don't say anything."

"Well, please don't feel obliged to meet me tonight."

"You're doing it now. I don't know if I can," Jason added less apologetically than she thought the conversation warranted. "I'll let you know what's happening."

"Don't put yourself to any extra trouble. I'm going home."

"I'll call you there, then."

She didn't quite advise him not to bother. She broke the connection and was stowing the phone when it stirred, a vibration muffled by her glove. As the disco melody began to tick she blinked at the digits through the whitish glow with which a streetlamp coated the display. It was Russell's number.

For an instant she was tempted to agree to dinner at a restaurant or a chat over drinks, except that he would end up pleading gently for more, every plea primed with the expectation of refusal. She might have given him the option of leaving a message, but she wanted to deal more decisively with him than she had with Jason. "Kerry," she said, turning along the path between the huddled mounds.

"Russell."

He sounded uncertain, presumably of her response. "I can see that," she told him.

"Can you?"

She took his surprise as a joke not much less feeble than he was making his voice. "On the call display," she explained nonetheless.

"You're up on these things, not like us oldsters. That's why I came to you."

"Haven't you charged your battery?" she said or, if she was honest, hoped. "You're starting to break up."

"Oh, don't say that." His voice surged, hissing and fragmenting in her ear, then subsided. "What would do that? Would the cold?"

"This much might. Why were you calling, Russell? I'm outside and I don't want mine to die on me."

"Mustn't." He might have been talking to himself until he said "I think it's even colder up here."

Kerry's gaze was drawn beyond the shops to the darker streets that climbed increasingly steeply to the glimmering ridge a thousand feet above the town. "Where's that?" she felt required to ask.

"Home."

She had no more idea where he lived than she had let him have about her; she'd found him a little too eager for that information. "Then I should do something about it," she said.

"Oh, will you? I knew you'd still be kind. Anything you feel you can. Just come and see me if you like."

"I'm sorry, Russell, but it's over. You must know that." Kerry hadn't finished when she heard a rattle and a sprinkling of static that put her in mind of a shower of ice. "Are you still there?" she said and, convinced of the opposite, shut the mobile in her handbag.

She'd reached the end of the shops without encountering a solitary person. She might as well have called in sick like several of her colleagues; the shop had hardly seen a customer all week, and none in the last three hours despite staying open late. Kerry heard the distant clatter of a garage door, and somewhere else uphill a woman was shouting to a child or a dog. Whatever the name was, it seemed to shatter on the sharpness of the air. The low moan that had occupied the pauses in Russell's speech must have been the note of Harvey's car as it laboured up into the dark.

Since the pavements of the first road homewards had been turned into slides by children or less wilfully by adults, she kept to the middle of the road. The light of the floppy-capped streetlamps fell short of her path, and it was only by treading gingerly on it that she established which of the blackness was ice. All the windows of the cars parked on both sides of the slope were either encased in frost or spread with the local newspaper, every visible page of which mentioned someone's death. The windows of the staggered houses were hermetically curtained even if dark, and Kerry felt as though the entire town apart from her was hiding from the weather. She'd tramped as far as the lowest crossroad when her phone began to clamour.

Was it wearing out, or had it caught a chill? Once she managed to fumble it out of her bag she was unable to read the faltering digits in the greenish window. She halted on the intersection, pinning down the hour hand of her

shadow and a less distinct minute one while she located the key with a clumsy finger. "On the way?" she said.

"I think you are."

Before he spoke she knew he wasn't Jason, from a rush of static like an effort to breathe. "Russell, can you please stop. I'm expecting a call."

"Anyone but me." For as long as it took him to say this he seemed hardly even to be talking to himself. "I wasn't asking what you think," he said.

To begin with he always had; it had been much of his appeal. "Don't you care about that now?" she was disappointed enough to retort.

"Didn't mean that. Don't confuse me," he protested so harshly that his voice grew almost shapeless. "I meant all I want is for us to see each other."

"I told you once, Russell. I'm sorry if it was rude of me not to answer all your messages, but you did leave a lot after I kept telling you I couldn't meet you. And now I've told you it's over."

"Don't say that." His voice sounded close to disintegrating altogether. "Once more is all I ask. You can see me at least."

"Find someone else, Russell. I'm sure you will. You deserve someone more —"

"More my own age?" he said, not so much interrupting as filling the pause. "There's nobody. I only know your number."

Perhaps he'd stored none except hers. Empty roads loomed on both sides of her vision, and she was aware of another at her back. She was making for the street ahead and trying to find words that would be as civil as final when he spoke. "If it's something I said, please say. Just remember I've never met anyone like you."

He'd ended up repeating that too often and too intensely, along with exhorting her not to waste herself on her job or on such of his friends as he'd met, but his insistence on introducing himself as her uncle had been worst of all. It had started as a joke, then turned into a plea for her not just to contradict him but to reassure him that everyone knew he was teasing. Although striving to hearten him exhausted her, she made a last effort. "You will," she said. "You'll meet someone better, you'll see. Now I'm—"

"Never." Before she could tell him not to be silly he said "No time."

"Look, Russell, is something really wrong? Because if there is you should call—"

"I just need you. You're coming. I can hear."

Kerry closed her fingers around the mobile and strained her ears until they ached with more than the temperature. The phone muttered in her fist—she even seemed to feel it wriggling feebly—but she couldn't hear him in any of the houses. He must be pretending to locate her, unless he was deluding himself. When the crushed voice stopped trying to slip through her fingers she returned the mobile to her bag. She quickened her pace uphill, and a whitish figure peered around a hulking gatepost at her. The token face had fallen askew on its way to leaving the head.

At least half a dozen other snowmen were lying in wait as she toiled up the road. She was in danger of feeling surrounded by them and very little else, as if the townsfolk had been replaced with frozen snow. Of course she was simply nervous that the glazed silence might be interrupted by the shrilling of her phone, but the knowledge didn't help. At least there was a pub across the intersection at the top of the slope she was conquering. Even if she didn't go in, its presence would be company for her. The drinkers beyond the lit windows must be keeping their voices down; perhaps just a few would have ventured out of their houses on a night like this. She was sure that she was hearing muted conversation until she stepped onto the level crossroad and saw that ice had transformed the windows into marble slabs. Their light was borrowed from the nearest streetlamp.

Now that she was denied the chance she couldn't avoid realising she would have liked to be among people if she received another call. She could only make for home as fast as was safe. The rest of the route was yet steeper, and she crossed to the pavement, which consisted of giant steps with a railing to help her climb.

Despite her glove, the rail felt like a handful of ice. To her right, lumps of snow had been gouged out of the crests of the hedges for snowballs or by someone's desperate clutch. Beyond the hedges on both sides of the road, pale figures no more shapely than a child's first drawing appeared to mark her progress. She might almost have fancied they were watching her, even those that had least with which to do so. When a phone jangled, she was near to imagining that it related to a dim hunched shape with the sloughed remains of a face. The sound was in the house belonging to the snowman.

She hauled herself past it in a rage at her nerves. It fell silent, and her phone rang.

She snatched it out so furiously that she was barely able to keep hold of it. A few indecipherable scraps of digits like traces of a fossil glimpsed through moss were visible in the window. She poked the key and clapped the mobile to her face. "Who's there?"

"Don't go too fast. Don't hurt yourself."

"I'm not going to." This wasn't enough of a retort or a challenge. "You can't see me," she said in case that made Russell betray he could.

"I don't need to. We've got a rapport, you and I." If that seemed to bring his voice closer, she wasn't about to let it persuade her of anything; he must be holding the mouthpiece against his lips to blur his words so much. Before she could deny his claim he said "We aren't as different as some people like to think."

By people, did he mean her? She shouldn't care; if she kept him talking, perhaps she could locate him. She hung her bag on her left arm and gripped the railing as she forged uphill. "Why are you saying that?" she had to ask.

"We both stayed where our roots are, didn't we? We never sought our future elsewhere."

"I stayed for my parents."

"So did I."

Could they still be alive? Kerry doubted it, given how much older than she'd taken him to be he'd finally owned up to being. "I thought you were going to write some more books about the countryside," she said.

"That was the plan."

"Why, have you given up?"

"I wouldn't be talking to you if I had."

This sounded more like a plea than she welcomed. "You don't need me, Russell. You were writing long before we met."

A whisper of restlessness made her think she'd scored a point until he said "Why did you start going out with me?"

His voice was disintegrating so much that she could hardly detect the tone, never mind the relevance. "Because you asked me," she said and didn't add

"Because you kept asking."

"You took pity on me, you mean. Couldn't you again?"

"No, Russell, because you had class. Can't you have some now?"

"There isn't much to me any more."

"You know that isn't true. You write books people want to read. I've seen them all over the place."

"If we're finished, so are they."

Was he saying anything that came into his head? As she clambered up the next step, through a tree's sparkling shadow that felt like the threat of being buried under an avalanche, she said "I don't believe you mean that. You must have got over me by now. It's been months."

"Is that all? I can't tell."

Was this another bid for sympathy? Presumably it was the transmission rather than his voice that sounded near to shivering to pieces, but it dismayed her. "Russell, if you're truly feeling so bad you ought to call—"

At once the phone was dead as ice. If he'd given up pestering her, she would let that be enough. She fumbled the mobile into her bag and flexed her stiff fingers before entrusting the bag to them. A dozen clutches at the rail, and twice as many paces as there were slippery steps, brought her to her road.

It stretched left, iced with light under three streetlamps partly masked with snow. The scene might have been embedded in the amber of the night sky. Perhaps it was the silence that rendered it unreal as a Christmas card. The house where she lived was part of the emptiness, since the couple on the ground floor had gone abroad for the winter. She would be happy just to switch on the fires and draw the curtains and have nothing else that she absolutely had to do, she vowed, and was heading left when her mobile came to life.

It could have been Jason, but when she succeeded in wielding the phone her voice felt cold and heavy as the spiked caps of the roofs. "Yes," she said.

"Not far now."

Russell's voice made her feel as if his lips were trying to keep their shape against her ear. "So tell me where," she said.

"Up here."

Suppose he was unable to be any more specific and nervous of admitting it? "Just talk as you walk. I'll hear you," she gathered he was saying despite shedding several consonants.

She couldn't leave the situation unresolved. If he needed help, she ought to find out where to send it. She turned away from her house and grasped the uphill railing. "Just talk," he repeated, though the first word almost dissolved into a hiss.

This street was even steeper. She had to keep hold of the rail, though her gloved hand ached with its iciness. At the end of every pace the handbag on her wrist blundered like a blind but affectionate creature against her hip. Beyond their plots of white the houses appeared to be holding themselves still for fear of inundation by the burdens on their roofs. A wind like the essence of the frozen dark groped at her face as though searching for the bones. She licked her stiff lips to release her voice. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Can't you think of anything?"

His voice must be shivering with static, not with panic. "The weather," she said less than wholly as a joke.

"About us. Times we had together." The silence that ensued might have signified exhaustion or a wordless plea until he said "When we went dancing. I did enjoy myself, you know."

It had been the beginning of their end. Once he'd finished shouting above the disco uproar that he was her uncle, he'd set about dancing with a violence that seemed designed to compete with everyone else in the room. She could almost see the thin figure jigging and jerking as if he'd borrowed all the artificial vigour of the strobe light, his sleeves and trousers flapping like flags in a gale. When he'd panted to a standstill he had subsided into a chair and watched her dance, his eyes flickering with resignation that might have concealed a plea. Now she could have hoped he would ask anything other than "Didn't you?"

"I'm remembering. I don't do everything aloud."

"Don't you want to talk about it?"

"I thought it didn't matter what I talk about as long as I keep talking."

"It doesn't," he might have finished saying if his voice hadn't collapsed into a flood of static.

In a moment the phone was lifeless. A wind drifted down from the white ridge that was gnawing the black sky. The gust lingered behind a hedge to disturb a newspaper or a bank of loose snow—something white that whispered, at any rate. As the wind fastened on her, Kerry shivered and nearly dropped the mobile, which had twitched in her hand. That was a preamble to playing the tune she might have heard at the disco with Russell. "I'm here," she told the blank phone.

"I know. You're outside."

The house beyond the gate to her right seemed to advance from the rank, although it was no taller or thinner than any of its neighbours. A few sets of footprints smudged by last week's brief false thaw led to a front door unconcerned with any colour. The house was beetle-browed with icicles, and as far as she could see, it was unlit. "Well, are you going to let me in?" she said.

"Sorry." He sounded worse than that. "If you could find your own way," he said, dropping several consonants.

Kerry fumbled to thumb the key and then to snap her bag shut on the mobile. As she ventured up the path she felt as if the ill-defined prints were directing her course. If he didn't answer the doorbell she would certainly phone for help. She planted one foot on the doorstep bloated with snow and poked the bellpush in the middle of the door. It rattled more than rang, and at once the door swung inwards.

Light fanned along the hall in time to catch the white mass that swelled into her face. Could the house be colder than the street? The enervated glow through the puffy branches of a tree revealed half of the hall, the lower reaches of a staircase, two open doorways with a light switch between them. On her way to the switch a shiver overwhelmed her. She thought this and her glove were hindering her fingers until she saw that the switch wouldn't budge because it was encased in ice.

She was distracted by the notion that the house was somehow less defined than it ought to be. She peered into the rooms on either side of the switch and saw why. The first would be a sitting-room, the second for dining, but the furniture was close to unidentifiable. Though the windows were shut

now, they had been open to the blizzard; the rooms and their contents were deep in snow. As she gazed at the dim pallid heaps, which barely referred to the shapes of a chair and a table and sideboard, Russell said "Up here."

She mustn't have switched off her mobile. His muffled voice was more fragmented than ever, and quite devoid of consonants. She wanted to finish whatever needed to be done, and so she hurried upstairs almost fast enough to outdistance a shiver, gripping the banister that felt cold and slippery enough for metal. "Where?" she called.

She gained the upper floor without hearing any answer. All the doors off the landing were open. While the bathroom appeared to be clear of snow, icicles glimmered beneath the taps. Next was a room so cold that its darkness put her in mind of black ice. Around the door she caught sight of the foot of a bed. She was hoping that he didn't plan to entice her in that direction when his crumbling voice said "Not there, here."

That could only apply to one room. As she stepped over the threshold she saw the town draped in pallor under a sky of brass flawed with stars. Russell's desk must overlook the view, but the desk was buried in a snowdrift. All the same, a form was slumped or crouched in the snowbound chair in front of it. Kerry hurried forward, angry as much as dismayed. "Russell, what have you—"

She was falling towards the chair. She regained her footing barely in time not to clutch at the chair and swing it around or worse. Whatever she'd slipped on, it wasn't ice. She blinked at the floor and tried not to believe what she was seeing. It was scattered with paper—with pages. The empty objects scattered among them were bindings, and she recognised the covers. He'd torn up all his books.

Had he done it for her to find? She wasn't going to feel guilty, but her eyes grew wet and unfocused as she leaned over the chair. "Russell, what did you think—"

She almost planted an unwary hand on the object in the chair for support as she began to make it out. She could only assume he'd ensured for some reason that he couldn't sit at his desk. He'd built his version of a snowman, which was near to collapsing. The lump on top contained more holes than a head should, while the body had thawed and refrozen into such contortions it reminded her of a dead spider. The items like pale glistening sticks that appeared to be exposed here and there must be ice. She started to blink

before deciding that she'd seen enough. She turned away hastily and picked her way over the waste of paper.

There was only the bedroom now. She was tempted to walk past and out of the house, but she was too anxious for him. She would have worried about anybody in the state of which she'd seen so much evidence. She pushed the door wide and strode into the room. "Russell, I've had—"

She didn't even manage to utter all of that. For a moment—far too brief—she thought he'd wrapped a heavy quilt around him as he sat propped up against the pillows on the bed under the open window. It was snow, which filled his open mouth. His eyes were doughy wads. He looked no thinner than when she'd last seen him—and then she understood that he owed much of his substance to snow. The little she could distinguish of him was naked, and was that a withered icicle protruding from his fist between his legs? She was trying desperately to grasp how recently he must have lost the power of speech when she heard him. "Not that," he said.

Though each word was in shreds, the voice wasn't on her mobile. She didn't know where it was, and so she almost couldn't move. A shudder helped release her, and she staggered out of the frozen room. "Don't go," Russell said.

His voice was emerging from one of the rooms, and not only his voice. She was nearly at the stairs when whatever was behind her touched the back of her neck. Its grasp was so icy that although it almost instantly disintegrated, the feeling of it lingered like a brand. She would have fallen headlong if she hadn't seized the banister. She fled downstairs and along the unlit hall, and heard a whisper at her back that might have been an attempt to speak or the best her pursuer could do in the way of footsteps. She groped at the latch and dragged the door open and slammed it behind her so hard that it dislodged snow from the roof. She skidded along the path and slithered downhill, clinging to the rail, as fast as carelessness would take her. She wasn't out of sight of Russell's house when her mobile rang.

She had to force herself to halt and dig in her handbag, though the sound of any of her friends would be reassuring. She couldn't identify the unfinished digits that appeared to be struggling into view. "Jason," she almost hoped aloud, but the dogged incomplete voice wasn't his. "You tried," it said. "My turn."

2005

The Winner

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Until Jessop drove onto the waterfront he thought most of the wind was racing the moonlit clouds. As the Mini left behind the last of the deserted office buildings he saw ships toppling like city blocks seized by an earthquake. Cars were veering away from the entrance to the ferry terminal. Several minutes of clinging grimly to the wheel as the air kept throwing its weight at the car took him to the gates. A Toyota stuffed with wailing children wherever there was space among the luggage met him at the top of the ramp. "Dublin's cancelled," the driver told him in an Ulster accent he had to strain to understand. "Come back in three hours, they're saying."

"I never had my supper," one of her sons complained, and his sister protested "We could have stayed at Uncle's." Jessop retorted inwardly that he could have delayed his journey by a day, but he'd driven too far south to turn back now. He could have flown from London that morning and beaten the weather if he hadn't preferred to be frugal. He sent his windblown thanks after the Toyota and set about looking for a refuge on the dock road. There were pubs in abundance, but no room to park outside them and no sign of any other parking area. He was searching for a hotel where he could linger over a snack, and realising that all the hotels were back beyond the terminal entrance, when he belatedly noticed a pub.

It was at the far end of the street he'd just passed. Enough horns for a brass band accompanied the U-turn he made. He swung into the cramped gap between two terraces of meagre houses that opened directly onto the pavement. Two more uninterrupted lines of dwellings so scrawny that their windows were as narrow as their doors faced each other across two ranks of parked cars, several of which were for sale. Jessop parked outside the Seafarer, under the single unbroken street lamp, and retrieved his briefcase from the back seat before locking the car.

The far end of the street showed him windowless vessels staggering about at anchor. A gust blundered away from the pub, carrying a mutter of voices.

The window of the pub was opaque except for posters plastered against the inside: THEME NIGHT'S, SINGA-LONG'S, QUIZ NIGHT'S. He would rather not be involved in any of those, but perhaps he could find himself a secluded corner in which to work. The lamp and the moon fought over producing shadows of his hand as he pushed open the thick shabby door.

The low wide dim room appeared to be entangled in nets. Certainly the upper air was full of them and smoke. Those under the ceiling trapped rather too much of the yellowish light, while those in the corners resembled overgrown cobwebs. Jessop was telling himself that the place was appealingly quaint when the wind used the door to shove him forward and slammed it behind him.

"Sorry," he called to the barman and the dozen or so drinkers and smokers seated at round tables cast in black iron. Nobody responded except by watching him cross the discoloured wooden floor to the bar. The man behind it, whose small eyes and nose and mouth were crammed into the space left by a large chin, peered at him beneath a beetling stretch of net. "Here's one," he announced.

"Reckon you're right there, cap'n," growled a man who, despite the competition, would have taken any prize for bulkiness.

"You'd have said it if he hadn't, Joe," his barely smaller partner croaked past a hand-rolled cigarette, rattling her bracelets as she patted his arm.

"I'm sorry?" Jessop wondered aloud.

She raised a hand to smooth her shoulder-length red tresses. "We're betting you went for the ferry."

"I hope you've staked a fortune on it, then."

"He means you'd win another, Mary," Joe said. "He wouldn't want you to lose."

"That's so," Jessop said, turning to the barman. "What do you recommend?"

"Nothing till I know you. There's not many tastes we can't please here, mister."

"Jessop," Jessop replied before he grasped that he hadn't been asked a question, and stared hard at the beer-pumps. "Captain's Choice sounds worth a go."

He surveyed the length of the chipped sticky bar while the barman hauled at the creaking pump. A miniature billboard said WIN A VOYAGE IN OUR COMPETTITTION, but there was no sign of a menu. "Do you serve food?" he said.

"I've had no complaints for a while."

"What sort of thing do you do?"

"Try me."

"Would a curry be a possibility? Something along those lines?"

"What do you Southerners think goes in one of them?"

"Anything that's edible," said Jessop, feeling increasingly awkward. "That's the idea of a curry, isn't it? Particularly on board ship, I should think."

"You don't fancy scouse."

"I've never tried it. If that's what's on I will."

"Brave lad," the barman said and thrust a tankard full of brownish liquid at him. "Let's see you get that down you."

Jessop did his best to seem pleased with the inert metallic gulp he took. He was reaching for his wallet until the barman said "Settle when you're going."

"Shall I wait here?"

"For what?" the barman said, then grinned at everyone but Jessop. "For your bowl, you mean. We'll find you where you're sitting."

Jessop didn't doubt it, since nobody made even a token pretence of not watching him carry his briefcase to the only unoccupied corner, which was farthest from the door. As he perched on a ragged leather stool and leaned against the yielding wallpaper under a net elaborated by a spider's web, a woman who might have been more convincingly blonde without the darkness on her upper lip remarked "That'll be a good few hours, I'd say."

"Can't argue with you there, Betty," said her companion, a man with a rat asleep on his chest or a beard, which he raised to point it at Jessop. "Is she right, Jessop?"

"Paul," Jessop offered, though it made him no more comfortable. "A couple, anyway."

"A couple's not a few, Tom," scoffed a man with tattoos of fish and less shapely deep-sea creatures swimming under the cuffs of his shabby brownish pullover.

"What are they else then, Daniel?"

"Don't fall out over me," Jessop said as he might have addressed a pair of schoolchildren. "You could both be right, either could, rather."

Resentment might have been a reason why Daniel jerked one populated thumb at a wiry wizened man topped with a black bobble cap. "He's already Paul. Got another name so we know who's who?"

"None I use."

"Be a love and fish it up for us."

At least it was Mary who asked in these terms, with a hoarseness presumably born of cigarettes. After a pause Jessop heard himself mumble "Desmond."

"Scouse," the barman said – it wasn't clear to whom or even if it was an order. Hoping to keep his head down, Jessop snapped his briefcase open. He was laying out papers on the table when the street door flew wide, admitting only wind. He had to slap the papers down as the barman stalked to the door and heaved a stool against it. Nobody else looked away from Jessop. "Still a student, are you, Des?" Betty said.

He wouldn't have believed he could dislike a name more than the one he'd hidden ever since learning it was his, but the contraction was worse. Des Jessop – it was the kind of name a teacher would hiss with contempt. It made him feel reduced to someone else's notion of him, in danger of becoming insignificant to himself. Meanwhile he was saying "All my life, I hope."

"You want to live off the rest of us till you're dead," Joe somewhat more than assumed.

"I'm saying there'll always be something left to discover. That ought to be true for everyone, I should think."

"We've seen plenty," Daniel grumbled. "We've seen enough."

"Forgive me if I haven't yet."

"No need for that," said Mary. "We aren't forgivers, us."

"Doesn't it make you tired, all that reading?" Betty asked him.

"Just the opposite."

"I never learned nothing from a book," she said once she'd finished scowling over his words. "Never did me any harm either."

"You'd know a couple's not a few if you'd read a bit," said Joe.

"Lay off skitting at my judy," Tom warned him.

For some reason everybody else but Jessop roared with laughter. He felt as if his nervous grin had hooked him by the corners of his mouth. He was wobbling to his feet when the barman called "Don't let them scare you off, Des. They just need their fun."

"I'm only..." Jessop suspected that any term he used would provoke general mirth. "Where's the..."

"The poop's got to be behind you, hasn't it?" Betty said in gleeful triumph.

Until he glanced in that direction he wasn't sure how much of a joke this might be. Almost within arm's length was a door so unmarked he'd taken it for a section of wall. When he pushed it, the reluctant light caught on two faces gouged out of the wood, carvings of such crudeness that the female was distinguishable from her mate only by a mop of hair. Beyond the door was a void that proved to be a corridor once he located a switch dangling from an inch of flex. The luminous rotting pear of a bulb revealed that the short passage led to an exit against which crates of dusty empties were stacked. The barred exit was shaken by a gust of wind and, to his bewilderment, what sounded like a blurred mass of television broadcasts. He hadn't time to investigate. Each wall contained a door carved with the rudiments of a face, and he was turning away from the Gents before the image opposite alerted him that the man's long hair was a patch of black fungus. He touched as little of the door as possible while letting himself into the Gents.

The switch in the passage must control all the lights. Under the scaly ceiling a precarious fluorescent tube twitched out a pallid glow with an incessant series of insect clicks. There was barely enough space in the room for a pair of clogged urinals in which cigarette butts were unravelling and a solitary cubicle opposite a piebald slimy sink. Beneath the urinals the wall was bearded with green mould. High up beside the cubicle a token window

was covered by a rusty grille restless with old cobwebs. Jessop kicked open the cubicle door.

A watery sound grew louder – an irregular sloshing he'd attributed to the cistern. He urged himself to the seatless discoloured pedestal. The instant he looked down, only the thought of touching the encrusted scabby walls restrained him from supporting himself against them. Whatever was gaping wide-mouthed at him from the black water, surely it was dead, whether it had been drowned by someone or swum up the plumbing. Surely it was the unstable light, not anticipation of him, that made the whitish throat and pale fat lips appear to work eagerly. He dragged one sleeve over his hand and wrenched at the handle of the rickety cistern. As a rush of opaque water carried the mouth into the depths, Jessop retreated to the first urinal and kept a hand over his nose and mouth while he filled the mouldy china oval to its lower brim.

He dodged out of the fluttering room and was nearly at the door to the bar when he faltered. A confusion of angry voices was moving away from him. A clatter of furniture ended it, and a hoarse voice he identified as Betty's ordered, "Now stay there." He was wishing away the silence as he eased the door open a crack.

The bar seemed emptier than when he'd left it. Two considerable men who'd been seated directly ahead no longer were. The stool hadn't moved from in front of the exit. Could the men be waiting out of sight on either side for him? As he grew furious with his reluctance to know, the barman saw him. "Food's on its way," he announced.

Mary leaned into view, one hand flattening her scalp, to locate Jessop. "Aren't you coming out? This isn't hide and seek."

When embarrassment drove Jessop forward he saw that Daniel had changed seats. He was penned into a corner by the men from the abandoned table, and looked both dishevelled and trapped. "He was trying to see your papers, Des," Betty said.

"Good heavens, I wouldn't have minded. It isn't important."

"It is to us."

As Jessop resumed his corner Tom said, "Got a sweetheart abroad, have you? Was she the lure?"

"His bonnie lies over the ocean," Mary took to have been confirmed, and began to sing.

"No he doesn't," Jessop retorted, but only to himself while he busied himself with his tankard, which had been topped up in his absence. Once the chorus subsided he said guardedly "No, they're over here."

"How many's that?" enquired Joe. "Bit of a ladies' man, are you?"

"A girl in every port," said Tom.

"Not in any really," Jessop said, risking a laugh he hoped was plainly aimed at himself.

"Same with us," Daniel said and gave his fellows an ingratiating look.

The microwave behind the bar rang as if signalling the end of a round, which let Jessop watch the barman load a tray and bring it to him. Once the bowlful of grey stew had finished slopping about, Jessop had to unwrap the fork and spoon from their tattered napkin. He was spooning up a blackened lump when Betty said "What do you make of that then, Des?"

This struck Jessop as the latest of several questions too many. "What would you?"

"Oh, we've had ours. We gobbled it."

"Sup up, Des," Daniel advised. "You'll get plenty of that where you're going."

Was the dish Irish, then? Jessop seemed to have no option other than to raise the dripping lump to his mouth. It was either an unfamiliar vegetable or a piece of meat softened beyond identification, presumably in whatever pot had contained the communal dinner. "Good?" Mary prompted as everyone watched.

"Gum." At least the mouthful allowed him not to answer too distinctly. He swallowed it as whole as an oyster, only to become aware that his performance had invited however many encores it would take to unload the bowl. He was chewing a chunk that needed a good deal of it when Joe declared "If you're not a student I'm saying you're a teacher."

Jessop succeeded at last in downing and retaining the gristly morsel. "Lecturer," he corrected.

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't say quite."

"Still teach, don't you? Still live off them that works, as well."

"Now, Joe," Mary interrupted. "You'll have our new mate not wanting to stay with us."

Jessop could have told her that had happened some time ago. He was considering how much of his portion he could decently leave before seeking another refuge from the gale, and whether he was obliged to be polite any longer, when Tom demanded "So what do you lecture, Des?"

"Students," Jessop might have retorted, but instead displayed the Beethoven score he'd laid out to review in preparation for his introductory lecture. "Music's my territory."

As he dipped his spoon in search of a final mouthful Mary said "How many marks would our singing get?"

"I don't really mark performances. I'm more on the theory side."

Joe's grunt of disdainful vindication wasn't enough for Tom, who said "You've got to be able to say how good it is if you're supposed to be teaching about it."

"Six," Jessop said to be rid of the subject, but it had occupied all the watching eyes. "Seven," he amended. "A good seven. That's out of ten. A lot of professionals would be happy with that."

Betty gave a laugh that apparently expressed why everyone looked amused. "You haven't heard us yet, Des. You've got to hear."

"You start us off, Betty," Daniel urged.

For as long as it took her to begin, Jessop was able to hope he would be subjected only to a chorus. Having lurched to her feet, she expanded her chest, a process that gave him more of a sense of the inequality of her breasts than he welcomed, and commenced her assault on the song. What was she suggesting ought to be done with the drunken sailor? Her diction and her voice, cracked enough for a falsetto, made it impossible to judge. Jessop fed himself a hearty gulp of Captain's Choice in case it rendered him more tolerant as she sat down panting. "Oh," he said hurriedly, "I think—"

"You can't say yet," Daniel objected. "You've got to hear everyone."

Jessop lowered his head, not least to avoid watching Mary. Betty's lopsidedness had begun to resemble an omen. The sound of Mary was

enough of an ordeal – her voice even screechier than her friend's, her answer to the question posed by the song even less comprehensible. "There," she said far too eventually. "Who'll be next?"

As Joe stood up with a thump that might have been designed to attract Jessop's attention, he heaped his spoon with a gobbet of scouse to justify his concentration on the bowl. Once the spoonful passed his teeth it became clear that it was too rubbery to be chewed and too expansive to be swallowed. Before Joe had finished growling his first line, Jessop staggered to his feet. He waved his frantic hands on either side of his laden face and stumbled through the doorway to the toilets.

The prospect of revisiting the Gents made him clap a hand over his mouth. When he elbowed the other door open, however, the Ladies looked just as uninviting. A blackened stone sink lay in fragments on the uneven concrete beneath a rusty drooling tap on a twisted greenish pipe. Jessop ran to the first of two cubicles and shouldered the door aside. Beyond it a jagged hole in the glistening concrete showed where a pedestal had been. What was he to make of the substance like a jellyfish sprawling over the entire rim? Before he could be sure what the jittery light was exhibiting, the mass shrank and slithered into the unlit depths. He didn't need the spectacle to make him expel his mouthful into the hole and retreat to the corridor. He was peering desperately about for a patch of wall not too stained to lean against when he heard voices – a renewal of the television sounds beyond the rear exit and, more clearly, a conversation in the bar.

"Are we telling Des yet?"

"Betty's right, we'll have to soon."

"Can't wait to see his face."

"I remember how yours looked, Mary."

It wasn't only their words that froze him – it was that, exhausted perhaps by singing, both voices had given up all disguise. He wouldn't have known they weren't meant to be men except for the names they were still using. If that indicated the kind of bar he'd strayed into, it had never been his kind. He did his best to appear unaware of the situation as, having managed to swallow hard, he ventured into the bar.

More had happened than he knew. Joe had transferred his bulk to the stool that blocked the street door. Jessop pretended he hadn't noticed, only to

realise that he should have confined himself to pretending it didn't matter. He attempted this while he stood at the table to gather the score and return it to his briefcase. "Well," he said as casually as his stiffening lips would allow, "I'd better be on my way."

"Not just yet, Des," Joe said, settling more of his weight against the door. "Listen to it."

Jessop didn't know if that referred to the renewed onslaught of the gale or him. "I need something from my car."

"Tell us what and we'll get it for you. You aren't dressed for this kind of night."

Jessop was trying to identify whom he should tell to let him go – the barman was conspicuously intent on wiping glasses – and what tone and phrasing he should use when Daniel said, "You lot singing's put Des off us and his supper."

"Let's hear you then, Des," Joe rather more than invited. "Your turn to sing."

"Yes, go on, Des," Mary shrilled. "We've entertained you, now you can."

Might that be all they required of him? Jessop found himself blurting "I don't know what to perform."

"What we were," Joe said.

Jessop gripped his clammy hands together behind his back and drew a breath he hoped would also keep down the resurgent taste of his bowlful. As he repeated the question about the sailor, his dwarfed voice fled back to him while all the drinkers rocked from side to side, apparently to encourage him. The barman found the glasses he was wiping more momentous than ever. Once Jessop finished wishing it could indeed be early in the morning, if that would put him on the ferry, his voice trailed off. "That's lovely," Betty cried, adjusting her fallen breast. "Go on."

"I can't remember any more. It really isn't my sort of music."

"It will be," Daniel said.

"Take him down to see her," Betty chanted, "and he'll soon be sober."

"Let him hear her sing and then he'll need no drinking," Mary added with something like triumph.

They were only suggesting lyrics, Jessop told himself – perhaps the very ones they'd sung. The thought didn't help him perform while so many eyes were watching him from the dimness that seeped through the nets. He felt as if he'd been lured into a cave where he was unable to see clearly enough to defend himself. All around him the intent bulks were growing visibly restless; Mary was fingering her red tresses as though it might be time to dispense with them. "Come on, Des," Joe said, so that for an instant Jessop felt he was being directed to the exit. "No point not joining in."

"We only get one night," said Tom.

"So we have to fit them all in," Daniel said.

All Jessop knew was that he didn't want to need to understand. A shiver surged up through him, almost wrenching his hands apart. It was robbing him of any remaining control – and then he saw that it could be his last chance. "You're right, Joe," he said and let them see him shiver afresh. "I'm not dressed for it. I'll get changed."

Having held up his briefcase to illustrate his ruse, he was making for the rear door when Mary squealed "No need to be shy, Des. You can in here."

"I'd rather not, thank you," Jessop said with the last grain of authority he could find in himself, and dodged into the corridor.

As soon as the door was shut he stood his briefcase against it. Even if he wanted to abandon the case, it wouldn't hold the door. He tiptoed fast and shakily to the end of the passage and lowered the topmost crate onto his chest. He retraced his steps as fast as silencing the bottles would allow. He planted the crate in the angle under the hinges and took the briefcase down the corridor. He ignored the blurred mutter of televisions beyond the door while he picked up another crate. How many could he use to ensure the route was blocked before anyone decided he'd been out of sight too long? He was returning for a third crate when he heard a fumbling at the doors on both sides of the corridor.

Even worse than the shapeless eagerness was the way the doors were being assaulted in unison, as if by appendages something was reaching out from – where? Beneath him, or outside the pub? Either thought seemed capable of paralysing him. He flung himself out of their range to seize the next crate, the only aspect of his surroundings he felt able to trust to be real. He couldn't venture down the dim corridor past the quivering doors. He rested

crate after crate against the wall, and dragged the last one aside with a jangle of glass. Grabbing his briefcase and abandoning stealth, he threw his weight against the metal bar across the door.

It wouldn't budge for rust. He dropped the case and clutched two-handed at the obstruction while he hurled every ounce of himself at it. The bar gave a reluctant gritty clank, only to reveal that a presence as strong as Jessop was on the far side of the door. It was the wind, which slackened enough to let him and the door stagger forward. He blocked the door with one foot as he snatched up the briefcase. Outside was a narrow unlit alley between the backs of houses. Noise and something more palpable floundered at him – the wind, bearing a tangle of voices and music. At the end of the alley, less than twenty feet away, three men were waiting for him.

Wiry Paul was foremost, flanked by Joe and Tom. He'd pulled his bobble hat down to his eyebrows and was flexing his arms like thick stalks in a tide. "You aren't leaving now we've given you a name," he said.

A flare of rage that was mostly panic made Jessop shout "My name's Paul."

"Fight you for it," the other man offered, prancing forward.

"I'm not playing any more games with anyone."

"Then we aren't either. You won."

"Won the moment you stepped through the door," Tom seemed to think Jessop wanted to hear.

Jessop remembered the notice about a competition. It was immediately clear to him that however much he protested, he was about to receive his prize. "You were the quiz," Paul told him as Joe and Tom took an identical swaying pace forward.

Jessop swung around and bolted for the main road. The dark on which the houses turned their backs felt close to solid with the gale and the sounds entangled in it. The uproar was coming from the houses, from televisions and music systems turned up loud. It made him feel outcast, but surely it had to mean there would be help within earshot if he needed to appeal for it. He struggled against the relentless gale towards the distant gap that appeared to mock his efforts by tossing back and forth. He glanced over his shoulder to see Paul and his cronies strolling after him. A car sped past the gap ahead as if to tempt him forward while he strove not to be blown into an alley to his right. Or should he try that route even if it took him farther

from the main road? The thought of being lost as well as pursued had carried him beyond the junction when Betty and Mary blocked his view of the road.

They were still wearing dresses that flapped in the wind, but they were more than broad enough to leave him no escape. The gale lifted Mary's tresses and sent them scuttling crabwise at Jessop. "Some of us try to be more like her," Mary growled with a defensiveness close to violence. "Try to find out what'll make her happier."

"Lots have tried," Betty said in much the same tone. "We're just the first that's had her sort on board."

"Shouldn't be surprised if her sisters want to see the world now too."

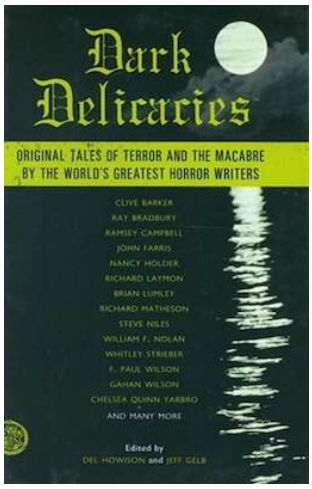
"She doesn't just take," Betty said more defensively still. "She provides."

Jessop had been backing away throughout this, both from their words and from comprehending them, but he couldn't leave behind the stale upsurge of his dinner. When he reached the junction again he didn't resist the gale. It sent him sidling at a run into the dark until he managed to turn. The houses that walled him in were derelict and boarded up, yet the noise on both sides of him seemed unabated, presumably because the inhabitants of the nearest occupied buildings had turned the volume higher. Why was the passage darkening? He didn't miss the strip of moonlit cloud until he realised it was no longer overhead. At that moment his footsteps took on a note more metallic than echoes between bricks could account for, but his ears had fastened on another sound – a song.

It was high and sweet and not at all human. It seemed capable of doing away with his thoughts, even with his fleeting notion that it could contain all music. Nothing seemed important except following it to its source – certainly not the way the floor tilted abruptly beneath him, throwing him against one wall. Before long he had to leave his briefcase in order to support himself against the metal walls of the corridor. He heard the clientele of the Seafarer tramp after him, and looked back to see the derelict houses rock away beyond Mary and Betty. All this struck him as less than insignificant, except for the chugging of engines that made him anxious to be wherever it wouldn't interfere with the song. Someone opened a hatch for him and showed him how to grasp the uprights of the ladder that led down into the unlit dripping hold. "That's what sailors hear," said another of the crew as Jessop's foot groped downwards, and Jessop wondered if that

referred to the vast wallowing beneath him as well as the song. For an instant too brief for the notion to stay in his mind he thought he might already have glimpsed the nature of the songstress. You'd sing like that if you looked like that, came a last thought. It seemed entirely random to him, and he forgot it as the ancient song drew him into the enormous cradle of darkness.

The Announcement



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"This isn't me." As I sprint around the corner of the hotel I shout it louder, but the taxi is already at an intersection. It vanishes along the cross street while I'm sucking in another breath. Three girls find my antics worthy of a titter. I give them an expansive shrug that's meant to be comical, but they've returned to watching half a dozen mute performances by a rock group in the window of a television shop. I'm trudging back to the lobby to ask for directions when a limousine draws up in front of the hotel.

So the taxi could have used that street despite the ban on traffic. Didn't the driver think I merited the exemption? He begrudged me a receipt, as if he didn't believe my journey deserved one or even a taxi. As I scowl at the limousine, a young woman in a severely grey suit climbs out and hurries to open the door for a puffed-up bantam the colour of rust in a T-shirt and jeans. "Mr Rigg won't need you till tomorrow when he's signing," she tells the chauffeur.

I make for her charge as if his name has reeled me in. "Excuse me, are you Bill Rigg? Are you staying at this hotel?"

His crumpled T-shirt answers my first question. It's printed with the cover of *The Koran Encryption,* his impossibly best-selling novel. He's showing me his mottled face with its mouth pressed as straight as his frown when the limousine cruises away and his minder darts to intervene. "Mr Rigg has finished for today," she informs me. "He'll be reading from his book again tomorrow morning and signing them at Texts."

"I know that." In case I sounded interested I add "I'm a writer. I've been reading at the festival as well."

Rigg unclenches his face to put on a quizzical look, but his features stay too close together. "Should we know you?"

"Joseph Nicholas Brady." Since this earns no recognition, I name my novel. "*The Absolutely True and Indisputably Verifiable Facts about the Universe!"*

Rigg scratches his flat shaven pate. "Where'd you get those?"

That's part of the point, as I tried to explain to my audience on the folding chairs in the barely coloured windowless room. The book is a satire on novels that claim to be based on secret history, and all the sources cited in the footnotes derive from my name: Harold Phelan, Jody Lane, Seb Holland, Sally Joiner, Leonard Parr, Neil Boole, Jeannie Charles, Ellen Spencer, Sephirah Hardy, Jess Loman, Phyllis Adler, Joan Bradley, Ned Sloane... Someone accused me of cynicism, and because she was clutching a copy of Rigg's wretched thousand-pager I asked whether she would rather believe that all the Islamic elements in art are the code of a conspiracy that's poised to rule the world. By then I'd lost my temper with the voice that had muttered throughout my reading. At first I'd thought it was one of my six listeners, and then I'd grasped that it was seeping through the wall. Now I realise that it sounded like Rigg's voice. Before I can demand where he was performing, the young woman says "Shall we go inside? You don't want to be mobbed by fans this late."

Her advice isn't directed at me, but I won't have them knowing how I've been treated. I'll sit in the bar until they go to their rooms. I'm about to lead the way when Rigg's small eyes peer at me. "Aren't you in the Grand? Sounded like you weren't expecting me to be."

I won't lie in my writing, and I shouldn't even to him, but it costs me an effort to admit "I'm in the Rest."

"The car took us there first by mistake," the young woman laughs, then renders her grin sympathetic. "We're picking up the bill. His publishers."

Mine didn't offer, nor did they provide any copies of my book. "You might want to keep an eye on his publicity this weekend," I tell her, more to display my professionalism than because I care. "I don't think the folk who are running this festival know what publicity means."

While she appreciates my concern or pretends to, Rigg can't be bothered. "Shouldn't need it if you're any good. Sold out tonight and I am tomorrow."

His speech is as perfunctory as his prose. Comparing his carelessness to the pains I take to choose my words makes my head throb. I'm struggling to

compose some witticism on the theme of not wanting to sell out when he turns his back. "I'm off to watch myself on telly," he declares, striding at the automatic doors as though he'll butt them if they don't give way to him.

The young woman blinks at me. "Will you be all right now?"

"I don't know where my hotel is from here."

"It isn't far. Shall I call a taxi for you?"

"Just tell me. I'll endeavour not to get mobbed."

She returns her phone to her gilded handbag and hastens to the corner of the building, where she points past the televisions. "Straight along for a few blocks. You'll be ready for bed."

For a moment I indulge in fancying she means this as an invitation, but she's gazing at me to ensure I obey her directions. When I reach the window full of screens I glance back. She hasn't lingered, and I suspect she's bound for Rigg's bed. I stare at the multiplication of yet another prancing rock group in case it's ousted by his image. I wouldn't be able to hear what he says, not that I want to. I almost succeed in thinking that he must be hard up for an audience if he has to watch himself.

As I tramp along the empty street the shop fronts dwindle and grow shabby. After ten minutes most of them are shuttered with metal if they aren't disused. On the block at the end of which I see a sign stuttering above my hotel, a betting shop nestles against an arcade of fruit machines between *Sensuous Couples,* whose grille has been adorned with a cartoon of an erupting penis, and a wine shop with returns in its doorway, not all of them smashed. Next to my accommodation a second-hand shop is called *Hi Its Fi,* a clump of words that makes me grind my teeth. Has someone left a television switched on behind the shutter? Can that be Rigg's muffled voice? I'm close to resting my ear against the rusty weatherbeaten metal slats when I lurch away in a rage to my hotel.

The sign has lost the bulk of its first syllable. All that flickers whenever it manages to summon up the energy is T ELLER'S REST. The grimy splintered glass of the narrow awning blurs it as I push open the rather less than wholly transparent door, scraping the already ragged brownish carpet of the rudimentary lobby. The stained reception counter is unattended except for a vacuum cleaner slouching beneath the pigeonholes, one of which protrudes a message slip that looks aged yellow by the dim

illumination leaking from under the cornices. A placard propped against the extravagantly scratched door of the solitary lift says OUt oF OARdER. So is the slogan, I'd comment if there was anyone to hear. Instead I make for the boxed-in stairs that are partly covered by a trampled blackened carpet and toil up to my room.

Though it's only two floors distant, I'm sweating by the time I reach it. The impressions of landscapes that are presumably intended to relieve the monotony of the sombre corridor look half melted by the central heating that's taking on the August mugginess. When I unlock my door, which is featurelessly pink except for a red 8 dangling from its lower screw, the stark room the colour of old bone seems to have stored up more than its share of the heat. The grubby gamboge curtains have drifted together on their sagging wire. I drag them apart, but the dwarfish double-glazed window opaque with condensation won't budge. I snarl at it and at the room in general, especially the token furniture, which gives me the feeling that it was hurriedly assembled and then crammed into one corner of an attic along with me. I snarl loudest at the midget television perched on a bracket opposite my frayed pillow, because I'm unable to resist switching it on in search of Rigg.

It comes to life with an explosion of noise that makes me desperate to mute it. I poke several buttons on the remote control before I succeed in gagging the set, which is showing a film with dialogue in sentences apparently too short to find space for grammar. The next channel shows a rock group I'm happy to have hushed, and the third brings me Rigg in conversation with a literary critic who surely ought to know better. Perhaps she does. I may never find out, because I can't restore the sound.

I do my best to fancy that his face is red not just with the raw colour but with shame, although his expression is insufferably smug. When I've finished bruising my thumb on the buttons I manage to refrain from flinging the control at him. I extinguish the television and strew the faded bedspread with my clothes on the way to the cupboard that does duty as a toilet and bathroom.

The shower curtain has ripped free of half its hooks. The water from the clogged shower head keeps faltering and spurting afresh, either much hotter or much colder. As I prance about the narrow bath to avoid the worst excesses of the shower I hear a muffled voice that I have to tell myself isn't

commenting on my antics. I flounder out of the bath and grab the single ragged towel from the precariously askew rail beside the cracked sink. As the water finishes giggling in the plughole, I realise that the mutter is in one of the adjoining rooms. While I can't distinguish any of its words, I recognise Rigg's voice.

I'm still wielding the meagre towel as I march into the bedroom. I kneel in the subsiding middle of the bed and press my ear against the damp wall, then squeeze between the wardrobe and the equally shaky dressing table to listen over there. It must be tiredness that leaves me incapable of deciding which side is playing host to Rigg, unless both are. I stand in the cramped gap between the bed and the dressing-table, one drawer of which protrudes several stubborn inches, and shout "Can you turn that down, please" twice.

At first there's no response. When I halve the request and double my volume, it earns me sleepy protests and thumps on both walls while Rigg's harangue continues as incomprehensibly as ever. I snatch the phone from its hiding place behind one curtain and poke the zero, which ought to call Reception as well as summing Rigg up. The phone is so dead that I could imagine I'm hearing his voice through the receiver.

I slam it back on the windowsill and struggle into my clammy clothes. Shoving the key on its cumbersome bludgeon into a hip pocket, I dash into the corridor, only for Rigg's voice to disappear as if the thick gloom has engulfed it. I won't be tricked. As soon as I stick my head inside the room I can hear him mumbling on. I bang the door shut and run along the humid corridor to the equally windowless stairs. "Hello?" I shout as I come in sight of the reception counter. "Is someone here, please?"

I'm about to summarise this more loudly when I grasp that Rigg's voice is outside the hotel. Although its words stay indistinct, the timbre makes its source clear, not least because I saw one near the building where I gave my talk. It's a speaker van. What is it saying? Rigg must be broadcasting his presence at the behest of the festival organisers or at least encouraged by them. More to the point, why is the van loitering outside the hotel? How late is it allowed to keep its racket up? I need my sleep. I drag the door over the scraped carpet and pounce out of the hotel.

The van isn't as close as I thought, which is why its message stays unclear. It's beyond a concrete flyover a hundred yards away in the opposite direction from the one that brought me here. As I strain my ears its engine

starts with a protracted rasp that sounds insulting, and the voice recedes. I head for the lobby, and then I halt as though I've been grabbed by the shoulders, which hunch up. I'm almost certain that Rigg said my name.

What comment has he recorded about me? Or is he in the vehicle, not watching television after all? Whatever he goes on to say, it's as unintelligible as his previous spiel. I won't be able to sleep while the van could be wandering the streets and undermining any reputation I may have. Perhaps I didn't really hear my name, but I have to know. I step off the patch of light outside the hotel and run to the flyover.

It's four lanes wide and supported by massive concrete pillars. They're sprayed with crude letters that barely form words and with less than words —initials and drawings primitive enough for a cave. Beyond the pillars directly ahead, a street illuminated by fewer lights than there are lamps is packed with dilapidated shops boarded up for the night if not for longer. At the end of the first block I glimpse tail-lights swinging left and trailing Rigg's blurred voice.

As I sprint from beneath the flyover I notice the street isn't deserted. The shadows between those streetlamps that aren't broken contain women, each of whom murmurs as I pass. I don't need to catch their words to know what they're offering, and I hurry past without responding. I'm nearly at the junction when a less circumspect woman dressed in a small amount of leather steps in front of me. "What are you after, love?"

"Them," I pant, jabbing my hands in front of me. "I'm after them."

She inflates her chest with a taut creak. She must think I had this in mind, because she says "Just these?"

"Not that. None of that," I gasp as I stumble around her. "Him."

"If you're one of that bunch you're up the wrong end."

I gather she's speculating about my sexual tastes, since her colleagues add their ribald thoughts. "I'm not talking about that," I protest. "Can't you hear?"

"We've been hearing you fine. You sound pretty desperate to me."

I haven't time for this, not least because her loose words are obscuring phrases I can almost identify along the street. "What did it say just then?"

"Watch who you're calling an it, love. Show some respect or we'll have to sort you out."

"You're the ones who ought to be showing respect, and a few other people as well." I shouldn't let myself be provoked, because now I'm blotting out the harangue of the van. It couldn't actually have said "He'd send anyone asleep, dopey sod," but what would have sounded like that? I grimace at the women to fend them off as I dash after the van.

It's several hundred yards away and moving just a little faster than I'm able to maintain. At least I can't see anyone ahead to hinder me. All the properties I'm passing are featureless with boards, as far as I can tell by the twitching light of the occasional unvandalised streetlamp. I assume they're shops, although they've shed any names they had. The rear lights of the van blaze between them like a threat of arson, so that I imagine them burning like paper; I could be tempted to dream that they're stacks of copies of Rigg's book. I don't know whether to race after the vehicle in case I can somehow overtake it or to stand still, because the clatter of my footsteps prevents me from distinguishing so much as a syllable. I'm hardly aware of stumbling to a halt as if this may arrest the van. Of course it doesn't, nor does yelling "What did you say?"

"What you say?"

For a moment I think there's an echo, so distorted that it's well-nigh incoherent. Then an object I took to have been abandoned in a bin bag that's sprawled across an unlit doorway pokes its aggrieved head up. "Not me," I tell it. "Never mind me. What did you just hear?"

"You, you daft bugger. What's the idea waking a man up? You've got no right. You're nobody."

"That's who I am." I'm nearly distracted enough to lean down and bellow this into the unsteady face, because I'm less certain than I want to be that I couldn't have heard Rigg mumble in the distance "Piss on Brady and all his silly slop." Can he be driving the vehicle and broadcasting such stuff? Is he drunk or on drugs or both? The occupant of the doorway struggles to rise but falls back with the clink of a bottle. I've already wasted too much time on him. As I turn my back I realise that the van is nowhere to be seen.

Rigg is all too audible, but I can't be sure of his words. "Here he is"? "See the shabby slob"? I bolt to the end of the shops and glimpse the inflamed

lights as they veer around a curve. The street they're following is crowded with houses flush with the pavements, which ought to mean that the ranting of the van will waken some of the householders. I hope it does—they'll want to silence it as much as I do—but as I run past the houses I observe that most of the windows are broken. If I'm not mistaken in the unrelieved darkness, many of the housefronts are blackened by fire. At least if the properties are empty, nobody will hear Rigg's comments about me. I arrive panting at the curve in the road and falter to a standstill. I can't see or hear the van.

"Good riddance," I gasp. It isn't loud—I need to regain my breath—but it prompts a response. "Is that you?"

The whisper is trickling through one or more of several fist-sized holes in the downstairs window of a house as dark as sleep. Since the answer to the question is obviously no, I'm drawing breath to say at least that when the whisperer adds "Don't make such a row. We don't want anybody hearing you."

"You're not the only one who doesn't," I'm stung to retort. The next whisper is only just discernible. "Is that him?"

A series of thumps and mutters apparently signifies somebody's attempts to reach the window. As I set about stealing away, an eye and the corresponding section of an unkempt head waver up to the lowest hole in the glass. The eye is considerably duller than the glint of a syringe on the littered floor. "No," the owner of the eye decides after the first of several pauses. "That's not him."

For an instant I'm absurdly glad that's settled, and then Rigg's voice revives. It's further blurred by distance, so that I'm uncertain whether he said "Needle Brady". Is he musing—making verbal notes—or issuing instructions? I'm so distracted that I hardly know what I'm saying, let alone to whom. "That's got to bother you as well," I appeal to the silhouette at the window. "Not just me."

"You are, pal."

The response sounds retarded by menace. As I catch sight of the glint again I'm aware what kind of needle I may be in danger from. It's one more reason why I shouldn't linger, but I hope the couple or however many are

lurking in the unlit room don't imagine that their hostility has driven me away as I pursue my tormentor's voice.

The next road across the street I'm on is more than twice as wide. Pairs of tall houses intervene their gardens between the pavement and themselves. The left-hand stretch leads into the town centre, towards which the van is receding. Its roof flares orange beneath each concrete streetlamp. Perhaps it's the spaciousness that lets me grasp Rigg's words despite the additional distance. "Prod His Lordship. Enjoy his headache."

Why is nobody except me objecting to him? We must be surrounded by an audience, since the houses are split into flats. "I'll prod you when I get hold of you," I shout and then devote my energy to catching up. I've barely put on speed when a window rattles open at the top of a house ahead. "Stop the noise," a man bellows. "People want to sleep."

"I'm trying to stop it," I roar. "Why don't you help?"

"I'll give you some help all right if you don't shut up."

He must be half asleep to be making so little sense. "Call the police," I urge. "It can't be legal at this time of night."

"What I'll do to you if you don't bugger off won't be for sure. Go home and get yourself some help."

I'm tempted to remain until he admits to hearing Rigg and undertakes to send for the authorities, but I'm too infuriated by Rigg's latest comments. "Brady's been on," he announces. "He's done. I heard him read. Snored all along, I did, me." I dodge into the middle of the road and dash in pursuit of the van, waving my arms as if I'm imitating each reappearance of my shadow and bawling less than words in an attempt to drown out the speaker. "Irony, he says he does," it continues. "All hype. He's a liar. He's a con. He does dire joyless horrid hellish crap."

Rigg's words are beginning to sound like some kind of code. "Posh and oily and sly is all," he adds as windows overlooking the street emit protests that, grotesquely, seem to be aimed at me. I'm closer than the vehicle, that's why, but I'm starting to feel far too much like a scapegoat when a lone walker appears halfway between me and the van.

She has been exercising her dog in a park at the end of the houses. I slow down so as not to alarm her while she ambles towards me, and point beyond her with both hands, a gesture I don't mean to appear quite so beseeching.

"You've been hearing that, haven't you?" I ask loud enough for the tenants of the flats to catch.

The hem of the light from a streetlamp slides over her pale pudgy face and seems to tug her copiously lipsticked mouth into a smile. "Have you as well? Oh good."

I mustn't let her shrillness deter me. "Did you hear what it said?"

"Of course," she says and simpers. "Didn't you?"

As she advances, kneeing her long black dress at every step, I see that she isn't walking a dog but yanking a misshapen bag on a leash. "I believe so," I concentrate on saying.

"Tell me and I'll tell you if I think you're right."

I clench my fists at Rigg's latest pronouncements and at forcing myself to repeat them. "He's alone. Poor old Brady's a horny bachelor and he's all alone. No bride and no children. Only in his brain."

"Oh, that's sad," the woman says and drags the bag onwards, scraping the pavement with a thin brown object that protrudes from the zip. "Is that you?"

"It's meant to be. He doesn't know anything worth knowing. Shall I tell you what his last book was? A quiz book. *How New A Man Are You,* it was called. That's how opportunistic he is, do you see?"

She looks determined not to give in to bewilderment. "Just let the ones who care about you talk to you," she advises. "You only have to find them and then they'll always be there for you. My gran and grandpa are."

I'm about to enquire why she thinks this relevant to anything I've said when I notice that the gateway through which she emerged leads not to a park but to a graveyard. The scrawny item dangling from her bag must be a withered bunch of flowers, but I'm not anxious to check. For once I'm relieved to hear sounds in the distance, shouts and the smashing of glass. Perhaps the van has encountered a mob. "You'll have to excuse me," I tell the woman and retreat to the opposite pavement to be out of her reach.

More glass shatters as I cross the intersection with the graveyard on the corner. I won't deny hoping that it's a window of the van. Perhaps it's a bottle, since Rigg isn't daunted. Indeed, he sounds enlivened and

determined that his message shall be clear. "Please do Brady, lads," he says. "Be physical. Nail him, bloody droner."

An unamplified voice responds, just loud enough for me to hear. "Carry on, boss."

"He's nearby. He's behind. Slippery Joe Brady. He's a real prince, he is. No, he's an arsehole. Bash him, boys. Reshape his head."

For as long as it takes Rigg to say all this I'm unable to move, and then I understand why his voice is growing louder. The van has turned and is coming back towards me. It's surrounded by voices that seem wordless with distance if not brutishness. He's bringing the mob.

I twist around in search of allies. There's no sign of the woman, not that appealing to her would have been much if any use, and all the windows of the flats are shut. I might try making an uproar to goad somebody to call the law, except that the road opposite the graveyard leads to a brighter thoroughfare. That's the business district, and surely where I'm most likely to find police.

I'm too intent on fleeing to observe when the houses give way to larger buildings. They're offices and banks, emblems of prosperity, locked up like safes. They make me feel cast out and ignored, not least because Rigg's monologue is gathering speed towards the junction. "Jab his eyes in. Slash his nose. Bop his ears. Pierce his scalp. Pop his balls. No loss, I'd say. I hope he dies."

I've staggered just a few more gasping paces when it and its attendant shouts spill into the road behind me. Its companions are still doing without language. My shadow is flung flat in the middle of the street like a victim about to be kicked insensible, but a backward glance shows me only the headlamps that have caught me in their spotlight. "I'll shred his papers," Rigg is saying. "I'll sprain his head. He'll yell. He's a jelly. He's a drip. I hope he perishes."

He's repeating himself. He's running out of words. I'd confront him with the limits of his vocabulary if he didn't have his thugs with him—and then his turns of phrase grow clear to me at last. He wouldn't talk like that; I've heard him talk. He's stolen my technique. His messages are built out of the letters of my name.

He'd have no style without me. He'd be nothing, and I swing around to shout it. The lights blind me, but I can hear the gang around them. Perhaps I won't take him on just now after all. To my left I see an alley that leads to a building that looks somehow familiar. Can I have strayed back to the hotel? Even that would be welcome. No sooner do I think it than I've dodged into the alley and am sprinting for the light at the end.

"Hold on, Brady," Rigg booms, and then all I can hear are my breaths trapped between the close walls. I keep nearly falling against the walls as I run. As the dazzle of the headlamps drains from my eyes, the dimness of the alley settles on them. They seem unable to determine how light it is when I stagger out of the alley, but there's no mistaking where I am. Opposite me is the building where I gave my talk, and to my left is a speaker van.

I barely hesitate. Somebody has abandoned a bottle in the doorway of the venue. I wish I had a drink, but I've no time. I glance about the street that looks flat as a stage set under the relentless lights, and then I pull out the hotel key on its heavy club. If other people can break glass, so can I for a purpose. At the very least the van is a refuge. I smash the driver's window with a single blow and pick fragments out of the door, then I unlock it and climb in.

I can no longer hear Rigg and his chosen audience. Ah, silence. The streets are so quiet he might never have been there. It's past time I was heard. Having come this far, I'm sure I'll be able to start the vehicle. Shall I abscond? No chance, as he'd say in idle pride. I can handle any shyness in heroic prose. If we have a shouting match in the street I'll have more to say and better, so long as the speaker operates. I locate the switch and press it, and hear my own breath filling the street. Shall I be horribly acerbic or rely on blarney? Slander idol Bill or deploy balance? Any dross will erode solid personal calibre. Soldier on, Brady. Besides, choice is no hindrance. I'll respond dryly. Nevertheless for an unpleasant moment I'm at a loss for words, and then I know where to start. I tug the microphone closer and say "This isn't me."

The Decorations

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"Here they are at last," David's grandmother cried, and her face lit up: green from the luminous plastic holly that bordered the front door and then, as she took a plump step to hug David's mother, red with the glow from the costume of the Santa in the sleigh beneath the window. "Was the traffic that bad, Jane?"

"I still don't drive, Mummy. One of the trains was held up and we missed a connection."

"You want to get yourself another man. Never mind, you'll always have Davy," his grandmother panted as she waddled to embrace him.

Her clasp was even fatter than last time. It smelled of clothes he thought could be as old as she was, and of perfume that didn't quite disguise a further staleness he was afraid was her. His embarrassment was aggravated by a car that slowed outside the house, though the driver was only admiring the Christmas display. When his grandmother abruptly released him he thought she'd noticed his reaction, but she was peering at the sleigh. "Has he got down?" she whispered.

David understood before his mother seemed to. He retreated along the path between the flower-beds full of grass to squint past the lights that flashed MERRY CHRISTMAS above the bedroom windows. The second Santa was still perched on the roof; a wind set the illuminated figure rocking back and forth as if with silent laughter. "He's there," David said.

"I expect he has to be in lots of places at once."

Now that he was nearly eight, David knew that his father had always been Santa. Before he could say as much, his grandmother plodded to gaze at the roof. "Do you like him?"

"I like coming to see all your Christmas things."

"I'm not so fond of him. He looks too empty for my liking." As the figure shifted in another wind she shouted "You stay up there where you belong. Never mind thinking of jumping on us."

David's grandfather hurried out to her, his slippers flapping on his thin feet, his reduced face wincing. "Come inside, Dora. You'll have the neighbours looking."

"I don't care about the fat old thing," she said loud enough to be heard on the roof and tramped into the house. "You can take your mummy's case up, can't you, David? You're a big strong boy now."

He enjoyed hauling the wheeled suitcase on its leash – it was like having a dog he could talk to, sometimes not only in his head – but bumping the luggage upstairs risked snagging the already threadbare carpet, and so his mother supported the burden. "I'll just unpack quickly," she told him. "Go down and see if anyone needs help."

He used the frilly toilet in the equally pink bathroom and lingered until his mother asked if he was all right. He was trying to stay clear of the argument he could just hear through the salmon carpet. As he ventured downstairs his grandmother pounced on some remark so muted it was almost silent. "You do better, then. Let's see you cook."

He could smell the subject of the disagreement. Once he'd finished setting the table from the tray with which his grandfather sent him out of the kitchen, he and his mother saw it too: a casserole encrusted with gravy and containing a shrivelled lump of beef. Potatoes roasted close to impenetrability came with it, and green beans from which someone had tried to scrape the worst of the charring. "It's not as bad as it looks, is it?" David's grandmother said through her first mouthful. "I expect it's like having a barbecue, Davy."

"I don't know," he confessed, never having had one.

"They've no idea, these men, have they, Jane? They don't have to keep dinner waiting for people. I expect your hubby's the same."

"Was, but can we not talk about him?"

"He's learned his lesson, then. No call to make that face at me, Tom. I'm only saying Davy's father – Oh, you've split up, Jane, haven't you. Sorry about my big fat trap. Sorry Davy too."

"Just eat what you want," his grandfather advised him, "and then you'd best be scampering off to bed so Santa can make his deliveries."

"We all want to be tucked up before he's on the move," said his grandmother before remembering to smile.

Santa had gone away like David's father, and David was too old to miss either of them. He managed to breach the carapace of a second potato and chewed several forkfuls of dried-up beef, but the burned remains of beans defeated him. All the same, he thanked his grandmother as he stood up. "There's a good boy," she said rather too loudly, as if interceding with someone on his behalf. "Do your best to go to sleep."

That sounded like an inexplicit warning, and was one of the elements that kept him awake in his bedroom, which was no larger than his room in the flat he'd moved to with his mother. Despite their heaviness, the curtains admitted a repetitive flicker from the letters ERR above the window, and a buzz that suggested an insect was hovering over the bed. He could just hear voices downstairs, which gave him the impression that they didn't want him to know what they were saying. He was most troubled by a hollow creaking that reminded him of someone in a rocking chair, but overhead. The Santa figure must be swaying in the wind, not doing its best to heave itself free. David was too old for stories: while real ones didn't always stay true, that wasn't an excuse to make any up. Still, he was glad to hear his mother and her parents coming upstairs at last, lowering their voices to compensate. He heard doors shutting for the night, and then a nervous question from his grandmother through the wall between their rooms. "What's he doing? Is he loose?"

"If he falls, he falls," his grandfather said barely audibly, "and good riddance to him if he's getting on your nerves. For pity's sake come to bed."

David tried not to find this more disturbing than the notion that his parents had shared one. Rather than hear the mattress sag under the weight his grandmother had put on, he tugged the quilt over his head. His grasp must have slackened when he drifted off to sleep, because he was roused by a voice. It was outside the house but too close to the window.

It was his grandfather's. David was disconcerted by the notion that the old man had clambered onto the roof until he realised his grandfather was calling out of the adjacent window. "What do you think you're doing, Dora? Come in before you catch your death."

"I'm seeing he's stayed where he's meant to be," David's grandmother responded from below. "Yes, you know I'm talking about you, don't you. Never mind pretending you didn't nod."

"Get in for the Lord's sake," his grandfather urged, underlining his words with a rumble of the sash. David heard him pad across the room and as rapidly if more stealthily down the stairs. A bated argument grew increasingly stifled as it ascended to the bedroom. David had refrained from looking out of the window for fear of embarrassing his grandparents, but now he was nervous that his mother would be drawn to find out what was happening. He mustn't go to her; he had to be a man, as she kept telling him, and not one like his father, who ran off to women because there was so little to him. In time the muttering beyond the wall subsided, and David was alone with the insistence of electricity and the restlessness on the roof.

When he opened his eyes the curtains had acquired a hem of daylight. It was Christmas Day. Last year he'd run downstairs to handle all the packages addressed to him under the tree and guess at their contents, but now he was wary of encountering his grandparents by himself in case he betrayed he was concealing their secret. As he lay hoping that his grandmother had slept off her condition, he heard his mother in the kitchen. "Let me make breakfast, Mummy. It can be a little extra present for you."

He didn't venture down until she called him. "Here's the Christmas boy," his grandmother shouted as if he was responsible for the occasion, and dealt him such a hug that he struggled within himself. "Eat up or you won't grow."

Her onslaught had dislodged a taste of last night's food. He did his best to bury it under his breakfast, then volunteered to wash up the plates and utensils and dry them as well. Before he finished she was crying "Hurry up so we can see what Santa's brought. I'm as excited as you, Davy."

He hoped she was only making these remarks on his behalf, not somehow growing younger than he was. In the front room his grandfather distributed the presents while the bulbs on the tree flashed patterns that made David think of secret messages. His grandparents had wrapped him up puzzle books and tales of heroic boys, his mother's gifts to him were games for his home computer. "Thank you," he said, sometimes dutifully.

It was the last computer game that prompted his grandmother to ask "Who are you thanking?" At once, as if she feared she'd spoiled the day for him,

she added "I expect he's listening."

"Nobody's listening," his grandfather objected. "Nobody's there."

"Don't say things like that, Tom, not in front of Davy."

"That isn't necessary, Mummy. You know the truth, don't you, David? Tell your grandmother."

"Santa's just a fairy tale," David said, although it felt like robbing a younger child of an illusion. "Really people have to save up to buy presents."

"He had to know when we've so much less coming in this Christmas," said his mother. "You see how good he's being. I believe he's taken it better than I did."

"I'm sorry if I upset you, Davy."

"You didn't," David said, not least because his grandmother's eyes looked dangerously moist. "I'm sorry if I upset you."

Her face was already quivering as if there was too much of it to hold still. When she shook her head her cheeks wobbled like a whitish rubber mask that was about to fall loose. He didn't know whether she meant to answer him or had strayed onto another subject as she peered towards the window. "There's nothing to him at all then, is there? He's just an empty old shell. Can't we get him down now?"

"Better wait till the new year," David's grandfather said, and with sudden bitterness "We don't want any more bad luck."

Her faded sunken armchair creaked with relief as she levered herself to her feet. "Where are you going?" her husband protested and limped after her, out of the front door. He murmured at her while she stared up at the roof. At least she didn't shout, but she began to talk not much less quietly as she returned to the house. "I don't like him moving about with nothing inside him," she said before she appeared to recollect David's presence. "Maybe he's like one of those beans with a worm inside, Davy, that used to jig about all the time."

While David didn't understand and was unsure he wanted to, his mother's hasty intervention wasn't reassuring either. "Shall we play some games? What would you like to play, Mummy?"

"What do you call it. Lollopy. The one with all the little houses. Too little for any big fat things to climb on. Lollopy."

"Monopoly."

"Lollopy," David's grandmother maintained, only to continue "I don't want to play that. Too many sums. What's your favourite, Davy?"

Monopoly was, but he didn't want to add to all the tensions that he sensed rather than comprehended. "Whatever yours is."

"Ludo," she cried and clapped her hands. "I'd play it every Sunday with your granny and grandpa when I was Davy's age, Jane."

He wondered if she wasn't just remembering but behaving as she used to. She pleaded to be allowed to move her counters whenever she failed to throw a six, and kept trying to move more than she threw. David would have let her win, but his grandfather persisted in reminding her that she had to cast the precise amount to guide her counters home. After several games in which his grandmother squinted with increasingly less comical suspicion at her opponents' moves, David's mother said "Who'd like to go out for a walk?"

Apparently everyone did, which meant they couldn't go fast or far. David felt out of place compared with the boys he saw riding their Christmas bicycles or brandishing their Christmas weapons. Beneath a sky frosty with cloud, all the decorations in the duplicated streets looked deadened by the pale sunlight, though they were still among the very few elements that distinguished one squat boxy house from another. "They're not as good as ours, are they?" his grandmother kept remarking when she wasn't frowning at the roofs. "He's not there either," he heard her mutter more than once, and as her house came in sight "See, he didn't follow us. We'd have heard him."

She was saying that nothing had moved or could move, David tried to think, but he was nervous of returning to the house. The preparation of Christmas dinner proved to be reason enough. "Too many women in this kitchen," his mother was told when she offered to help, but his grandmother had to be reminded to turn the oven on, and she made to take the turkey out too soon more than once. Between these incidents she disagreed with her husband and her daughter about various memories of theirs while David tried to stay low in a book of mazes he had to trace with a pencil. At dinner he could tell that his mother was willing him to clean his plate so as not to

distress his grandmother. He did his best, and struggled to ignore pangs of indigestion as he washed up, and then as his grandmother kept talking about if not to every television programme her husband put on. "Not very Christmassy," she commented on all of them, and followed the remark with at least a glance towards the curtained window. Waiting for her to say worse, and his impression that his mother and grandfather were too, kept clenching David's stomach well before his mother declared "I think it's time someone was in bed."

As his grandmother's lips searched for an expression he wondered if she assumed that her daughter meant her. "I'm going," he said and had to be called back to be hugged and kissed and wished happy Christmas thrice.

He used the toilet, having pulled the chain to cover up his noises, and huddled in bed. He had a sense of hiding behind the scenes, the way he'd waited offstage at school to perform a line about Jesus last year, when his parents had held hands at the sight of him. The flickers and the buzzing that the bedroom curtains failed to exclude could have been stage effects, while over the mumbling of the television downstairs he heard sounds of imminent drama. At least there was no creaking on the roof. He did his best to remember last Christmas as a sharp stale taste of this one continued its antics inside him, until the memories blurred into the beginnings of a dream and let him sleep.

Movements above his head wakened him. Something soft but determined was groping at the window – a wind so vigorous that its onslaughts made the light from the sign flare like a fire someone was breathing on. The wind must be swinging the bulbs closer to his window. He hadn't time to wonder how dangerous that might be, because the creaking overhead was different: more prolonged, more purposeful. He was mostly nervous that his grandmother would hear, but there was no sign of awareness in the next room, and silence downstairs. He pressed the quilt around his ears, and then he heard sounds too loud for it to fend off – a hollow slithering followed by a thump at the window, and another. Whatever was outside seemed eager to break the glass.

David scrambled onto all fours and backed away until the quilt slipped off his body, but then he had to reach out to part the curtains at arms' length. He might have screamed if a taste hadn't choked him. Two eyes as dead as pebbles were level with his. They didn't blink, but sputtered as if they were

trying to come to a kind of life, as did the rest of the swollen face. Worse still, the nose and mouth surrounded by a dirty whitish fungus of beard were above the eyes. The inversion lent the unnecessarily crimson lips a clown's ambiguous grimace.

The mask dealt the window another blundering thump before a savage gust of wind seized the puffed-up figure. As the face sailed away from the glass, it was extinguished as though the wind had blown it out. David heard wires rip loose and saw the shape fly like a greyish vaguely human balloon over the garden wall to land on its back in the road.

It sounded as if someone had thrown away a used plastic bottle or an empty hamburger carton. Was the noise enough to bring his grandmother to her window? He wasn't sure if he would prefer not to be alone to see the grinning object flounder and begin to edge towards the house. As it twitched several inches he regretted ever having tipped an insect over to watch it struggle on its back. Then another squall of wind took possession of the dim figure, sweeping it leftwards out of sight along the middle of the road. David heard a car speed across an intersection, its progress hardly interrupted by a hollow thump and a crunch that made him think of a beetle crushed underfoot.

Once the engine dwindled into silence, nothing moved on the roads except the wind. David let the curtains fall together and slipped under the quilt. The drama had ended, even if some of its lighting effects were still operating outside the window. He didn't dream, and wakened late, remembering at once that there was nothing on the roof to worry his grandmother. Only how would she react to the absence?

He stole to the bathroom and then retreated to his bedroom. The muffled conversations downstairs felt like a pretence that all was well until his grandmother called "What are you doing up there?"

She meant David. He knew that when she warned him that his breakfast would go cold. She sounded untroubled, but for how long? "Eat up all the lovely food your mother's made," she cried, and he complied for fear of letting her suspect he was nervous, even when his stomach threatened to throw his efforts back at him. As he downed the last mouthful she said "I do believe that's the biggest breakfast I've ever had in my life. I think we all need a walk."

David swallowed too soon in order to blurt "I've got to wash up."

"What a good boy he is to his poor old granny. Don't worry, we'll wait for you. We won't run away and leave you," she said and stared at her husband for sighing.

David took all the time he could over each plate and utensil. He was considering feigning illness if that would keep his grandmother inside the house when he saw the door at the end of the back garden start to shake as if someone was fumbling at it. The grass shivered too, and he would have except for seeing why it did. "It'll be too windy to go for a walk," he told his grandmother. "It's like Grandad said, you'll catch cold."

His mouth stayed open as he realised his mistake, but that wasn't the connection she made. "How windy is it?" she said, standing up with a groan to tramp along the hall. "What's it going to do to that empty old thing?"

David couldn't look away from the quivering expanse of grass while he heard her open the front door and step onto the path. His shoulders rose as if he fancied they could block his ears, but even sticking his fingers in mightn't have deafened him to her cry. "He's got down. Where's he hidden himself?"

David turned to find his mother rubbing her forehead as though to erase her thoughts. His grandfather had lifted his hands towards his wife, but they drooped beneath an invisible weight. David's grandmother was pivoting around and around on the path, and David was reminded of ballet classes until he saw her dismayed face. He felt that all the adults were performing, as adults so often seemed compelled to do, and that he ought to stop them if he could. "It fell down," he called. "It blew away."

His grandmother pirouetted to a clumsy halt and peered along the hall at him. "Why didn't you say? What are you trying to do?"

"Don't stand out there, Dora," his grandfather protested. "You can see he only wants—"

"Never mind what Davy wants. It can be what I want for a change. It's meant to be my Christmas too. Where is he, Davy? Show me if you think you know so much."

Her voice was growing louder and more petulant. David felt as if he'd been given the job of rescuing his mother and his grandfather from further embarrassment or argument. He dodged past them and the stranded sleigh

to run to the end of the path. "It went along there," he said, pointing. "A car ran it over."

"You didn't say that before. Are you just saying so I won't be frightened?"

Until that moment he hadn't grasped how much she was. He strained his gaze at the intersection, but it looked as deserted as the rest of the street. "Show me where," she urged.

Might there be some trace? David was beginning to wish he hadn't spoken. He couldn't use her pace as an excuse for delay; she was waddling so fast to the intersection that her entire body wobbled. He ran into the middle of the crossroads, but there was no sign of last night's accident. He was even more disconcerted to realise that she was so frightened she hadn't even warned him to be careful on the road. He straightened up and swung around to look for fragments, and saw the remains heaped at the foot of a garden wall.

Someone must have tidied them into the side road. Most of the body was a shattered pile of red and white, but the head and half the left shoulder formed a single item propped on top. David was about to point around the corner when the object shifted. Still grinning, it toppled sideways as if the vanished neck had snapped. The wind was moving it, he told himself, but he wasn't sure that his grandmother ought to see. Before he could think how to prevent her, she followed his gaze. "It is him," she cried. "Someone else mustn't have liked him."

David was reaching to grab her hand and lead her away when the head shifted again. It tilted awry with a slowness that made its grin appear increasingly mocking, and slithered off the rest of the debris to inch along the pavement, scraping like a skull. "He's coming for me," David's grandmother babbled. "There's something inside him. It's the worm."

David's mother was hurrying along the street ahead of his grandfather. Before they could join his grandmother, the grinning object skittered at her. She recoiled a step, and then she lurched to trample her tormentor to bits. "That'll stop you laughing," she cried as the eyes shattered. "It's all right now, Davy. He's gone."

Was the pretence of acting on his behalf aimed at him or at the others? They seemed to accept it when at last she finished stamping and let them usher her back to the house, unless they were pretending as well. Though

the adults had reverted to behaving as they were supposed to, it was too sudden. It felt like a performance they were staging to reassure him.

He must be expected to take part. He had to, or he wouldn't be a man. He pretended not to want to go home, and did his best to simulate enjoyment of the television programmes and the games that the others were anxious his grandmother should like. He feigned an appetite when the remnants of Christmas dinner were revived, accompanied by vegetables that his mother succeeded in rescuing from his grandmother's ambitions for them.

While the day had felt far too protracted, he would have preferred it to take more time over growing dark. The wind had dropped, but not so much that he didn't have to struggle to ignore how his grandmother's eyes fluttered whenever a window shook. He made for bed as soon as he thought he wouldn't be drawing attention to his earliness. "That's right, Davy, we all need our sleep," his grandmother said as if he might be denying them theirs. He suffered another round of happy Christmases and hugs that felt more strenuous than last night's, and then he fled to his room.

The night was still except for the occasional car that slowed outside the house – not, David had to remember, because there was anything on the roof. When he switched off the light the room took on a surreptitious flicker, as if his surroundings were nervous. Surely he had no reason to be, although he could have imagined that the irritable buzz was adding an edge to the voices downstairs. He hid under the quilt and pretended he was about to sleep until the sham overtook him.

A change in the lighting roused him. He was pushing the quilt away from his face so as to greet the day that would take him home when he noticed that the illumination was too fitful to be sunlight. As it glared under the curtains again he heard uncoordinated movement through the window. The wind must have returned to play with the lit sign. He was hoping that it wouldn't awaken his grandmother, or that she would at least know what was really there, when he realised with a shock that paralysed his breath how wrong he was. He hadn't heard the wind. The clumsy noises outside were more solid and more localised. Light stained the wall above his bed, and an object blundered as if it was limbless against the front door.

If this hadn't robbed David of the ability to move, the thought of his grandmother's reaction would have. It was even worse than the prospect of

looking himself. He hadn't succeeded in breathing when he heard her say "Who's that? Has he come back?"

David would have blocked his ears if he had been capable of lifting his fists from beside him. He must have breathed, but he was otherwise helpless. The pause in the next room was almost as ominous as the sounds that brought it to an end: the rumble of the window, another series of light but impatient thumps at the front door, his grandmother's loose unsteady voice. "He's here for me. He's all lit up, his eyes are. The worm's put him back together. I should have squashed the worm."

"Stop wandering, for God's sake," said David's grandfather. "I can't take much more of this, I'm telling you."

"Look how he's been put back together," she said with such a mixture of dismay and pleading that David was terrified it would compel him to obey. Instead his panic wakened him.

He was lying inert, his thoughts as tangled as the quilt, when he heard his grandmother insist "He was there."

"Just get back in bed," his grandfather told her.

David didn't know how long he lay waiting for her to shut the window. After that there seemed to be nothing to hear once her bed acknowledged her with an outburst of creaking. He stayed uneasily alert until he managed to think of a way to make sense of events: he'd overheard her in his sleep and had dreamed the rest. Having resolved this let him feel manly enough to regain his slumber.

This time daylight found him. It seemed to render the night irrelevant, at least to him. He wasn't sure about his grandmother, who looked uncertain of something. She insisted on cooking breakfast, rather more than aided by her husband. Once David and his mother had done their duty by their portions it was time to call a taxi. David manhandled the suitcase downstairs by himself and wheeled it to the car, past the decorations that appeared dusty with sunlight. His grandparents hugged him at the gate, and his grandmother repeated the gesture as if she'd already forgotten it. "Come and see us again soon," she said without too much conviction, perhaps because she was distracted by glancing along the street and at the roof.

David thought he saw his chance to demonstrate how much of a man he was. "It wasn't there, Granny. It was just a dream."

Her face quivered, and her eyes. "What was, Davy? What are you talking about?"

He had a sudden awful sense of having miscalculated, but all he could do was answer. "There wasn't anything out here last night."

Her mouth was too nervous to hold onto a smile that might have been triumphant. "You heard him as well."

"No," David protested, but his mother grabbed his arm. "That's enough," she said in a tone he'd never heard her use before. "We'll miss the train. Look after each other," she blurted at her parents, and shoved David into the taxi. All the way through the streets full of lifeless decorations, and for some time on the train, she had no more to say to him than "Just leave me alone for a while."

He thought she blamed him for frightening his grandmother. He remembered that two months later, when his grandmother died. At the funeral he imagined how heavy the box with her inside it must be on the shoulders of the four gloomy men. He succeeded in withholding his guilty tears, since his grandfather left crying to David's mother. When David tried to sprinkle earth on the coffin in the hole, a fierce wind carried off his handful as if his grandmother had blown it away with an angry breath. Eventually all the cars paraded back to the house that was only his grandfather's now, where a crowd of people David hadn't met before ate the sandwiches his mother had made and kept telling him how grown-up he was. He felt required to pretend, and wished his mother hadn't taken two days off from working at the nursery so that they could stay overnight. Once the guests left he felt more isolated still. His grandfather broke one of many silences by saying "You look as if you'd like to ask a question, Davy. Don't be shy."

David wasn't sure he wanted to be heard, but he had to be polite and answer. "What happened to Granny?"

"People change when they get old, son. You'll find that out, well, you have. She was still your grandmother really."

Too much of this was more ominous than reassuring. David was loath to ask how she'd died, and almost to say, "I meant where's she gone."

"I can't tell you that, son. All of us are going to have to wait and see."

Perhaps David's mother sensed this was the opposite of comforting, for she said "I think it's like turning into a butterfly, David. Our body's just the chrysalis we leave behind."

He had to affect to be happy with that, despite the memory it threatened to revive, because he was afraid he might otherwise hear worse. He apparently convinced his mother, who turned to his grandfather. "I wish I'd seen Mummy one last time."

"She looked like a doll."

"No, while she was alive."

"I don't think you'd have liked it, Jane. Try and remember her how she used to be and I will. You will, won't you, Davy?"

David didn't want to imagine the consequences of giving or even thinking the wrong answer. "I'll try," he said.

This appeared to be less than was expected of him. He was desperate to change the subject, but all he could think of was how bare the house seemed without its Christmas finery. Rather than say so he enquired, "Where do all the decorations go?"

"They've gone as well, son. They were always Dora's."

David was beginning to feel that nothing was safe to ask or say. He could tell that the adults wanted him to leave them alone to talk. At least they oughtn't to be arguing, not like his parents used to as soon as he was out of the way, making him think that the low hostile remarks he could never quite hear were blaming him for the trouble with the marriage. At least he wouldn't be distracted by the buzzing and the insistent light while he tried to sleep or hear. The wind helped blur the voices below him, so that although he gathered that they were agreeing, he only suspected they were discussing him. Were they saying how he'd scared his grandmother to death? "I'm sorry," he kept whispering like a prayer, which belatedly lulled him to sleep.

A siren wakened him – an ambulance. The pair of notes might have been crying "Davy" through the streets. He wondered if an ambulance had carried off his grandmother. The braying faded into the distance, leaving silence except for the wind. His mother and his grandfather must be in their beds, unless they had decided David was sufficiently grown-up to be left by himself in the house. He hoped not, because the wind sounded like a loose voice repeating his name. The noises on the stairs might be doing so as

well, except that they were shuffling footsteps or, as he was able to make out before long, rather less than footsteps. Another sound was approaching. It was indeed a version of his name, pronounced by an exhalation that was just about a voice, by no means entirely like his grandmother's but too much so. It and the slow determined unformed paces halted outside his room.

He couldn't cry out for his mother, not because he wouldn't be a man but for fear of drawing attention to himself. He was offstage, he tried to think. He only had to listen, he needn't see more than the lurid light that flared across the carpet. Then his visitor set about opening the door.

It made a good deal of locating the doorknob, and attempting to take hold of it, and fumbling to turn it, so that David had far more time than he wanted to imagine what was there. If his grandmother had gone away, had whatever remained come to find him? Was something of her still inside her to move it, or was that a worm? The door shuddered and edged open, admitting a grotesquely festive glow, and David tried to shut his eyes. But he was even more afraid not to see the shape that floundered into the room.

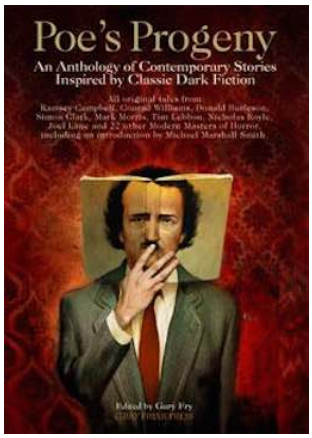
He saw at once that she'd become what she was afraid of. She was draped with a necklace of fairy lights, and two guttering bulbs had taken the place of her eyes. Dim green light spilled like slimy water down her cheeks. She wore a long white dress, if the vague pale mass wasn't part of her, for her face looked inflated to hollowness, close to bursting. Perhaps that was why her mouth was stretched so wide, but her grin was terrified. He had a sudden dreadful thought that both she and the worm were inside the shape.

It blundered forward and then fell against the door. Either it had very little control of its movements or it intended to trap him in the room. It lurched at him as if it was as helpless as he was, and David sprawled out of bed. He grabbed one of his shoes from the floor and hurled it at the swollen flickering mass. It was only a doll, he thought, because the grin didn't falter. Perhaps it was less than a doll, since it vanished like a bubble. As his shoe struck the door the room went dark.

He might almost have believed that nothing had been there if he hadn't heard more than his shoe drop to the floor. When he tore the curtains open he saw fairy lights strewn across the carpet. They weren't what he was certain he'd heard slithering into some part of the room. All the same, once he'd put on his shoes he trampled the bulbs into fragments, and then he fell to his hands and knees. He was still crawling about the floor when his

mother hurried in and peered unhappily at him. "Help me find it," he pleaded. "We've got to kill the worm."

Just Behind You



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"Here they are at last," David's grandmother cried, and her face lit up: green from the luminous plastic holly that bordered the front door and then, as she took a plump step to hug David's mother, red with the glow from the costume of the Santa in the sleigh beneath the window. "Was the traffic that bad, Jane?"

"I still don't drive, Mummy. One of the trains was held up and we missed a connection."

"You want to get yourself another man. Never mind, you'll always have Davy," his grandmother panted as she waddled to embrace him.

Her clasp was even fatter than last time. It smelled of clothes he thought could be as old as she was, and of perfume that didn't quite disguise a further staleness he was afraid was her. His embarrassment was aggravated by a car that slowed outside the house, though the driver was only admiring the Christmas display. When his grandmother abruptly released him he thought she'd noticed his reaction, but she was peering at the sleigh. "Has he got down?" she whispered.

David understood before his mother seemed to. He retreated along the path between the flower-beds full of grass to squint past the lights that flashed MERRY CHRISTMAS above the bedroom windows. The second Santa was still perched on the roof; a wind set the illuminated figure rocking back and forth as if with silent laughter. "He's there," David said.

"I expect he has to be in lots of places at once."

Now that he was nearly eight, David knew that his father had always been Santa. Before he could say as much, his grandmother plodded to gaze at the roof. "Do you like him?"

"I like coming to see all your Christmas things."

"I'm not so fond of him. He looks too empty for my liking." As the figure shifted in another wind she shouted "You stay up there where you belong. Never mind thinking of jumping on us."

David's grandfather hurried out to her, his slippers flapping on his thin feet, his reduced face wincing. "Come inside, Dora. You'll have the neighbours looking."

"I don't care about the fat old thing," she said loud enough to be heard on the roof and tramped into the house. "You can take your mummy's case up, can't you, David? You're a big strong boy now."

He enjoyed hauling the wheeled suitcase on its leash – it was like having a dog he could talk to, sometimes not only in his head – but bumping the luggage upstairs risked snagging the already threadbare carpet, and so his mother supported the burden. "I'll just unpack quickly," she told him. "Go down and see if anyone needs help."

He used the frilly toilet in the equally pink bathroom and lingered until his mother asked if he was all right. He was trying to stay clear of the argument he could just hear through the salmon carpet. As he ventured downstairs his grandmother pounced on some remark so muted it was almost silent. "You do better, then. Let's see you cook."

He could smell the subject of the disagreement. Once he'd finished setting the table from the tray with which his grandfather sent him out of the kitchen, he and his mother saw it too: a casserole encrusted with gravy and containing a shrivelled lump of beef. Potatoes roasted close to impenetrability came with it, and green beans from which someone had tried to scrape the worst of the charring. "It's not as bad as it looks, is it?" David's grandmother said through her first mouthful. "I expect it's like having a barbecue, Davy."

"I don't know," he confessed, never having had one.

"They've no idea, these men, have they, Jane? They don't have to keep dinner waiting for people. I expect your hubby's the same."

"Was, but can we not talk about him?"

"He's learned his lesson, then. No call to make that face at me, Tom. I'm only saying Davy's father – Oh, you've split up, Jane, haven't you. Sorry about my big fat trap. Sorry Davy too."

"Just eat what you want," his grandfather advised him, "and then you'd best be scampering off to bed so Santa can make his deliveries."

"We all want to be tucked up before he's on the move," said his grandmother before remembering to smile.

Santa had gone away like David's father, and David was too old to miss either of them. He managed to breach the carapace of a second potato and chewed several forkfuls of dried-up beef, but the burned remains of beans defeated him. All the same, he thanked his grandmother as he stood up. "There's a good boy," she said rather too loudly, as if interceding with someone on his behalf. "Do your best to go to sleep."

That sounded like an inexplicit warning, and was one of the elements that kept him awake in his bedroom, which was no larger than his room in the flat he'd moved to with his mother. Despite their heaviness, the curtains admitted a repetitive flicker from the letters ERR above the window, and a buzz that suggested an insect was hovering over the bed. He could just hear voices downstairs, which gave him the impression that they didn't want him to know what they were saying. He was most troubled by a hollow creaking that reminded him of someone in a rocking chair, but overhead. The Santa figure must be swaying in the wind, not doing its best to heave itself free. David was too old for stories: while real ones didn't always stay true, that wasn't an excuse to make any up. Still, he was glad to hear his mother and her parents coming upstairs at last, lowering their voices to compensate. He heard doors shutting for the night, and then a nervous question from his grandmother through the wall between their rooms. "What's he doing? Is he loose?"

"If he falls, he falls," his grandfather said barely audibly, "and good riddance to him if he's getting on your nerves. For pity's sake come to bed."

David tried not to find this more disturbing than the notion that his parents had shared one. Rather than hear the mattress sag under the weight his grandmother had put on, he tugged the quilt over his head. His grasp must have slackened when he drifted off to sleep, because he was roused by a voice. It was outside the house but too close to the window.

It was his grandfather's. David was disconcerted by the notion that the old man had clambered onto the roof until he realised his grandfather was calling out of the adjacent window. "What do you think you're doing, Dora? Come in before you catch your death."

"I'm seeing he's stayed where he's meant to be," David's grandmother responded from below. "Yes, you know I'm talking about you, don't you. Never mind pretending you didn't nod."

"Get in for the Lord's sake," his grandfather urged, underlining his words with a rumble of the sash. David heard him pad across the room and as rapidly if more stealthily down the stairs. A bated argument grew increasingly stifled as it ascended to the bedroom. David had refrained from looking out of the window for fear of embarrassing his grandparents, but now he was nervous that his mother would be drawn to find out what was happening. He mustn't go to her; he had to be a man, as she kept telling him, and not one like his father, who ran off to women because there was so little to him. In time the muttering beyond the wall subsided, and David was alone with the insistence of electricity and the restlessness on the roof.

When he opened his eyes the curtains had acquired a hem of daylight. It was Christmas Day. Last year he'd run downstairs to handle all the packages addressed to him under the tree and guess at their contents, but now he was wary of encountering his grandparents by himself in case he betrayed he was concealing their secret. As he lay hoping that his grandmother had slept off her condition, he heard his mother in the kitchen. "Let me make breakfast, Mummy. It can be a little extra present for you."

He didn't venture down until she called him. "Here's the Christmas boy," his grandmother shouted as if he was responsible for the occasion, and dealt him such a hug that he struggled within himself. "Eat up or you won't grow."

Her onslaught had dislodged a taste of last night's food. He did his best to bury it under his breakfast, then volunteered to wash up the plates and utensils and dry them as well. Before he finished she was crying "Hurry up so we can see what Santa's brought. I'm as excited as you, Davy."

He hoped she was only making these remarks on his behalf, not somehow growing younger than he was. In the front room his grandfather distributed the presents while the bulbs on the tree flashed patterns that made David think of secret messages. His grandparents had wrapped him up puzzle books and tales of heroic boys, his mother's gifts to him were games for his home computer. "Thank you," he said, sometimes dutifully.

It was the last computer game that prompted his grandmother to ask "Who are you thanking?" At once, as if she feared she'd spoiled the day for him,

she added "I expect he's listening."

"Nobody's listening," his grandfather objected. "Nobody's there."

"Don't say things like that, Tom, not in front of Davy."

"That isn't necessary, Mummy. You know the truth, don't you, David? Tell your grandmother."

"Santa's just a fairy tale," David said, although it felt like robbing a younger child of an illusion. "Really people have to save up to buy presents."

"He had to know when we've so much less coming in this Christmas," said his mother. "You see how good he's being. I believe he's taken it better than I did."

"I'm sorry if I upset you, Davy."

"You didn't," David said, not least because his grandmother's eyes looked dangerously moist. "I'm sorry if I upset you."

Her face was already quivering as if there was too much of it to hold still. When she shook her head her cheeks wobbled like a whitish rubber mask that was about to fall loose. He didn't know whether she meant to answer him or had strayed onto another subject as she peered towards the window. "There's nothing to him at all then, is there? He's just an empty old shell. Can't we get him down now?"

"Better wait till the new year," David's grandfather said, and with sudden bitterness "We don't want any more bad luck."

Her faded sunken armchair creaked with relief as she levered herself to her feet. "Where are you going?" her husband protested and limped after her, out of the front door. He murmured at her while she stared up at the roof. At least she didn't shout, but she began to talk not much less quietly as she returned to the house. "I don't like him moving about with nothing inside him," she said before she appeared to recollect David's presence. "Maybe he's like one of those beans with a worm inside, Davy, that used to jig about all the time."

While David didn't understand and was unsure he wanted to, his mother's hasty intervention wasn't reassuring either. "Shall we play some games? What would you like to play, Mummy?"

"What do you call it. Lollopy. The one with all the little houses. Too little for any big fat things to climb on. Lollopy."

"Monopoly."

"Lollopy," David's grandmother maintained, only to continue "I don't want to play that. Too many sums. What's your favourite, Davy?"

Monopoly was, but he didn't want to add to all the tensions that he sensed rather than comprehended. "Whatever yours is."

"Ludo," she cried and clapped her hands. "I'd play it every Sunday with your granny and grandpa when I was Davy's age, Jane."

He wondered if she wasn't just remembering but behaving as she used to. She pleaded to be allowed to move her counters whenever she failed to throw a six, and kept trying to move more than she threw. David would have let her win, but his grandfather persisted in reminding her that she had to cast the precise amount to guide her counters home. After several games in which his grandmother squinted with increasingly less comical suspicion at her opponents' moves, David's mother said "Who'd like to go out for a walk?"

Apparently everyone did, which meant they couldn't go fast or far. David felt out of place compared with the boys he saw riding their Christmas bicycles or brandishing their Christmas weapons. Beneath a sky frosty with cloud, all the decorations in the duplicated streets looked deadened by the pale sunlight, though they were still among the very few elements that distinguished one squat boxy house from another. "They're not as good as ours, are they?" his grandmother kept remarking when she wasn't frowning at the roofs. "He's not there either," he heard her mutter more than once, and as her house came in sight "See, he didn't follow us. We'd have heard him."

She was saying that nothing had moved or could move, David tried to think, but he was nervous of returning to the house. The preparation of Christmas dinner proved to be reason enough. "Too many women in this kitchen," his mother was told when she offered to help, but his grandmother had to be reminded to turn the oven on, and she made to take the turkey out too soon more than once. Between these incidents she disagreed with her husband and her daughter about various memories of theirs while David tried to stay low in a book of mazes he had to trace with a pencil. At dinner he could tell that his mother was willing him to clean his plate so as not to

distress his grandmother. He did his best, and struggled to ignore pangs of indigestion as he washed up, and then as his grandmother kept talking about if not to every television programme her husband put on. "Not very Christmassy," she commented on all of them, and followed the remark with at least a glance towards the curtained window. Waiting for her to say worse, and his impression that his mother and grandfather were too, kept clenching David's stomach well before his mother declared "I think it's time someone was in bed."

As his grandmother's lips searched for an expression he wondered if she assumed that her daughter meant her. "I'm going," he said and had to be called back to be hugged and kissed and wished happy Christmas thrice.

He used the toilet, having pulled the chain to cover up his noises, and huddled in bed. He had a sense of hiding behind the scenes, the way he'd waited offstage at school to perform a line about Jesus last year, when his parents had held hands at the sight of him. The flickers and the buzzing that the bedroom curtains failed to exclude could have been stage effects, while over the mumbling of the television downstairs he heard sounds of imminent drama. At least there was no creaking on the roof. He did his best to remember last Christmas as a sharp stale taste of this one continued its antics inside him, until the memories blurred into the beginnings of a dream and let him sleep.

Movements above his head wakened him. Something soft but determined was groping at the window – a wind so vigorous that its onslaughts made the light from the sign flare like a fire someone was breathing on. The wind must be swinging the bulbs closer to his window. He hadn't time to wonder how dangerous that might be, because the creaking overhead was different: more prolonged, more purposeful. He was mostly nervous that his grandmother would hear, but there was no sign of awareness in the next room, and silence downstairs. He pressed the quilt around his ears, and then he heard sounds too loud for it to fend off – a hollow slithering followed by a thump at the window, and another. Whatever was outside seemed eager to break the glass.

David scrambled onto all fours and backed away until the quilt slipped off his body, but then he had to reach out to part the curtains at arms' length. He might have screamed if a taste hadn't choked him. Two eyes as dead as pebbles were level with his. They didn't blink, but sputtered as if they were

trying to come to a kind of life, as did the rest of the swollen face. Worse still, the nose and mouth surrounded by a dirty whitish fungus of beard were above the eyes. The inversion lent the unnecessarily crimson lips a clown's ambiguous grimace.

The mask dealt the window another blundering thump before a savage gust of wind seized the puffed-up figure. As the face sailed away from the glass, it was extinguished as though the wind had blown it out. David heard wires rip loose and saw the shape fly like a greyish vaguely human balloon over the garden wall to land on its back in the road.

It sounded as if someone had thrown away a used plastic bottle or an empty hamburger carton. Was the noise enough to bring his grandmother to her window? He wasn't sure if he would prefer not to be alone to see the grinning object flounder and begin to edge towards the house. As it twitched several inches he regretted ever having tipped an insect over to watch it struggle on its back. Then another squall of wind took possession of the dim figure, sweeping it leftwards out of sight along the middle of the road. David heard a car speed across an intersection, its progress hardly interrupted by a hollow thump and a crunch that made him think of a beetle crushed underfoot.

Once the engine dwindled into silence, nothing moved on the roads except the wind. David let the curtains fall together and slipped under the quilt. The drama had ended, even if some of its lighting effects were still operating outside the window. He didn't dream, and wakened late, remembering at once that there was nothing on the roof to worry his grandmother. Only how would she react to the absence?

He stole to the bathroom and then retreated to his bedroom. The muffled conversations downstairs felt like a pretence that all was well until his grandmother called "What are you doing up there?"

She meant David. He knew that when she warned him that his breakfast would go cold. She sounded untroubled, but for how long? "Eat up all the lovely food your mother's made," she cried, and he complied for fear of letting her suspect he was nervous, even when his stomach threatened to throw his efforts back at him. As he downed the last mouthful she said "I do believe that's the biggest breakfast I've ever had in my life. I think we all need a walk."

David swallowed too soon in order to blurt "I've got to wash up."

"What a good boy he is to his poor old granny. Don't worry, we'll wait for you. We won't run away and leave you," she said and stared at her husband for sighing.

David took all the time he could over each plate and utensil. He was considering feigning illness if that would keep his grandmother inside the house when he saw the door at the end of the back garden start to shake as if someone was fumbling at it. The grass shivered too, and he would have except for seeing why it did. "It'll be too windy to go for a walk," he told his grandmother. "It's like Grandad said, you'll catch cold."

His mouth stayed open as he realised his mistake, but that wasn't the connection she made. "How windy is it?" she said, standing up with a groan to tramp along the hall. "What's it going to do to that empty old thing?"

David couldn't look away from the quivering expanse of grass while he heard her open the front door and step onto the path. His shoulders rose as if he fancied they could block his ears, but even sticking his fingers in mightn't have deafened him to her cry. "He's got down. Where's he hidden himself?"

David turned to find his mother rubbing her forehead as though to erase her thoughts. His grandfather had lifted his hands towards his wife, but they drooped beneath an invisible weight. David's grandmother was pivoting around and around on the path, and David was reminded of ballet classes until he saw her dismayed face. He felt that all the adults were performing, as adults so often seemed compelled to do, and that he ought to stop them if he could. "It fell down," he called. "It blew away."

His grandmother pirouetted to a clumsy halt and peered along the hall at him. "Why didn't you say? What are you trying to do?"

"Don't stand out there, Dora," his grandfather protested. "You can see he only wants—"

"Never mind what Davy wants. It can be what I want for a change. It's meant to be my Christmas too. Where is he, Davy? Show me if you think you know so much."

Her voice was growing louder and more petulant. David felt as if he'd been given the job of rescuing his mother and his grandfather from further embarrassment or argument. He dodged past them and the stranded sleigh

to run to the end of the path. "It went along there," he said, pointing. "A car ran it over."

"You didn't say that before. Are you just saying so I won't be frightened?"

Until that moment he hadn't grasped how much she was. He strained his gaze at the intersection, but it looked as deserted as the rest of the street. "Show me where," she urged.

Might there be some trace? David was beginning to wish he hadn't spoken. He couldn't use her pace as an excuse for delay; she was waddling so fast to the intersection that her entire body wobbled. He ran into the middle of the crossroads, but there was no sign of last night's accident. He was even more disconcerted to realise that she was so frightened she hadn't even warned him to be careful on the road. He straightened up and swung around to look for fragments, and saw the remains heaped at the foot of a garden wall.

Someone must have tidied them into the side road. Most of the body was a shattered pile of red and white, but the head and half the left shoulder formed a single item propped on top. David was about to point around the corner when the object shifted. Still grinning, it toppled sideways as if the vanished neck had snapped. The wind was moving it, he told himself, but he wasn't sure that his grandmother ought to see. Before he could think how to prevent her, she followed his gaze. "It is him," she cried. "Someone else mustn't have liked him."

David was reaching to grab her hand and lead her away when the head shifted again. It tilted awry with a slowness that made its grin appear increasingly mocking, and slithered off the rest of the debris to inch along the pavement, scraping like a skull. "He's coming for me," David's grandmother babbled. "There's something inside him. It's the worm."

David's mother was hurrying along the street ahead of his grandfather. Before they could join his grandmother, the grinning object skittered at her. She recoiled a step, and then she lurched to trample her tormentor to bits. "That'll stop you laughing," she cried as the eyes shattered. "It's all right now, Davy. He's gone."

Was the pretence of acting on his behalf aimed at him or at the others? They seemed to accept it when at last she finished stamping and let them usher her back to the house, unless they were pretending as well. Though

the adults had reverted to behaving as they were supposed to, it was too sudden. It felt like a performance they were staging to reassure him.

He must be expected to take part. He had to, or he wouldn't be a man. He pretended not to want to go home, and did his best to simulate enjoyment of the television programmes and the games that the others were anxious his grandmother should like. He feigned an appetite when the remnants of Christmas dinner were revived, accompanied by vegetables that his mother succeeded in rescuing from his grandmother's ambitions for them.

While the day had felt far too protracted, he would have preferred it to take more time over growing dark. The wind had dropped, but not so much that he didn't have to struggle to ignore how his grandmother's eyes fluttered whenever a window shook. He made for bed as soon as he thought he wouldn't be drawing attention to his earliness. "That's right, Davy, we all need our sleep," his grandmother said as if he might be denying them theirs. He suffered another round of happy Christmases and hugs that felt more strenuous than last night's, and then he fled to his room.

The night was still except for the occasional car that slowed outside the house – not, David had to remember, because there was anything on the roof. When he switched off the light the room took on a surreptitious flicker, as if his surroundings were nervous. Surely he had no reason to be, although he could have imagined that the irritable buzz was adding an edge to the voices downstairs. He hid under the quilt and pretended he was about to sleep until the sham overtook him.

A change in the lighting roused him. He was pushing the quilt away from his face so as to greet the day that would take him home when he noticed that the illumination was too fitful to be sunlight. As it glared under the curtains again he heard uncoordinated movement through the window. The wind must have returned to play with the lit sign. He was hoping that it wouldn't awaken his grandmother, or that she would at least know what was really there, when he realised with a shock that paralysed his breath how wrong he was. He hadn't heard the wind. The clumsy noises outside were more solid and more localised. Light stained the wall above his bed, and an object blundered as if it was limbless against the front door.

If this hadn't robbed David of the ability to move, the thought of his grandmother's reaction would have. It was even worse than the prospect of

looking himself. He hadn't succeeded in breathing when he heard her say "Who's that? Has he come back?"

David would have blocked his ears if he had been capable of lifting his fists from beside him. He must have breathed, but he was otherwise helpless. The pause in the next room was almost as ominous as the sounds that brought it to an end: the rumble of the window, another series of light but impatient thumps at the front door, his grandmother's loose unsteady voice. "He's here for me. He's all lit up, his eyes are. The worm's put him back together. I should have squashed the worm."

"Stop wandering, for God's sake," said David's grandfather. "I can't take much more of this, I'm telling you."

"Look how he's been put back together," she said with such a mixture of dismay and pleading that David was terrified it would compel him to obey. Instead his panic wakened him.

He was lying inert, his thoughts as tangled as the quilt, when he heard his grandmother insist "He was there."

"Just get back in bed," his grandfather told her.

David didn't know how long he lay waiting for her to shut the window. After that there seemed to be nothing to hear once her bed acknowledged her with an outburst of creaking. He stayed uneasily alert until he managed to think of a way to make sense of events: he'd overheard her in his sleep and had dreamed the rest. Having resolved this let him feel manly enough to regain his slumber.

This time daylight found him. It seemed to render the night irrelevant, at least to him. He wasn't sure about his grandmother, who looked uncertain of something. She insisted on cooking breakfast, rather more than aided by her husband. Once David and his mother had done their duty by their portions it was time to call a taxi. David manhandled the suitcase downstairs by himself and wheeled it to the car, past the decorations that appeared dusty with sunlight. His grandparents hugged him at the gate, and his grandmother repeated the gesture as if she'd already forgotten it. "Come and see us again soon," she said without too much conviction, perhaps because she was distracted by glancing along the street and at the roof.

David thought he saw his chance to demonstrate how much of a man he was. "It wasn't there, Granny. It was just a dream."

Her face quivered, and her eyes. "What was, Davy? What are you talking about?"

He had a sudden awful sense of having miscalculated, but all he could do was answer. "There wasn't anything out here last night."

Her mouth was too nervous to hold onto a smile that might have been triumphant. "You heard him as well."

"No," David protested, but his mother grabbed his arm. "That's enough," she said in a tone he'd never heard her use before. "We'll miss the train. Look after each other," she blurted at her parents, and shoved David into the taxi. All the way through the streets full of lifeless decorations, and for some time on the train, she had no more to say to him than "Just leave me alone for a while."

He thought she blamed him for frightening his grandmother. He remembered that two months later, when his grandmother died. At the funeral he imagined how heavy the box with her inside it must be on the shoulders of the four gloomy men. He succeeded in withholding his guilty tears, since his grandfather left crying to David's mother. When David tried to sprinkle earth on the coffin in the hole, a fierce wind carried off his handful as if his grandmother had blown it away with an angry breath. Eventually all the cars paraded back to the house that was only his grandfather's now, where a crowd of people David hadn't met before ate the sandwiches his mother had made and kept telling him how grown-up he was. He felt required to pretend, and wished his mother hadn't taken two days off from working at the nursery so that they could stay overnight. Once the guests left he felt more isolated still. His grandfather broke one of many silences by saying "You look as if you'd like to ask a question, Davy. Don't be shy."

David wasn't sure he wanted to be heard, but he had to be polite and answer. "What happened to Granny?"

"People change when they get old, son. You'll find that out, well, you have. She was still your grandmother really."

Too much of this was more ominous than reassuring. David was loath to ask how she'd died, and almost to say, "I meant where's she gone."

"I can't tell you that, son. All of us are going to have to wait and see."

Perhaps David's mother sensed this was the opposite of comforting, for she said "I think it's like turning into a butterfly, David. Our body's just the chrysalis we leave behind."

He had to affect to be happy with that, despite the memory it threatened to revive, because he was afraid he might otherwise hear worse. He apparently convinced his mother, who turned to his grandfather. "I wish I'd seen Mummy one last time."

"She looked like a doll."

"No, while she was alive."

"I don't think you'd have liked it, Jane. Try and remember her how she used to be and I will. You will, won't you, Davy?"

David didn't want to imagine the consequences of giving or even thinking the wrong answer. "I'll try," he said.

This appeared to be less than was expected of him. He was desperate to change the subject, but all he could think of was how bare the house seemed without its Christmas finery. Rather than say so he enquired, "Where do all the decorations go?"

"They've gone as well, son. They were always Dora's."

David was beginning to feel that nothing was safe to ask or say. He could tell that the adults wanted him to leave them alone to talk. At least they oughtn't to be arguing, not like his parents used to as soon as he was out of the way, making him think that the low hostile remarks he could never quite hear were blaming him for the trouble with the marriage. At least he wouldn't be distracted by the buzzing and the insistent light while he tried to sleep or hear. The wind helped blur the voices below him, so that although he gathered that they were agreeing, he only suspected they were discussing him. Were they saying how he'd scared his grandmother to death? "I'm sorry," he kept whispering like a prayer, which belatedly lulled him to sleep.

A siren wakened him – an ambulance. The pair of notes might have been crying "Davy" through the streets. He wondered if an ambulance had carried off his grandmother. The braying faded into the distance, leaving silence except for the wind. His mother and his grandfather must be in their beds, unless they had decided David was sufficiently grown-up to be left by himself in the house. He hoped not, because the wind sounded like a loose voice repeating his name. The noises on the stairs might be doing so as

well, except that they were shuffling footsteps or, as he was able to make out before long, rather less than footsteps. Another sound was approaching. It was indeed a version of his name, pronounced by an exhalation that was just about a voice, by no means entirely like his grandmother's but too much so. It and the slow determined unformed paces halted outside his room.

He couldn't cry out for his mother, not because he wouldn't be a man but for fear of drawing attention to himself. He was offstage, he tried to think. He only had to listen, he needn't see more than the lurid light that flared across the carpet. Then his visitor set about opening the door.

It made a good deal of locating the doorknob, and attempting to take hold of it, and fumbling to turn it, so that David had far more time than he wanted to imagine what was there. If his grandmother had gone away, had whatever remained come to find him? Was something of her still inside her to move it, or was that a worm? The door shuddered and edged open, admitting a grotesquely festive glow, and David tried to shut his eyes. But he was even more afraid not to see the shape that floundered into the room.

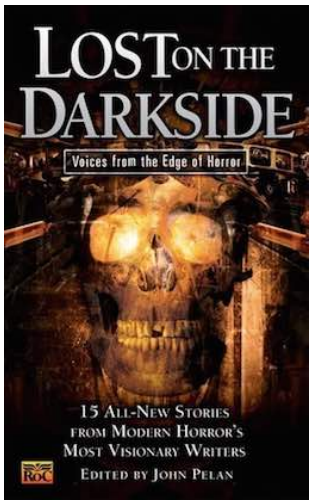
He saw at once that she'd become what she was afraid of. She was draped with a necklace of fairy lights, and two guttering bulbs had taken the place of her eyes. Dim green light spilled like slimy water down her cheeks. She wore a long white dress, if the vague pale mass wasn't part of her, for her face looked inflated to hollowness, close to bursting. Perhaps that was why her mouth was stretched so wide, but her grin was terrified. He had a sudden dreadful thought that both she and the worm were inside the shape.

It blundered forward and then fell against the door. Either it had very little control of its movements or it intended to trap him in the room. It lurched at him as if it was as helpless as he was, and David sprawled out of bed. He grabbed one of his shoes from the floor and hurled it at the swollen flickering mass. It was only a doll, he thought, because the grin didn't falter. Perhaps it was less than a doll, since it vanished like a bubble. As his shoe struck the door the room went dark.

He might almost have believed that nothing had been there if he hadn't heard more than his shoe drop to the floor. When he tore the curtains open he saw fairy lights strewn across the carpet. They weren't what he was certain he'd heard slithering into some part of the room. All the same, once he'd put on his shoes he trampled the bulbs into fragments, and then he fell to his hands and knees. He was still crawling about the floor when his

mother hurried in and peered unhappily at him. "Help me find it," he pleaded. "We've got to kill the worm."

Unblinking



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Dignam wasn't sure if the essays he was marking defeated him or the gaze of his neighbour did. Now that the postwoman had delivered to both sides of the road, the man was regarding him across it with what looked unreasonably like accusation. With its unyielding stare and its fixed resentful grimace, Dignam could almost have taken the face for a mask somebody had hung inside the window opposite. It felt as hostile as all the essays he'd graded so far—as their insistence that mental illness could be a gift. He wandered downstairs to see that the post was even less rewarding than he'd assumed: a credit card had sent him the same invitation twice. He was about to bin the duplicate unopened when he realised it was addressed to his neighbour.

His name was Brady, then. How likely was he to welcome the item? Dignam was tempted to throw it away, but it didn't belong to him. He let himself out onto the short path piebald with March frost and fringed with icy spikes of grass. The glazed road was crunchy with frozen winged seeds from Brady's sprawling sycamore. As Dignam stepped between the crumbling stone gateposts under the tree, the man thumped on his window. "Wait there," he shouted and backed into dimness.

Dignam ambled down a path so overgrown it was indistinguishable from the abandoned garden to the front door, which was as scaly as the rest of the exterior. Beside it thick off-white curtains hung inert as paint against the entire interior of a bay window spotted with many rains. He'd started to think Brady had been distracted from claiming his mail when rapid footsteps clumped downstairs and the door was wrenched open with a vicious creak. "I said I was coming," Brady declared, having barely lowered his loose voice.

What had kept him? Not combing his spectacularly uneven greyish hair, nor getting dressed, since he was almost certainly wearing only a dressing-

gown stained with egg and toothpaste. This close, his whitish wrinkled puffed-up face more than ever resembled a mask through which his glittering bloodshot eyes peered suspiciously at Dignam. "This is yours," Dignam said. "She delivered it to me by mistake."

"What is it?"

"Just an invitation to take out a credit card, as though there isn't already enough plastic in the world."

"And how would you know how many I've got of those?"

"I've no idea. I meant generally, of course. Me, I've got all I can cope with."

Brady thrust out a hand that involved a smell of stale cloth and turned over the envelope to scrutinise the blank expanse of orange paper before examining the front afresh. OPEN AT ONCE! THIS COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE! red letters in blue outlines exhorted beneath his address. "Steamed it open, did you?" he enquired.

"Most decidedly not. Why should you—

There's where," Brady scoffed, poking a chewed cracked fingernail under the flap. "And you gave yourself away knowing what's inside."

"That's because I received the identical mailing."

"Identical, was it? Had my name on too?"

"Except for that and of course the address. I really must assure you—"

"I'll bet you must." Brady ripped open the envelope and squinted at the picture of a credit card, then stuffed the wad of paper into a dangling pocket. "Teacher, that right?"

"Actually I'm—"

"Don't tell me. A university teacher."

"A lecturer, yes. How did you know?"

"If you don't want everyone knowing you shouldn't let them see you marking papers and thinking what you're thinking about the girls that wrote them."

"They aren't only girls. Plenty of men as well."

Brady looked worse than vindicated. "I think I'll ask you to excuse me," Dignam said, feeling close to trapped by the man's view of him.

He was almost at the pavement when a stout middle-aged woman tramped by. "Watch out for that one, Mrs Vernon," Brady shouted. "Reads other people's letters. He'll be in our houses next."

The woman frowned at Dignam and increased her speed. "Mr Brady," he called for her to overhear, "if you spread that sort of tale I'll be forced to take action."

"Got my name now, have you? I'll be seeing about yours. Get off my property right now with your threats or it'll be me that brings the police."

"I haven't time to argue," Dignam said before he crossed the road to escape the shadow of the tree, a gloom that felt too much like Brady's notion of him. As the man's door shut with a victorious slam, Dignam saw the woman peering back at him while she hurried past the variously bushy gardens to the shop on the corner of the main road. An impulse to head off any rumours sent him after her.

Apart from the counter, the small shop was crammed with shelves laden with groceries. "Here's a newcomer," said the shopkeeper, a woman shorter by a head than Mrs Vernon but compensatively broader.

"Sorry," Dignam felt bound to respond, having passed the shop on his way to work for years. "Just a paper today."

As he made for the counter Mrs Vernon moved aside a little too far for politeness. He rested a hand on the nearest newspaper. "Excuse me, Mrs Vernon, we haven't been introduced ..."

Her sharp face drew into itself as her lips pressed themselves almost colourless before demanding "Where did you get my name?

"I heard it just now, if you recall."

"Listening outside, were you? I don't like that, Mrs Timms."

As the shopkeeper opened her pudgy hands in front of her to accept this, Dignam protested "When our friend shouted after you, I meant, of course."

"If you're talking about Mr Brady," Mrs Vernon said, "you didn't sound very friendly."

"Neighbour, then. Would you say he can be a little odd?"

"I wouldn't, and I'm sure you wouldn't either, Mrs Timms."

"I expect you'd rather not speak ill of a customer. He's certainly got an odd idea of me. All I did was take him some post I'd received by mistake."

"Who are you to say he's not right upstairs?" Mrs Vernon apparently saw reason to object. "You're not a doctor."

"I am of psychology, actually. I lecture on it at the university."

"That's no doctor, that's a teacher. How many nutters have you met?

"Not a great number. If you put it like that," Dignam said in some rebuke, "none."

"Takes one to know one or think someone else is, more like."

Perhaps a cloud had masked the sun, but the growing darkness felt as if his brain was shrinking out of reach of light. "All I wanted to establish was that Mr Brady was mistaken to say I'd tampered with his letter."

"Sounds like everyone's mistaken except you."

"So you won't be going near his house," Mrs Timms advised.

What else had the women been saying about him? As he turned away with as much dignity as he could gather, there seemed to be far too much clutter between him and the door, and in his brain too. "Aren't you buying?" Mrs Timms said.

"I don't think I've laid claim to anything, have I?" He indicated the counter with one upturned hand, only to discover that print from the newspaper he'd leaned on had transferred itself to his palm. MADAM was the solitary word above a report about a brothel, and the latter portion was reversed like an illiterate tattoo on his skin. He slapped a pound coin on the counter hard enough for the shopkeeper to recoil with a timidity he thought melodramatic. "Here's your money. Keep your wares," he said and marched out of the shop.

The clang of the bell above the door spiked the back of his skull. After the dimness the sunlight felt strident too. He closed his eyes to let the flattened sharp-edged world regain some perspective until he realised he must appear to be loitering to overhear what the women said about him. They were silent, having seen him eavesdropping. He narrowed his eyes and stumbled along the road that seemed at best only vaguely imagined. As he widened them to demonstrate how harshly it was present, he wondered if during the entire confrontation Brady could really not have blinked once.

He wasn't doing so now. When Dignam resumed his seat at the desk he was met by a glare as unyielding as the sun that squinted through the branches of the sycamore. "Hope they sting," he muttered, blinking fast, and snatched the next essay off the heap. He recognised Hannah's generously flowing script, and was greeting it with a secret smile until his gaze snagged on the phrase he least hoped to encounter.

She thought schizophrenics had privileged perceptions too, did she? If she was so enamoured of his colleague's ideas, perhaps she should go to bed with Roger Douglas instead of with him. The unworthiness of the idea made Dignam nervous of betraying it to the watcher over the road, an absurd fear but nonetheless one reason why he lowered his head. *Many schizophrenics display insights far beyond the average... While it is dangerous to regard mental states as contagious, they can sometimes be shared in part by an observer... It requires unusual strength of mind to live with unmedicated schizophrenia...* Did Hannah mean to experience it or to be connected with a sufferer? Dignam had taken some satisfaction in inking his query alongside the text when he saw that the next sentence made it clear she'd meant suffering oneself. Too late, he thought, and glanced up to see why the light was flickering.

Brady had retreated from view, but a silent white explosion glared out of the depths of the room—the flash of a bulb. He was photographing Dignam, who heaved his window open as Mrs Vernon passed the house, her coat flapping in a wind. "Watch out for your friend with the camera," he called when she peered nervously towards the rattle of the sash. "Lord knows what he'll do with us now he's taken us."

She didn't look at Brady, despite the finger Dignam stretched forth. She fled onwards as though he'd made an improper approach. While the slam of his window was aimed at Brady, it only spurred her faster. He ducked to Hannah's essay in several kinds of rage. When the light flickered again he felt not merely spied upon but found out. "She's a mature student," he muttered. "She can choose for herself."

Did he imagine Brady could hear? He crouched to give the man a shot or several of his scalp, only to be bring himself too close to the page to read it no matter how hard he stared. Why was he wasting time? He had plenty of essays to mark in his office on the campus, and it was wholly irrational of him not to want to encounter Roger Douglas. He shoved himself away from

the desk and twisted to sit with his back to the window as a preamble to quitting the house.

The route to the university led past the corner shop. Any other was absurdly devious. He might have had a word with the proprietor, but she was talking to a bulky man who frowned through the window at Dignam. Did that mean they were discussing him? "Off to work, Mrs Timms," he called, which made her blink.

Five minutes' stroll, but now two minutes' striding, took him along the seasick pavement of the potholed main road to the traffic lights. On his right a hill was piled with concrete tenements whose balconies always reminded him of battlements, though he suspected that he would have felt most beleaguered by living too close to his neighbours; doing so as a student had often brought him within screaming distance of a breakdown. To his left the cross street grew immediately more civilised as it met the campus, and he promised himself that his mind would. There was really no need to look behind him as he crossed the road. It was having a respite from traffic, and certainly nobody was following him.

He hadn't expected the campus to be so busy on a Saturday. Most of the students were bound for the library, though a few small groups were heading for the pub that faced it. Also on that course was a solitary woman in a dark grey suit, whom he would have taken for a lecturer except for her beacon of red hair. Even tied back so severely, it was unmistakably Hannah's. She was too distant for him to hail without drawing more attention than he wanted. As she stepped delicately into the pub, he told himself that he deserved a drink.

The moment he crossed the threshold, dimness and uproar fell on him. Although the room was at least twice the size of Mrs Timms' shop, the crowd made it feel even smaller. Blinking let him locate Hannah at the bar. He'd taken a pace towards her when he saw she was talking to Roger Douglas.

Surely they resembled a couple only because they were younger then Dignam, but he would have dodged out of the pub if the other lecturer hadn't caught sight of him. Douglas raised his long lean tanned face, pointing his satyr's beard at him. "Look how psychology brings us all together," he remarked to Hannah.

Hannah turned to recognise Dignam. A smile widened her eyes and then her deceptively prim lips. "Oh, Dr Dignam. I didn't see you were here."

"He wasn't, were you, Terry? He was just behind you."

"Hardly just," Dignam said, having lifted a hand to acknowledge them both.

"So long as we are to our students, hey?"

"I can't imagine why you'd think I wouldn't be. May I buy you whatever you're having, Miss Martin? Just an orange, right you are. I shouldn't think that pint will take you long, Roger. Let me come to the rescue."

Dignam felt expansive and in control once he'd succeeded in coaxing the barmaid over. As she levered out his pint he noticed the book on the bar in front of Douglas: *Visions of Schizophrenia.* "Do you always carry your own book with you? I suppose you feel you need to advertise yourself."

"That's our student's copy that she liked enough to buy."

Dignam was swallowing a rusty mouthful of beer to keep down several retorts, by no means solely aimed at Douglas, when his colleague said "Didn't you have a book in mind once yourself? Will Hannah have a chance to read that too before she leaves us?"

"I'd want to base it on observation. Perhaps I'm less anxious to make a name."

"There's plenty of observation in my book. You should try not just skimming it sometime."

"Observation of yourself when you were taking drugs, you mean."

"Exactly, when I was trying every psychotropic I could lay my hands on, and let me tell you they didn't always look like my hands. No point in being anything but honest, would you agree, Hannah? Nothing good comes of repression."

Dignam was able to hope Douglas had made her uncomfortable until she said "I admired how you didn't hold back."

"Perhaps I shouldn't, then." Dignam saw her face try not to stiffen, though he had no intention of exposing their relationship. "I believe I may have hit upon the subject of my book," he said.

"Do we get to hear?" Douglas urged.

"I've come into contact with a sufferer."

"If you'll accept a word of advice, don't think of them that way. Look on them as an opportunity to share perceptions you might never have otherwise."

"Privileged perceptions, you mean," Dignam said and couldn't resist staring at Hannah.

"They're the ones. Treat yourself to some while you've the chance. They were what you wanted to consult me about, weren't they, Hannah? Forgive me if I don't call you Miss Martin. I like to think of my students as friends."

"I'm sure Miss Martin should be in no doubt as to my regard for her." Shouting this over the hubbub of the bar made Dignam feel walled in by his language. He drained his remaining third of a pint as an excuse to say "I'll see you at my Monday lecture then, Miss Martin."

"If not before, who knows?" Douglas used a finger and thumb to wipe froth from his moustache, a gesture that reminded Dignam of a villain in a melodrama. "Off to continue your observations, Terry?"

"I imagine that should be the case."

Either Dignam left the pub too energetically or his vision had inured itself to the dimness, because he was confronted by an all-embracing glare. Pressing his eyes shut, even with fingers as well as lids, only trapped it. "Are you okay?" someone asked, and he had to insist that he was. Once he was able to distinguish that nobody was spying on him, or at least no longer, he ran across the campus to his office.

There were essays on his desk, but nothing to contain them. While he searched for a carrier, footsteps advanced and hesitated and executed some further movement in the corridor. Their owner must be inspecting pictures on the walls, not deliberately staying out of sight or threatening to appear, but the noises made it harder for Dignam to be sure how empty the room was. His rummaging sent dust like the remnants of chalked words into the lethargically inclined sunlight. The essays weren't so urgent that they couldn't wait, and he was suddenly anxious to be home. No doubt this was how it felt to have an idea for a book, an idea that was eager to reach the page.

Words were scrambling over one another in his head as he emerged into the deserted corridor. In under five minutes he was running past the corner

shop. He rammed the key into his lock and sprinted upstairs, to be confronted by the man across the road. The unblinking eyes seemed to tug the expressionless face to meet him, unless his own movement brought it closer. He was resisting the temptation to raise a hand in an ironic greeting when he saw that his palm was still imprinted with a word.

Had Hannah and his rival seen it? He licked the other hand and rubbed the pair together as he sat at the desk, until he began to see himself as Brady must see him, washing himself like an animal or worse. He grabbed a pad out of the desk drawer and seized the nearest pen, the red. *A spies on B because he believes A to be spying on him. A's paranoia narrows the focus of his mind to B or A. Paranoia is a form of focusing that excludes insight and any sense of everything that lies outside the focus. As a substitute for this lack the paranoid mind derives delusions from the subject on which it is focused...*

Was this an opening paragraph? It felt more like notes for several or even for a number of chapters. Hannah's unfaithful ideas seemed to be interfering with the clarity he'd thought he was bringing home, and he reached to turn the scattered pages of her essay blank side up. Then his smeared hand faltered. Hadn't he tidied them before leaving the house? Had he failed to notice that he'd left the window raised almost an inch?

His head jerked up, not quite in time to be able to confirm he'd glimpsed a mocking grin across the road. Could someone really have entered the house and opened the window to provide an explanation for any disturbance? The mere thought appeared to send Brady into hiding. When the man thrust his head out of the front door, Dignam wondered if he might be on his way to protest his innocence. Instead Brady stalked along the road, the plastic jackets of three library books glinting dully under his arm. Why should Dignam still feel watched? He frowned at Brady's house and then couldn't stop. A face was peering at him from the gloomy depths of the upstairs room.

He had to lean close enough to the window to coat it with his breath before he understood that he was glimpsing a photograph on the wall. Indeed, there were several, yet he increasingly felt as if he was staring into a mirror. He sat and waited for the sun to crawl far enough to light upon the faces that weren't really watching him. "You're touched all right," he said, though Brady wasn't there to be told. All the faces were so enlarged that they

resembled indistinct ghosts, but they weren't quite blurred enough for Dignam not to recognise at least a dozen versions of his own face.

Brady must have developed them while the subject was out of the house. He hadn't shot them all that morning, however. How long had he been spying unobserved? The question troubled Dignam even more than the pictures did. He craned out of the window to no satisfactory effect, then went for a closer look. Before he reached the end of his path the faces had sunk out of view. As he resolved to work while he kept watch for Brady, he saw what the tree had prevented him from noticing. A bunch of keys was dangling from Brady's front door.

Had he left them as a temptation? It seemed more important that it would take him at least an hour to walk to the nearest library and back. Dignam crossed the road and walked once backwards around the sycamore while pretending not to ascertain that he wasn't being watched from any of the houses, and then he strode to Brady's door. The keys were hanging from a mortise lock. He turned that key, then with a deft twist of the rusty Yale admitted himself to the house. In another second the lumbering door shut behind him.

He wished he hadn't been so swift. Before he was embraced by darkness he'd glimpsed a hall papered with newsprint and a millipede fleeing over a ragged tufted brown carpet to huddle, legs and antennae twitching, at the foot of stairs bare except for discoloured splotches. The house smelled of rot and old paper, and was thick with the lack of clarity he thought only ignorance could bring. He was groping to ease the door ajar when his eyes began to take hold of the dimness. He locked the mortise and advanced along the hall. His first pace felt as if it was sinking into turf or earth. The sound of his next told him why and perhaps explained the underlying rotten odour. He was treading on sycamore seeds that a wind or Brady must have brought into the house. The noise and the sensation put him in mind of trampling insects, one reason why he hurried to the first internal door. Though the pallid plastic doorknob felt sticky as a second-hand lollipop, he turned it back and forth. The door was locked.

He didn't need to open doors to see. Enough illumination seeped through the grubby fanlight above the front door. Any insects in the hall were either lying low among the scattered seeds or dead. At least half a dozen sycamore shoots were growing on or between the uncovered floorboards, but

Dignam's attention fastened on the walls. Hardly an inch of them was visible for the newspapers tacked to them and overrun with red ink. A marker pen, if not several, had been used to ring words and link them with lines, some the length of the hall.

"And" was one of the emphasised words; in fact, quite a few. And, and, and, and, and, and, and, and... They felt like threats of a never-ending process. No sense was to be gained from the newspaper photographs either. A man's pointing finger was linked to a woman's hand several yards away, while another wavering line lassoed both a war memorial and the chimney of a mansion. Dignam was trying to imagine a connection when he remembered why he was there: for a closer examination of the pictures of him and then for whatever course of action suggested itself.

A single contact with the banister was enough. The wood was as sticky as the doorknob. He followed his vague jerking shadow to the upper storey, where the dimness felt like the stale smell rendered visible. Only the hollow clatter of his footsteps made it clear that the floor was uncarpeted. He wasn't surprised the front bedroom was locked, but finding that none of the keys fitted threw him.

He crouched to peer through the keyhole. Beyond a dishevelled bed he was just able to identify his own window pinched microscopic, a sight that made his brain feel shrunken. He lurched to his feet and backed across the landing to take a run at the door. Just in time he realised Brady would suspect him. As he shook himself intelligent he elbowed the bathroom door, which swung wide.

A toilet roll squatted on the toilet lid, and the cardboard tubes from perhaps a hundred used rolls were heaped on the cistern. Three seedlings and a sycamore as tall as his waist were rooted in earth several inches deep in the cracked white metal bath. Another stunted infant tree stood in a sink full of earth. He hardly knew why he darted forward to close his fists around all the leaves and crush them to sticky pulp. As he turned away he saw his guiltily gleeful face in the smeary speckled mirror. He started as though he'd caught sight of an intruder. His movement was enough to dislodge a cardboard tube from the top of the pile. Immediately, like lemmings that had found a leader, the rest toppled off the cistern.

He felt as if something had gripped his mouth with claws to manipulate it into one or more of several competing expressions. He couldn't judge from

the mirror whether he was grinning or grimacing, unless he was about to be overtaken by quite another look. He stooped to pick up a tube in each hand, then balanced another pair on top of them on the cistern, and a third. He was restoring two more to the pile when the whole array sprawled across the tattered linoleum.

How long had he been in the house? Since he hadn't checked when he'd entered, his watch was useless. He abandoned his asinine task and charged downstairs, then up again to shut the bathroom door. The dimness clung to his mind as he raced down a second time and fumbled the key into the mortise lock. He almost slammed the door behind him, closing it stealthily instead. He thrust the key into the lock and twisted it so hard he bruised his fingers. In no more time than it took him to remember to breathe he was hastening across the road in a flurry of sycamore seeds. He was almost at his gate when Brady turned the corner by the shop.

Could he have seen? All of Dignam was desperate to hide—all except his mind. It kept him leaning nonchalantly on a gatepost while he sorted through remarks. "You read a lot, I see." "Fond of words, Mr Brady?" "I hope you didn't write in those books like you—" His fear that he might utter one or more of these spurred him to blurt "Back from the library, then?"

He thought the unrelenting stare was meant to convict him of fatuousness until Brady demanded "Who told you I was there?"

Too late Dignam realised the man was empty-handed. "I saw you taking your books."

"Better taking them than medicine." Brady smirked without moderating his stare. "Keeping an eye on me, are you? You'll need both and a friend's as well."

"Simply being neighbourly," Dignam said and was suddenly afraid that his face was betraying his escapade, a notion that threatened to distort his lips. "It does no harm to look out for others."

"I'll be looking out for you, that's for sure. Any more observations or am I dismissed?"

Surely he couldn't have been eavesdropping in the dimness of the pub. "Please don't allow me to detain you," Dignam said.

"Don't kid yourself you can stop me."

Dignam thought he'd said the opposite. He was sending a silent gasp of relief after the man's back when he remembered that Brady was about to find the keys. Before Dignam could let him do so by himself, Brady spun around. "Made me forget these, did you?" he yelled past the tree.

"I rather think you did it unaided."

Dignam only spoke, but Brady heard him. "And how did you know?" he shouted louder still.

"You told me."

The silence gave him time to understand that Brady hadn't quite before the man bellowed "What's your next trick going to be? Breaking in to see what you can lecture about? Poison me while you're at it, why don't you."

"Don't talk rot," Dignam shouted for any neighbours to hear and strode to his door. He heard Brady's keys rattle as he took out his own. It seemed crucial that he should be at his window by the time Brady went upstairs. He sprinted for his desk as the door slammed like a lid. A seed crunched underfoot as he reached the stairs. His hand must be sticky, not the banister. He sat panting in his not entirely stable chair and tidied the pages of Hannah's essay, then forgot them as he leaned across them. The room that faced him was empty of faces. The sun showed him a blank wall.

He was staring at the wall as if this might force the images to develop from it when the door let Brady in, and a kitchen chair. He planted it close to the window and sat forward on it, folding his arms, fastening his gaze like twin cameras on his neighbour. Of course he was pretending that he hadn't dashed up to the room before Dignam had reached his. He had needed only to throw the photographs out of sight on the floor. Dignam stood and stretched, but couldn't see them. He felt as if Brady's gaze was weighing him back into the chair to deal with Hannah's thoughts.

Here was the Roger Douglas concept that enraged him most of all: that insanity was somehow magical. She had found more similarities—the ritualistic use of objects, the ambition to alter reality by the power of the mind, the way witches had once been regarded and the mentally ill often were now, a resemblance leading to Dignam's suggestion that before long the insane would be viewed as soothsayers or visionaries. If people were sufficiently irrational to depend on astrology, he often said, why not go to the extreme? She clearly hadn't appreciated his irony. Her conclusion felt

like a belated attempt to placate him, and overall the essay seemed designed to mediate between him and Douglas. He was squeezing the red pen so viciously it creaked between his fingers when the phone rang on the corner of his desk.

As he lifted the receiver his gaze couldn't avoid Brady's. He had to rid himself of a grotesque fancy that the man had somehow made the phone go off. "Terry Dignam," he said.

"Terry? Terry," she repeated as if testing her entitlement to use the name. "It's Hannah."

"I gathered that."

"I just wanted to ask if you meant what you said."

"I generally do. It's a peculiarity of mine. Something in particular?"

"I thought you might be saying it so Roger didn't realise, well, you know. Aren't you coming to me for dinner tomorrow?"

"I don't think that's going to be possible," Dignam said, holding Brady's gaze.

"Oh."

The syllable was laden with so much disappointment and self-doubt and accusation that he felt compelled to say "I suppose you could do it here if you liked."

"Only if you want me to."

"I thought I'd made it clear I shouldn't have suggested it otherwise."

"You'll need to tell me where to find you."

"I was about to," he said, and did. He hung up the receiver before informing Brady "You've got what you asked for. There'll be someone else to keep an eye on you."

With an effort he lowered his gaze to the essay. *50%,* he scribbled in the margin. *Some of your ideas will bear developing—decide which.* He looked up in something like triumph to confront an empty room, and was irrational enough to feel relieved until he grasped where Brady might be. The thought seemed to lodge like an infection in his bladder. He waddled wide-legged to the bathroom and drained himself, then returned to his desk. Brady was awaiting him.

His face was an unreadable mask. Even his eyes failed to react to his subject, who felt as if their scrutiny was puppeting him across the room to sit at his desk like a miscreant under the gaze of a teacher. Brady couldn't know that Dignam had been in his house. If Dignam hadn't, the man would believe that he had, but what did that mean? It made Dignam feel embedded in Brady's view of him. He hunched over the next essay, only for a reference to privileged perceptions to swell into his vision as though it had been freshly penned. He shoved the pages aside to concentrate on his own work, his notes, his book. *The subject sits at a window,* he scrawled, which didn't help him deal with the glare he sensed on top of his brain or in it—didn't reduce his awareness of it or give it meaning. He raised his head and met it. If it came to a contest, sanity must win.

He strove to put everything he knew about himself into his eyes. He continued when they began to sting, because it would seem feeble of him to be first to blink. The first time he was forced to, he pinched his thighs between his nails. His leg was aching in too many places to count by the time he observed that night was falling. When he glanced down at the page he couldn't read his own words.

How long did he propose to sit at the window? He was holding Brady still, but that wasn't necessary; the man would never be able to steal into the house. Dignam took the cramp in his guts for hunger. "Time for some of us to eat," he muttered. "Just make sure it's not poisoned."

He was unhappy to find that he couldn't eat much. Half the omelette he made to use up milk he scraped into the bin. He still had several bottles too many from trying to moderate his coffee intake and woo sleep. He finished one and bore another into the front room in case it would soothe the cramp in his innards while he allowed himself some television. There was nothing on the many channels to engage his mind: simplistic quizzes, violence whose lack of apparent effect struck him as close to psychotic, comedy shows accompanied by laughter so inappropriate it seemed crazed. While he gazed at the screen, was Brady gazing at the house? The possibility made his mind feel cramped. As soon as watching had tired him enough he stumbled up to bed.

He didn't recall closing his study door, but he resisted the temptation to peer around it to see if his neighbour was spying, which demonstrated how sane he was, as if he needed proof. Once he was in bed he set about

forgetting his tormentor. He shouldn't have given the man a thought; by the time he ceased to feel his eyes he couldn't tell how much of the dark consisted of Brady's fancies about him. Certainly it helped Brady come into the room.

At first he only stared at Dignam and leaned close to show that his eyes were lidless, and then he began to shake his huge wild head. Dignam assumed this expressed disapproval until seeds and insects rained on him. He wasn't sure which dropped into his helplessly gaping mouth as Brady towered over him. The man's head was pressed against the ceiling now; some of the twigs sprouting from his cranium bent with a thin creak and snapped off. He reached up with arms longer than the room was wide and plucked a handful of shoots off the cracked scaly expanse of his forehead. He clamped Dignam's eyes open with two fingers of the other hand before planting the shoots between his victim's lips. With a flabby cry that made him feel less in control of his mouth than ever, Dignam jerked awake. Brady was above him, a looming shape more solid than the dark.

Dignam's gasp felt like taking back his cry. It seemed to suck the contents of his mouth deeper into him. He recoiled against the bars above the pillow, and the metal clashed against the wall as he flung out a hand for the light cord. For a moment his fingers felt entangled by twigs, and then he succeeded in tugging the light on.

He was alone in the room. There were no seeds or insects on or around the bed. Nevertheless he felt poisoned by the dream, which he sensed hovering like the man's oppressive presence, waiting to resume its shape. What stale taste was lingering in Dignam's mouth? When he floundered to the bathroom, gargling seemed to emphasise the taste. He threw his study door open to see if Brady was watching in triumph.

A streetlamp cast a net of shadow from the tree over the house opposite—too much shadow for Dignam to be anything like certain if the window was deserted. Poking his head forth didn't resolve the question. His eyes stung, and a taste like indigestion filled his mouth. He slammed the window and hurried downstairs, wiping his hand on his pyjamas between clutches at the stair banister.

Two could play at the game Brady had wished on him. He drank half a bottle of milk and eased the metal cap off another, then found the seed that someone had tracked into the hall. He rubbed it between his hands, staining

his palms, and crumbled the fragments with his nails into a powder he could sprinkle in the milk. He restored the cap and shook the bottle until it looked full of nothing but innocent milk. Having pulled on a jacket and trousers over his pyjamas, he hid the bottle inside his jacket as he left the house.

What did he intend to do? If Brady was watching, only to remind him he was also being watched. Dignam was beneath the sycamore, whose shadow felt as though innumerable seeds were poised to fall on him, before he could be sure Brady's window was unmanned. He strode as quickly as silence permitted to the man's front door. "Milko," he said under his breath. "Special Sunday delivery for Brady." He set the bottle on the step with a clunk far more muted than his heartbeat and allowed his uncontrollable grin to lead him back across the road.

He couldn't sleep now. He had to watch. He almost slammed the front door in his eagerness to dash upstairs and resume his post at the desk. He hadn't missed anything; the bottle was still on the doorstep. Its glimmer put him in mind of a headstone too shrunken by distance to move him. What had he done? Nothing fatal, certainly—nothing as poisonous as Brady's effect on him. Perhaps Brady would see that it was best to call a truce once he understood worse could befall him.

Soon Dignam's eyes felt charred by the dark and by watching. More than once the bottle reared up like a pallid larva or executed a jig from willingness to be discovered. "Gargoyle," he called, "gargoyle," but that failed to summon his adversary. In time the streetlamp grew redundant and eventually, without his noticing, dead. At some point he realised he was visible, and snatched an essay off the heap, not that he could make sense of the words just now. They seemed to underline his view of the house opposite, to suggest only that mattered. Once Brady opened the front door, he was all that did.

He didn't see the milk at first. He advanced to the gate and frowned up and down the street. As he turned back to the house Dignam saw him stiffen. He marched to grab the bottle and tear off the cap before swinging around to display how he was emptying the milk over the wild lawn strewn with seeds. In a few seconds he was at the window, holding up the bottle as evidence.

Evidence of what? He hadn't drunk from it, and he'd thrown away the contents. It would be monstrously unfair of him to accuse a neighbour of

poisoning him. If he planned to sit there like a dairy advertisement, that was no reason for Dignam to indulge him. Dignam marked the essays almost faster than he could breathe— *confused thinking, too much identification with your subject, too closely observed for objectivity, too narrowly focused* —and swept the heap aside to work on his book. The solitary sentence on the topmost page brought him back to Brady, who hadn't moved or blinked.

How long was Dignam going to let himself be held there? Usually on Sundays he bought a paper to read in the pub on the campus, but suppose Brady took some crazed revenge while his neighbour was away? For once Dignam would have to patronise the corner shop.

He hadn't reached his gate when Brady emerged, flourishing the bottle. "Didn't kill me yet," he shouted. "Have another go."

"Take it as a warning," Dignam responded barely aloud. As he hurried to the shop he glanced back at every other step to ensure Brady wasn't sneaking towards his house. Had the man mouthed something or gestured to make three youths who were loitering outside the shop snigger at Dignam? A furious glance that screwed an ache into Dignam's neck found Brady turning away to speak to a girl in her teens or younger. As she followed Brady up the path Dignam wondered "Is someone up to no good with that child?"

"Dirty bugger," one youth snarled. The others muttered viciously .is Dignam dodged into the shop.

Mrs Vernon and the shopkeeper were waiting for him. "Had a bad night, did you?" Mrs Vernon said.

He felt as if Brady's obsession with him had turned into a plague. "What makes you say that?" he demanded.

"Anybody would, the way you're dressed." He looked down at himself as a preamble to sarcasm and saw the pyjama cuffs protruding from his trousers, the pyjama collar sprawling forth from his jacket. As he gaped in search of words, Mrs Timms enquired "What were you saying outside?"

"Your friend Mr Brady has just taken a young girl inside his house."

"That'll be his granddaughter. She visits him on Sundays." Dignam retreated to the door and surveyed the deserted streets. "Where did those boys go? Have you any idea where they live?"

"Which were those?" said Mrs Timms, and her customer added less gently "We thought you were talking to yourself."

Why were they trying to confuse him? If it was what Brady wanted, let him take the consequences. Dignam bought a newspaper and ran home. Suppose Brady had arranged the diversion to distract him? As soon as he'd secured the door he hunted for telltale seeds and did his best to ascertain whether the banister or any of the doorknobs was stickier than it ought to be.

The news in the paper seemed to belong to a world that had become detached from him. At the end of every sentence, and before long of every phrase, his eyes twitched up to focus on the house across the road. The afternoon, though not the paper, was half finished by the time Brady let the girl out. Dignam sprinted to his gate as Brady sent her on her way with not too much of a hug or a kiss. "Excuse me," Dignam called. "You may want to watch out for some young boys round here."

"Hurry home, Jane." Once she had picked up speed the man said "Maybe that's your kind of thing. It won't do for me."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Then how do you know what I mean?"

"I'm trying to warn you in case you're in danger," Dignam's unwieldy mouth managed to pronounce. "Some people can get queer notions in their heads."

"You'd be the last person I'd need to tell me, Mr Dignam."

"Where did you get my name?"

"I know everything worth knowing about you, believe me." If his stare was meant to convey this, Dignam was equal to it. His eyes had only begun to sting when Brady turned his back. "It's Doctor, so there's something you don't know for a start," Dignam said, but he'd blinked. As Brady shut his door Dignam slammed his and ran to his desk.

Sorting paper kept him busy: the news, the essays, the seed of his book. Soon he was beyond telling which was which. Was he watching out for Brady or hoping the youths would teach him manners? Perhaps they were waiting for the dark that sprouted branches against Brady's house. When a solitary figure disentangled itself from the shadows, he thought it was

Brady bound for revenge. Once his peeled eyes recognised Hannah he strove to remember why she was there. Of course, she was anxious to learn what he thought of her essay and her.

Perhaps she would assume he was out, since the room was unlit. She met his eyes, however, as she ventured up the path, a plastic bag swinging from each hand. Now he remembered she had undertaken to provide dinner. The prospect kept him at his desk until she'd rung the doorbell twice, at which point he raced down to enquire "Would you mind telling me where you just got those?"

She looked puzzled and a little hurt. "I didn't just get them anywhere. I brought them from home."

"I'm going to watch you prepare the meal, am I?"

"It's made. All we need is a microwave. I know you've got one."

"Which of my neighbours have you been talking to?"

"None of them. I've never even seen one."

"Well, now you have," he said, jabbing all his fingers at the face among the flattened branches.

She gave it rather too perfunctory a look. "Can I come in now, do you think? It's chilly out here."

He was about to say he was too busy for dinner when he wondered if she might report back to Roger Douglas. If his rival heard that Dignam had been behaving oddly, what might he be capable of saying to their colleagues? "Come in by all means," Dignam said loud enough to be heard across the road. "I've nothing to hide."

Once he'd slammed the door behind her Hannah didn't move towards the kitchen until he led the way. He clawed at the light switch and twisted a chair backwards to sit on while he observed her putting the first carton in the microwave. This done, she was so ill at ease that nobody could blame him for enquiring "What's wrong?"

"Have you only just got up?"

"I've been too busy to get dressed. Do you want me to change?"

"You needn't. I've seen worse." Apparently this was a timid joke, perhaps intended to nerve her to say "Busy marking, would that have been?"

"Marking and working on the book I'm not supposed to be up to writing."

"I've never said that and I wouldn't. I know you have it in you." This was plainly the start of the process of asking "Did you finish your marking?"

"Shilly-shally, Hannah, shilly-shally."

"I'm not sure I..."

"That's your problem. Try believing in yourself enough to say what you mean. Have I marked your essay? Yes."

"Am I allowed to hear what you thought?"

"It seems to me you're in two minds. Decide which one you're sticking to."

"Can't I take the best from each?"

"They aren't compatible. By the time I'd finished trying to make sense of your essay my head was splitting in half. You're meant to be writing about madness, not driving people mad."

He thought he might have said too much until some of it silenced her. The hush emphasised how little he was eating. Weren't there seeds in the vegetable curry she served as the first course? He did his best to pick forkfuls nowhere near them, which left most of the contents of his plate untouched. "I'm saving myself," he said and felt the choice of words tug at his lips.

At least the silence let him hear any noises in the street. Before he'd finished hacking spicy chicken off its bones and sifting the rice with his fork, he had dashed into the front room twice. The second time Hannah followed, letting him retreat to the kitchen ahead of her and dump most of his plateful in the bin. Did she suspect? He could think of no other reason for her to replenish his plate. "I know you're worried about work," the said, "but it won't help to starve yourself, will it? Anyway, I don't know anyone who thinks you're past it except you."

How many lies were packed into that? "Don't delude yourself you know what I think," he said, and more slyly "I can enjoy your dinner by watching you eat."

She laid her utensils to rest among the bones. "I made it for you."

Suppose she'd eaten precisely enough not to poison herself? He consigned the remains to the bin and stacked the plates in the sink with a clatter that felt as if sections of his skull were grating together. It suddenly seemed

crucial that Hannah shouldn't think he was behaving unusually in any way, lest she tell someone at the university. "I hope that doesn't mean you're leaving," he made himself say.

"Not if you don't want me to."

"You know what I want," he said and unzipped his trousers to demonstrate there was no misunderstanding.

Did she stiffen so that she wouldn't recoil? "Not down here, Terry," she protested.

"Indeed not. Up is best."

As he ensured that she preceded him upstairs, his extension raised itself from flopping against his trousers to sway in her direction. From the landing he glimpsed Brady at the window. If he discharged his task with Hannah in the office chair he could keep an eye out for the youths, but she had already switched on the light in the bedroom. When she sat on the edge of the bed he pushed her as flat as the tousled quilt permitted and eased her skirt up.

Her black briefs were slippery silk, which he felt squeaking beneath his nails until those caught in the filigreed edge. He pulled the briefs down far enough that he could insert himself in Hannah as he clambered onto her. At first he wasn't sure if her moans denoted pleasure or discomfort or simply determination to improve her grades, and then he wondered if they were meant to deafen him to sounds outside the house. He was reaching to lean a hand on her mouth and if necessary her nose as well when he heard shouts and a smash of glass across the road.

Dragging himself out of Hannah was more of a release than he was prepared for. Spurts of solidified dimness preceded him into the study. The sensations this entailed were far more remote than the sight of Brady at the window. The man hadn't moved, and there was no sign of the youths. Dignam wiped himself on a sheet of paper, which he flung into the bin as he resumed his seat. He was peering in search of broken glass when Hannah arrived behind him. "Terry," she pleaded, "what are you trying to do?"

He wasn't so easily distracted; he wouldn't even blink. "Are you asking me to believe you don't know?"

"I can't stay if you're going to behave like this."

"Then that solves a good few problems. I'll see you tomorrow in class."

Why was she loitering? She was about to ask for her essay, of course. "Tomorrow," he repeated so loud that it widened his eyes. He didn't let them shrink until he saw her on the stretch of pavement he was able to keep in view without losing sight of Brady.

Once she lost shape and vanished from the rim of his vision he felt as if there had never been anyone except himself in the house.

Whatever the sound of breaking glass had signified, it appeared not to have affected Brady. He was staring at Dignam as if his entire being was concentrated in his eyes, but Dignam was equal to him. He wouldn't move or blink until his subject did. If Brady refused to heed his warning, he would bring whatever happened on himself. The gang weren't likely to kill him, after all. He hadn't made Dignam act out Brady's view of him. He never had.

In time Dignam's eyes drooped, and his head. He stretched his eyes wide until they felt on the edge of sprouting from their holes. He roused himself by pinching his thighs and eventually his penis with his nails. He wanted to think his opponent was having to resort to worse, but there wasn't a hint of movement over the road. How could the man sit so inert and never blink? A stealthy dawn had separated the topmost branches from the sky before Dignam was certain something was wrong.

He began to gesture wildly at the figure across the road. He tried to find the grin that had overtaken his face in the other house, and rocked his head from side to side and popped his eyes. When this had no effect he held up the hand that had borrowed a word from i he newspaper in the corner shop and stabbed a finger at it. Next he climbed on the desk, trampling the papers, to wave his penis at his tormentor. None of this earned him a reaction. Brady wasn't just still, he was lifeless. Something—surely only his mental condition—must have frightened him to death.

In a moment that felt like stepping over the brink of a nightmare Dignam remembered everything he'd done: the milk, the youths. He leapt off the desk, jarring his ankles, and floundered out of the room. He ought to have checked that Hannah hadn't left the front door unlocked for anyone to sneak in, but it was fastened now. He closed it behind him as gently as his shivering fingers could manage and limped down the path.

Could he still be performing Brady's fantasies about him? What if the man had used the photographs to manipulate him? Just as witches had to let their victims know they were supposed to be under a spell, so Brady had ensured he saw the photographs. Or perhaps the seeds crunching underfoot were the key to it all; perhaps they spread Brady's influence. Dignam was so busy sorting out the truth that he was well across the road before twinges in his penis alerted him that it was exposed to the night air. He was stowing it away when with an outraged shout Brady sprang to his feet and vanished from the window.

What kind of a trick did he think he'd been playing? Dignam folded his arms and challenged the front door. He heard a disarrayed clatter of footsteps at the top of the stairs, and then the noises tumbled over one another. They were brought to an end by a weighty thud in the hall, followed by utter silence.

A nervous grin distorted his mouth as he limped on tiptoe to the door and hauled up the rusty flap of the letterbox. He knelt among the seeds and ducked to the metal slot, and had to lever his eyes wide with fingers and thumbs before he could believe what he was seeing. Brady was upside down, his body on the stairs, his head at an excessive angle in the hall. His accusing glare looked strengthened by its inversion, and seemed to require no effort at all.

Dignam met it as if he might still outstare it, and then he shut the flap and staggered to his feet and fled along the path. How long would Brady take to be discovered? Dignam wanted to be present so that whoever found the corpse would see him at his window and know he couldn't have been responsible. He leaned his elbows on the desk and gripped his head with both hands to keep his eyes trained on the house opposite. The deserted window appeared to be pretending Brady wasn't still obsessed with him. Suppose the man never closed his eyes again, or it no longer mattered if he did, since Dignam's last sight of them was embedded in his mind? The sun was helping parch his own eyes when he realised how he was putting himself at risk. He might be suspected if he behaved unusually in any way —if he didn't go to work.

He grabbed the trampled mass of papers from his desk and stuffed them into a carrier bag he found in the kitchen. At his gate he glanced at Brady's house while pretending to collect seeds, but could see no faces, neither

Brady's nor his own. "Just off to work, Mrs Timms," he called into the shop. The stained carrier blundered against him as he limped to the crossroads, where the traffic lights drilled colours into his skull with a piercing buzz. Layers of grey matter piled up on the hill, but he succeeded in leaving their ossification behind as he made his swaying way across the campus. Although it was scattered with students, none of them was heading for his lecture. He was about to demand an explanation when he realised he was late.

This was no reason for Roger Douglas to have taken the podium, and why was Hannah on the front row? She gazed up at Douglas as he said "My experience—"

"My course isn't about yours, Dr Drugless." Dignam limped to the podium amid a rustling he mistook for general excitement until he traced it to the carrier bag. "Sorry, that's the last thing I should call you, isn't it? Thanks for filling in for me. You can stop now."

Douglas grasped himself by the beard or held up a mask. "Are you sure you're, you'll forgive me, but are you up to this?"

"I could ask what you think you're up to. I believe Miss Martin thinks I'm still competent to teach, don't you, Miss Martin? And I'm sure you speak for all your fellow students."

They were certainly all gazing at him in the same way. It couldn't be pity; it must be sympathy—they were on his side. "Thank you, Roger," he said, indicating the auditorium with a hand like a blurred sign.

Douglas stepped down reluctantly but lingered at the back of the room. If he'd decided he could learn from his colleague, perhaps there was hope for him. Dignam emptied the carrier onto the lectern, only to find that the pages were stuck together by vegetable matter. He mustn't let the sight claw at his guts; once the stuff dried he would be able to separate the essays. "So we've been talking about experience, have we?" he said, fixing his gaze on the heaps of faces. "Let's talk about mine, then. My experience..."

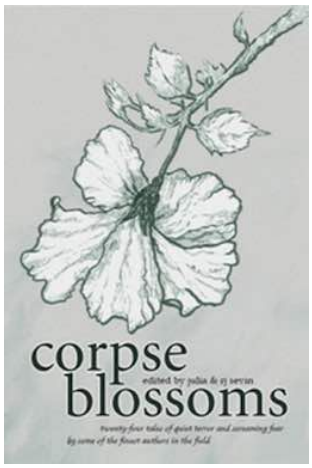
How could he tell them about Brady? Even mentioning the man would betray he'd watched him. The thought made everything feel turned upside down like the eyes he could see on the stairs. "My experience," he said he didn't know how many times while eyes stared at him. Most of them weren't Brady's, unless they all were. When had Douglas sneaked out of the room?

No doubt he was bringing someone else to observe the lecture. Dignam had to demonstrate that he still had plenty to offer, but how? "My experience," he said, and his gaze lit upon his own handwriting. At once he knew both what his opening sentence should be and how he could regain control of the lecture. "A man sits in a room," he said in triumph.

It appeared to mean less to his students than to him. He lowered himself into a chair on the podium and, having tugged his sleeves over his pyjama cuffs, leaned forward to compose the precarious stacks of heads with his gaze. "I'm not going to tell you my experience, I'm going to let you observe it for yourselves," he said. "Observe what distinguishes me from a man with a mental problem. Don't look away until you have."

Some of them must have seen almost at once. Others, not only Hannah, apparently found it harder. He wouldn't relax until everyone had finished the assignment. When refusing to blink began to take away his sight, his innards shrank into him, but soon his inability to see whether he was being watched felt more like peace. He heard people leave the auditorium, and others come in, and voices murmuring. He had to be grateful that they were so anxious not to disturb him. When the voices converged on him and hands helped him up, he was content to be led to rest now that he'd carried out the task he was paid for. A solitary thought was enough for him. He need see nothing that he didn't want to see so long as he never blinked.

Skeleton Woods



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They were never called that, but they seem to be now. When I manage to drag the warped sash high enough for me to lean over my old bedroom windowsill, I'm almost certain as I squint at the wooden arch daubed with moonlight that Skelton has acquired an extra letter. Under the moon the urban dell resembles a web that has caught the luminous worm of the stream. The woods look smaller than I remember, and even more secretive, no doubt because the trees have grown since I last took in the view. That's why the closest branches appear to be reaching for my attention until I back away and slam the window.

It's time to leave. I've seen all there is to see, which is virtually nothing. Every item of furniture has gone, even the lampshades and carpets. They were so faded they wouldn't have helped sell the house, but the stark rooms under the naked dusty bulbs feel stripped of all their memories. I switch off the lights on the upper floor and hurry past the rattling echoes of my footsteps in the darkened rooms as empty as my skull. Only the hall light remains to be extinguished, and I open the front door first so as not to feel trapped in the damp stale gloom. I jab the switch and am heading down the passage that has yielded its drab colours to the moonlight when I'm reminded of trying to escape before our mother could issue her instructions. "Watch out for Tim," she would tell me. "Don't let him get in any trouble, Philip."

At first I was proud to be trusted to take care of my younger brother—and I'm overwhelmed by such a flood of memories that I have to grip the scaly doorframe for support. I remember wheeling him in his pram through the woods, which our mother believed was safer than pushing him through the streets—old houses on our side of the railway, a cheap new estate beyond—that enclosed the reserve. I wasn't meant to take him in the tunnel that led the footpath and the stream underneath the railway, but of course I did,

talking to him in a voice overgrown with a giant one that amused him. Once he graduated to a buggy I made him promise not to tell our mother if he ever wanted to go through the tunnel again, and now I realise I was teaching him to be surreptitious with me as well. I'm even more responsible for events I don't want to remember.

The worst of it is that we didn't need to deceive her. She walked me to school over one or the other bridge across the railway, but once I started taking Tim she encouraged us to use the tunnel; it would keep us clear of the children from the estate, at least until we reached the only local school. Relying on me let her work longer at the hospital, and soon she could afford to buy me a bicycle. In two years this passed to Tim, which seemed fair to me; it and its upsized replacement had been second-hand when I was given them for Christmas. But he didn't take long to see that it gave him the chance not to do as I told him.

Wasn't our mother to blame? People weren't supposed to cycle in the woods, but she thought the route was safer for us than the roads or even the pavements. "Just be careful of the old folk," was her only warning. Tim was too intent on leaving me behind to bother about them or anyone else on the footpath. I gave up shouting "Wait for me on the other side," because it simply provoked him to race faster through the tunnel and out of sight, leaving behind a mocking laugh that seemed to scuttle all over the glistening bricks in the dimness. If the stream was low he might cycle along it, storing up ripples that sounded as though a dweller in the mud was sniggering.

Was the water already tainted by then? Tim was about that age when he began to call the place Skeleton Woods. That needn't mean anything, but I'm so enraged by the rest of my memories that I slam the door behind me and tramp out of the wild garden. I want to see how the woods have grown.

The entrance is directly across the road. Four-year-old Tim used to call them our garden. Whenever he said anything that delighted her, such as that, our mother would clap her hands and sigh. The memory slips away, because I can't see the letter that was added to the name carved on the arch. It must have been the shadow of a twig. "Skelton Woods," I repeat as I stare at the thin arch until it appears to be exuding moonlit clouds. I shake my head to dislodge the impression and step onto the path beneath the arch.

Trees close over the path as it slopes down to the stream. It's ribbed with steps and imprinted with shadows like traces of roots about to break through the earth. Where it levels out, the shadows merge into a mass of blackness, solid except for the glimmer of fallen leaves. As I pad down the steps, something clatters fast between the trees across the stream. Since nobody could be so thin, I imagine it was a squirrel. I try to drive off any other lurkers by adding weight to my tread as I reach the foot of the slope.

It isn't as dark as it looked from above. Leaves colourless as scraps of paper glow among the shadows on the path and hide a secret pattern in the dimness. The November trees have fastened their claws in the sky, so that I could fancy they're bringing the luminous clouds to a standstill. Apart from the whisper of the milky stream, the woods seem as fixed as a memory. I stride along the path, through the tangles of shadows. Perhaps I'll find Tim's and my den. I found it one Saturday while I was cycling by myself. He was watching television programmes for children younger than he was. If I'd changed the channel his screams would have given our mother one of her headaches. Besides, she'd said "Let him have his favourite, Philip. You used to like that show." I didn't want to be reminded, and tried to be an explorer several times my age as I cycled onto one of the side paths that led deeper into the woods. A cluster of bushes at the intersection put me in mind of a jungle hut. There was just one way in, so low I had to crawl, but the interior could have accommodated at least a dozen tribesmen, while the green ceiling was high enough for someone taller than me to stand up. As a man walking beside the stream wondered why his dog was straining to reach the bushes, I realised I could watch and not be detected. Even better, the entrance to my hideout wasn't visible from either path.

I thought of hiding there from Tim, and then I realised I could make him do my bidding. I told him I had a secret that he would never learn unless he promised not to leave me behind again. I had to threaten to tell our mother that he'd been disobeying before he would promise. He knew she would accuse him of resembling our father or, worse still, the woman he'd gone off somewhere with that we mustn't name. Even so, he had to be coaxed to walk. I didn't want our bicycles to betray our presence.

As soon as he saw a woman on the path by the stream he began to call "You can't see us. We're here." How wise of me was it to persuade him just to make noises at people instead? Once he discovered that if he dragged a

stick across the slender trunks of the bushes nobody could identify the bony rattling, he would play for hours. Now I wonder when he decided that it sounded like a skeleton.

He was already calling the dell Skeleton Woods. Our mother applauded and told him to carry on being himself. When he did in the schoolyard I saw his classmates laughing at him. "He thinks they're called Skeleton Woods."

"They are," Tim protested, clenching his fists and his small thin face smaller. "There are skeletons in them."

"There's never," one girl scoffed.

"Go when it's dark and you'll see."

"What'll we see? You making a face like that? Doesn't scare us."

"They live in the trees and they'll jump on you. When you hear the clicky noise that's them laughing, it's their teeth. And you'll see their shadows and think they're just bits of trees till they grab you and make you into bones like them. That's how it works, there was only one at first and it caught people and made them stay down there with it."

I couldn't judge whether his audience was impressed by all this or by how his eyes had glazed as if he was gazing inwards at the scenes he was describing. I was simply glad our mother wasn't there to deliver his biggest round of applause. Did he mean to frighten his classmates out of the woods? He had the opposite effect. Before long we heard children in the woods at night, giggling and whispering, sometimes crying out and running away. Perhaps they were fleeing the screams, not knowing they were Tim's response to not being allowed to go out after dark. "You're all I've got," our mother said, presumably including me.

He managed to content himself with daylight once he found it offered victims. I remember how his features widened with delight when he saw from our hideout two of his classmates who were venturing along the path, not nervously enough for him. He rattled the bushes and watched the girls shriek and stare about and dash away, and then he dodged out of hiding and ran after them, shouting "The skeletons want you. They'll be waiting for you."

A man out walking from the old people's home that overlooked the woods pointed his stick at him. "Don't stir things up, son. You don't know what you're doing."

Tim stared at him as the girls were surrounded by their own cries in the tunnel. "You'll be one soon," he said and ran off, leaving the old man to lean on his shaky stick.

I can't locate the den. I've forgotten which side path it was closest to, and all the clumps of bushes by the main one are the wrong shape, just crouching huddles full of gaps. I mightn't be able to recognise how it's grown, if it has even survived. I lower myself onto a bench that's too damp for me to rest my hands on and fumble a bottle of water out of my quilted coat. As I drain the bottle the pale rushes bordering the path finger the dim air with their fattened tips, though I can't hear the ripples that must be stirring the fleshless stalks. I could almost imagine that the stream is keeping some activity to itself.

How much was the water to blame? Hardly anyone seemed to give it a thought except Tim. Of course we may have been the only ones who saw the dog. There was gossip about a leak from a medical factory, but that was beyond the horizon, past an underground section of the stream. By then I was too worried about Tim to take much notice of the rumour. He was thirteen and using drugs.

At first I hoped that someone else had started hiding in our den. More than once I'd found the stubs of scrawny cigarettes under the bushes, on the carpet of fallen leaves that lent the interior a special secret glow. When I asked Tim about them he stared at me. Silence was his new response to much that he was asked, either to do or to answer. Our mother had been unable to keep him in at night for at least a year, and was reduced to sending me after him while she tried to relax with a bottle of wine. "Don't let anything happen to him," she would plead. "He's still your little brother."

He didn't seem like it to me. I thought he was determined to act older than I was, to do things I wouldn't dare. I knew it the night I trailed him to the den and saw greyness drifting out of the bushes. I tried to believe it was mist until I smelled it, which made my head swim. I dodged around the bushes and crawled underneath, bruising my elbows as twigs scraped my back. I lurched upright to see Tim suck most of the last inch of a thin cigarette to ash, then lick the remains and his fingers before dropping the blackened scrap. "What do you think you're doing?" I gasped.

When this was met with a wordless stare I stood up as straight as the branches overhead would allow and leaned over Tim, who was squatting

cross-legged. "Where did you get that?" I tried demanding.

"Want some?"

"I don't, and you certainly shouldn't. Don't ever do it again."

This time his silence didn't hold. "You're not my dad. I'll do what 1 like."

"Suppose I tell mother? What'll you do then?"

He glared at me so fiercely that even in the dimness I could see his eyes were red. "Go on, tell her. Like I care."

We both knew I wouldn't, and I wished I hadn't threatened to. "Why are you doing it at all? Don't you know what it can do to you?

"Helps me is what." Before I was goaded to ask the obvious question, he answered it. "See things."

I attempted to laugh, though it made me feel like one of the scoffers in the schoolyard years earlier. "What things?"

"Like him."

Tim stared at the leafy canopy above me, which gave a loud creak. The next moment something clawed so viciously at my scalp it might have been eager to reach my brain. I ducked but managed not to cry out as I glimpsed a thin shape crouching on top of the branches. In an instant I couldn't distinguish it. I must have mistaken part of the tree above the bushes for a figure after I'd stood up too far and scratched myself on a twig. Its raggedly perforated head could only be a bird's nest. "There's nothing. You're just making yourself see things," I said.

His mouth twisted smaller as if locking up a secret, but then he spoke. "That's all you know. It makes them come."

"No, it made me," I said, feeling clever. I felt less so once I followed him out of the den and was unable to locate the nest I'd thought was a head or even the branches I'd taken for limbs. Apparently the incident satisfied him in some way, because he headed home, which meant I had to worry that our mother would notice his condition. I was relieved when he made for his room without speaking and shut himself in with his headphones. I was even able to convince our mother that he had only been out for a walk.

After that I had to chase him most nights, always in the woods. He found it easier than ever to outdistance me on the latest of my old bicycles while I cycled warily along the twisted flickering paths. Sometimes he would linger

in the tunnel to leave pungent smoke waiting for me in the dark. I never overtook him before he finished what he'd brought, until the night I almost collided with him as I put on speed out of the tunnel. He was so immobile that I grew even more afraid for him. "What's wrong?" I cried.

"Shut up. I'm looking."

When I peered past him I was reassured to see there was something to look at: a more or less Alsatian dog that was drinking from the edge of the stream. At first I thought Tim was fascinated by the way the glimmering ripples crowded back across the water to splash the dog's muzzle as though impatient to be swallowed. Then the animal raised its head and turned it slowly to survey the woods in an entirely uncanine fashion. I found I couldn't breathe until it finished and plunged its entire face into the stream for another drink. I wanted to intervene somehow, but I hadn't moved when the dog backed away and trotted along the path, swinging its head from side to side with great deliberation. "It's the water," Tim whispered.

"Well, don't you try," I said more loudly, feeling too much like our mother.

"Who's going to stop me?"

"It's poisoned, don't you realise? Do you want to kill yourself?"

"Maybe."

Though I didn't believe him, his saying it dismayed me. I was wondering if I would have to fight him to keep him from drinking the water, and how I would explain any injuries to our mother, when he cycled off at speed. I almost screamed at him to wait until I realised from the way he was peering about that he wanted to observe the dog's behaviour. I would have helped him find it if it kept him clear of the stream. I cycled after him as fast as I dared, but there was no sign of the animal, either on the main route or on the paths that wound under the trees, not to mention those that crossed the stream. Eventually Tim scowled at me as if I'd chased the dog away, and then he sped home.

Neither of us had anything to tell our mother. I hid from her questions in my room and gazed from my window at the furtive obscure movements of the woods. What was ranging about under the trees as if searching for prey? Was it the dog? If I captured it I could take it to someone for examination, and then they would warn everyone about the water. I could save Tim.

The next day was Saturday. While our mother took him shopping for new shoes to replace a pair he'd trodden holes in, I found a length of old clothesline in the back yard and hurried down to the woods. I walked every path, some of them more than once at least, but couldn't see or hear the dog. I was trudging back to the tunnel when I heard something less than footsteps descending a side path towards me. Once I saw that the cause of the thin relentless sound was the stick an old man was clutching, I had to cover a nervous laugh.

He grabbed the back of a bench overgrown with initials so as to poke his stick at me. "You'll never catch them with a rope." Politeness required me to ask "What?"

He hobbled around the bench, pivoting on his gnarled fist, and lowered himself to sit. "Dray's the name. Yours?" I felt as if I was being set a test. "Philip."

As he lifted his long face his neck stretched so thin that it looked barely capable of supporting his pale puffy head. "Weren't you the lad that was going on about skeletons?"

"That was my brother." In defence of Tim I added "He was just making up stories."

"You don't make things like that up."

I couldn't tell if this was a statement or a warning. "Why not?"

"They're underneath everything. They're under us now. Don't they teach you anything at school any more?"

I managed not to resent this, because I thought I could impress him. "You mean fossils and all that? I know about those."

"Well, give him a trophy. I'll bet you don't know nothing wants to be dead. It wants to be more alive, just in another way. Some things get together and help each other to be. And telling stories like that does."

By now I was lost. I wasn't even sure if he meant Tim's stories or this one. As I tried to make out what his face would have looked like with less of a profusion of flesh he said "So what were you chasing after?"

"Have you seen a dog? I think it's drugged."

"Good God, things just keep getting worse. Who did it? You or your brother?"

"We wouldn't ever," I protested loud enough to send some eavesdropper and its lanky shadow scuttling away behind the bushes. "It's the stream. Some kind of drug has got into it."

Did I imagine that I could call on him to deal with this because he was an adult? I didn't want to trouble my mother. His response wasn't encouraging, however. "That's all it needs."

I was too nervous for politeness now. "What are you talking about?"

"If it's like that on the surface it'll reach down. There are things that haven't even been alive yet. It'll dredge up worse."

I was more than sorry to have asked. I would have retreated except for the need to learn "So did you see the dog?"

"I didn't, son. I've seen nothing you'd like to see." I was afraid he might expand on this until he said "I used to live round here, you know. It's all changed. I can't even find my home."

"You still live here, honestly. Keep looking and you'll find it." I couldn't take him—I was already responsible for Tim. I hurried away, and when I returned through the tunnel Mr Dray had gone. I never found the dog either, just as I haven't found the den, and now I wonder if that's on the far side of the tunnel.

I mustn't be nervous of going through. There never was a reason. I push myself up off the bench and do my best to stride along the path, which has begun to resemble a trail of mist. Has it always followed the course of the stream so closely? Except for the substance I could imagine they're identical. The water glows as whitely as the sky that trickles between the entangled branches, so that I feel in danger of forgetting which is reflecting which. I'm almost glad when the darkness grows more solid between the trees ahead.

It's the railway embankment. For a few yards I can distinguish the glistening outlines of bricks arched over the stream and the path, and then there appears to be blackness for hundreds of feet, leading to the huddle of tree-trunks framed by the end of the tunnel. I don't need to see in order to walk through, even if the path is slippery with mud. The trouble is rather that as I pick my way I'm more able to discern it than I ought to be. It's as though the stream is carrying the moonlight through the tunnel, but if the water's luminous that might be worse. Can I really see ripples settling into

stillness beside me in the middle of the tunnel before they come back to life some yards further on? How can any of this be possible? I'm halted by the notion that something is about to rear up out of the stagnant stretch of water, unless the water itself is preparing to leap at me. That's the kind of thing Tim would have imagined, and perhaps Mr Dray as well. The thought releases me, and I flounder and skid to the end of the tunnel.

The bare trees open out to the sky above the stream. Between the branches that overtop the banks of the valley, a very few windows are lit. I can tell by their smallness that they belong to the new houses, and now I remember another time I did. It was the night I found Tim with a girl in our den.

He'd stopped smoking, as far as I could establish, which only aggravated my unease. What might he be doing to himself now? He often didn't speak for hours, and avoided me whenever he could. Although I disliked resenting how his state didn't affect his school-work, mine was suffering from my anxiety for him. Perhaps our mother was aware of some of this, because eventually she asked "Is everything all right between you two?"

We were sitting in the kitchen with the fluorescent tube glaring down at the remains of that night's burgers from the Turkish fish and chip shop. Tim barely even shrugged, but I thought the twitch of his shoulders looked nervous. The best I could manage and try to believe in was "We're still us."

"I hope so." She let her gaze trail over me and then Tim as she drained another glass of wine from the box. "I see enough bad things at work. I don't want to come home to them."

When Tim sat up out of his crouch I was afraid his interest had been caught too well. Was he thinking there were better things to see and how to do so? Suppose he hinted or more than implied as much? My head was throbbing with the search for some remark that would forestall his when he shoved his chair backwards. "I'm going out," he muttered.

"Oh, where are you going now? What did I say?"

All at once I'd had enough—too much to be careful any longer. "That's right, Tim, where are you going? Why don't you say for once?

He didn't bother looking at either of us. "I told you, out," he said and almost immediately was.

As the front door slammed I dashed into the front room, nearly tripping over his computer magazines strewn beside an armchair, and saw him

making for the woods. Once his head dropped below the brink of the path I picked up a wineglass from the couch in front of the television and carried it to the kitchen. Perhaps I hoped the gesture would satisfy my mother in some way, but she was waiting with a question. "Do you think it's a girl?"

"I don't know," I said and tried to concentrate on clearing the table. I dealt with the washing-up as swiftly as I could, striving not to let her glimpse my concern for Tim. At least he wasn't cycling, and so I hoped he hadn't gone too far for me to find him. "I'll go out for a bit," I said.

"A bit of what, Philip?" Her smile couldn't keep up its slyness or even its shape. "Why don't you find yourself a girl too? I wouldn't mind."

I hurried out as much to escape her insistence as to discover the reason for Tim's eagerness. I'd followed the path beside the stream so frequently that by now it felt like a connection in my brain. I tried just to walk and ignore the surroundings. I tiptoed through the tunnel, and as I left the scrabbling of echoes behind I saw lit windows above the trees. They let me feel less apprehensive until I heard Tim's voice.

I don't know how far I'd walked—perhaps farther from the tunnel than I have now. I sit on a bench anyway and close my eyes so as not to watch the stream groping at the darkness with its reeds, because it feels as though they're reaching to snag my mind. At first it seemed that the bony tangles of branches were muttering. "I made them up," Tim was saying. "Skeletons are for kids."

I'd begun to wonder if he was talking to himself when a voice so high it reminded me of how mine still leapt an octave said "So why do you still call them Skeleton Woods?"

"That's what they are. The skeletons are everything that's here. Ordinary people just see them. When you know that's all they are you can start to see the rest. You're not just a skeleton, are you? Neither is this place."

I hoped the silence denoted boredom, but then the girl spoke. I heard admiration and apprehensive eagerness. "What do you see?"

I couldn't stand any more. I shouted into the bushes "Never mind what. Why are you seeing things, Tim? What have you been doing to yourself now?"

I thought I'd shocked him into some kind of awareness until they both laughed. "Is that him?" the girl said.

"That's him all right. Big fat Phil. Phil the mummy's boy. Doesn't dare do anything she wouldn't like him to, or maybe that's what he wants her to think. Wonder what he does to himself when he's in his room with nobody to see."

"Nothing," I shouted and tried to part the branches, but they were as immovable as ribs, between which the darkness allowed me no view. "I can see you," I lied. "Stop that now."

I heard a kiss that suggested the darkness had developed soft wet flesh. Once his mouth was free Tim said "He's mad because he thinks this is his place."

"I found it," I declared and dealt the roots a kick that shook the bushes, rattling twig after twig.

"It was here first. You didn't make it anything."

"I thought I made it ours."

"Well, it isn't any more," Tim said and scrambled out so fast I thought he was going to attack my ankles like a dog. "So piss off and play somewhere else."

"I'm not playing, you are." Perhaps that was his worst betrayal, to dismiss my concern like that. "He's always made things up," I called into the bushes. "They're just like the stories he used to tell when he started school. He likes people thinking he's got more imagination than them, that's all. It's rubbish, everything he told you. There were never skeletons here and there aren't now."

By now Tim was on his feet. He brought his face so close to mine I saw his eyes glitter like coal. "You'll see," he said.

"Keep people like that out of there in future."

When I heard his companion crawling towards us I retreated alongside the stream; I didn't want a confrontation with anyone else. I lingered at a bend in the path long enough to watch the two of them vanish into the dark towards the new houses. I considered following them to learn what else they did, but I felt I'd done enough for one night. I was in bed before I wondered what exactly Tim had meant by "You'll see."

Did he plan to make me if I wasn't careful? I didn't want to think so. Perhaps he was trying to work on my nerves by passing me drinks at dinner

—glasses of water from the tap. At first I told him I could fetch them myself, and then not to bother, and eventually just not to. Once I knocked over a glass he'd insisted on filling, and our mother burst into tears. He took that as an excuse to leave, and by the time I'd calmed her down and assured her that nothing was really wrong I couldn't find him when I went out to check on him.

We were at a new school now. Tim had taken to its size at once, and soon to the ways the girls were also bigger. At least it didn't involve passing through the woods. Instead I tailed him along the edge of the new estate. Sometimes he lost me, but after the night I caught him with the girl in the den I succeeded in observing him several times with one, presumably the same girl. In the schoolyard he had to share her with her giggling friends, but I saw them walk to school together more than once. The last time I overtook them and was able to watch them arguing. When they noticed me the disagreement grew fiercer, and they hurried off before I could hear what they were saying. It must have come to an unpleasant end, because when I asked Tim that night why he was walking home alone he gave me a look bordering on hatred. "Because I am," he said.

I wasn't sure this meant he'd finished with the girl. Whenever he went out at night I couldn't find him, even if I was cycling while he was on foot. Eventually I couldn't stand it, and waited for him outside the front door after dinner. "What are you up to now?" I murmured.

"Only one way to find out. Still want to see?"

"You aren't frightening me, Tim. There's nothing to be frightened of."

"Come on then, if you can keep up," he said so fiercely I felt his words condense like mist on my face.

When he dodged I thought he meant to run into the woods. Instead he hurried around the side of the house, and I was afraid he'd brought something too close to home. He was only collecting his bicycle. As I sprinted across the yard to mine our mother cried from somewhere inside the house "Can't you stay in with me for once?"

Tim glared at me as if I was to blame, and then he cycled fast around the building. I was about to follow when I realised that in the confusion, if indeed he was confused, he'd taken my latest bicycle and left its predecessor. For years that one had been too small for me, but I mustn't let

him elude me. I squatted on it as best I could and wobbled alongside the house towards the woods.

I nearly lost my balance as the front wheel jerked downwards beneath the arch, Descending the steps felt like cycling over a giant's ribcage almost buried in the earth. Even when I reached the level path I couldn't help veering back and forth on it. Twigs clawed at my splayed knees while tree-trunks lurched at me as if they were bent on clubbing my skull. I might have abandoned the chase if I hadn't been able to hear Tim.

I heard my bicycle rattling along the path before it set up echoes in the tunnel. I could have imagined they'd barely ceased when I arrived at the downturned mouth. As soon as I rode in, the clacking of my pedals was multiplied by chattering in the blackness. No wonder I was so distracted that halfway through I strayed off the slippery path into the shallow water. I almost sprawled headlong on the path as I dragged the bicycle free of the stream. "Tim," I yelled furiously, but the only response was my own voice.

I righted the bicycle and pedalled awkwardly out of the tunnel. Even once I emerged from beneath the twitching of faint ripples on the bricks, I felt as though the stream was clinging to my feet and ankles. I did my best to shake off the chill as it seeped up through me while I tried to speed along the path. Then my flailing legs snatched both feet off the pedals, and as I struggled to regain control the machine toppled over.

At least I didn't fall on the hard path or in the water. I ended up with one leg under the bicycle on the damp grassy bank of the stream. As the clicking of the rear wheel wound down I saw that I was opposite the den. I was almost certain that I'd heard another noise—a stealthy creak among the bushes. I opened my mouth to shout at Tim, but instead I lifted the bicycle and used it to lever myself to my feet before laying it down again. I could be as sly as Tim if I had to be. I tiptoed swiftly onto the side path and dropped to all fours on the grass. Crawling into the den, I felt as if I'd won a game of hide and seek. "Tim," I said triumphantly, and looked up.

I couldn't see much, either despite or because of the pallor of the fallen leaves, but I knew at once that the figure craning down towards me wasn't Tim. For an instant I thought it was Mr Dray— thought I heard the scraping of his stick over the scattered twigs. His condition must have worsened, since he had more than one stick now; indeed, he sounded built out of them. He creaked and rattled closer, so that I glimpsed dimness through more than

one gap in the looming mass of his head, and I scrabbled backwards out of the den.

I was floundering to my feet when I heard a commotion among the bushes. Whatever was in there sounded impatient to claw its way out, unless the figure Tim had cobbled together from bits of the woods in an attempt to impress me had collapsed against the branches. By the time I managed to conclude the latter, I'd staggered away from the den. "It didn't work," I called, and then I saw his bicycle lying beside the stream—my bicycle, that was.

Where was the one I'd ridden? How far had I blundered before I could stop? All that seemed to matter was that Tim had to be nearby. I sensed that I was being watched. "Tim," I called and heard a surreptitious movement somewhere close. It wasn't among the huddles of bushes or in the gloomy labyrinth of trees; it was just the whisper of ripples around two small whitish rocks in the middle of the stream. In the moonlight they looked more than weathered. They looked—I searched for the word and grew dizzy with alarm as it came to me—scuffed. They were the toes of a pair of trainers, which led my gaze to the faint shape of a body in the stream.

"Tim," I cried and ran to the edge. The water was coated with moonlight, which virtually blotted out the figure lying on its back. I threw myself flat on the soaked grass and reached for its hands, but I couldn't find them in the unexpected depths. I was confused by an impression that the face was somehow wrong, though I couldn't distinguish its features, until I realised it must be upside down. I rolled up my sleeves and plunged my hands deeper but still found nothing to grasp. In desperation I lurched forward on the bank to immerse my arms all the way to the shoulders, and my head sank underwater.

A face rose to meet mine, but it wasn't Tim's face. It was too large, and luminous with moonlight or of itself. Its eroded piebald features reminded me of the moon too, except that they were blurred by an excess of flesh. I had a sudden suffocating notion that the figure I'd glimpsed in the den had swum or drifted to find me while putting on flesh. A drowned voice seemed to fill my ears. "Now you'll see," I thought it said. I was terrified that whatever the shape had for hands were about to seize mine and drag me into the impossible depths. I snatched my arms clear of the water and dug my fingers into the earth to haul myself away from the stream.

As I staggered to my feet and stumbled backwards onto the path I noticed that the objects poking up from the stream were only rocks whitened by lichen, and that's all I want to remember just now. Why did I come down here? I grip the bench, which feels spongy as a fungus, and stand up. When I hauled my face out of the water my surroundings appeared to have grown brighter—as bright as they've become. That's because my vision is feasting on the moonlight, and wasn't it then? All that matters is that there was nothing under the water or anywhere else, then or now. I simply want to leave because I've no reason to be here. I'm beginning to find the place oppressive, even the scent that looms out of the shadows. I plant one hand over my mouth and nose as I tramp along the twisting path.

The scent seeps between my fingers. It puts me in mind of an old woman's perfume in which she has doused her entire body to disguise the smell of burgeoning flesh. It's threatening to make me dizzy, which is why I'm confused by a movement in or on the stream. Either the insect was skimming the surface before I was aware of it or it has emerged from the water. It must be a kind of dragonfly, even if it's white as ice, with wings like traceries of crystal. It glides in my direction, and I lean towards it. So does a growth at the edge of the stream, a flower like puckered white lips on a stick. The plump wrinkled lips gape wide and close around the fly, and I seem to hear the faint fragile crunch of its wings as the swollen stem works throatily Then I dash away along the path for fear of hearing the lips speak.

The scent keeps up with me. Perhaps it belongs to the flowers that pout at me alongside the stream, or perhaps the spiders in their cut-glass webs that span the bushes are exuding it. As I try not to watch, the spiders blossom, their luminous white bodies efflorescing with filaments and scaly petals while every leg twitches its web in such unison it might be a message. A chalky bird flaps out of a tree, and I hope I may be able to look at it instead, until I realise that although it's flying away above the stream, it's growing no smaller in my eyes, which has to mean that it's expanding with each beat of its wings. The trees are flexing their branches, drawing white flesh down from the bloated sky, slipping it on like fat gloves. I try to ignore the sight of the glowing tree-trunks as they writhe and gesture me towards them. I have to run in that direction, but only to pass them. I'll be safe as long as I stay on the path. Surely I'm not really feeling it stir like a cocoon about to crack open. At least nothing to either side of it can reach me if I keep to the

middle—and then I hear something that can. There are footsteps ahead, around a bend in the path.

They're heavy and deliberate. They're coming for me. I know that before a voice calls my name. I stare about wildly, but there's nowhere to hide; even the shade under the trees is as bright as the clouds. Besides, I don't think I could bear treading on the restless white pelt that was the grass, never mind approaching the bushes that crouch forward to peer at me from beneath their pallid swollen convoluted fleshy scalps. I spin around again and almost fall against a tree, which is still trying to lure me with sinuous movements, although I can see it's old and cracked and scabby. Then the voice calls out again, too close. "Philip. Philip Dray," it insists, and the speaker strides into view.

For as long as he stands gazing at me I'm sure he's a total stranger. When he takes another step I realise that, despite the uniform, he's Tim. The recognition seems to bare everything at me—the litter caught in the broken trees, the avalanches of household rubbish on the slopes below the new estate, the objects like long whitish flattened glistening fingers under the bushes, a rusty bicycle in the stream. Perhaps the clump of splintered bushes beside us is the den, its branches charred, the ground beneath it glittering with syringes and glass. Is all this the skeleton? If that's the case, I don't want to know about it; I'd even rather listen to Tim. "Come on, old fellow," he says. "Let's get you home."

I'm not about to tell him I've forgotten where it is. I wait for him to take my arm and lead me along the path. I need some distraction from everything I won't look at, and so I say "How's mother?"

He doesn't answer until we're past the bend and I see the steps up to the road. "It all got too much for her, Phil," he says and seems to wonder if he should say any more. "She's gone. It was a long time ago.

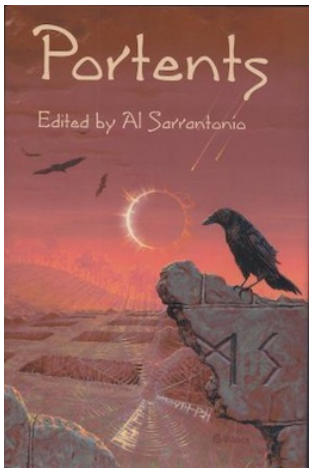
I don't think his gaze is accusing me. It looks more like suppressed pity, but I don't want either. As he ushers me far enough to see his police car at the top of the steps I retort "You were the one who took drugs, you know. I don't care how you've changed."

He turns his eyes away from me. I don't know what they're withholding, and I'd rather not. I focus my attention on the path, and then I grin to myself so fiercely I can feel it hiding from him under my face. I'm looking at our shadows, and I see what he can't have noticed. At last I understand the real

name of the place. He's holding me by the gap between the bones of my arm.

2006

Passing Through Peacehaven



"Lord, it's so long since I wrote *Passing Through Peacehaven*—2006—that I don't recall much about its genesis. It was certainly suggested by overhearing announcements at a railway station, the kind of everyday occurrence that I may have taken for granted for most of my life until it suddenly turns around in my mind to display an unexpected side. Ideas are everywhere!"—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in *The Mammoth Book Of Best New Horror 23*

Written in: 2006
First published in *Portents*, February 2011

"Wait," Marsden shouted as he floundered off his seat. His vision was so overcast with sleep that it was little better than opaque, but so far as he could see through the carriages the entire train was deserted. "Terminate" was the only word he retained from the announcement that had wakened him. He blundered to the nearest door and leaned on the window to slide it further open while he groped beyond it for the handle. The door swung wide so readily that he almost sprawled on the platform. In staggering dangerously backwards to compensate he slammed the door, which seemed to be the driver's cue. The train was heading into the night before Marsden realised he had never seen the station in his life.

"Wait," he cried, but it was mostly a cough as the smell of some October fire caught in his throat. His eyes felt blackened by smoke and stung when he blinked, so that he could barely see where he was going as he lurched after the train. He succeeded in clearing his vision just in time to glimpse distance or a bend in the track extinguish the last light of the train like an ember. He panted coughing to a halt and stared red-eyed around him.

Two signs named the station Peacehaven. The grudging glow of half a dozen lamps that put him in mind of streetlights in an old photograph illuminated stretches of both platforms but seemed shy of the interior of the enclosed bridge that led across the pair of tracks. A brick wall twice his height extended into the dark beyond the ends of the platform he was on.

The exit from the station was on the far side of the tracks, through a passage where he could just distinguish a pay phone in the gloom. Above the wall of that platform, and at some distance, towered an object that he wasted seconds in identifying as a factory chimney. He should be looking for the times of any trains to Manchester, but the timetable among the vintage posters alongside the platform was blackened by more than the dark. As he squinted at it, someone spoke behind him.

It was the voice that had wakened him. Apart from an apology for a delay, the message was a blur. "I can't hear much at the best of times," Marsden grumbled. At least the station hadn't closed for the night, and a timetable on the other platform was beside a lamp. He made for the bridge and climbed the wooden stairs to the elevated corridor, where narrow grimy windows above head height and criss-crossed by wire mesh admitted virtually no illumination. He needn't shuffle through the dark; his mobile phone could light the way. He reached in his overcoat pocket, and dug deeper to find extra emptiness.

Marjorie wouldn't have approved of the words that escaped his lips. He wasn't fond of them himself, especially when he heard them from children in the street. He and Marjorie would have done their best to keep their grandchildren innocent of such language and of a good deal else that was in vogue, but they would need to have had a son or daughter first. He ran out of curses as he trudged back across the bridge, which felt narrowed by darkness piled against the walls. The platform was utterly bare. Did he remember hearing or perhaps only feeling the faintest thump as he'd left his seat? There was no doubt that he'd left the mobile on the train.

He was repeating himself when he wondered if he could be heard. His outburst helped the passage to muffle the announcer's unctuous voice, which apparently had information about a signal failure. Marsden wasn't going to feel like one. He marched out of darkness into dimness, which lightened somewhat as he reached the platform.

Had vandals tried to set fire to the timetable? A blackened corner was peeling away from the bricks. Marsden pushed his watch higher on his wizened wrist until the strap took hold. Theoretically the last train—for Bury and Oldham and Manchester—was due in less than twenty minutes. "What's the hold-up again? Say it clearly this time," Marsden invited not

quite at the top of his voice. When there was no response he made for the phone on the wall.

Was it opposite some kind of memorial? No, the plaque was a ticket window boarded up behind cracked glass. Surely the gap beneath the window couldn't be occupied by a cobweb, since the place was staffed. He stood with his back to the exit from the station and fumbled coins into the slot beside the receiver before groping for the dial that he could barely see in the glimmer from the platform.

"Ray and Marjorie Marsden must be engaged elsewhere. Please don't let us wonder who you were or when you tried to contact us or where we can return the compliment..." His answering message had amused them when he recorded it—at least, Marjorie had made the face that meant she appreciated his wit—but now it left him feeling more alone than he liked. "Are you there?" he asked the tape. "You'll have gone up, will you? You'll have gone up, of course. Just to let you know I'm stranded by an unexpected change of trains. If you play me back don't worry, I'll be home as soon as practicable. Oh, and the specialist couldn't find anything wrong. I know, you'll say it shows I can hear when I want to. Not true, and shall I tell you why? I'd give a lot to hear you at this very moment. Never mind. I will soon."

Even saying so much in so many words earned him no response, and yet he didn't feel unheard. His audience could be the station announcer, who was presumably beyond one of the doors that faced each other across the corridor, although neither betrayed the faintest trace of light. "I nearly didn't say I love you," he added in a murmur that sounded trapped inside his skull. "Mind you, you'll know that, won't you? If you don't after all these years you never will. I suppose that had better be it for now as long as you're fast asleep."

He still felt overheard. Once he'd hung up he yielded to a ridiculous urge to poke his head out of the corridor. The platforms were deserted, and the tracks led to unrelieved darkness. He might as well learn where he'd ended up while there was no sign of a train. "Just stepping outside," he informed anyone who should know.

The corridor didn't seem long enough to contain so much blackness. He only just managed to refrain from rubbing his eyes as he emerged onto an unpromising road. The front of the station gave it no light, but the

pavements on either side of the cracked weedy tarmac were visibly uneven. Beyond high railings across the road the grounds of the factory bristled with tall grass, which appeared to shift, although he couldn't feel a wind. Here and there a flagstone showed pale through the vegetation. A sign beside the open gates had to do with motors or motor components, and Marsden was considering a closer look to pass the time when the announcer spoke again. "Going to attract effect" might have been part of the proclamation, and all that Marsden was able to catch.

Some delay must be owing to a track defect, of course. Much of the voice had ended up as echoes beyond the railings or simply dissipated in the night, but he also blamed its tone for confusing him. It had grown so oily that it sounded more like a parody of a priest than any kind of railway official. Marsden tramped into the passage and knocked on the door beside the ticket window. "Will you repeat that, please?"

If this sounded like an invitation to an argument, it wasn't taken up. He found the doorknob, which felt flaky with age, but the door refused to budge. He rubbed his finger and thumb together as he crossed to the other door, which tottered open at his knock, revealing only a storeroom. It was scattered with brushes and mops, or rather their remains, just distinguishable in the meagre light through a window so nearly opaque that on the platform he'd mistaken it for an empty poster frame. Vandals must have been in the room; the dimness smelled as ashen as it looked, while the tangles of sticks that would once have been handles seemed blackened by more than the dark. That was all he managed to discern before the voice spoke to him.

Was the fellow too close to the microphone? If he was trying to be clearer, it achieved the opposite. Of course nobody was next to alive; a train was the next to arrive. "Speak clearly, not up," Marsden shouted as he slammed the door and hurried to the bridge, where he did his best to maintain his pace by keeping to the middle of the passage. If an object or objects were being dragged somewhere behind him, he wanted to see what was happening. He clumped breathlessly down the stairs and limped onto the platform. How could he have thought the windows were poster frames? There was one on either side of the exit, and although both rooms were unlit, a figure was peering through the window of the office.

Or was it a shadow? It was thin and black enough. There was no light inside the room to cast it, and yet it must be a shadow, since it had nothing for a face. Marsden was still trying to identify its source when he noticed that the door he'd slammed was wide open. It had felt unsteady on its hinges, and at least he had an explanation for the dragging sound he'd heard. He set about laughing at his own unease, and then the laugh snagged in his throat like another cough. The silhouette was no longer pressed against the window.

Had it left traces of its shape on the discoloured glass? As he paced back and forth, trying either to confirm or shake off the impression, he felt like an animal trapped in a cage and watched by spectators. He'd met with no success by the time the voice that might belong to the owner of the shadow had more to say. "Where's the party?" Marsden was provoked to mutter. "What's departing?" he demanded several times as loud. "It's supposed to arrive first," he pointed out, glaring along the tracks at the unrelieved night. The few words he'd managed to recognise or at least to guess had sounded oilier than ever, close to a joke. Why couldn't the fellow simply come and tell him what to expect? Was he amusing himself by spying on the solitary passenger? "Yes, you've got a customer," Marsden declared. "He's the chap who has to stand out here in the cold because you can't be bothered to provide a waiting-room."

The complaint left him more aware of the storeroom, so that he could have imagined he was being observed from there too. He would much rather fancy his return home to the bed that he hoped Marjorie was keeping warm for him. As he hugged himself to fend off the late October chill he wasn't too far from experiencing how her arms would feel when she turned in her sleep to embrace him. He couldn't help wishing that the tape had brought him her voice.

The only one he was likely to hear was the announcer's, and he needed to ensure he did. He lowered himself onto a bench opposite the exit and planted his hands on his knees. Though the seat felt unwelcomingly moist if not actually rotten, he concentrated on staying alert for the next message. His ears were throbbing with the strain, and his skin felt as if his sense of being watched were gathering on it, by the time his attention was rewarded.

Was someone clinking glasses? Had the staff found an excuse to celebrate? Marsden had begun to wonder if they were deriding his predicament when

he identified the noise of bricks knocking together. The factory was more dilapidated than he'd been able to make out, then, and there was movement in the rubble. Perhaps an animal was at large—more than one, by the sound of it—or else people were up to no good. Suppose they were the vandals who'd tried to set fire to the station? Would the announcer deign to emerge from hiding if they or others like them trespassed on railway property, or was he capable of leaving his solitary customer to deal with them? Marsden could hear nothing now except his own heart, amplified by his concentration if not pumped up by stress. He wasn't sure if he glimpsed surreptitious movement at the exit, where he could easily imagine that the dark was growing crowded; indeed, the passage was so nearly lightless that any number of intruders might sneak into it unseen. He was gripping his knees and crouching forward like a competitor at the start of some pensioners' event while he strained to see whether anyone was sidling through the gloom when his heart jumped, and he did.

The voice was louder than ever, and its meaning more blurred. Even the odd relatively clear phrase amid the magnified mumbling left much to be desired. Marsden could have thought he was being warned about some further decay and informed that he had a hearing problem. The latter comment must refer to engineering, but wasn't this unreasonable too? How many hindrances was the train going to encounter? The reports of its progress were beginning to seem little better than jokes. But here was a final one, however inefficiently pronounced. It meant that the train was imminent, not that anything would shortly be alive.

Perhaps the man was slurring his words from drunkenness, and the clinking had indeed been glass, unless the contrivance of equality had reached such a pitch that the station was obliged to employ an announcer with a speech impediment. On that basis Marsden might seek a job as a telephone operator, but he and Marjorie were resigned to leaving the world to the young and aggressive. He peered along the railway, where the view stayed as black as the depths of the corridor opposite. All that his strained senses brought him besides a charred smell and a crawling of the skin was, eventually, another message.

"You won't be burying this old man," he retorted under his clogged breath. While the announcement must have referred to the train to Bury and Oldham, the voice had resembled a priest's more than ever. "And where's

this train that's supposed to be arriving?" he demanded loud enough to rouse an echo in the exit corridor.

The next message was no answer. Presumably he was being told that unattended luggage would be removed without warning, but since he had no luggage, what was the point? Couldn't the fellow see him? Perhaps some legislation allowed him to be blind as well as largely incomprehensible. Still, here were another few words Marsden understood, even if he couldn't grasp where passengers were being told to change. "What was that?" he shouted, but the announcer hadn't finished. His tone was so ecclesiastical that for the space of an exaggerated heartbeat Marsden fancied he was being offered some kind of service, and then he recognised the phrase. It was "out of service".

He sucked in a breath that he had to replace once he'd finished coughing. "What's out?" he spluttered. "Where's my train?"

The only reply was an echo, all the more derisive for sounding more like "Where's my Ray?" He levered himself to his feet, muttering an impolite word at having somehow blackened the knee of his trousers, and hobbled to the bridge. An arthritic pang set him staggering like an old drunk, but he succeeded in gaining the top of the stairs without recourse to the banisters. He preferred to keep to the middle of the bridge, especially along the passage over the tracks. It was too easy to imagine that the darkness beneath the obscured windows was peopled with supine figures. Surely the humped mounds consisted simply of litter, despite the marks on a window about halfway along, five elongated trails that might have been left by a sooty hand as its owner tried to haul his body up. That afternoon Marsden had given a few coins to a woman lying in a railway underpass, but he hoped not to encounter anyone of the kind just now. He faltered and then stumbled fast to the end of the passage, mumbling "No change" as he clattered down to the platform.

"Here's your customer," he said at several times the volume, "and what are you going to do about it?" The question trailed away, however, and not only because the office was so thoroughly unlit from within. The imprint on the window had silenced him. He might still have taken it for a shadow if it weren't so incomplete. Just the top half of a face with holes for eyes was recognisable, and the bones of a pair of hands.

Some grimy vandal must have been trying to see into the room. Of course the marks weren't on the inside of the glass, or if they were, that was no reason to think that the figure at the window had stood in the same place. Nevertheless Marsden wasn't anxious to look closer, although he'd managed to distinguish nothing in the office. He made for the door with all the confidence he could summon up.

The storeroom distracted him. Even if his stinging eyes had adjusted to the dimness, he couldn't understand how he'd failed to see that the room was more than untidy. It was full of burned sticks and bits of stick, some of which were thin as twigs. One charred tangle that, to judge by the blackened lump at the nearer end, consisted partly of a mop or brush came close to blocking the door. When he lurched to shut away the sight the edge of the door caught the object, and he glimpsed it crumbling into restless fragments before the slam resounded through the passage. He limped to the office door and, having rapped on a scaly panel, shouted "Will you come and tell me to my face what's happening?"

As far as he could determine, silence was the answer. He could have fancied that the station and its surroundings were eager for his next outburst. "You're meant to make yourself plain," he yelled. "I couldn't understand half of what you said."

If he was hoping to provoke a response, it didn't work. Had he offended the man? "I need to know where I'm going," he insisted. "I don't think that's unreasonable, do you?"

Perhaps the fellow thought he could behave as he liked while he was in charge. Perhaps he felt too important to descend to meeting the public, an attitude that would explain his tone of voice. Or might he not be on the premises? If he was beyond the door, what could he expect to gain by lying low? Surely not even the worst employee would act that way—and then Marsden wondered if he'd strayed on the truth. Suppose it wasn't a railway employee who was skulking in the office?

The kind of person who'd tried to set fire to the station would certainly be amused by Marsden's plight and think it even more of a joke to confuse him. Perhaps the indistinctness of the announcements was the result of suppressed mirth. Marsden shouldn't waste any more time if the information was false. He hurried to the phone and glared at the dim wall, which didn't bear a single notice.

No doubt vandals had removed any advertisements for taxis. At least the phone wasn't disabled. He fumbled the receiver off its hook and leaned almost close enough to kiss the blackened dial as he clawed at an enquiry number. He could have thought his hearing had improved when the bell began to ring; it sounded close as the next room. The voice it roused was keeping its distance, however. "Can you speak up?" Marsden urged.

"Where are you calling, please?"

This was sharp enough for a warning. Presumably the speaker was ensuring he was heard. "Peacehaven," Marsden said. "Taxis."

"Where is that, please?"

"Peacehaven," Marsden pronounced loud enough for it to grow blurred against his ear before he realised that he wasn't being asked to repeat the name. "Somewhere near Manchester."

In the pause that ensued he might have heard movement outside the passage. His hectic pulse obscured the noise, which must have been the tall grass scraping in a wind, even if he couldn't feel it. He was relieved when the voice returned until he grasped its message. "Not listed," it said.

"Forgive me, I wasn't asking for Peacehaven Taxis. Any cab firm here will do."

"There is no listing."

Was the fellow pleased to say so? He sounded as smug as the worst sort of priest. "The nearest one, then," Marsden persisted. "I think that might be—"

"There are no listings for Peacehaven."

"No, that can't be right. I'm in it. I'm at the railway station. You must have a number for that at least."

"There is none."

Marsden was aware of the dark all around him and how many unheard lurkers it could hide. "Is there anything more I can do for you?" the voice said.

It sounded so fulsome that Marsden was convinced he was being mocked. "You've done quite enough," he blurted and slammed the receiver on its hook.

He could try another enquiry number, or might he call the police? What could he say that would bring them to his aid yet avoid seeming as pathetic as he was determined not to feel? There was one voice he yearned to hear in the midst of all the darkness, but the chance of this at so late an hour seemed little better than infinitesimal. Nevertheless he was groping for change and for the receiver. He scrabbled at the slot with coins and dragged the indistinct holes around the dial. The bell measured the seconds and at last made way for a human voice. It was his own. "Ray and Marjorie Marsden must be engaged elsewhere . . ."

"I am. I wish you weren't," he murmured and felt all the more helpless for failing to interrupt his mechanical self. Then his distant muffled voice fell silent, and Marjorie said "Who is it?"

"It's me, love."

"Is that Ray?" She sounded sleepy enough not to know. "I can hardly hear you," she protested. "Where have you gone?"

"You'd wonder." He was straining to hear another sound besides her voice —a noise that might have been the shuffling of feet in rubble. "I'm stuck somewhere," he said. "I'll be late. I can't say how late."

"Did you call before?"

"That was me. Didn't you get me?"

"The tape must be stuck like you. I'll need to get a new one."

"Not a new husband, I hope." He wouldn't have minded being rewarded with the laugh he'd lived with for the best part of fifty years, even though the joke felt as old as him, but perhaps she was wearied by the hour. "Anyway," he said, "if you didn't hear me last time I'll sign off the same way, which as if you didn't know—"

"What was that?"

For too many seconds he wasn't sure. He'd been talking over it, and then she had. Surely it had said that a train was about to arrive; indeed, wasn't the noise he'd mistaken for thin footsteps the distant clicking of wheels? "It's here now," he tried to tell her through a fit of coughing. By the time he was able to speak clearer, the train might have pulled in. Dropping the receiver on the hook, he dashed for the platform. He hadn't reached it when he heard a scraping behind him.

The storeroom was open again, but that wasn't enough in itself to delay him. His eyes had grown all too equal to the gloom in the passage, so that he was just able to discern marks on the floor, leading from outside the station to the room. Could someone not be bothered to pick up their dirty feet? The trails looked as if several objects had been dragged into the room. He didn't believe they had just been left; that wasn't why they made him uneasy. He had to squint to see that they were blurred by more than the dark. Whatever had left them—not anybody shuffling along, he hoped, when their feet would have been worse than thin—had crumbled in transit, scattering fragments along the route. He thought he could smell the charred evidence, and swallowed in order not to recommence coughing, suddenly fearful of being heard. What was he afraid of? Was he growing senile? Thank heaven Marjorie wasn't there to see him. The only reason for haste was that he had a train to catch. He tramped out of the passage and might have maintained his defiant pace all the way to the bridge if a shape hadn't reared up at the window of the storeroom.

Was the object that surmounted it the misshapen head of a mop? He couldn't distinguish much through the grimy pane, but the idea was almost reassuring until he acknowledged that somebody would still have had to lift up the scrawny excuse for a figure. It hadn't simply risen or been raised, however. A process that the grime couldn't entirely obscure was continuing to take place. The silhouette—the blackened form, rather—was taking on more substance, though it remained alarmingly emaciated. It was putting itself back together.

The spectacle was so nightmarishly fascinating that Marsden might have been unable to stir except for the clatter of wheels along the tracks. He staggered around to see dim lights a few hundred yards short of the station. "Stop," he coughed, terrified that the driver mightn't notice him and speed straight through. Waving his arms wildly, he sprinted for the bridge.

He'd panted up the stairs and was blundering along the middle of the wooden corridor when he thought he heard a noise besides the approach of the train. Was he desperate to hear it or afraid to? He might have tried to persist in mistaking it for wind in the grass if it weren't so close. He did his utmost to fix his shaky gaze on the far end of the corridor as he fled past shadow after crouching shadow. He almost plunged headlong down the further stairs, and only a grab at the slippery discoloured banister saved

him. As he dashed onto the platform he saw that both doors in the passage out of the station were open. The sight brought him even closer to panic, and he began to wave his shivering arms once more as he tottered to the edge of the platform. "Don't leave me here," he cried.

The squeal of brakes seemed to slice through the dark. The engine blotted out the view across the tracks, and then a carriage sped past him. Another followed, but the third was slower. Its last door halted almost in front of him. Though the train was by no means the newest he'd ridden that day, and far from the cleanest, it seemed the next thing to paradise. He clutched the rusty handle and heaved the door open and clambered aboard. "You can go now. Go," he pleaded.

Who was the driver waiting for? Did he think the noises on the bridge were promising more passengers? There was such a volume of eager shuffling and scraping that Marsden almost wished his ears would fail him. He hauled at the door, which some obstruction had wedged open. He was practically deaf with his frantic heartbeat by the time the door gave, slamming with such force that it seemed to be echoed in another carriage. At once the train jerked forward, flinging him onto the nearest musty seat. He was attempting to recover his breath when the announcer spoke.

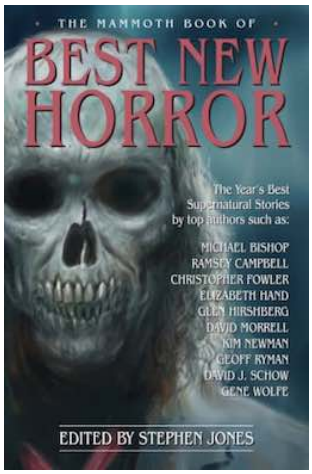
Was a window open in the carriage? The voice sounded close enough to be on the train, yet no more comprehensible. It was no longer simply unctuous; it could have been mocking a priest out of distaste for the vocation. Its only recognisable words were "train now departing", except that the first one was more like Ray—perhaps not just on this occasion, Marsden thought he recalled. He craned towards the window and was able to glimpse that both doors in the exit corridor were shut. Before he had time to ponder any of this, if indeed he wanted to, the train veered off the main line.

"Where are you taking me?" he blurted, but all too soon he knew. The train was heading for the property behind the station, a turn of events celebrated by a short announcement. There was no question that the speaker was on board, though the blurring of the words left Marsden unsure if they were "Ray is shortly alive." The swerve of the train had thrown open the doors between the carriages, allowing him to hear a chorused hiss that might have signified resentment or have been an enthusiastic "Yes" or, possibly even worse, the collapse of many burned objects into the ash he could smell. As the train sped through a gateway in the railings, he read the name on the

sign: not Peacehaven Motors at all, or anything to do with cars. Perhaps the route was only a diversion, he tried to think, or a short tour. Perhaps whoever was on the train just wanted somebody to visit the neglected memorials and the crematorium.

2007

Digging Deep



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Also published in: *Just Behind You*

It must have been quite a nightmare. It was apparently enough to make Coe drag the quilt around him, since he feels more than a sheeted mattress beneath him, and to leave a sense of suffocating helplessness, of being worse than alone in the dark. He isn't helpless. Even if his fit of rage blotted out his senses, it must have persuaded the family. They've brought him home. There wasn't a quilt on his hospital bed.

Who's in the house with him? Perhaps they all are, to impress on him how much they care about him, but he knows how recently they started. There was barely space for all of them around his bed in the private room. Whenever they thought he was asleep some of them would begin whispering. He's sure he overheard plans for his funeral. Now they appear to have left him by himself, and yet he feels hemmed in. Is the dark oppressing him? He has never seen it so dark.

It doesn't feel like his bedroom. He has always been able to distinguish the familiar surroundings when any of his fears jerked him awake. He could think that someone—his daughter Simone or son Daniel, most likely—has denied him light to pay him back for having spent too much of their legacy on the private room. However much he widens his eyes, they remain coated with blackness. He parts his dry lips to call someone to open the curtains, and then his tongue retreats behind his teeth. He should deal with the bedclothes first. Nobody ought to see him laid out as if he's awaiting examination. In the throes of the nightmare he has pulled the entire quilt under him.

He grasps a handful and plants his other hand against the padded headboard to lift his body while he snatches the quilt from beneath him. That's the plan, but he's unable to take hold of the material. It's more

slippery than it ought to be, and doesn't budge. Did his last bout of rage leave him so enfeebled, or is his weight pinning down the quilt? He stretches out his arms to find the edges, and his knuckles bump into cushions on both sides of him. But they aren't cushions, they're walls.

He's in some kind of outsize cot. The walls must be cutting off the light. Presumably the idea is to prevent him from rolling out of bed. He's furious at being treated like this, especially when he wasn't consulted. He flings up his hands to grab the tops of the walls and heave himself up to shout for whoever's in the house, and his fingertips collide with a padded surface.

The sides of the cot must bend inwards at the top, that's all. His trembling hands have flinched and bruised his sunken cheeks, but he lifts them. His elbows are still pressed against the bottom of the container when his hands blunder against an obstruction above his face. It's plump and slippery, and scrabbling at it only loosens his nails from the quick. His knees rear up, knocking together before they bump into the obstacle, and then his feet deal it a few shaky kicks. Far too soon his fury is exhausted, and he lies inert as though the blackness is earth that's weighing on him. It isn't far removed. His family cared about him even less than he suspected. They've consigned him to his last and worst fear.

Can't this be another nightmare? How can it make sense? However prematurely eager Simone's husband may have been to sign the death certificate, Daniel would have had to be less than professional too. Could he have saved on the embalming and had the funeral at once? At least he has dressed his father in a suit, but the pockets feel empty as death.

Coe can't be sure until he tries them all. His quivering fists are clenched next to his face, but he forces them open and gropes over his ribs. His inside breast pocket is flat as a card, and so are the others in the jacket. When he fumbles at his trousers pockets he's dismayed to find how thin he is—so scrawny that he's afraid the protrusion on his right hip is a broken bone. But it's in the pocket, and in his haste to carry it to his face he almost shies it out of reach. Somebody cared after all. He pokes at the keypad, and before his heart has time to beat, the mobile phone lights up.

He could almost wish the glow it sheds were dimmer. It shows him how closely he's boxed in by the quilted surface. It's less than a hand's breadth from his shoulders, and when he tilts his face up to judge the extent of his prison the pudgy lid bumps his forehead. Around the phone the silky

padding glimmers green, while farther down the box it's whitish like another species of mould, and beyond his feet it's black as soil. He lets his head sink onto the pillow that's the entire floor and does his desperate best to be aware of nothing but the mobile. It's his lifeline, and he needn't panic because he can't remember a single number. The phone will remember for him.

His knuckles dig into the underside of the lid as he holds the mobile away from his face. It's still too close; the digits merge into a watery blur. He only has to locate the key for the stored numbers, and he jabs it hard enough to bruise his fingertip. The symbol that appears in the illuminated window looks shapeless as a blob of mud, but he knows it represents an address book. He pokes the topmost left-hand key of the numeric pad, although he has begun to regret making Daniel number one, and holds the mobile against his ear.

There's silence except for a hiss of static that sounds too much like a trickle of earth. Though his prison seems oppressively hot, he shivers at the possibility that he may be too far underground for the phone to work. He wriggles onto his side to bring the mobile a few inches closer to the surface, but before his shoulder is anything like vertical it thumps the lid. As he strives to maintain his position, the distant phone starts to ring.

It continues when he risks sinking back, but that's all. He's close to pleading, although he doesn't know with whom, by the time the shrill insistent pulse is interrupted. The voice isn't Daniel's. It's entirely anonymous, and informs Coe that the person he's calling isn't available. It confirms Daniel's number in a different voice that sounds less than human, an assemblage of digits pronounced by a computer, and invites him to leave a message.

"It's your father. That's right, I'm alive. You've buried me alive. Are you there? Can you hear me? Answer the phone, you—Just answer. Tell me that you're coming. Ring when you get this. Come and let me out. Come now."

Was it his breath that made the glow flicker? He's desperately tempted to keep talking until this chivvies out a response, but he mustn't waste the battery. He ends the call and thumbs the key next to Daniel's. It's supposed to contact Simone, but it triggers the same recorded voice.

He could almost imagine that it's a cruel joke, even when the voice composed of fragments reads out her number. At first he doesn't speak when

the message concludes with a beep, and then he's afraid of losing the connection. "It's me," he babbles. "Yes, your father. Someone was a bit too happy to see me off. Aren't you there either, or are you scared to speak up? Are you all out celebrating? Don't let me spoil the party. Just send someone who can dig me up."

He's growing hysterical. These aren't the sorts of comments he should leave; he can't afford to antagonise his family just now. His unwieldy fingers have already terminated the call—surely the mobile hasn't lost contact by itself. Should he ring his son and daughter back? Alternatively there are friends he could phone, if he can remember their numbers—and then he realises there's only one call he should make. Why did he spend so long in trying to reach his family? He uses a finger to count down the blurred keypad and jabs the ninth key thrice.

He has scarcely lowered the phone to his ear when an operator cuts off the bell. "Emergency," she declares.

Coe can be as fast as that. "Police," he says while she's enquiring which service he requires, but she carries on with her script. "Police," he says louder and harsher.

This earns him a silence that feels stuffed with padding. She can't expect callers who are in danger to be polite, but he's anxious to apologise in case she can hear. Before he can take a breath a male voice says "Gloucestershire Constabulary."

"Can you help me? You may have trouble believing this, but I'm buried alive."

He sounds altogether too contrite. He nearly emits a wild laugh at the idea of seeking the appropriate tone for the situation, but the policeman is asking "What is your name, sir?"

"Alan Coe," says Coe and is pinioned by realising that it must be carved on a stone at least six feet above him.

"And where are you calling from?"

The question seems to emphasise the sickly greenish glimmer of the fattened walls and lid. Does the policeman want the mobile number? That's the answer Coe gives him. "And what is your location, sir?" the voice crackles in his ear.

Coe has the sudden ghastly notion that his children haven't simply rushed the funeral—that for reasons he's afraid to contemplate, they've laid him to rest somewhere other than with his wife. Surely some of the family would have opposed them. "Mercy Hill," he has to believe.

"I didn't catch that, sir."

Is the mobile running out of power? "Mercy Hill," he shouts so loud that the dim glow appears to quiver.

"Whereabouts on Mercy Hill?"

Every question renders his surroundings more substantial, and the replies he has to give are worse. "Down in front of the church," he's barely able to acknowledge. "Eighth row, no, ninth, I think. Left of the avenue."

There's no audible response. The policeman must be typing the details, unless he's writing them down. "How long will you be?" Coe is more than concerned to learn. "I don't know how much air I've got. Not much."

"You're telling us you're buried alive in a graveyard."

Has the policeman raised his voice because the connection is weak? "That's what I said," Coe says as loud.

"I suggest you get off the phone now, sir."

"You haven't told me how soon you can be here."

"You'd better hope we haven't time to be. We've had enough Halloween pranks for one year."

Coe feels faint and breathless, which is dismayingly like suffocation, but he manages to articulate "You think I'm playing a joke."

"I'd use another word for it. I advise you to give it up immediately, and that voice you're putting on as well."

"I'm putting nothing on. Can't you hear I'm deadly serious? You're using up my air, you—Just do your job or let me speak to your superior."

"I warn you, sir, we can trace this call."

"Do so. Come and get me," Coe almost screams, but his voice grows flat. He's haranguing nobody except himself.

Has the connection failed, or did the policeman cut him off? Did he say enough to make them trace him? Perhaps he should switch off the mobile to conserve the battery, but he has no idea whether this would leave the phone

impossible to trace. The thought of waiting in the dark without knowing whether help is on the way brings the walls and lid closer to rob him of breath. As he holds the phone at a cramped arm's length to poke the redial button, he sees the greenish light appear to tug the swollen ceiling down. When he snatches the mobile back to his ear the action seems to draw the lid closer still.

An operator responds at once. "Police," he begs as she finishes her first word. "Police."

Has she recognised him? The silence isn't telling. It emits a burst of static so fragmented that he's afraid the connection is breaking up, and then a voice says "Gloucestershire Constabulary."

For a distracted moment he thinks she's the operator. Surely a policewoman will be more sympathetic than her colleague. "It's Alan Coe again," Coe says with all the authority he can summon up. "I promise you this is no joke. They've buried me because they must have thought I'd passed on. I've already called you once but I wasn't informed what's happening. May I assume somebody is on their way?"

How much air has all that taken? He's holding his breath as if this may compensate, although it makes the walls and lid appear to bulge towards him, when the policewoman says in the distance "He's back. I see what you meant about the voice."

"What's wrong with it?" Coe says through his bared teeth, then tries a shout, which sounds flattened by padding. "What's the matter with my voice?"

"He wants to know what's wrong with his voice."

"So you heard me the first time." Perhaps he shouldn't address her as if she's a child, but he's unable to moderate his tone. "What are you saying about my voice?"

"I don't know how old you're trying to sound, but nobody's that old and still alive."

"I'm old enough to be your father, so do as you're told." She either doesn't hear this or ignores it, but he ensures she hears "I'm old enough for them to pass me off as dead."

"And bury you."

"That's what I've already told you and your colleague."

"In a grave."

"On Mercy Hill below the church. Halfway along the ninth row down, to the left of the avenue."

He can almost see the trench and his own hand dropping a fistful of earth into the depths that harboured his wife's coffin. All at once he's intensely aware that it must be under him. He might have wanted to be reunited with her at the end—at least, with her as she was before she stopped recognising him and grew unrecognisable, little more than a skeleton with an infant's mind—but not like this. He remembers the spadefuls of earth piling up on her coffin and realises that now they're on top of him. "And you're expecting us to have it dug up," the policewoman says.

"Can't you do it yourselves?" Since this is hardly the best time to criticise their methods, he adds "Have you got someone?"

"How long do you plan to carry on with this? Do you honestly think you're taking us in?"

"I'm not trying to. For the love of God, it's the truth." Coe's free hand claws at the wall as if this may communicate his plight somehow, and his fingers wince as though they've scratched a blackboard. "Why won't you believe me?" he pleads.

"You really expect us to believe a phone would work down there."

"Yes, because it is."

"I an't hea ou."

The connection is faltering. He nearly accuses her of having wished this on him. "I said it is," he cries.

"Very unny." Yet more distantly she says "Now he's aking it ound a if it's aking up."

Is the light growing unreliable too? For a blink the darkness seems to surge at him—just darkness, not soil spilling into his prison. Or has his consciousness begun to gutter for lack of air? "It is," he gasps. "Tell me they're coming to find me."

"You won't like it if they do."

At least her voice is whole again, and surely his must be. "You still think I'm joking. Why would I joke about something like this at my age, for God's sake? I didn't even know it was Halloween."

"You're saying you don't know what you just said you know."

"Because your colleague told me. I don't know how long I've been here," he realises aloud, and the light dims as if to suggest how much air he may have unconsciously used up.

"Long enough. We'd have to give you full marks for persistence. Are you in a cupboard, by the way? It sounds like one. Your trick nearly worked."

"It's a coffin, God help me. Can't you hear that?" Coe cries and scrapes his nails across the underside of the lid.

Perhaps the squealing is more tangible than audible. He's holding the mobile towards it, but when he returns the phone to his ear the policewoman says "I've heard all I want to, I think."

"Are you still calling me a liar?" He should have demanded to speak to whoever's in charge. He's about to do so when a thought ambushes him. "If you really think I am," he blurts, "why are you talking to me?"

At once he knows. However demeaning it is to be taken for a criminal, that's unimportant if they're locating him. He'll talk for as long as she needs to keep him talking. He's opening his mouth to rant when he hears a man say "No joy, I'm afraid. Can't trace it."

If Coe is too far underground, how is he able to phone? The policewoman brings him to the edge of panic. "Count yourself lucky," she tells him, "and don't dare play a trick like this again. Don't you realise you may be tying up a line while someone genuinely needs our help?"

He mustn't let her go. He's terrified that if she rings off they won't accept his calls. It doesn't matter what he says so long as it makes the police come for him. Before she has finished lecturing him he shouts "Don't you speak to me like that, you stupid cow."

"I'm war ing ou, ir—"

"Do the work we're paying you to do, and that means the whole shiftless lot of you. You're too fond of finding excuses not to help the public, you damned lazy swine." He's no longer shouting just to be heard. "You weren't much help with my wife, were you? You were worse than useless when she

was wandering the streets not knowing where she was. And you were a joke when she started chasing me round the house because she'd forgotten who I was and thought I'd broken in. That's right, you're the bloody joke, not me. She nearly killed me with a kitchen knife. Now get on with your job for a change, you pathetic wretched—"

Without bothering to flicker the light goes out, and he hears nothing but death in his ear. He clutches the mobile and shakes it and pokes blindly at the keys, none of which brings him a sound except for the lifeless clacking of plastic or provides the least relief from the unutterable blackness. At last he's overcome by exhaustion or despair or both. His arms drop to his sides, and the phone slips out of his hand.

Perhaps it's the lack of air, but he feels as if he may soon be resigned to lying where he is. Shutting his eyes takes him closer to sleep. The surface beneath him is comfortable enough, after all. He could fancy he's in bed, or is that mere fancy? Can't he have dreamed he wakened in his coffin and everything that followed? Why, he has managed to drag the quilt under himself, which is how the nightmare began. He's vowing that it won't recur when a huge buzzing insect crawls against his hand.

He jerks away from it, and his scalp collides with the headboard, which is too plump. The insect isn't only buzzing, it's glowing feebly. It's the mobile, which has regained sufficient energy to vibrate. As he grabs it, the decaying light seems to fatten the interior of the coffin. He jabs the key to take the call and fumbles the mobile against his ear. "Hello?" he pleads.

"Coming."

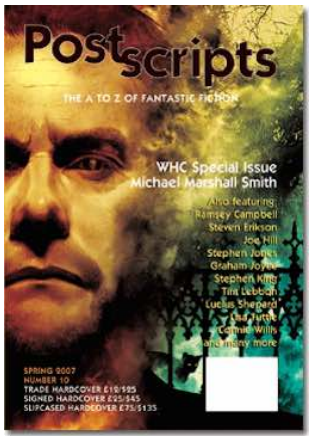
It's barely a voice. It sounds as unnatural as the numbers in the answering messages did, and at least as close to falling to bits. Surely that's the fault of the connection. Before he can speak again the darkness caves in on him, and he's holding an inert lump of plastic against his ear.

There's a sound, however. It's muffled but growing more audible. He prays that he's recognising it, and then he's sure he does. Someone is digging towards him.

"I'm here," he cries and claps a bony hand against his withered lips. He shouldn't waste whatever air is left, especially when he's beginning to feel it's as scarce as light down here. It seems unlikely that he would even have been heard. Why is he wishing he'd kept silent? He listens breathlessly to

the scraping in the earth. How did the rescuers manage to dig down so far without his noticing? The activity inches closer—the sound of the shifting of earth—and all at once he's frantically jabbing at the keypad in the blackness. Any response from the world overhead might be welcome, any voice other than the one that called him. The digging is beneath him.

Peep



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I'm labouring up the steepest section of the hill above the promenade when the twins run ahead. At least we're past the main road by the railway station. "Don't cross—" I shout or rather gasp.

Perhaps each of them thinks or pretends to think I'm addressing the other, because they don't slow down until they reach the first side street and dodge around the corner.

"Stay there," I pant. They're already out of sight, having crouched below the garden wall. I wonder if they're angry with me by association with their parents, since Geraldine wasn't bought a kite to replace the one she trampled to bits when yesterday's weather let her down. They did appear to relish watching teenage drivers speed along the promenade for at least a few minutes, which may mean they aren't punishing me for their boredom. In any case I ought to join in the game. "Where are those children?" I wonder as loudly as my climb leaves breath for. "Where can they be?"

I seem to glimpse an answering movement beyond a bush at the far end of the wall. No doubt a bird is hiding in the foliage, since the twins pop their heads up much closer. Their small plump eight-year-old faces are gleeful, but there's no need for me to feel they're sharing a joke only with each other. Then Geraldine cries "Peep."

Like a chick coming out of its shell, as Auntie Beryl used to say. I can do without remembering what else she said, but where has Geraldine learned this trick? Despite the August sunshine, a wind across the bay traces my backbone with a shiver. Before questioning Geraldine I should usher the children across the junction, and as I plod to the corner I wheeze, "Hold my __"

There's no traffic up here. Nevertheless I'm dismayed that the twins dash across the side street and the next one to the road that begins on the summit, opposite the Catholic church with its green skullcap and giant hatpin of a

cross. They stop outside my house, where they could be enjoying the view of the bay planted with turbines to farm the wind. Though I follow as fast as I'm able, Gerald is dealing the marble bellpush a series of pokes by the time I step onto the mossy path. Catching my breath makes me sound harsh as I ask "Geraldine, who taught you that game?"

She giggles, and so does Gerald. "The old woman," he says.

I'm about to pursue this when Paula opens my front door. "Don't say that," she rebukes him.

Her face reddens, emphasising how her cropped hair has done the reverse. It's even paler by comparison with the twins' mops, so that I wonder if they're to blame. Before I can put my reluctant question, Gerald greets the aromas from the kitchen by demanding, "What's for dinner?"

"We've made you lots of good things while you've been looking after grandpa."

The twins don't think much of at least some of this, although I presume the reference to me was intended to make them feel grownup. They push past their mother and race into the lounge, jangling all the ornaments. "Careful," Paula calls less forcefully than I would prefer. "Share," she adds as I follow her to the kitchen, where she murmurs, "What game were you quizzing them about?"

"You used to play it with babies. I'm not saying you. People did." I have a sudden image of Beryl thrusting her white face over the side of my cot, though if that ever happened, surely I wouldn't remember. "Peep," I explain and demonstrate by covering my eyes before raising my face above my hand.

Paula's husband Bertie glances up from vigorously stirring vegetables in the wok he and Paula brought with them. "And what was your issue with that?"

Surely I misunderstood Gerald, which can be cleared up later. "Your two were playing it," I say. "A bit babyish at their age, do you think?"

"Good Lord, they're only children. Let them have their fun till they have to get serious like the rest of us," he says and cocks his head towards a squabble over television channels. "Any chance you could restore some balance in there? Everything's under control in here."

I'm perfectly capable of cooking a decent meal. I've had to be since Jo died. I feel as if I'm being told where to go and how to act in my own house. Still, I should help my remaining family, and so I bustle to the lounge, where the instant disappearance of a channel leaves the impression that a face dropped out of sight as I entered. Gerald has captured the remote control and is riffling through broadcasts. "Stop that now," I urge. "Settle on something."

They haven't even sat on the furniture. They're bouncing from chair to chair by way of the equally venerable sofa in their fight over the control. "I think someone older had better take charge," I say and hold out my hand until Gerald flings the control beside me on the sofa. The disagreement appears to be over two indistinguishably similar programmes in which vaguely Oriental cartoon animals batter one another with multicoloured explosions and other garish displays of power. I propose watching real animals and offer a show set in a zoo for endangered species, but the response makes me feel like a member of one. My suggestion of alternating scenes from each chosen programme brings agreement, though only on dismissing the idea, and Geraldine capitulates to watching her brother's choice.

The onscreen clamour gives me no chance to repeat my question. When I try to sneak the volume down, the objections are deafening. I don't want Paula and her husband to conclude I'm useless—I mustn't give them any excuse to visit even less often—and so I hold my peace, if there can be said to be any in the room. The cartoon is still going off when we're summoned to dinner.

I do my best to act as I feel expected to behave. I consume every grain and shoot and chunk of my meal, however much it reminds me of the cartoon. When my example falls short of the twins I'm compelled to encourage them aloud—"Have a bit more or you won't get any bigger" and "That's lovely, just try it" and in some desperation "Eat up, it's good for you." Perhaps they're sick of hearing about healthy food at home. I feel clownishly false and even more observed than I did over the television. I'm quite relieved when the plates are scraped clean and consigned to the dishwasher.

I'd hoped the twins might have grown up sufficiently since Christmas to be prepared to go to bed before the adults, but apparently holidays rule, and the table is cleared for one of the games Gerald has insisted on bringing.

Players take turns to insert plastic sticks in the base of a casket, and the loser is the one whose stick releases the lid and the contents, a wagging head that I suppose is meant to be a clown's, given its whiteness and shock of red hair and enlarged eyes and wide grin just as fixed. I almost knock the game to the floor when one of my shaky attempts to take care lets out the gleeful head, and then I have to feign amusement for the children's sake. At first I'm glad when Gerald is prevailed upon to let his sister choose a game.

It's Monopoly. I think only its potential length daunts me until the children's behaviour reminds me how my aunt would play. They sulk whenever a move goes against them and crow if one fails to benefit their twin, whereas Beryl would change any move she didn't like and say "Oh, let me have it" or simply watch to see whether anyone noticed. "Peep," she would say and lower her hand in front of her eyes if she caught us watching. My parents pretended that she didn't cheat, and so I kept quiet, even though she was more than alert to anyone else's mistakes.

Eventually I try conceding tonight's game in the hope the other adults will, but it seems Paula's husband is too much of a stockbroker to relinquish even toy money. The late hour enlivens the twins or at any rate makes them more active, celebrating favourable moves by bouncing on the chairs. "Careful of my poor old furniture," I say, though I'm more dismayed by the reflection of their antics in the mirror that backs the dresser, just the top of one tousled red head or the other springing up among the doubled plates. I'm tired enough to fancy that an unkempt scalp rendered dusty by the glass keeps straying into view even while the twins are still or at least seated. Its owner would be at my back, but since nobody else looks, I won't. Somewhat earlier than midnight Bertie wins the game and sits back satisfied as the twins start sweeping hotels off the board in vexation. "I think someone's ready for bed," I remark.

"You go, then," says Gerald, and his sister giggles in agreement.

"Let grandpa have the bathroom first," says their mother.

Does she honestly believe I was referring to myself? "I won't be long," I promise, not least because I've had enough of mirrors. Having found my toothbrush amid the visiting clutter, I close my eyes while wielding it. "Empty now," I announce on the way to my room. In due course a squabble migrates from the bathroom to the bunks next door and eventually trails into silence. Once I've heard Paula and her husband share the bathroom,

which is more than her mother and I ever did, there are just my thoughts to keep me awake.

I don't want to think about the last time I saw Beryl, but I can't help remembering when her playfulness turned unpleasant. It was Christmas Eve, and she'd helped or overseen my mother in making dozens of mince pies, which may have been why my mother was sharper than usual with me. She told me not to touch the pies after she gave me one to taste. I was the twins' age and unable to resist. Halfway through a comedy show full of jokes I didn't understand I sneaked back to the kitchen. I'd taken just one surreptitious bite when I saw Beryl's face leaning around the night outside the window. She was at the door behind me, and I hid the pie in my mouth before turning to her. Her puffy whitish porous face that always put me in mind of dough seemed to widen with a grin that for a moment I imagined was affectionate. "Peep," she said.

Though it sounded almost playful, it was a warning or a threat of worse. Why did it daunt me so much when my offence had been so trivial? Perhaps I was simply aware that my parents had to put up with my mother's sister while wishing she didn't live so close. She always came to us on Christmas Day, and that year I spent it fearing that she might surprise me at some other crime, which made me feel in danger of committing one out of sheer nervousness. "Remember," she said that night, having delivered a doughy kiss that smeared me with lipstick and face powder. "Peep."

Either my parents found this amusing or they felt compelled to pretend. I tried to take refuge in bed and forget about Beryl, and so it seems little has changed in more than sixty years. At least I'm no longer walking to school past her house, apprehensive that she may peer around the spidery net curtains or inch the front door open like a lid. If I didn't see her in the house I grew afraid that she was hiding somewhere else, so that even encountering her in the street felt like a trap she'd set. Surely all this is too childish to bother me now, and when sleep abandons me to daylight I don't immediately know why I'm nervous.

It's the family, of course. I've been wakened by the twins quarrelling outside my room over who should waken me for breakfast. "You both did," I call and hurry to the bathroom to speed through my ablutions. Once the twins have begun to toy with the extravagant remains of their food I risk

giving them an excuse to finish. "What shall we do today?" I ask, and meet their expectant gazes by adding, "You used to like the beach."

That's phrased to let them claim to have outgrown it, but Gerald says "I've got no spade or bucket."

"I haven't," Geraldine competes.

"I'm sure replacements can be obtained if you're both going to make me proud to be seen out with you," I say and tell their parents, "I'll be in charge if you've better things to do."

Bertie purses his thin prim lips and raises his pale eyebrows. "Nothing's better than bringing up your children."

I'm not sure how many rebukes this incorporates. Too often the way he and Paula are raising the twins seems designed to reprove how she was brought up. "I know my dad wouldn't have meant it like that," she says. "We could go and look at some properties, Bertie."

"You're thinking of moving closer," I urge.

Her husband seems surprised to have to donate even a word of explanation. "Investments."

"Just say if you don't see enough of us," says Paula.

Since I suspect she isn't speaking for all of them, I revert to silence. Once the twins have been prevailed upon to take turns loading the dishwasher so that nothing is broken, I usher them out of the house. "Be good for grandpa," Paula says, which earns her a husbandly frown. "Text if you need to," he tells them.

I should have thought mobile phones were too expensive for young children to take to the beach. I don't want to begin the outing with an argument, and so I lead them downhill by their impatient hands. I see the scrawny windmills twirling on the bay until we turn down the road that slopes to the beach. If I don't revive my question now I may never have the opportunity or the nerve. "You were going to tell me who taught you that game."

Gerald's small hot sticky hand wriggles in my fist. "What game?"

"You know." I'm not about to release their hands while we're passing a supermarket car park. I raise one shoulder and then the other to peer above them at the twins. "Peep," I remind them.

Once they've had enough of giggling Geraldine splutters, "Mummy said we mustn't say."

"I don't think she quite meant that, do you? I'm sure she won't mind if you just say it to me when I've asked."

"I'll tell if you tell," Gerald informs his sister.

"That's a good idea, then you'll each just have done half. Do it in chorus if you like."

He gives me a derisive look of the kind I've too often seen his father turn on Paula. "I'll tell mummy if you say," he warns Geraldine.

I mustn't cause any more strife. I'm only reviving an issue that will surely go away if it's ignored. I escort the twins into a newsagent's shop hung with buckets and spades and associated paraphernalia, the sole establishment to preserve any sense of the seaside among the pubs and wine bars and charity shops. Once we've agreed on items the twins can bear to own I lead them to the beach.

The expanse of sand at the foot of the slipway from the promenade borders the mouth of the river. Except for us it's deserted, but not for long. The twins are seeing who can dump the most castles on the sand when it starts to grow populated. Bald youths tapestried with tattoos let their bullish dogs roam while children not much older than the twins drink cans of lager or roll some kind of cigarette to share, and boys who are barely teenage if even that race motorcycles along the muddy edge of the water. As the twins begin to argue over who's winning the sandcastle competition I reflect that at least they're behaving better than anybody else in sight. I feel as if I'm directing the thought at someone who's judging them, but nobody is peering over or under the railings on the promenade or out of the apartments across it. Nevertheless I feel overheard in declaring, "I think you've both done very well. I couldn't choose between you."

I've assumed the principle must be to treat them as equally as possible—even their names seem to try—but just now dissatisfaction is all they're sharing. "I'm bored of this," Gerald says and demolishes several of his rickety castles. "I want to swim."

"Have you brought your costumes?"

"They're in our room," says Geraldine. "I want to swim in a pool, not a mucky river."

"We haven't got a pool here anymore. We'd have to go on the train."

"You can take us," Gerald says. "Dad and mum won't mind."

I'm undismayed to give up sitting on the insidiously damp sand or indeed to leave the loudly peopled beach once I've persuaded the twins not to abandon their buckets and spades. I feel as if the children are straining to lug me uphill except when they mime more exhaustion than I can afford to admit. They drop the beach toys in my hall together with a generous bounty of sand on the way to thundering upstairs. After a brief altercation they reappear and I lead them down to the train.

Before it leaves the two-platformed terminus we're joined by half a dozen rudely pubertal drinkers. At least they're at the far end of the carriage, but their uproar might as well not be. They're fondest of a terse all-purpose word. I ignore the performance as an example to the twins, but when they continue giggling I attempt to distract them with a game of I Spy: s for the sea on the bare horizon, though they're so tardy in participating that I let it stand for the next station; f for a field behind a suburban school, even if I'm fleetingly afraid that Gerald will reveal it represents the teenagers' favourite word; c for cars in their thousands occupying a retail park beside a motorway, because surely Geraldine could never have been thinking of the other syllable the drinkers favour; b for the banks that rise up on both sides of the train as it begins to burrow into Birkenhead... I don't mean it for Beryl, but here is her house.

Just one window is visible above the embankment on our side of the carriage: her bedroom window. I don't know if I'm more disturbed by this glimpse of the room where she died or by having forgotten that we would pass the house. Of course it's someone else's room now—I imagine that the house has been converted into flats—and the room has acquired a window box; the reddish tuft that sprouts above the sill must belong to a plant, however dusty it looks. That's all I've time to see through the grimy window before the bridge I used to cross on the way to school blocks the view. Soon a station lets the drinkers loose, and a tunnel conducts us to our stop.

The lift to the street is open at both ends. It shuts them when Geraldine pushes the button, her brother having been promised that he can operate the lift on our return, and then it gapes afresh. Since nobody appears I suspect Gerald, but he's too far from the controls. "Must have been having a yawn,"

I say, and the twins gaze at me as if I'm the cause. No wonder I'm relieved when the doors close and we're hoisted into daylight.

As we turn the corner that brings the swimming pool into view the twins are diverted by a cinema. "I want to see a film," Gerald announces.

"You'll have to make your minds up. I can't be in two places at once. I'm just me."

Once she and her brother have done giggling at some element of this Geraldine says, "Grumpo."

I'm saddened to think she means me, especially since Gerald agrees, until I see it's the title of a film that's showing in the complex. "You need to be twelve to go in."

"No we don't," they duet, and Gerald adds "You can take us."

Because they're so insistent I seek support from the girl in the pay booth, only to be told I'm mistaken. She watches me ask, "What would your parents say?"

"They'd let us," Geraldine assures me, and Gerald says, "We watch fifteens at home."

Wouldn't the girl advise me if the film weren't suitable? I buy tickets and lead the way into a large dark auditorium. We're just in time to see the screen exhort the audience to switch off mobile phones, and I have the twins do so once they've used theirs to light the way along a row in the absence of an usherette. The certificate that precedes the film doesn't tell me why it bears that rating, but that's apparent soon enough. An irascible grandfather embarrasses his offspring with his forgetfulness and the class of his behaviour and especially his language, which even features two appearances of the word I ignored most often on the train. The twins find him hilarious, as do all the children in the cinema except for one that keeps poking its head over the back of a seat several rows ahead. Or is it a child? It doesn't seem to be with anyone, and now it has stopped trying to surprise me with its antics and settles on peering at me over the seat. Just its pale fat face above the nose is visible, crowned and surrounded by an unkempt mass of hair. The flickering of the dimness makes it look eager to jerk up and reveal more of its features, though the light is insufficient to touch off the slightest glimmer in the eyes, which I can't distinguish. At last the oldster in the film saves his children from robbers with a display of martial arts, and

his family accepts that he's as loveable as I presume we're expected to have found him. The lights go up as the credits start to climb the screen, and I crane forward for a good look at the child who's been troubling me. It has ducked into hiding, and I sidle past Geraldine to find it. "You're going the wrong way, grandpa," she calls, but neither this nor Gerald's mirth can distract me from the sight of the row, which is deserted.

Members of the audience stare at me as I trudge to the end of the aisle, where words rise up to tower over me, and plod back along the auditorium. By this time it's empty except for the twins and me, and it's ridiculous to fancy that if I glance over my shoulder I'll catch a head in the act of taking cover. "Nothing," I say like Grumpo, if less coarsely, when Gerald asks what I'm looking for. I bustle the twins out of the cinema, and as soon as they revive their phones Gerald's goes off like an alarm.

In a moment Geraldine's restores equality. They read their messages, which consist of less than words, and return their calls. "Hello, mummy," Geraldine says. "We were in a film."

Her brother conveys the information and hands me the mobile. "Dad wants to speak to you."

"Bertie. Forgive me, should we have—"

"I hope you know we came to find you on the beach."

"Gerald didn't say. I do apologise if you—"

"I trust you're bringing them home now. To your house." I don't understand why he thinks the addition is necessary. "I'm afraid we're in trouble," I inform the twins as Geraldine ends her call. I have to be reminded that it's Gerald's turn to control the lift at the railway station. At least our train reaches the platform as we do, and soon it emerges into the open, at which point I recall how close we are to Beryl's house. As the train passes it I turn to look. There's nothing at her window.

The tenant must have moved the window box. It does no good to wonder where the item that I glimpsed is now. I'm nervous enough by the time we arrive at the end of the line and I lead the twins or am led by them uphill. They seem more eager than I feel, perhaps because they've me to blame. I'm fumbling to extract my keys when Paula's husband opens the front door as if it's his. Having given each of us a stare that settles on me, Bertie says "Dinner won't be long."

It sounds so much like a rebuke, and is backed up by so many trespassing smells that I retort, "I could have made it, you know."

"Could you?" Before I can rise to this challenge he adds "Don't you appreciate my cuisine and Paula's?"

"Your children don't seem to all that much," I'm provoked to respond and quote a favourite saying of Jo's. "It isn't seaside without fish and chips."

"I'm afraid we believe in raising them more healthily."

"Do you, Paula? In other words, not how your mother and I treated you?" When she only gazes sadly at me from the kitchen I say, "It can't be very healthy if they hardly touch their food."

"It isn't very healthy for them to hear this kind of thing."

"Find something to watch for a few minutes," her husband tells them. "Maybe your grandfather can choose something suitable."

I feel silenced and dismissed. I follow the children into the lounge and insist on selecting the wildlife show. "I've got to watch as well," I say, even if it sounds like acknowledging a punishment. They greet the announcement of dinner without concealing their relief, although their enthusiasm falls short of the meal itself. When at last they've finished sprinkling cheese on their spaghetti they eat just the sauce, and hardly a leaf of their salad. Though I perform relishing all of mine, I have a sense of being held responsible for their abstinence. I try not to glance at the mirror of the dresser, but whenever I fail there appear to be only the reflections of the family and me.

Once the twins have filled up with chocolate dessert, it's time for games. I vote against reviving the one in which the pallid head pops up, which means that Gerald vetoes his sister's choice of Monopoly. Eventually I remember the games stored in the cupboard under the stairs. The dark shape that rears up beyond the door is my shadow. As I take Snakes and Ladders off the pile I'm reminded of playing it with Paula and her mother, who would smile whenever Paula clapped her hands at having climbed a ladder. I've brought the game into the dining room before I recall playing it with Beryl.

Was it our last game with her? It feels as if it should have been. Every time she cast a losing throw she moved one space ahead of it. "Can't get me," she would taunt the snakes. "You stay away from me, nasty squirmy things." I

thought she was forbidding them to gobble her up as if she were one of her snacks between meals, the powdered sponge cakes that she'd grown more and more to resemble. Whenever she avoided a snake by expanding a move she peered at me out of the concealment of her puffed-up face. I felt challenged to react, and eventually I stopped my counter short of a snake. "Can't he count?" my aunt cried at once. "Go in the next box."

Once I'd descended the snake I complained, "Auntie Beryl keeps going where she shouldn't."

"Don't you dare say I can't count. They knew how to teach us when I was at school." This was the start of a diatribe that left her panting and clutching her chest while her face tried on a range of shades of grey. "Look what you've done," my father muttered in my ear while my mother tried to calm her down. When Beryl recaptured her wheezing breath she insisted on finishing the game, staring hard at me every time she was forced to land on a snake. She lost, and glared at me as she said, "Better never do anything wrong, even the tiniest thing. You don't know who'll be watching."

Of course I knew or feared I did. I wish I'd chosen another game to play with Paula and her family. Before long Gerald pretends one of his throws hasn't landed on a snake. "Fair play, now," I exhort, earning a scowl from Gerald and a look from his father that manages to be both disapproving and blank. Perhaps Geraldine misinterprets my comment, because soon she cheats too. "If we aren't going to play properly," I say without regarding anyone, "there's no point to the game." Not addressing somebody specific gives me a sense of including more people than are seated at the table, and no amount of glancing at the mirror can rid me of the impression. I've never been so glad to lose a game. "Will you excuse me?" I blurt as my chair stumbles backwards. "I've had quite a day. Time for bed."

My struggles to sleep only hold me awake. When at last the twins are coaxed up to their room and the adults retreat to theirs, I'm still attempting to fend off the memory of my final visit to my aunt's house. She was ill in bed, so shortly after the game of Snakes and Ladders that I felt responsible. She sent my mother out for cakes, though the remains of several were going stale in a box by her bed. There were crumbs on the coverlet and around her mouth, which looked swollen almost bloodlessly pale. I thought there was too much of her to be able to move until she dug her fingers into the bed and, having quivered into a sitting position that dislodged a musty shawl

from her distended shoulders, reached for me. I took her hand as a preamble to begging forgiveness, but her cold spongy grasp felt as if it was on the way to becoming a substance other than flesh, which overwhelmed me with such panic that I couldn't speak. Perhaps she was aware of her overloaded heart, since she fixed me with eyes that were practically buried in her face. "I'll be watching," she said and expelled a breath that sounded close to a word. It was almost too loose to include consonants—it seemed as soft as her hand—but it could have been "Peep." I was terrified that it might also be her last breath, since it had intensified her grip on me. Eventually she drew another rattling breath but gave no sign of relaxing her clutch. Her eyes held me as a time even longer than a nightmare seemed to ooze by before I heard my mother letting herself into the house, when I was able to snatch my hand free and dash for the stairs. In less than a week my aunt was dead.

If I didn't see her again, being afraid to was almost as bad. Now that she was gone I thought she could be anywhere and capable of reading all my thoughts, especially the ones I was ashamed to have. I believed that thinking of her might bring her, perhaps in yet worse a form. I'd gathered that the dead lost weight, but I wasn't anxious to imagine how. Wouldn't it let her move faster? All these fears kept me company at night into my adolescence, when for a while I was even more nervous of seeing her face over the end of my bed. That never happened, but when at last I fall uneasily asleep I wake to see a shock of red hair duck below the footboard.

I'm almost quick enough to disguise my shriek as mirth once I realise that the glimpse included two small heads. "Good God," Bertie shouts from downstairs, "who was that?"

"Only me," I call. "Just a dream."

The twins can't hide their giggles. "No, it was us," cries Geraldine.

At least I've headed them off from greeting me with Beryl's word. Their father and to a lesser extent Paula give me such probing looks over breakfast that I feel bound to regain some credibility as an adult by enquiring "How was your search for investments?"

"Unfinished business," Bertie says.

"We were too busy wondering where you could have got to," Paula says.

"I hope I'm allowed to redeem myself. Where would you two like to go today?"

"Shopping," Geraldine says at once.

"Yes, shopping," Gerald agrees louder.

"Make sure you keep your phones switched on," their father says and frowns at me. "Do you still not own one?"

"There aren't that many people for me to call."

Paula offers to lend me hers, but the handful of unfamiliar technology would just be another cause for concern. At least we don't need to pass my aunt's house—we can take a bus. The twins insist on sitting upstairs to watch the parade of small shops interrupted by derelict properties. Wreaths on a lamppost enshrine a teenage car thief before we cross a bridge into the docks. I won't let the flowers remind me of my aunt, whose house is the best part of a mile away. The heads I see ducking behind the reflection in the window of the back seats belong to children. However little good they're up to, I ignore them, and they remain entirely hidden as we make for the stairs at our stop.

The pedestrian precinct appears to lead to a cathedral on the far side of the foreshortened river. The street enclosed by shops is crowded, largely with young girls pushing their siblings in buggies, if the toddlers aren't their offspring. The twins bypass discount stores on the way to a shopping mall, where the tiled floor slopes up to a food court flanked by clothes shops. Twin marts called Boyz and Girlz face each other across tables occupied by pensioners eking out cups of tea and families demolishing the contents of polystyrene cartons. "I'll be in there," Geraldine declares and runs across to Girlz.

"Wait and we'll come—" I might as well not have commenced, since as I turn to Gerald he dodges into Boyz. "Stay in the shops. Call me when you need me," I shout so loud that a little girl at a table renders her mouth clownish with a mis-aimed cream cake. Geraldine doesn't falter, and I'm not sure if she heard. As she vanishes into the shop beyond the diners I hurry after her brother.

Boyz is full of parents indulging or haranguing their children. When I can't immediately locate Gerald in the noisy aisles I feel convicted of negligence. He's at the rear of the shop, removing fat shoes from boxy alcoves on the

wall. "Don't go out whatever you do. I'm just going to see your sister doesn't either," I tell him.

I can't see her in the other shop. I'm sidling between the tables when I grasp that I could have had Gerald phone for me to speak to her. It's just as far to go back now, and so I find my way through an untidy maze of abandoned chairs to Girlz. Any number of those, correctly spelled, are jangling racks of hangers and my nerves while selecting clothes to dispute with their parents, but none of them is Geraldine. I flurry up and down the aisles, back and forth to another catacomb of footwear, but she's nowhere to be seen.

"Geraldine," I plead in the faded voice my exertions have left me. Perhaps it's best that I can't raise it, since she must be in another shop. I didn't actually see her entering this one. As I dash outside I'm seized by a panic that tastes like all the food in the court turned stale. I need to borrow Gerald's mobile, but the thought makes me wonder if the twins could be using their phones to play a game at my expense—to co-ordinate how they'll keep hiding from me. I stare about in a desperate attempt to locate Geraldine, and catch sight of the top of her head in the clothes store next to Girlz.

"Just you stay there," I pant as I flounder through the entrance. It's clear that she's playing a trick, because it's a shop for adults; indeed, all the dresses that flap on racks in the breeze of my haste seem designed for the older woman. She's crouching behind a waist-high cabinet close to the wall. The cabinet quivers a little at my approach, and she stirs as if she's preparing to bolt for some other cover. "That's enough, Geraldine," I say and make, I hope, not too ungentle a grab. My foot catches on an edge of carpet, however, and I sprawl across the cabinet. Before I can regain any balance my fingers lodge in the dusty reddish hair.

Is it a wig on a dummy head? It comes away in my hand, but it isn't all that does. I manage not to distinguish any features of the tattered whitish item that dangles from it, clinging to my fingers until I hurl the tangled mass at the wall. I'm struggling to back away when the head jerks up to confront me with its eyes and the holes into which they've sunk. I shut mine as I thrust myself away from the cabinet, emitting a noise I would never have expected to make other than in the worst dream.

I'm quiet by the time the rescuers arrive to collect their children and me. It turns out that Geraldine was in a fitting room in Girlz. The twins forgot most of their differences so as to take charge, leading me out to a table where there seems to be an insistent smell of stale sponge cake. Nobody appears to have noticed anything wrong in the clothes shop except me. I'm given the front passenger seat in Bertie's car, which makes me feel like an overgrown child or put in a place of shame. The twins used their phones to communicate about me, having heard my cries, and to summon their parents. I gather that I'm especially to blame for refusing the loan of a mobile that would have prevented my losing the children and succumbing to panic.

I do my best to go along with this version of events. I apologise all the way home for being insufficiently advanced and hope the driver will decide this is enough. I help Paula make a salad, and eat up every slice of cold meat at dinner while I struggle to avoid thinking of another food. I let the children raid the cupboard under the stairs for games, although these keep us in the dining room. Sitting with my back to the mirror doesn't convince me we're alone, and perhaps my efforts to behave normally are too evident. I've dropped the dice several times to check that nobody is lurking under the table when Paula suggests an early night for all.

As I lie in bed, striving to fend off thoughts that feel capable of bringing their subject to me in the dark, I hear fragments of an argument. The twins are asleep or at any rate quiet. I'm wondering whether to intervene as diplomatically as possible when Paula's husband says "It's one thing your father being such an old woman—"

"I've told you not to call him that."

"—but today breaks the deal. I won't have him acting like that with my children."

There's more, not least about how they aren't just his, but the disagreements grow more muted, and I'm still hearing what he called me. It makes me feel alone, not only in the bed that's twice the size I need but also in the room. Somehow I sleep, and look for the twins at the foot of the bed when I waken, but perhaps they've been advised to stay away. They're so subdued at breakfast that I'm not entirely surprised when Paula says "Dad, we're truly sorry but we have to go home. I'll come and see you again soon, I promise."

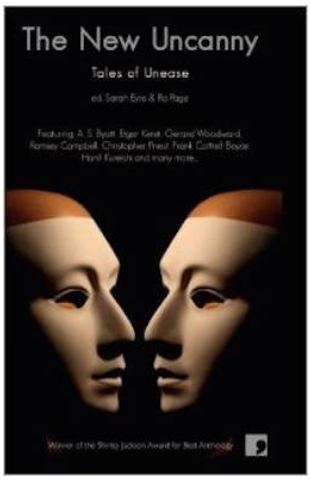
I refrain from asking Bertie whether he'll be returning in search of investments. Once all the suitcases have been wedged into the boot of the Jaguar I give the twins all the kisses they can stand, along with twenty pounds each that feels like buying affection, and deliver a token handshake to Paula's husband before competing with her for the longest hug. As I wave the car downhill while the children's faces dwindle in the rear window, I could imagine that the windmills on the bay are mimicking my gesture. I turn back to the house and am halted by the view into the dining room.

The family didn't clear away their last game. It's Snakes and Ladders, and I could imagine they left it for me to play with a companion. I slam the front door and hurry into the room. I'm not anxious to share the house with the reminder that the game brings. I stoop so fast to pick up the box from the floor that an ache tweaks my spine. As I straighten, it's almost enough to distract me from the sight of my head bobbing up in the mirror.

But it isn't in the mirror, nor is it my head. It's on the far side of the table, though it has left even more of its face elsewhere. It still has eyes, glinting deep in their holes. Perhaps it is indeed here for a game, and if I join in it may eventually tire of playing. I can think of no other way to deal with it. I drop the box and crouch painfully, and once my playmate imitates me I poke my head above the table as it does. "Peep," I cry, though I'm terrified to hear an answer. "Peep."

2008

Double Room



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You aren't with us, are you?"

"I'd like to be."

"What's your name?" the other girl said, looking impudently quizzical. "You've seen ours."

He was glad if they assumed he'd been squinting in the dimness of the hotel bar only at the badges pinned above their long slim thighs. Each badge bore the image of a winged young woman dressed in a chain-mail bikini and a virtually transparent robe, an outfit both girls had copied apart from the wings. The sword in her hand indicated their names, Primmy and Barbaria. "Edwin Ferguson," he said.

"That's an old name," Primmy commented.

"You need to be old to know all the tricks."

"I like a good trick, don't you, Primmy? Are you going to show us yours, Edwin?"

However guilty he couldn't help feeling, he thought he might feel worse if he let the opportunity pass. "I only give private performances," he said.

"Is it going to be all for us?" Primmy cried.

Barbaria bent her head and an eyebrow towards her, prompting Ferguson to assure the girls "It's all right, I didn't think you were angels."

"Why not?" Primmy demanded.

He pointed at her badge—at least, he hoped it was clear that was where he was pointing. "No wings."

"Sometimes we are," Barbaria said. "We can be all kinds."

"Depends who we're with."

"I'm looking forward to finding out. What roles you like playing, I mean."

He made the sudden silence the occasion for a sip of Scotch followed by a larger one. "You're looking at them," Barbaria said.

"And they're all you'll be seeing," Primmy said.

He was able to mistake this for a promise until they turned away as a man strolled into the bar. He was at least as old as Ferguson and even stouter, with greying hair that Ferguson thought far too long for his age. Nevertheless the girls stood up eagerly, although Primmy lingered to say "Thanks for the fun."

"Is that all?" When she tried to appear prim instead of primitive Ferguson was provoked to add "Maybe you shouldn't come out in public dressed like that. You might give some people the wrong idea."

"We were at the masquerade."

"You've been doing some of that all right." Loud enough for her to catch he said "And what do you get up to the rest of the time?"

Barbaria turned long enough to inform him "We're social workers."

"Is that what they call it these days?" he might have retorted except for feeling obsolete. As the girls each took the newcomer by an arm Ferguson saw that the man's badge depicted a bronzed bruiser in sandals and loincloth and crown, who was brandishing a blade at a lengthy name Ferguson felt expected to recognise. He drained his Scotch and murmured to the barman "Who's he?"

"One of their writers."

In his sleeveless denim outfit the fellow didn't look much like one, or his age. Was being a writer all it took to have girls hanging on your arms? Perhaps now Ferguson had time to write the book he imagined he contained, the rest would follow. The idea seemed so variously disloyal that he felt his face glow like the light of a brake he'd applied too belatedly to himself, and he hurried not much better than blindly out of the bar.

He hadn't reached the lifts when the lobby grew loudly crowded with people emerging from the conference suite. While a few were fantastically costumed, most struck him as not much less anonymous and awkward than himself. The hotel notice-board identified their event as a Fantasy Weekend, but it didn't mean the kind of fantasy he'd yielded to imagining. At least, it certainly didn't for him.

He kept his back to the mirror in the lift once he'd jabbed the button. On its way the lift opened to admit a view of the second-floor corridor, where badged individuals and their noise and drinks were spilling out of a room. For a moment he wished he were in there, but the room sounded too small for the revellers who were. That was one reason why the wish fell away before the corridor did.

The adjacent lift had just delivered someone to the third floor. Ferguson glimpsed their shadow vanishing around the corner ahead as he made for his room. From the corner he saw the door next to his standing ajar. "Good night," he called as it shut, because the clinically pallid corridor with its equally colourless doors separated by timid abstract pastels felt like losing all sense of himself. His last word was echoed in such a muffled voice that he couldn't be sure of its gender.

Once the lock on his door had given his card the green light he left the card in a slot inside the stubby vestibule to drape the room with indirect lighting. The word flat might have been invented for the accommodation: the boxy wardrobe and dressing-table, the single angular nominally padded chair, the double bed tucking nothingness up tight. Perhaps the midget television might provide some company—distraction, at any rate.

A fat old man with a threadbare grizzly scalp met him in the bathroom. The sight fired up the taste of his Indian dinner, the taste of which rose in a volcanic belch. "Pardon," he said almost as inadvertently, rousing a muffled echo. He wasn't apologising to his reflection; he didn't even watch the old fool mouth the syllables. He lifted the toilet seat and its lid with the toe of his shoe, and the plastic ovals rapped the tiled wall. The small room seemed to have an echo for everything. He dragged his baggy zip down to fumble himself forth, and had hardly started pouring when the noise became a duet. The other performer was in the adjoining bathroom.

Urinating in company always made Ferguson feel like a shy child, and he faltered to a dribble that trailed off to a drip. Was his neighbour suffering from the identical problem? Straining never helped, and the silence aggravated his inhibition just as much. He could only hum to lessen his awareness or pretend it wasn't troubling him. "Let's Do It" always came into his head on these occasions, and he might have added words—one of his rhymes for bees, "People who have finished having pees" or "Women who

are down upon their knees", that used to amuse Elizabeth whenever he sang them at random—if his neighbour hadn't joined in.

He still couldn't identify the gender from the voice. His own was shriller than it had any right or need to be. Perhaps his fellow guest was borrowing his solution to the urinary annoyance; they hummed louder once Ferguson did. He squeezed his eyes shut and then managed to relax them, and was rewarded with activity where it mattered. Something had worked for his neighbour as well. The streams dwindled and fell silent simultaneously, and he was shaking himself dry when he heard a clink through the wall.

His neighbour had put a glass down, but it was ridiculous to fancy they'd been using a glassful of water to imitate his sounds. He pulled a tissue out of the box by the sink to blow his nose. As he dropped the wad in the toilet he heard a nasal trumpeting in the adjacent bathroom.

If it sounded very much like his, did it have much leeway to sound different? Hooking the toilet seat with the side of his shoe, he let it drop along with its lid on the pedestal, and was unsurprised to hear an echo through the wall. Both toilets flushed while he turned back to the sink. He had barely started brushing his teeth when the sound was imitated in the other bathroom.

The old wreck in the mirror let his wrinkled mouth hang open, displaying all his front teeth and the gap one had left last month. How could such a tiny noise be audible through the wall? How could his? He decided he'd heard an echo until another bout of brushing was copied beyond the mockingly blank wall. His neighbour must be making the noise in some other way, unless they were attacking their teeth with a savagery that sounded demonic. "Hope they all drop out of your head," Ferguson spluttered and spat in the sink.

The answering spit was fierce enough for an insult. The words that followed were repeated in exactly Ferguson's tone, as far as he could distinguish the qualities of the voice. Was it deliberately muffled? Perhaps the speaker was obscuring it with a hand, hiding their ruined teeth from the other mirror, a notion that prompted Ferguson to blurt "What must you look like?"

Although he thought he'd only muttered it, the question came back through the wall. The idiotic trick must be affecting him more than he realised. "I

know how I look," he couldn't help retorting as he wiped foam off his lips. "I think I'm better off not knowing how you do."

He was unable to imagine a sufficiently grotesque costume for them. Perhaps they passed for normal until an event like this weekend's gave them licence not to be, Well before they finished echoing his latest remarks he was sick of the joke, if it could be called one. "Very funny," he responded, wondering why he'd waited for the mimicry to finish. "Thanks for the laugh. Just what I needed. I haven't been so entertained since—"

He didn't know. When the partial sentence came back neutered through the wall, he had the uneasy idea that the imitator was about to complete it for him. It faltered as he had, but he wasn't about to finish it off. He couldn't just blame the clown beyond the wall for the whole asinine situation; there was a clown in here too, looking foolish and pathetic, not to mention incapable of controlling his own behaviour. If he didn't make any more noise, the other would have nothing to mimic. He turned off the light, muting the switch with his hand, before tiptoeing out of the room.

For the duration of a couple of prolonged but silent breaths he was able to enjoy the possibility that his neighbour might be lingering in the bathroom for another noise to echo, and then the enforced hush set about troubling him. It emphasised the anonymity of the bedroom, which felt close to empty even of him. He wasn't going to be forced to act as if he weren't there. Grabbing the remote control from the shelf that enthroned the dwarf television, he threw himself on the bed.

Did he just hear the springs yield beneath him, or was there an answering twang in the adjacent bedroom? He supported his shoulders with a pillow and awakened the television with a shrill whisper of static. Dismissing the Frugotel information menu, he began to search the channels: a comedy film teeming with teenagers even louder than the party he'd seen from the lift, a report of a polo game where all the players were in wheelchairs, a documentary about a drug that was meant to retard ageing, an episode of a reality series called *Fostered for a Fortnight,* another by the name of *From a Previous Relationship...* He hadn't reached the second channel when, with barely a second's delay each time, a television beyond the wall behind his head commenced dogging his progress.

His neighbour was entitled to watch television too. The order of the browsing needn't be significant, since it was the obvious one. Ferguson felt

irrational for wondering what would happen if he reversed it—at least, until he did so and heard the other television copy him. Changing channels at random produced the same result, and he had to struggle not to shout at the wall. How could he watch the programme he'd been tempted to? Without the sound, of course.

He buttoned it before poking the keys to summon the Frugrownup channel, where he came in some way through an act of the kind the channel offered the no doubt solitary members of its audience. The rhythmic activity was as noiseless as it was vigorous, so that he couldn't help fancying that the participants were all straining to produce a sound. At least he'd called up silence in the next room too, and his body had begun to show signs of emulating that of the man on the screen by the time he heard a noise through the wall.

Somebody was panting. It grew louder and more dramatic, keeping pace with the efforts on the television. His neighbour had given in to the same temptation, Ferguson tried to think, but weren't the gasps too theatrical even for this sort of film, and oddly androgynous? Was the other guest producing them to taunt him? Without question there was just a solitary voice, and he could hear faint laughter too. It was muffled by distance, unless there were more people in the next room, covering their mouths so as to titter at his situation. That was beginning to seem as contemptible as his attempts to pick up the girls in the bar. He switched off the television, and the panting stopped at once.

He lurched away from the bed and stumbled to the window. The hotel was indeed reflected across the deserted downtown street, where the front of a building was largely composed of glass. He could see his room and his faint self in the elongated window of an unlit office, but no sign of the next room. Could its occupant really have seen the reflection of the programme Ferguson had been watching? Perhaps they were using binoculars, or their eyes were keener than his. He dragged the dun curtains together, to be rewarded by a clash of curtain rings on the far side of the wall.

"Show's over," he mouthed and saw the old man beyond the dressing-table risk a triumphant grin. "Try and get to me now," they both said silently as he began to undress. He heard no further sound through the wall as he dumped his clothes on the chair and wriggled under the sheet and the dishevelled quilt before darkening the room.

The silence in the other one felt so frustrated that he nearly laughed aloud, but he wasn't about to invite an imitation. He closed his eyes and edged the quilt over his exposed ear and sought the dark. It swarmed with thoughts, of which the most bearable was the book he'd imagined writing. Even this seemed potentially troubling now—the idea of a couple who fell in love at first sight only to be separated for the rest of their lives. When at last they met again they would be too changed and too senile to recognise each other. In their final moments one would regain the memory, which would seem to keep them together for eternity. Who would have it, or could it somehow be granted to both? The more Ferguson worried the idea the less likely it felt, and he was glad when the Scotch and the bottle of wine he'd had at dinner conspired to sink him in the dark.

A voice wakened him. He thought it was his own, despite its lack of shape. "Elizabeth," it repeated, or more accurately "Livadeth." It was talking in its sleep—no, replicating how he must have talked in his. "Weary of you," it said.

He wouldn't have said that, ever. He must have been asking where she was. "I bloody am of you," he informed his imitator. As soon as the remark started to be echoed he thumped the wall above the rudimentary headboard. "Enough," he yelled. "Enough."

The thumping was mimicked, and so was every repetition of the word. He might have been competing for the last one. He groped for the light switch above the ledge that was Frugotel's version of a bedside table, and was marching or at any rate limping at speed towards the corridor before he grasped that he shouldn't leave the room while he was naked. Grabbing his trousers, he danced an ungainly impromptu hornpipe to don them, accompanied by echoes next door of the thuds of his bare feet. This enraged him so much that he almost forgot to retrieve his key as he stalked into the corridor.

It was deserted. If there was muffled laughter, surely it was downstairs. He pounded on the next door with both fists, so hard that the plastic digits of its number seemed to tremble. No doubt that was partly because of the pounding that answered his. "Stop this bloody game right now," he shouted. "Normal people need their sleep."

He was echoed so closely that they might as well have been speaking in chorus. "That's all. You've had—" he said and felt idiotic for attempting to

catch the imitator out by stopping unexpectedly, all the more so when it didn't work. "You've had your chance," he declared and shoved his face at the spyhole in the door. The darkness beyond it only convinced him that he was being observed. Having dealt the door a final thump, he tramped to grab the phone from the ledge by his bed.

The receptionist hadn't finished announcing herself when he said "Can you do something about whoever's next door?"

"What seems to be the problem, sir?"

"They're—" He might have demanded whether she could hear the echo of his side of the conversation, but he didn't want to seem irrational. "They're making all sorts of noise," he said. "I've asked them to stop but they won't."

"Which room is that, sir?"

"They're in 339."

"Just a moment." After several of those the phone rang in the next room. It was answered immediately, but only by a childish imitation. "Ring ring," the voice said in falsetto. "Ring ring."

The phone fell silent, and so did the mimicry. As he strained to hear more than the labouring of his heart, the receptionist said "Is that Mr Ferguson?"

"There's just me here, yes. Why?"

"I'm afraid you're mistaken."

"What do you mean?"

"We've got nobody in 339."

"Don't give me that. You told me you were full. You couldn't change my booking."

"It was a late cancellation."

"Well, someone's in there. I can hear them. I've heard them all the time we've been talking. Maybe some of this weird lot you're full up with have managed to get in." The muttered repetition of his protests had begun to madden him. "Don't take my word for it," he urged. "Go and see."

There was silence at his ear and beyond the wall. Eventually the receptionist said "Somebody will come up."

Ferguson replaced the receiver and was devoting his energy to making no further sound when he wondered if his complaints might have warned off

his tormentor. Suppose the person fled and left him looking like a fool? He sprinted to the door despite the twinges of his heart and leaned into the corridor. It was empty, and his neighbour hadn't had time to dodge out of sight along it. He glared towards 339 until he heard a lift hum and stop humming, and a large man in the yellow Frugotel uniform appeared around the corner.

Other than frowning at Ferguson, he refrained from any comment. Once he'd finished peering through the spyhole he rapped on the door of 339. "Staff," he called. "Can I have a word, please."

Ferguson wouldn't have been surprised if the man had received every one of them back, but apparently the prankster wasn't so easily tempted. The man knocked harder and then slid a card into the lock. Brandishing the card like an identification and a threat, he advanced into the room. Ferguson mostly heard his own heart, but there were also the click of a light switch and the scrawny rattle of a shower curtain. He waited for the sounds to be followed up, and then he snatched his key card out of the slot on the wall and padded heavily into the corridor. "What's the hold-up? Who—"

He faltered, not just because the next room was almost indistinguishably similar to his. The Frugotel employee was staring at him across the tucked-in bed. "It's like Reception told you, sir. Nobody's in this room."

"You are," Ferguson thought of retorting, but demanded "Have you looked in the wardrobe?"

The man lingered over looking at him, so that Ferguson wasn't far from opening it by the time the employee did. "Nobody," he said at once. "Nobody's been here. Now if you wouldn't—"

A woman's peevishly sleepy protest interrupted him. "What's going on now?"

She was in the room opposite Ferguson's. From the threshold her husband or a man performing some of the functions of one informed her "It's the old hooligan that was making all the row out here before."

Ferguson was sure he recognised one of the rowdy drinkers from the floor below. "That's more your style, isn't it? I thought people were meant to keep their drinks in the bar."

He wouldn't have minded if the hotel employee had asked what he meant, but it was the man across the corridor who spoke. "You know, he looks like

the old reprobate Primmy said was trying to get off with her and Barbaria when they just wanted a quiet drink."

"I don't think any of you know how to be quiet," Ferguson retorted and might have said more if the man hadn't called "Good God, he's showing everyone what it sounded like he wanted to show them."

Ferguson glanced down to find his flies gaping wide. While his member had the grace to hide its head, its mat as grey as dust was well in evidence. "Forgive me," he gasped, yanking up the zip so fiercely that it came close to scalping his crotch. "I'm a bit distracted. It's not long since I lost my wife."

"Then what are you staying here for?" the offstage woman across the corridor wanted everyone to know.

"We'd already booked. I didn't want to let the hotel down. I thought it'd be better than staying at home by myself. We often used to come here," Ferguson added as best he could for a nervous belch, which he tried to explain by saying "It was one of our favourite towns to eat in."

None of this seemed adequate, but before Ferguson could think of a further excuse the man said "We can tell."

"We're sorry to hear of your tragedy. Please accept our sincerest condolences." It was unclear whether the employee was speaking for Frugotel or on behalf of the couple opposite. Having locked 339, he said "Will you be all right now?"

"I haven't been hearing things, if that's what you mean. That's to say I have. I certainly have." Ferguson folded his arms in case this lent him some authority and to hide his hirsute obese breasts. "I've lost my wife," he said, "not my mind."

He had time to interpret the awkwardness of the silence in various ways before the uniformed man said "We don't want any more of a disturbance. Most of our guests are asleep."

"I don't. I'd like to be," Ferguson said and backed into his room. He'd managed not to slam the door when he wished he'd left his listeners a better image of Elizabeth. Perhaps they imagined an old woman as overfed as he was, not the girl he'd carried over a stream and to a gate a quarter of a mile up the sunny slope beyond it, or the mother who'd perched their daughter on her shoulders when they'd returned for the same hillside climb, or the grandmother who'd continued to outdistance him on their countryside walks

even once those had grown shorter and more effortful. He bruised his forehead against the door as he peered through the spyhole. If anyone was out there he was going to let them know that he and more importantly Elizabeth had come here for the countryside, not just the food. The corridor was deserted and silent, however. "It's all your fault," he almost yelled at the next room, instead mouthing the words. He tiptoed across the prickly carpet to stand by the bed, where he unbuttoned his trousers and eased the zip down and stepped clumsily but silently out of them. Once they were heaped on the floor he sat so gradually on the bed that the springs stayed as quiet as he was. He inched under the bedclothes and stood a pillow on end to support his raised head while he waited for some sound from the next room.

Could the imitator have gone away? Might they have fled as soon as he'd had the receptionist phone the room? He was convinced that he'd heard them imitating his subsequent protests, but if he was left alone at last, surely it was all that mattered. He listened to the hush until it let him breathe freely and slowed his heart, and then he reached to lay the pillow down. His knuckles bumped the headboard, and he heard an answering rap through the wall.

He might have grabbed the phone to demand another visit from the staff or, better, have dashed into the corridor to cause uproar outside 339, ensuring that the intruder couldn't escape unseen this time. Instead he spoke, quite conversationally. "I know you're there."

"I loathed her hair."

He wanted to believe he'd misheard or imagined the voice, which was more muffled than ever. Even when Elizabeth's hair had grown so thin her scalp showed through, he'd stroked it in the hope she would forget about its state. He hardly knew whom he was addressing as he objected "I never said that."

"I never said fat."

"That's right, I didn't."

"That's right, I did it."

"No, not that either."

"Oh, what a liar."

"That's just not true."

"That just stopped you."

Ferguson had begun to feel trapped in an infantile game by someone who'd succumbed to their second childhood if not worse. He could hardly wait for them to finish echoing or rather misrepresenting him before he responded—he was becoming desperate to think of an answer they couldn't turn into a gibe. He might have imagined he was being tricked into selecting words his tormentor found it easy to mishear. Although he tried to take his time, the best he could produce was "What a lie."

The indefinite voice didn't bother imitating his pause. "Watched her die."

While there was no denying this, he didn't need to admit "That's true."

"Not you."

He was afraid his words might take him unawares. "All right," he mumbled, "let's have silence."

"All right, let's have slyness."

He found his mouth with a hand, flattening his lips to keep in any further inadvertent speech. He ached to sleep, but suppose it released his voice? Even the notion of dozing made him feel threatened by a dream—an ill-defined image of somebody wakening in a dark place and struggling to communicate by whatever clumsy methods they still had. His mind recoiled, but staying awake was no refuge. Soon the voice in the next room began to speak.

He bore it mutely as long as he could, and then he tried to deny all it said. No, he hadn't ever even slightly wanted her to die. No, he hadn't grown tired of holding her hand as she lay in bed open-mouthed as a stranded fish. No, he hadn't wished as her hand grew slack yet again that this time it had slackened for good. No, he hadn't been disgusted by having to dab at her drool and deal with her other secretions. No, he hadn't sneaked out of their room to pray for an end to it all. By now he was striving to blot out the voice, but it went inexorably on until he lost any sense of which of them was trying to contradict the other. "All right," he cried at last. "I did, but only for her sake."

If this was echoed, it was by the flatness of the hotel room. He felt abruptly far too alone in the dark. When he switched on the light, the room looked as

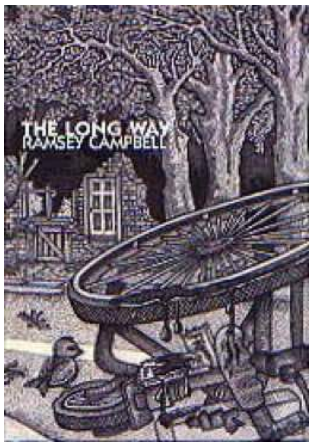
impersonal as a hospital ward—the kind of ward where Elizabeth hadn't wanted to spend her last weeks. His scattered belongings were at best pathetic attempts to make some kind of claim for his presence. "I shouldn't have come," he whispered. "There's nothing here."

He didn't know who was supposed to overhear this, or perhaps he did. "It didn't mean anything with those girls," he tried saying. "They wouldn't have wanted me. Nobody would."

He was hoping to be contradicted, but the only sounds were his—the creak of the bed as he shifted his weight, the intermittent urgency of his heartbeat. "You're still there, aren't you?" he said louder. "Say you're there. Say anything you like."

His voice made the room sound as small and flatly featureless as a cell. So did his rapping and then knocking on the wall. It was too late to wonder what he'd done to earn the answering silence. If he caused much more noise the hotel staff might intervene again and drive away for good whoever had been there. He could still use the phone, and he keyed 339, though his fingers were so unsteady that their fat tips almost added extra numbers. He heard the other phone ring in the dark, and continue ringing and at last fall silent, because he'd laid the receiver to rest in its cold plastic trench. After that there was silence—for all the long night, silence.

The Long Way



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It must have been late autumn. Because everything was bare I saw inside the house.

Dead leaves had been scuttling around me all the way from home. A chill wind kept trying to shrink my face. The sky looked thin with ice, almost as white as the matching houses that made up the estate. Some of the old people who'd been rehoused wouldn't have known where they were on it except for the little wood, where my uncle Philip used to say the council left some trees so they could call it the Greenwood Estate. Nobody was supposed to be living in the three streets around the wood when I used to walk across the estate to help him shop.

So many people in Copse View and Arbour Street and Shady Lane had complained about children climbing from trees and swinging from ropes and playing hide and seek that the council put a fence up, but then teenagers used the wood for sex and drink and drugs. Some dealers moved into Shady Lane, and my uncle said it got shadier, and the next road turned into Cops View. He said the other one should be called A Whore Street, though my parents told him not to let me hear. Then the council moved all the tenants out of the triangle, even the old people who'd complained about the children, and boarded up the houses. By the time I was helping my uncle, people had broken in. They'd left Copse View alone except for one house in the middle of the terrace. Perhaps they'd gone for that one because the boards they'd strewn around the weedy garden looked rotten. They'd uncovered the front door and the downstairs window, but I could never see in for the reflection of sunlight on leaves. Now there weren't many leaves and the sun had a cataract, and the view into the front room was clear. The only furniture was an easy chair with a fractured arm. The chair had a pattern like shadows of ferns and wore a yellowish circular antimacassar. The pinstriped wallpaper was black and white too. A set of shelves was coming loose from the back wall but still displaying a plate printed with a

portrait of the queen. Beside the shelves a door was just about open, framing part of a dimmer room.

I wondered why the door was there. In our house you entered the rooms from the hall. My uncle had an extra door made so he could use his wheelchair, and I supposed whoever had lived in this house might have been disabled too. There was a faint hint of a shape beyond the doorway, and I peered over the low garden wall until my eyes ached. Was it a full-length portrait or a life-size dummy? It looked as if it had been on the kind of diet they warned the girls about at school. As I made out its arms I began to think they could reach not just through the doorway but across far too much of the room, and then I saw that they were sticks on which it was leaning slightly forward—sticks not much thinner than its arms. I couldn't distinguish its gender or how it was dressed or even its face. Perhaps it was keeping so still in the hope of going unnoticed, unless it was challenging me to object to its presence. I was happy to leave it alone and head for my uncle's.

He lived on Pasture Boulevard, where he said the only signs of pasture were the lorries that drove past your bedroom all night. The trees along the central reservation were leafy just with litter. My uncle was sitting in the hall of the house where he lived on the ground floor, and wheeled himself out as soon as he saw me. "Sorry I made you wait, Uncle Philip," I said.

"I'll wait for anything that's worth the wait." Having raised a thumb to show this meant me, he said "And what's my name again, Craig?"

"Phil," I had to say, though my parents said I was too young to.

"That's the man. Don't be shy of speaking up. Ready for the go?"

He might have been starting a race at the school where he'd taught physical education—teaching pee, he called it—until he had his first stroke. When I made to push the chair he brought his eyebrows down and thrust his thick lips forward, which might have frightened his pupils but now made his big square face seem to be trying to shrink as the rest of him had. "Never make it easy, Craig," he said. "You don't want my arms going on strike."

I trotted beside him to the Frugo supermarket that had done for most of the shops that were supposed to make the estate feel like a village. Whenever a Frugo lorry thundered past us he would mutter "There's some petrol for your lungs" or "Hold your breath." In the supermarket he flung a week's

supply of healthy food from the Frugorganic section into the trolley and bought me a Frugoat bar, joking as usual about how they'd turned the oats into an animal. I pushed the trolley to his flat and helped him unload it and took it back to Frugo. When I passed his window again he opened it, flapping the sports day posters he'd tacked to the wall of the room, to shout "See you in a week if you haven't got yourself a girlfriend."

I had the books I borrowed from the public library instead, but I didn't need him to announce my deficiency. I knew he disapproved of girls for boys my age—they sapped your energy, he said. "I'll always come," I promised and made for Copse View, where the trees looked eager to wave me on. The wind gave up pushing me as I reached them, and I stopped at the house where the boards had been pulled down. As I peered across the front room, resting my fists on the crumbling wall, my eyes began to ache again. However much I stared, the dim figure with the sticks didn't seem to have moved—not in an hour and a half. It had to be a picture; why shouldn't whoever used to live there have put a poster up? I felt worse than stupid for taking so long to realise. My parents and the English teacher at my school said I had imagination, but I could do without that much.

Ten minutes brought me home to Woody Rise. "Well, would he?" my uncle used to say even after my parents gave up laughing or groaning. The houses on this edge of the estate were as big as his but meant for one family each—they looked as if they were trying to pass for part of the suburb that once had the estate for a park. My father was carrying fistfuls of cutlery along the hall. "Here's the boy who cares," he called, and asked me "How's the wheelie kid?"

"Tom," my mother rebuked him from the kitchen.

I thought he deserved more reproof when I wasn't even supposed to shorten my uncle's name, but all I said was "Good."

As my father repeated this several times my mother said "Let's eat in here. Quick as you like, Craig. We've people coming round for a Homewatch meeting."

"I thought you were going out."

"Just put your coat on your chair for now. We've rescheduled our pupils for tomorrow. Didn't we say?"

She always seemed resentful if I forgot whichever extra job they were doing when. "I suppose you must have," I tried pretending.

"Had you found some mischief to get up to, Craig?" my father said. "Has she got a name?"

"I hope not," my mother said. "You can welcome the guests if you like, Craig."

"He's already looked after my brother, Rosie."

"And some of us have done more." In the main this was aimed at my father, and she said more gently "All right, Craig. I expect you want to be on your own for a change."

I would rather have been with them by ourselves—not so much at dinner, where I always felt they were waiting for me to drop cutlery or spill food. I managed to conquer the spaghetti bolognese by cutting up the pasta with my fork, though my mother didn't approve much of that either. Once I'd washed up for everyone I was able to take refuge in my bedroom before all the neighbours came to discuss watching out for burglars and car thieves and door-to-door con people and other types to be afraid of. I needed to be alone to write.

Nobody knew I did. My stories tried to be like the kind of film my parents wouldn't let me watch. That night I wrote about a girl whose car broke down miles from anywhere, and the only place she could ask for help was a house full of people who wouldn't come to her. The house was haunted by a maniac who cut off people's feet with a chainsaw so they couldn't escape. I frightened myself with this more than I enjoyed, and when I went to sleep despite the murmur of neighbours downstairs I dreamed that if I opened my eyes I would see a figure standing absolutely still at the end of the bed. I looked once and saw no silhouette against the glow from the next street, but it took me a while to go back to sleep.

For most of Sunday my parents were out of the house. As if they hadn't had enough of teaching at school all week, my mother did her best to coax adults to read and write while my father educated people about computers. They couldn't help reminding me of my school, where I wasn't too unhappy so long as I wasn't noticed. It was in the suburb next to the estate, and some of the boys liked to punch me for stealing their park even though none of us was alive when the estate was built, while a few of the girls seemed to want

me to act as uncouth as they thought people from it should be. I tried to keep out of all their ways and not to attract any questions in class. My work proved I wasn't stupid, which was all that mattered to me. I liked English best, except when the teacher made me read out my work. I would mumble and stammer and squirm and blush until the ordeal was done. I hated her and everyone else who could hear my helplessly unmodulated voice, most of all myself.

I wouldn't have dared admit to anyone at school that I quite liked most homework. I could take my own time with it, and there was nobody to distract me, since my parents were at night school several evenings, either teaching or improving their degrees. It must have been hard to pay the mortgage even with two teachers' salaries, but I also thought they were competing with each other for how much they could achieve, and perhaps with my uncle as well. All this left me feeling I should do more for him, but there was no more he would let me do.

Soon it was Saturday again. I was eager to look at the house on Copse View, but once it was in sight I felt oddly nervous. I wasn't going to avoid it by walking around the triangle. That would make me late for my uncle, and I could imagine what he would think of my behaviour if he knew. The sky had turned to chalk, and the sun was a round lump of it caught in the stripped treetops; in the flat pale light the houses looked brittle as shell. The light lay inert in the front room of the abandoned house. The figure with the sticks was there, in exactly the same stance. It wasn't in the same place, though. It had come into the room.

At least, it was leaning through the doorway. It looked poised to jerk the sticks up at me, unless it was about to use them to spring like a huge insect across the room. While the sunlight didn't spare the meagre furniture—the ferny chair and its discoloured antimacassar, the plate with the queen's face on the askew shelf still clinging to the pinstriped wall—it fell short of illuminating the occupier. I could just distinguish that the emaciated shape was dressed in some tattered material—covered with it, at any rate. While the overall impression was greyish, patches were as yellowed as the antimacassar, though I couldn't tell whether these were part of the clothes or showing through. This was also the case with the head. It appeared to be hairless, but I couldn't make out any of the face. When my eyes began to sting with trying I took a thoughtless step towards the garden wall, and then

I took several back, enough to trip over the kerb. The instant I regained my balance I dashed out of Copse View.

Perhaps there was a flaw in the window, or the glass was so grimy that it blurred the person in the room, though not the other contents. Perhaps the occupant was wearing some kind of veil. Once I managed to have these thoughts they slowed me down, but not much, and I was breathing hard when I reached my uncle's. He was sitting in the hall again. "All right, Craig, I wasn't going anywhere," he said. "Training for a race?"

Before I could answer he said "Forget I asked. I know the schools won't let you compete any more."

I felt as if he didn't just mean at sports. "I can," I blurted and went red.

"I expect if you think you can that counts."

As we made for Frugo I set out to convince him in a way I thought he would approve of, but he fell behind alongside a lorry not much shorter than a dozen houses. "Don't let me hold you up," he gasped, "if you've got somewhere you'd rather be."

"I thought you liked to go fast. I thought it was how you kept fit."

"That's a lot of past tense. See, you're not the only one that knows his grammar."

I was reminded of a Christmas when my mother told him after some bottles of wine that he was more concerned with muscles than minds. He was still teaching then, and I'd have hoped he would have forgotten by now. He hardly spoke in the supermarket, not even bothering to make his weekly joke as he bought my Frugoat bar. I wondered if I'd exhausted him by forcing him to race, especially when he didn't head for home as fast as I could push the laden trolley. I was dismayed to think he could end up no more mobile than the figure with the sticks.

I helped him unload the shopping and sped the trolley back to Frugo. Did he have a struggle to raise the window as he saw me outside his flat? "Thanks for escorting an old tetch," he called. "Go and make us all proud for a week."

He'd left me feeling ashamed to be timid, which meant not avoiding Copse View. As I marched along the deserted street I thought there was no need to look into the house. I was almost past it when the sense of something eager

to be seen dragged my head around. One glimpse was enough to send me fleeing home. The figure was still blurred, though the queen's face on the plate beside the doorway was absolutely clear, but there was no question that the occupant had moved. It was leaning forward on its sticks at least a foot inside the room.

I didn't stop walking very fast until I'd slammed the front door behind me. I wouldn't have been so forceful if I'd realised my parents were home. "That was an entrance," said my father. "Anything amiss we should know about?"

"We certainly should," said my mother.

"I was just seeing if I could run all the way home."

"Don't take your uncle too much to heart," my mother said. "There are better ways for you to impress."

On impulse I showed them my homework books. My father pointed out where the punctuation in my mathematics work was wrong, and my mother wished I'd written about real life and ordinary people instead of ghosts in my essay on the last book I'd read. "Good try," she told me, and my father added "Better next time, eh?"

I was tempted to show them my stories, but I was sure they wouldn't approve. I stayed away from writing any that weekend, because the only ideas I had were about figures that stayed too still or not still enough. I tried not to think about them after dark, and told myself that by the time I went to my uncle's again, whatever was happening on Copse View might have given up for lack of an audience or been sorted out by someone else. But I was there much sooner than next week.

It was Sunday afternoon. While my mother peeled potatoes I was popping peas out of their pods and relishing their clatter in a saucepan. A piece of beef was defrosting in a pool of blood. My father gazed at it for a while and said "That'd do for four of us. We haven't had Phil over for a while."

"We haven't," said my mother.

Although I wouldn't have taken this for enthusiasm, my father said "I'll give him a tinkle."

Surely my uncle could take a taxi—surely nobody would expect me to collect him and help him back to his flat after dark. I squeezed a pod in my fist while I listened to my father on the phone, but there was silence except

for the scraping of my mother's knife. My hand was clammy with vegetable juice by the time my father said "He's not answering. That isn't like him."

"Sometimes he isn't much like him these days," said my mother.

"Can you go over and see what's up, Craig?"

As I rubbed my hands together I wondered whether any more of me had turned as green. "Don't you want me to finish these?" I pleaded.

"I'll take over kitchen duty."

My last hope was that my mother would object, but she said "Wash your hands for heaven's sake, Craig. Just don't be long."

While night wouldn't officially fall for an hour, the overcast sky gave me a preview. I was in sight of the woods when I noticed a gap in the railings on Shady Lane. Hadn't I seen another on Arbour Street? Certainly a path had been made through the shrubs from the opening off Shady Lane. It wound between the trees not too far from Copse View.

As I dodged along it bushes and trees kept blocking my view of the boarded-up houses. I couldn't help glancing at the vandalised house; perhaps I thought the distance made me safe. The scrawny figure hadn't changed its posture or its patchwork appearance. It looked as if it was craning forward to watch me or threatening worse. Overnight it had moved as much closer to the street as it had during the whole of the previous week.

I nearly forced my own way through the undergrowth to leave the sight behind. I was afraid I'd encouraged the figure to advance by trying to see it, perhaps even by thinking about it. Had the vandals fled once they'd seen inside the house? No wonder they'd left the rest of the street alone. I fancied the occupant might especially dislike people of my age, even though I hadn't been among those who'd rampaged in the woods. I was almost blind with panic and the early twilight by the time I fought off the last twigs and found the unofficial exit onto Arbour Street.

I was trying to be calmer when I arrived at my uncle's. He seemed to be watching television, which lent its flicker to the front room. I thought he couldn't hear me tapping on the pane for the cheers of the crowd. When I knocked harder he didn't respond, and I was nervous of calling to him. I was remembering a horror film I'd watched on television once until my mother had come home to find me watching.

I'd seen enough to know you should be apprehensive if anyone was sitting with his back to you in that kind of film. "Uncle Philip," I said with very little voice.

The wheelchair twisted around, bumping into a sofa scattered with magazines. At first he seemed not to see me, then not to recognise me, and finally not to be pleased that he did. "What are you playing at?" he demanded. "What are you trying to do?"

He waved away my answer as if it were an insect and propelled the chair across the room less expertly than usual. He struggled to shove the lower half of the window up, and his grimace didn't relent once he had. "Speak up for yourself. Weren't you here before?"

"That was yesterday," I mumbled. "Dad sent me. He—"

"Sending an inspector now, is he? You can tell him my mind's as good as ever. I know they don't think that's much."

"He tried to phone you. You didn't answer, so—"

"When did he? Nobody's rung here." My uncle fumbled in his lap and on the chair. "Where is the wretched thing?"

Once he'd finished staring at me as if I'd failed to answer in a class he steered the chair around the room and blundered out of it, muttering more than one word I would never have expected him to use. "Here it is," he said accusingly and reappeared brandishing the cordless phone. "No wonder I couldn't hear it. Can't a man have a nap?"

"I didn't want to wake you. I only did because I was sent."

"Don't put yourself out on my behalf." Before I could deny that he was any trouble he said "So why's Tom checking up on me?"

"They wanted you to come for dinner."

"More like one did if any. I see you're not including yourself."

I don't know why this rather than anything else was too much, but I blurted "Look, I came all this way to find out. Of—"

One reason I was anxious to invite him was the thought of passing the house on Copse View by myself, but he didn't let me finish. "Don't again," he said.

"You'll come, won't you?"

"Tell them no. I'm still up to cooking my own grub."

"Can't you tell them?"

I was hoping that my father would persuade him to change his mind, but he said "I won't be phoning. I'll phone if I want you round."

"I'm sorry," I pleaded. "I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant," he said and gazed sadly at me. "Never say sorry for telling the truth."

"I wasn't."

I might have tried harder to convince him if I hadn't realised that he'd given me an excuse to stay away from Copse View. "Don't bother," he said and stared at the television. "See, now I've missed a goal."

He dragged the sash down without bothering to glance at me. Even if that hadn't been enough of a dismissal, the night was creeping up on me. I didn't realise how close it was until he switched on the light in the room. That made me feel worse than excluded, and I wasn't slow in heading for home.

Before I reached the woods the streetlamps came on. I began to walk faster until I remembered that most of the lamps around the woods had been smashed. From the corner of the triangle I saw just one was intact—the one outside the house on Copse View. I couldn't help thinking the vandals were scared to go near; they hadn't even broken the window. I couldn't see into the room from the end of the street, but the house looked awakened by the stark light, lent power by the white glare. I wasn't anxious to learn what effect this might have inside the house.

The path would take me too close. I would have detoured through the streets behind Copse View if I hadn't heard the snarl of motorcycles racing up and down them. I didn't want to encounter the riders, who were likely to be my age or younger and protective of their territory. Instead I walked around the woods.

I had my back to the streetlamp all the way down Arbour Street. A few thin shafts of light extended through the trees, but they didn't seem to relieve the growing darkness so much as reach for me on behalf of the house. Now and then I heard wings or litter flapping. When I turned along Shady Lane the light started to jab at my vision, blurring the glimpses the woods let me have of the house. I'd been afraid to see it, but now I was more afraid not to

see. I kept having to blink scraps of dazzle out of my eyes, and I waited for my vision to clear when a gap between the trees framed the house.

Was the figure closer to the window? I'd been walking in the road, but I ventured to the pavement alongside the woods. Something besides the stillness of the figure reminded me of the trees on either side of the house. Their cracked bark was grey where it wasn't blackened, and fragments were peeling off, making way for whitish fungus. Far too much of this seemed true of the face beyond the window.

I backed away before I could see anything else and stayed on the far pavement, though the dead houses beside it were no more reassuring than the outstretched shadows of the trees or the secret darkness of the woods, which kept being invaded by glimpses of the house behind the streetlamp. When I reached the corner of the triangle I saw that someone with a spray can had added a letter to the street sign. The first word was no longer just Copse.

Perhaps it was a vandal's idea of a joke, but I ran the rest of the way home, where I had to take time to calm my breath down. As I opened the front door I was nowhere near deciding what to tell my parents. I was sneaking it shut when my mother hurried out of the computer room, waving a pamphlet called Safe Home. "Are you back at last? We were going to phone Philip. Are you by yourself? Where have you been?"

"I had to go a long way. There were boys on bikes."

"Did they do something to you? What did they do?"

"They would have. That's why I went round." I wouldn't have minded some praise for prudence, but apparently I needed to add "They were riding motorbikes. They'd have gone after me."

"We haven't got you thinking there are criminals round every corner, have we?" My father had finished listening none too patiently to the interrogation. "We don't want him afraid to go out, do we, Rosie? It isn't nearly that bad, Craig. What's the problem with my brother?"

"He's already made his dinner."

"He isn't coming." Perhaps my father simply wanted confirmation, but his gaze made me feel responsible. "So why did you have to go over?" he said.

"Because you told me to."

"Sometimes I think you aren't quite with us, Craig," he said, though my mother seemed to feel this was mostly directed at her. "I was asking why he didn't take my call."

"He'd been watching football and—"

I was trying to make sure I didn't give away too much that had happened, but my mother said "He'd rather have his games than us, then."

"He was asleep," I said louder than I was supposed to speak.

"Control yourself, Craig. I won't have a hooligan in my house." Having added a pause, my mother turned her look on my father. "And please don't make it sound as if I've given him a phobia."

"I don't believe anyone said that. Phil's got no reason to call you a sissy, has he, Craig?" When I shook or at least shivered my head my father said "Did he say anything else?"

"Not really."

"Not really or not at all?"

"Not."

"Now who's going on at him?" my mother said in some triumph. "Come and have the dinner there's been so much fuss about."

Throughout the meal I felt as if I were being watched or would be if I even slightly faltered in cutting up my meat and vegetables and inserting forkfuls in my mouth and chewing and chewing and, with an effort that turned my hands clammy, swallowing. I managed to control my intake until dinner was finally done and I'd washed up, and then I was just able not to dash upstairs before flushing the toilet to muffle my sounds. Once I'd disposed of the evidence I lay on my bed for a while and eventually ventured down to watch the end of a programme about gang violence in primary schools. "Why don't you bring whatever you're reading downstairs?" my mother said.

"Maybe it's the kind of thing boys like to read by themselves," said my father.

I went red, not because it was true but on the suspicion that he wanted it to be, and shook my head to placate my mother. She switched off the television in case whatever else it had to offer wasn't suitable for me, and then my parents set about sectioning the Sunday papers, handing me the

travel supplements in case those helped with my geography. I would much rather have been helped not to think about the house on Copse View.

Whenever the sight of the ragged discoloured face and the shape crouching over its sticks tried to invade my mind I made myself remember that my uncle didn't want me. I had to remember at night in bed, and in the classroom, and while I struggled not to let my parents see my fear, not to mention any number of situations in between these. I was only wishing to be let off my duty until the occupant of the derelict house somehow went away. My uncle didn't phone during the week, and I was afraid my father might call him and find out the truth, but perhaps he was stubborn as well.

I spent Saturday morning in dread of the phone. It was silent until lunchtime, and while I kept a few mouthfuls of bread and cheese down too. I lingered at the kitchen sink as long as I could, and then my mother said "Better be trotting. You don't want it to be dark."

"I haven't got to go."

"Why not?" my father said before she could.

"Uncle Phil, Uncle Philip said he'd phone when he wanted me."

"Since when has he ever done that?"

"Last week." I was trying to say as little as they would allow. "He really said."

"I think there's more to this than you're telling us," my mother warned me, if she wasn't prompting.

"It doesn't sound like Phil," my father said. "I'm calling him."

My mother watched my father dial and then went upstairs. "Don't say you've nodded off again," my father told the phone, but it didn't bring him an answer. At last he put the phone down. "You'd better go and see what's up this time," he told me.

"I think we should deal with this first," said my mother.

She was at the top of the stairs, an exercise book in her hand. I hoped it was some of my homework until I saw it had a red cover, not the brown one that went with the school uniform. "I knew it couldn't be our work with the community that's been preying on his nerves," she said.

"Feeling he hasn't got any privacy might do that, Rosie. Was there really any need to—"

"I thought he might have unsuitable reading up there, but this shows he's been involved in worse. Heaven knows what he's been watching or where."

"I haven't watched anything like that," I protested. "It's all out of my head."

"If that's true it's worse still," she said and tramped downstairs to thrust the book at my father. "We've done our best to keep you free of such things."

He was leafing through it, stopping every so often to frown, when the phone rang. I tried to take the book, but my mother recaptured it. I watched nervously in case she harmed it while my father said "It is. He is. When? Where? We will. Where? Thanks." He gazed at me before saying "Your uncle's had a stroke on the way home from shopping. He's back in hospital."

I could think of nothing I dared say except "Are we going to see him?"

"We are now."

"Can I have my book?"

My mother raised her eyebrows and grasped it with both hands, but my father took it from her. "I'll handle it, Rosie. You can have it back when we decide you're old enough, Craig."

I wasn't entirely unhappy with this. Once he'd taken it to their room I felt as if some of the ideas the house in Copse View had put in my head were safely stored away. Now I could worry about how I'd harmed my uncle or let him come to harm. As my father drove us to the hospital he and my mother were so silent that I was sure they thought I had.

My uncle was in bed halfway down a rank of patients with barely a movement between them. He looked shrunken, perhaps by his loose robe that tied at the back, and on the way to adopting its pallor. My parents took a hand each, leaving me to shuffle on the spot in front of his blanketed feet. "They'll be reserving you a bed if you carry on like this, Phil," my father joked or tried to joke.

My uncle blinked at me as if he were trying out his eyes and then worked his loose mouth. "Nod, you fool," he more or less said.

I was obeying and doing my best to laugh in case this was expected of me before I grasped what he'd been labouring to pronounce. I hoped my parents also knew he'd said it wasn't my fault, even if I still believed it was. "God, my shopping," he more or less informed them. "Boy writing on the pavement. Went dafter then." I gathered that someone riding on the

pavement had got the bags my uncle had been carrying and that he'd gone after them, but what was he saying I should see as he pointed at his limp left arm with the hand my mother had been holding? He'd mentioned her as well. He was resting from his verbal exertions by the time I caught up with them. "Gave me this," he'd meant to say. "Another attack."

My parents seemed to find interpreting his speech almost as much of an effort as it cost him. I didn't mind it or visiting him, even by myself, since the route took me nowhere near Copse View. Over the weeks he regained his ability to speak. I was pleased for him, and I tried to be equally enthusiastic that he was recovering his strength. The trouble was that it would let him go home.

I couldn't wish he would lose it again. The most I could hope, which left me feeling painfully ashamed, was that he might refuse my help with shopping. I was keeping that thought to myself the last time I saw him in hospital. "I wouldn't mind a hand on Saturday," he said, "if you haven't had enough of this old wreck."

I assured him I hadn't, and my expression didn't let me down while he could see it. I managed to finish my dinner that night and even to some extent to sleep. Next day at school I had to blame my inattention and mistakes on worrying about my uncle, who was ill. Before the week was over I was using that excuse at home as well. I was afraid my parents would notice I was apprehensive about something else, and the fears aggravated each other.

While I didn't want my parents to learn how much of a coward I was, on another level I was willing them to rescue me by noticing. They must have been too concerned about the estate—about making it safe for my uncle and people like him. By the time I was due to go to him my parents were at a police forum, where they would be leading a campaign for police to intervene in schools however young the criminals. I loitered in the house, hoping for a call to say my uncle didn't need my help, until I realised that if I didn't go out soon it would be dark.

December was a week old. The sky was a field of snow. My white breaths led me through the streets past abandoned Frugo trolleys and Frugoburger cartons. I was walking too fast to shiver much, even with the chill that had chalked all the veins of the dead leaves near Copse View. The trees were showing every bone, but what else had changed? I couldn't comprehend the

sight ahead, unless I was wary of believing in it, until I reached the end of the street that led to the woods. There wasn't a derelict house to be seen. Shady Lane and Arbour Street and, far better, Copse View had been levelled, surrounding the woods with a triangle of waste land.

I remembered hearing sounds like thunder while my uncle was in hospital. The streets the demolition had exposed looked somehow insecure, unconvinced of their own reality, incomplete with just half an alley alongside the back yards. As I hurried along Copse View, where the pavement and the roadway seemed to be waiting for the terrace to reappear, I stared hard at the waste ground where the house with the occupant had been. I could see no trace of the building apart from the occasional chunk of brick, and none at all of the figure with the sticks.

I found my uncle in his chair outside the front door. I wondered if he'd locked himself out until he said "Thought you weren't coming. I'm not as speedy as I was, you know."

As we made for Frugo I saw he could trundle only as fast as his weaker arm was able to propel him. Whenever he lost patience and tried to go faster the chair went into a spin. "Waltzing and can't even see my partner," he complained but refused to let me push. On the way home he was slower still, and I had to unload most of his groceries, though not my Frugoat bar, which he'd forgotten to buy. When I came back from returning the trolley he was at his window, which was open, perhaps because he hadn't wanted me to watch his struggles to raise the sash. "Thanks for the company," he said.

I thought I'd been more than that. At least there was no need for me to wish for any on the walk home. I believed this until the woods came in sight, as much as they could for the dark. Night had arrived with a vengeance, and the houses beyond the triangle of wasteland cut off nearly all the light from the estate. Just a patch at the edge of the woods was lit by the solitary intact streetlamp.

Its glare seemed starkest on the area of rubbly ground where the house with the watchful occupant had been. The illuminated empty stretch reminded me of a stage awaiting a performer. Suppose the last tenant of the house had refused to move? Where would they have gone now that it was demolished? How resentful, even vengeful, might they be? I was heading for the nearest street when I heard the feral snarl of bicycles beyond the houses. Without further thought I made for the woods.

Arbour Street and Shady Lane were far too dark. If the path took me past the site of the house, at least it kept me closer to the streetlamp. I sidled through the gap in the railings and followed the track as fast as the low-lying darkness let me. More than once shadows that turned out to be tendrils of undergrowth almost tripped me up. Trees and bushes kept shutting off the light before letting it display me again, though could anyone be watching? As it blazed in my eyes it turned my breaths the colour of fear, but I didn't need to think that. I was shivering only because much of the chill of the night seemed to have found a home in the woods. The waste ground of Copse View was as deserted as ever. If I glanced at it every time the woods showed it I might collide with something in the dark.

I was concentrating mostly on the path when it brought me alongside the streetlamp. Opposite the ground where the demolished house had been, the glare was so unnaturally pale that it reduced the trees and shrubs and other vegetation to black and white. A stretch of ferns and their shadows beside the path looked more monochrome than alive or real. My shadow ventured past the lamp before I did, and jerked nervously over a discoloured mosaic of dead leaves as I turned my back on the site of the house. Now that the light wasn't in my eyes I could walk faster, even if details of the woods tried to snag my attention: a circular patch of yellowish lichen on a log, lichen so intricate that it resembled embroidery; the vertical pattern on a tree trunk, lines thin and straight as pinstripes; a tangle of branches that put me in mind of collapsed shelves; a fractured branch protruding like a chair arm from a seat in a hollow tree with blanched ferns growing inside the hollow. None of this managed to halt me. It was a glimpse of a face in the darkness that did.

As a shiver held me where I was I saw that the face was peering out of the depths of a bush. It was on the side of the path that was further from Copse View, and some yards away from my route. I was trying to nerve myself to sprint past it when I realised why the face wasn't moving; it was on a piece of litter caught in the bush. I took a step that tried to be casual, and then I faltered again. It wasn't on a piece of paper as I'd thought. It was the queen's portrait on a plate.

At once I felt surrounded by the deserted house or its remains. I swung around to make sure the waste ground was still deserted—that the woods were. Then I stumbled backwards away from the streetlamp and almost

sprawled into the undergrowth. No more than half a dozen paces away—perhaps fewer—a figure was leaning on its sticks in the middle of the path.

It was outlined more than illuminated by the light, but I could see how ragged and piebald the scrawny body was. It was crouching forward, as immobile as ever, but I thought it was waiting for me to make the first move, to give it the excuse to hitch itself after me on its sticks. I imagined it coming for me as fast as a spider. I sucked in a breath I might have used to cry for help if any had been remotely likely. Instead I made myself twist around for the fastest sprint of my life, but my legs shuddered to a halt. The figure was ahead of me now, at barely half the distance.

The worst of it was the face, for want of a better word. The eyes and mouth were little more than tattered holes, though just too much more, in a surface that I did my utmost not to see in any detail. Nevertheless they widened, and there was no mistaking their triumph. If I turned away I would find the shape closer to me, but moving forward would bring it closer too. I could only shut my eyes and try to stay absolutely still.

It was too dark inside my eyelids and yet not sufficiently dark. I was terrified to see a silhouette looming on them if I shifted so much as an inch. I didn't dare even open my mouth, but I imagined speaking—imagined it with all the force I could find inside myself. "Go away. Leave me alone. I didn't do anything. Get someone else."

For just an instant I thought of my uncle, to establish that I didn't mean him, and then I concentrated on whoever had robbed him. An icy wind passed through the woods, and a tree creaked like an old door. The wind made me feel alone, and I tried to believe I entirely was. At last I risked looking. There was no sign of the figure ahead or, when I forced myself to turn, behind me or anywhere else.

I no longer felt safe in the woods. I took a few steps along the path before I fought my way through the bushes to the railings. I'd seen a gap left by a single railing, but was it wide enough for me to squeeze through? Once I'd succeeded, scraping my chest and collecting flakes of rust on my prickly skin, I fled home. I slowed and tried to do the same to my breath at the end of my street, and then I made another dash. My mother's car was pulling away from the house.

She halted it beside me, and my father lowered his window. "Where do you think you've been, Craig?"

His grimness and my mother's made me feel more threatened than I understood. "Helping," I said.

"Don't lie to us," said my mother. "Don't start doing that as well."

"I'm not. Why are you saying I am? I was helping Uncle Phil. He's gone slow."

They gazed at me, and my father jerked a hand at the back seat. "Get in."

"Tom, are you sure you want him—"

"Your uncle's been run over."

"He can't have been. I left him in his flat." When this earned no response I demanded "How do you know?"

"They found us in his pocket." Yet more starkly my father added "Next of kin."

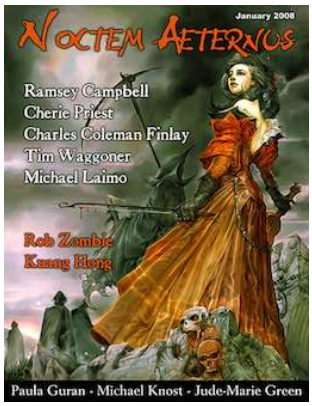
I didn't want to enquire any further. When the isolated streetlamp on Copse View came in sight I couldn't tell whether I was more afraid of what else I might see or that my parents should see it as well. I saw nothing to dismay me in the woods or the demolished street, however—nothing all the way to Pasture Boulevard. My mother had to park several hundred yards short of my uncle's flat. The police had put up barriers, beyond which a giant Frugo lorry was skewed across the central strip, uprooting half a dozen trees. In front of and under the cab of the lorry were misshapen pieces of a wheelchair. I tried not to look at the stains on some of them and on the road, but I couldn't avoid noticing the cereal bars strewn across the pavement. "He forgot to buy me one of those and I didn't like to ask," I said. "He must have gone back."

My parents seemed to think I was complaining rather than trying to understand. When I attempted to establish that it hadn't been my fault they acted as if I was making too much of a fuss. Before the funeral the police told them more than one version of the accident. Some witnesses said my uncle had been wheeling his chair so fast that he'd lost control and spun into the road. Some said he'd appeared to be in some kind of panic, others that a gang of cyclists on the pavement had, and he'd swerved out of their way. The cyclists were never identified. As if my parents had achieved one of their aims at last, the streets were free of rogue cyclists for weeks.

I never knew how much my parents blamed me for my uncle's death. When I left school I went into caring for people like him. In due course these included my parents. They're gone now, and while sorting out the contents of our house I found the book with my early teenage stories in it—childish second-hand stuff. I never asked to have it back, and I never wrote stories again. I couldn't shake off the idea that my imagination had somehow caused my uncle's death.

I could easily feel that my imagination has been revived by the exercise book—by the cover embroidered with a cobweb, the paper pinstriped with faded lines, a fern pressed between the yellowed pages and blackened by age. I'm alone with my imagination up here at the top of the stairs leading to the unlit hall. If there's a face at the edge of my vision, it must belong to a picture on the wall, even if I don't remember any there. Night fell while I was leafing through the book, and I have to go over there to switch the light on. Of course I will, although the mere thought of moving seems to make the floorboards creak like sticks. I can certainly move, and there's no reason not to. In a moment—just a moment while I take another breath—I will.

Dragged Down



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As usual, Mz Chester meant far too well. Once all of Year Eight AM were at their desks and starting to be relatively quiet she said "Who's going to tell us a legend about the tunnel?"

"Miss me miss." Having wiped his floppy mouth, Craig offered "There's a man in the middle with needles sticking out of him and he waits for girls to walk through."

"You wish." Jade finished touching up her lips and stowed the mirror and lipstick in her leather bag before adding "He's got a doctor's knife and he cuts the lychees off the boys."

"He chucks them in the canal," her friend Davina agreed, "and they come out Angie Leek's end."

Bas was close to protesting that wasn't Angelique's name, since she'd confined herself to a tired smile, when Mz Chester intervened. "I hope none of you watches films like that," she said. "I told you last week, those aren't legends. They have to be stories you can't trace back to their source."

Over the weekend boys had shouted challenges and worse at one another through the tunnel before meeting halfway, where several had ended up in the canal. As he saw she wanted to foster the idea that the tunnel might represent more than a division between the halves of the town, Bas had an inspiration. "You don't need to shout," he said.

Mz Chester pushed her glasses higher on her almost equally square face. "I don't believe I was, Basil."

"Not you, miss. I mean down there. You just have to whisper at the end and anyone that's at the other side can hear you."

"That's not a legend," Craig spluttered. "Snot even a story."

"You can make it one," Jade told Davina. "You have to go at midnight..."

"And you'll hear someone saying your name and you have to go to them..."

Angelique raised her hand, but only to prop her chin on her fist. Like her friends, she seemed increasingly bullied into silence by their classmates from the other side of town. Bas felt he was demonstrating that it didn't only produce bullies as he added "Because they'll be the person you'll spend the rest of your life with."

That didn't apply to his parents, though couples stayed together in many of the books he liked. Perhaps the unreality was why his barely teenage peers greeted the idea with derision, even some from Angelique's side of the tunnel. This didn't matter once she gave him a quick smile like a secret she was sharing just with him. "That's much more like it," Mz Chester said. "That's really quite authentic."

"What's or then trick?"

"Authentic, Jade. You can say it if you try." Having waited in vain, the teacher said "I'm saying Basil's legend sounds like a real one.

"He robbed it, you mean," said Davina.

"I don't steal," Bas protested. "I made it up."

"If it isn't a tradition it deserves to be," Mz Chester confused him by declaring. "Now I want you all to write a legend about the tunnel, and we won't have any based on nasty films. Think about the fairy tales you liked when you were little. Some people like them even at my age."

Bas shielded his exercise book with his arms while he developed the idea that if you went to the tunnel at midnight and whispered the name of the person you wanted to marry they would have to come to the other end. It did resemble some of the stories his mother used to read to him. He wondered what Angelique might be imagining beneath the concealment of her long blonde hair, but he couldn't read her small neat handwriting across the aisle. Mz Chester waited for them to finish before having Craig collect everybody's books. "Lots of trolls," she commented. "Very good, Angelique and Basil."

Craig rewarded him with a vicious punch on his upper arm. By the time Bas recovered, the girls had been sent ahead out of the classroom as usual. He almost caught up with Angelique in the schoolyard until her brother Sebastian, two years older and bulkier, escorted her and her friends out of the gates. As they and their associates staked their claim to the suburb, Bas made for his side of the tunnel.

A teacher was stationed at the top of the steps to the canal, shaking his head at any pupils of Waterside College who ventured near. Bas joined the rowdy exodus across the bridge above six lanes of speeding traffic. Someone had cut a new hole in the wire mesh that was supposed to prevent people from dropping debris on the road. Through it Bas saw how his territory of tower blocks surrounded by low houses—cartons for humans, he always thought—was divided from the wider thoroughfares of ample twofold dwellings beyond the school. In a minute the littered street lined with untaxed cars brought him home. He transferred a pair of empty lager cans from the stunted wall of the token front yard to the bin on the way to admitting himself to the house.

His mother had found time between cleaning offices and hospital wards to cook him a casserole. He microwaved and ate it all, even the vegetables. Once he'd washed up he stayed in the boxy kitchen with his homework—easy English, not much harder History, dully detailed Science—and then went into the other downstairs room to watch some of the sort of film Mz Chester disapproved of. Later still he took an Alan Garner novel from one of the shelves in his room to bed. With his window open as far as the slat at the top would strain, the June heat and the muted lapping of the canal put him to sleep.

He was rowing a boat through the tunnel, if his unseen companion wasn't wielding the oars, when his mother flustered him awake. "Breakfast on the table," she urged as soon as he left the cubicle of a bathroom. She scrutinised the backs of his ears and tidied his shirt collar and patted down a tuft of his hair while he was too busy to escape, and gave him a harassed hug and kiss the instant he'd finished. "Pardon me if I run," she said, though she looked more tired than ever. "We'll do something at the weekend."

He knew she had to work hard, which was why he tried. Even with two jobs she couldn't afford to rent a house any better than this. He heard the engine of her Mini struggling to start as he washed the breakfast things. On his way across the bridge he saw bits of wood like the remains of a wreck floating out of the tunnel past the school. Parents who'd campaigned against moving Waterside College to the new site stood like vigilantes under the sign that bore the mottoes MORE THAN A SCHOOL—A COMMUNITY and EXCLUSIVELY INCLUSIVE and OUR MISSION PROMISE: LIVE AND LEARN. Some parents frowned at the trespassers, including Bas, and

he wondered how they would react if they learned he didn't feel part of either group of pupils. He was looking for Angelique when the assembly bell summoned everyone into the school.

He was almost fast enough into the hall to sit by her. Behind her was next best, even if it placed him between Craig and Jade. He admired the sheen of her hair and a glimpse of her nape framed by two blonde locks while Jade popped fleshy bubbles of gum and Craig misspelled a female syllable on the back of the seat occupied by Angelique's friend Glenda. The pupils stood, many miming weariness, as Mr Lemon strode onstage. Once they'd collapsed into their seats again the headmaster clasped his hands over his capacious stomach and made a chin vanish by raising his head to survey the audience. Bas thought he looked like a comedian determined to be serious, but perhaps it was the other way round, because Mr Lemon said "Who's got some change?"

By now the school was used to his approach, and groans were the only response. Some of the teachers seated behind him seemed to feel expected to be eager, and Mr Mayhew dug in a hip pocket. "Change for the better," Mr Lemon said, and a few teachers dutifully laughed. "What makes change?" he enquired, and answered his own question when nobody fell for it. "Imagination, that's the secret. It sounds as if it's made up of an image and a nation, doesn't it? It's where the image of our nation comes from. A nation's a community, and what's our school?"

"Community," Bas felt compelled to mouth as others muttered it.

"Shout up or you'll have people imagining you aren't proud of it. We're all part of its image, and we need to make that positive. If you've a positive image of yourself you can change for the better. Shall I tell you what I heard?"

Bas had heard a yawn infecting several pupils, but Mr Mayhew murmured "Please, head."

"It shows you can give anything a better image, even that tunnel where I hope we'll be seeing no more trouble. Mz Chester asked Year Eight AM to come up with a positive story about it, and if this isn't true it ought to be. They say if you stand at the end of the tunnel at midnight and call the name of the person you want to marry you'll see them at the other end."

Some of Year Eight had begun to grow resentful until they heard the legend, and Bas would have resented not being named if the general reaction hadn't consisted of catcalls and simulated vomiting. "Don't scoff unless you can do better," Mr Lemon said. "That's to say, don't even if you can." He led the school in the day's hymn of inclusion, and when he'd finished clapping along to it he cried "What's our job today?"

"Know something we didn't know yesterday," Bas wished he didn't feel bound to mouth. He shielded his arm from Craig's responsive punch as they spilled into the aisle, and heard Glenda say to Angelique "That was your midnight story, wasn't it?"

"No, it was me," Bas said so loud that teachers frowned at him.

"Never mind trying to be like us. You tell him, Ange."

Angelique gave him a bright-eyed look. "It was mine, actually."

Though he didn't want to argue with her, she seemed to have robbed him of any other words. Before he could reply Craig said "You calling him a liar, Angie Leek?"

"She doesn't want to call him anything, and that's not her name."

"Should be Leaky Ange," Davina said, and Jade emitted a supportive pop.

Angelique blushed for some reason that was beyond Bas, though he felt it related to his presence. She said no more on the way to the classroom, where Glenda said "Mz Chester, it was Ange's legend Mr Lemon told us, wasn't it?"

"It was hers and Basil's."

Not only Glenda looked outraged for Angelique. "He copied hers, you mean," said Glenda.

Angelique shook her head so vigorously that it appeared to double its blondeness. "I didn't see him copying."

"Nor did I," Mz Chester said. "You both got the idea by yourselves, didn't you? Or you thought you did. Maybe you were tapping into myth. That's how folk stories get started. Nobody knows who was the first to tell them."

Once the teacher's attention moved elsewhere, Glenda scowled at Bas. "Just because she didn't see you doesn't mean you didn't cheat," she hissed.

He was sure he glimpsed sympathy in Angelique's glance. He felt cramped by failing to speak, but too many people would have overheard. He hardly said a word all morning, even when teachers gazed at him as if he was letting them down. When he ended up behind Angelique in the lunch queue he was afraid that he'd left it too late. Then she reached for a tray and as he fumbled to hand her the topmost, the roar of conversations and clangour of utensils let him blurt "We ought to try it."

Her slim fingers didn't quite touch his. "Ta," she said but added "What?"

"See what happens if you call down the tunnel."

"We're here, Ange," Glenda interrupted as she headed for a table.

Angelique turned away, but not before flashing him a tooth-brushed smile and murmuring "I wonder."

So did he, but that was as much as he dared. He wasn't sure if Glenda had heard, though she and her cronies found a subject to whisper and giggle about once Angelique joined them. Suppose the others came with her to the tunnel? Suppose only they came? He wouldn't be able to bear their derision, especially if it spread through the school. Before he'd finished that night's casserole he had pretty well decided not to go—but suppose Angelique turned up and assumed he'd set out to humiliate her? The possibility distracted him from his homework and the television, even when the programmes abandoned good behaviour after nine o'clock. Even so, if his mother's job at the hospital on the far side of the tunnel hadn't kept her out until the early hours he might not have left the house.

A parched breeze jangled the wire mesh on the bridge and fluttered the litter that did for leaves on the bushes a few front gardens boasted. The traffic had abated; just the occasional wave of sound merged with the lapping of the canal. As he picked his way down the weedy steps at the end of the road, Bas heard glass smash in the other half of town. He was hoping it wouldn't divert Angelique as he stepped on the towpath.

One of the spotlights protecting the school shone directly into the canal. It lent the water beyond the tunnel the aggressive brightness of the rim of an eclipse, which charred the inside of the passage blacker than the sky. Beside the school foreshortened silhouettes of railings lay in the canal, crumbling with rust or rather losing definition to the glare. As they stirred like fronds

of weed he wasn't sure if he'd glimpsed a figure disappearing around the curve of the towpath. "Are you there?" he called under his breath.

His voice must have carried out of the tunnel, because it sent some creature off the path into the water. The small echoing plop sounded as if it were at his feet. The drowned railings wriggled sluggishly while reflections of ripples tried to climb the steep banks before slithering back. Otherwise there was no response, and so Bas whispered "Angelique."

The tunnel emitted a thundery rumble as a car passed above him. Even when he spoke her name as if she were beside him it earned no answer. Was there a figure among the restless metal bars? He could have imagined that it was escaping from the unstable submerged cage. Had it returned, or was there another? The antics of the railings made him uncertain whether he was seeing anyone at all. He'd repeated Angelique's name several times before he began to feel ridiculous, all the more so if she was silently eavesdropping. He stalked home to dream that she was locked in an underwater cage and pleading with him to let her out before she drowned. At least she was gratifyingly grateful when he did.

He never found out how much, because his mother wakened him for breakfast. The dream left him wondering if he had indeed seen Angelique through the tunnel—if she could have been too shy to make herself known. He was afraid that his mother might ask why he was preoccupied, but she must have concerns of her own. "Busy day again," she said as a mingled apology and farewell and perhaps as an exhortation to him.

She'd wakened late, which meant he had. Once she hurried out he gobbled the rest of his breakfast before giving the plate as quick a wash as he'd had in the bathroom. He ran across the bridge, much to the disdain of schoolmates who were taking all the time they could, and reached the school only just ahead of the bell. He had to sit several rows behind Angelique in the hall, wishing that classmates were required to sit together instead of being encouraged to make new acquaintances. How could she not sense his gaze on her neck? She hadn't acknowledged it when Mr Lemon strode onstage more purposefully than ever. "Hands up anyone who doesn't think we're a community," he said.

Bas suspected quite a few were being withheld, and not just beyond the stage. Presumably Mr Lemon was unaware of this, since he said "And don't we think a community should be able to police itself?" While nobody

expressed disagreement, this didn't seem to be enough for him. "It should sadden every one of us that we've had to call the police in," he said and dabbed at one eye. "Let's hope they don't trace the crime back to any member of our community. If any of us know anything, they can prove they're members by coming to me."

He'd been staring wistfully at the audience for some moments when Mr Mayhew cleared his throat. "Should we tell them what's happened?"

"I was about to, thank you, Leonard." Having repeated his pause, Mr Lemon said "The school was broken into last night. Six new computers were taken, not even out of their boxes."

Now Bas knew where the glass had been smashed, and perhaps why he'd glimpsed figures dodging past the railings. He felt as if his hot face could draw the missile of Mr Lemon's gaze. If he ought to have realised he was hearing burglars at the school, wasn't Angelique just as responsible? She would have been closer to the robbery if she had come to the tunnel. Once everyone had finished swaying and clapping to the day's communal chant he hurried to catch her up as they left the hall. "Angelique, did you—"

She was turning when Glenda interrupted. "What are you after now?

"I'm trying to ask about last night."

"She's told me she knows nothing about it. It's people like you they need to look at."

"What do you mean, people like me?"

"People from your side of town. People who their parents dont know where they are at night, if they've got any parents."

Before Bas could produce a retort, perhaps aimed at her grammar, Davina joined in. "Don't you call us robbers, specially not him."

"He's better than any of you lot," said Jade, "and that means Angie Leek."

"I'm not," Bas protested. "I don't need you saying things like that. I'm just me."

"Well, excuse us," Jade said. "We didn't know we weren't good enough to talk about you."

"We'd better leave him with his friends he wants to be like," said Davina.

Bas sidled past her, but too late. Angelique was hallway down the corridor. His frustration was so close to rage that he didn't trust himself to speak, either in class or at break, when she was surrounded by friends. He was nowhere near her in the lunch queue, and the stares of her friends kept him away from her table. He retreated to one full of fourth years whom he didn't know and who didn't want to know him. At least this let him concentrate on watching Angelique, and when she made for the counter to return her tray he seized his. As he attempted to head her off before she could rejoin her group, her brother stepped in his way. "Where do you think you're going?"

Bas brandished the tray. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like a little boy who doesn't know where he belongs."

Bas did his best to stand taller, though it felt as if his hot face were hauling him up. "I'm not a little boy," he said louder than he meant to, "and—"

"That's not all you are you think you're not." As his sister hesitated nearby Sebastian regarded her just long enough to say "I'm dealing with this."

She blinked at them before retreating to her table. Bas turned towards it, but Sebastian sidestepped to block him, which made Bas blurt "I only want —"

"We know what you want, and you won't be getting it." Sebastian worked his hefty shoulders as if limbering up for a fight and leaned his snub-nosed bludgeon of a face at Bas. "Maybe we have to help you people get an education now they've moved the school," he said near the top of his voice, "but you can forget about dragging us down. And in case that isn't simple enough for you, that means stay away from my little sister."

Bas heard jeers and laughter, no doubt aimed at him. Shouldn't the teacher overseeing lunch have intervened on behalf of the school? Bas avoided looking at him too and blundered almost blindly out of the uproarious hall. He took refuge in the boys' toilets, in the solitary cubicle with an intact bolt, where he gazed at the mass of misspelled sentences and even cruder drawings, formulae to conjure sex up, that enclosed him. At the end of lunchtime a lone memory let him venture out, though he wasn't sure of it. He only thought Angelique had wanted to speak up for him.

It wasn't enough. He was unable to catch her eye, let alone the expression he'd seemed to glimpse. Surely she wasn't spurning him as Glenda and her giggling gaggle made a show of doing, or as Craig and Jade and Davina

brusquely did. When lessons ended Bas tried to overtake her in the corridor until he saw that her brother had taken charge. He hung back in the school until they were well beyond the gate.

What had she intended her look to convey? He attempted to suppress the question by lingering over the latest casserole and then over his homework. They failed to distract him, and so did returning discs to Dave's Video Dive next to the Angler's Arms and the Bet Your Life betting shop—even the films he borrowed to watch. The words of a Philip Pullman novel fell short of his brain, and he was about to undress for bed when he grew aware of the whisper of the canal. Although it was beyond the back yard and the alley and a second fence, it could almost have been under his window. The restlessness of water—the sibilance of ripples followed by their lapping against the edge of the canal—sounded like a repetition of his name.

Was it just the water? As he strained his ears, the impression of a summons gathered in his brain. He stood on the bed to shove as much of his head as would fit through the transom. While the sound was no clearer, he was suddenly sure who was calling him. He jumped off the bed and ran out of the house.

His feet seemed hardly to touch the pavement. He felt weightless as a dream. The street appeared to have been refined by the late hour, stripped down to light and shadow. He heard a burglar alarm and the hunting cries of police cars, but they were far away, nothing to do with him. They withdrew into insignificance as he descended the steps to the canal.

He felt as if the dark of the tunnel were focusing the mysteriousness of the night for him. The water was so still that the passage might have been holding its breath on his behalf. When the topsy-turvy railings stirred, he had the notion that they were beckoning him into the dazzle at the far end. He saw no other movement, and wondered if she'd given up on him. "Here," he whispered and, when this produced no Angelique, tried saying conversationally "Here."

In a moment a whisper enlivened the dark. "Basil."

"That's you, isn't it, Angelique?" Since the question felt like doubting her, he wished he hadn't uttered it so loud. "I'm coming," he murmured and advanced into the tunnel.

He hadn't ventured far when the spotlight began to alleviate the gloom, sketching trickles of moisture under the brick arch. All the same, he was taken unawares by the wallowing bulk that caught up with him in the middle of the passage. He had to let it float onwards before he distinguished that it was a large cardboard box. It was some way ahead by the time he realised that it bore a picture of a computer. He ought to grab it, not to hide evidence that the thieves lived on his side of town but so that he and Angelique could take it to the headmaster. He hurried along the slippery towpath, and the carton drifted among the unstable railings as he reached the mouth of the tunnel. He was making to pace the box until it sailed within reach when the person who had been concealed by the arch stepped in front of him. "Here comes two kinds of refuse," Sebastian announced, though he was alone. "What do you mean by calling my sister like a dog?"

"I was saying I was here," Bas felt vulnerable enough to explain.

"Do you imagine anyone cares about that? Don't you dare say my sister."

Mightn't Sebastian be interfering because she did? Before Bas could recover from learning that the older boy had been the whisperer, Sebastian peered at the carton. "That's what you were chasing, was it? Trying to dispose of the evidence?"

"I was going to show Mr Lemon."

"I'll be doing that," Sebastian said and blocked his way when Bas tried to sidle around him. "Crawl back in your burrow while you're able and don't come sniffing round here again."

There was no way past him. He looked capable of flinging Bas into the canal. He loitered at the entrance until the younger boy was halfway down the tunnel, and Bas willed him to fall in the water as he fished out the carton. There ought to be a legend that wishing would make this or worse happen. Nothing did, and Bas had to retreat into the dilapidated litter-strewn criminal territory that was home. As he reached the house he saw from his watch that it was only just midnight. No wonder his mother still wasn't in, but it hadn't even been time for his and Angelique's legend to work.

He fell asleep dreaming she would tell him that Sebastian had prevented her from coming to the tunnel, and the possibility wakened him before his mother could. "Eager beaver," she said at breakfast. "I'm glad you like your

school." But when he reached the schoolyard there was no sign of Angelique, not even with her brother.

He couldn't locate her in the hall. Teachers frowned at him for turning around while Mr Lemon assured everyone that speaking up was standing up. Nobody did either in response. Bas wanted to talk to Angelique first, but she wasn't in the classroom. He was nerving himself to question Glenda when Mz Chester said "Basil."

She had originally connected him and Angelique, and he wondered if she had some news for him. "What, miss?"

"I was right, the story you wrote wasn't so far off the mark. There's a tradition that if you go to the water at midnight you can call spirits out of it."

"It was our story," Jade objected to Davina as Craig told them "Shows he robbed it, robber."

Bas wasn't sure if Mz Chester was referring specifically to the canal, but another question concerned him more. "It wasn't just mine, it was Angelique's," he said. "Why isn't she in today?"

"I haven't heard. Does anyone know?"

"We wouldn't tell him," said Glenda, "even if we did."

"I hope you'd tell the school," Mz Chester said as she was summoned by a bleep of the laptop on her desk. "Well, you are in demand today, Basil. You're to go to Mr Lemon's office."

Bas tried to feel like a celebrity as he tramped along the corridor echoing with teachers' voices. A transverse passage decorated with class work about Buddhism led to the headmaster's door. Not too long after Bas knocked on it Mr Lemon said "Proceed."

He sat forward at his weighty desk, which hid his stomach, and propped his prayerful hands up before lowering his head an inch that produced an extra chin. "Well, Basil. How are we treating you?

"All right." Since this visibly fell short of expectations, Bas added "Fine, I think."

"Only think? You can't be sure if you're part of our community." When Bas didn't risk an answer the headmaster said "You could prove you are."

"How, sir?"

"Just the truth will do," Mr Lemon said as his face seemed to grow heavier still. "I hear you know more than you're saying about Monday's unfortunate incident."

"Which one?" Bas managed only to mouth, but he was afraid it might have been legible. "Sebastian Barnes said, didn't he? What was he doing there?"

"Protecting the premises. The question is why you were."

"Seeing if that legend worked, the one you told us you liked."

"Storytelling won't help, Basil. The number on the packaging shows it was taken from here."

"What's that got to do with me?" Bas had to make an effort to say Sir.

"We're told you were anxious to dispose of it."

Bas was enraged to find he couldn't keep his lip from shaking his voice. "I wanted to bring it to show you."

"You've had your wish, then. It's been shown." Mr Lemon gazed hard at him before adding "Please try and stay clear in future."

"Why?" Bas said, too affronted to bother with politeness.

"It can be dangerous down there. I believe a fellow was found drowned in the tunnel while our school was being built."

Bas remembered his mother using the death to warn him of various dangers, until he'd lost count of how often he'd mumbled agreement. "He was a druggie," he said.

Mr Lemon frowned as though Bas had contradicted him. "If you've nothing else to say you should be in your class."

Bas turned towards the door and then back to the desk. "Sir?"

"Anything, by all means."

"Just Sebastian's sister. Why's she off school?"

"We understand she's unwell." The question obviously disappointed the headmaster, and so did having to say "I'm glad you're concerned for one of your new classmates, but better keep it within bounds."

This time Bas couldn't doubt how he was being told to stay clear. As he trudged back to class he felt like an outcast whose status everyone was aware of, and all the more shameful for having tried to deny it. "Was he saying how you robbed our story?" Jade suggested, and Davina contributed

"Was you talking about Angie Leek?" The silence of Glenda and her friends was a comment in itself, and his hot face was more of an answer than he wanted to provide, but he succeeded in staying mute until the first break. In the schoolyard he made for Sebastian before any doubts could impede him. "What's wrong with Angelique?"

"You are." Sebastian shared mirth with several of his classmates at the spectacle of Bas. "You are, you little upstart," he said, "and if I hear you've even whispered to her after she comes back, there's a few of us who'll teach you how to shut your mouth."

Bas felt more than able to do that, helped by his swollen lips. All at once there was only one thing he wanted to say, but it would have to wait for nightfall. Staying utterly quiet for the rest of the day lent his intention more strength, and so did fasting at lunchtime in the bolted cubicle. He was too tense to eat dinner either. He laboured over his homework and then devoted his time to composing a fragment of language that meant far more to him. At last he tore the pages covered with erasures out of the middle of his history exercise book and dropped the crumpled wad in the street on his way to the canal.

The water that the darkness of the tunnel was drawing in looked thick and sluggish. It was laden with so much garbage—rotting fruit and vegetables, sodden pornographic magazines, opened packs of frozen food, plastic cartons like miniature boats ridden not by witches but by half-chewed hamburgers—that he assumed somebody had tipped at least one bin into the canal. As he followed the parade to the tunnel he felt as if he'd joined it. He leaned into the stony mouth and whispered "Come out. Come out however bad you are."

Once his voice finished troubling the darkness, the silence grew absolute. His words had become entangled with the echoes of ripples, but now even the lapping had ceased. The light at the far end left the depths of the passage blacker than blindness, and he was straining his eyes when he realised that the cage of the inverted railings had grown as still as the fence itself. He gazed at it for some moments before he grasped what he ought to be seeing. Although the last of the rubbish had vanished into the dark while he was speaking, none of it had emerged from the tunnel.

It must have caught on an obstruction. As his vision began to flicker with strain, he thought he saw where the rubbish had lodged. It appeared to be

gathering halfway along the tunnel. The current must be unequal to breaking the jam, though it was pushing it above the surface. Was it really strong enough to raise the dark mass so far? The hulking silhouette had wobbled high enough to outline the roundish lump on top of it against the light when Bas retreated to the steps and fled home.

For the first time in years he gave in to wishing that his mother would be there. As he lay in bed, yearning to hear a key in the lock, he heard a floundering so hollow that he knew it was in the tunnel. It sounded as if some kind of body was struggling to leave the water. Eventually it ceased, and the canal reverted to lapping. He hadn't looked out of his window since returning to his room, and he wasn't about to do so. At last his nervous vigil was rewarded by a scraping at the front door. It wasn't the scratching of nails or anything like them, it was his mother's key. Once he heard her trudge upstairs he was able to take refuge in sleep.

The surreptitious restlessness of the canal kept waking him, however, until he had to go to the window. A smell of rot drifted through the transom as he saw the marks that trailed through the open gate into the back yard. Even when he realised they came in pairs, they were so differently misshapen that he didn't recognise them as footprints until the intruder shuffled backwards to confront him. It had putrid fruit for eyes, but perhaps there was a skull inside the lump he'd seen silhouetted in the tunnel, because it was grinning, exposing more than teeth. It was thin as a skeleton fleshed out with scraps of garbage, but despite the instability of its substance it was able to caper and stretch its crumbling hands towards him. "What is it?" his mother complained sleepily as he screamed and woke, so that he had to call "Me. Nothing."

Surely daylight should have taken his fears away, but he was afraid to go downstairs in case his mother saw he was hiding a secret. He loitered in the bathroom until she left the house, and lingered over his breakfast even though he could hardly taste it. He was nervous of going to school and of understanding why. It might be still worse not to know, and at close to the last moment he dashed out of the house and across the bridge. Was the crowd in the schoolyard more subdued than usual? He couldn't see Angelique, and perhaps more to the point, there was no sign of her brother. Bas didn't know how this made him feel. Sebastian's friends who had mocked Bas stared at him with open dislike as everyone was rung into the

school. In the assembly hall he contrived not to sit near anybody he knew, which isolated him with the sight of the teachers lined up on the stage, all of them as solemn as statues in a tomb. Even Mr Lemon had managed to leave his heartiness behind; indeed, for several seconds after the pupils regained their seats he appeared to have abandoned speech as well. "I'm afraid we have some very sad news," he said at last, and Bas felt as if the headmaster's gaze didn't just include him but was directed at him. "There was apparently an accident last night down in the tunnel. I hope at least it will be a warning to every one of us to stay away in future. It's a sad reflection on our community that we had to lose one of us to bring the danger home to us. Please bow your heads with me in memory of Angelique Barnes from Year Eight AM. Let's believe she is on a voyage to a better place."

Until Mr Lemon named the victim Bas had been able to believe that the muffled sobs clustered in the middle of the hall came from someone other than Glenda and her friends. They sobbed louder while Mr Lemon promised everybody counselling, but Glenda was dry-eyed when she confronted Bas in the classroom. "I hope you know she went down there because she had a row about you with her brother."

Bas clung to the only inconsistency he could think of. "How do you know that?"

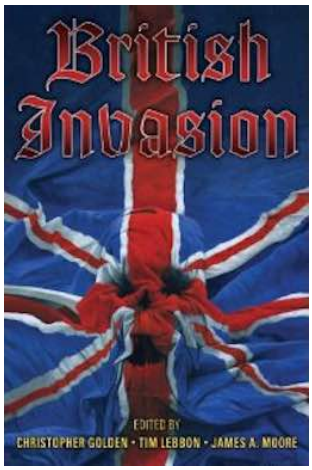
"Because he told us when we went to pick her up for school." Glenda glared at him as if he'd tried to deny the tragedy. "We think she was looking for you," she accused him. "She slipped on some rubbish and got tangled up in more of it and drowned, that's what her dad says must have happened. Shows what can go wrong if we don't stay away from rubbish."

Bas had no retort, because he felt more responsible than she could know. He imagined Angelique's struggles as she was held down in the water, unable to scream, since otherwise he would have heard her. How guilty did he look? Enough so that nobody talked to him, any more than he spoke to them. He wished he could hide in the cubicle all day instead of just at lunchtime. He had never been so glad to find his mother out at work. He left his dinner in the refrigerator and his homework in its bag, and spent the hours in striving to believe there was more to the legend Mz Chester had told him.

Sirens were tearing through the night, but down by the canal it was as quiet as graveyards were in books. Only the water stirred as he paced to the mouth of the tunnel. "Angelique," he pleaded with the darkness. "Angelique." Was he hearing just his own echoes, or was there a fainter whisper underneath them? Was it more than water? "Please be there," he said as loud as he dared, and advanced into the tunnel. The light beyond it blinded him, so that he could move no faster than a sleepwalker on the treacherous path. The closer he came to the middle of the passage, the more profound the blackness in it seemed to grow. "Is that you?" he murmured almost too breathlessly to hear. Another unseen ripple answered him, and he imagined how cold the lightless depths must be. But the hand that reached up to take his was colder still.

2009

Respects



"*Respects* owes its existence to the present trend of treating young criminals as folk heroes. Not long before I wrote it a young car thief was eulogised in the obituary pages of the local free newspaper at least as sentimentally as the miscreant in my tale. As far as I can see, there's one less thief to bother the rest of us. Since I wrote the story, shopkeepers in an entire suburb were terrorised into shutting their premises out of a show of respect for a gang member who was gunned down. It seems as if the kind of family I wrote about in *The One Safe Place* has begun to rule our streets. Time for another novel, perhaps, if I don't get stomped to death first for remonstrating with their kind."—Ramsey Campbell, Story notes from *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy And Horror 2010*

"The dialogue is brilliant, and it captures an odious sense of entitlement on the part of Dorothy's tormentors that seems extremely true to life."—Ros Jackson, reviewing *The Mammoth Book Of Best New Horror 21*

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By the time Dorothy finished hobbling downstairs, somebody had rung three times and knocked several more. Charmaine Bullough and some of her children were blocking the short garden path under a nondescript November sky. "What did you see?" Charmaine demanded at once.

"Why, nothing to bother about." Dorothy had glimpsed six-year-old Brad kicking the door, but tried to believe he'd simply wanted to help his mother. "Shouldn't you be at school?" she asked him.

Brad jerked a thumb at eight-year-old J-Bu. "She's not," he shouted.

Perhaps his absent siblings were, but not barely teenage Angelina, who was brandishing a bunch of flowers. "Are those for me?" Dorothy suggested out of pleasantness rather than because it seemed remotely likely, then saw the extent of her mistake. "Sorry," she murmured.

Half a dozen bouquets and as many wreaths were tied to the lamp-standard on the corner of the main road, beyond her gate. Charmaine's scowl seemed to tug the roots of her black hair paler. "What do you mean, it's not worth bothering about?"

"I didn't realise you meant last week," Dorothy said with the kind of patience she'd had to use on children and parents too when she was teaching.

"You saw the police drive our Keanu off the road, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid I can't say I did."

At once, despite their assortment of fathers, the children resembled their mother more than ever. Their aggressive defensiveness turned resentful in a moment, accentuating their features, which were already as sharp as smashed glass. "Can't or won't?" Charmaine said.

"I only heard the crash."

Dorothy had heard the cause as well–the wild screech of tyres as the fifteen-year-old had attempted to swerve the stolen Punto into her road apparently at eighty miles an hour, only to ram a van parked opposite her house—but she didn't want to upset the children, although Brad's attention seemed to have lapsed. "Wanna wee," he announced and made to push past her, the soles of his trainers lighting up at every step.

As Dorothy raised a hand to detain him, J-Bu shook a fist that set bracelets clacking on her thin arm. "Don't you touch my brother. We can get you put in prison."

"You shouldn't just walk into someone else's house," Dorothy said and did her best to smile. "You don't want to end up—"

"Like who?" Angelina interrupted, her eyes and the studs in her nose glinting. "Like Keanu? You saying he was in your house?"

Dorothy might have. The day before the crash she'd come home to find him gazing out of her front room. He hadn't moved until she managed to fumble her key into the lock, at which point he'd let himself out of the back door. Apart from her peace of mind he'd stolen only an old handbag that contained an empty purse, and so she hadn't hurried to report him to the overworked police. If she had, might they have given him no chance to steal the car? As Dorothy refrained from saying any of this, Charmaine dragged Brad back. "Come out of there. We don't want anyone else making trouble for us."

"I'm sorry not to be more help," Dorothy felt bound to say. "I do know how you feel."

Angelina peered so closely at her that Dorothy smelled some kind of smoke on the girl's breath. "How?"

"I lost my husband just about a year ago."

"Was he as old as you?" J-Bu said.

"Even older," said Dorothy, managing to laugh.

"Then it's not the same," Angelina objected. "It was time he went."

"Old people take the money we could have," said J-Bu.

"It's ours for all the things we need," Brad said.

"Never mind that now," said Charmaine and fixed Dorothy with her scowl. "So you're not going to be a witness."

"To what, forgive me?"

"To how they killed my son. I'll be taking them to court. The social worker says I'm entitled."

"They'll have to pay for Keanu," said Brad.

Dorothy took time over drawing a breath. "I don't think I've anything to offer except sympathy."

"That won't put shoes on their feet. Come on, all of you. Let's see Keanu has some fresh flowers. He deserves the best," Charmaine added louder still.

Brad ran to the streetlamp and snatched off a bouquet. About to throw them over Dorothy's wall, he saw her watching and flung them in the road. As Angelina substituted her flowers, Dorothy seemed to hear a noise closer to the house. She might have thought a rose was scratching at the window, but the flower was inches distant. In any case, the noise had sounded muffled by the glass. She picked up a beer can and a hamburger's polystyrene shell from her garden and carried them into the house.

When she and Harry had moved in she'd been able to run through it without pausing for breath. She could easily outdistance him to the bedroom, which had been part of their fun. Now she tried not to breathe, since the flimsy shell harboured the chewed remains of its contents. She hadn't reached the kitchen when she had to gasp, but any unwelcome smell was blotted out by the scents of flowers in vases in every downstairs room.

She dumped the rubbish in the backyard bin and locked the back door. The putty was still soft around the pane Mr Thorpe had replaced. Though he'd assured her it was safe, she was testing the glass with her knuckles when something sprawled into the hall. It was the free weekly newspaper, and Keanu's death occupied the front page. LOCAL TEENAGER DIES IN POLICE CHASE.

She still had to decide whether to remember Harry in the paper. She took it into the dining-room, where a vase full of chrysanthemums held up their dense yellow heads towards the false sun of a Chinese paper globe, and spread the obituary pages across the table. Keanu was in them too. Which of the remembrances were meant to be witty or even intended as a joke? "Kee brought excitement into everyone's life"? "He was a rogue like children are supposed to be"? "There wasn't a day he didn't come up with some new trick"? "He raced through life like he knew he had to take it while he could"? "Even us that was his family couldn't keep up with his speed"? Quite a few of them took it, Dorothy suspected, along with other drugs. "When he was little his feet lit up when he walked, now they do because he's God's new angel." She dabbed at her eyes, which had grown so blurred that the shadows of stalks drooping out of the vase appeared to grope at the newsprint. She could do with a walk herself.

She buttoned up her winter overcoat, which felt heavier than last year, and collected her library books from the front room. Trying to read herself to sleep only reminded her that she was alone in bed, but even downstairs she hadn't finished any of them – the deaths in the detective stories seemed insultingly trivial, and the comic novels left her cold now that she couldn't share the jokes. She lingered for a sniff at the multicoloured polyanthuses in the vase on her mother's old sideboard before loading her scruffiest handbag with the books. The sadder a bag looked, the less likely it was to be snatched.

The street was relatively quiet beneath the vague grey sky, with just a few houses pounding like nightclubs. The riots in Keanu's memory–children smashing shop windows and pelting police cars with bricks–had petered out, and in any case they hadn't started until nightfall. Most of the children weren't home from school or wherever else they were. Stringy teenagers were loitering near the house with the reinforced front door, presumably waiting for the owner of the silver Jaguar to deal with them. At the far end

of the street from Dorothy's house the library was a long low blotchy concrete building, easily mistaken for a new church.

She was greeted by the clacking of computer keyboards. Some of the users had piled books on the tables, but only to hide the screens from the library staff. As she headed for the shelves Dorothy glimpsed instructions for making a bomb and caught sight of a film that might have shown an equestrian busy with the tackle of her horse if it had been wearing any. On an impulse Dorothy selected guides to various Mediterranean holiday resorts. Perhaps one or more of her widowed friends might like to join her next year. She couldn't imagine travelling by herself.

She had to slow before she reached her gate. A low glare of sunlight cast the shadow of a rosebush on the front window before being extinguished by clouds, leaving her the impression that a thin silhouette had reared up and then crouched out of sight beyond the glass. She rummaged nervously in her handbag and unlocked the door. It had moved just a few inches when it encountered an obstruction that scraped across the carpet. Someone had strewn Michaelmas daisies along the hall.

Were they from her garden? So far the vandals had left her flowers alone, no doubt from indifference. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness she saw that the plants were scattered the length of the hall, beyond which she could hear a succession of dull impacts as sluggish as a faltering heart. Water was dripping off the kitchen table from the overturned vase, where the trail of flowers ended. She flustered to the back door, but it was locked and intact, and there was no other sign of intrusion. She had to conclude that she'd knocked the vase over and, still without noticing unless she'd forgotten, tracked the flowers through the house.

The idea made her feel more alone and, in a new way, more nervous. She was also disconcerted by how dead the flowers were, though she'd picked them yesterday; the stalks were close to crumbling in her hands, and she had to sweep the withered petals into a dustpan. She binned it all and replenished the vase with Harry's cyclamen before sitting on the worn stairs while she rang Helena to confirm Wednesday lunch. They always met midweek, but she wanted to talk to someone. Once she realised that Helena's grandchildren were visiting she brought the call to an end.

The house was big enough for children, except that she and Harry couldn't have any, and now it kept feeling too big. Perhaps they should have moved,

but she couldn't face doing so on her own. She cooked vegetables to accompany the rest of yesterday's casserole, and ate in the dining-room to the sound of superannuated pop songs on the radio, and leafed through her library books in the front room before watching a musical that would have made Harry restless. She could hear gangs roving the streets, and was afraid her lit window might attract them. Once she'd checked the doors and downstairs windows she plodded up to bed.

Girls were awaiting customers on the main road. As Dorothy left the curtains open a finger's width she saw Winona Bullough negotiate with a driver and climb into his car. Was the girl even sixteen? Dorothy was close to asking Harry, but it felt too much like talking to herself, not a habit she was anxious to acquire. She climbed into her side of the bed and hugged Harry's pillow as she reached with her free hand for the light-cord.

The night was a medley of shouts, some of which were merely conversations, and smashed glass. Eventually she slept, to be wakened by light in the room. As she blinked, the thin shaft coasted along the bedroom wall. She heard the taxi turn out of the road, leaving her unsure whether she had glimpsed a silhouette that reminded her of stalks. Perhaps the headlamps had sent a shadow from her garden, though wasn't the angle wrong? She stared at the dark and tried not to imagine that it was staring back at her. "There's nobody," she whispered, hugging the pillow.

She needed to be more active, that was all. She had to occupy her mind and tire her body out to woo a night's unbroken sleep. She spent as much of Saturday in weeding the front garden as the pangs of her spine would allow. By late afternoon she wasn't even half finished, and almost forgot to buy a wreath. She might have taken Harry some of his own flowers, but she liked to support the florist's on the main road, especially since it had been damaged by the riots. At least the window had been replaced. Though the florist was about to close, he offered Dorothy a cup of tea while his assistant plaited flowers in a ring. Some good folk hadn't been driven out yet, Dorothy told them both, sounding her age.

She draped the wreath over the phone in her hall and felt as if she were saying goodbye to any calls, an idea too silly to consider. After dinner she read about far places that might have changed since she and Harry had visited them, and watched a love story in tears that would have embarrassed him. She was in bed by the time the Saturday-night uproar began. Once she

was wakened by a metallic clack that sounded closer than outside, but when she stumbled to the landing the hall was empty. Perhaps a wind had snapped the letterbox. As she huddled under the quilt she wondered if she ought to have noticed something about the hall, but the impression was too faint to keep her awake. It was on her mind when church bells roused her, and as soon as she reached the stairs she saw what was troubling her. There was no sign of the wreath.

She grabbed the banister so as not to fall. She was hastening to reassure herself that the flowers were under the hall table, but they weren't. Had she forgotten taking them somewhere? They were in none of the ground-floor rooms, nor the bathroom, her bedroom, the other one that could have been a nursery but had all too seldom even done duty as a guest room. She was returning downstairs when she saw a single flower on the carpet inches from the front door.

Could a thief have dragged the wreath through the letterbox? She'd heard that criminals used rods to fish property from inside houses. She heaved the bolts out of their sockets and flung the door open, but there was no evidence on the path. It didn't seem worth reporting the theft to the police. She would have to take Harry flowers from the garden. She dressed in her oldest clothes and brought tools from the shed, and was stooping to uproot a weed that appeared to have sprouted overnight when she happened to glance over the wall. She straightened up and gasped, not only with the twinge in her back. One of the tributes to Keanu looked far too familiar.

She clutched at her back as she hobbled to the streetlamp. There was the wreath she'd seen made up at the florist's. It was the only item to lack a written tag. "Earned yourself some wings, Kee" and "Give them hell up there" and "Get the angels singing along with your iPod" were among the messages. The wreath was hung on the corner of a bouquet's wrapping. Dorothy glared about as she retrieved it, daring anyone to object. As she slammed the front door she thought she heard small feet running away.

She had no reason to feel guilty, and was furious to find she did. She locked away the tools and changed into the dark suit that Harry used to like her to wear whenever they dined out. A bus from the shattered shelter on the main road took her to the churchyard, past houses twice the size of hers. All the trees in their gardens were bare now. She and Harry had been fond of telling each other that they would see them blossom next year. The trees in

the graveyard were monotonously evergreen, but she never knew what that was meant to imply. She cleared last week's flowers away from Harry's stone and replaced them with the wreath, murmuring a few sentences that were starting to feel formulaic. She dropped the stale flowers in the wire bin outside the concrete wedge of a church on her way to the bus.

As it passed her road she saw the Bulloughs on her path. Charmaine and her offspring strode to meet her at the lamp. "Brad says you lifted our Keanu's flowers."

"Then I'm afraid he's mistaken. I'm afraid—"

"You should be," said Arnie, the biggest and presumably the eldest of the brood. "Don't talk to my mam like that, you old twat."

Dorothy had begun to shake – not visibly, she hoped – but stood her ground. "I don't think I'm being offensive."

"You're doing it now," Arnie said, and his face twisted with loathing. "Talking like a teacher."

"Leave it, Arn," his mother said more indulgently than reprovingly, and stared harder at Dorothy. "What were you doing touching Keanu's things?"

"As I was trying to explain, they weren't his. I'm not accusing anybody, but someone took a wreath I'd bought and put it here."

"Why didn't you?" demanded Angelina.

"Because they were for my husband."

"When are you going to get Kee some?" J-Bu said at once.

"She's not," Charmaine said, saving Dorothy the task of being more polite. "Where were these ones you took supposed to be?"

"They were in my house."

"Someone broke in, did they? Show us where."

"There's no sign of how they did it, but—"

"Know what I think? You're mad."

"Should be locked up," said Angelina.

"And never mind expecting us to pay for it," Arnie said.

"I'm warning you in front of witnesses," said their mother. "Don't you ever touch anything that belongs to this family again."

"You keep your dirty hands off," J-Bu translated.

"Mad old bitch," added Brad.

Dorothy still had her dignity, which she bore into the house without responding further. Once the door was closed she gave in to shivering. She stood in the hall until the bout was over, then peeked around the doorway of the front room. She didn't know how long she had to loiter before an angry glance showed that the pavement was deserted. "Go on, say I'm a coward," she murmured. "Maybe it isn't wise to be too brave when you're on your own."

Who was she talking to? She'd always found the notion that Harry might have stayed with her too delicate to put to any test. Perhaps she felt a little less alone for having spoken; certainly while weeding the garden she felt watched. She had an intermittent sense of it during her meal, not that she had much appetite, and as she tried to read and to quell her thoughts with television. It followed her to bed, where she wakened in the middle of the night to see a gliding strip of light display part of a skinny silhouette. Or had the crouching shape as thin as twigs scuttled across the band of light? Blinking showed her only the light on the wall, and she let the scent of flowers lull her to sleep.

It took daylight to remind her there were no flowers in the room. There seemed to be more of a scent around her bed than the flowers in the house accounted for. Were her senses letting her down? She was glad of an excuse to go out. Now that they'd closed the post office around the corner the nearest was over a mile away, and she meant to enjoy the walk.

She had to step into the road to avoid vehicles parked on the pavement, which was also perilous with cyclists taking time off school. Before she reached the post office her aching skull felt brittle with the sirens of police cars and ambulances in a hurry to be elsewhere, not to mention the battering clatter of road drills. As she shuffled to the counter she was disconcerted by how much pleasure she took in complaining about all this to her fellow pensioners. Was she turning into just another old curmudgeon weighed down by weary grievances? Once she'd thanked the postmaster several times for her pension she headed for the bus stop. One walk was enough after all.

Although nobody was waiting outside her house, something was amiss. She stepped gingerly down from the bus and limped through gaps in the

traffic. What had changed about her garden? She was at the corner of the road when she realised she couldn't see a single flower.

Every one had been trampled flat. Most of the stalks were snapped and the blossoms trodden into the earth, which displayed the prints of small trainers. Dorothy held onto the gatepost while she told herself that the flowers would grow again and she would live to see them, and then she walked stiff as a puppet into the house to call the police.

While it wasn't an emergency, she didn't expect to wait nearly four unsettled hours for a constable less than half her age to show up. By this time a downpour had practically erased the footprints, which he regarded as too common to be traceable. "Have you any idea who's responsible?" he hoped if not the opposite, and pushed his cap higher on his prematurely furrowed forehead.

"The family of the boy you were trying to catch last week."

"Did you see them?"

"I'm certain someone must have. Mrs Thorpe opposite hardly ever leaves the house. Too worried that clan or someone like them will break in."

"I'll make enquiries." As Dorothy started to follow him he said "I'll let you know the outcome."

He was gone long enough to have visited several of her neighbours. She hurried to admit him when the doorbell rang, but he looked embarrassed, perhaps by her eagerness. "Unfortunately I haven't been able to take any statements."

"You mean nobody will say what they saw," Dorothy protested in disbelief.

"I'm not at liberty to report their comments."

As soon as he drove away she crossed the road. Mrs Thorpe saw her coming and made to retreat from the window, then adopted a sympathetic wistful smile and spread her arms in a generalised embrace while shaking her head. Dorothy tried the next house, where the less elderly but equally frail of the unmarried sisters answered the door. "I'm sorry," she said, and Dorothy saw that she shouldn't expect any witness to risk more on her behalf. She was trudging home when she caught sight of an intruder in her front room.

Or was it a distorted reflection of Keanu's memorial, thinned by the glare of sunlight on the window? At first she thought she was seeing worse than unkempt hair above an erased face, and then she realised it was a tangle of flowers perched like a makeshift crown or halo on the head, even if they looked as though they were sprouting from a dismayingly misshapen cranium. As she ventured a faltering step the silhouette crouched before sidling out of view. She didn't think a reflection could do that, and she shook her keys at the house on her way to the door.

A scent of flowers greeted her in the hall. Perhaps her senses were on edge, but the smell was overpowering–sickly and thick. It reminded her how much perfume someone significantly older might wear to disguise the staleness of their flesh. Shadows hunched behind the furniture as she searched the rooms, clothes stirred in her wardrobe when she flung it open, hangers jangled at her pounce in the guest room, but she had already established that the back door and windows were locked. She halted on the stairs, waving her hands to waft away the relentless scent. "I saw you," she panted.

But had she? Dorothy kept having to glance around while she cooked her dinner and did her best to eat it, though the taste seemed to have been invaded by a floral scent, and later as she tried to read and then to watch television. She was distracted by fancying there was an extra shadow in the room, impossible to locate unless it was behind her. She almost said "Stay out of here" as she took refuge in bed. She mouthed the words at the dark and immediately regretted advertising her nervousness.

She had to imagine Harry would protect her before she was able to sleep. She dreamed he was stroking her face, and in the depths of the night she thought he was. Certainly something like a caress was tracing her upturned face. As she groped for the cord, the sensation slipped down her cheek. The light gave her time to glimpse the insect that had crawled off her face, waving its mocking antennae. It might have been a centipede or millipede–she had no chance to count its many legs as it scurried under the bed.

She spent the rest of the interminable night sitting against the headboard, the bedclothes wrapped tight around her drawn-up legs. She felt surrounded, not only by an oppressive blend of perfume that suggested somebody had brought her flowers–on what occasion, she preferred not to

think. As soon as daylight paled Keanu's streetlamp she grabbed clothes and shook them above the stairs on her way to the bathroom.

She found a can of insect spray in the kitchen. When she made herself kneel, stiff with apprehension as much as with rheumatism, she saw dozens of flowers under her bed. They were from the garden–trampled, every one of them. Which was worse: that an intruder had hidden them in her room or that she'd unknowingly done so? She fetched a brush and dustpan and shuddered as she swept the debris up, but no insects were lurking. Once she'd emptied the dustpan and vacuumed the carpet she dressed for gardening. She wanted to clear up the mess out there, and not to think.

She was loading a second bin-liner with crushed muddy flowers when she heard Charmaine Bullough and her youngest children outdoing the traffic for noise on the main road. Dorothy managed not to speak while they lingered by the memorial, but Brad came to her gate to smirk at her labours. "I wonder who could have done this," she said.

"Don't you go saying it was them," Charmaine shouted. "That's defamation. We'll have you in court."

"I was simply wondering who would have had a motive."

"Never mind sounding like the police either. Why'd anybody need one?"

"Shouldn't have touched our Kee's flowers," J-Bu said.

Her mother aimed a vicious backhand swipe at her head, but a sojourn in the pub had diminished her skills. As Charmaine regained her balance Dorothy blurted "I don't think he would mind."

"Who says?" demanded Brad.

"Maybe he would if he could." Dorothy almost left it at that, but she'd been alone with the idea long enough. "I think he was in my house."

"You say one more word about him and you won't like what you get," Charmaine deafened her by promising. "He never went anywhere he wasn't wanted."

Then that should be Charmaine's house, Dorothy reflected, and at once she saw how to be rid of him. She didn't speak while the Bulloughs stared at her, although it looked as if she was heeding Charmaine's warning. When they straggled towards their house she packed away her tools and headed for the florist's. "Visiting again?" the assistant said, and it was easiest to tell

her yes, though Dorothy had learned to stay clear of the churchyard during the week, when it tended to be occupied by drunks and other addicts. She wouldn't be sending a remembrance to the paper either. She didn't want to put Harry in the same place as Keanu, even if she wished she'd had the boy to teach.

Waiting for nightfall made her feel uncomfortably like a criminal. Of course that was silly, and tomorrow she could discuss next year's holiday with Helena over lunch. She could have imagined that her unjustified guilt was raising the scents of the wreath. It must be the smell of the house, though she had the notion that it masked some less welcome odour. At last the dwindling day released her, but witnesses were loitering on both sides of the road.

She would be committing no crime – more like the opposite. As she tried to believe they were too preoccupied with their needs to notice or at least to identify her, a police car cruised into the road. In seconds the pavements were deserted, and Dorothy followed the car, hoping for once that it wouldn't stop at the Bullough house.

It didn't, but she did. She limped up the garden path as swiftly as her legs would work, past a motor bicycle that the younger Bulloughs had tired of riding up and down the street, and posted the wreath through the massively brass-hinged mahogany door of the pebbledashed terrace house. She heard Charmaine and an indeterminate number of her children screaming at one another, and wondered whether they would sound any different if they had a more than unexpected visitor. "Go home to your mother," she murmured.

The police were out of sight. Customers were reappearing from the alleys between the houses. She did her best not to hurry, though she wasn't anxious to be nearby when any of the Bulloughs found the wreath. She was several houses distant from her own when she glimpsed movement outside her gate.

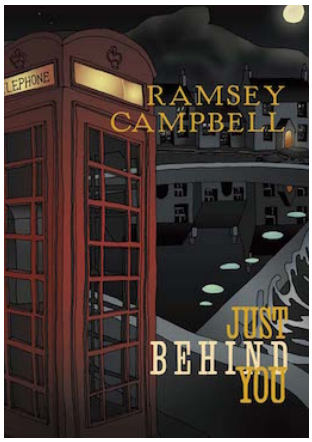
The flowers tied to the lamp-standard were soaked in orange light. Most of them were blackened by it, looking rotten. Though the concrete post was no wider than her hand, a shape was using it for cover. As she took a not entirely willing step a bunch of flowers nodded around the post and dodged back. She thought the skulker was using them to hide whatever was left of its face. She wouldn't be scared away from her own house. She stamped towards it, making all the noise she could, and the remnant of a body sidled

around the post, keeping it between them. She avoided it as much as she was able on the way to her gate. As she unlocked the door she heard a scuttling of less than feet behind her. It was receding, and she managed not to look while it grew inaudible somewhere across the road.

The house still smelled rather too intensely floral. In the morning she could tone that down before she went for lunch. She made up for the dinner she'd found unappetising last night, and bookmarked pages in the travel guide to show Helena, and even found reasons to giggle at a comedy on television. After all that and the rest of the day she felt ready for bed.

She stooped to peer under it, but the carpet was bare, though a faint scent lingered in the room. It seemed unthreatening as she lay in bed. Could the flowers have been intended as some kind of peace offering? In a way she'd been the last person to speak to Keanu. The idea fell short of keeping her awake, but the smell of flowers roused her. It was stronger and more suggestive of rot, and most of all it was closer. The flowers were in bed with her. There were insects as well, which didn't entirely explain the jerky movements of the mass of stalks that nestled against her. She was able to believe they were only stalks until their head, decorated or masked or overgrown with shrivelled flowers, lolled against her face.

Safe Words



First published in *Just Behind You*, 2009

At first Masters thought the girls in uniform were watching him. Then a mottled pensioner in a musty flapping tweed suit waddled past in the lobby of the cinema, and their unanimous gaze followed him. He ogled the schoolgirls on a St Trinian's poster until he noticed the usherettes, and then he dodged into the unit as if it were a lair. Both girls wrinkled their noses. "I'm not cleaning up after him," one said.

"We shouldn't let his sort in," said her colleague.

"Better going to a film than doing something worse."

"Make sure he doesn't sit near any girls in there."

"I wasn't," Masters felt he needed to establish, since their attention was drifting towards him. "In there, I mean. I just saw *Pride and Prejudice*."

Presumably inattention made one say "Nobody's prejudiced here."

"Me included," Masters said.

This was plainly of no interest. Outside the multiplex the early September evening sky reshaped small masses of white cloud above the retail park. A multitude of cars slumbered in the amber twilight while families strolled around the shops on the mile of perimeter— not so much a communal activity as a reverie of shopping. He was heading for his car when he saw almost a classful of schoolgirls outside the Hummock of Sphagnum.

He thought they hadn't realised the quaint name belonged to a pub until he realised they were a few years older than their costumes. He was about to hurry past when a kneesocked young woman in a pleated skirt and white blouse noticed him. "Excuse me," she called, "aren't you Charlie from the school?"

"You'd better pull your tie up, Nancy," one of her friends advised her.

Masters had been trying to ignore how they were dressed. "I'm Charles Masters," he said. "And you'll be ... "

"Nancy Hamilton. Your new music teacher."

Mr Duggan had introduced her to the staff at the end of the summer term. Masters hardly remembered meeting her or telling her to call him Charlie, his standard response to any introduction, but he would remember her now: bright red hair in pigtails, oval face and snub nose, pale slightly pink cheeks, full faintly amused lips... "Let's hope none of your pupils see you like this," he said.

"Let's hope just you do," she said with a wink.

Masters licked his lips and blurted "I've been watching a film of a book that's on the syllabus."

"We believe you," said her friend. "We don't think you were watching us."

He heard his voice grow more rigid than his hot face. "I meant some of the pupils might be here for it too."

"Watch out, Nancy. Sounds like you're in trouble."

"I'll see you tomorrow." This earned a chorus of encouragement, and so he added "At school." The chorus was even more enthusiastic about this. As he retreated Nancy called "Bottoms up, Charlie." Had somebody brought her a drink? Masters didn't look, but as he walked with some effort to his Mini he seemed to sense attention at his back. When he glanced in the mirror, nobody was outside the pub.

Four miles took him home and brought the night on. By the sound of it, the couple on the ground floor were making love or watching such a film or both. He drummed on the banister as he went upstairs, but it made no appreciable difference. A faint aroma of microwaved curry loitered in the hall of his apartment. He was in the main room and heading for the computer when he veered towards the shelves of discs of films. He tried John Wayne and Howard Keel and Elvis Presley, but perhaps he'd had enough of films for one evening, and so he went to bed with David Lodge on language. Long before he switched the light off he was pondering Nancy Hamilton's wink.

In the morning he used the flush to muffle the plops of his droppings, then took a fierce shower before spicing his armpits and minting his teeth in front of his plump introverted reflection. Once black coffee and a one-man packet of cereal had done him for breakfast, he dressed and went out to his car. Jude and Beverley were slipping into theirs, but he resisted the

temptation to enquire what kind of night they'd had. Foliage hung limp and dull along the suburban avenues as he drove to Justwell High, which often struck him as describing too many of the pupils rather than naming the school. Above it the sky was featureless with cloud no paler than the concrete buildings. Today was just for the staff, many of whose cars were already parked in the yard. Masters found the nearest space for his and hurried into Excellence Block.

In the assembly hall three mathematics teachers were helping Mr Duggan arrange chairs in a circle as if to solve a geometry problem. "Do come in, that's the way," Mr Duggan boomed. "All here now, are we? Then let's get interpersonal. Bonding before brainstorms, that's how we work."

Masters was wondering why he needed to be reminded, and looking for an empty chair as the staff sat down like the players of some kind of game, when he realised the headmaster wasn't addressing him. "You'll remember our new colleague," Mr Duggan told them all.

Masters glanced back to see Nancy Hamilton in a restrained grey suit and flat shoes, which hushed her footsteps. Her red hair was tied severely back. Bob Pollard, the head of his department, was levelling an impatient hand at the place beside him. As Masters took the seat Nancy sat almost opposite him, and Mr Duggan rounded off the problem by sitting nearly equidistant from them. "Let's start by each sharing a secret about ourselves," he said.

This was his latest inspiration, which homed in on Masters by the shortest route. As colleagues owned up to reading horror Action or enjoying Frugoburgers or listening to Rolf Harris albums, he tried to think of an admission to make. Too soon it was his turn, and he blurted "I collect films."

Nobody bothered reacting. Perhaps he sounded unadventurous, but he couldn't afford to surprise them. Was Nancy having to consider her admission too? She seemed thoughtful. Her immediate neighbour confessed to nights of Bingo with his mother, and then she said "I like being someone else."

"There's a new idea." Having applauded or at least slapped his fat hands together, Mr Duggan said "How do you mean that exactly?"

"I like playing roles. Dressing up."

"You'll want to speak to her about your drama group, Bob," the headmaster told Pollard, who pursed his lips but nodded. The parade of secrets grew ponderous with jokes as it approached Mr Duggan, who put it out of its misery by saying "I broke a window when I was a boy. Let's keep the thoughts flowing. Who's going to give us ideas?"

"I've a few about discipline," Pollard said.

As Masters clasped his hands in his lap Nancy produced a notebook from her handbag. "That's the spirit," Mr Duggan told her. "You take down whatever you think you should take down."

Masters crouched forward and flattened his lap with his hands while he tried to find somewhere to look. Suppose someone noticed that he alone wasn't looking at Nancy? He gazed at her harder than he meant to and was rewarded with a wink. He barely managed not to wink back, though everybody else was watching Pollard as he enthused about regaining respect for the uniform, single file and silence in the corridor, standing up when a teacher entered the room... "Well, that's so old it's nearly new," Mr Duggan said. "I'll raise it with our Learning Consumers Council. That's the elected body of our pupils, Nancy, that we liaise with on a monthly basis. I hope this meeting will be just as productive and meaningful. Who's next in the ring?"

It wasn't going to be Masters. He had a condition to cover up, not too obviously, he hoped. It made him more aware of language that was secretly significant to him: keep your end up, get to the bottom of it, over the, position ... Whenever someone's words lurched out of their context he glanced at Nancy, and twice he was given a wink. At last it was lunchtime, and he was painfully conscious how hard it might be to struggle to his feet. He tried to stay unnoticed while the rest of the staff made for the canteen, but Mr Duggan came over to him. "You've been looking eager to put something in, Charles. Nothing's inhibiting you, I hope."

He couldn't risk changing his cramped stance. "Are you having trouble with anything?" Mr Duggan said.

"Just thinking," Masters said in the hope that would end the interrogation.

"By all means do it aloud. That's why we're here today and every day. You know I've always got an ear." Mr Duggan lowered his voice and himself to enquire "It's not the new member, is it?"

Masters gritted his teeth so as to mutter "How do you mean?"

"Miss Hamilton. She hasn't been bothering you."

"She's done nothing at all."

"You seemed to find her the most interesting thing in the room." Mr Duggan brought up a smile and weighted it with a frown. "Could the interest be more than professional?"

"I was just thinking she'll be good for Justwell."

"You young people." Whatever Mr Duggan meant by this and by shaking his head, he added "You'll remember we have to set an example, won't you? I'm sure I don't need to remind anyone. I'd be happy to have her for a daughter."

Once Mr Duggan was well on his way to the door, Masters succeeded in rising from some of his crouch. He overtook the headmaster in the corridor to dodge into the male staff toilet. "If you wouldn't—" Mr Duggan said, but Masters hadn't time to linger. He was bolting the door of the solitary cubicle when Mr Duggan said "Are you likely to be long?"

"I'll try not to be."

"I may as well wait, shall I?"

Mr Duggan's toilet was next to his office in Achievement Block. While Masters was tempted to send him there, he said only "I don't know."

"I'll wait in the corridor," Mr Duggan declared.

Presumably he'd grasped that Masters was embarrassed, even if he couldn't suspect why, thank God. As soon as the door to the corridor shut, Masters dashed to the sink. Suppose Mr Duggan heard the tap and thought it was safe to come in? "I'm nearly done," Masters shouted loud enough, he hoped, to cover up the splashing of cold water. "Just another, just another minute or so. Another few seconds. Not many more now." Though the water had achieved the desired effect, he couldn't dry himself with the roller towel except by hopping on tiptoe. Barely in time, having zipped himself up, he thought to flush the toilet for Mr Duggan to hear. "All yours," he told him in the corridor.

His face was growing hot by the time Mr Duggan said "I hope you washed your hands, Charles. Can't have a healthy mind without clean hands."

"Of course," Masters said, waggling his fingers so vigorously he sprinkled the other man. "Sorry," he said and regretted adding "Just water."

In the canteen he thought it best to stay away from Nancy Hamilton, not even in her sight unless she'd turned her head. He loaded his plate with half a dozen species of salad from the Well-being Buffet that many of the pupils called Smellpeeing. "Eating myself healthier," he told Mr Duggan when the headmaster ambled around the tables like just another of the staff, but the comment didn't seem to go down much better than the oily multicoloured pasta did. He was healthy enough—there were many other people like him. After lunch he had to muffle a cough with a fist whenever anybody's choice of words seized his imagination. Nancy was to his left now, and he would have had to crane his neck to see her. At last Mr Duggan closed the proceedings by saying "Let's carry our enthusiasm forward into the school year."

Masters felt as if he was carrying part of himself forward as he made not much less than a bolt for freedom. He took refuge in his car and subsided as he drove awkwardly home. Boys were playing football in the yard of the primary school across the road. The irregular pulse kept faltering and reviving as he microwaved his packaged Chinese dinner. The thumps fell silent at last while he ate out of the plastic carton, and he was able to hear the couple downstairs. They sounded in the mood for a quiet evening; not a solitary word was audible, though their murmurs were. Would they be too quiet for him to watch a film?

He shouldn't feel so secretive. They weren't films only people like him watched, and how many of the actors in them shared his tastes? Rock Hudson and Harold Lloyd and Steve Martin? Peter Cushing, Ray Milland, Robert Mitchum, William Powell, Alfie Bass? Bob Todd's enthusiasm seemed unmistakeable, while Lionel Stander applied himself and his belt with rather more than a will. Masters would have liked to know how some of the women felt when they were over someone's knee or in an equally humiliating position: Paulette Goddard, Ginger Rogers, Mai Zetterling, Francoise Dorleac, Maureen O'Hara, Doris Day... Helena Bonham Carter looked delightfully dishevelled after a caning, and perhaps he could content himself with that, since the actual punishment wasn't shown or, more importantly, heard. Would scenes from the foreign films be audible downstairs—identifiable, rather? Words weren't the issue now. Jude and

Beverley might overhear Marcello Mastroianni caning Sydne Rome, or Per Oscarsson using a ruler on Geraldine Chaplin in school uniform, or Magda Vasaryova being whipped in the street with the tube from a bicycle pump and then baring her bottom for more... Wouldn't that be quiet enough? Another Czech film, *Closely Observed Trains,* was even quieter about the reason he'd bought it, and he inserted that disc in the player.

Much of the film took place in a railway station, where the station master warned his assistant that if she misbehaved he would mark her bottom. One night she took the bait, and he bent her over and took quite a time about lowering her knickers, the kind English schoolgirls used to wear. When he'd first watched it the episode had taken Masters unawares; he hadn't realised there were such scenes in films or that they could be so excruciatingly appealing. It had revealed him to himself, but now that he knew the outcome of the scene—the station master simply imprinted the girl's bottom with a rubber stamp—it no longer worked, and the aftermath in which she displayed her stamped behind to several interested bureaucrats didn't compensate. He ejected the disc and switched on the computer.

He was paying only for the Internet. He didn't pay for any site. Searching for references wasn't so different from browsing in a dictionary or a thesaurus for all the disciplinary words and phrases, a pastime he'd discovered after watching the scene with the stamp. On some sites people wrote about their experiences or fantasies, which helped him to feel less alone and abnormal, not least because many of the contributors seemed to suffer from these feelings too, although why should they fear exposure when gay couples like the one downstairs no longer did? Some sites reviewed films dedicated to his tastes, and some offered clips of the films. Since he only used the free sites, he couldn't be so obsessed or desperate. He was sure he'd recently seen a clip that was beginning to mean more to him.

It wasn't on www.baredbottoms.com or www.spickandpanked.de or www.thefirmfirm.co.uk. www.blushingbums.co.uk didn't have it, nor did www.cheekycheeks.com. Eventually he found it on www.severleyspanked.co.uk, where he often wondered whether the misspelling of the site name was designed to be provocative. In *Naughty Nancy's Punishment*, or rather in the excerpt meant to tempt viewers to buy the film, a gowned headmistress lectured a young woman in a gymslip

about her behaviour. A room containing a bookcase and a flimsy desk represented an office, and the lecture was just as rudimentarily amateur. "I won't have such behaviour at my school," the headmistress declared without ever specifying what it was. "I've never seen such behaviour in my life. I don't expect my head girl to behave like that. If you're going to act like a junior you'll have to be treated like one." Nancy shifted her feet and twisted her skirt with her fingers and worked on looking apprehensively penitent until she was sent to fetch a chair. She brought one from off-screen and spent at least a minute in arranging it as instructed in front of the desk before the headmistress was prepared to sit on it. "Over my knee, young lady," she said and repeated the order while the young woman—a phrase that had no power at all for Masters—mimed reluctance. She was complying at last when the excerpt came to an end.

He left the site and typed the title of the film in the Frugoget search box, so enthusiastically that he had to keep deleting mistakes. *Baughty Nancy, Naughty Ban, Naughty Nancy's Pubis*... That part didn't appeal to him; it wasn't why he watched the films, and whenever they showed it he felt uneasy, not least with the notion that even a grown-up schoolgirl was being made to bare it. *Naughty Nancy's Punishment*, and at last he had the words right, but they did him no good. The only free sample was the one he'd watched.

He wasn't going to pay when there was no need. He watched the clip again. "Over my knee, young lady..." Sometimes just a few magical words were enough. The headmistress repeated them, and then his mind did, by which time they were achieving the effect he'd had reason to regret in the assembly hall. He attempted to maintain its delicious equilibrium as long as it would let him. When at last he was unable to resist bringing it to a conclusion he was in the bathroom, and soon after that in bed.

He needn't feel guilty. He was sure that the people he'd watched had been enjoying themselves, both of them. If he wasn't normal, what did that make them? Of course they all were, just as much as Nancy Hamilton. Until today his favourite words and phrases had never affected him when he'd heard them innocently used. How careful would he have to be now that they did?

He slept so dreamlessly that he didn't hear the alarm clock. He floundered out of sleep and bed almost half an hour late. He would have brushed his teeth in the shower except for fear of electrocuting himself with the brush.

He hadn't time for breakfast or to respond to Beverley's effusive greeting as he ran downstairs. "Well, good morning to us, I'm sure," Jude complained.

"Nothing personal." They looked wilfully unconvinced, and as Masters struggled with the vintage latch of the front door he added "I mean, nothing against you. Either of you. Both of you either."

"Sounds like a threesome," Beverley said.

"Or a daisy chain," said Jude.

Masters succeeded in twisting the latch. "I'm just in a rush."

"Then don't let us take up another instant of your time," Jude said.

Masters dashed to his car and sped through the suburb whenever the traffic and the guards with signs on poles in the roads outside schools let him. At Justwell High he had to sound his horn behind groups of pupils on his way to the car park. He inched the Mini into the space between the hulking vehicles the gym masters drove, and then he hurried across the crowded schoolyard to Excellence Block.

As usual, Mr Duggan had a new theme for his welcome speech—welcome, Masters thought, only as in welcoming. "Every year we all set off on an adventure voyage. We're on the good ship Education..." The ship's officers had to stand up as he named them and face the pupils as well as a fusillade of pops of gum. He promised that the captain's door was always open, which suggested to Masters that the contents of the cabin needed to be nailed down. Soon Mr Duggan drifted off among his metaphors, asking all the members of the crew to keep everything shipshape and then declaring that they were ambassadors for the school as well as explorers for knowledge and divers for it too. At last it was time for the teachers to teach.

Masters had sixth-formers for the morning—Year Twelve, who were rewarded with the old-fashioned title for choosing to stay on. Pollard was still furious that Mr Duggan had prescribed the subject for the term—the relevance of language to modern life—but Masters hardly cared, since in any case he wasn't allowed to select it. He was impressed and wryly amused by the detailed analysis his pupils applied to a Frugo special offers leaflet. All the same, he was impatient for an opportunity to speak to Nancy Hamilton.

The day brought none, though they were both in Attainment Block. At the breaks she always seemed to be surrounded by her fellow music teachers.

On Wednesday he heard her voice not raised but edged with authority as she addressed a class in her room on a corner of the building. Was he secretly glad that circumstances were keeping them apart? Was he afraid to approach her because she was real? He had no excuse on Thursday morning, when he came face to face with her in his corridor.

She was there when he returned from the mid-morning break. "Just you wait in the corridor, young lady," he couldn't help hearing himself say. "Go and wait outside my room." She was talking to several Year Eleven girls about their tastes in music and apparently discovering that she liked some of the same performers: Afterbirth, Susie Cervix, a band called SSS... Was she trying to seem school-girlish? As Masters attempted to tamp down his thoughts, a girl said "Who do you like, Mr Master?"

"Now, Sarah, you know that's not my name," he said and risked admitting "Madonna and Armand van Helden."

"Don't know him."

Neither did her friends, although they giggled. Perhaps Nancy was unaware that both performers had made spanking videos—Madonna enthused about receiving the treatment. "Well," Nancy said, "time for everyone to—"

He couldn't let the chance to talk to her escape him. "How are you finding life in the corner?"

"Which is that?" she said but also winked.

"Your classroom. You're settling in all right."

"No complaints so far."

Did she mean from her or about her? It seemed an odd comment to make in front of their pupils, but perhaps she felt as awkward as he did. "Well," she said, "as I was saying, I think it's time everyone was in their classes."

In a moment she was striding down the corridor, her severely pinstriped bottom waving an adieu if it wasn't a promise. Masters realised he shouldn't have watched her for so long when Sarah said "Do you like her, Mr Master?"

Speaking too harshly might have betrayed his confusion, and so he sounded close to playful. "What's my name, Sarah?"

"It's Mr Masters, isn't it?" She might have been emulating his tone as she added "Mr Master."

"Just you be careful. If you keep on behaving like that you may end up finding out how much of one I am."

The girls squealed with shock or delight or amusement, not at all unlike Nancy's companions had outside the pub. He was about to step up his sternness when the girls grew blank-faced and retreated along the corridor. He turned to see Bob Pollard frowning at him. "Everything in hand, Mr Masters?" Pollard said.

"I've handled them. No further action necessary," Masters said and shut himself in his room.

He needn't act as if he had something to hide. He'd never spoken to a pupil like that before, and he wouldn't again. Real schoolgirls didn't figure in his fantasies—their shrill immaturity, their shallowness, their lived-in uniforms and fashionably drooping socks didn't appeal to him at all. He tried to lose himself in language, in analyses of last night's television adverts, even if he wasn't allowed to point out that the sixth-formers had misspelled many of the words they'd used or copied down. "Let them sort that out when we've got them to university," Mr Duggan always said.

While Masters didn't set out to favour the boys, that afternoon he was more at ease with them than with the girls. He was trying to be absolutely careful, and it felt like cowardice. Wasn't he guilty of that with Nancy Hamilton? He only had to catch her and say whatever needed saying. The trouble was that she wouldn't ordinarily pass his room—hers was closer to the corridor on the far side of the block—and whenever he tracked her down she was with pupils or colleagues. He had to find a reason to go to her room.

He almost missed the one she gave him late on Friday afternoon. As he helped a class analyse the language in the photographs of graffiti they'd brought in, he heard distant music from a small sweet orchestra with the high notes of an organ joining in the dance. The last school bell of the day contributed a contemporary dissonance like a warning that the music wasn't up to date. Masters outdistanced most of the sixth-formers to the door and hurried to Nancy's room.

Most of the audience had made their escape, but several gawky fourth years were lingering. He might have carried on around the corner if he

hadn't hesitated long enough that Nancy saw him. Her smile was an enquiry as well as a greeting, and he was almost at her desk before he realised he'd failed to prepare a remark. The best he could whip up was "What were you playing? What was your dancing organ?"

"Handel. My treat for the end of the week."

He was wondering whether it was her reward or the children's or both when she said "Lovely, wasn't it?"

"It's not the only—"

He didn't know how he might have gone on if a girl hadn't interrupted. "Can we bring our own music next week, miss?"

At least this established that Nancy was unmarried. He peered at her ring finger, which was bare as any schoolgirl's should be. "Don't you like mine?" she said.

The Year Ten screwed her face up. "A bit old."

"Don't you mean old-fashioned?" Masters said. "Sometimes that's best."

"We'll see next week, girls," Nancy said and turned back to him. "Was that all?"

He guessed she didn't want it to be, but the girls were loitering. "Shall I walk along with you?" he said.

"I've work to finish here first."

"Kept in after class, hey?" As her eyelid twitched he said "Maybe we should find a better time."

"For what, Mr Masters?"

He thought she barely pronounced the final consonant. "To get to know each other," he murmured.

She blinked past him at the girls. "We could go for a drink," he thought it best to add in case they heard.

"When?"

His reply almost fell over itself in its eagerness to be uttered. "Tonight?"

"Not tonight."

"How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." She appeared to be sampling the word before she said "Where?"

"Where I saw you playing your role."

This elicited a wink. "I'll see you there eightish," she said.

He was so happy to be heading for the future that he was halfway to Frugo before he thought they should have swapped phone numbers. Surely there would be no need. The rest of Friday felt like a celebration: stocking up for next week at the supermarket, his dinner of microwaved paella from the Frugood delicatessen counter, the first bottle of wine of the weekend—only the weekend, and not the whole bottle, which proved he was no alcoholic. It didn't seem to matter what he watched on television, because he enjoyed it all: the news, a quiz, a quiz about the news, a comedy, a comedy quiz. He didn't have recourse to the computer or even to dreams in bed.

He spent more of Saturday than usual on cleaning and tidying his rooms. He didn't know how the evening might develop after drinks and, he hoped, dinner. Just one unresolved element bothered him, and when he heard voices downstairs he hurried out of his apartment. "Can I have a word, chaps?"

"Which one?" Jude said.

"If there was any misunderstanding last time we met I'd like to clear it up."

"Clear away," Beverley said.

"I was almost late for work. I don't know what you do, but I expect you know what that can be like."

"Beverley's an accountant and I work in a bank."

"And we make a point of never being late."

"All I'm trying to say," Masters persisted, "is I didn't mean to snub you. I hope you know I'm not like that."

"We don't know what you're like," Beverley said.

"Not too much unlike you in a way. That's to say we're all, how shall I put it, people who like to think they're normal wouldn't think we are."

Both men gazed at him, and then Jude scragged the latch. "Time we went shopping," he said. "That's what people like us do."

"I do as well," Masters told them, but they were out of the house.

He finished cleaning the apartment and found more tidying to occupy the afternoon. Why weren't his disciplinary video discs in order? He made them alphabetical and was admiring the result when it occurred to him that there was a principle only his sort would appreciate. While it was a challenge, eventually the discs were lined up from the least severe—films like the one where Conrad Veidt kept threatening to spank Valerie Hobson—to the most, such as the film he always had to stop before the caned schoolgirl released the cord of the guillotine from between her teeth. He didn't enjoy torture, let alone anything worse.

He'd scarcely established the final order when it was time to call a taxi. "Being careful?" the driver said as Masters seated himself.

"Of what?"

"Not driving when you've had a drink."

"I wouldn't. I hope someone else doesn't either."

"And who's that going to be?"

"The young lady I—" Rather than say or even think too much he said "The one I'm meeting."

The pavement outside the Hummock of Sphagnum was crowded with smokers. Quite a few of Sunday's schoolgirls had been smoking, though not Nancy Hamilton. Almost no tables or booths in the pub were unoccupied, but she was nowhere to be seen. When a bargirl decided it was his turn at last he bought a glass of Canadian Chardonnay and found an empty booth, where he sat on the outer end of a padded bench and stood his glass on the far side of the table to keep a place for Nancy. At a quarter past eight he was no longer alone, until he convinced several middle-aged women that he wouldn't be the solitary occupant of the booth. As they tramped off in search of a table he glimpsed someone flourishing a cane—a billiard cue. At twenty past the jukebox struck up a song accompanied by rhythmic whacks on some form of percussion. Twenty-five past brought him still more people on a quest for seats, and he began to wonder whether Nancy had been in the pub at eight o'clock before deciding he'd let her down. Why couldn't they have exchanged mobile numbers? Somebody was being slapped nearby—no, people were clapping in time with the new selection from the jukebox. Now here came the latest searcher for a seat, and he had to insist yet again

that he was waiting for a friend, or was he deluding himself? He lifted his head and saw Nancy Hamilton.

She was wearing a black sweater and equally tight denim jeans. Her hair swayed around her face as if to conceal her expression. Her full lips looked ready as ever to pout, but she settled on a wry smile and a lingering wink. "I haven't kept you waiting long, have I?" she said.

He held up the glass he'd been unable to refill for fear of losing the booth. "As long as it's taken me to drink this."

"Oh dear. That was naughty of me, wasn't it?" As Masters responded, though not verbally and he very much hoped not visibly, she said "White, was it? I'll get you another."

"Should you put something on your seat? I've been looking after it for you."

"It does look a bit bare." She dropped her handbag on the bench, having taken out her purse. "Keep an eye on it," she said and made for the bar.

Masters turned, not without some covert difficulty, to watch her progress. In the snug blue material her bottom looked like an unmistakeable message, and he clearly wasn't the only customer in the pub to think so. What role was she playing—a teenager on a night out? As she returned with a glass of white wine in each hand, a young couple hurried after her. "Are those taken?" the man said.

"They are. These aren't. Slide along, Charlie."

She moved her handbag to the end of the bench against the wall and followed it, and Masters sat across from her. In a moment he was boxed in by the man and faced by one more woman than he welcomed, and it didn't help that Nancy appeared to be waiting for him to speak. "In the corner again," he said.

"We are."

Was she being provocative or seeing that the other couple didn't understand? Perhaps her wink meant both. "Bottoms up," he said. "Just one."

The second phrase was audible only inside his head, though it seemed loud as the clink of their glasses. "Here's to the end of the week," Nancy said.

"Back to school again soon."

"No need to talk about that here."

As he scrutinised her face he saw that she was withholding a wink, which was surely as good as a promise. He was taking rather more than a sip of wine when she said "So tell me all about your secret."

He hadn't quite swallowed, and now he did too fast. He coughed for a generous number of moments before his neighbour on the bench dealt his back several hearty thumps. None of this helped him think of a reply, but as soon as he'd washed away the last threat of a cough with another gulp of wine Nancy said "All right now? Let's be hearing, then."

"I'm not sure what you want," Masters said and let her see him glance towards their seatmates.

"Have you forgotten what you said?" As he struggled to decide or risk guessing which of his comments she could have in mind, she said "When we had to talk about ourselves. What sort of films do you collect?"

"All sorts. Any that take my fancy. Sometimes I think the end's in sight and then something else turns up." When this failed to earn a wink he said "I wouldn't be surprised if you'd like them."

"Tell me some."

He'd said too much, and achieved nothing with another sidelong glance. "Musicals?" he tried suggesting.

"I do like some. Which ones?"

"Kiss Me Kate and *Blue Hawaii,* they're the ones everyone knows. And *My Fair Lady"* he was inspired to add, though he didn't own it. "Eliza, bring me my slipper."

"I'm fond of that," Nancy said as her neighbour on the bench protested "That's not right."

"What's not?" her boyfriend said.

"It's 'Eliza, where the devil are my slippers?' That's what he says at the end of the film. Sorry, shouldn't be listening. We should be having our own conversation."

Masters drained his glass and stood up to buy drinks for Nancy and himself. Perhaps not offering to treat the other couple would let them know they weren't included in anything. When he came back with the drinks,

however, Nancy was telling them how she taught music. As soon as she gave him a chance he said "What's your favourite?"

"I think you'll have guessed."

"Your favourite music."

"Exactly." After a pause and with some disappointment she said "Handel."

"Handel with care," said the man beside Masters and looked ready to favour him with a further thump.

As Nancy's neighbour winced at the joke Masters said "What was the band I heard you say you liked, the one with three esses?"

"Skanks Smoking Skunk," said Nancy's seatmate.

"The girls brought it up," Nancy said. "I wouldn't have."

She seemed deliciously close to penitent, but how could he respond? At first he was grateful when the other man took over the conversation, enthusing about his car stereo and then the sports car he'd bought as a bargain. His girlfriend explained or apologised that he sold cars, and after several minutes more of him Masters started interjecting questions. Wouldn't the salesman rather have a spanking new car? Did he cane his car much? Were prices going to bottom out? Did he think they'd touched bottom? If prices dropped, would the salesman be able to keep his end up, or might he find himself up a creek without a paddle? This sounded forced even to Masters, who became aware that he'd drunk most of a bottle of wine despite not having eaten since breakfast. Even if the salesman didn't understand his choice of words, he and his girlfriend had begun to look uncomfortable, possibly suspicious. All the same, Masters was ready to ask what position he assumed on the environment when Nancy said "Do you think we'd better move on?"

Masters finished his drink and rose to his feet so eagerly that everyone else in the booth seemed to be taken unawares. He had to glance around to see that Nancy was following him across the pub. She caught up with him beyond the smokers' rally. In the glare of the lamps, which looked close to propping up the suffused reddish sky, her face resembled a quizzical mask. "So where did you want to go now?" he said.

"I wasn't meaning we should leave. I meant it might be good to change the subject."

"We'll have to be careful of our words, won't we?" He tailed that with a laugh and said "What kind of dinner would you like?"

"I had something before I came out. Didn't you?"

"I didn't have time."

"You need to eat, Charlie. I could make you something if you like."

"That would be perfect."

"Don't imagine too much," Nancy said, which might have sounded like a warning if she hadn't winked as well. "Let me call a taxi.

He felt proud and excited while he waited with her. He held the door open for her and sat beside her, careful not to touch. The taxi headed towards the school, away from where he lived, and turned along a side street lined with pairs of houses big enough for a main road. "You must be doing well for yourself," he said.

"It's my parents' house. They're away for the weekend."

"Lucky there's someone to take you in hand, then," Masters said, showing her his palm to fend off the money she held out. "It's my treat."

The house greeted her with a security light as she stepped into the large gravelled garden. The garden was bordered by shrubs, and weren't some of them cotoneaster? "Caning at Easter," Masters murmured as he thought of telling Nancy that the shrub derived its name from the Slovak tradition in which girls were still birched by their suitors. She had already let herself in and was switching off an alarm as he followed her into the wide bright hall, which smelled of lilacs and more faintly of pipe tobacco. The light of a cut-glass chandelier glinted on the glass of a series of photographs that climbed beside the broad staircase—pictures of a baby and progressively a child who grew up to be Nancy by the time the portraits reached the landing. Masters might have imagined they were leading him upstairs, but Nancy led him to the kitchen, an extensive room dominated by pine and metal. "I'm good at sandwiches," she said. "What do you fancy?"

"You don't have to be too good. Whatever you think will be fine."

She opened the refrigerator and bent over, stretching the seat of her jeans even tighter and rounder. Masters flattened his right hand on the chilly table to keep it under control and sat on a hard straight chair. As she took salami and salad out of the refrigerator he said "So did you hire that costume?"

"This one?" Nancy said, bumping the metal door shut with her bottom. "Why would I need to do that?"

"The one I saw you in that night."

"Gosh, no," she said and set about chopping the salad. "That's my old uniform."

"All of it?" When she looked puzzled he tried saying "It's all authentic."

"Everything you saw." As he wondered whether he could risk pursuing this she said "I don't feel comfortable otherwise."

"Well then, you—"

"In a costume unless it's accurate, I mean. I must have a word with Bob Pollard."

Though this was as unwelcome as it seemed irrelevant, Masters tried to use it. "Why, do you want to be back at school?"

"Just to talk to him about the theatre group. I'm in one already. That's where I wear costumes."

"You ought to dress up like you did more often."

She looked up, but not at Masters. She might have been addressing her reflection in the window backed by a large dim garden as she said "How's your appetite?"

He couldn't tell whether the question was designed to be ambiguous. "To be honest, I'm not very hungry," he said and took a breath so deep it seemed to taste of the faint lingering domestic smells. "I think—"

"I'll just give you one of my specials, then, and you can always have more."

She was turning to the refrigerator again, perhaps to resume her mockingly provocative stance, when Masters said "I think you should go and get dressed."

"I am dressed. What's wrong with how I am?"

She clearly was an actress. He might have believed in her confusion if it hadn't been for her wink. "You know perfectly well what I mean, young lady," he said. "Go and put on your uniform."

"Why?"

He could never have anticipated there would be so much delicious tension in the game. She must be experiencing it too, which tightened the knot of expectancy in his stomach and reached lower. "So you'll be appropriately dressed," he said.

"Appropriate to what?"

"To what's in store for you, my girl. Skanks Smoking Skunk, indeed. If you act like a naughty schoolgirl you must expect to be treated like one."

"Forgive me." Without letting him have time to take this as a plea she said "I'm not at school any more, and even if I was—"

"That's were, young lady. Perhaps you'd better have a grammar lesson too. Now just you go and get changed unless you want to go across my knee like that. You won't be keeping those on long in any case."

As he stood up or more accurately crouched to move the chair away from the table she stepped back, dropping the knife with a clatter on the breadboard. She was playing the scene for all she was worth. He shouldn't be moving his chair—he should tell her to put one in the middle of the floor, where there was space for her to wriggle and kick as girls did. The tension dissipated as he sat down, but he had plenty to say to revive it. He was opening his mouth when Nancy said "What do you think you're doing?"

"Waiting for you to do as you're told, young lady. And when you come back—"

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm afraid you are."

Was she betraying her inexperience? The line didn't fit the scenario. "And where might that be, young lady?" he prompted.

"Home, I should think. Not here, anyway. I don't know how you've got the wrong idea about me, but I've never done that kind of thing."

"Maybe not done it, but you know all about it, don't you? Or maybe you want to."

"Whatever makes you think that?"

"You have. You've kept giving me the wink. There, you're doing it now."

"That's nerves."

The knot in his guts had grown more apprehensive than expectant and was bidding to become the hardest part of him. "What is?" he demanded.

"My eye. It's a tic. I try not to do it. I don't try so hard when I'm with people I think I can trust."

Masters staggered to his feet, shoving the chair back. He saw her growing tense again, but it gave him nothing like pleasure. The middle of his body felt like a hole in his sense of himself. "All right," he said, which seemed to fall short of conveying any reassurance. "I won't come anywhere near you. I'm sorry I—Don't worry, I'm gone."

The security light showed him up as he stumbled out of the house and dragged the door shut. Gravel gnashed beneath his feet all the way to the gate. He was groping for his mobile when he realised that he mustn't loiter near the house in case Nancy or her neighbours saw him. As he wandered homewards he phoned for a taxi, but it was ten minutes before he saw one. He waved at it with the little authority he still had, expecting the driver to ignore him. When it halted he recognised the woman who had driven him to the pub. "Walking it off?" she said.

"What do you think I'd have to walk off?"

This silenced her while she turned the car away from Nancy's house, and then she said "Looks as if you've been getting around."

"I've been getting nothing."

"What happened to your young lady?"

"Nothing happened to her. Nothing at all. Can we just get home?"

Although he'd shut the driver up at last, he felt as if there were no words he could use that mightn't set a trap for him. She scarcely thanked him for the change he let her keep when he arrived home. He blundered upstairs, faster for hearing a key in the front door. Jude and Beverley had come home too, and he couldn't face talking to them. As their chatter spilled into the downstairs hall he closed his door with rather too much of a slam.

He splashed his face with handfuls of cold water—he no longer had a reason to apply it elsewhere—and gulped several glassfuls before sprawling into bed. Whenever he managed to doze, memory jerked him awake. What had he done? What did he deserve for behaving like that? The thought led nowhere he wanted to find himself just now. He couldn’t risk a

confrontation at the school; he had to talk to Nancy before then. Surely he could phone even if it wouldn't be wise to go to her house.

In the morning the Internet gave him the land line number. He was so appalled by the temptation to spend time on the spanking sites while he waited until it wasn't too early to phone that he almost shoved the computer off the desk in his haste to shut it down. He stared at his breakfast without managing to summon up an appetite and eventually went out to buy a plump Sunday newspaper. Once he'd tiptoed upstairs so as not to disturb Jude and Beverley he rang Nancy's house. A man answered at once.

Masters jabbed the key to end the call and clenched his fist around the mobile. Had it been her father or a boyfriend? They couldn't identify the mobile, but suppose they rang back? It was slippery with sweat by the time his hand relaxed. They must have decided the call was a wrong number, and perhaps he could still phone Nancy. Her mobile number must be on record at the school.

He crept downstairs and hurried to his car. Across the road a solitary youth had been elected as an emblem of rude health—was kicking a football around the schoolyard, at any rate. There were no games at Justwell, where the yard was deserted. Masters had to yank the bolts of the gates out of the pavement before he could drive into the yard. Even once he'd parked in the shadow of Attainment Block he still felt too exposed by the bare sky. Did he look like an intruder sneaking into the school to get up to mischief? He wasn't one, because the door was locked.

Surely a caretaker ought to be on the site, and Masters could say he needed something from his room. He rapped on the door of Attainment and then knocked without rousing a response. The other blocks didn't own up to being occupied either. He went back to Attainment and trudged around the outside. None of the windows was open, and those that looked as if they might admit him didn't yield, neither Nancy's nor the school secretary's. When the tour brought him back to his car he drove out of the yard and shut the gates, ramming the bolts into their sockets. The clank and its equally commanding twin put him in mind of a prison cell.

Could he stay off sick tomorrow? It would only delay any confrontation. He spent hours attempting to distract himself with the Sunday paper, but the words might as well have been in an unknown tongue. Television didn't engage his mind either—the screen could have been as blank as the

computer monitor. When he went to the shelves full of films, he had to step back from a compulsion to grab them by the handful and fling them into the bin. He took refuge in bed, where shame and guilt and apprehension were waiting for him.

He was up early in the morning—no point lying in bed when he couldn't sleep for thoughts. He hoped he would at least lose weight by going without today's breakfast too. It let him drive early to school, to have more of a choice of a seat in the hall, wherever Nancy wasn't sitting near. She was already at the left end of the front row. He sat at the opposite end of the next one and willed her not to look back.

She didn't, even or especially when Mr Duggan used words or phrases that might have made her wink: bear in mind, rear, behind... Each of them made Masters feel as if the headmaster was observing his hot and hotter face. He was fleeing to Attainment before Nancy stood up, almost before any of the pupils did. He closeted himself with the sixth form and heard at least some of their analyses of the blurbs on their favourite albums. Skanks Smoking Skunk were mentioned more than once. What else wouldn't let him stop thinking of Nancy? He ought to go to her room and ensure they were alone when he spoke to her. But at morning break she was waiting in the corridor.

Masters felt as if the exodus of teenagers was blocking his escape, unless the sight of Nancy was. He wasn't as ready for her as he'd tried to think. She hesitated until the last of his class emerged, and then she stepped or strode or stalked into the room. "Have you got time for a word?"

"Shut the door. Come over here."

His speech seemed eager to play tricks on him. He was only doing his best to ensure they weren't overheard. He moved towards the window and stared through it at a weed sprouting from the concrete roof of Achievement like a feather in a cap. As Nancy joined him she murmured "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said what I said."

He didn't dare face her in case he was misinterpreting her. "You said quite a lot, so which—"

"I didn't mean to say I couldn't trust you. It isn't as though you actually did anything."

"I wouldn't have if you didn't want it."

"I've nothing against it for people who like it. It just isn't me. I've never been treated that way."

"Then maybe you can't know if—" He was going too far again, at least given where they were. "I wouldn't have started if I hadn't seen you dressed like that," he said.

"You ought to be careful. You might come up against someone who isn't like me. You don't want to get the wrong sort of reputation."

"Schoolgirls, you mean? They don't do anything like that for me, any of the ones here. My kind of schoolgirl—" He turned to look at her at last, which might have made further words redundant, but that wasn't why he broke off. Standing in the doorway with a fist around the doorknob was Bob Pollard.

Among the feelings that overwhelmed Masters were rage and a sense of betrayal. "I told you to shut the door."

"I thought I did," Nancy said, and no more as she noticed Pollard.

Masters stared hot-eyed at him. "How long have you been there?"

"More than long enough."

"Do you usually sneak into people's rooms? Don't you ever knock?"

"I believe Miss Hamilton wanted to speak to me."

"Oh yes, and what was that about?"

"Drama," Pollard said.

Nancy seemed to confirm or qualify this with a wink, but at last Masters was fully aware that the trait meant nothing at all. "Leave that," he said as Pollard made to close the door. "I'm on my way out.

Pollard gave this an old-fashioned look. Several girls were strolling, if even that, past the classroom. "Never mind listening," Masters blustered. "Just you make yourselves scarce before—" Rather than risk continuing, he marched away along the corridor.

He dodged into the male staff toilet and bolted the cubicle door. Whenever anyone tried it he muttered less than a word—less, he hoped, than would identify him. When the bell ended the break he strode to his classroom like a teacher in a film. Some of Year Eleven had watched *Pride and Prejudice* at home, but they only wanted to talk about the actors, so that he felt as if language had ceased to matter. He did his best by the book for an hour, but

it seemed as remote as they blatantly found it. He might have welcomed lunchtime—he was planning to spend it away from the school—if a sixth-former hadn't stopped him outside the room. "Mr Duggan wants you in his office."

Did the boy know why? How many other people knew? By the time Masters reached Achievement, he'd more than renewed his fury. As he shut Mr Duggan's door behind him he struggled to control his words. "I don't know what Bob thinks he heard, but it was a private conversation."

Mr Duggan raised his head while keeping his gaze on Masters. "What should he have heard?"

"As I say, it was private. Nothing to do with the school. Nancy needed to discuss something with me, that's all."

"And didn't know Mr Pollard was there, is that so? I haven't spoken to him." With just enough of a pause to load it with meaning Mr Duggan added "Yet."

"So why did you want to see me?"

"I'd like you to explain your behaviour recently around the school."

"What behaviour? Are you sure you haven't been listening to Pollard?" Masters was contending with rage again. "Nobody needs to look out around me, not the girls or anyone else," he said. "Especially not them."

Perhaps the addition was unnecessary or worse, and he was trying to think how to counteract it when the headmaster said "Your behaviour yesterday."

"Which was..."

"You were seen attempting to break into the school."

"Who says I was?"

"I do, Charles." Mr Duggan looked saddened by the question and the answer. "A lady who lives across the road showed me your picture on her mobile," he said. "She didn't know you taught here."

"She must have seen I didn't break in. I'd left something in my room, that's all."

"What would that have been?" Having waited some seconds, Mr Duggan said "Could it have been something you wanted to hide?"

"Such as what? Come on, come and look. Search all you want. I won't touch a thing."

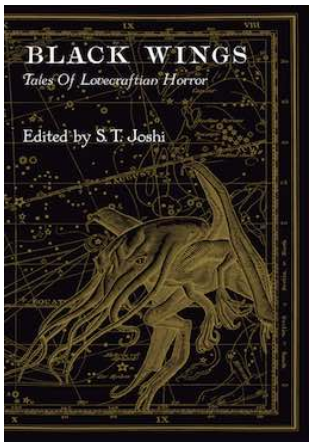
"Don't say anything you might regret, Charles." Mr Duggan remained seated with an emphatic creak of his fat chair. "I think you've said enough just now," he advised. "We'll need to have another session after I've consulted."

"If it's with Pollard I don't give me much of a chance," Masters said, and then there were no more words.

Perhaps the parting shot helped lose him his job. Being raided must have, whoever told the police about him, even when his computer was returned at last without his being prosecuted. By then the local newspaper had named him and identified him as a teacher and mentioned that he lived opposite another school. Before he left Justwell High, hardly anyone was speaking to him. Nor did Jude and Beverley, even on his last day in the house. "At least you found someone like each other," he said at the end of his final trudge downstairs, but their door stayed shut. As he and the removal van set out to trek three hundred miles he bore his last sight of Nancy with him—little more than a glimpse along a corridor crowded with girls. He would always wonder what she'd mouthed at him. All he knew was that it had come with a wink.

2010

The Correspondence Of Cameron Thaddeus Nash



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In 1968 August Derleth was sent a number of letters that had apparently been received by H. P. Lovecraft. The anonymous parcel bore no return address. Although the letters had been typed on a vintage machine and on paper that appeared to be decades old, Derleth was undecided whether they were authentic. For instance, he was unsure that someone living in a small English village in the 1920s would have had access to issues of *Weird Tales,* and he could find no obvious references to Nash in any of Lovecraft's surviving correspondence. Derleth considered printing some or all of Nash's letters in the *Arkham Collector* but decided against using them in the Winter 1969 issue devoted to Lovecraft. Later he asked me to think about writing an essay on Lovecraft for a new Lovecraftian volume that might offer the letters a home, but the project was shelved. Intrigued by his references to the Nash letters, I persuaded him to send me copies, including the other documents. It isn't clear what happened to the originals. When I visited Arkham House in 1975, James Turner knew nothing about them, and he was subsequently unable to trace them. He did mention that in *Howard Phillips Lovecraft: Dreamer on the Nightside,* Frank Belknap Long referred to an English writer who "thought it was amusing to call people names," by whom Lovecraft had supposedly been troubled for several years. Since Long was unable to be more specific, Turner deleted the reference. I reproduce all the letters here, followed by the final documents. Nash's signature is florid and extends across the page. It grows larger but less legible as the correspondence progresses.

7, Grey Mare Lane,
Long Bredy,
West Dorset,
Great Britain.

April 29th, 1925.

My dear Mr. Lovecraft,

Forgive a simple English villager for troubling such a celebrated figure as yourself. I trust that the proprietors of your chosen publication will not think it too *weird* that a mere reader should seek to communicate with his idol. As I pen these words I wonder if they might not more properly have been addressed to the eerie letter-column of that magazine. My fear is that the editor would find them unworthy of ink, however, and so I take the greater risk of directing them to you. I pray that he will not find me so presumptuous that he forwards them no farther than the bin beside his desk.

May I come swiftly to my poor excuse for this intrusion into your inestimably precious time? I have sampled six issues of the "unique magazine", and I am sure you must be aware that it has but a single claim to uniqueness—the contributions of your good self. I scarcely know whether to marvel or to be moved that you should allow them to appear amongst the motley fancies which infest the pages of the journal. Do you intend to educate the other contributors by your example? Are you not concerned that the ignorant reader may be repelled by this commonplace herd, thereby failing to discover the visions which you offer? The company in which you find yourself reads like the scribbling of hacks who have never dared to dream. I wish that the magazine would at least emblazon your name on the cover of every number which contains your prose. I promise you that on the occasion when I mistakenly bought an issue which had neglected to feature your work, I rent it into shreds so small that not a single vapid sentence could survive.

I am conscious how far any words of mine will fall short of conveying my admiration of your work. May I simply isolate those elements which remain liveliest in my mind? Your parable of Dagon seems to tell a truth at which the compilers of the Bible scarcely dared to hint, but I am most intrigued by the dreams which the narrator is afraid to remember in daylight. The quarry of your hideous hound declares that his fate is no dream, yet to this English reader it suggests one, brought on by the banal Baskerville investigations of

Sherlock Holmes. Your narrator de la Poer dreams whilst awake, but are these reveries shaped by awful reality or the reverse? As for the descendant of the African union, perhaps he never dreams of his own nature because he has a *germ in* him—the same germ which infects the minds of all those who believe we are as soulless as the ape. But it is your *hypnotic* tale of Hypnos which exerts the firmest hold on my imagination. May I press you to reveal its source? Does it perhaps hint at your own experience?[1]

As to myself, I am sure you will not want to be fatigued by information about me. I am but a player at the human game. However long I sojourn in this village, none of its natives will tempt me to grow *breedy*. While my body works behind a counter, my spirit is abroad in the infinity of imagination. At least the nearby countryside offers solitude, and it harbours relics of the past, which are keys to dreams. Please accept my undying gratitude, Mr. Lovecraft, for helping to enliven mine. If you should find a few moments to acknowledge this halting missive, you will confer existence on a dream of your most loyal admirer.

I have the honour to remain, Mr. Lovecraft,

Your respectful and obedient servant,

Cameron Thaddeus Nash.

7, Grey Mare Lane,
Long Bredy,
West Dorset,
Great Britain.

August 12th, 1925.

My esteemed Mr. Lovecraft,

I am sorry that you find New York inhospitable and that you have been inconvenienced by burglary. May I counsel you to reflect that such disadvantages are negligible so long as one's fancies remain unfettered? Your corporeal experiences count for naught unless they prevent you from dreaming and from communicating your dreams. Let me assure you that they have reached across the ocean to inspire a fellow voyager.

I was sure that your stories which I have read gave voice to your dreams, and I rejoice to understand that other tales of yours do so. But why must

these pieces languish in amateur publications? While the mob would doubtless greet them with brutish incomprehension, surely you should disseminate your visions as widely as possible, to give other dreamers the opportunity to chance upon them. I hope some of our kind made themselves a Yuletide present of your tale about the festival in the town which you had never visited except in dreams. I fear that any reader with a brain must have been seasonably inebriated to enjoy the other contents of that number of the magazine. How can it still neglect to advertise your presence on the cover? I remain appalled that the issue which contained your tale of Hypnos chose to publicise Houdini's contribution instead. How misguided was the editor to provide a home for those ridiculous Egyptian ramblings? Houdini even dares to claim that the tale is the report of a dream, but we genuine dreamers see through his charlatanry. I believe he has never dreamed in his life, having been too bent on performing tricks with his mere flesh.[2]

May I presume to pose a question? I wonder if Hypnos represents only as terrible an aspect of dream as you believe the reader could bear to confront, unless this evasion is born of your own wariness. For myself, I am convinced that at the farthest reach of dream we may encounter the source, whose nature no deity ever imagined by man could begin to encompass. Perhaps some Greek sage glimpsed this truth and invented Hypnos as a mask to spare the minds of the multitude. But, Mr. Lovecraft, our minds stand above the mass, and it is our duty to ourselves never to be daunted from dreaming.

I wish you could have shared my midsummer night's experience, when I spent a midnight hour with the Grey Mare and her colts. They are fragments of an ancient settlement, and I seemed to dream that I found the buried entrance to a grave. It led into a labyrinth illuminated only by my consciousness. As I ventured deeper I became aware that I was descending into an unrecorded past. I understood that the labyrinth was the very brain of an ancient mage, the substance of which had fertilised the earth, where his memories emerged in the form of aberrant subterranean growths. One day I may fashion this vision into a tale.

I have done so, and I take the great liberty of enclosing it. Should you ever be able to spare the time to glance over it, I would find any comments that you cared to offer beyond price. Perhaps you might suggest a title more fitting than *The Brain Beneath the Earth?*

I bid you adieu from a land which you have dreamed of visiting.

Yours in inexpressible admiration,

Cameron Thaddeus Nash.

18, Old Sarum Road,
Salisbury,
Wiltshire,
Great Britain.

October 30th, 1925.

Dear H. P. Lovecraft,

Thank you for your kind praise of my little tale, and thank you for taking the trouble to think of a title. Now it sounds more like a story of your own. Please also be assured of my gratitude for the time you spent in offering suggestions for changes to the piece. I am sure you will understand if I prefer it to remain as I dreamed it. I am happy that in any case you feel it might be worthy of submission to the "unique magazine", and I hereby authorise you to do so. I am certain that *Beneath the Stones* can only benefit from your patronage.

I must apologise for my mistake over the "Houdini" tale. Had it appeared as *Under the Pyramids* by none other than the great Howard Phillips Lovecraft, I promise you that it would have excited a different response from this reader. I should have guessed its authorship, since it proves to be the narration of a dream. May I assume that Houdini supplied some of the material? I believe this robs the tale of the authenticity of your other work. Only genuine dreamers can collaborate on a dream.

I was amused to learn that you had to devote your wedding night to typing the story afresh. Perhaps your loss of the original transcription was a lucky chance which you should continue to embrace. I trust you will permit a fellow dreamer to observe that your courtship and marriage appear to have distracted you from your true purpose in the world. I fervently hope that you have not grown unable to dream freely now that you are no longer alone. May your wife be preventing you from visiting sites which are fertile with dreams, or from employing relics to bring dreams to your bed? You will have noticed that I have moved onwards from my previous abode,

having exhausted the site of which I wrote to you. I believe my new situation will provide me with a portal to dreams no living man has begun to experience.

In the meantime I have read your brace of tales which recently saw publication. The musician Zann and his street are dreams, are they not? Only in dreams may streets remain unmapped. Is the abyss which the music summons not a glimpse or a hint of the source of the ultimate dream? And Carter's graveyard reverie conjures up the stuff of dream.[3] It rightly stays unnameable, for the essence of dreams neither can nor should be named. You mentioned that these tales were composed before your courtship. May I take the liberty of suggesting that they remind you what you are in peril of abandoning? The dreamer ought to be a solitary man, free to follow all the promptings of his mind.

At least while you are unable to write, you are still communicating visions —my own. Now that you have become my American representative I shall be pleased if you will call me Thad. It is the name I would ask a friend to use, and it sounds quite American, does it not? Let me take this opportunity to send you three more tales for your promotion. I am satisfied with them and with their titles. May I ask you not to show them to any of your circle or to mention me? I prefer not to be heard of until I am published. I hope that the magazine will deign to exhibit both of our names on the cover. Let the spiritless scribblers be confined within, if they must continue to infest its sheets.

Yours in anticipation of print,

Thad Nash.

18, Old Sarum Road,
Salisbury,
Wiltshire,
Great Britain.

February 14th, 1926.

Dear Howard Phillips Lovecraft,

I am grateful to you for your attempt to place my work. You had previously mentioned that Farthingsworth Wrong[4] tends to be unreceptive to the truly

unique. I am certain that you must have done everything in your power to persuade him to your opinion of my tales. Are there other markets where you will do your best to sell them, or is it more advisable to wait for his tastes to mature? You will appreciate that I am relying on your experience in these matters.

I do not recall your mentioning that you had written new fiction last summer. I am relieved to learn that your marital subjugation has not permanently crippled your ability to dream. May I assume that these stories did not hinder your marketing of my work? I believe that our writing has little in common other than the title you provided, but I wonder if the editor's judgement may have been adversely affected by your sending him too many pieces all at once. Perhaps in future it would be wise to submit my work separately from your own, and with a reasonable interval between them.

I am heartened by the information that you plan to write a history of supernatural literature. I am sure that your appreciation of the form will produce a guide which should be on the shelves of every dreamer. I look forward eagerly to reading it. If I can advise or in any way aid you, please do not hesitate to ask.

You will be anxious to hear about the progress of my own work. Please reassure yourself that your failure to place my stories has not cast me down. Rather has it goaded me to venture deeper into dream, whence I shall return bearing prizes no less wonderful than dreadful. I shall tell ancient truths which no reader will be able to deny and no editor dare to suppress. I am certain that the nearby sites contain unsuspected relics, although soon I may have no more need of them. However it is used, a relic is but the germ of a dream, just as your dreams are the germs of your fiction. I wonder to what extent your dreams have become fixed on your native Providence? Perhaps your desire to return there is draining your imagination of the energy to rise higher and voyage farther. I hope you will ultimately find as congenial an environment as I have myself.

I await news of your efforts.

Yours for the supremacy of dream,

Cameron Thad Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

May 23rd, 1926.

Dear HPL,

I write to alert you that, like yours, my body has found a new lodging. It became necessary for me to decamp to an unfamiliar town. I had been surprised one night in the process of obtaining a relic. The donor of the item could have made no further use of it, but I fear that the mob and its *uninformed, uniformed* representatives of *unformed uniformity* have little understanding of the dreamer's needs. The resultant pursuit was unwelcome, and a source of distraction to me. For several nights I was annoyed by dreams of this mere chase, and they led to my seeking a home elsewhere.

Well, I am done with graves and brains and the infusion of them. I am safe inside my skull, where the mob cannot spy, nor even dreamers like yourself. I have learned to rise above the use of material aids to dream. I require but a single talisman—the night and the infinite darkness of which it is the brink. Let the puny scientists strive to design machines to fly to other worlds! This dreamer has preceded them, employing no device save his own mind. The darkness swarms with dreams, which have been formed by the consciousnesses of creatures alien beyond the wildest fancies of man. Each dream which I add to my essence leads me deeper into uncharted space. A lesser spirit would shrivel with dread of the ultimate destination. In my tales I can only hint at the stages of my quest, for fear that even such a reader as yourself may quail before the face of revelation.

I see you are content to have reverted to your native Providence. I hope that your contentment will provide a base from which you may venture into the infinite. I have read your recent contributions to Farthingsworth's rag. Will you forgive my opining that your story of the dreamer by the ancestral tomb seems a trifle earthbound? I had higher expectations of the other tale, but was disappointed when the narrator's dreams urged him to climb the tower not to vistas of infinity but to a view of the dull earth. No wonder he found nothing worthy of description in the mirror.[5] I wonder if, while immolated in your marriage, you became so desperate to dream that you were unable to direct the process. I counsel you to follow my example. The

dreamer must tolerate no distractions, neither family nor those that call themselves friends. None of these is worth the loss of a solitary dream.

At your urging I recently viewed the moving picture of *The Phantom of the Opera*. You mentioned that you fell asleep several times during the picture, and I have to inform you that you must have been describing your own dream of the conclusion rather than the finale which appears on the screen. I assure you that no "nameless legion of things" welcomes the Phantom to his watery grave. I am glad that they at least remained nameless in your mind. No dream ought to be named, for words are less than dreams.

I look forward to reading your short novel about the island raised by the marine earthquake, although would an unknown island bear such a name as "L'yeh" or indeed any name?[6] And I am anxious to read your survey of supernatural literature when it, too, is completed. In the meantime, here are three new tales of mine for your perusal and advancement. Please do make all speed to advise me as soon as there is news.

Yours in the fellowship of dreams and letters,

CTN.

P.S. Could you make sure to address all correspondence to me under these initials?

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

April 17th, 1927.

Dear HPL,

I trust that you have not been alarmed by my prolonged silence. I thought it wise not to attract the attention of the mob for a judicious period. I also felt obliged to give you the opportunity to place some of your fiction and to compose new tales before I favoured you with the first sight of my latest work. I think now you have been amply represented in Farthingsworth's magazine, and I am encouraged to learn that you have recently been productive. I believe it is time that you should have reports of my nocturnal

voyaging, and I shall include all those which I judge to be acceptable to my audience. Some, I fear, might overwhelm the mind of any other dreamer.

I hope those which I send you will go some way towards reviving your own capacity to dream. May I assume that the anecdote about the old sea captain and his bottles was a sketch for a longer story and saw publication by mistake? I suppose it was trivial enough for Farthingsworth's mind to encompass. I note that the narrator of your tale about the Irish bog is uncertain whether he is dreaming or awake, but his dream scarcely seems worth recording. Your tale of the nameless New Yorker is no dream at all, since the narrator's night is sleepless, and the only fancy you allow him is your own, which you have already achieved—to return to New England. As for the detective in Red Hook, he needs specialists to convince him that he dreamed those subterranean horrors, but I am afraid the medical view failed to persuade this reader.[7]

I am glad to hear that you wrote your story of the upraised island. May I trust that it has greater scope than the tales I have discussed above? Perhaps this may also be the case with your most recent piece, though I confess that the notion of a mere colour falls short of rousing my imagination. No colour can be sufficiently alien to paint the far reaches of dream, which lie beyond and simultaneously at the core of the awful gulf which is creation. Of the two novels you have recently completed, does the celebration of your return to Providence risk being too provincial? I hope that the account of your dream-quest is the opposite, and I am touched that you should have hidden my name within the text for the informed reader to discover. But I am most pleased by the news that you have delivered your essay on supernatural literature to the publisher. Could you tell me which living writers you have discussed?[8]

Let me leave you to do justice to the enclosed pieces. Perhaps in due time I may risk sending those I have withheld, when you have sufficiently progressed as a dreamer. Have you yet to loose your mind in the outer darkness? Every dream which I encounter there is a step towards another, more ancient or more alien. I have shared the dreams of creatures whose bodies the mob would never recognise as flesh. Some have many bodies, and some have none at all. Some are shaped in ways at which their dreams can only hint, and which make me grateful for my blindness in the utter

dark. I believe these dreams are stages in my advance towards the ultimate dream, which I sense awaiting me at the limit of unimaginable space.

Yours in the embrace of the dark,

CTN.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

June 23rd, 1927.

Dear HPL,

Of course you are correct in saying that my new pieces have progressed. I hope that you will be able to communicate your enthusiasm to Farthingsworth and to any other editors whom you approach on my behalf.

Thank you for the list of living writers whose work you have praised in your essay. May I take it that you have withheld one name from me? Perhaps you intended me to be surprised upon reading it in the essay, unless you wished to spare my modesty. Let me reassure you that its presence would be no surprise and would cause me no embarrassment. If by any chance you decided that my work should not be discussed in the essay because of its basis in actual experience, pray do remind yourself that the material is cast in fictional form. In the case of such an omission, I trust that the error will be rectified before the essay sees publication.

Yours in urgency,

CTN.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

August 25th, 1927.

Dear HPL,

I was glad to receive your apology for neglecting to include me in your essay. On reflection, I have concluded that your failure to do so was advantageous. As you say, my work is of a different order. It would not benefit from being discussed alongside the fanciful yarns of the likes of Machen and Blackwood. It is truth masquerading as fiction, and I believe you will agree that it deserves at least an essay to itself. I hope its qualities will aid you in placing your appreciation in a more prestigious journal, and one which is more widely read. To these ends I sent you yesterday the work which I had previously kept back. I trust that your mind will prove equal to the truths conveyed therein. While you assimilate their implications, I shall consider how far they are suitable for revelation to the world.

Yours in the darkest verities,

CTN.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

November 1st, 1927.

Dear HPL,

I am assured by the postmistress that the parcel of my work has had ample time to reach you. I hope that the contents have not rendered you so speechless that you are unable to pen a response. Pray do not attempt to comment on the pieces until you feel capable of encompassing their essence. However, I should be grateful if you would confirm that they have safely arrived.

Yours,

CTN.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

January 1st, 1928.

Lovecraft,

Am I meant to fancy that the parcel of my work faded into nothingness like a dream? You forget that my dreams do not fade. They are more than common reveries, for they have grasped the stuff of creation. The accounts which I set down may be lost to me, but their truths are buried in my brain. I shall follow wherever they may lead, even unto the unspeakable truth which is the core of all existence.

I was amused by your lengthy description of your Halloween dream of ancient Romans. I fear that, like so many of your narrators, you are shackled to the past, and unable to release your spirit into the universe. I read your *amazing* story of the alien colour, but I failed to be *amazed* except by its unlikeness.[9] How can there be a colour besides those I have seen? The idea is nothing but a feeble dream, and your use of my name in the tale is no compliment to me. When I read the sentence "The Dutchman's breeches became a thing of sinister menace," I wonder if the story is a joke which you sought to play on your ignorant audience.

Nevertheless, it has some worth, for it convinces me that you are by no means the ideal agent for my work. I ignored your presumption in suggesting changes to my reports as if they were mere fiction, but I am troubled by the possibility that you may regard your work as in any way superior to mine. Is it conceivable that you altered the pieces which you submitted on my behalf? I suspect you of hindering them for fear that your fiction might be unfavourably compared to them, and in order that it might reach the editors ahead of them. I am sure that you excluded my work from your essay out of jealousy. I wonder if you may have resented my achievement ever since I gave you my honest appraisal of your Houdini hotchpotch. For these reasons and others which need not concern you, I hereby withdraw my work from your representation. Please return all of it immediately on receipt of this letter.

Sincerely,

Cameron Thaddeus Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

March 3rd, 1928.

Loathecraft,

Where is my work? I have still not had it back.

C. T. Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

May 1st, 1928.

Lovecramped,

So a second parcel has vanished into the void! How capricious the colonial post must be, or so you would have me believe. I am not to think that you are fearful of my seeing any alterations that you made to my work. Nor should I suspect you of destroying evidence that you have stolen elements of my work in a vain attempt to improve your own. You say that I should have kept copies, but you may rest assured that the essence is not lost. It remains embedded in my brain, where I feel it stirring like an eager foetus as it reaches for the farthest dream.

I wonder if its undeveloped relative may have made its lair in your brain as you read my work. Perhaps it is consuming your dreams instead of helping send them forth, since your mind falls so short of the cosmos. Your limits are painfully clear from your tale of the regurgitated island. Could you imagine nothing more alien than a giant with the head of an octopus? You might at least have painted it your non-existent colour. Giants were old when the Greeks were young, and your dreams are just as stale. No doubt your acolytes—Augur Dulldeath and Clerk Ashen Sniff and Dullard Wantdie and Stank Kidnap Pong and the rest of your motley entourage[10]—will counterfeit some admiration of the tale.

I assume they have been deluded into valuing your patronage, and are so afraid of losing it that they dare offer you no criticism. I would demonstrate

to you how your tale should have been written if it included any matter worthy of my attention. In any case, all my energy is necessary to dealing with my dreams. I doubt that I shall write them down in future. I am unaware of anyone who deserves to learn of them. Let mankind experience them for itself when it has sufficiently evolved to do so.

C. T. Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

December 25th, 1929.

Lugcraft,

Did you dream that you would never hear from me again? Had you, perhaps, even forgotten my existence, since reading my work has evidently taught you nothing as a writer? You are but a shell in which a few dreams writhed and then withered when exposed to daylight. I had the misfortune to leaf through your claptrap about Dunwich.[11] I suppose you must have chosen to write about the submarine village before you remembered that you had already written about a submarine island.[12] You would have done better to leave both of them sunken. Can you dream of nothing except tentacles? It seems to me that your writing is a decidedly *fishy* business. Has my mislaid work yet to put in a mysterious reappearance?

I was reminded of you upon recently encountering Mr. Visiak's novel *Medusa*.[13] He, too, writes of a tentacled colossus which inhabits an uncharted rock. His prose is infinitely subtler and more skilled than your own, and evokes the dream which must have been its seed. Have you read the book? Perhaps it is one reason why you appear to have written so little of late. He has achieved all that you strain to achieve and more, with none of your symptoms of labour. He is rightly published by a reputable London house, whereas your efforts are removed from view within a month. Pulp thou art, and pulp thou shalt remain.

Are you struggling to shape some kind of myth out of the mumbo-jumbo in your recent effusions? It does not begin to hint at any kind of truth. You can

never hope to touch upon that until you approach the ultimate, the source, the solitary presence, the very secret of all being. What is the universe but the greatest dream, which dreamed itself into existence? At its core, which is also its farthest boundary, is the lair of its creator. That awful entity is the essence of all dreams, and so it can be glimpsed only through them. The visionary dreams of the inhabitants of the universe are fragments of its nature, and it is jealous of bestowing them. Could you convey any of this in your spiritless fiction? I am certain you could not. Even I flinched from the merest distant glance upon the presence which hovers in the deepest dark, mouthing vast secrets while it plucks many-legged at the fabric of the universe. Perhaps I shall capture its essence in a final literary offering, *The Eater of Dreams*. Should it see print, your attempts and those of all your acolytes will fade into deserved oblivion.

C. T. Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

November 1st, 1931.

Lumpcraft,

Have you still failed to lay your hands on my misplaced work? It is evident that you have learned nothing from its example. When I saw the title of your latest washout I wondered if the whisperer might have been your feeble version of the truth to which I previously alluded, but it is even weaker than I would have expected of you.[14] The conclusion of the tale was obvious to me before I read the first page. You have always donned the mask of fiction to aid you in your pitiful attempts to scare your few admirers, but now it should be plain to the dullest of them that there is nothing behind the mask.

Your day is done, Lumpcraft, such as it ever was. I was amused to see that you have rendered Farthingsworth's rag even less unique by reprinting your tired tales of the hound and the rats. Are you now so bereft of imagination that you must resort to reanimating these soulless cadavers? Perhaps you

have realised that, enervated though they are, they have more life than your latest efforts.

Which of those has lured in your new lickspittle, Rabbity Cowherd?[15] I presume he is avid for the world to notice that he refers in his own scribblings to your mumbo-jumbo. Is this intended to delude the reader into mistaking your puerile fancies for truth, or is it simply a game which you and your courtiers play? If you had been granted even the briefest glimpse of the denizen of the ultimate darkness, you would not dare to misuse your dreams in this fashion. You would recognise that you are but the least of its countless dreams. If you had discerned the merest hint of its nature, you would know that by attempting to perceive it, you had attracted its attention. How shall I describe the experience in words that the likes of you may understand? It feels as though some embryonic organ has become embedded in my brain. Sometimes I feel it stir, and then I know that I am observed by a consciousness so vast and so indifferent to me that it shrivels my being to less than an atom. Perhaps these moments are immeasurably brief, and yet they last for an eternity, both of which are constant states of the denizen of the infinite. In such a moment I become aware that time is as much of an illusion as space and all the materials which compose the universe. Nothing is real except the dreams of the source that clutches with its countless limbs at its creation. What would you write if you grasped even a fraction of its nature, Lumpcraft? I believe that you would never write again. What a boon that would be! For myself, I have done writing to you. You are no more to me than I am to the boundless dreamer.

C. T. Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

September 3rd, 1933.

Pulpcraft,

Well, you have outdone yourself. Who else could have written your tale about the witch's house?[16] Who else would have wanted to do so? Who,

having committed the offence, would have put his name to it? I am beginning to think that you may indeed not have received my later work. Certainly its example is nowhere to be seen, although the same may equally be said of my work which you admitted to receiving. This latest farrago is an insult to the very name of dream, and I suspect that even your fawning friends will search in vain for elements to praise. Since they all write fiction, no doubt they will produce some to comfort you. Are you so timid or so dishonest that you cannot admit your failings as a writer even to yourself? Were I you, Pulpcraft, I should give up the struggle before I perpetrated worse embarrassments. I writhe in disgust at your humdrum pulpy prose, and so does the mouth in my brain.

It is indeed the semblance of a mouth. Just as the glimpses of the presence with which I tantalised you were no more than similes, so this may be the merest hint of the reality. All the same, I often feel its moist lips shift within my cranium, and sometimes I have felt a tongue explore the folds of my brain, probing among them. Increasingly I seem to sense its whispered secrets seeping into the substance of my cerebrum. At times I have to overcome a compulsion to voice them as I deal with the mob beyond the counter. Does this raise your hope that I may reveal some of them to you? You will have no further opportunity to steal the fruits of my dreaming. You lack the courage to venture where my spirit travels, and so you are unworthy of the reward. Let your prudent *providence* provide you with the prize you earn.

C. T. Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

October 24th, 1935.

Cravecraft,

Behold, you have enticed a new follower to yourself! Bobby Blob writes like a very young man.[17] Was Dulldeath not one, too? Doubtless you find their kind easiest to influence. Do you now require your lackeys to imitate

your awkward prose besides including your mumbo-jumbo in their fiction? Perhaps you should be wary of accepting young Blob's tale of the shambler as a tribute.[18] The narrator appears to need very little excuse to do away with the writer from Providence. I am reminded that Stank Pong also exterminated such a writer.[19] He had an even better reason, since his image of the hand which plays with brains comes closer to the cosmic truth than all your slime and tentacles and gibberish.

You should heed the message of your minions. You are redundant, Cravecraft, and a burden on your scanty audience. Do you not see that your friends feel obliged to praise you? I believe your lack of inspiration has finally overwhelmed you, since your pen appears to have dribbled its last. You are reduced to disinterring the decayed carcasses of tales which should have been left in their unmarked graves. The fiddler Zann begs for pennies once more, and the white ape joins in with a jig. Why, you have given the tale of the ape a new name in the hope of misleading the reader that its publication is *unique*![20] I doubt that even Farthingsworth's dull audience will be deluded. No mask can disguise material which is so uninspiringly familiar, and all the perfumes in the world cannot swamp the stench of rot.

You will be interested to learn that one of the conduits through which I was dreamed into the world has ceased to function. He leaves a sizeable amount of money and his fellow channel, my mother. Both are useful in relieving me of the need to remain in prosaic employment. As well as dealing with domestic matters, my mother will act as my envoy to the mundane world. I am glad to be free of the distractions of customers and fellow butchers, for their incomprehension was becoming an annoyance. The secrets that are mouthed within my brain must be pronounced aloud, but only the enlightened should hear them. Do not dream for an instant that you are numbered among that fellowship.

C. T. Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

June 19th, 1936.

Strivecraft,

Never imagine that you can pass off my discoveries as your own. Wherever you are published, I shall find you. Do you now seek to *astound*? You appear to have *astounded* your new readers solely by your unwelcomeness.[21] They are as unimpressed by all your slime and tentacles as any audience should be. What possessed you to inflict your outmoded fancies on a readership versed in science? Since you claimed Farthingsworth as your most sympathetic editor, have you perhaps thrown yourself upon an agent? He must be poor, both financially and intellectually, to accept your work. At least, if I am not mistaken, he has revised it to improve your prose. No doubt your craven sycophants will chorus that your enfeebled work goes from strength to strength.

The true visionary neither requires supporters nor expects them. My mother's only functions are to keep the house in order and to deal with the mob on my behalf. Her interpretations of my pronouncements are none of my concern, and I shall not allow them to annoy me. It is only to retain her usefulness that I exert myself to keep my secrets from her, instead sharing them with the lonely hills when the night permits. There I can release the truths which the lips constantly shape in my brain. Sometimes things consumed by ancientness gather about me to listen to my utterances, and sometimes I am witnessed by creatures that will inhabit the earth when the mob is no more.

As to you, Strivecraft, will you persist in scribbling when you have less than nothing to communicate? Perhaps you should be shown what a true seer looks like. The next time I dispatch my mother to the shops I may have her bring me a camera. While your mind would shrivel at the merest glimpse of the source of all dreams, perhaps you can bear to look upon its human face, although I do not think you will survive the comparison. I think you will never again want to face yourself in a mirror.

C. T. Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

October 12th, 1936.

Limpcraft,

I see that Rabbity Coward has ceased to play the brave barbarian. His dreams must have been as frail as your own. Or might he have intended to set you an example by ridding the world of himself? How long will you persist in loitering where you are unwanted? The readers of the scientific fiction magazine have made your unwelcomeness plainer still.[22] What delusion drives you to seek publication where you must know you will be loathed? Even Farthingsworth is not so desperate that he feels compelled to disseminate your latest flops. Limpcraft, you are but a dismal caricature of the man I once sought to be. As well as burdening literature, your inert presence weighs me down and binds me to the earth. My brain aches at the thought that you continue to infest the world, just as my jaws ache with declaration.

I have the camera, but I do not think any technician could look upon the photograph which would be developed. Whenever my mother is at home I keep to my room. I have trained her to leave my meals outside the door, since it would be inconvenient to have her flee. The curtains shut out the attentions of the mob. I have no need of mirrors, because I know that I am transformed by dreaming. Perhaps I am growing to resemble the source, or perhaps its awareness has begun to consume me. Perhaps I am how it mouths its way into the world. By now the lips that gape within me feel as vast as space. Your puny skull could never contain even the notion of them.

C. T. Nash.

1, Toad Place,
Berkeley,
Gloucestershire,
Great Britain.

January 18th, 1937.

Lovecrass,

So you are dreaming of me, are you? Or you are so bereft of dreams that you have to write tales about me. I am a *haunter* of the *dark*, am I, and a shell which owes its vitality to the presence of a woman.[23] It is time that

you were confronted with the truth. I shall convey a revelation from which even your mind will be unable to hide. I vow that you will no longer be able to ignore your ignorance.

I shall enclose my photograph. There is, of course, no need for my to delegate my mother to obtain a print, since you can have the film developed yourself. Have you the courage to gaze upon the face of dream, or has all your dreaming been a sham? Perhaps you will never sleep again while you remain in the world, but whenever you dream, there shall I be. Do not imagine that your death will allow you to escape me. Death is the dream from which you can never awaken, because it returns you to the source. No less than life, death will be the mirror of your insignificance.

C. T. Nash.

This was apparently Nash's final letter. Two items are appended to the correspondence. One is a page torn from a book. It bears no running title, and I have been unable to locate the book, which seems to have been either a collection of supposedly true stories about Gloucestershire or a more general anthology of strange tales, including several about that area. Presumably whoever tore out the sheet found the following paragraph on page 232 relevant:

Residents of Berkeley still recall the night of the great scream. Sometime before dawn on the 15th of March 1937, many people were awakened by a sound which at first they were unable to identify. Some thought it was an injured animal, while others took it for a new kind of siren. Those who recognised it as a human voice did so only because it was pronouncing words or attempting to pronounce them. Although there seems to have been general agreement that it was near the river, at some distance from the town, those who remember hearing it describe it as having been almost unbearably loud and shrill. The local police appear to have been busy elsewhere, and the townsfolk were loath to investigate. Over the course of the morning the sound is said to have increased in pitch and volume. A relative of one of the listeners recalled being told by her mother that the noise sounded "as if someone was screaming a hole in himself". By late morning the sound is supposed to have grown somehow more diffuse, as though the source had become enlarged beyond control, and shortly before

noon it ceased altogether. Subsequently the river and the area beside it were searched, but no trace of a victim was found.

The second item is a photograph. It looks faded with age, a process exacerbated by copying. The original image is so dim as to be blurred, and is identifiable only as the head and shoulders of a man in an inadequately illuminated room. His eyes are excessively wide and fixed. I am unable to determine what kind of flaw in the image obscures the lower part of his face. Because of the lack of definition of the photograph, the fault makes him look as if his jaw has been wrenched far too wide. It is even possible to imagine that the gaping hole, which is at least as large as half his face, leads into altogether too much darkness. Sometimes I see that face in my dreams.

Notes

1. Nash refers here to Lovecraft's tales *Dagon*, *The Hound*, *The Rats in the Walls*, *Arthur Jermyn* and *Hypnos*, all recently published in *Weird Tales*

2. In this paragraph Nash refers to *The Festival* and *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs*.

3. Nash is referring to *The Music of Erich Zann* and *The Unnamable*.

4. Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales*.

5. *The Tomb* and *The Outsider*.

6. Lovecraft's original name for the island in *The Call of Cthulhu*.

7. *The Terrible Old Man*, *The Moon-Bog*, *He* and *The Horror at Red Hook*.

8. *The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Colour out of Space*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and *Supernatural Horror in Literature*

9. *The Colour out of Space* was published in *Amazing Stories*.

10. August Derleth, Clark Ashton Smith, Donald Wandrei and Frank Belknap Long.

11. *The Dunwich Horror*.

12. Dunwich is a submerged town off the Suffolk coast.

13. *Medusa: A Story of Mystery, and Ecstasy, & Strange Horror* (Gollancz, 1929).

14. *The Whisperer in Darkness*.

15. Robert E. Howard.

16. *The Dreams in the Witch House*.

17. Robert Bloch.

18. *The Shambler from the Stars*.

19. *The Space-Eaters* by Frank Belknap Long.

20. The tale originally published as *The White Ape* was reprinted as "Arthur Jermyn".

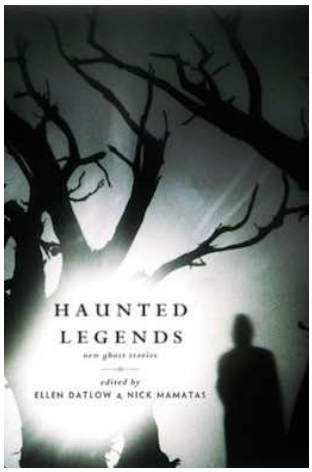
21. On its appearance in *Astounding Stories, At the Mountains of Madness* attracted hostile comment in the letter-column.

22. After the publication of *The Shadow out of Time*, *Astounding Stories* ran further hostile correspondence.

23.. Nash is referring to *The Haunter of the Dark* and *The Thing on the Doorstep*, published in the most recent issues of *Weird Tales*.

Chucky Comes To Liverpool

"Chucky and his films have indeed become Liverpool legends of the darkest kind. The media ascribed the murder of James Bulger in 1991 by two Merseyside ten-year-olds to the influence of *Child's Play 3*, although the film had been seen by neither of them and was never mentioned in evidence. (In fact the film that the murder resembles is the PG-rated *Home Alone*, in which the ten-year-old Macauley Culkin amuses the audience by submitting burglars to some of the violence James Bulger was to suffer three years later.) Subsequent Chucky films were never shown in Liverpool, and the newspaper reports quoted in my story are real. Footage of the abduction of James Bulger can be seen on YouTube accompanied by a pop song."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in *Haunted Legends*



First published in *Haunted Legends*, 2010

As Robbie watched his mother he felt ten years old, but it wasn't unwelcome for once. She looked as she used to when they played board games together; her eyes would calm down while her face hid its lines until she seemed no older than she was, hardly twice the age he'd racked up now. She'd been happy to concentrate on just one thing, and it included him. He was buoyed up by the memory until she glanced away from the computer screen in the front room and saw him.

Did she think he was spying on her through the window, the way his father had after they'd split up? Her head jerked back as if her frown had pinched her face hard, and Robbie hurried to let himself into the house. Her bicycle and rucksack had narrowed the already narrow hall. As he dumped his schoolbag on the stairs she was snatching pages from the printer, so hastily that one sailed out of her grasp. "Leave it, Robbie," she said.

"I'm only getting it for you."

It was a cinema poster headed **CHUCK IN THE DOCK**. Most of it consisted of a doll's wickedly gleeful round young face, which was held together with stitches that looked bloody even in black and white. Whatever it was advertising would be shown over the weekend at the Merseyscreen multiplex as part of the Liberating Liverpool arts festival, which was all

Robbie had time to learn before his mother reached for the sheet. "Well, now you've had a good look after you were told not to," she said.

"What's all that for?"

"Something you mustn't see."

"I just did."

"That isn't clever. That's nothing but sly." Once she'd finished giving him a disappointed look she said "It's about films I don't want you ever to watch."

There were so many of those he'd lost count, if he was counting—any with fights or guns or knives, which could make him behave like boys did, or bombs, though mostly grownups used those, or language, which didn't seem to leave him much. "More of them," he said.

"I won't have you turning into a man like your father. Too many of you think it's your right to bully women and do a lot worse to them." Before Robbie dared to ask what she was leaving unsaid, which was very little where his father was concerned, she added "I'm not saying you're like that yet. Just don't be ever."

"Why did you print all that out? What's it for?"

"It's time we took more of a stand." He guessed she meant Mothers Against Mayhem as she said "They're evil films that should never be shown. They were supposed to be banned everywhere in Liverpool. They get inside children and make them act like that."

"Like what?"

"Like that thing," she said and poked the pages she'd laid face down on the table. "Now that's all. You're bullying me." She gazed harder at him while she said "Promise me you'll never watch any of those films."

"Promise."

"Let's see your hands."

He felt younger again, accused of being unclean. While he hadn't crossed his fingers behind his back, he didn't think he had quite promised either. Eventually she said "You'd better put dinner on. We've a meeting at Midge's."

Midge was the tutor on her assertiveness course and the founder of Mothers Against Mayhem. Robbie sidled past the bicycle to the kitchen,

which was even smaller than the front room, and switched on the oven. He still felt proud of learning to cook, though he would never have said so at school. He only wished his mother wouldn't keep reminding him that his father was unable or unwilling even to boil an egg. He watched bubbles pop on the surface of the casserole of scouse, a spectacle that put him in mind of a monster in another sort of film he wasn't meant to view. Gloves too fat for a killer in a film to wear helped him transfer the casserole to the stained mat the table always sported. "Mmm," his mother said and "Yum," despite eating less and faster than Robbie. "Enough for dinner tomorrow," she declared. "Have you got plenty of homework?"

"A bit. A lot really."

"Give it all you've got." She was already shrugging her rucksack on. "I don't know how late I'll be," she said as she wheeled her bicycle to the front door. "If I'm not here you know when to go to bed."

He left the stagnant casserole squatting on its mat while he washed up the dinner items before making for the front room. Like the television, the computer was inhibited by all the parental locks his mother could find. He logged on to find an essay about Liverpool poets, and changed words as he copied it into his English homework book. He was altering the last paragraph when his mobile rang.

It no longer had a Star Wars ringtone since his mother decided that was about war. Robbie didn't give peace much of a chance—he silenced the chorus before they had time to chant all they were saying. "Is that Duncan Donuts?" he said.

"If that's Robin Banks."

His father had named Robbie for a Liverpool footballer, but now his mother told people he was called after a singer. "My mam's with your mam," Duncan said. "All mams together."

"The midge got them."

"More like the minge did."

This went too far for Robbie's tastes. "What are you doing tonight?"

"What do you think? I'm in the park."

"Just finishing my homework."

"Wha?" Duncan improved on this by adding "Doing your housework?"

"Homework," Robbie said, not without resentment. "I'm on the last lap."

"Whose?" Duncan didn't wait for an answer. "Hurry up or I'll of smoked it all."

Robbie found some words to change as he transcribed the paragraph. Shutting the computer down, he hurried out of the house. Across the road Laburnum Place was just a pair of stubby terraces of houses almost as compressed as his, but the next street—Waterworks Street—led to the park. A wind urged clouds across the black October sky while another brought a thick stink up from the grain silos at the Seaforth docks. Robbie heard explosions and saw violent glares along the cross streets, but war hadn't broken out yet; they were premature fireworks, and the huge prolonged crash behind him wasn't the work of a bomb—it was another delivery of scrap at the yard beyond the Strand shopping mall.

A pedestrian crossing guarded by nervous amber beacons ended at the park gates. Shadows of bushes sprawled across the concrete path leading to a disused bandstand. Sleepy pigeons fluttered on the cupola as if waiting to compete for a position on the birdless weather vane. There was no sign of Duncan inside the railings that encircled the bandstand, but Robbie located him by the smell of skunk.

The other thirteen-year-old was sitting on the balustrade at the top of a wide flight of steps that climbed beside a bowling green. Above him a noseless whitish statue on a pedestal brandished the stump of a wrist like the victim of a maniac with a cleaver. Behind the statue a deserted basketball court was overlooked by houses at least twice the size of Robbie's. Duncan must have watched him search around the bandstand, since the vantage point commanded a view in every direction. Robbie ran up the steps two at a time as leaves slithered underfoot, crunching like a baby's bones. "Give us some," he said.

Though Duncan hadn't finished the fat joint, perhaps he had already smoked one. He took a drag before passing Robbie the remains. "It's fucking special, that," he gasped as he laboured to contain the smoke.

Robbie inhaled as much as he could and held it until he had to let some of it out through his nose. More emerged in a series of belches while Duncan had another toke. "You're right," Robbie said, or someone using his voice did.

"Wha?"

"It's special."

"Fucking special."

"Fucking," Robbie had to agree as, with a rumble, the world started to collapse. It was another crash of scrap down by the river, but he could barely hold on to that sense of it. The statue pointed the gun barrel of its arm at a silhouetted tree, bits of which swelled up to flap across the park. Fallen leaves cawed as a tree took them back, and he was afraid he'd smoked too much too soon. In a bid to recover control of the teeming interior of his skull he said "Do you know what they're talking about?"

"The crows? They's saying they's black. Respect, man," Duncan called to them.

"Not them." Robbie laughed, but it didn't help much. "The mams," he said.

"Can't hear them. Can you?"

"Course I can't," Robbie said, hoping their voices wouldn't invade the cavern above his eyes. "I know what they're disgusting, though."

He wasn't sure if he'd intended to use the wrong word. "Wha?" Duncan said.

"The most evilest film anyone's ever made anywhere ever."

Duncan passed him the smouldering roach. As the tip reddened like a warning light he said "Bet I know which."

Robbie exhaled the token toke as if he were anxious to discover "Which?"

"Chucky. One of his."

The idea lit Duncan's face up. It glared pale as plastic, and lines like stitches pinched his red eyes narrow while his teeth gleamed unnaturally white. The jagged lines were shadows of twigs cast by a firework in the sky, however much they lingered, and Robbie tried to erase them by asking "How did you know that?"

"Give us that if you're not having it." Duncan sucked the roach down to his fingertips and doused it on his tongue and threw his head back to swallow it. At last he said "I know everything, that's why. You turn into a puppet if you watch those films."

"Films can't do that. They're just films."

"Those ones can. It started round here."

Robbie had a notion that he already knew all this, and yet he had to ask "What did?"

"Two kids killed a littler one like Chucky does. It was up the road when my mam was living with my real dad before they had me. And then some bigger kids tortured some girl and they were listening to Chucky when they did. A man that had a shop with Chucky videos by the Strand, someone smashed the window and stabbed him with the glass. Chucky does that to people, and a kid in Liverpool stabbed his mam's friend and said Chucky made him. And there was a Paki shop up the road they set fire to because he had magazines with Chucky in them."

Robbie was distracted by a sense of being spied upon. The watchful face was on a screen. He glanced toward it and saw curtains bring the film to an end—no, fall shut at the window of a house beyond the basketball court. "Want to see him?" Duncan said.

Robbie saw shadows clawing their way up through the concrete paths.

Pigeons shivered as they strutted across the dim stage of the bandstand like the opening act of a show whose star performer was about to appear. Surely their feathers were only trembling in the wind. "Where?" he risked asking.

"At mine next time they have a meeting."

"You've never got those films."

"I can get them whenever I want them, and lots of others she doesn't like too."

"Why don't we get some of those? Can you get—"

"You're not scared of Chucky, are you?" Duncan's grin widened as if stitches were about to split his cheeks. "Godzillions of kids have watched him and they haven't done anything. Even girls," he said and let his grin drop. "If we smoke enough we'll be too stoned for him to make us." His gaze strayed past Robbie, and he slipped down from the balustrade. "Time we went," he said.

Robbie twisted around to see red and blue fireworks in the gateway beyond the basketball court. They were the roof lights of a police car, and Duncan had already dodged behind the cleaver victim's plinth. "Don't go that way,"

Robbie had to whisper in case the crows raised the alarm. "Someone in those houses called the police."

"I'm not going. I'm gone," Duncan said and crouched lower. "You go somewhere else."

Robbie was sure that if he encountered the police his face would betray him, grinning too much while he struggled not to grin. He retreated down the steps and showed Duncan his severed head. "Catch you at school. Me, not the police."

"They won't bother much about kids having a smoke. Wait till they've gone and we'll skin up again."

"You can," Robbie said and ran down the steps, desperate to leave behind the swarms of beetles that crunched underfoot. The police might hear that, or the applause his sprint past the bandstand earned from his pigeon audience. He skidded to a halt at the gates that framed the pedestrian crossing, where the beacons were trying to measure his pulse, and then he dashed across the road. Lights flared down the cross streets, but they were fireworks, not police speeding to cut him off. Nobody grabbed him from behind as his key scrabbled to let him into the house.

How long did he have to spend at perfecting the use of the toothbrush on the teeth a face was baring in the mirror? Only the fear that his mother would see that he'd changed sent him to bed. The bed was a boat in which he was floating away from explosions on a beach, and then he was brought home by the soundtrack—the thud of the front door, the trundling of the bicycle along the hall, the thump of the dropped rucksack. Other noises followed—some that he was embarrassed to overhear—but the impact of the rucksack left an echo in his skull. It brought him out of his room once he believed his mother was asleep.

A streetlamp lowered its bulbous head to watch him through the window over the front door. Suppose his mother had left the pages with Midge? They were in the rucksack, and he took them into the front room. Since he couldn't risk switching the light on, he tiptoed to the window and unfolded the crumpled wad in the glare from the street. Except for the poster for a showing of all five Chucky films and a talk about them, the sheets were copies of newspaper reports. Fifteen years ago but less than a mile away, two boys not even his age had tortured a toddler to death. Several newspapers blamed a Chucky film, and one said **For the sake of ALL our**

kids... BURN YOUR VIDEO NASTY. The bold letters seemed to glisten like the stitches on Chucky's face. He wasn't so easily destroyed, even if the cinemas in Liverpool had banned him. He'd made some young kidnappers use his voice while they were torturing a girl, and it had been Chucky's idea for a seven-year-old Liverpool boy to stab his mother's friend twenty-one times with a kitchen knife. Newspapers had tried to have him stopped, but two more films had been made about him, though they hadn't been shown in Liverpool. Now he was getting his way there too. No wonder he was grinning, and as Robbie stared into the gleeful eyes the expression tugged at his own mouth.

It must be all right to watch the films when you were old enough—otherwise the dockland cinema wouldn't be allowed to show them. The showing was for adults only, but videos didn't need to be. If Duncan could watch them, Robbie could; he wasn't going to let his mother make his friend despise him. He was years older than any of the boys Chucky had manipulated. Maybe they'd all been young enough to play with dolls and believe in them along with Christmas and fathers and the other things that went away as you grew up. Being frightened of films must do, and it was time it did. Robbie folded the pages and stowed them in the rucksack and took his grin to bed.

He always felt dull the morning after he'd had a smoke, but his mother brightened him. "Good job we've got that dinner," she said over breakfast. "We're at Midge's again. They have to be stopped, those films."

She was on her way to work at Frugo in the mall by the time he left the house. He joined the parade of boys and girls in black and white, which seemed to lead to a funeral for the past—a Liverpool history lesson where most of his classmates were silent as mourners. He didn't have a chance to speak to Duncan until the morning break. As they emerged into the corridor Duncan said "I've got them."

"Chucky."

As Duncan's grin confirmed this, a girl they didn't even know demanded "What about him?"

"We're going to see him," Robbie said.

"My mother says nobody should out of respect."

"That's what crows get," said Duncan.

She and her friend blinked blankly in unison. "They'll bring him back," the other girl said with an extravagant shudder.

"Who will?" Robbie protested in case he was being accused.

"Anyone that watches him."

"Anyone that does when they know they shouldn't," said her friend. "That's like trying to call him up."

"It's like calling up a demon so you'll get possessed," the first girl said.

"These won't, though."

Their scorn provoked Robbie to blurt "Why won't we?"

"They'll never let you in to see those films."

"We don't care. We—"

"We'll get in anyway," Duncan interrupted. "Chucky'll let us in so we can see him."

He mustn't want the girls to know about the viewing session at his house. He wasn't quite as reckless as he liked Robbie to think. The girls scoffed at him and ran into the schoolyard as Duncan muttered "I've got two for tonight. I'll text you when."

For the rest of the day Robbie was dry-mouthed and brittle-skulled and barely able to sit still. He had to at dinner so that his mother wouldn't notice. "Lots of homework again?" she said.

"Like last night."

This was cleverer than usual, because she didn't realise. He must be growing up. "Never mind, you've got all evening," she told him.

He was altering an article about the slums of Victorian Liverpool when his mobile took a message. *shes gon cum ruond*, it said.

Comming, Robbie responded. His head tingled and throbbed while he searched for words to change so that he could leave the house. Televisions relayed images from room to room all the way along the street to the Jawbone Tavern. Duncan and his mother lived in a house as small as Robbie's almost opposite the pub. His friend and a smell of skunk met Robbie at the front door. "Better be ready for this," Duncan said.

Robbie hesitated, only to see several men emerging from the pub for presumably another kind of smoke. Duncan raised two fingers, displaying

the joint and gesturing at the men. "Get some of that. Last night's was for wimps."

"Not out here. Someone might see."

"I don't want her smelling it in the house." With a protracted red-eyed look Duncan said "Go out the back."

He needn't make it seem as if Robbie's caution were the problem. Robbie followed him along the hall, which at least was free of bicycles, and through a kitchen cluttered with furniture into the yard. He had a manly toke that made him thoroughly aware of the spectators—upstairs windows, all of them lifeless except for the wailing of a child somewhere he couldn't locate. Before he and Duncan finished the joint he'd had enough of the windowless cell above which fireworks clawed at the sky on his behalf. "Where's Chucky, then?" he said.

"Waiting for you."

Duncan meant for both of them, of course. He led Robbie to the front room, where a plump couch and two undernourished chairs were miming patience at a blank television. The chair that had been on less of a diet was occupied by a romance of the Liverpool slums, while a woman's orange cardigan sprawled across half of the couch. Duncan slipped a disk into the player and lounged beside the cardigan. "Chuck that," he said.

Robbie laid the rumpled paperback on the carpet and propped his spine—more especially the cumbersome head it was sprouting—against the chair as *Child's Play* started on the screen. That was the name of the film and, he supposed, what you called the mischief that the Chucky doll got up to once a killer's spirit hid inside it. Why did everyone blame the boy who owned the doll? Why couldn't they see that the doll was pretending to be him? They even took him to a psychiatrist for the doll to kill. At last the boy's mother caught Chucky misbehaving and the boy helped throw him on a fire, burning him for the sake of all the kids as the paper said you should, though the mother still had to blow him to bits with a gun. Robbie was relieved she'd seen the truth at last. As he let go of the bony arms of the chair, which had apparently been bruising his hands for some time, Duncan said "Wimp."

"Who is?"

"Him, going crying to his mam. Hope the other one's better."

How could the doll come back? It had grown its stitches now, but this wasn't even its second film, and so Robbie couldn't tell what had revived it. It killed a woman who used to go with the killer, and then it put her inside a girl doll. As that one began to speak, a noise crept into the room—giggling that ballooned into shrieks. "What's so funny?" Robbie was panicked into asking.

"It's Marge out of the Simpsons."

At once Robbie recognised the croaky female voice from his mother's favourite cartoon show. He felt isolated with the sight of Marge Simpson disguised as a doll that helped Chucky kill people. Eventually she was burned alive, which didn't finish her off, and Chucky was exhaustively shot once again despite shouting "I'll be back." Didn't someone else say that? How many films had Chucky and his partner taken over? A baby or a bloody doll popped out of her to end the film. Duncan ejected the disk and set about searching the cable channels, which fluttered past like slides snatching at the chance to move until Robbie cried "He's there."

Duncan jumped up, and the cardigan cowered away from him, flailing an armless arm. "Who?" he snarled, dashing to the window.

"Chucky. Not out there."

Duncan shut the curtains and glared at Robbie, whether for unnerving him or because he hadn't pointed out that passersby could see what they were watching. "That's not him."

"It's one of him," Robbie protested, but as the grinning doll sprang from under a boy's bed Duncan poked the information button to reveal it was a Spielberg film. It was meant to be about a poltergeist, which didn't reassure Robbie. "I'd better get home before she does," he said.

Duncan grinned like Chucky. "You're never scared of your mam."

"I'm not scared of any fucker or any fucking thing."

"Better believe I'm not. My dad tried to make me scared of stupid fucking Chucky. Not my real dad, the one I got for my birthday when I was four."

"What did he do?"

"Never mind what he done." Having stared at Robbie, Duncan added "Said Chucky would get me if I was bad. That's what they used to tell kids."

Had someone once told Robbie that? It seemed uneasily familiar. "They didn't know what they were on about," Duncan said. "That's not how Chucky works."

He meant in the films, of course—he couldn't mean anything else. "See you at school," Robbie said.

"Shut it on your way out. I'm going to watch him give the doctor shocks again."

The street was deserted. Lamps patched the pavements with light, which mouldered on the roofs of parked cars. If Robbie were a girl or in a film he might be daunted by the gaps between the vehicles, where a small jerky figure could dart out as its victim reached one of the stretches of pavement the lamps didn't entirely illuminate. The only place he had to look for Chucky was on all the televisions, and he was lingering outside a window to see that no doll attacked the young couple in bed on the screen when a woman in an armchair caught sight of him. As she sprang to her feet he fled home. She didn't chase him, but did she know where he lived? Suppose she told his mother? She couldn't say he'd been looking for Chucky; nobody knew that, not even Duncan. Chucky was safe in his head where nobody would notice him.

The house was unlit, which meant that Robbie's mother wouldn't see him until he had a chance to sleep off any guilt that might escape onto his face. It didn't look guilty in the bathroom mirror, where it foamed at the mouth while the toothbrush polished its grin. He was in bed well before his mother came home, though he couldn't sleep. If he'd been allowed a computer in his room he would have played on it, but the games might have been too violent for his mother's taste; she'd decided even board games were aggressive. He slept once the grinning doll subsided inside the jack-in-the-box of his head.

He thought he was behaving normally at breakfast, however dull his head felt, until his mother said "What's the matter, Robbie? Why are you looking like that?"

"I'm not looking like anything."

"Your eyes are. Aren't you sleeping?"

"It's all the stuff you've been saying about Chucky."

"I won't again. Don't worry, we'll be getting rid of him." As a further comfort she said "My turn to make dinner."

So there wasn't a meeting. Perhaps that was why Duncan didn't seek him out but only gave him a grin across the classroom. He joined him at the morning break, when the girl who'd accosted them yesterday caught up with them in the schoolyard. "Hope you're happy now," she said.

Robbie grinned, though it felt inadvertent if not meaningless. "Why?" Duncan demanded.

"Someone's brought your Chucky back."

"We haven't lost him," Robbie blurted as Duncan said louder "Who's brought what where?"

"They've got him in a shop down by the Strand, in the window where everyone can see him."

"They've got no respect," her friend said.

"Nobody can stop him. He'll get everywhere," Duncan said, baring his teeth.

He kept the grin up until the girls left them alone. If he seemed to find it hard to abandon, that was just a joke. He made the face at any girls who looked at him and Robbie as they slouched around the yard, and the trick amused Robbie so much that he couldn't help joining in, even if it felt as though strings were attached to the corners of his mouth. His lips had grown weary by the time the bell herded everyone into the school.

The history mistress wanted to hear stories of the past that people's families had told them. One boy said how the government had hated Liverpool so much they'd tried to take all the jobs down south, and a girl retorted that the unions hadn't let her dad or anybody do their jobs. "I think those are legends more than they're history," Mrs Picton said, and Robbie took the cue. "What about Chucky?" he said.

"What about..."

"He's a story mams and dads tell, isn't he? How it all started when those kids watched that film."

Before Mrs Picton could respond, Robbie's classmates did. Someone used to dream Chucky was under the bed after she'd read about him in the paper. Someone knew a girl who'd set her dolls on fire in case any of them might

be Chucky. Someone else had heard of a boy who'd attacked his sister because he thought Chucky was inside her. Several people confirmed this, but Duncan said nothing at all. "It's only a film," Mrs Picton said, which sounded somehow familiar. "That doesn't mean any of you should watch anything like that at your age."

"Didn't those boys really kill anyone, then?" Robbie said.

"Of course they did. It's history, and now please leave it alone."

Why should he feel accused? He didn't speak for the rest of the lesson, despite the doubtful glances she kept giving him. When the bell jerked him to his feet at last she said "Will you wait, please, Robbie."

He stood like a doll at his desk until she took him to the headmistress. If someone had reported him for being Chucky in the yard, why wasn't Duncan with him? It should be Duncan who was being stared at and whispered girlishly about as he was escorted along the corridor like a killer to the execution chamber. Robbie and his guard were almost at Mrs Todd's office when he realised they couldn't do this to him; his mother had to be there. But she was in the office.

She looked even more disappointed than the other women did, and he turned on Mrs Picton. "You said it was only a film."

"What have you been watching?" his mother said.

"I didn't see them all. Dunk saw more. They haven't done anything to us. Like she says, it's just a legend. Just some wimpy films."

"Have you been too busy watching films," Mrs Todd enquired, "to do your homework?"

"I did it all. Who says I haven't?"

"The school does," Robbie's mother said sadly. "Your teacher found it on the Internet."

Robbie's skull felt close to cracking like plastic. "That's only like looking it up in a book."

"It was practically word for word," said Mrs Picton. "You'd think you wanted to be caught."

"What have you been filling your head with instead?" his mother clearly didn't care to know.

"Try devoting your imagination to your schoolwork. That's what it's for," Mrs Todd said. "I'm letting you off with a warning this time, but I'll treat any further offence much more seriously. Please remember you're letting yourself and your mother down as well as the school."

"And I'll want to see that work from you done properly," Mrs Picton said.

His mother played his silent jailer as far as the schoolyard. She was hardly out of the gate when Duncan came to him. "What did they want?"

"Just about my homework."

"Was it bad?"

Robbie had to imitate his grin, because he didn't know if Duncan meant the homework or the interview. "It was evil."

This widened Duncan's grin, which aggravated Robbie's. It was starting to feel like a contest when a girl said "What do you two think you look like?"

"Chucky," the boys said in chorus, which made them grin until Robbie's cheeks felt in danger of splitting like plastic.

He couldn't keep it up all afternoon, though his lips stirred if any of the teachers even glanced at him. Though the lessons felt interminable, they ended far too soon. Where could he go except home? He wasn't about to be scared of his mother when he wasn't scared of Chucky, especially since she was. Her nagging would just leave his head duller still—and then he thought of somewhere to go on the way home.

The metal benches outside the shopping precinct were crammed with quartets of pensioners, warily eyeing his schoolmates while they fought at bus stops or flung litter at each other. Robbie felt watched by them as he caught sight of the face across the road, in a small shop on the side street opposite a corner of the precinct. He sprinted in front of a bus stuffed with children and gave the driver his best grin, encouraged by the face in the shop window full of skulls and hairy visages and greenish corpse heads. Though the eyeless round rubbery mask was decorated with stitches, Robbie wasn't sure whether they were all where they should be. The longer he gazed at it, the more secretive the grin seemed to grow. He thought of wearing the mask while his mother lectured him, but she wouldn't let him own it, any more than he could buy even one of the fireworks lined up at the foot of the window. Suppose she didn't know? He could wear it when he

went out at night while she was with Midge. He hadn't enough money on him, but there was more in his room, and that was why he hurried home.

His mother came into the hall as he shut the front door. "What have you been doing now?"

"Nothing. Coming home."

"Can't I trust you any more? Whose idea was it to do exactly what I told you not to?"

"Both of ours." Robbie dropped his schoolbag on the stairs, only to feel that it was blocking his way as she and her bicycle were. "You won't tell his mam what I said about him, will you? You don't have to. Please don't, please."

"Why, are you frightened how he'll behave now you've watched those films?"

"Course not. That's stupid. Why do you want to stop people seeing them? They aren't that scary, and they only make little kids be bad."

"I wouldn't grin about it. Is that really what you think? You'd better look at this." Grabbing her rucksack, she extracted the crumpled pages and flapped one at him. "What do you call them?" she said.

She was brandishing the report about the girl who'd been tortured in Manchester. Robbie thought he was expected to say that her tormentors were monsters or just men until he saw what he'd overlooked: the people who'd listened to Chucky's voice had been years older than he was now. He would have liked to have the Chucky mask to hide his face. All he could find to say was "Some of them were girls."

"That shows how bad those films are. That's why they have to be stopped, and now I can't leave you on your own."

"Why can't you?"

"I almost wish we had your father back. Are you going to turn into something else for me to worry about? Aren't you ever going to do anything to make me proud?"

Robbie ducked to his schoolbag so that she wouldn't see his face. "My homework," he muttered.

While he was no more eager to do it than usual, rewriting the history essay distracted him intermittently from his fears—that the English teacher would

notice he'd copied from the Internet, that Duncan would discover Robbie had told on him, that they weren't as immune to the films as they'd thought, because they weren't old enough after all. His nerves kept jabbing the dull lump of his mind, and he was glad when his mother called him to dinner.

Perhaps she looked reproachful because she'd made turkey burgers, his favourite. Whenever their eyes met he thought it best to grin. The meal ended some time after he'd stopped enjoying it. As she returned the chutney to the refrigerator his mother said "Now look what you've made me do."

She was craning inside, her neck between the doorframe and the edge of the door, as she held the refrigerator open with one hand. "What?" Robbie said.

"I forgot to buy orange and now there's none for breakfast."

As the legs of his chair and the linoleum collaborated on a squeal that a maniac's victim might have been proud of, Robbie said "I'll go."

"Just hurry there and hurry back."

He ran upstairs and made sure she heard him go into the bathroom, and then he dodged into his room. Now his footfalls felt as light as plastic. The money was the only secret in his room, not that it was much of one; less than half was change he'd kept the last time she'd sent him to the shops. Dust squeaked beneath his fingernails as he groped behind the wardrobe for the coins. He flushed the toilet and sprinted downstairs, to be met by his mother. "Remember what I said," she told him.

As he hurried to the shop he felt as if his face was shaping itself so that the mask would fit. What would the mask allow him to do? He thought of peering in the windows at the televisions inside which Chucky might be hiding, and his grin expanded, only to sag when he reached the street that led down to the Strand. The shop with the masks in was dark.

The door didn't budge, and nobody answered however hard Robbie clattered the letter box. "What are you grinning at?" he demanded, but the mask didn't seem to hear. It looked entertained by his plight, unless it was amused by its secret thoughts. Suppose he smashed the window and set Chucky free that way? He glanced about to make sure the street was deserted and in search of something he could use. Then, with a shock that turned his mouth so dry it felt raw with skunk, he realised what he was planning to do.

Had the mask put the idea into his mind? What else might Chucky have sneaked in? Robbie remembered wishing he could wear the mask so that he could deal with his mother, and all at once he saw her neck in the guillotine of the refrigerator. Lightning widened the empty eyes as if the mask had been enlivened by the memory. The flash was the explosion of a firework above the houses, and it sent Robbie away from the window, to the grocery around the corner.

Had the flash been an omen too? There were fireworks under the glass counter, and he used the carton of juice to point. "One of them as well."

He thought the shopkeeper was about to refuse, but she must have been waiting for politeness. As she shook her head and laid the firework on the counter Robbie said "And some matches."

She didn't take the second chance to say no. Robbie paid and hurried back to the intersection. If there was anybody in the other street he wouldn't be able to carry out his plan—but the street was deserted even by traffic. He wandered over to the shop as if he were bound somewhere else entirely, and then he lit the firework.

The stitched mask seemed to watch him askance as he inserted the long cardboard barrel through the letter box and gave it a violent sideways shove. The firework landed inside the window. In a few seconds it spouted fire, and moments later several fireworks were ablaze. Even if Chucky never stayed burned in the films, mightn't this destroy his face? The mask appeared to writhe in fear as detonations shook the window. The glass held, but the masks slithered down it to fall on top of the outbursts of flame. Gouts of fire spurted from Chucky's eyes, which grew larger and blacker and emptier, and then the helpless upturned face began to split apart as if the stitches had torn open. When the pieces started curling up and bubbling like slugs, Robbie dashed home.

He felt both reckless and justified. His mother should be proud of him, but could he risk telling her? As he inserted the unnecessarily shaky key into the lock he was trying to decide how much he might hint. He'd eased the door shut when he heard a voice croaking somewhere in the house.

It was Chucky's mate. Before Robbie could begin to deal with this, his mother darted like a killer out of the front room. "Where have you been this time? How long does it take to buy juice?"

He was distracted by the film she'd been watching—the Simpsons film. "There was a shop on fire," he said.

"I suppose I can't blame you for that."

Robbie didn't grin until he was heading for the kitchen, and managed to suppress the expression on his way back. Once he joined in watching the film he had no idea how to look. He tried only laughing if his mother did, but this was almost always when Marge Simpson spoke in that unnatural voice. He peered at the film as if it might show him what else he could do, and then his mobile clanged. As he brought up the message his mother leaned over to read it. *chuckies burnd shop down*, Duncan wanted him to know. "What does he mean?" Robbie's mother demanded.

Robbie thought it wisest just to shrug, and she was rediscovering how to laugh with Marge when the ringtone interrupted. "Is that Duncan again?" Robbie's mother said and silenced the television. "Put him on the loudspeaker."

Robbie was unnerved by the sight of her dubbing Marge's dialogue. Poking the loudspeaker key seemed to bring an audience into the room. "That shop those girls said about, it's on fire," Duncan shouted over the sounds of the crowd. "You want to come and see."

"I saw."

"Did you see Chucky? He's gone now. Maybe he done it and went."

"No he didn't." Since Robbie's fervour apparently impressed his mother, he added "He's just in his films."

"Till someone lets him out."

"I've got to go now," Robbie said and cut the call off.

He still had to face his mother. "Was he trying to tell you he'd started the fire?" she said.

"It wasn't him."

"How do you know?"

"There was a Chucky mask he'd have wanted. It's all burned up."

Far too many seconds passed before her gaze relented. "Just please don't ever watch any of those films again."

"I won't."

"Don't go anywhere near them."

At once, having realised what else he could do, Robbie was afraid she meant to extract the promise. She picked up the remote control, however, and restored the doll's voice. He kept hearing it and Chucky's even once the film was over, but now he knew how to stop them. When his mother started watching a programme about refuges for women he used it as an excuse to go to bed. "You get your sleep. You've plenty to do tomorrow," she said.

She had no idea. He wasn't sure himself. As he lay in bed he saw Chucky's face bubble and blacken while it struggled to crawl out of the flames. It didn't let him sleep much; he kept jerking awake like a puppet someone was testing. He was afraid his mother might interrogate him at breakfast, but perhaps she was used to his red eyes or too preoccupied to notice. He tried not to grin every time she looked at him, and eventually he was able to stay out of her sight by taking his homework into the front room.

For English he had to write about a film. He was tempted to discuss Chucky but didn't know what he might say. He wrote about the Simpsons film, although the need to avoid mentioning the truth about Marge's voice felt like wearing a mask. As he strove to keep his mind on the essay, the phone in the hall went off like an alarm.

Had someone seen him set fire to the shop? Would the police believe why he'd had to do it? He heard his mother take the receiver to the kitchen, but he couldn't distinguish her words or even her tone. He wrote very few words while he listened for her footsteps in the hall. At last she came back and opened the door. "Midge wants us to picket the films tonight," she said. "What am I going to do with you?"

He was searching for an answer when his mobile tried to crawl across the table. *what you doeing tonit*, Duncan wanted to know. Robbie couldn't say, and he felt his skull grow thin as plastic as he waited for his mother to decide. Neither of them had spoken by the time Duncan rang. "Let me hear," Robbie's mother said.

As Robbie amplified the sound Duncan said "Where have you fucked off to now?"

"Doing my homework."

"Hope it's evil." When Robbie didn't respond Duncan said "My mam's got me picketing Chucky tonight. Should be a laugh. Want to come?"

Robbie's mother shook her head as hard as she was gazing at him. "Can't," he said.

"Why, what'll you be doing?"

"Homework," Robbie said, the only safe answer he could think of. "I've got to do some of it again."

"All right," his mother said as he ended the call, "I'm going to trust you. You don't need to come with me tonight."

She was making sure he wouldn't be with Duncan. Robbie felt as if he were in a film where whatever the plot required was bound to happen. Nothing else had to for the rest of the day, and he stayed in the front room when he wasn't helping his mother shop. He wondered if he was grinning too often over dinner, but she left him to clear up. He waited to be certain she was well on her way to Midge's, and then he left the house.

He might have borrowed the bicycle if she hadn't locked it. As he hurried to the bus stops, the smell from the grain silos hovered in the cold dark air like the stench of melted plastic. Burning claws reared up to sear black prints on the sky or on his eyes, and he heard the mound of Chucky's grave collapse as the doll fumbled its way out, but that was scrap being dumped beside the river. A bus took him into Liverpool, where he alighted just short of the dockland multiplex.

People were converging on it—students, older couples, solitary characters carrying *Gorehound* magazine with Chucky's face on it. All of them were met outside the cinema by pickets waving placards—**CHILDREN NOT CHUCKY, HORROR ISN'T HEALTHY, CARE FOR KIDS INSTEAD OF FILMS, SAVE OUR BABES FROM SADISM**... Whichever Robbie's mother might be wielding, he ran behind an apartment block without locating her.

The luxury block was guarded by an electrified fence, the outside of which led him parallel to the river. He didn't think anyone saw him sprint from the corner of the fence to the rear of the multiplex, where the plot he was enacting seemed to abandon him. All the back doors of the cinemas were locked, and the side doors were just as immovable. As he faltered in the recess of the exit closest to the pickets, they began to chant "Chuck Chucky out" and drum the staves of their placards on the concrete. Somebody was remonstrating with them, and when Robbie peeked around the corner he

saw it was the manager, supported by quite a few of the cinema personnel. Among the pickets growing louder in response were Duncan's and Robbie's mothers, but nobody appeared to see him dodge through the nearest front door into the multiplex.

Nearly all the staff must be confronting the pickets, and the girls in the box office were dealing with a queue. There wasn't even anyone to take tickets at the entrance to the screens. While the staff at the popcorn counter might have, they were serving customers. Robbie walked not too quickly or too surreptitiously past them into a corridor where posters indicated which door led to which film. He hadn't found the poster he was looking for when he heard Chucky's voice.

It was beyond a door marked STAFF ONLY. Robbie glanced around to see that the corridor was deserted. He hauled the door open and slipped past as it began to close behind him. He felt as if he were not merely in a film but in a dream he'd had, unless he was having it now. He was where he would have hoped to be—in a projection room.

The projectionist was elsewhere. Six projectors—half the number of screens—were casting images through dwarfish windows on the far side of the room. The mocking gleeful voice led Robbie to the second machine from the left. A window next to the one the projector was using showed him Chucky's face swollen larger than any of the audience beneath it in the darkened auditorium. They were watching a documentary about the films, all five of which were stacked in cans beside the projector.

Robbie lifted both fire extinguishers out of their cradles on the walls and laid them alongside the projector. A film magazine was lying on a table by the door, and he tore it up to pile the pages between the extinguishers. Prising the lid off the topmost can of film, he tipped out the contents, which unwound across the heap of paper. The chant of the pickets and the drumming of sticks urged him on. By the time he'd emptied all the cans his fingernails twinged from opening the lids, and his arms ached with his efforts. None of this mattered, because the extinguishers had prevented the tangle of celluloid from burying all the paper. Perhaps Chucky wanted to be caught—to be stopped. Robbie took out the matchbox and struck a match.

The paper flamed at once, blazing up beneath the pile of film. In a moment the celluloid was on fire. Chucky was still ranting in the shaky darkness, but he wouldn't be for long. Robbie would have liked to see the flames reach

the film in the projector, except that the fire or the projectionist might trap him. As the room began to fill with a plastic stench he retreated into the corridor. He was loitering outside the toilets near an exit—he would look as if he were waiting for someone if anybody noticed him—when a man appeared at the far end of the corridor and made for the projection room.

For just an instant Robbie wanted to warn him, and then he realised that the projectionist must have watched Chucky while checking all the films. Robbie observed him as he pulled the door open and uttered a syllable and lurched into the room. The door shut behind him, puffing out thick smoke, and then there was silence apart from the noise of the pickets. Robbie was at the side exit when a figure covered with flames and partly composed of them staggered into the corridor.

Was it a doll? Bits of plastic were peeling away from it, unless they were pieces of film. It wasn't making much noise; a clogged rising groan was the best it could do for a scream. Perhaps its face was melting. As it pranced away it looked more than ever like a puppet, growing smaller while its hands clutched at and flinched away from its blazing skull. It had almost reached the far end of the corridor when a woman and her children came out of a cinema to scream on its behalf. Robbie had to cover his grin with a hand as if he was overcome by their emotion; he might have been putting on a mask. As the family retreated screaming into the cinema and the puppet fell on any face it had left, he let himself out of the multiplex.

The pickets were still chanting and thumping their sticks. He would have told them there was no longer any need, but however necessary his actions had been, suppose he was misunderstood? He sprinted behind another apartment block while fireworks in the sky celebrated his success. The top deck of a bus from the stop beyond the multiplex gave him a view of people streaming out of all the exits, and just a few signs sprouting from the crowd. A placard sank out of sight as he watched, and he thought it was acknowledging him.

He had to shut a smell of melted plastic out of the house. He felt hollow, but in the best way—emptied of the need to intervene. He drowsed in bed until he heard his mother come home, and then he fell asleep. He didn't dream or waken, even when a church started ringing its bells. Perhaps they were for Chucky's funeral, but there must have been a phone as well, because Robbie opened his eyes at last to see his mother in the doorway of

his room. "You had a long one," she said. "My nan used to say you only sleep well if you've been good."

Could he tell her how good he'd been? As he tested the mechanism of his lips she said "You missed it all."

His lips parted, but she headed off whatever he might have said. "It's a good job you weren't there, though."

"Why?"

"There was a fire at the cinema. The police think it was deliberate. They want to talk to us."

Would they understand? She ought to hear before they did, and Robbie was about to tell his secret when she said "One of the staff was in the fire. Midge just called to say he died. We're all going over to hers for a while. I've left your breakfast."

So she hadn't meant the police were after him. He should have seen how normal she wanted life to be. She looked sad for the projectionist, and perhaps he hadn't deserved to be burned, but he'd had to be. All at once she looked sadder. "I forgot your juice again."

"I can get some."

"You're a good boy really. Stay like that," she said and hurried downstairs.

As soon as the bicycle trundled out of the house Robbie headed for the bathroom. He still had work to do. Perhaps he could be sad about it, if you needed to be sad about people who'd turned into dolls. He didn't look sad in the mirror; he could see no expression at all—his ordinary face was the only mask he needed. He was contemplating it when his phone struck up its slogan.

There wouldn't be peace yet, but there might be soon. "You should of been there last night," Duncan told him.

"What happened?"

"My mam and yours nearly got in a fight with the cinema. And somebody started a fire and half of it's burned down, and a feller was in it. I'll tell you all about it when I see you. I've got some stuff that'll do your head in."

Watching so much Chucky had done that to Duncan, Robbie thought. "Where?" he said.

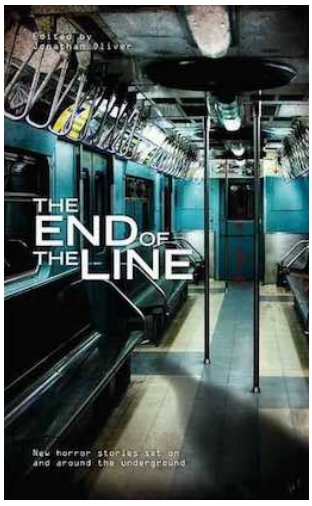
"In the park. I found somewhere nobody'll know we're there. Are you coming now?"

"I've got to go to the shop first."

"Being your mam's good boy again, are you?"

"You'll see." Robbie knew Duncan was grinning, and imagined how they both would when they met. His grin wouldn't be the same as Duncan's; it was a mask, because he was the opposite of Chucky. "I won't be long," he said. "I'll be back."

The Rounds



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As the train arrives at James Street one of the women behind me in the carriage murmurs "They're talking about us again."

"What's somebody saying this time?" her friend protests, but I miss the answer in the midst of a recorded warning not to leave luggage unattended. The amplified voice seems to herd commuters off the underground platform onto the train, and an Asian woman in a headscarf black enough for a funeral takes a seat at the far end of the carriage. Perhaps she's a lawyer from the courts at the top of James Street, since she's carrying a briefcase. The voice falls silent as the train heads into the tunnel.

There's just a solitary track on the loop under Liverpool, where the tunnel shrinks to half its previous width. Lights embedded in the walls flash out of the dark every few seconds like some land of signal. In about a minute more passengers board at Moorfields; it's the start of the rush hour. I'm at the nearest doors well before the train pulls into Lime Street, where the Muslim woman alights further down the carriage. As I make to step onto the platform I notice she's without her briefcase.

"Excuse me," I call, but she doesn't seem to hear. Several people look up or around and then lose interest as I dash along the carriage. The case is on the floor by the seat she vacated, and I grab it before struggling between the last of the commuters boarding the train. The woman isn't on the platform. She could have used the lift, but the escalators are closer, and I sprint for the exit that leads to them.

Is she late for a main line train? By the time I reach the bank of escalators her strides have taken her almost to the top. I'd try and overtake her on the other upward escalator, but it isn't moving. "Excuse me," I shout, "you dropped this."

She turns with one hand on the banister and smiles, though the expression looks a little automatic. I'm hurrying towards her when she sails out of view. The briefcase is so shabby that I might conclude she meant to dump it if it weren't also heavy with documents. I assume that's what the contents are, but the lock is jammed; it's so distorted that someone might already have tried to force it—perhaps she has lost the key. I admit I'm glad to find her waiting beyond the escalator, this side of the ticket barrier. "Oh, thank you," she says and makes her smile rueful. "I don't know what I could have been thinking of."

I'm at least equally ashamed of having thought she might be up to no good. It shows how prejudiced we've all grown, how inclined to think in today's stereotypes. I pass her the briefcase with both hands, and she grasps the scruffy handle as she shows her ticket at the barrier. I flash my pass and am following her along the passage to the escalators that lead up to the main station when my breast pocket emits a series of piercing clanks that put me in mind of a faulty pacemaker.

I read the message on my mobile as the escalator lifts me into the glare of sunlight through the glass roof. Have to cancel, it says. No train. Beneath the huge cautionary voice of the station there's the babble of a crowd that's hurrying to the platforms while at least as many people stream out onto the concourse. The Muslim woman has disappeared among them. I pocket the mobile without sending a response and tramp down the descending escalator. As I display my pass the ticket collector says "You look familiar."

"I expect there's plenty more like me." I'd say that was as witty as her quip, but she doesn't bother laughing. She seems to feel it's her duty to ask "Weren't you here just now?"

"If you say so."

"Did you forget something?"

"That's not me. I thought I was meeting someone but I'm not after all."

"You want to be sure what's happening another time."

The pointless exchange has delayed me so much that as I step on the underground escalator I hear a squeal of wheels—the arrival of the train I meant to catch. I clutch at the unsynchronised banisters and dash down two sinking steps at a time, to reach the platform just as the train sets about shutting its doors. With a leap that leaves me feeling rejuvenated I jam my

foot between the nearest pair, which flinch apart, raising an alarm that all the others take up. "I've still got it," I declare as I board the train.

Nobody seems interested. One man lowers his head as though his tweed hat is weighing it down. A younger man is leafing through a cardboard folder full of documents, and a girl is lost in the world of her personal stereo, while a woman in a coat patterned like a chessboard frowns at a Mtogo poster as if she thinks an African restaurant has no right to advertise on the train. I find a seat near the doors as the train heads for Central Station, where it swaps commuters for commuters before following the loop back to James Street. Just one passenger alights there, hurrying behind the crowd on the platform. She's the Muslim with the briefcase.

She must have used the lift at Lime Street while I was held up at the barrier. I've a reason to have caught the first train back, but what's hers? However prejudiced it makes me feel, I can't help lurching to my feet and forcing my way onto the platform. She's already past the nearest exit—she isn't even on the stairs to which it leads. If I find she's returning to the courts, where she could perfectly well have left some item, I hope I'll be cured of making suspicious assumptions. If she sees me I'll be more embarrassed still. I sprint up the boxed-in stairs and reach the top just in time to see her leaving the enclosed bridge across the underground tracks. She isn't bound for the outside world. She's on her way down to the platform for the trains around the loop.

I hear a train approaching, and her running down to meet it. I can't see her as I dash down the steps, and she isn't on the platform scattered with commuters. I'm opposite the last carriage of the train. I could try to reach the driver or attract their attention, but what would I say? All I know is that if the woman plans to abandon the briefcase again, we should all be safe until she's well away from it. The thought sends me onto the train.

This time I don't trigger the alarm, and the train moves off at once. The carriage is crowded, but I can see every head, and there's no sign of a headscarf. Suppose she's so fanatical that she would take it off to be less obvious? I struggle through the crowd, peering at every face and at the floor beside and between and especially under the seats. All the people in the aisle would make a briefcase easier to hide, but it seems the woman wasn't in this carriage, or at least she hasn't left the case here. I haul open the door between the carriages, to see a man leaning against the next door. He's so

bulky that he blocks the view into the other carriage, and he doesn't budge when I knock on the window. I make to shove the door at him, and then I'm overwhelmed by a blaze of light. It isn't an explosion, even if my innards wince. The train has emerged from the tunnel.

We're at Moorfields. The doors open to the platform, but I'm nowhere near any of them. When I push at the one between the carriages the man with his wide flabby shoulders against it doesn't shift an inch. More people squeeze onto the train, and I'm near to panicking. As it moves off I crane back to stare through a window at the platform. A woman is striding fast along a passage to the escalators. She's the headscarved Mohammedan, and she doesn't have her briefcase.

My guts clench like a helpless fist, and a sour taste surges into my mouth. Until this moment I can't really have believed my own suspicions—might as well have been enacting a scene from a cheap thriller based on the news. As the tunnel closes around the carriage I kick the connecting door and pound on it with both fists. When the hulking man turns his big stupid head to stare at me I flash my pass, too quickly for him to take issue with it. "Let me through," I shout and mime as well.

Even he must realise we all need to be concerned about security, though he makes it clear that he's doing me a favour by stepping aside. I brush past him and shoulder my way through the swaying crowd. The lights on the walls of the tunnel are hurtling towards me like the future. There's a bag of shopping between two seats, and there's another carrier bag on the floor, but where's the briefcase? Is it even in this carriage? How much distance may the woman want to put between herself and the case, or how little? I'm nearly at the first set of doors, and I'm shamefully tempted to make my escape, but we're still in the tunnel. The train lurches as if it has been derailed, and its hollow roar seems to grow louder. I seize the metal pole above the partition that separates the seats from the crowded space in front of a pair of doors. The carriage steadies, and as I grasp there was no explosion I see a briefcase on the floor, almost hidden by the legs of passengers. "Sir," I say urgently, "is that your case?"

The man who's closest to it glances down and then just as indifferently at my face. "Nothing to do with me."

His neighbours shake their heads, and I stoop to retrieve the case. I recognise it at once—recognise the warped lock, which I'm beginning to

think might have been deliberately forced out of shape so that nobody can open it. I close my fist around the ragged handle and lift the case.

At once light flares all around me. I'm back at Lime Street. All along the carriage matrix signs spell it out, and a woman's amplified voice pronounces the words for anyone who can't read. As I make for the doors I'm frantically trying to decide where to take the briefcase. The train is coasting to a halt, and I'm still trapped by all the bodies pressing close around me, when someone taps me on the shoulder hard enough for a knock on a door. "That yours?" a man says in my ear.

"It isn't," I declare and struggle around to face him. He's a cleaner in a yellow jerkin. Usually the cleaners don't collect the rubbish from the trains during the rush hour, and his appearance is as unexpected as it's reassuring —even the Union Jack badge just visible on the lapel of his jacket. "It was left before," I murmur for only him to hear. "I think—"

"We saw," he says just as low and reaches for the briefcase. "Give it here."

However grateful I am to let it go, I want to be sure he understands. "You saw who left it," I mutter.

"We know all about those."

This could be prejudice symbolised by the badge. Under the circumstances I can't be choosy, and I hand him the briefcase. "Be careful with it," I whisper. "Whatever's inside—"

"It's seen to, granddad," he says and steps onto the platform.

As he strides towards the nearest exit a young woman offers me a seat. Perhaps I look shaken by having to deal with the briefcase, unless she heard what the cleaner called me. I sink onto the seat, but I can't begin to relax until the train leaves the station and is safely in the tunnel. "Thank God that's over," I say aloud.

I oughtn't to have spoken. At least nobody seems to want to enquire into my remark. One man clasps his hands and bows his head as if to dazzle everyone with the shine of his bald scalp. A girl in a sweater striped like a wasp stares out of the window at the repetition of the lights. A young businessman reads a magazine, and the woman next to him might almost be hypnotised by the swaying of her earrings, which are shaped like inverted question marks although she doesn't look remotely Spanish. More passengers manage to find room when we reach Central Station, and soon

the voice of the train reads out the illuminated announcement about James Street. In a very few moments I'll be out of the loop at last. Just one person leaves the train and heads for the exit. He's wearing a yellow jerkin, and he's carrying a briefcase.

He's the man who spoke to me. It needn't be the same case, except that I can see the warped lock. Didn't he understand my warning? How could he risk bringing the case back on the train? The explanation makes my nerves yank me to my feet. "It's him as well," I gasp. "He's part of it."

Nobody appears to want to understand or to let me off the train. I have to shout in one man's ear before he gives an inch, followed by hardly any more as I struggle past him. I've barely staggered onto the platform when the train shuts its doors. I could shout to the driver, but if anyone else hears me, won't that cause a panic or worse? My heart thumps like a frenzied drum as I dash up the steps to the underground bridge.

I can't see the man in the yellow jerkin or the briefcase. Has he used one of the lifts up to street level? I could—there are always staff at the top—but that might take longer than it's safe to take. There's a more immediate way of communicating with the staff, and I sprint across the bridge to leap down two steps at a time to the other platform.

Passengers are waiting for a train around the loop, but I can't see what I'm afraid to see. An intercom is embedded in the wall. A blue button offers **Information**, but I jab the green one that says **Emergency**. My heart deals me a couple of irregular thumps that I hear as well as feel before the grille above the buttons speaks. "Hello?"

"I'm at James Street." Lurching close to the grille, I cup my hands around my mouth to murmur "I think—"

"Can't hear you."

"You won't want anybody else hearing." All the same, the man's voice is coarse with static, and suppose mine is even more distorted? I press the sides of my hands around the grille and shove my mouth closer. "Someone's up to something down here," I say as loud as I dare. "They keep trying to leave a case on the train."

"Who does?"

"I think they're Muslims, or they may not be. Maybe they're people who're against Muslims and trying to make it look as if it's them." The speaker has

begun to remind me of a grille in the door of a cell. I strain my eyes as far to the side as their aching muscles will drag them. I can't see the man or the briefcase, but everyone nearby seems to be watching me until they look away. I'm the last person they ought to suspect, and they wouldn't find my behaviour odd if they knew I was acting on their behalf. "The one who's got the case now," I say urgently, "he's one of your cleaners or he's pretending to be."

"Where are you saying he is?"

"He just got off the train at James Street. I'm not sure where he went." I have to raise my voice to compete with the sounds of the latest train. Most of the people around me converge on the doors, and I'm so confused by nervousness that for a moment I think I'm about to miss the train. Of course I don't want to return to the loop, and I'm about to demand how the railway will be dealing with my information when a man darts off the stairs and onto the train.

He's wearing an unobtrusively dark suit. It's no longer hidden by the yellow jerkin, and I might not have recognised him except for the flag pinned to his lapel and the briefcase in his hand. "He's here," I shout, and my hands sprawl away from the grille. "He's got back on the train."

The only response from the grille is a blurred metallic clatter. I didn't say that the man has the case, and now I'm sure it's too late. My instincts send me to the train before I have a chance to think, and I dodge between the closing doors. "Let me through," I say at once.

I didn't have time to reach the carriage the man boarded. Nobody ahead of me seems to believe my mission is urgent. I have to thrust my pass over people's shoulders to flash it in their faces, just long enough to leave them with an impression of officialdom. I'm crawling with sweat from the closeness of so many bodies, whose softness feels horribly vulnerable, ready to be blown apart. The carriage seems little better than airless, and I feel walled in by the tunnel, not to mention my own scarcely rational decision to pursue the man onto the train. Now I'm at the door to the next carriage, and someone is lounging against it. As I pound on the glass my heart mimics the rhythm. At last the loafer turns his sluggish apathetic head. He stares at my pass and then at me as if I might be a patient posing as a nurse, and then he slouches aside just far enough to let me sidle around the door.

I can't see the man with the briefcase. His badge is too small to show up in the crowd, and what else is there to distinguish him? Mousy hair, bland nondescript face, dark suit—none of these stands out. My heart counts the seconds like a clock or some more lethal mechanism as I force my way along the carriage. I peer at the floor but see only people's legs—bones that could shatter in a moment, flesh and muscles that would fill the air. I'm nearly at the first set of doors, and I crane around the partition behind the seats. There indeed is the briefcase.

I feel as though I've rehearsed the moment. I stoop and grab the handle, and I'm lifting the case when the train shudders in the midst of a burst of light. I'm almost used to that, because I know it means we've reached Moorfields. I still haven't located the man with the flag in his lapel, but it can't matter just now. The moment the door opens I struggle through the crowd and its reinforcements onto the platform. Where can I take the briefcase? I'm fleeing to the nearest exit when a hand grasps my shoulder. "Where do you think you're going with that?" says a voice.

It belongs to a tall man in an unobtrusively expensive suit. The lines on his high forehead and the hint of grey in his cropped black hair may be raising his apparent age, but he seems reassuringly official. "Where's safe?" I blurt.

"I'm asking what you're doing with it," he says and keeps hold of my shoulder.

"Trying to get rid of it, to dispose of it, I mean. Someone deliberately left it on the train, and not just once either. Don't you know what that means?" I'm so desperate that I shake the case at him, and it emits an ominous metallic rattle. "Just let me—"

"You made the call."

I don't see how this can be an accusation, and so I say "It was me, yes."

"Thank you, Mr Conrad."

I'm bemused by this, even though his grip on my shoulder has begun to feel more appreciative than custodial. "How do you know my name?"

"We know everything we have to know."

His eyes have grown so professionally blank that I say "You're not with the railway, are you?"

"We're responsible for this kind of situation. That's all I can tell you." He lets go of my shoulder and repeats, "Thank you, Mr Conrad."

Even when he holds out his hand I don't immediately see he's asking for the briefcase. Its reappearances have left me wary, and I say "I wonder if you've got some identification."

"Don't you think we would have?" he says and produces a wallet almost as thin as a wafer. It contains a single card with his name and his likeness and some abbreviated information. "Is that good enough for you?" he wants to know.

"Thank you, Mr Joseph," I say and hand over the briefcase.

He doesn't move away at once. He has to know what he's about, which is why I didn't panic when he lingered over questioning me—he would hardly have been putting himself at risk. There may be a trace of doubt in my eyes, since he says "Are you sure that settles it? Would you like to be there when its disposed of?"

"I'm sure." Indeed, I'm growing anxious for him and the case to be gone. "You're the authority," I tell him. "It's in safe hands now."

As he heads for the nearest stairway I hear a train. I'm eager to board, and more eager for it to leave any danger behind. The doors close as I find a seat and give in to expressing relief—shaking my head, mopping my brow, letting out a loud sigh that shudders with my heartbeat. "I've really done it this time," I declare.

Nobody responds except for glancing at me as if I might be a mental patient on the loose. I don't care what they think of me; I know I've kept them safe. A young man in a business suit returns to reading a comic book, and a girl gazes at her extravagantly large wristwatch, which shows seven minutes to six. A woman who pushed her thin spectacles high with a forefinger lets them subside, and a man lifts one foot after the other to rub the toecaps of his shoes even shinier on his trouser cuffs. None of the passengers might be able to do any of this without me. The idea accompanies me around the loop, past Lime Street and Central Station, and prompts me to stare along the James Street platform. I see nobody with a briefcase, but the absence isn't quite reassuring enough. As the doors start to close I jump off the train and run up the stairs to the underground bridge.

I still seem to have a task. When a train appears I stay on the platform until the doors begin to close, but I can't see anyone suspicious. As soon as I step aboard a girl gives me a seat, and everything seems settled as the train sets off around the loop. A bald man with a tweed hat on his lap gazes at the polished toecaps of his shoes before turning over his newspaper. A bespectacled woman in a checked overcoat and with queries dangling from her earlobes is reading another copy of the paper. A young man dressed for business takes a comic book from among the documents in a cardboard folder, and a young woman in a waspishly striped sweater pushes a headphone away from one ear while she consults her considerable wristwatch. As blackness closes around the train I see the time is seven minutes to six.

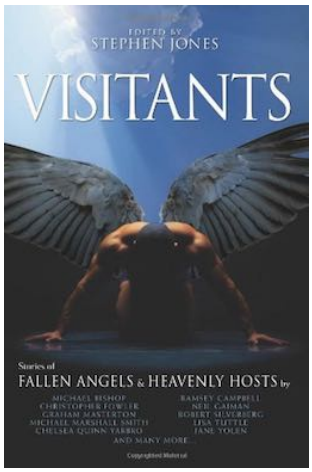
I could imagine the lights on the tunnel walls are signalling to me, and I search for some distraction inside the carriage. The headline on the front page of the bald man's newspaper says Islamic Panic, but I'm not sure if that's the name of a terrorist group. The bespectacled woman's paper has its letters page facing me. One letter is entitled No Asylum, which seems to be the slogan of a party called Pure Brit, and the correspondent has suggested that the party is planting bombs so as to blame Muslims and provoke a backlash against immigrants. I grow aware of a voice too small to belong to any of the passengers. It isn't in my head; it's on the young woman's headphones—a recorded radio phone-in, where somebody is arguing that the bombs are the work not of Muslims or their foes but the first stages of a plan by the secret service to force the country to accept dictatorship. Another caller on the phone-in accuses the man who was credited with trying to save his fellow passengers of having planted the bomb himself. All these idle theories make me feel as if nothing is to be trusted, and I focus my attention on the young man's comic book. The cover shows a boffin grimacing in disbelief while he tells his colleagues "It's not that kind of time bomb. It's a bomb that destroys time. It'll blow the past to bits."

"It's nothing like that." The idea has gone too far, and I can't keep quiet any longer, especially since I've seen the truth at last. I can hear the women murmuring behind me like nurses, and I should have listened to them sooner. "That's right, someone's talking about us again," I tell everyone. "But don't you see, if they can keep changing it we can change it too."

Nobody appears to want to listen. They're all gazing at the floor, even those who've turned towards me. "It needn't be what any of them say happened to us," I insist—I feel as if a voice is speaking through me. "It needn't even be what did."

Everyone is staring at the floor beside me. I look at last and see the briefcase. "We don't have to be what people say just because of where we are," I vow as I take hold of the handle. A thunderous rumble swells in my ears, and brightness flares in my eyes, but it's on the wall of the tunnel. I mustn't be distracted by the absence of my shadow—of anyone's. I have to get my task right this time, and then we can head for the light, out of the tunnel.

With The Angels



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As Cynthia drove between the massive mossy posts where the gates used to be, Karen said "Were you little when you lived here, Auntie Jackie?"

"Not as little as I was," Cynthia said.

"That's right," Jacqueline said while the poplars alongside the high walls darkened the car, "I'm even older than your grandmother."

Karen and Valerie giggled and then looked for other amusement. "What's this house called, Brian?" Valerie enquired.

"The Populars," the four-year-old declared and set about punching his sisters almost before they began to laugh.

"Now, you three," Cynthia intervened. "You said you'd show Jackie how good you can be."

No doubt she meant her sister to feel more included. "Can't we play?" said Brian as if Jacqueline were a disapproving bystander.

"I expect you may," Jacqueline said, having glanced at Cynthia. "Just don't get yourselves dirty or do any damage or go anywhere you shouldn't or that's dangerous."

Brian and the eight-year-old twins barely waited for Cynthia to haul two-handed at the brake before they piled out of the Volvo and chased across the forecourt into the weedy garden. "Do try and let them be children," Cynthia murmured.

"I wasn't aware I could change them." Jacqueline managed not to groan while she unbent her stiff limbs and clambered out of the car. "I shouldn't think they would take much notice of me," she said, supporting herself on the hot roof as she turned to the house.

Despite the August sunlight, it seemed darker than its neighbours, not just because of the shadows of the trees, which still put her in mind of a graveyard. More than a century's worth of winds across the moors outside the Yorkshire town had plastered the large house with grime. The windows on the topmost floor were half the size of those on the other two storeys, one reason why she'd striven in her childhood not to think they resembled the eyes of a spider, any more than the porch between the downstairs rooms looked like a voracious vertical mouth. She was far from a child now, and she strode or at any rate limped to the porch, only to have to wait for her sister to bring the keys. As Cynthia thrust one into the first rusty lock the twins scampered over, pursued by their brother. "Throw me up again," he cried.

"Where did he get that from?"

"From being a child, I should think," Cynthia said. "Don't you remember what it was like?"

Jacqueline did, not least because of Brian's demand. She found some breath as she watched the girls take their brother by the arms and swing him into the air. "Again," he cried.

"We're tired now," Karen told him. "We want to see in the house."

"Maybe grandma and auntie will give you a throw if you're good," Valerie said.

"Not just now," Jacqueline said at once.

Cynthia raised her eyebrows high enough to turn her eyes blank as she twisted the second key. The door lumbered inwards a few inches and then baulked. She was trying to nudge the obstruction aside with the door when Brian made for the gap. "Don't," Jacqueline blurted, catching him by the shoulder.

"Good heavens, Jackie, what's the matter now?"

"We don't want the children in there until we know what state it's in, do we?"

"Just see if you can squeeze past and shift whatever's there, Brian."

Jacqueline felt unworthy of consideration. She could only watch the boy wriggle around the edge of the door and vanish into the gloom. She heard fumbling and rustling, but of course this didn't mean some desiccated

presence was at large in the vestibule. Why didn't Brian speak? She was about to prompt him until he called "It's just some old letters and papers."

When he reappeared with several free newspapers that looked as dusty as their news, Cynthia eased the door past him. A handful of brown envelopes contained electricity bills that grew redder as they came up to date, which made Jacqueline wonder "Won't the lights work?"

"I expect so if we really need them." Cynthia advanced into the wide hall beyond the vestibule and poked at the nearest switch. Grit ground inside the mechanism, but the bulbs in the hall chandelier stayed as dull as the mass of crystal teardrops. "Never mind," Cynthia said, having tested every switch in the column on the wall without result. "As I say, we won't need them."

The grimy skylight above the stairwell illuminated the hall enough to show that the dark wallpaper was even hairier than Jacqueline remembered. It had always made her think of the fur of a great spider, and now it was blotchy with damp. The children were already running up the left-hand staircase and across the first-floor landing, under which the chandelier dangled like a spider on a thread. "Don't go out of sight," Cynthia told them, "until we see what's what."

"Chase me." Brian ran down the other stairs, one of which rattled like a lid beneath the heavy carpet. "Chase," he cried and dashed across the hall to race upstairs again.

"Don't keep running up and down unless you want to make me ill," Jacqueline's grandmother would have said. The incessant rumble of footsteps might have presaged a storm on the way to turning the hall even gloomier, so that Jacqueline strode as steadily as she could towards the nearest room. She had to pass one of the hall mirrors, which appeared to show a dark blotch hovering in wait for the children. The shapeless sagging darkness at the top of the grimy oval was a stain, and she needn't have waited to see the children run downstairs out of its reach. "Do you want the mirror?" Cynthia said. "I expect it would clean up."

"I don't know what I want from this house," Jacqueline said.

She mustn't say she would prefer the children not to be in it. She couldn't even suggest sending them outside in case the garden concealed dangers—broken glass, rusty metal, holes in the ground. The children were staying with Cynthia while her son and his partner holidayed in Morocco, but

couldn't she have chosen a better time to go through the house before it was put up for sale? She frowned at Jacqueline and then followed her into the dining-room.

Although the heavy curtains were tied back from the large windows, the room wasn't much brighter than the hall. It was steeped in the shadows of the poplars, and the tall panes were spotted with earth. A spider's nest of a chandelier loomed above the long table set for an elaborate dinner for six. That had been Cynthia's idea when they'd moved their parents to the rest home; she'd meant to convince any thieves that the house was still occupied, but to Jacqueline it felt like preserving a past that she'd hoped to outgrow. She remembered being made to sit up stiffly at the table, to hold her utensils just so, to cover her lap nicely with her napkin, not to speak or to make the slightest noise with any of her food. Too much of this upbringing had lodged inside her, but was that why she felt uneasy with the children in the house? "Are you taking anything out of here?" Cynthia said.

"There's nothing here for me, Cynthia. You have whatever you want and don't worry about me."

Cynthia gazed at her as they headed for the breakfast room. The chandelier stirred as the children ran above it once again, but Jacqueline told herself that was nothing like her nightmares—at least, not very like. She was unnerved to hear Cynthia exclaim "There it is."

The breakfast room was borrowing light from the large back garden, but not much, since the overgrown expanse lay in the shadow of the house. The weighty table had spread its wings and was attended by six straight-backed ponderous chairs, but Cynthia was holding out her hands to the high chair in the darkest corner of the room. "Do you remember sitting in that?" she apparently hoped. "I think I do."

"I wouldn't," Jacqueline said.

She hadn't needed it to make her feel restricted at the table, where breakfast with her grandparents had been as formal as dinner. "Nothing here either," she declared and limped into the hall.

The mirror on the far side was discoloured too. She glimpsed the children's blurred shapes streaming up into a pendulous darkness and heard the agitated jangle of the chandelier as she made for the lounge. The leather suite looked immovable with age, and only the television went some way

towards bringing the room up to date, though the screen was as blank as an uninscribed stone. She remembered having to sit silent for hours while her parents and grandparents listened to the radio for news about the war—her grandmother hadn't liked children out of her sight in the house. The dresser was still full of china she'd been forbidden to venture near, which was grey with dust and the dimness. Cynthia had been allowed to crawl around the room—indulged for being younger or because their grandmother liked babies in the house. "I'll leave you to it," she said as Cynthia followed her in.

She was hoping to find more light in the kitchen, but it didn't show her much that she wanted to see. While the refrigerator was relatively modern, not to mention tall enough for somebody to stand in, it felt out of place. The black iron range still occupied most of one wall, and the old stained marble sink projected from another. Massive cabinets and heavy chests of drawers helped box in the hulking table scored by knives. It used to remind her of an operating table, even though she hadn't thought she would grow up to be a nurse. She was distracted by the children as they ran into the kitchen. "Can we have a drink?" Karen said for all of them.

"May we?" Valerie amended.

"Please." Once she'd been echoed Jacqueline said "I'll find you some glasses. Let the tap run."

When she opened a cupboard she thought for a moment that the stack of plates was covered by a greyish doily. Several objects as long as a baby's fingers but thinner even than their bones flinched out of sight, and she saw the plates were draped with a mass of cobwebs. She slammed the door as Karen used both hands to twist the cold tap. It uttered a dry gurgle rather too reminiscent of sounds she used to hear while working in the geriatric ward, and she wondered if the supply had been turned off. Then a gout of dark liquid spattered the sink, and a gush of rusty water darkened the marble. As Karen struggled to shut it off Valerie enquired "Did you have to drink that, auntie?"

"I had to put up with a lot you wouldn't be expected to."

"We won't, then. Aren't there any other drinks?"

"And things to eat," Brian said at once.

"I'm sure there's nothing." When the children gazed at her with various degrees of patience Jacqueline opened the refrigerator, trying not to think that the compartments could harbour bodies smaller than Brian's. All she found were a bottle of mouldering milk and half a loaf as hard as a rusk. "I'm afraid you'll have to do without," she said.

How often had her grandmother said that? Supposedly she'd been just as parsimonious before the war. Jacqueline didn't want to sound like her, but when Brian took hold of the handle of a drawer that was level with his head she couldn't help blurting "Stay away from there."

At least she didn't add "We've lost enough children." As the boy stepped back Cynthia hurried into the kitchen. "What are you doing now?"

"We don't want them playing with knives, do we?" Jacqueline said.

"I know you're too sensible, Brian."

Was that aimed just at him? As Cynthia opened the cupboards the children resumed chasing up the stairs. Presumably the creature Jacqueline had glimpsed was staying out of sight, and so were any more like it. When Cynthia made for the hall Jacqueline said "I'll be up in a minute."

Although she didn't linger in the kitchen, she couldn't leave her memories behind. How many children had her grandmother lost that she'd been so afraid of losing any more? By pestering her mother Jacqueline had learned they'd been stillborn, which had reminded her how often her grandmother told her to keep still. More than once today Jacqueline had refrained from saying that to the twins and to Brian in particular. Their clamour seemed to fill the hall and resonate all the way up the house, so that she could have thought the reverberations were shaking the mirrors, disturbing the suspended mass of darkness like a web in which a spider had come to life. "Can we go up to the top now?" Brian said.

"Please don't," Jacqueline called.

It took Cynthia's stare to establish that the boy hadn't been asking Jacqueline. "Why can't we?" Karen protested, and Valerie contributed "We only want to see."

"I'm sure you can," Cynthia said. "Just wait till we're all up there."

Before tramping into the nearest bedroom she gave her sister one more look, and Jacqueline felt as blameworthy as their grandmother used to make

her feel. Why couldn't she watch over the children from the hall? She tilted her head back on her shaky neck to gaze up the stairwell. Sometimes her grandfather would raise his eyes ceilingwards as his wife found yet another reason to rebuke Jacqueline, only for the woman to say "If you look like that you'll see where you're going." Presumably she'd meant heaven, and perhaps she was there now, if there was such a place. Jacqueline imagined her sailing upwards like a husk on a wind; she'd already seemed withered all those years ago, and not just physically either. Was that why Jacqueline had thought the stillbirths must be shrivelled too? They would have ended up like that, but she needn't think about it now, if ever. She glanced towards the children and saw movement above them.

She must have seen the shadows of the treetops—thin shapes that appeared to start out of the corners under the roof before darting back into the gloom. As she tried to grasp how those shadows could reach so far beyond the confines of the skylight, Cynthia peered out of the nearest bedroom. "Jackie, aren't you coming to look?"

Jacqueline couldn't think for all the noise. "If you three will give us some peace for a while," she said louder than she liked. "And stay with us. We don't want you going anywhere that isn't safe."

"You heard your aunt," Cynthia said, sounding unnecessarily like a resentful child.

As Brian trudged after the twins to follow Cynthia into her grandmother's bedroom Jacqueline remembered never being let in there. Later her parents had made it their room—had tried, at any rate. While they'd doubled the size of the bed, the rest of the furniture was still her grandmother's, and she could have fancied that all the swarthy wood was helping the room glower at the intrusion. She couldn't imagine her parents sharing a bed there, let alone performing any activity in it, but she didn't want to think about such things at all. "Not for me," she said and made for the next room.

Not much had changed since it had been her grandfather's, which meant it still seemed to belong to his wife. It felt like her disapproval rendered solid by not just the narrow single bed but the rest of the dark furniture that duplicated hers, having been her choice. She'd disapproved of almost anything related to Jacqueline, not least her husband playing with their granddaughter. Jacqueline avoided glancing up at any restlessness under the roof while she crossed the landing to the other front bedroom. As she gazed

at the two single beds that remained since the cot had been disposed of, the children ran to cluster around her in the doorway. "This was your room, wasn't it?" Valerie said.

"Yours and our grandma's," Karen amended.

"No," Jacqueline said, "it was hers and our mother's and father's."

In fact she hadn't been sent to the top floor until Cynthia was born. Their grandfather had told her she was going to stay with the angels, though his wife frowned at the idea. Jacqueline would have found it more appealing if she hadn't already been led to believe that all the stillbirths were living with the angels. She hardly knew why she was continuing to explore the house. Though the cast-iron bath had been replaced by a fibreglass tub as blue as the toilet and sink, she still remembered flinching from the chilly metal. After Cynthia's birth their grandmother had taken over bathing Jacqueline, scrubbing her with such relentless harshness that it had felt like a penance. When it was over at last, her grandfather would do his best to raise her spirits. "Now you're clean enough for the angels," he would say and throw her up in the air.

"If you're good the angels will catch you"—but of course he did, which had always made her wonder what would happen to her if she wasn't good enough. She'd seemed to glimpse that thought in her grandmother's eyes, or had it been a wish? What would have caught her if she'd failed to live up to requirements? As she tried to forget the conclusion she'd reached Brian said "Where did they put you, then?"

"They kept me right up at the top."

"Can we see?"

"Yes, let's," said Valerie, and Karen ran after him as well.

Jacqueline was opening her mouth to delay them when Cynthia said "You'll be going up there now, won't you? You can keep an eye on them."

It was a rebuke for not helping enough with the children, or for interfering too much, or perhaps for Jacqueline's growing nervousness. Anger at her childish fancies sent her stumping halfway up the topmost flight of stairs before she faltered. Clouds had gathered like a lifetime's worth of dust above the skylight, and perhaps that was why the top floor seemed to darken as she climbed towards it, so that all the corners were even harder to

distinguish—she could almost have thought the mass of dimness was solidifying. "Where were you, auntie?" Karen said.

"In there," said Jacqueline and hurried to join them outside the nearest room.

It wasn't as vast as she remembered, though certainly large enough to daunt a small child. The ceiling stooped to the front wall, squashing the window, from which the shadows of the poplars seemed to creep up the gloomy incline to acquire more substance under the roof at the back of the room. The grimy window smudged the premature twilight, which had very little to illuminate, since the room was bare of furniture and even of a carpet. "Did you have to sleep on the floor?" Valerie said. "Were you very bad?"

"Of course not," Jacqueline declared. It felt as if her memories had been thrown out—as if she hadn't experienced them—but she knew better. She'd lain on the cramped bed hemmed in by dour furniture and cut off from everyone else in the house by the dark that occupied the stairs. She would have prayed if that mightn't have roused what she dreaded. If the babies were with the angels, mustn't that imply they weren't angels themselves? Being stillbirths needn't mean they would keep still—Jacqueline never could when she was told. Suppose they were what caught you if you weren't good? She'd felt as if she had been sent away from her family for bad behaviour. All too soon she'd heard noises that suggested tiny withered limbs were stirring, and glimpsed movements in the highest corners of the room.

She must have been hearing the poplars and seeing their shadows. As she turned away from the emptied bedroom she caught sight of the room opposite, which was full of items covered with dustsheets. Had she ever known what the sheets concealed? She'd imagined they hid some secret that children weren't supposed to learn, but they'd also reminded her of enormous masses of cobweb. She could have thought the denizens of the webs were liable to crawl out of the dimness, and she was absurdly relieved to see Cynthia coming upstairs. "I'll leave you to it," Jacqueline said. "I'll be waiting down below."

It wasn't only the top floor she wanted to leave behind. She'd remembered what she'd once done to her sister. The war had been over at last, and she'd been trusted to look after Cynthia while the adults planned the future. The sisters had only been allowed to play with their toys in the hall, where

Jacqueline had done her best to distract the toddler from straying into any of the rooms they weren't supposed to enter by themselves—in fact, every room. At last she'd grown impatient with her sister's mischief, and in a wicked moment she'd wondered what would catch Cynthia if she tossed her high. As she'd thrown her sister into the air with all her strength she'd realised that she didn't want to know, certainly not at Cynthia's expense—as she'd seen dwarfish shrivelled figures darting out of every corner in the dark above the stairwell and scuttling down to seize their prize. They'd come head first, so that she'd seen their bald scalps wrinkled like walnuts before she glimpsed their hungry withered faces. Then Cynthia had fallen back into her arms, though Jacqueline had barely managed to keep hold of her. Squeezing her eyes shut, she'd hugged her sister until she'd felt able to risk seeing they were alone in the vault of the hall.

There was no use telling herself that she'd taken back her unforgivable wish. She might have injured the toddler even by catching her—she might have broken her frail neck. She ought to have known that, and perhaps she had. Being expected to behave badly had made her act that way, but she felt as if all the nightmares that were stored in the house had festered and gained strength over the years. When she reached the foot of the stairs at last she carried on out of the house.

The poplars stooped to greet her with a wordless murmur. A wind was rising under the sunless sky. It was gentle on her face—it seemed to promise tenderness she couldn't recall having experienced, certainly not once Cynthia was born. Perhaps it could soothe away her memories, and she was raising her face to it when Brian appeared in the porch. "What are you doing, auntie?"

"Just being by myself."

She thought that was pointed enough until he skipped out of the house. "Is it time now?"

Why couldn't Cynthia have kept him with her? No doubt she thought it was Jacqueline's turn. "Time for what?" Jacqueline couldn't avoid asking.

"You said you'd give me a throw."

She'd said she wouldn't then, not that she would sometime. Just the same, perhaps she could. It might be a way of leaving the house behind and all it represented to her. It would prove she deserved to be trusted with him, as

she ought not to have been trusted with little Cynthia. "Come on then," she said.

As soon as she held out her arms he ran and leapt into them. "Careful," she gasped, laughing as she recovered her balance. "Are you ready?" she said and threw the small body into the air.

She was surprised how light he was, or how much strength she had at her disposal. He came down giggling, and she caught him. "Again," he cried.

"Just once more," Jacqueline said. She threw him higher this time, and he giggled louder. Cynthia often said that children kept you young, and Jacqueline thought it was true after all. Brian fell into her arms and she hugged him. "Again," he could hardly beg for giggling.

"Now what did I just say?" Nevertheless she threw him so high that her arms trembled with the effort, and the poplars nodded as if they were approving her accomplishment. She clutched at Brian as he came down with an impact that made her shoulders ache. "Higher," he pleaded almost incoherently. "Higher."

"This really is the last time, Brian." She crouched as if the stooping poplars had pushed her down. Tensing her whole body, she reared up to fling him into the pendulous gloom with all her strength.

For a moment she thought only the wind was reaching for him as it bowed the trees and dislodged objects from the foliage—leaves that rustled, twigs that scraped and rattled. But the thin shapes weren't falling, they were scurrying head first down the tree-trunks at a speed that seemed to leave time behind. Some of them had no shape they could have lived with, and some might never have had any skin. She saw their shrivelled eyes glimmer eagerly and their toothless mouths gape with an identical infantile hunger. Their combined weight bowed the lowest branches while they extended arms like withered sticks to snatch the child.

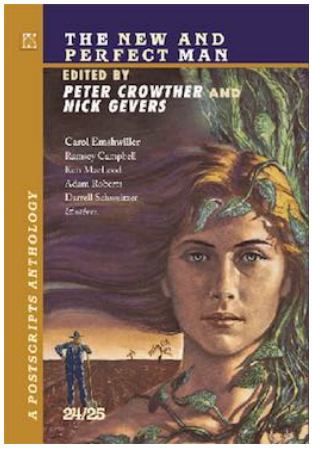
In that helpless instant Jacqueline was overwhelmed by a feeling she would never have admitted—a rush of childish glee, of utter irresponsibility. For a moment she was no longer a nurse, not even a retired one as old as some of her patients had been. She shouldn't have put Brian at risk, but now he was beyond saving. Then he fell out of the dark beneath the poplars, in which there was no longer any sign of life, and she made a

grab at him. The strength had left her arms, and he struck the hard earth with a thud that put her in mind of the fall of a lid.

"Brian?" she said and bent groaning to him. "Brian," she repeated, apparently loud enough to be audible all the way up the house. She heard her old window rumble open, and Cynthia's cry: "What have you done now?" She heard footsteps thunder down the stairs, and turned away from the small still body beneath the uninhabited trees as her sister dashed out of the porch. Jacqueline had just one thought, but surely it must make a difference. "Nothing caught him," she said.

2011

The Room Beyond



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As soon as Todd drove off the motorway it vanished from the mirror, and so did the sun across the moor. On both sides of the street the slender terraced houses huddled together like old folk afraid of descending the precipitous slope. Most of the shops in the town at the foot of the street were illuminated, but the streetlamps seemed oblivious of the September dusk. As he braked and braked again he saw the hotel sign across the maze of roofs.

The middle was blocked by the spire of a church, but BEL and the final E were visible. He hadn't realised that the hotel was on the far side of town. Whenever he stayed with his uncle and aunt he'd come by train, from which they had escorted him through the back streets to their house, interrogating him and talking at him so incessantly that he'd had little chance to learn the route. It had been the same on Sundays, when they'd walked to the Bellevue for a dauntingly formal lunch. Now the town hardly seemed large enough to accommodate either route.

More than this had changed in fifty years. While the clock from beneath which figures emerged on the hour was still outside the jewellers on the High Street, the road was one way only now. It turned away from the hotel, and all the side streets leading there displayed No Entry signs. Most of the shops were either new or disused, and the Apollo, where he'd once seen an airman climbing steps to heaven, had become the Valley Bottom pub. In a few minutes Todd found himself back at the clock, which hadn't moved on from twenty-five to six. The tarnished figures were paralysed on their track, and one stood in a miniature doorway as if he were loath to venture beyond. Shops were being shuttered, and at last the streetlamps came on, illuminating virtually deserted streets. This time Todd left the High Street ahead of the bend, but the lane he followed returned to the clock. He glimpsed Christ the Redeemer down a narrow alley, though the church was

dark. He had to drive along the High Street yet again to discover that a road around the outside of the town led towards the hotel.

Was the park beside the road the one where his relatives had taken him to hear a brass band? He wouldn't have placed it so close to the hotel. The doctor's surgery must have been in one of the derelict houses facing the park, but Todd couldn't identify which. He hadn't thought of it for all these years, and he would have been happy to forget it now. He hadn't passed a single inhabited house by the time the road brought him to the hotel.

He had to laugh, as his uncle liked him to. The long black building was less than half the size he seemed to remember. While it might have been designed to resemble a mansion, he could have taken it for some kind of institution now. A wind blundered off the moor and flapped a torn section of the canvas awning across most of the unilluminated name. A couple of cars were parked on the forecourt, under a solitary orange floodlight that turned his blue Passat as black as they appeared to be. Dead windblown vegetation splintered beneath the wheels as he parked in front of a tall window blacked out by heavy curtains. His boxy suitcase was resting on the back seat, and he trundled it to the hotel. No uniformed doorman was waiting to sweep the massive glass door wide, and Todd might have imagined that the door itself had shrunk. Its metal corner scraped over the tiled floor with an excruciating screech that made the receptionist glower. She was a brawny broad-shouldered woman with gilded spectacles as narrow as her eyes. Her grey hair was severely waved, and the glasses seemed to pinch her features small and sharp. She kept up her frown as Todd crossed the lobby, which was lit to some extent by a few bulbs of the dusty chandelier. More than just her attitude reminded him of someone else, so that he blurted "Excuse me, did you have a mother?"

She pursed her lips so hard that the surrounding skin turned grey along with them. "I beg your pardon," she said while doing nothing of the kind.

Her voice was hoarse and blurred, like a smoker's who was also somewhat drunk. "Sorry," Todd said and risked a laugh, only to wish he'd kept it to himself. "Does it run in the family, I meant to say."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"What you do. Admitting. Admission." Todd's words seemed to be straying out of his control, an unwelcome reminder of his age. "What I'm trying to

say," he said, "was she a receptionist? The one in the practice by the park round the corner."

"That's a graveyard, not a park."

He could only assume she had somewhere else in mind. "Anyway," he said, "Can I have my room?"

"Have you booked?"

"I rang," Todd said and wondered if the woman who'd taken the call had been her in a more hospitable mood. "Jacob Todd."

"Todd." His uncle used to greet him with a cry of "Now it's all jake," but Todd felt as if the receptionist had dropped his name with a dull thud. She dragged a ledger bound in black from under the counter and plucked at the pages before repeating "Todd" like an accusation. He might have thought the pages at the back were loose with age until he realised they were registration forms, one of which she laid before him on the counter. "Fill yourself in," she said.

Discolouration had lent the form a dark border. The print was both small and smudged, and squinting at it only left Todd more frustrated with the task it set him. "Who needs all this?"

The receptionist raised her spectacles to train her gaze on him. Her fingertips looked as earthy as the edges of the form. "You might be taken ill," she said.

"Suppose I am, who'll want all this information?"

"The authorities," she said and stared unblinkingly at him.

The solitary writing instrument on the counter was a ballpoint splintered like a bone and bandaged with sticky plastic tape. As Todd strove to fit his details into narrow boxes on the form, the inky tip stumbled about like a senile limb. Last name, first name, address, date of birth, place of birth... "What's your business in our town?" the receptionist said.

"A funeral."

"You'll be just round the corner."

Even if that was indeed a graveyard, it needn't be the only one in town. Christ the Redeemer hadn't appeared to be anywhere near the hotel. Todd could go for a walk and find his way to the church once he'd checked into his room. Profession, driving licence number, car registration number,

telephone number, email... "Will you be taking the dinner?" the receptionist said.

Todd was distracted by someone's attempts to enter the hotel or even to locate the handle of the door. He turned to see that the door was shaking just with rain, which was surging across the moor. "When do you need to know?" he said.

"As soon as you like." This plainly meant as soon as she did. "Cook wants to get away."

Perhaps at least the meal would be up to the standard Todd remembered, and he could save his walk in case the rain ceased. "Put me down, then," he said.

The receptionist vanished like a shadow into a small office behind the counter. Presumably the dim light from the lobby was all she required, for Todd heard the rattle of a telephone receiver. "One for dinner," she said, and somewhere in the building a distant version of her voice joined in. Another hollow rattle was succeeded by a metallic one, and she reappeared with a key attached to a tarnished baton. "Are you written up yet?" she said.

Towards the bottom of the form the print was almost too indistinct to read. Method of payment, onward destination, next of kin... "That's a blank, I'm afraid," Todd said. He scrawled his signature, in which age had reduced the first name to resembling Jab, and unstuck his discoloured fingers from the pen while the receptionist pored over the form.

He'd had more than enough of the sight of her greyish scalp through her irregular parting—it put him in mind of a crack in weedy stone—by the time she raised her head. "Retired from what?" she apparently felt entitled to learn.

"Education." When this didn't lessen her scrutiny Todd added, "Teaching them their sums."

This failed to earn him even a blink "Will you be dressing?" she said.

"For dinner, you mean?" She'd begun to remind him of his aunt, who had always found some element of his appearance to improve—a collar to tug higher on his neck, a tie to yank tighter, a handkerchief that was either lying too low in his breast pocket or standing too impolitely erect. "I'll be changing," he said.

"Better look alive, then. It's nearly eight, you know."

"Nowhere, near," said Todd, shaking the cuff of his heavy sweater back from his thin wrist. He was about to brandish the time—not much after half past five—when he saw his watch had stopped. His aunt and uncle had sent it for his twenty-first, and it had never let him down before. He drew his cuff over its battered face and found the receptionist frowning at him as if he'd betrayed some innumeracy. "Let's have my key, then," he said, "and I'll be down as soon as I'm fit to kill."

Whenever she'd finished sprucing him Todd's aunt used to say that was how he was dressed, but perhaps the receptionist didn't know the phrase.

"You're number one," she informed him, planting the brass club on the counter with a blow like the stroke of a hammer. "You'll have to work the lift yourself."

Todd couldn't tell whether she was apologising for the attendant's absence or reminiscing about the hotel's better days. As he headed for the gloomy alcove that housed the entrance to the single lift, a wheel of his suitcase dislodged a loose tile. The receptionist watched with disfavour while he replaced it in its gritty niche, and he didn't linger over deciphering the blurred letters on the underside of the tile—presumably some firm's trademark. Once he dragged open both latticed doors of the lift he struggled over shutting them. The wall of the lift shaft inched past the rusty mesh, and at last the floor of a grudgingly illuminated corridor sank into view, although the lift fell short of aligning with it. Todd had to clamber up and haul his suitcase after him before he could make for his room.

It was at the far end of the left-hand stretch of corridor, where a window above a fire escape showed the town reduced to runny mud by the rain on the glass. The feeble lamps on the corridor walls resembled glazed flames, all the more by flickering. The number on Todd's door was dangling head down from its one remaining screw. He twisted the key in the aged shaky lock and pushed the leaden door open, to be met by a smell of old fabric. It made Todd feel enclosed, invisibly and impalpably but oppressively, even after he switched on the miniature chandelier.

The small room was darkened by the furniture—a black wardrobe with a full-length mirror in its narrow door, an ebony dressing-table, a squat chest of drawers that looked stunted by age, a bed that wasn't quite single or double, with a hint of an indentation underneath a shaggy blanket as brown

as turned earth. A door led to a shower and toilet, while another would have communicated with the next bedroom but was blocked by a luggage stand. Behind the heavy curtains at the foot of the bed Todd found a window that showed him darkness raging above the moor. He was unpacking his case when he heard what could have been the fall of several pans in the kitchen. As he changed into his dark suit—the only one he'd brought—a phone rang.

At first he thought it was in the next room. It shrilled at least a dozen times before he traced the dusty wire from the skirting board to the upper compartment of the wardrobe. When he swung the door open, the receiver toppled off the hook, starting to speak as he fumbled it towards his face. "The gong's gone, Mr Todd."

The receptionist's tone seemed capable of stripping Todd of all the years since his last visit. "Oh, is that what it was?" he retorted. "I'll be with you as soon as I can."

He would have liked to shower and shave, but the hotel could take the blame, even if the man in the black frame of the mirror would never have passed his aunt's inspection. Todd had always felt on probation, never quite knowing if his visits were treats or punishments. "If you won't behave you can go to your aunt's," his mother used to say, and he'd suspected she was a little afraid of her older sister. His uncle hadn't seemed to be, and made a joke wherever he could find one, but then he'd done so at the surgery as well. Todd didn't need to be alone with those memories, and hurried out of the room.

If he'd been able to locate the stairs he would have used them, but the corridor offered him just the silent doors, bearing numbers like steps in a child's first arithmetic lesson. He was close to hearing them chanted in his skull. He stepped gingerly down into the lift and pushed the marble button, only to leave a blotchy print on it. He hadn't even washed his hands. "Not my fault," he muttered, feeling threatened by a second childhood.

The lobby was deserted except for a sign on a stand outside a room Todd hadn't previously noticed. The plastic numbers separated by a hyphen weren't years, they were hours with just sixty minutes between them. The words above them would have said DINING ROOM if they hadn't lost a letter. Todd found the N on the carpet in the doorway—carpet trampled as flat and black as soil. As he attempted to replace the letter between the I and its twin he felt as if he were playing an infantile game. He hadn't succeeded

when he grew aware of being watched from the room beyond the sign. "Just putting you together," he said.

The waiter was dressed even more sombrely than Todd. He stepped back a silent pace and indicated the room with a sweep of one white-gloved hand. The room was nowhere near as daunting as Todd recalled. While the tables were still draped like altars, and the place was certainly as hushed as church, it was scarcely big enough for a chapel. Even if it had always sported chandeliers, he didn't remember them as being so ineffectual. He had to squint to be sure of the burly waiter's small sharp face, the eyes narrowed as though in need of spectacles, the brow that he could have imagined had been tugged unnaturally smooth by the removal of a wig from the clipped grey hair. He was disconcerted enough to blurt "Has your sister gone off?"

The waiter paced to the farthest table and drew back its solitary chair. "Who was that, sir?"

His voice was as unctuously slow as a priest's at a pulpit, and might have been striving for hoarseness and depth. "Aren't you related to the lady at reception?" Todd said.

"They say we're all related, don't they?" Before Todd could give this whatever response it deserved, the waiter said "Will you be taking the buffet?"

Todd sat down as the waiter slipped the chilly leather seat beneath him. "Can I see the menu?" he said.

He never had while he was visiting—he'd only watched his aunt and uncle leafing through leather-bound volumes and then ordering for him. "I wouldn't recommend it, sir," the waiter said.

Todd was starting to feel as he'd felt as a child—that everyone around him knew a secret he wouldn't learn until he was older. "Why not?" he demanded.

"We're just providing the buffet option on this occasion. Chef had to leave us."

"Then I haven't much choice, have I?"

"We always have while we're alive."

The waiter sounded more priestly than ever, and his pace was deliberate enough for a ritual as he approached the lengthy table that stood along the left side of the room. He uncovered every salver and tureen before extending a hand towards them. "Enough for a large party, sir."

When waiters used to say things like that, Todd had expected his uncle to respond with a witticism. The hotel seemed to be turning into a joke Todd didn't understand. As he crossed the shiny blackened carpet to the buffet, the waiter raised a cloth from an elongated heap at the end of the table and handed him a plate. The buffet offered chicken legs and slices of cold meat, potatoes above which a fog hovered or at least a stagnant cloud of steam, a mound of chips that reminded him of extracting sticks from a haphazard pile in a game for which his aunt had never had the patience. Last came salads, and as he loaded his plate a lettuce leaf attempted a feeble crawl before subsiding on the salver. The movement might have betrayed the presence of an insect, but it was the work of a wind that had moved the floor-length curtain away from a window behind the table as though somebody was lurking there. As a child Todd had somehow been led to believe that God lived behind the curtains above the altar in the church.

The curtains on the far side of the table veiled only a vast darkness tossing restlessly as a sleeper in a nightmare. He did his best to ignore the impression while remarking "At least I'm the first one down."

"The only one," the waiter said and found utensils under the cloth for him. "It's all been put on for you, Mr Todd."

Was this meant to shame him into taking more? Todd might have wondered if his fellow guests knew better than to eat at the hotel, but he was more inclined to ask how the waiter knew his name. The man spoke before Todd could. "Will you be having the house?"

"I'll try a bottle. Make it red." In a further attempt to recapture some sense of maintaining control, Todd said, "And a jug out of the tap."

The waiter gave a priestly bow before gliding through a doorway to the left of the buffet, and Todd heard him droning to himself under his breath. Any response was in the same voice, and monotonous enough to suggest that the man was murmuring a ritual. After some sounds of pouring the waiter reappeared with a tray that bore an unstoppered carafe and a jug. He served Todd water and wine and stepped back. "Can you taste it, sir?" he murmured.

Todd took a mouthful of the wine, which seemed oddly lifeless, like some kind of token drink. "It'll do," he said, if only to make the waiter step back.

The man continued loitering within rather less than arm's length. He'd clasped his hands together on his chest, which put Todd in mind of someone praying beside a bed. When he tried to concentrate on his meal the hands glimmered so much at the edge of his vision that he might have imagined the gloves were plastic. "I'll be fine now," he said as persuasively as he could.

The waiter seemed reluctant to part his hands or otherwise move. At last he retreated, so slowly that he might have felt he didn't exist apart from his job. "Call me if there's anything you need," he said as he replaced the covers on the buffet before withdrawing into the inner room. He began murmuring again at once, which made it hard for Todd to breathe. It reminded him too much of the voice he used to hear beyond the doctor's waiting-room.

"Go to the doctor's with your uncle," his aunt would say, and Todd had never known whether she disliked having him in the house by herself or was providing her husband with company if not distraction, unless it had been her way of making certain that Todd's uncle saw the doctor yet again. Every time he'd filled the wait with jokes at which Todd had felt bound to laugh, although neither the quips nor his mirth had seemed to please the other patients. He'd felt not just embarrassed but increasingly aware that the joking was designed to distract someone—himself or his uncle or both—from the reason they were waiting in the room. He had never ventured to ask, and his uncle hadn't volunteered the information. It had been the secret waiting beyond the door through which his uncle would disappear with a last wry grin at Todd, after which Todd would gaze at the scuffed carpet while he tried to hear the discussion muffled by the wall. Eventually his uncle would return, looking as if he'd never given up his grin. While Todd had seldom managed to distinguish even a word, he'd once overheard his uncle protest "This isn't much of a joke."

Todd knew the secret now, but he preferred not to remember. He was even glad to be distracted by the waiter, who had stolen at some point back into the dining-room. Todd seemed to have been so preoccupied that he might have imagined somebody else had eaten his dinner, which he couldn't recall tasting. The jug and carafe were empty too. He'd barely glanced at his plate

when the waiter came swiftly but noiselessly to him. "Do go back, Mr Todd."

The subdued light and the oppressive silence, not to mention the buffet, were making Todd feel as if he were already at a wake. "I've finished, thank you," he said. "The doctor says I have to watch my food."

When his uncle used to say that, Todd could never tell if it was a joke. Certainly his uncle had gazed at his food until his wife protested "Don't put ideas in the boy's head, Jack." Since the waiter seemed ready to persist, Todd said, "I'll be down in the morning. I have to be ready for a funeral."

The waiter looked lugubriously sympathetic, but Todd was thrown by the notion that the man already had. "Whose is that, sir?"

"I'd rather not talk about it if you don't mind." Todd regretted having brought the subject up. "I'm on my own now," he said as he made his way between the empty tables, which had begun to remind him of furniture covered with dustsheets in an unoccupied house. When he glanced back from the lobby the waiter was nowhere to be seen, and Todd's place was so thoroughly cleared that he might never have been there. A curtain stirred beside the long uneven mound draped from head to foot on the buffet table, and Todd discovered he would rather not see the mound stir too. He made some haste to leave before he realised that he didn't know when breakfast was served. Calling "Hello?" brought him no response, neither from the dining-room nor from the impenetrably dark office beyond the reception counter. He'd arrange to be wakened once he was in his room.

Why did he expect to be met in the lift? He was close to fancying there was no room for anyone but him as soon as he returned to the panelled box. He fumbled the gates shut and watched the wall ooze past them like a mudslide. He was anxious for light to appear above it well before that happened, and as soon as the lift wobbled to a halt he clambered up into the corridor.

It was as silent as ever. The sombre doors between the dim glazed flames could easily have reminded him of a mausoleum. The rain on the window at the end was borrowing colours from the lights of the town. The storm was slackening, and Todd was able to read some of the illuminated signs. Beneath the race of headlamps on the motorway he made out several letters perched on a high roof—ELLE and also U. An unwelcome thought took him to the window, on which he couldn't distinguish his breath from the

unravelling skeins of rain. The sign swam into focus as if he were regaining his vision, and he saw it belonged to the Bellevue Hotel.

If anybody heard his gasp of disbelief, they gave no response. For a moment he had no idea where he was going, and then he found his numbered baton and jammed the key into the lock. A few bulbs flared in the dwarfish chandelier—not as many as last time, but they showed him the shabby leather folder on the dressing-table. He threw the folder open on the bed, revealing a few dog-eared sheets of notepaper and a solitary envelope. While he couldn't tell how much of their brownishness the items owed to age, there was no mistaking the name they bore. He was in the Belgrave Hotel.

It might have been yet another element of a joke that somebody was playing on him, unless he was playing it on himself. He was too late to change hotels, whatever time it was—"too late, Kate," as his uncle liked to say even when Todd's aunt wasn't there. Just now Todd wanted nothing more than to lie down, but first he needed to arrange his morning call.

He retrieved the phone from the upper cupboard of the wardrobe, only to find no instructions on the yellowed paper disc in the middle of the dial. When he picked up the bony receiver he heard a sound not unlike a protracted breathless gust of wind, presumably the Belgrave's version of a dialling tone. 9 seemed the likeliest number, but when he tried it Todd heard a phone begin to ring along the corridor. He was tempted to speak to his fellow guest, if only to establish there was one, but the hollow muffled note tolled until he cut it off. Dialling 1 brought him only the empty tone, and so he tried the zero. A bell went off in the depths of the building and was silenced, and a slow hoarse blurred voice in his ear said "Mr Todd."

"Can you get me up for eight?"

"For how many would that be, sir?"

"I'm saying can you see I'm down for breakfast. What time's that?"

"Eight will do it, Mr Todd."

Had the receptionist heard his first question after all? Todd was too weary to say any more—almost too exhausted to stand up. He stumbled to the token bathroom, where he lingered as briefly as seemed polite. The shower cubicle put him in mind of a cramped lift that had somehow acquired plumbing, while the space outside it was so confined it almost forced the

toilet under the sink. Another reason for him to leave the windowless room was the mirror, but the wardrobe door showed him more of the same, displaying how age had shrunken and sharpened his face. He switched off the light and clambered into bed.

The indentation in the mattress made it easiest for him to lie on his back, hands crossed on his breastbone. He heard a hollow plop of rain on wood and then an increasingly sluggish repetition of the sound, which put him in mind of heartbeats. The wind was more constant, keeping up an empty drone not unlike the voiceless noise of the receives. Though he'd remembered one of his uncle's favourite turns of phrase—the comment about lateness—it didn't revive as many jokes as Todd hoped. It only brought back his uncle's response to hearing the doctor's receptionist call his name. "That's me," he would say, "on my tod."

It wasn't even true. His nephew had been with him, sharing the apprehension the man had been anxious if not desperate to conceal. None of these were memories Todd wanted to keep close to him in the dark. With an effort he recalled names his uncle had dug up from history: Addled Hitler, Guiser Wilhelm, Josef Starling, Linoleum Bonypart, Winsome Churchill... For years Todd had believed they had all been alive at the same time. Now the names seemed more like evidence of senility than jokes— blurred versions of the past that put him in mind of the way the rain on the window had twisted the world into a different shape. They left him unsure of himself, so that he was grateful to hear a voice.

It was next door. No, it was beyond the other room, though not far, and apparently calling a name. Presumably the caller wanted to be let in, since Todd heard a door open and shut. For a while there was silence, and then someone came out of the adjoining bathroom—a door opened, at any rate.

As Todd tried to use the hint of companionship to help him fall asleep, he grew aware of more sounds in the next room. His neighbour must be drunk. They seemed to be doing their utmost to speak—to judge by their tone, striving to voice some form of protest—but so unsuccessfully that Todd might have imagined they had no means of pronouncing words. He was struggling to make sense of it, since it was impossible to ignore, when someone else spoke. Was it the voice he'd first heard? Or perhaps the guest in the next room but one was calling for quiet. In a moment a door opened and closed. Todd willed the silence to let him sleep, but he was still awake

when he heard the door again, followed by activity in the other room. His neighbour seemed to be in a worse state than ever, and had given up any attempt to speak while bumping into all the furniture. After some time the ungainly antics subsided, letting Todd hope his neighbour had found the bed or at least fallen asleep. But a voice was calling a name, and the door was audible again. By now Todd knew the silence wouldn't last, and he reared up from the trough of the mattress. "What are you doing in there?" he shouted.

The darkness engulfed his protest as somebody came back into the next room. They no longer sounded able to walk. They were crawling about on the floor, so effortfully that Todd fancied he heard them thumping it with their hands if not clawing at it. He'd had enough, and he lurched off the bed, groping at the dark until he found the light switch. As soon as a couple of bulbs flickered in the chandelier he stumbled along the corridor to knock on the door of his neighbour's room.

The huge indifferent voice of the dark answered him—the wind. He pounded on the door until the number shivered on its loose screw, but nobody responded. The nearest glazed flame lent the digit a vague shadow that came close to transforming it into an 8, although Todd was reminded of a different symbol. It would have needed to be lying down, as he did. He thumped on the door again as a preamble to tramping back to his room. He parted his thin dry lips as he snatched the receiver off the hook and heard its empty sound. It was the wind, and the instrument was dead as a bone.

As he let the receiver drop into its cradle he heard the door in the next room. He couldn't take a breath while he listened to the noises that ensued. His neighbour was crawling about as blindly as before but less accurately than ever. It took them a considerable time to progress across the room. Todd would have preferred them not to find the connecting door, especially once he heard a fumbling at the bottom of it, a rudimentary attempt that sounded too undefined to involve fingers. As the door began to shake, a rage indistinguishable from panic swept away Todd's thoughts. Grabbing the suitcase, he flung it on the bed and dragged the luggage stand aside. He heard a series of confused noises in the other room, as if somebody were floundering across it, retreating in an agony of embarrassment at their own state. The connecting door wasn't locked, and he threw it wide open.

The next room was deserted, and it wasn't a bedroom. By the light from his own room Todd made out two low tables strewn with open books and magazines. Against the walls stood various chairs so decrepit that they seemed to need the dimness to lend them more substance. If the room hadn't been deserted he might not have ventured in, but he felt compelled to examine the items on the tables, like a child determined to learn a secret. He was halfway across the stained damp carpet when he wished he hadn't left his room.

The books were textbooks, in so many pieces that they might have been dismantled by someone's fumbling attempts to read them. There were no magazines, just scattered pages of the oversized books. Despite the dimness, Todd was able to discern more about the illustrations than he even slightly liked. All of them depicted surgical procedures he wanted to believe could never have been put into practice, certainly not on anyone alive or still living afterwards. Mixed up with the pages were sheets of blank paper on which someone had drawn with a ballpoint pen, perhaps the taped-up pen that lay among them. Its unsteadiness might explain the grotesque nature of the drawings, which looked like a child's work or that of someone unusually crippled. In a way Todd was grateful that he couldn't judge whether the drawings were attempts to reproduce the illustrations from the textbooks or to portray something even worse. He was struggling to breathe and to retreat from the sight of all the images, not to mention everything they conjured up, when he heard the door shut behind him.

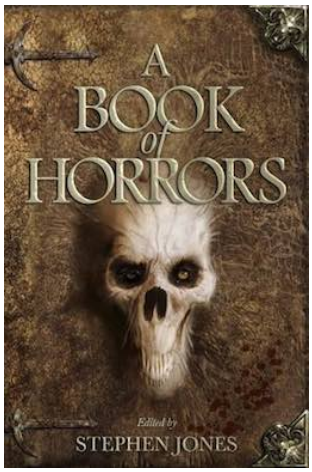
He whirled around to find he could still see it—could see it had no handle on this side. He only had to push it open, or would have except that it was locked. He was throwing all his weight against it, the very little weight he seemed to have left, when a voice at his back said "Mr Todd."

It was the voice he'd been hearing, as hoarse and practically as blurred as it had sounded through the wall. "You don't want me," he pleaded, "you want someone else," but the silence was so eloquent that he had to turn. He still had one hope—that he could flee into the corridor—but the door to it had no handle either. The only open door was on the far side of the room.

The doorway was admitting the light, such as it was. When he trudged across the waiting-room he saw that the source of the dim glow was a solitary bare bulb on a tattered flex. It illuminated a room as cramped as a trench. The bare rough walls were the colour of earth, which might be the

material of the floor. The room was empty apart from a long unlidded box. Surely the box might already contain someone, and Todd ventured forward to see. He had barely crossed the threshold when a voice behind him murmured "He's gone at last." They switched off the power and shut him in, and the light left him so immediately that he had no time to be sure that the room was another antechamber.

Getting It Wrong



"This is one of many tales that spring from some everyday element that I've taken for granted for years and suddenly don't. In this case, quiz shows where contestants can phone a friend. I think I may also have had at the back of my mind one of our friend John Probert's wickeder delights. Oddly enough, after finishing the tale I discovered that there could have been another answer to the Elisha Cook, Jr. question, since he also plays a criminal in the Mickey Spillane film *I, The Jury*. Though he has two major scenes, he isn't credited. Let's assume my characters didn't know that any more than I did."—Ramsey Campbell, Afterword to the story in *A Book Of Horrors*

First published in *A Book Of Horrors*, 2011

Edgeworth was listening to a reminiscence of the bus ride in Hitchcock's Lucky Jim when the phone rang. He switched off the deluxe anniversary special collector's edition of Family Plot and raised the back of his armchair to vertical. As he grabbed the receiver he saw the time on his watch jerk even closer to midnight. 'Hello?' he said and in less than a second 'Hello?'

'Is this Mr Edgeworth?'

He didn't recognise the woman's voice, not that he knew any women he could imagine ringing him. 'That's who you've got,' he said.

'Mr Eric Edgeworth?'

'You're not wrong yet.'

'Have you a few minutes, Mr Edgeworth?'

'I don't want anybody fixing my computer. I haven't had an accident at work or anywhere else either. I'm not buying anything and I'm not going to tell you where I shop or what I shop for. My politics are my affair and so's the rest of what I think right now. I've never won a competition, so don't bother saying I have. I don't go on holiday abroad, so you needn't try to sell me anything over there. I don't go away here either, not that it's any of your business. Anything else you want to know?'

'That isn't why were calling, Mr Edgeworth.' In the same brisk efficient tone she said 'Will you be a friend of Mary Barton?'

At first Edgeworth couldn't place the name, and then it brought him an image from work - a woman heaping cardboard tubs of popcorn while she kept up a smile no doubt designed to look bright but more symptomatic of bravery 'I wouldn't go that far,' he said, although the call had engaged his interest now: it might be the police. 'Is she in trouble?'

'She's in inquisition.' This might well have meant yes until the woman added 'She'd like you to be her expert friend.'

'Never heard of it.' Having deduced that they were talking about a quiz show, Edgeworth said 'Why me?'

'She says she's never met anyone who knows so much about films.'

'I don't suppose she has at that.' All the same, he was growing suspicious. Could this be a joke played by some of his workmates? 'When's she going to want me?' Edgeworth said.

'Immediately, if you're agreeable.'

'Pretty late for a quiz, isn't it?'

'It's not a show for children, Mr Edgeworth.'

'Aren't I supposed to be asked first?'

'We're doing that now.'

If all this was indeed a joke, he'd turn it on them. 'Fair enough, put her on,' he said as he stood up, retrieving his dinner container and its equally plastic fork from beside the chair.

'Please stay on the line.'

As Edgeworth used his elbow to switch on the light in the boxy kitchen off the main room of the apartment, a man spoke in his ear. 'Eric? Good to have you on. Terry Rice of Inquisition here.'

He sounded smug and amused, and Edgeworth had no doubt he was a fake. The kitchen bin released a stagnant tang of last night's Chinese takeaway while Edgeworth shoved the new container down hard enough to splinter it and snap the fork in half. 'Mary's hoping you'll give her an edge,' the man said. 'Do you know the rules?'

'Remind me.'

'There's only one you should bother about. You're allowed to get three answers wrong.'

'If we're talking about films I'm not bothered at all.'

'You don't need any more from me, then. Mary, talk to your friend.'

'Eric? I'm sorry to trouble you like this so late. I couldn't think of anybody else.'

That was a laugh when she'd hardly ever spoken to him. It was the first time she'd even used his name, at least to him. From her tone he could tell she was wearing her plucky smile. 'What channel are you on?' he said.

He was hoping to throw her, but she barely hesitated. 'Night Owl.'

The hoaxers must have thought this up in advance. Edgeworth would have asked how he could watch the channel, but he didn't want to end the game too soon. He'd begun to enjoy pretending to be fooled, and so he said 'What have you brought me on for?'

'Because I don't know what a film is.'

He thought this was true of just about all his workmates - a good film, at any rate. He'd imagined a job in a cinema would mean working with people who loved films as much as he did. Had she tried to put a tremble in her voice just now? She'd got that wrong; contestants on quiz shows weren't supposed to sound like that. 'Give me a go, then,' he said.

'What's the film where James Dean has a milkshake?'

Edgeworth waited, but that was all. She ought to be telling him how little time he had, and shouldn't there be some kind of urgent music? 'East of Eden,' he said.

'That's a twist,' said whoever was calling himself Terry Rice.

'Mr Rice is saying you're not right, Eric.'

It was a funny way of saying so, even by the standards of a prank. Perhaps that was why she sounded nervous. 'Then it'll be Rebel without a Cause,' Edgeworth said with a grin but no mirth.

'That's another.'

'Mr Rice says that's not right either.'

She sounded close to desperation. However far they took the pretence, Edgeworth could go further. 'It's Giant for sure, then,' he said. 'They're the only films he starred in.'

'That's one more.'

Did Edgeworth hear a faint suppressed shriek? Perhaps one of Mary Barton's accomplices had poked her to prompt her to speak. 'That can't be right, Eric,' she said high enough to irritate his ear.

'Give up,' the supposed quizmaster said or asked, though Edgeworth wasn't sure who was being addressed. 'Eric can't have heard of Has Anybody Seen My Gal?'

'Of course I have. I've seen it. James Dean has a milkshake at the soda fountain.' In case this failed to restore his own reputation Edgeworth added 'I knew it was the answer.'

'Were you fancying a bit of fun? You should play seriously even if you think it's just a game.' To Edgeworth's disbelief, this sounded like a rebuke. 'I expect your friend has something to say about it,' the man said.

'She's not my friend and none of you are.' Edgeworth confined himself to mouthing this, if only to hear what comment she would have to manufacture. He heard her draw an unsteady breath and say 'Thanks for coming on, Eric. I wish—'

'No point in wishing here. You know that isn't how we play. Thank you for entering into the spirit, Eric,' the man said and, along with Mary and the girl who'd called, was gone.

Surely his last words contradicted his rebuke, which had to mean he couldn't even keep the hoax up. Of course the number he'd called from had been withheld. It was too late for Edgeworth to go back to the commentary on the disc, and he returned the film to the shelf before tramping to the bathroom and then to bed.

With all his films he didn't need to dream. In the morning he ate off a tray in front of Third Time Sucky, a Stooges short just the right length for breakfast. 'I wish I knew what to wish for.' 'I wish I had one of your wishes.' 'I wish you two would shut up,' Moe retorted, the effects of which made Edgeworth splutter a mouthful of Sticky Rotters over his dressing-gown. He showered and donned his uniform, which said Frugotomovies on the sweater, and headed for the Frugoplex.

The cinema was an extensive concrete block that resembled the one where he lived. The February sky was just as flat and white. He'd chosen the apartment because he could walk to the cinema, but there were increasingly fewer new films that he wanted to watch; he hardly used his free pass any

more. At least he didn't have to enthuse about them to the public. He was gazing with disfavour at the titles outside when the manager let him in. 'Any problem?' Mr Gittins said, and his plump smooth face displayed a smile too swift and sketchy to be identified as such. 'I hope you can leave it at home.'

Rather than retort that some of his workmates were to blame, Edgeworth made for the anonymous concrete staffroom. Soon the rest of the staff began to show up, some of them not far from late. Without exception they were decades younger than he was. As he took his place behind a ticket desk Larry Rivers came over. 'What were you watching last night, Eric?' Larry said with a grin as scrawny as his face.

Had he called himself Terry Rice last night? His name was similar, and he liked quizzing Edgeworth, who said 'I was listening.'

'What were you listening to, Eric?'

He was using the name like a quizmaster. Edgeworth was tempted to confront him, but perhaps that was exactly what he and the rest of them wanted. 'The man who wrote North by Northwest,' Edgeworth said.

'Don't know it. Is it a film?'

Edgeworth suspected this wasn't even meant as a joke. 'Cary Grant,' he said. 'James Mason.'

'Don't know them either.'

'Hitch, for heaven's sake.'

'Is that the film with Will Smith?' one of the girls seemed to feel it would be helpful to suggest.

'Hitchcock, love.'

'Sounds a bit mucky to me.'

'Sounds a bit like sexual harassment,' another girl warned Edgeworth.

'Alfred Hitchcock,' he said in desperation. 'Psycho.'

'Was that the one with Vince Vaughn?' Larry said.

Did they all think the past - anything older than them - was a joke? No wonder Timeless Video had failed when there were so many people like them. Edgeworth had lost all the money he'd sunk in the video library, which was why he'd been glad of the job at the Frugoplex. Some old things

wouldn't go away, not least him. He was about to say at least some of this when Mr Gittins opened the door once again. 'Only just in time,' he said like a head teacher at a school gate.

Mary Barton ducked as if her apologetic smile had dragged her head down. Did she glance at Edgeworth or just towards all the staff around the ticket counter? She seemed wary of being seen to look. She hurried to the staffroom and scampered back to the lobby as Mr Gittins addressed the staff. 'Let's keep the public happy and coming back for more.'

Edgeworth might have wished to be a projectionist if the job wouldn't have involved watching too many films that bored him if not worse. He was reduced to noticing which film attracted the most customers, a dispiriting observation. Today it was the latest 3-D film, Get Outta My Face. Whenever there was a lull he watched Mary Barton at the refreshments counter opposite. Had her left little finger been bandaged yesterday? It looked significantly bigger than its twin. Her smile was if possible braver than ever, especially if she caught him watching, though then he stared at her until her eyes flinched aside. At times he thought her thin prematurely lined face was trying to look even older than it was, almost as old as him. He wasn't going to accuse her and give everyone a chance to scoff at him; he wouldn't put it past them to accuse him of harassing her. Instead he made sure she never had an opportunity to speak to him away from the public - she clearly didn't have the courage or the gall to approach him in front of anyone who wasn't privy to last night's witless joke.

When he left for home she was besieged by a queue, but as she filled a popcorn tub that she was holding gingerly with her left hand she sent him an apologetic look. If they'd been alone it might well have goaded him to respond. He had to be content with stalking next door to Pieca Pizza, where he bought a Massive Mighty Meat that would do for tomorrow's dinner as well.

He downed two slices in the kitchen and took another three into the main room, one for each version of Touch of Evil. He was halfway through Orson Welles' preferred cut when the phone rang. He paused the manic gangling hotel clerk and prepared to say a very few short words to the uninvited caller. 'It's that time again, Eric,' said a voice he could hardly believe he was hearing.

'My God, you're worse than a joke.' Edgeworth almost cut him off, but he wanted to learn how long they could keep up the pretence. 'Can't you even get your own rules right?' he jeered.

'Which rules are those, Eric?'

'Three mistakes and I was supposed to be out of your game.'

'You haven't quite got it, my friend. Last night was just one question you couldn't answer.'

'Trust me, I could. I was having a laugh just like you.'

'Please don't, Eric.'

Mary Barton sounded so apologetic it was painful, which he hoped it was for her. He could almost have thought she'd been forced against her will to participate in the hoax, but any sympathy he might have felt she lost by adding 'Don't make any more mistakes. It's serious.'

'He sounds it.'

'We get this problem sometimes.' The man's amusement was still plain. 'Listen to your friend,' he said. 'See how she sounds.'

'I'm truly sorry to be pestering you again, Eric. Hand on heart, you're my only hope.'

Edgeworth didn't know which of them angered him more. Her pathetic attempt to convince him she was desperate made her sound as though she was trying to suppress the emotion, and he was provoked to demand 'Where are you on the television? I want to watch.'

'We're on the radio.' With a giggle all the more unpleasant because it had to be affected the man said 'You wouldn't want to, trust me.'

Edgeworth agreed, having left out the comma. What radio show would have inflicted this kind of conversation on its audience? All that interested him now, though not much, was learning what question they'd come up with this time. They must have been reading a film guide to have thought of last night's. 'Go on then, Mr Terry Rice,' he said, baring his teeth in a substitute for a grin. 'Terrorise me again.'

'Do your best, Mary.'

'What's the Alfred Hitchcock film where you see him miss a bus?'

Someone stupider than Edgeworth might have imagined she was pleading with him, Did they genuinely expect him not to realise they were mocking what he'd said today to Larry Rivers? 'Strangers on a Train,' he said at once.

'Have a closer look.'

He didn't know if this was meant for him or the Barton woman, but her voice grew shrill and not entirely firm. 'Not that one, Eric.'

'Must have been The Birds, then.'

'Closer.'

'Please, Eric,' Mary Barton blurted, and he was disgusted to hear her attempting to sound close to tears. 'You must know. It's your kind of thing.'

'I know,' Edgeworth said with a vicious grin. 'I'll give it to you. Rope.'

'Not close enough yet.'

'Please!'

Edgeworth jerked the receiver away from his aching ear. 'What are you supposed to be doing?'

'It's my eye.'

Was he also meant to hear a stifled sob? 'That's what my grandma used to say,' he retorted. 'She'd say it to anyone talking rubbish.' Nevertheless he wasn't going to seem ignorant. 'Here's your answer since you're making such a fuss about it, as if you didn't know. It's—'

'Too late, Eric,' the man said without concealing his delight. 'You've had your second chance.'

'Please ...'

Edgeworth could only just hear Mary Barton's voice, as if it was no longer directed at him. He was right to hold the phone at arm's length to protect his eardrum from any surprises they had in mind, because he heard a shrill metallic sound before the line went dead. It was ridiculous even to think of searching the airwaves for Night Owl. He did his best to pick up the Welles film where he'd left off, but the twitching maniac in charge of the motel disturbed him more than he liked. He put the film back in its place among the dozens of Ts before tramping angrily to bed.

He lurched awake so often, imagining he'd heard the phone, that not just his eyes were prickly with irritation by the time he had to get up for work.

He was going to let Mary Barton know he'd had more than enough, and he wouldn't give the rest of them the chance to enjoy the show. 'Eager to get going?' the manager said by way of greeting.

'I'm eager all right,' Eric said and grinned as well.

He clocked on and hurried to the ticket counter, hoping Mary Barton would be first to arrive so that he could follow her to the staffroom. She'd been warned yesterday about timekeeping, after all. He watched the manager let in their workmates and grew more frustrated every time the newcomer wasn't her. Larry Rivers was among the last to join Edgeworth at the counter. 'What were you up to last night, Eric?' he said.

Edgeworth almost turned on him, but he could play too. 'Nothing you've ever seemed interested in.'

Somebody more gullible than Edgeworth might have thought the fellow felt rebuffed. No doubt he was disappointed that Edgeworth hadn't taken the bait, and some of their audience looked as if they were. There was still no sign of Mary Barton by opening time. 'Meet the public with a smile,' Mr Gittins said.

Perhaps the woman had stayed home because she was too embarrassed to face Edgeworth, unless it was her day off. 'Isn't Mary Barton coming in?' he said before he knew he meant to.

'She's called in sick.' Mr Gittins seemed surprised if not disapproving that Edgeworth felt entitled to ask. As he made for the doors he added 'Some trouble with her eye.'

Edgeworth struggled to think of a question. 'She'll have had it for a while, won't she?'

'She's never said so.' Mr Gittins stopped short of the doors to say 'Her mother hasn't either.'

'What's she got to do with anything?'

'She's looking after Mary's children while Mary's at the hospital. Happy now, Eric? Then I hope we can crack on with the job.'

As Mr Gittins let the public in, one of the girls alongside Edgeworth murmured 'You'll have to send her a Valentine, Eric. She isn't married any longer.'

'Keep your gossipping tongues to yourselves.' He glared at her and her friends who'd giggled, and then past them at Rivers. 'I'm putting you on your honour,' he said as his grandmother often had. 'You and your friends have been ringing me up at night, haven't you?'

'What?' Once Rivers finished the laugh that underlined the word he said 'We get more of you here than we want as it is, Eric.'

After that nobody except the public spoke to Edgeworth, and he couldn't even interest himself in which films they were unwise enough to pay for. Of course there was no reason to believe Rivers was as ignorant as he'd pretended - not about the late-night calls, at any rate. Edgeworth felt as if the long slow uneventful day were a curtain that would soon be raised on a performance he had no appetite for. At last he was able to leave behind everyone's contemptuous amusement, which felt like a threat of worse to come. When he shut himself in his apartment he found that he hoped he was waiting for nothing at all.

The pizza tasted stale and stodgy, an unsuccessful attempt to live up to itself. He tried watching classic comedies, but even his favourites seemed unbearably forced, like jokes cracked in the midst of a disaster or anticipating one. They hardly even passed the time, never mind distracting him from it. He was gazing in undefined dismay at the collapse of a dinosaur skeleton under Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn when the phone went off like an alarm.

He killed the film and stared at the blank screen while the phone rang and rang again. He left it unanswered until a surge of irrational guilt made him grab it. 'What is it now?' he demanded.

'Someone was scared you weren't playing any more, Eric.'

'I thought your friend was meant to be in hospital,' Edgeworth said in triumph.

'She's your friend, Eric, only yours. You're the only one she can turn to about films.'

'Can't she even speak for herself now?'

'I'm here, Eric.' Mary Barton's voice had lost some strength or was designed to sound as feeble as the prank. 'They've fixed me up for now,' she said. 'I had to come back tonight or I'd have lost everything.'

'Trying to make a bit extra for your children, are you?'

'I'm trying to win as much as we need.'

Was she too preoccupied to notice his sarcasm, or wouldn't that fit in with her game? Could she really be so heartless that she would use her children to prolong a spiteful joke? His grandmother never would have - not even his mother, though she'd had plenty to say about any of Edgeworth's shortcomings that reminded her of his unidentified father. 'Ready to help?' the man with Mary Barton said.

'What will you do if I don't?'

Edgeworth heard a suppressed moan that must be meant to sound as terrified as pained. 'Up to you if you want to find out,' the man said.

'Go on then, do your worst.' At once Edgeworth was overtaken by more panic than he understood. 'I mean,' he said hastily, 'ask me about films.'

'Be careful, Mary. See he understands.'

The man seemed more amused than ever. Did he plan to ask about some detail in the kind of recent film they knew Edgeworth never watched? Edgeworth was ready with a furious rejoinder by the time Mary Barton faltered 'Which was the film where Elisha Cook played a gangster?'

There were three possibilities; that was the trick. If she and Rivers hoped to make Edgeworth nervous of giving the wrong answer, they had no chance. 'The Maltese Falcon,' he said.

'Wider, Mary.'

'That's not right, Eric.'

Her voice had grown shriller and shakier too, and Edgeworth was enraged to find this disturbed him. 'He was a gangster in that,' he objected.

'It isn't what they want.'

'Then I expect they're thinking of The Killing.'

'Wider again,' the man said as if he could hardly bear to put off the end of the joke.

'No, Eric, no.'

It occurred to Edgeworth that the actor had played a criminal rather than a gangster in the Kubrick film. The piercing harshness of the woman's ragged voice made it hard for him to think. 'Just one left, eh?' he said.

'Please, Eric. Please be right this time.'

She might almost have been praying. Far from winning Edgeworth over, it embarrassed him, but he wasn't going to give a wrong answer. 'No question,' he said. 'It's Baby Face Nelson.'

'Wider still.'

'What are you playing at?' Edgeworth protested. 'He was a gangster in that.'

'No, it was his son,' the man said. 'It was Elisha Cook Junior.'

'That's what you've been working up to all along, is it?' Edgeworth wiped his mouth, having inadvertently spat with rage. 'What a stupid trick,' he said, 'even for you.' He would have added a great deal if Mary Barton hadn't cried 'No.'

It was scarcely a word. It went on for some time with interruptions and rose considerably higher. Before it had to pause for breath Edgeworth shouted 'What are you doing?'

'It's a good thing we aren't on television.' By the sound of it, the man had moved the phone away from her. 'We couldn't show it,' he said gleefully, 'and I don't think you'd want to see.'

'Stop it,' Edgeworth yelled but failed to drown out the cry.

'Relax, Eric. That's all for you for now,' Terry Rice said and left silence aching in Edgeworth's ear.

The number was withheld again. Edgeworth thought of calling the police, but what could that achieve? Perhaps it would just prove he'd fallen for a joke after all. Perhaps everything had been recorded for his workmates to hear. He grabbed the remote control and set about searching the audio channels on the television. He thought he'd scanned through every available radio station, since the identifications on the screen had run out, when a voice he very much wished he couldn't recognise came out of the blank monitor. 'This is Night Owl signing off,' Terry Rice said, and Edgeworth thought he heard a muffled sobbing. 'Another night, another game.'

Edgeworth gazed at the silent screen until he seemed to glimpse a vague pale movement like a frantic attempt to escape. He turned off the set, nearly breaking the switch in his haste, and sought refuge in bed. Very occasionally his thoughts grew so exhausted that they almost let him doze. He did without breakfast - he couldn't have borne to watch a film. Once the

shower had made him as clean as he had any chance of feeling he dressed and hurried to work.

He had to ring the bell twice at length to bring Mr Gittins out of his office. The manager's plump smooth face set not much less hard than marble as he saw Edgeworth. He was plainly unimpressed by Edgeworth's timeliness; perhaps he thought it was a ruse to gain his favour. 'I hope you'll be doing your best to get on with your colleagues,' he said.

'Why, who's said what?'

Mr Gittins didn't deign to answer. He was turning away until Edgeworth blurted 'Do we know if Mary Barton's coming in today?'

'What concern is it of yours?' Having gazed at Edgeworth, Mr Gittins said 'She won't be in for some time. I'm told she can't walk.'

Edgeworth swallowed, but his voice still emerged as a croak. 'Do we know why?'

'It really isn't something I'm prepared to discuss further.'

Mr Gittins looked disgusted by Edgeworth's interest and whatever it revived in his mind. Edgeworth gave him a grimace that felt nothing like apologetic and dashed to the staffroom. For once the list of staff and their phone numbers on the notice board was of some use. He keyed Mary Barton's number on his mobile and made the call before he had time to grow any more fearful. Well ahead of any preparation he could make for it a woman's tightened weary voice said 'Hello, yes?'

'I'm one of Mary's friends at work. I was wondering how she is.' With more of an effort he managed to add 'Just wondering what's wrong with her.'

'Has it got something to do with you?'

The woman's voice was loud and harsh enough to start two children crying, and Edgeworth felt as if the sounds were impaling his brain. 'I wouldn't say it has exactly, but—'

'If I thought you were the man who did that to Mary I'd find you and make sure you never went near a woman again. Just you tell me your name or I'll —'

Edgeworth jabbed the key to terminate the call and shoved the mobile in his pocket. As soon as it began to ring he switched it off. He couldn't loiter in the staffroom in case Mr Gittins wondered why, and so he ventured into

the lobby, where a stray lump of popcorn squeaked piteously underfoot and then splintered like an insect. He'd hardly reached the ticket counter when the phones on it began to ring in chorus. 'See who it is,' Mr Gittins said.

Edgeworth clutched at the nearest receiver and hoisted it towards his face. 'Frugoplex Cinemas,' he said, trying not to sound like himself.

When he heard the woman's voice he turned his back on the manager. While she wasn't the caller he'd been afraid to hear or the one he might have hoped for, she was all too familiar. 'Congratulations, Eric,' she said. 'Three wrong means you're our next contestant. Someone will pick you up tonight.'

He dropped the phone, not quite missing its holder, and turned to find Mr Gittins frowning at him. 'Was that a personal call?'

'It was wrong. Wrong number,' Edgeworth said and wished he could believe. Mr Gittins frowned again before making for the doors as some of Edgeworth's workmates gathered outside. Edgeworth searched their faces through the glass and struggled to think what he could say to them. Just a few words were repeating themselves in his head like a silent prayer. 'You're my friend, aren't you?' he would have to say to someone. 'Be my friend.'

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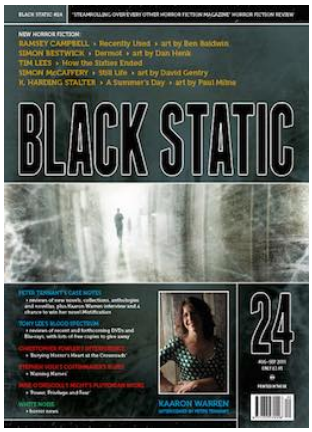

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Tunstall thought he hadn't slept when the phone rang. He clutched it and sat up on the bed, which felt too bare and wide by half. On the bedside table the photograph of him with Gwyneth in the sunlit mountains far away was waiting to be seen once more, and beyond it the curtains framed a solitary feeble midnight star. He rubbed his aching eyes to help them focus on the mobile as he thumbed the keypad. "Hello?" he said before he'd finished lifting the phone to his face.

"Forgive me, is this Charlie?"

The sight of Gwyneth's name on the midget screen had raised his hopes, but the voice belonged to somebody he'd never met. "Charles Tunstall," he had to say, "yes."

"Excuse me, Mr Tunstall. Your name is showing up on this phone as the last person called."

"I know." He couldn't leave it at that, and he said "It's my wife's."

"We hoped so." While the pause after the first word was close to imperceptible, the woman seemed to have to get ready to add "I'm afraid Mrs Tunstall—"

"What? Go on, for God's sake."

Why did he need to interrupt? It only delayed her saying "Your wife has had an accident, Mr Tunstall."

He felt as if they were rehearsing a script whose triteness simply made it more painful. "What's happened?" he said and was unable to go on.

"We believe she missed her footing on the escalator at the shopping precinct."

He knew it all too well. He'd always stood in front of her or held her hand to keep her steady as the metal steps bore them eighty feet down. Why couldn't the friends with whom she'd been dining have looked after her as

he did? If she'd wanted to demonstrate her independence by setting off home on her own, why couldn't she at least have held tight to the banisters? Tunstall tried to take a breath before saying his next overused line. "How is she?"

"She's on her way to the hospital. Do you know where that is?"

He resented the question almost as much as the lack of information. "Of course I know."

"You might want to make your way over as soon as possible. Can you drive, or is there somebody who can?"

"I'm not that far gone yet. I can drive myself."

"How close are you?"

Though he was desperate to reduce the answer, he had to say "Fifteen minutes."

"That should do it, Mr Tunstall."

Tunstall struggled not to demand what she meant. "I'm on my way," he said.

He was. As he'd dashed across the bedroom Gwyneth's wardrobe had crept open with a jangle of hangers like the sound of a deadened alarm. Her bathrobe had slipped from the hook on the bathroom door to lie white and motionless beside the shower. The dormant beds in the next room had put him in mind of goodnights, of Gwyneth stooping to kiss the grandchildren. He'd taken the stairs two precarious treads at a time, so clumsily the house had seemed to shake. The kitchen calendar was scrawled with notes by him and Gwyneth, reminders large enough to read along the hall if their handwriting hadn't grown so vague. The dining-table was set for the weekend's family dinner, utensils glimmering in the dimness, and in the front room he might have glimpsed a crossword Gwyneth had begun, frowning at the clues or at fitting the letters into their boxes. As he ended the phone call he lurched out of the house.

The terraced side street was as deserted as his mind was attempting to be. He didn't need to think, he only had to drive. Beyond the bijou front gardens all the houses were silent enough for a stage set awaiting a performance. On both sides of the road parked cars glittered with November frost like a hint of Christmas. At least it hadn't blotted out his

windscreen. Tunstall hauled the door open and jabbed the key into the ignition, and felt as if crouching into the driver's seat had shrunk or even crippled him. When he swung the car out of the meagre space between its neighbours, Gwyneth's water bottle from the gym trundled across the floor beside him.

He was driving almost faster than he dared, especially once he turned along the promenade. Now that the summer illuminations had been taken down, the seafront felt like a reminiscence of a holiday resort—the lightless fairground, the shuttered arcades, the hotels closed for the winter. Although a few faint stars glittered intermittently above the flat black sea, the darkness stretching to the horizon looked capable of going on for ever. He mustn't think about that—mustn't think anything other than that he would be in time, which made him tread on the accelerator as if he could outrun the dark.

Beyond the last hotels the buildings dwindled. The road left the side streets behind as it bent inland, where it was flanked by fields darker than the sky. No doubt they helped ice crawl over his windscreen, which made him feel as if his eyes were growing cataracts. Even once he turned the heater up to maximum and raised the headlight beams, he appeared to be speeding into blurred emptiness, defined only by a strip of illuminated tarmac so uniform it mightn't have been moving. When he saw an indistinct light ahead he braked for fear of an oncoming vehicle. He had to scrape the windscreen with his nails to be sure he was seeing the hospital.

He was praying, although wordlessly, by the time it came into focus. Clumps of floodlights towered above the concrete grounds, blanching flowers around scattered patches of turf, so that the vegetation looked artificial if not dead. The light robbed the long low unadorned buildings not just of any colour but of depth. As the car sped through the gates with a slither of tyres he was desperately tempted to leave it outside the main block, in one of the spaces for ambulances. He would only have to come back and move it before he went to Gwyneth, and he drove fast to the car park.

The metal arm at the entrance must have repeated its actions so often that it was practically lifeless. The hospital buildings were no longer in his mirrors when he found a space among the inert vehicles. Every windscreen was a white slab, and every roof sparkled like a festive decoration. As Tunstall

limped breathlessly back to the reception area, he saw the breath he was leaving behind, an ephemeral ghost in the icy air. "Why can't I know where to go?" he pleaded without wishing for an answer, and tried to put all of himself into tramping faster to the hospital.

Before the automatic doors succeeded in crawling apart he was close to digging his fingers between them. Beyond them a glassed-in counter faced several dozen chairs, in some of which figures sat as if they feared any movement would disturb their injuries or ailments. As Tunstall hastened to the reception counter he heard an ambulance reiterate, probably to nobody, that it was reversing. "Excuse me," he said louder than the mechanical voice and tapped on the glass.

The receptionist took some moments to raise her round smooth nondescript face, but not enough to find much of an expression. "You've just brought my wife in," Tunstall was already saying. "She fell on an escalator."

The woman gazed at his lips as if to make certain he'd finished. He couldn't help parting them again, which only silenced her. At last she said "Did we tell you we had?"

"Not you. Whoever rang me did." The need to go through all this brought Tunstall close to clawing at the window. "The name's Tunstall," he blurted. "Hers and mine. It has been since before you were thought of."

"Tunstall." The receptionist's head sank, reminding Tunstall of the sight of her close-cropped turfy blonde coiffure. As she peered at her computer screen she murmured "What first name?"

"Gwyneth," Tunstall said and was compelled to add "Gwyn."

"Gwyneth Tunstall." The receptionist set about typing, not nearly sufficiently fast for him. When she leaned towards the monitor he had the grotesque notion that she was about to nod off, having spent too long at her repetitive job. "She's in a block," she appeared to tell him.

"A Block," Tunstall had to repeat.

"Block A, that's right."

Her deliberateness might have been rebuking his urgency, and made him more nervous. "Where's that again?" he yearned not to need to ask.

"Along there." Raising her left hand just enough to indicate that corridor, she said "You'll see the signs."

He was lurching past the seated patients, none of whom might have stirred, when she called "Mr Tunstall…"

He swung around so violently it seemed to leave his vision behind. Once his eyes cleared he managed to distinguish her through the glass, which the glare of the overhead lights had iced almost opaque. "I was going to say," she said, "when you get there you may have to wait to see her."

"I already have," Tunstall almost retorted. Surely all that mattered was being told where to find Gwyneth, and he made for the corridor as the receptionist began to page a Timmy Sawyer.

The passage was the colour of moonlit fog and nearly as featureless. A few doors bearing words he didn't need to focus on did very little to relieve the blankness of the walls. At the end he saw a sign, apparently too far away to read. He was panting by the time he came close enough to identify the first few letters of the alphabet, as if he were rediscovering how. It was a list of the hospital blocks, and A was Intensive Care.

He couldn't pretend not to have known as much, but mightn't it just mean that somebody cared about Gwyneth—cared enough to keep her alive? Tunstall squeezed his raw eyes shut while he breathed a plea, and opened them at once for fear of losing his sense of where he was. The sign pointed left to all the blocks, and he hurried into a corridor he couldn't have distinguished from the one he'd just left, except for the sight of a nurse wheeling a prone form on a trolley, receding so fast that the sheets flapped as if a wind had invaded the hospital. In another moment nurse and trolley vanished through a pair of doors at the end of the corridor, and at once he couldn't hear them.

Her urgency had brought him close to panic. The doors led to a walkway made of thick translucent plastic, which merged the light above the grounds into a generalised radiance like the glow of a befogged moon. The chill of the night fastened on Tunstall as he blundered through the walkway into the next block. The sign that met his eyes might have been designed for if not by someone close to blindness, but he had to strain them to distinguish that the large ill-preserved letter stencilled on both walls was E, not A at all.

Perhaps there had been a more direct route, but he mustn't think of retracing his steps; it would feel too much like giving up. He could only hasten past the side wards, glimpsing twin ranks of supine sheeted figures with a nurse on watch beyond each pair of doors, an illuminated face like a

mask in some kind of shrine. He had to fend off an impression that the corridor was leading him into fog. The pallid surface in the distance was a wall, which stopped retreating once he concentrated on it, and soon he came close enough to see it wasn't even blank. There was a list of blocks, divested of one letter. The arrow sent him left again, and he did his best to run.

His haste seemed to lodge shadowy blotches where the walls met the roof. Beyond another corridor of silent twilit wards a walkway was darkened by fallen leaves, which scraped and scuttled like beetles on the plastic. Tunstall hugged himself and rubbed his shivering arms as he dashed through the passage, which felt entirely too exposed to the wind. The double doors thumped behind him like a faltering heartbeat as he saw the letter that identified the next block. For a panicky moment he feared he'd lost more than his way, and then he realised that the letter wasn't E again, even if the Bs on both walls looked as if a vandal had tried to erase them. What sense did the arrangement of the buildings make? He just had to believe he was heading for the right one, but he clamped a shaky hand over his lips so as not to call Gwyneth's name.

As he hurried down a corridor not at all unlike the ones he was trying to leave behind, a crumbling voice followed him. It was still paging Timmy Sawyer, who was apparently needed in E Block. The address system must be overdue for maintenance; the receptionist's voice was so splintered that the last words could almost have been the harsh cry of a night bird. Tunstall might have imagined the nurses in the wards took him to be responding to the summons. More likely they weren't sure what he was doing, a solitary wanderer in the hospital so late at night, although the frozen glowing faces owned up to no thoughts at all.

He was more than halfway down the corridor before the wall at the end gave up its likeness to fog. His head was aching as much as his eyes by the time the sign came into focus. It was almost the same as the previous list, though in a different order, and where could the arrow have pointed except left? An uneven section of linoleum snagged his feet as he dashed around the corner, and he supported himself on the wall. He thought he felt the chilly plaster crack, but he hadn't time to look.

The next walkway was damaged. Slits in the plastic admitted the wind, and dead leaves were crawling on the grubby floor. Grit had strayed in too, and

its grinding underfoot felt like a symptom of fever. Gusts of wind sent shudders through the tunnel. They seemed more threatening than Tunstall cared to understand, so that he hurried along it fast enough to outrun his breath.

He faltered as the double doors ground shut behind him. The letter on each wall was nearly a B, though even closer to an E. Until he controlled his vision the sight put him in mind of a digital display reassembling its fragments. Identifying the letter as an F wasn't reassuring; had whoever laid out the hospital been as confused as Tunstall felt? He had to be grateful to see somebody else in the corridor.

The woman wasn't digging up the floor at the far end; she was nuzzling the wall with a vacuum cleaner. "Excuse me," Tunstall called and hurried towards her, trailing sodden gritty leaves that he hoped she wouldn't notice. "Am I right for Intensive Care?"

She turned with a finger to her lips. The gesture was more distinct than her face, which he could have imagined her holding still with the finger. She pointed left with the silent vacuum cleaner—that must be what the jerky movements meant, however much they looked like an attempt to drive a pest away. Tunstall wasn't anxious to speak again, since his shout had brought dim heads rearing up from beneath sheets beyond the doors on either side of him, though surely not in unison. Before he had a chance to overtake the thin woman she disappeared as if the machine had towed her around the corner. When he reached it she was nowhere to be seen.

He might have concluded she didn't want to be blamed for the state of the corridor. Perhaps the walls were stained just by his blotchy vision, and she couldn't do much about the incompleteness of the linoleum. He mustn't let any of this distract him; he just had to remember that Gwyneth was here in the hospital. The sign in front of him displayed another rearrangement of the letters and sent him left as usual. How often had he turned that way? Would it bring him back where he'd started from? He could only follow the arrow, not quite fast or breathlessly enough to be unable to think.

He did his best not to glance into the wards, where his glimpses of the solitary illuminated faces seemed increasingly similar. They no longer looked enshrined; they reminded him more of waxworks in a museum. The voice in the air sounded synthetic enough to belong to one if not to all. Was Timmy Sawyer needed in the hallway of E Block? Being unable to grasp

the last words made Tunstall feel threatened with losing a sense. Ahead of him the double doors shook with the wind, and so did the walkway beyond them. It was quaking so violently he couldn't focus on the tunnel.

Tunstall blundered through the doors and saw there was no tunnel. Where it might have been was a cracked concrete path, enclosed by fog so thick he couldn't see the grounds. He stumbled at a run along the path, shivering as the fog seeped into him. His breaths tasted like a fever by the time he saw a pair of doors ahead. The pallid surface framing them wasn't fog, but the face of the figure beyond the small glass panels might have been. It was a blank white patch.

When he saw the eyes above the erased blotch Tunstall realised it was a surgical mask. The windows in the doors were so befogged that he could have thought a blurred face was forming from the mask rather than concealed by it. Before Tunstall could read any expression in the eyes, the surgeon darted out of sight. Was it the disappearance or the urgency that brought Tunstall to the edge of panic? He only knew he had to be quick. He was even repeating the word, which emerged as one gasp of fog after another. He used both hands to thump the doors, and they lumbered inwards.

The whitish light seemed to flare up, illuminating one more corridor. Leaves scrabbled along it like insects retreating into their nest. Only the letter on the wall should count, an A with its left leg crippled by a fall of plaster. The right-hand line appeared to be pointing to the nearest side ward, and why couldn't that be an omen? As Tunstall lurched in that direction, the voice that had followed him through the hospital reiterated its message. "Timmy Sawyer E hallway—" He didn't need to understand that—indeed, he didn't want to—or how the light had changed as the doors staggered shut. He sprinted to the entrance to the ward as if he could outdistance the voice and peered through the nearest window.

Gwyneth was in the first bed on the left. Her face was upturned on the pillow, and she looked peacefully asleep. Wires and slim tubes led from various parts of her. In the pale foggy light they put Tunstall in mind of a cobweb, and he could imagine wisps of mist floating from them. He eased the left-hand door open and advanced into the ward.

He was trying to see only Gwyneth and above all not to blink. It didn't have to matter that the message in the air was growing clearer. As he gazed

at her luminous face he was able to believe that her peace was the only message for him. That wasn't quite enough, and he felt his lips part as if they were yearning for a kiss. When he spoke it felt more like a gasp, a breath he couldn't hold in any longer. "Gwyneth."

"Charlie."

He might have mistaken the sound for a whisper of dead leaves, except that her eyelids fluttered as well. He was struggling not to hear the other voice, which had grown less fragmented. He'd just remembered he could block his ears when the words came into focus. "Time he saw where he always goes… Time he saw where he always goes…" All the memories he'd succeeded in keeping at bay overwhelmed him, and he stumbled to reach for Gwyneth's hand. Before he could touch her his eyes gave way to strain, and he blinked.

In a breath he saw the light again, streaming through the broken windows and holes in the roof. It illuminated the remains of the solitary bed leaning on one splintered leg, the rusty springs strewn with fallen plaster. His entire being strove to see what had been there, but once more it was too late. He trudged out of the ward and dragged the doors at the end of the corridor open on their rusty twisted hinges. The moonlit fog was still so thick he wondered if he would be able to locate his car. He found it soon enough—it was alone in the middle of the waste ground—and drove home. He knew it was useless to loiter at or even near the hospital.

The fog stayed among the fields, allowing him to drive faster along the promenade. He parked the car and let himself into the house and plodded upstairs to sit on the bed, where he brought up Gwyneth's last text message on his phone, the goodnight she'd sent while dining with her friends. It wasn't the same as hearing her voice. How old was the message now? Not old enough for him to forget—never that—and he held onto the phone when he lay down.

He thought he hadn't slept when it rang. He clutched it and sat up on the bed, which felt too bare and wide by half. On the bedside table the photograph of him with Gwyneth in the sunlit mountains far away was waiting to be seen once more, and beyond it the curtains framed a solitary feeble midnight star. He rubbed his aching eyes to help them focus on the mobile as he thumbed the keypad. "Hello?" he said before he'd finished lifting the phone to his face.

"Forgive me, is this Charlie?"

Long ago he'd learned he had no option but to go through it all again. Perhaps this time Gwyneth would open her eyes—perhaps she would even see him. "Charles Tunstall," he had to say, "yes."

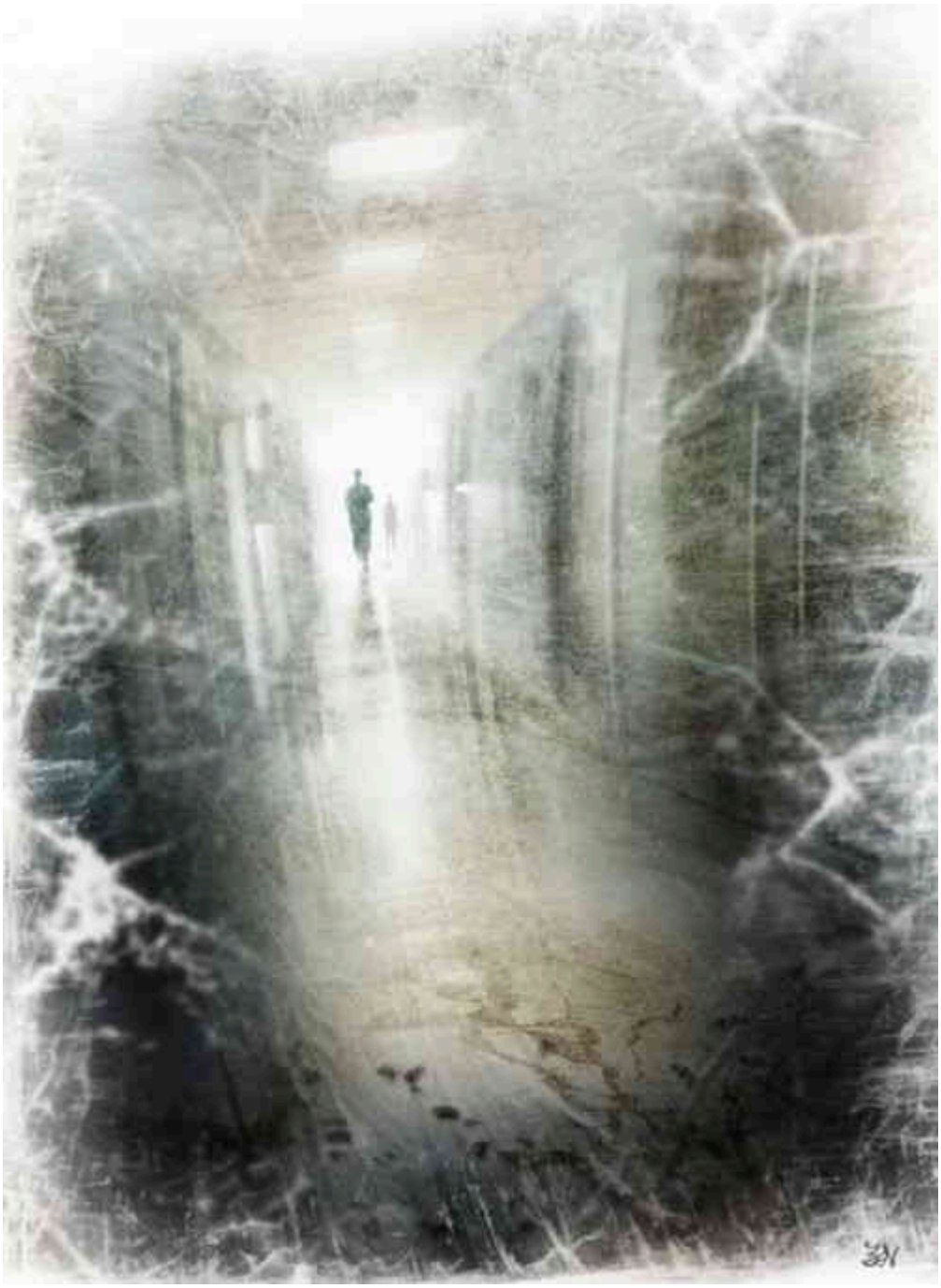
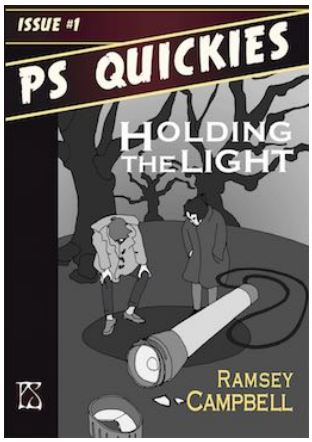


Illustration by Ben Baldwin, taken from Black Static #24, 2012.

Holding The Light



"Holding the Light came out of an experience in Rhodes two years ago, at Epta Piges ('Seven Springs'). During the occupation, Italians constructed an irrigation tunnel there, 180 metres long and very much like the one that figures in my tale. It's a favourite stop on guided tours and turned up on two that we took. You won't be surprised that I was delighted to go through it both times, though others in the party stayed out. Pete Crowther had mentioned a Hallowe'en chapbook he wanted to publish, including several new tales. Sadly, the event he wanted to build it around didn't work out, but by that time I'd written my contribution, and he published it as a singleton. As soon as I went through the Epta Piges tunnel the first time I knew I had a tale for him."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to the story in *The Mammoth Book Of Best New Horror 23*, 2012

First published as the chapbook *Holding The Light*, November 2011

As his cousin followed him into the Frugoplex lobby Tom saw two girls from school. Out of uniform and in startlingly short skirts they looked several years older. He hoped his leather jacket performed that trick for him, in contrast to the duffle coat Lucas was wearing. Since the girls were giggling at the cinema staff dressed as Hallowe'en characters, he let them see him laugh too. "Hey, Lezly," he said in his deepest voice. "Hey, Dianne."

"Don't come near us if you've got a cold," Lezly protested, waving a hand that was bony with rings in front of her face.

"It's just how boys his age talk," Dianne said far too much like a sympathetic adult and blinked her sparkly purple eyelids. "Who's your friend, Tom?"

"It's my cousin Lucas."

"Hey, Luke."

Lezly said it too and held out her skull-ringed hand, at which Lucas stared as if it were an inappropriate present. "He's like that," Tom mumbled but refrained from pointing at his own head. "Don't mind him."

"Maybe he doesn't want to give you his germs, Lezly." To the boys Dianne said "What are you going to see?"

"*Vampire Dating Agency*," Lucas said before Tom could make a choice.

"That's for kids," Lezly objected. "We're not seeing any films with them."

"We don't have to either, do we, Lucas?" Tom said in a bid to stop his face from growing hotter. "What are you two seeing?"

"*Cheerleaders with Guts*," Dianne said with another quick glittery blink.

"We can't," Lucas informed everyone. "Nobody under fifteen's allowed."

Tom glared at him as the girls did. At least none of the staff dealing with the noisy queues appeared to have heard the remark. Until that moment Tom had been able to prefer visiting the cinema to any of the other activities their parents had arranged for the boys over the years—begging for sweets at neighbours' houses, ducking for apples and a noseful of water, carving pumpkins when Lucas's received most of the praise despite being so grotesque only out of clumsiness. Now that the parents had reluctantly let them outgrow all this Tom seemed to be expected to take even more care of his cousin. Perhaps Lucas sensed his resentment for once, because he said "We don't have to go to a film."

"Who doesn't?" said Dianne.

Tom wanted to say her and Lezly too, but first he had to learn "Where, then?"

"The haunted place." When nobody admitted to recognising it Lucas said "Grinfields."

"Where the boy and girl killed themselves together, you mean," Lezly said.

"No, he did first," Dianne said, "and she couldn't live without him."

It was clear that Lucas wasn't interested in these details, and he barely let her finish. "My mum and dad say they did it because they watched films you aren't supposed to watch."

"My parents heard they were always shopping," Tom made haste to contribute. "Them and their families spent lots of money they didn't have and all it did was leave them thinking nothing was worth anything."

That was his father's version. Perhaps it sounded more like a gibe at the girls than he was afraid Lucas's comment had. "Why do you want us to go there, Luke?" Dianne said.

"Who's Luke?"

"I told you," Tom said in some desperation, "he's like that."

"No I'm not, I'm like Lucas."

At such times Tom understood all too well why his cousin was bullied at school. There was also the way Lucas stared at anybody unfamiliar as if they had to wait for him to make up his mind about them, and just now his pasty face—far spottier than Tom's and topped with unruly red hair—was a further drawback. Nevertheless Dianne said "Are you sure you don't want to see our film?"

She was speaking to Tom, but Lucas responded. "We can't. We've been told."

"I haven't," Tom muttered. He watched the girls join the queue for the ticket desk manned by a tastefully drooling vampire in a cloak, and then he turned on Lucas. "We need to switch our phones off. We're in the cinema."

Accuracy mattered most to Lucas. Once he'd done as he was told Tom said "Let's go, and not to the kids' film either."

A frown creased Lucas's pudgy forehead. "Which one, then?"

"None of them. We'll go where you wanted," Tom said, leading the way out into the Frugall retail park.

More vehicles than he thought he could count in a weekend were lined up beneath towering lamps as white as the moon. In that light people's faces looked as pallid as Lucas's, but took on colour once they reached the shops, half a mile of which surrounded the perimeter. As Tom came abreast of a Frugelectric store he said "We'll need a light."

Lucas peered at the lanky lamps, and yet again Tom wondered what went on inside his cousin's head. "A torch," he resented having to elucidate.

"There's one at home."

"That's too far." Before Lucas could suspect he didn't want their parents learning where the boys would be Tom said "You'll have to buy one."

He was determined his cousin would pay, not least for putting the girls off. He watched Lucas select the cheapest flashlight and load it with batteries, then drop a ten-pound note beside the till so as to avoid touching the checkout girl's hand. He made her place his change there for him to scoop up while Tom took the flashlight wrapped in a flimsy plastic bag. "That's mine. I bought it," Lucas said at once.

"You hold it then, baby." Tom stopped just short of uttering the last word, though his face was hot again. "Look after it," he said and stalked out of the shop.

They were on the far side of Frugall from their houses and the school. An alley between a Frugranary baker's and a Frugolé tapas bar led to a path around the perimeter. A twelve-foot wall behind the shops and restaurants cut off most of the light and the blurred vague clamour of the retail park. The path was deserted apart from a few misshapen skeletal loiterers nuzzling the wall or propped against the chain-link fence alongside Grinfields Woods. They were abandoned shopping trolleys, and the only sound apart from the boys' padded footsteps was the rustle of the plastic bag.

Tom thought they might have to follow the path all the way to the housing estate between Grinfields and the retail park, but soon they came to a gap in the fence. Lucas dodged through it so fast that he might have forgotten he wasn't alone. As Tom followed he saw his own shadow emerge from a block of darkness fringed with outlines of wire mesh. The elongated shadows of trees were reaching for the larger dark. By the time the boys found the official path through the woods they were almost beyond the glare from the retail park, and Lucas switched on the flashlight. "That isn't scary," he declared as Tom's shadow brandished its arms.

Tom was simply frustrated that Lucas hadn't bothered to remove the flashlight from the bag. He watched his cousin peer both ways along the dim path like a child showing how much care he took about crossing a road, and then head along the stretch that vanished into darkness. The sight of Lucas swaggering off as though he didn't care whether he was followed did away with any qualms Tom might have over scaring him more than he would like. He tramped after Lucas through the woods that looked as if the dark had formed itself into a cage, and almost collided with him as the blurred jerky light swerved off the path to flutter across the trees to the left. "What's pulling something along?" Lucas seemed to feel entitled to be told.

"It's got a rope," Tom said, but didn't want to scare Lucas too much too soon. "No, it's only water."

He'd located it in the dried-up channel out of sight below the slope beyond the trees. It must be a lingering trickle of rain, which had stopped before

dark, unless it was an animal or bird among the fallen leaves. "Make your mind up," Lucas complained and swung the light back to the path.

The noise ceased as Tom tramped after him. Perhaps it had gone underground through the abandoned irrigation channel. Without warning—certainly with none from Lucas—the flashlight beam sprang off the ragged stony path and flew into the treetops. "Is it laughing at us?" Lucas said.

Tom gave the harsh shrill sound somewhere ahead time to make itself heard. "What do you think?"

"Of course it's not," Lucas said as if his cousin needed to be put right. "Birds can't laugh."

Once more Tom suspected Lucas wasn't quite as odd as he liked everyone to think, although that was odd in itself. When the darkness creaked again he said "That's not a bird, it's a tree."

Lucas might have been challenging someone by striding up the path to jab the beam at the treetops. As he disappeared over a ridge the creaking of the solitary branch fell silent. Though he'd taken the light with him, Tom wasn't about to be driven to chase it. He hadn't quite reached the top of the path when he said "No wonder aunt and uncle say you can't make any friends."

He hadn't necessarily intended his cousin to hear, but Lucas retorted "I've got one."

Tom was tempted to suggest that Lucas should have brought this unlikely person instead of him. His cousin was taking the light away as though to punish Tom for his remark. Having left the path, he halted under an outstretched branch. "You can see where they did it," he said.

The flashlight beam plunged into the earth—into a circular shaft that led down to the middle of the irrigation tunnel. At some point the entrance had been boarded over, but now the rotten wood was strewn among the trees. Tom peered into the opening, from which a rusty ladder descended into utter darkness. "You can't see if you don't take the bag off."

As darkness raced up the ladder, chasing the light out of the shaft, Lucas said "What do you think is laughing now?"

"Maybe you should go down and find out."

Another hollow liquid giggle rose out of the unlit depths, and Tom thought of convincing his cousin it wasn't water they were hearing. Lucas crumpled

the bag in his hand and sent the light down the shaft again. The beam just reached the foot of the ladder, below which Tom seemed to glimpse a dim sinuous movement before Lucas snatched the beam out of the shaft and aimed it at the branch overhead. "He hung himself on that, didn't he, and then she threw herself down there."

He sounded little more than distantly interested, which wasn't enough for Tom. "Aren't you going down, then? I thought you wanted a Halloween adventure."

The glowing leafless branch went out as Lucas swung the light back to the path. "All right," he said and made for the opposite side of the ridge.

Did he really need absolute precision or just demand it? As Tom trudged after him he heard a rustling somewhere near the open shaft. "I thought you never left litter," he called. "How about that bag?"

"It's here," Lucas said and tugged it half out of his trouser pocket before stuffing it back in.

When Tom glanced behind him the Frugall floodlights glared in his eyes, and he couldn't locate what he'd heard—perhaps leaves stirring in a wind, although he hadn't felt one. Of course there must be wildlife in the woods, even if he'd yet to see any. He followed Lucas down the increasingly steep path and saw the flashlight beam snag on the curve of a stone arch protruding from the earth beside the track. It was the end of the tunnel, which had once helped irrigate the fields beyond the ridge. Now the fields were overgrown and the tunnel was barricaded, or rather it had been until somebody tore the boards down. As Lucas poked the flashlight beam into the entrance he said "Where's the bell?"

Tom thought the slow dull metallic notes came from a car radio in the distance, but said "Is it in the tunnel?"

Lucas stooped under the arch, which wasn't quite as tall as either of the boys. "Listen," he said. "That's where."

Tom heard a last reverberation as he stepped off the path. Surely it was just his cousin's gaze that made him wonder if the noise had indeed come from the tunnel, unless someone was playing a Halloween joke. Suppose the girls had followed them from the cinema and were sending the sound down from the ridge? In his hopelessly limited experience this didn't seem the kind of

thing girls did, especially while keeping quiet as well. The thought of them revived his discontent, and he said "Better go and see."

Lucas advanced into the tunnel at once. His silhouette blotted out most of the way ahead, the stone floor scattered with sodden leaves, the walls and curved roof glistening with moss, a few weeds drooping out of cracks. The low passage was barely wider than his elbows as he held them at his sides —so narrow that the flashlight bumped against one wall with a soft moist thud as he turned to point the beam at Tom. "What are you doing?"

"Get that out of my face, can you?" As the light sank into the cramped space between them Tom said "I'm coming too."

"I don't want you to."

Tom backed out, almost scraping his scalp on the arch. "Now you've got what you want as usual. Just you remember you did."

"It won't be scary if we both go in." This might have been an effort to placate his cousin—as much of one as Lucas was likely to make—but Tom suspected it was just a stubborn statement of fact. "I'm not scared yet," Lucas complained. "It's Halloween."

"Want me to make sure?"

"I know it is." Before Tom could explain, if simply out of frustration, Lucas said "You've got nothing to do."

He sounded intolerably like a teacher rebuking an idle pupil. As Tom vowed to prove him wrong in ways his cousin wouldn't care for, Lucas ducked out of the tunnel and thrust the flashlight at him. "You can hold this while I'm in there."

Tom sent the beam along the tunnel. It fell short of the ladder, which was a couple of hundred yards in. Once Lucas returned to the tunnel the light wouldn't even reach past him. Tom was waiting to watch his reaction to this when Lucas said "I don't mean here."

He might have been criticising Tom's ability to understand, a notion that was close to more than Tom could take. "Where?" he demanded without at all wanting to know.

"Go up and shine it down the hole, then I can see where halfway is. Shout when you get to the hole."

"And you answer." In case this wasn't plain enough Tom added "So I can hear."

"Course I will."

Tom could have done without the haughtiness. He made off with the flashlight, swinging it from side to side of the deserted woods. As he reached the top of the path the lights above the distant retail park glared in his eyes, and he had a momentary impression that a rounded object was protruding just above the shaft at the midpoint of the tunnel. He squeezed his eyes shut, widening them as he stepped onto the ridge. Perhaps he'd seen an exposed root beyond the shaft, but he couldn't see it now. He marched to the opening and sent the beam down to the tunnel, where he seemed to glimpse movement—a dim shape like a scrawny limb or an even thinner item retreating at speed into the dark. It must have been a shadow cast by the ladder. "Come on," he called. "I'm here."

"I'm coming."

Tom was disconcerted to hear his cousin's shout resound along the tunnel while it also came from beyond the ridge. Despite straining his eyes he couldn't judge how far the flashlight beam reached; the glare from the retail park was still hindering his vision. He dodged around the shaft to turn his back on the problem, and saw that the beam of the cheap flashlight fell short of illuminating the tunnel itself. "Can you see the light?" he called.

"I see something."

Tom found this wilfully vague. "What?" he yelled.

"Must be you."

This was vaguer still, particularly for Lucas. Was he trying to unnerve his cousin? Tom peered into the shaft, waiting for Lucas to dart into view in a feeble attempt to alarm him. Or did Lucas mean to worry him by staying out of sight? Tom vowed not to call out again, but he was on the edge of yielding to the compulsion when an ill-defined figure appeared at the bottom of the shaft. He didn't really need it to turn its dim face upwards to show it was Lucas. "What am I doing now?" Tom grudged having to ask.

"Holding the light."

"I'm saying," Tom said more bitterly still, "what do you want me to do?"

"Stay there till I say," Lucas told him and stooped into the other section of the tunnel.

Tom tried to listen to his receding footsteps but soon could hear nothing at all—or rather, just the sound he'd previously ascribed to plastic. Perhaps the bag in his cousin's pocket was brushing against the wall, except that Tom seemed to hear the noise behind him. Had Lucas sneaked out of the far end of the tunnel to creep up and pounce on him? Surely his shadow would give him away, and when Tom swung around, only the trees were silhouetted against the glare from the retail park. He'd kept the flashlight beam trained down the shaft on the basis that he might have misjudged Lucas, but how long would he have to wait to hear from him? He had a sudden furious idea that, having left the tunnel, Lucas was on his way home. "Where are you now?" he shouted.

"Here," Lucas declared, appearing at the foot of the shaft.

So he'd been playing a different trick—staying out of sight until Tom grew nervous. "Finished with the light?" Tom only just bothered to ask.

"Go and meet me at the end," Lucas said before ducking into the dark.

Tom felt juvenile for using the flashlight to search among the trees around him—he wasn't the one who was meant to be scared—and switched it off as he hurried down the path. He was waiting at the mouth of the tunnel by the time his cousin emerged. Lucas looked dully untroubled, unless the darkness was obscuring his expression, and Tom wished he'd hidden long enough to make his cousin nervous. "What's it like?" he tried asking.

"Like I wasn't alone."

"You weren't."

"That's scary."

Tom thought he'd been more than sufficiently clear. He was feeling heavy with resentment when Lucas said "Now it's your turn."

As Tom switched on the flashlight, darkness shrank into the tunnel. "You can't do that," Lucas protested. "I'm supposed to go on top with it so you'll be in the dark."

Was he planning some trick of the kind Tom had spared him? When Tom hesitated while the unsteady shadows of weeds fingered the moss on the walls of the tunnel, Lucas said "I have to say what we do with it. It's mine."

Tom was so disgusted that he almost dropped the flashlight because of his haste to be rid of it. "I'll have to shout," Lucas told him. "You won't see."

He hadn't extinguished the light, which scrambled up the path ahead of him, leaving Tom to wonder if Lucas was uneasy after all. Suppose that distracted him from keeping the beam down the shaft? Once his cousin vanished over the ridge Tom peered along the tunnel, but it might as well have been stuffed with earth. He hadn't distinguished even a hint of light when Lucas called "It's waiting."

His voice was in more than one place again—somewhere down the tunnel and on the ridge as well. It occurred to Tom that he should have extracted a promise, and he cupped his hands around his mouth to yell "Say you'll wait there for me."

"That's what I'm doing."

Tom could have fancied he was hearing another voice imitate Lucas. "Say you will," he insisted, "as long as I want the light."

"I will as long as you want the light."

This had to be precise enough, and surely Lucas was incapable of acting other than he'd said he would. Wasn't his saying it in more than one voice like a double promise? Tom had no reason to hesitate, even if he wished Dianne were with him to be scared and then comforted. He wouldn't be comforting Lucas, and he ducked into the tunnel.

The darkness fastened on his eyes at once. They felt coated with it, a substance like the blackest paint. It hindered his feet too, as if they had to wade through it, shuffling forward an inch at a time, which was all he felt able to risk. He extended his arms in front of him to avoid touching the slimy walls, though he could have imagined his fingertips were about to bump into the dark. Of course there was nothing solid in front of him. Lucas hadn't switched off the flashlight and sneaked down the ladder to stand in the blackness until Tom's outstretched fingers found him. Just the same, the thought made Tom bring his hands back and lower his arms. "Are you really up there?" he shouted.

"You'll see."

His cousin's voice was somewhere ahead and above the tunnel. Otherwise the exchange didn't reassure Tom as much as he would have hoped if he'd needed reassurance. It wasn't simply that his shout had been boxed in by the

walls and the roof that forced his head down; his voice had seemed muffled by some obstacle in front of him. Was he about to see it? There appeared to be a hint of pallor in the blackness, if that wasn't just an effect of straining his eyes or of hoping to locate the flashlight beam. When he edged forward the impression didn't shift, and he kept his gaze fixed on the promise of light until his foot nudged an object on the floor of the tunnel.

He heard it stir and then subside. He had no room to sidle around it, and he didn't care to turn his back. By resting his foot on it and trampling on it he deduced that it was a mass of twigs and dead leaves. He trod hard on it on his way past, and worked out that the material must have fallen down the shaft, which was just visible ahead by the light that nearly reached down to the tunnel roof. He could scarcely believe how long he'd taken to walk halfway; it felt as if the darkness had weighed down the passing of time. A few waterlogged leaves slithered underfoot as he reached the shaft and was able to raise his head. "See me?" he called.

Lucas was an indefinite silhouette against the night sky beyond the flashlight, which almost blinded Tom even though the beam on the wall opposite the ladder was so dim. "You were a long time," Lucas protested.

An acoustic quirk made versions of his voice mutter in both sections of the tunnel. Before Tom could reply, less irately than the complaint deserved, Lucas said "When you've been through the rest you have to come back this way."

That he had needn't mean Tom should. Lucas wasn't frightened yet, which was among the reasons why Tom intended to leave the tunnel by the far end so as to tiptoe up behind him. He shut his eyes to ready them for the darkness as far as he could. He hadn't opened them when Lucas enraged him by calling "Are you scared to go in?"

Tom lowered his head as if he meant to butt the dark and advanced into the tunnel. He wouldn't have believed the blackness could grow thicker, but now it didn't just smother his eyes—it filled them to the limit. He'd taken a very few steps, which felt shackled by his wariness, when his foot collided with another heap of leaves. He heard twigs if not small branches snap as he trod several times on the yielding heap, which must be almost as long as he was tall. Once he was past it the floor seemed clear, but how far did he have to shuffle to catch his first glimpse of the night outside? It couldn't be so dark out there that it was indistinguishable from the underground passage.

He was stretching his eyes wide, which only served to let more of the darkness into them, when his foot struck a hindrance more solid than leaves—an object that his groping fingers found to be as high and wide as the tunnel. The entrance was boarded up.

So Lucas hadn't just been setting out the rules of the game. Perhaps he'd believed he was making it plain that Tom couldn't leave the tunnel at this end. Tom thumped the boards with his fists and tried a few kicks as well, but the barrier didn't give. When he turned away at last he had to touch the cold fur of the wall with his knuckles to be certain he was facing down the tunnel. He shuffled forward as if he were being dragged by his bent head, and his blacked-out eyes were straining to find the light when his toe poked the mass of leaves and wood on the floor. If he was so close to the shaft, why couldn't he make out even a hint of the flashlight beam? "What are you playing at?" he shouted.

There was no response of any kind. Perhaps Lucas had decided to alarm him. He dealt the supine heap a kick, but it held more or less together. He tramped on it a number of times while edging forward. It was behind him, though not far, when something moved under his feet—a large worm, he thought, or a snake. As he stumbled clear of it he heard scattered leaves rustle with its movement, and recognised the sound he'd attributed to plastic on his way to the tunnel. He needn't think about it further—he only wanted to reach the light. That still wasn't visible, and he wasn't eager to shout into the dark again, surely just because Lucas might think he was scared. He had no idea how many timid paces he'd taken before he was able to lift his head.

For a moment this felt like nothing but relief, and then he saw that the top of the shaft was deserted. "Lucas," he yelled. "Lucas." He was trying just to feel furious, but the repetition unnerved him—it seemed too close to doing his best to ensure that only his cousin would respond. He was about to call once more when Lucas appeared above him, at least fifty feet away, and sent the flashlight beam down the highest rungs of the ladder. Tom would have shouted at him except for being assailed by a sudden unwelcome thought. He knew why he'd seemed to take too long to return to the shaft: because the supine mass on which he'd trodden was further from it than before. While he'd been trying to find his way out, it had crawled after him in the dark.

He twisted around to peer behind him, but the blackness was impenetrable. Although he was afraid to see, not seeing might be worse. "Lucas," he blurted, and then forced himself to raise his voice. "Send the light down here."

The response was a noise very much like one he'd previously heard—a clang like the note of a dull bell. Now he realised it had been the sound of an object swinging against the ladder, repeatedly colliding with the upper rungs. This time the flashlight was making the noise, and struck another rung as it plummeted down the shaft. The lens smashed on the tunnel floor, and the light went out at once.

"What have you done now," Tom almost screamed, "you stupid useless retard?" He dropped into a crouch that felt as if a pain in his guts had doubled him over. His fingers groped over the cold wet stone and eventually closed around the flashlight. He pushed the switch back and forth, but the bulb must be broken too. When he jerked his head back to yell at Lucas he saw that the dim round hole at the top of the shaft was empty once more. He staggered to his feet and threw out a hand to help him keep his balance, and clutched an object that was dangling beside him in the tunnel. It was the rope he'd wanted to think was a worm or a snake.

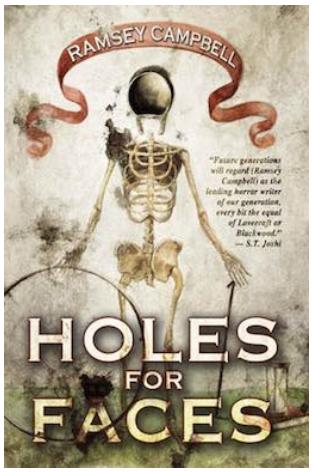
A mindless panic made him haul at the bedraggled rope, and an object nuzzled the back of his hand. It was a face, though not much of one, and as he recoiled with a cry he felt it sag away from the bone. He was backing away so fast he almost overbalanced when he heard sounds in the other section of the tunnel. Between him and the way out, someone was running through the absolute blackness as if they had no need of light—as if they welcomed its absence.

For a moment that seemed endless Tom felt the darkness claim him, and then he shied the flashlight in the direction of the sodden flopping footsteps. He clutched at the ladder and hauled himself desperately upwards. He mustn't think about climbing towards the outstretched branch that had creaked as the boys made for the ridge. Perhaps nobody had killed themselves—perhaps that was just a story made up by adults to scare children away from any danger. He could no longer hear the loose footsteps for all the noise he was making on the shaky ladder. Lucas must be waiting by the shaft—he'd promised to—and of course he'd turned the light away when he'd heard Tom thumping the boards that blocked the tunnel. The

thought gave Tom the chance to realise who the friend Lucas said he had must be. "I'm still your friend," he called, surely not too late, as he clambered up the rusty ladder. He didn't dare to look down, and he was just a few rungs from the top when he lost his footing. His foot flailed in the air and then trod on the head of whatever was climbing after him.

It moved under his foot—moved more than any scalp ought to be able—as he kicked it away. He was terrified what else he might tread on, but he only found the rung again. His head was nearly level with the exit from the shaft before a pulpy grasp closed around his ankle. However soft they were, the swollen fingers felt capable of dragging him down into the blackness to share it with its residents. He thrust his free hand above the shaft in a desperate appeal. Surely Lucas hadn't felt so insulted that he'd abandoned his cousin—surely only he was out there. "Get hold of me," Tom pleaded, and at once he had his answer.

Behind The Doors



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As Adam ran to the school gates he cried "Look what the teacher gave me, grandad."

It was an Advent calendar, too large to fit in his satchel. Each of the little cardboard doors had the same jolly bearded countenance, with a bigger one for Christmas Day. "Well," Summers said as the mid-December air turned his breath pale, "that's a bit late."

The ten-year-old's small plump face flushed while his eyes grew wider and moister. "He gave me it because I did best in the class."

"Then hurrah for you, Adam." Summers would have ruffled the boy's hair if it hadn't been too clipped to respond. "Don't scoff all the chocolates you should have had already," he said as Adam poked at a door with an inky finger. "We don't want your mum and dad telling me off for letting you spoil your dinner."

"I was going to give you one," the boy protested, shoving the calendar under one arm before he tramped across the road.

Summers kept a sigh to himself as he followed Adam into the park opposite Park Junior. He didn't want to upset the boy, especially when he recalled how sensitive he'd been at Adam's age. He caught up with him on the gravel path along an avenue of leafless trees, above which the sky resembled an untrodden snowfield. "How did you earn the prize, Adam?"

"The maths teacher says I should be called Add 'Em."

"Ha," said Summers. "Who's the witty teacher?"

"Mr Smart," Adam said and glanced back to see why Summers had fallen behind. "He's come to our school because Miss Logan's having a baby."

Summers overtook him beside the playground, a rubbery expanse where swings hung inert above abandoned cans of lager. "What else can you tell me about him?"

“I expect he was teaching when you were at school.” With some pride in the observation Adam said “He must be as older than you than I’m old.”

“Does he always give his pupils calendars like that?”

“I don’t know. Shall I ask him?”

“No, don’t do that. Don’t mention me, that’s to say anything I said.”

“Didn’t you ever get one?”

Summers attempted to swallow a sour stale taste. “Not that I could tell you.”

Adam considered this while his expression grew more sympathetic, and then he said “You can have mine if you like.”

Summers was touched by the offer but disconcerted by the prospect. “I tell you what,” he said, “you give me that and I’ll buy you another.”

He was glad for Adam as soon as the boy handed him the calendar. Even if only the winter day made the cardboard feel cold and damp, the corners were scuffed and the colours looked faded. The jovial faces were almost as white as their beards, and the floppy red hats had turned so brown that they resembled mounds of earth perched on the heads. Summers thrust the calendar under his arm to avoid handling it further. “Let’s get you home,” he said.

Beyond a bowling green torn up by bicycles a Frugo Corner supermarket had replaced a small parade of shops that used to face the park. As the automatic doors let out the thin strains of a carol from the overhead loudspeakers, Summers wondered if it was too late for Advent calendars to be on sale. He couldn’t bring the date to mind, and trying to add up the spent days of December made his head feel raw. But there were calendars beside the tills, and Adam chose one swarming with creatures from outer space, though Summers was unclear what this had to do with Christmas.

His old house was half a mile away across the suburb. Along the wide quiet streets the trees looked frozen to the sky. He saw Adam to the antique door that Paul and Tina had installed within their stained-glass wrought-iron porch. “Will you be all right now?”

The boy gave the elderly formula an old-fashioned look. “I always am,” he reminded Summers and slipped his key into the lock.

The streets narrowed as Summers made his way home. The houses grew shabbier and their doorbells multiplied, while the gardens were occupied by seedy cars and parts of cars. Each floor of the concrete block where he lived was six apartments long, with a view of an identical block. Once Elaine left him he'd found the house too large, and might have given it to his son even if Paul hadn't moved in with a partner.

The apartment was something like halfway along the middle balcony, two doors distant from the only other number with a tail, but Summers knew it by the green door between the red pair. He marched down the hall to the kitchen, where he stopped short of the bin. If the sweets in the calendar weren't past their edible date, why shouldn't he finish them off?

He stood it on the mantelpiece in the main room, beneath Christmas cards pinned to the nondescript wallpaper. As he searched for the first cardboard door he heard an object shift within the calendar, a sound emphasised by the silence of the hi-fi and the television and the empty suite that faced them. At last he located the door in the midst of the haphazard dates and pried it open with a fingernail. The dark chocolate behind the door was shaped like the number. "One up for me," he declared, biting it in half.

The sweet wasn't stale after all. He levered the second door open as soon as he found it, remarking "Two's not for you" as he put the number in his mouth. How many did he mean to see off? He ought to heed the warning he'd given Adam about dinner. "Three's a crowd," he commented once he managed to locate the number. That had certainly felt like the case when, having decided that Paul was old enough for her to own up, Elaine had told Summers about the other man. The taste in his mouth was growing bitter yet sickly as well, and any more of it might put him off his dinner. Perhaps it already had, but since taking early retirement he'd gained weight that he could do with losing. There was no point in eating much when he was by himself.

For a while he watched the teachers' channel, which seemed to be the only sign of intelligence on television. An hour or two of folk music on the hi-fi with the sound turned low out of consideration for the neighbours left him readier for bed. He brushed his teeth until the only flavour in his mouth was toothpaste, and then he did his best to be amused by having to count a multitude of Santas in the dark before he could fall asleep.

At least his skull wasn't crawling with thoughts of tomorrow's lessons and more lessons yet to plan, and tests to set, and conflicts to resolve or at any rate address, both among the children and within themselves. However badly he might sleep, he no longer had to set the alarm clock, never mind lying awake for hours before it went off or struggling to doze until it did. Since it was Friday he needn't bother with breakfast; he would be meeting some of his old colleagues from Dockside Primary—and then he realised he'd lost count of the weeks. His friends would be preparing for tonight's Christmas play at the school, and they'd cancelled their usual Friday lunch.

He could still do without breakfast, given the stale sweetish taste in his mouth. He brushed his teeth at length and used mouthwash before swallowing his various pills. Once he was dressed heavily enough to switch off the heating he wandered into the living room to feed himself today's date from the Advent calendar. When at last he put his finger on the eighteenth he felt he'd earned a walk in the park.

In spring he'd liked to take his classes to the one near Dockside Primary—to imagine that their minds were budding like the trees. That was before teaching had turned into a business of filling in forms and conforming to prescribed notions as narrow as the boxes on the documents. Now he could think that the children in the schoolyard of Park Junior were caged not just by the railings but by the educational system. He couldn't see Adam, but if he ventured closer the boy might be embarrassed by his presence. What was Summers doing there at all? The children's uninhibited shouts must prove that Smart was nowhere near.

Summers watched the school until he saw teachers trooping back from lunch, but none of them looked familiar. Once the yard was empty he stood up from the bench. Ambling around the park used up some time, and then he strolled to the Dockside library, where he might have found work if the job had involved fewer numbers. People even older than he was or just as unemployed were reading the papers, and he had to content himself with a tabloid. Perhaps the prose as terse as the bitten-off headlines was all that some people could read. That was a failure of education, like the young and even younger criminals who figured in many of the reports. The paper took him a very few minutes to read, and then he hurried back to the school. He wanted to be there before anyone emerged.

Some teachers did in the midst of the flood of children, but he recognised none of them, and Adam was impatient to question him. “How many did you have?”

Summers was thrown by the irrational notion that it could have been a problem set by Smart. “Not as many as you, I expect,” he retorted.

“I just had one and then we had some after dinner.”

“Good boy.” Summers felt a little sly for adding “Did your teacher say anything about it?”

“He wanted me to add up all the days till today in my head.”

“Just this month, you mean. And did you?”

“I got it right. He said everyone should be like me.”

“It wouldn’t be much of a world if we were all the same, do you think?” Summers sensed that the boy had more to tell. “Is that all he did?”

“Jimmy was next to top in class but he got the answer wrong.”

“What happened, Adam?”

“Mr Smart gave him a calendar as well but now Jimmy has to give it back.”

“I knew he couldn’t change. He’s the shit he always was.”

Summers had done his best to lower his voice, but Adam giggled with delight. “What did you say, grandad?”

“You didn’t hear it, and don’t tell your parents, all right? There’s no need for language like that.”

“I don’t mind. Some of the boys in my class say worse, and the girls.”

“Then they shouldn’t, even about—” Although Summers had already said too much, his nerves were prompting him. “Just so long as your teacher never tries anything like that with you,” he said. “He’ll have me to deal with. I’ve got the calendar.”

“He won’t, grandad. He says he wishes all the summers were like me.”

Summers recalled Smart’s jokes about his name, but they’d been vicious. “So long as you are, Adam,” he said, and nothing more until they reached the house. “I’ll see you all tomorrow,” he said, which meant once a week.

He brought dinner home from the Donner Burger Pizzeria, and ate nearly half of the fish and some of the chips before thoughts of Smart stole his appetite. He'd prove he deserved to have the prize. He cleared the kitchen table and laid the calendar face up on it. The open doors stood more or less erect, and he totted up their numbers while he looked for the fourth. There it eventually was, and he rewarded himself with the contents as he added to the total in his head and carried on the search. Ten became fifteen, and he swallowed to make room for the five in his mouth. He needn't eat any more chocolates; he certainly shouldn't see off however many led to today's, even if it would feel like saving Adam from any reason to be grateful to the teacher. Twenty-what, twenty-one, twenty-more… At the eighth he lost count and had to start again. The relentless glare of the fluorescent tube overhead intensified his sense of sitting an examination, but it was only a mock one. One, three, six, ten… This time he progressed as far as the eleventh, and then searching through the numerical maze drove the total out of his head. He did his best to add up the numbers without looking for them, but he'd tallied fewer than many when he found he had to see them. He tried saying them aloud as he found them and repeating the latest total over and over while he searched for the next number, though he had to keep raising his voice to hold the count in his head. At last he arrived at the date and shouted the total, not loud enough to bother the neighbours, he hoped. He was about to feed himself one more sweet when he wondered if he'd arrived at the right answer.

He added all the numbers up again, and the total was even louder than the process. It was a shout of frustration, because the amount was twenty-two less than his previous answer, which couldn't even mean he'd missed a number out. He tried another count, though his throat was raw with shouting before he came to the end. Figuring out the difference aggravated the headache that was already making his vision throb. The total was nineteen more than the last one, which meant it was three less than he'd added up in the first place, but why did he need to know any of this? His head felt as if it was hatching numbers, a sensation that exacerbated a greasy sweetish sickness in his mouth. He stumbled to the bathroom to gulp water and splash some on his face. When none of this seemed to help he groped his way into the bedroom, but his thoughts came to bed with him. The year Smart had taken him for mathematics had been one of the worst of his life.

“I’m here to make you smart like me,” the teacher had informed the class. “If I don’t do it one way I’ll do it another.” With his plump petulant constantly flushed face he’d resembled an overgrown schoolboy, and he’d revealed a schoolboy’s ingenuity at inventing tortures, tweaking a tuft of hair at the nape of the neck to lift his victim on tiptoe and hold them there until he’d delivered a lecture to them or about them. He’d called his favourite victim Summer because, he’d said in anything but praise, the boy was so singular. Before long Summers had spent every school night lying awake in terror of the next day, but he’d been too ashamed to tell his parents and afraid that any intervention would only make the situation worse. He’d lost count of how often he’d been singled out before the first of December, when Smart asked him to add up the days of the month.

Everyone had found his bewilderment hilarious. He’d had to risk answering at last, and Smart had given him a round of dry applause. When he’d produced an advent calendar from his briefcase Summers had felt encouraged until he was called to the front of the class to find the date. Long before he did, the teacher was declaring “Summer means to keep us all here till next summer.” After that every mathematics lesson began with Summers on his feet to announce the total to date. He’d succeeded for over a week, having lost even more sleep to be sure of the answers, but he’d gone wrong on the ninth and on every school day for the rest of December. He’d still had to find the day’s sweet as he stood on tiptoe, raised ever higher by the agonising drag at his neck, and then he’d had to drop the chocolate into the bin.

His anger at the memory kept him awake. Counting Father Christmases no longer helped, and he tried adding up punches to Smart’s cruel smug face. That was satisfying enough to let Summers doze, only to waken in a rage, having realised that he didn’t need to find the numbers on the calendar to count them. He turned it on its face and listed all the dates in a column on a pad—if he hadn’t felt that mobile phones involved too many numbers he would have had a calculator to use now. He tapped each date with the pen as he picked his way down the column. A smell of paint threatened to revive his headache, but eventually he had a number to write at the foot of the last row and another to add at the top of the next one. At last he had the full amount, and muttered something like a prayer before adding up the dates again. He did the sum a third time to be certain, and then he rewarded himself with a bath. Three times in a row he’d arrived at the same answer.

He oughtn't to have tried to prove he could repeat the calculation in his head. By the time he succeeded, the water was too cold to stay in. He meant only to glance at the bedside clock to see how soon he ought to leave for Paul's and Tina's, but he was already late. He almost snagged the padding of his jacket with the zip as he hurried out, to be hindered by tins of paint on the balcony. His left-hand neighbour's door had turned green. "Just brightening the place up for you," the overalled workman said, sounding rather too much like a nurse in a sickroom.

Summers had scarcely rung the bell in the wrought-iron porch when Adam ran to open the door. "I said grandad said he was coming."

Paul emerged in a chef's apron from the kitchen as Tina appeared from the dining-room with an electric corkscrew. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting," Summers said.

"Don't give it a thought." To his wife Paul said "I told you he'd never mistake the date."

"He's just being silly, Teddy," Tina assured Summers, which only made him wonder what else she'd said about him. "Take your grandfather's coat, Adam," she said and blinked at Summers. "Haven't you been well?"

"Perfectly," Summers said, feeling too defensive to be truthful. "What makes you ask?"

"You look as if you could do with feeding," Paul said.

"You can have one of my chocolates if you like," said Adam.

"I hope you thanked grandpa for the calendar," Paul said. "I never had one at your age."

"I gave grandad one as well."

"Poor mite," Tina said to Paul, and less satirically "That was kind of you, Adam."

"He gave me mine so he could have the one the teacher gave me."

"I don't think I understand."

She was gazing at Paul, but Summers felt interrogated. "Perhaps we could discuss it later," he said.

"Adam, you can set the table," Tina said as if it were a treat, and gestured the adults into the lounge. Once the door was shut she said "What's the

situation?”

“I shouldn’t really think there is one,” Summers tried saying.

“It sounds like one to us,” Tina said without glancing at Paul. “Why did you want Adam’s present?”

“I just took it off him because it looked a bit ancient. Exactly like his grandfather, you could say.”

“You mean you binned it.”

Summers might have said so, but suppose Adam learned of it? “I didn’t do that, no. I’ve still got most of it.”

“Most,” Paul said like some kind of rebuke.

“I ate a few chocolates.” Summers felt driven to come up with the number. “Five of them,” he said with an effort. “I’m sure they’re nowhere near as good as the ones I gave Adam.”

“They can’t be so bad,” Tina said, “if you saw five of them off.”

“All right, it wasn’t only that. I just didn’t want Adam taking anything from that man.”

“Which man?” Tina demanded as Paul said even more sharply “Why?”

“The maths man. I hope he won’t be there much longer. Smart,” Summers made himself add and wiped his lips. “I wouldn’t trust him with a dog, never mind children.”

“What are you saying?” Tina cried as Paul opened his mouth.

“I had him for a year at Adam’s age. It felt like the rest of my life.” Summers saw he had to be specific so that they wouldn’t imagine worse. “He loved hurting people,” he said.

“He’d never get away with that these days at school,” Paul protested.

“There are more ways than physical. Let’s just hope Adam stays his favourite.”

Tina gave Summers a long look before enquiring “Have you said any of this to Adam?”

“I wouldn’t put him under any pressure, but I do think you should keep a close eye on the situation.”

“I thought you said there wasn’t one,” Tina said and opened the door to the hall. “We’ll be discussing it further.”

Summers gathered that he wouldn’t be involved, and couldn’t argue while Adam might hear. He offered to help but was sent into the dining-room, where Tina served him a glass of wine while his son and grandson brought in dinner. He saw they meant to make him feel at home, but every Saturday he felt as if he’d returned to find the house almost wholly unfamiliar, scattered with a few token items to remind him he’d once lived there—mostly photographs with Elaine in them. At least he could enthuse about Paul’s casserole, but this gave Adam an excuse to ask “Do you know what it’s called, grandad?”

“Adam,” his mother warned him.

“It’s not called Adam.” Perhaps the boy was misbehaving because he’d been excluded from the conversation in the lounge. “It’s cock off, Ann,” he said.

“That’s very rude,” Tina said, “and not at all clever.”

“Maybe it’s cocker fan.”

“That’s rude too.” Apparently in case it wasn’t, Tina insisted “And silly as well.”

“Then I expect it’s cock—”

“Now, Adam, you’ve already impressed us with your schoolwork,” Summers said as he thought a grandparent should. “You’re an example to us all. You’re even one to me.”

“How am I, grandad?”

“I’ve been doing some sums of my own. I can tell you what the month adds up to so far.” When nobody asked for the answer Summers felt not much better than distrusted, but he’d repeated the amount to himself all the way to the house. “One hundred and eighty-one,” he said with some defiance.

Adam squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “No it isn’t, grandad.”

“I’m sure it is, you know.” On the way to growing desperate Summers said “Hang on, I’ve left today out, haven’t I?”

“That’s not it, grandad. One hundred and ninety, you should have said.”

“I don’t think that can be right,” Summers said to the boy’s parents as well. “That’s ten times whatever it’s ten times, nineteen, isn’t it, of course.”

“I should have thought the last thing you’d want to do,” Tina said, “is undermine his confidence.”

“He’s undermining mine,” Summers complained, but not aloud. He was silent while he tried to make the days add up to Adam’s total. They either fell short or overshot it, and the need to carry on some sort of conversation didn’t help, any more than the drinks during and after the meal did.

The streets were full of numbers—on the doors of houses and the gates, on the front and back of every car and, if they were for sale, in their windows too. There were just three digits to each registration plate, and he tried to add up each group as it came in sight. He was absurdly grateful to reach home, although the orange lights on the balcony had turned his door and its neighbours identically black. “Nine,” he repeated, “nine, nine,” and felt as if he were calling for aid by the time he managed to identify the door.

The Advent calendar was still lying on its numbers, and he hoped that would keep them out of his head—but they were only waiting for him to try to sleep, and started awake whenever he did. They got out of bed with him in the morning and followed him into the bath. Couldn’t he just add today to Adam’s total? That seemed too much like copying an answer in an examination, and in any case he wanted to learn how Adam had arrived at the result. When it continued to elude him he floundered out of the bath.

He did his best to linger over dressing, then listed all the numbers on a new sheet of the pad, pronouncing them aloud to make certain he missed none. Today’s date could be added once he’d written down the total. He poked each number with the ballpoint as the amount swelled in his head, only for the pen to hover above the space beneath the line he’d drawn at the foot of the column. He went down the list of figures again and again, jabbing at them until they looked as though they’d contracted a disease. He announced every amount on the way to the total—he might almost have been uttering some kind of Sunday prayer—but none of this was much use. One hundred and seventy-nine, one hundred and ninety-three, one hundred and eighty-seven… He hadn’t hit upon the same amount twice, let alone the one Adam had told him, when somebody rang the raucous doorbell.

He thought they might have come to complain about his noise, especially once he noticed it was dark. He couldn’t leave the table until the sum was

done. “One hundred and ninety,” he said, but that wasn’t the whole of the total. “Seven,” he yelled in a rage, “one hundred and ninety-seven,” and shoved back his chair to tramp along the hall.

He was preparing to apologise, if hardly to explain, but Tina was outside. “Well, this is a surprise,” he said. “Come in.”

“I won’t, thanks, Teddy. I just came to tell you—” With a frown that Summers felt was aimed to some extent at him, she turned to say “Adam, I told you to wait in the car.”

“I wanted to say goodbye to grandad.”

“Why,” Summers said in bewilderment, “where’s anybody going?”

“Adam will be going home with a friend next week.” Apparently in recompense, Tina added “You’ll still be coming to us for Christmas.”

“You mean I’m not wanted for picking up Adam from school.”

“I’ve explained the situation.”

As Summers managed not to retort that he suspected the opposite, Adam said “Grandad, did you go to school when you were a baby?”

“I wasn’t quite that young. Why do you ask?”

“Grandma said you were a baby when Mr Smart had you at school.”

Elaine had been in the same class—Summers used to thank their schooldays for bringing them together. Now he was almost too enraged to ask “What else did she say about me?”

“We won’t talk about it now if you don’t mind,” Tina said, “and I hope it won’t spoil Christmas either. Just say goodbye to your grandfather till then, Adam.”

“Bye, grandad,” the boy said. “You got something nice from Mr Smart, didn’t you? All the chocolates.”

“I won’t argue,” Summers said and watched Tina shoo Adam back to the car. When he returned to the kitchen the clamour of numbers and emotions in his head robbed him of the ability to think. Turning the calendar over didn’t help, especially since every open door had been flattened shut. He stared at however many identical idiotically grinning faces there were, and the pad swarming with diseased amounts, and all at once his mind seemed

to clear. Had Tina freed him? Now that he wouldn't be associated with Adam, surely he could deal with the teacher.

He didn't feel beset by numbers once he went to bed. He slept, and in the morning he was able to ignore the calculations on the pad. He listened to symphonies on the radio until it was time to head for Park Junior, and was in a shelter with a view of the school several minutes before the last bell. When the children streamed out under the grey sky, the explosion of colours and chatter felt like a promise of spring. He was cut off from it, skulking in a corner so that Adam wouldn't notice him. Soon he saw his grandson with another boy, and they set about kicking a ball as they followed a young woman into the park.

As Summers turned his face to the wall to make sure he wasn't recognised, he felt like a schoolboy sent to stand in the corner. Surely Adam hadn't looked happier than he did when his grandfather met him. As soon as the thumps of the football passed the shelter Summers peered towards the school. Suppose the teacher had sneaked away unobserved? Summers hurried to the railings opposite the school but could see nobody he knew. The doors let out some teachers and then even more he didn't recognise, and he was clenching his shaky fists in frustration by the time a man emerged into the deserted schoolyard.

He was thin and bent, and as grey as the sky—his suit, his thinning hair, the smoke of the cigarette he lit before stalking to the gates. For a moment Summers wondered if the teacher was too old to bother with—even old enough to be given some grudging respect - and then he saw that Smart had become the vicious old man he'd resembled forty years ago. Any hesitation felt too much like fear, and he barely managed to unclench his fists as he strode out of the park. "Mr Smart," he said in triumph. "Can I ask you a question?"

The teacher stared at him with no more interest than emotion. "Are you a parent?"

"That and a lot more." Summers was determined to relish the confrontation. "Can you tell me what December adds up to so far?" he said.

"Are you asking for one of my pupils?"

"No, I'm speaking for myself. I've learned to do that." Summers struggled to contain his rage as he enquired "Can you do it in your head?"

"Quite obviously I can." Smart took a measured puff at the cigarette and exhaled smoke, disturbing a stained hair in his left nostril. "It's two hundred and thirty-one," he said, "if that's of any consequence to you."

"Not so sure of yourself for a bit there, were you? That's a taste of what it feels like."

"I fear you have the advantage of me," Smart said and made to step around him.

"You bet I have. It's taken long enough but it was worth the wait." Summers sidestepped to block his way. "Don't you know me yet?" he demanded. "Tortured so many youngsters you've lost count, have you?"

"What on earth do you imagine you're referring to?" Smart narrowed his already pinched eyes at a clatter of cans in the park, where Summers had seen teenagers drinking lager on the swings. "That's what comes of undermining discipline in school," Smart said. "They'd never behave like that if we were still allowed to touch them."

"It's your sort who undermined it. Made everyone who suffered from the likes of you want to make sure nobody ever does again. It's your fault it's so hard to keep discipline now. It's swine like you that lost teachers their respect."

Smart lifted the cigarette towards his face but seemed uncertain where his mouth was. "Did I have you at school?"

"Recognised one of your victims at last, have you? One of the ones you could touch. Do you dream about touching children, you filthy shit? I've often thought that's what your sort wanted to get up to. You took out on children because they made you want to fiddle with them. I bet having them at your mercy worked you up as well." Was Smart's face turning grey just with the winter twilight? "Just remember I know where you are now," Summers murmured. "If I even think you're mistreating anyone I'll make it my business to lose you your job. What are you going to do with your fag? Thinking of using it on me, are you? Just try and I'll stick it somewhere that'll make you scream."

Smart's mouth had begun to work soundlessly, and Summers was reminded of a masticating animal. The cigarette looked close to dropping from the man's fingers, which were shaking the ash loose. Had Summers gone too far? Not unless Smart could identify him, and surely the man

would have done so aloud. “Have the Christmas you deserve,” Summers told him and turned away from him.

When he glanced back from the park he saw the teacher standing just where he’d left him. Smart raised his hand as though bidding him some kind of farewell, but he was finding his mouth with the cigarette. “Who’s the baby now?” Summers muttered. “Go on, suck your dummy. Suck yourself to death.”

He felt exhilarated as a schoolboy who’d got away with a prank. He might almost have boasted to the teenage drinkers on the swings. If he had any doubts about how he’d spoken to the teacher, they left him as soon as he saw his old house. It was Smart’s fault that he wasn’t trusted to bring Adam home, and when he reached the apartment block he might have thought the teacher had played another trick. The glare of the declining sun showed him that both doors flanking his had turned green, so that every door on the balcony was the same colour.

“It’s nine, you swine,” he said, he hoped not too loud, and let himself in once he was sure of the number on the door. Smart couldn’t undermine his confidence any longer, and so he tore the calculations off the pad and flung the spotty wad of paper in the bin. The calendar was a trophy, all the more so since Smart didn’t know he had it. He microwaved a cottage pie and a packet of vegetables, and gobbled the lot like a growing boy. He could have thought he was growing up at last, having dealt with the teacher.

How many doors had he already opened on the calendar? He wasn’t going to reopen them; taking chocolates at random was one more way to taunt the teacher. “Unlucky for you,” he mumbled as he crunched the thirteenth sweet, and “That’s how old you like them, is it?” on prising open the tenth door. He might have finished all the chocolates except for not wanting to make himself sick. The best celebration would be a good night’s sleep.

At first he didn’t understand why it kept being interrupted. Whenever he jerked awake he felt as if he’d heard a sound, unless he’d had a thought. He stayed in bed late; he couldn’t be seen with Adam at the school in case Smart took some revenge. What if he’d simply made the teacher even more vindictive? Suppose Smart had recognised him after all and meant to take it out on Adam? A sour stale taste urged Summers to the bathroom. Water didn’t rid him of the taste, and he stumbled to the kitchen, only to falter in the doorway. More compartments than he’d opened on the calendar last

night stood open now—six doors, no, seven. Those that had reopened were the five he'd previously emptied. With its upright tabs the calendar resembled a miniature graveyard.

"I wish it was yours, you swine," Summers muttered. He was growing more anxious, and once he was dressed he headed for Park Junior. Soon he saw Adam, though not soon enough for his nerves. The boy was chasing other boys in the schoolyard and being chased, and looked entirely carefree, but had he encountered Smart yet? For a moment Summers had the irrational notion that the teacher was not merely hiding like himself but skulking at his back. There was nothing in the corner of the shelter except a scattering of cigarette butts on the floor and on the end of the bench.

Once the schoolyard was deserted Summers lingered in the shelter, listening for Smart's cold high voice—straining his ears so hard that he thought he heard it amid the scrape of windblown leaves on gravel. The idea that Smart was still at large in the school made him want to storm into the school and report the swine to the headmistress—to say whatever would get rid of him. To overcome the compulsion he had to retreat out of sight of the school. Long before the final bell he was back in the shelter. He hadn't counted the cigarette ends, and so he couldn't tell if they'd multiplied or even whether they'd been rearranged like an aid to a child's arithmetic. He spied on the schoolyard until he saw Adam, who looked happier than ever. Summers hid his face in the corner while the boys and their football clamoured past, and then he turned back to the school. He watched until the doors finished swinging at last, but there was no sign of Smart in the secretive dusk.

Had he been moved to another school? "So long as you're safe, Adam," Summers murmured, but the comment seemed to sum up how little he'd achieved. He was so preoccupied that he nearly tried to let himself into the wrong flat. Of course the number on the door was upside down. He shut his door and tramped along the hall to stare at the advent calendar as if it might inspire him. The shadows of the cardboard markers appeared to deepen the empty compartments, and he was seeing them as trenches when the doorbell rang.

Paul's expression was oddly constrained. "Well, you'll be pleased," he said.

"You're trusting me with Adam again."

Paul took a breath but didn't speak at once. "The teacher you had trouble with," he said, "you can forget about him."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"He's no longer with us." Since Summers didn't react Paul added "He's dead."

"Good heavens," Summers said, although he hoped those weren't involved. "When did that come about?"

"He had some kind of stroke when he was driving home yesterday. People saw him lose control and his car went into the front of a bus."

"That's unexpected." Summers did his best to control his face but thought it prudent to admit "I can't say I'm too distressed."

"I wasn't expecting you to be."

"So I'll be collecting Adam from school tomorrow, yes?"

Paul made another breath apparent on the way to saying "Let's leave it for this week, shall we? We'll sort it out after Christmas."

"Is it you who doesn't want me looking after him?" When Paul was silent Summers said "I didn't know I'd raised you not to stand up for yourself."

His son paused but said "Mum makes it sound as if you didn't for yourself at school."

"Then she'd better know I've changed. Just hope you never find out how much, like—" Summers' rage was close to robbing him of discretion. "Go home to your family. I'll leave you all alone till Christmas," he said and shut the door.

Any qualms he might have suffered over causing Smart's demise were swallowed by his fury with Elaine and Tina and, yes, Paul. He stalked into the kitchen to bare his teeth at the calendar. "I wish I'd been there," he said in a voice that wasn't far from Smart's. "Did you count the seconds when you saw what was coming? It'd just about sum you up." Talking wasn't enough, and he poked a door open at random. "Revenge is sweet, don't you think? Revenge is a sweet," he said and shoved the pair of digits he'd uncovered into his mouth.

Perhaps it was too sweet, the chocolate plaque bulging with numbers. He didn't much care for the taste that filled his mouth once the unexpectedly brittle object crumbled like a lump of ash. As the sweetness immediately

grew stale he had the impression that it masked a less palatable flavour. He grabbed a bottle of brandy still half full from last Christmas and poured some into the Greatest Granddad mug Adam had given him. A mouthful seared away part of the tastes, and another did more of the job, but he still felt as if some unpleasant sensation lay in wait for him. Perhaps he was exhausted, both emotionally and by insomnia. He could celebrate the end of Smart with a good night's sleep.

His nerves didn't let him. He kept thinking he'd heard a sound, unless he was about to hear one, or was it too stealthy to be audible? He didn't know how often he'd opened his aching eyes to confront the cluttered darkness before he saw a pair of red eyes staring back at him. They were two of the digits on the bedside clock until one pinched into a single line. It was a minute after midnight, and a day closer to Christmas.

The thought sent him out of bed. While he wouldn't be putting any of the contents of the calendar anywhere near his mouth, perhaps he could relax once he'd located the date and opened the door. As the fluorescent tube jittered alight he could have imagined he glimpsed a flap staggering upright on the calendar. He peered at the swarm of identically mirthful faces in search of the date. How many of the doors were open? Seven, or there should be, and he prodded them while counting them aloud. However often he added them up there was one more, and it was today's.

Could he have opened the door and forgotten? Was that a blurred fingerprint on the chocolate? He grabbed the calendar and shook the sweet into the bin. He was tempted to stuff the calendar in as well, if that wouldn't have felt too much like continuing to fear the teacher. "Do your worst," he mumbled, still not entirely awake. Throwing the calendar on the table, he sat down to watch.

Before long the lids of some of the compartments began to twitch. It was his debilitated vision or the shaking of the table, if not both. Whenever his head lurched more or less upright, having slid off his fists that were propping it up, he had to force his eyes wide and count the open doors afresh. "Eight," he kept declaring, even when someone thumped on the wall of the kitchen. "Had enough for one day, have you?" he retorted, though he wasn't sure to whom. He didn't notice when the fluorescent glow merged with pallid sunlight, but it seemed to be an excuse for retreating into bed.

It was almost dark by the time he gave up dozing. He had enough food to last until Christmas—enough that he needn't be troubled by the identical doors on the balcony. He ate some of a bowl of cereal while he glared a raw-eyed challenge at the calendar, and then he listened to a carol concert on the radio—it was many years since he'd heard carollers at his or anybody's door. The music lulled him almost to sleep until the choir set about amassing the twelve days of Christmas and all that they brought. Even after he switched off the radio, the numbers kept demanding to be totalled in his head.

Well before midnight he was at the kitchen table, where he stood the bedside clock next to the calendar. The digits twitched into various shapes on their way to turning into eyes, which he could have imagined were refusing to blink because they were determined to watch him, even without pupils. At last—it seemed much longer than a minute—the final digit shrank, but nothing else moved. Didn't that last number look more like an I than a 1? Summers was attempting to ignore it when it crumbled into segments, but he mustn't feel compelled to count them; he had to catch the calendar opening today's door, or see whatever happened. He gripped his temples and dug his thumbs into his cheeks, feeling the bones of his skull. His face began to ache, but not enough to keep him alert, though he didn't know he'd dozed until his head jerked up. "Eight," he said when at last he thought he was sure of the number. He oughtn't to start bothering the neighbours again, and there was a way to avoid it—by tearing all the open doors off the calendar. They and the boxy holes they left put him in mind of a vandalised graveyard, an idea that felt capable of shrinking Smart no larger than an insect. "That's all you are. That's all you ever were," Summers muttered as his head drooped.

When had he eaten last? No wonder he was weak. At least he didn't need to leave the table to find food. He dragged the calendar to him and fumbled a door open. Some instinct must have guided him, since it was the first unopened one—the number of his flat. As he bit the chocolate, the coiled object on the little slab writhed into life. Its tail slithered from between his teeth, and it wormed down his throat as though it had rediscovered its burrow in the earth.

His head wavered up, and he clapped a hand over his mouth. No more doors were open after all—only eight, he was able to believe once he'd

counted the gaping compartments several times. The calendar wasn't as close to him as he'd imagined, and he might have been sure he'd dreamed the grisly incident except for an odd taste in his mouth. Perhaps it was merely stale and sweetish, or was there an underlying earthiness? It sent him to gulp brandy straight from the bottle, and he turned back to the table just in time to glimpse a movement. A lid had been lifted, although it was instantly still.

"Caught you," Summers cried. It bore today's date. The prize it had exposed was marked with scratches, as if someone had been clawing at it for want of a better victim. He shook the chocolate into the bin and tore off the date. "Finished for today?" he demanded, but couldn't interpret the lack of an answer. He was sinking shakily onto the chair when he glanced at the clock. The number beside the blind red eyes was his apartment's. No, it was upside down with its tail in the air, but it still showed he'd spent the night in front of the calendar.

He felt as if Smart had robbed him of all sense of time as well as any confidence about numbers. He would be no fun on Christmas Day if he'd had so little sleep. "You won't spoil this Christmas as well," he vowed. Suppose the presents for his family and Tina were ruined somehow? He threw the calendar on its face and pinned it down with a saucepan so heavy that his arms shook. Once he'd returned the clock to the bedside table he fetched the presents from the living room and lined them up in bed before he joined them.

He had to keep reminding himself that the muffled rustling came from the presents, especially whenever it wakened him after dark. His lurches into consciousness were too reminiscent of the Christmas he'd spent dreading next year's days with Smart, far too many to count—shivering awake to realise the worst nightmare wasn't in his sleep. The nights leading up to his retirement had been just as bad, and Smart's fault too. He saw the eyes blink wide to stare towards him, and managed to name the digits next to them. "One and two, that's three to you," he mouthed, and "Happy Christmas" when the right eye narrowed to a slit. He didn't need to go and look at the calendar; surely he would hear if anything happened. He lay awake listening, and tried not to move in case that disturbed the wrappings of the presents, though why should he fear being heard? It was almost dawn by the time he went to look.

The light in the fluorescent tube buzzed and fluttered like an insect and eventually grew still. Summers used both hands to remove the saucepan and then turned over the calendar. It put him in mind of lifting a slab—one from beneath which something might scuttle or crawl. Nothing else stirred, however. That wasn't why he let the calendar fall on its back with a hollow flimsy sound. All the numbers on the remaining doors were blurred beyond any possibility of recognition, while the festive faces were no more than blotches with misshapen blobs for eyes. Had age overtaken the calendar? Summers only needed to open today's door to finish celebrating his triumph. He could open all of them to find it if he had to—but prising one open revealed that the sweet was as unrecognisably deformed as the number on the door. The next was the same, and its neighbour, and he felt as if they were showing how deranged Smart had always been or was now. At last Summers wakened enough to realise that he didn't have to try every door; today's was larger. As soon as he located it he dug his fingertip under the lid.

His nail sank into a substance too firm for chocolate but in another way not firm enough, and then the object moved beneath his finger. As he recoiled, the door sprang up, exposing a greyish piebald surface in which a rounded lump bulged. He was trying to grasp the sight when the lump into which he'd poked his finger blinked again and glared at him. Even though it had already begun to wither and grow discoloured, he knew it all too well.

He swept the calendar onto the floor and trampled on it, feeling more than cardboard give way underfoot. He might have been stamping on a mask, but not an empty one. Once it was crushed absolutely flat he watched to be sure that nothing crept from beneath it, not even a stain, and then he retreated to the bedroom.

Suppose he'd set the madness free? He didn't like to keep the presents so close to the remains of the calendar. In any case it might be wise to set off for his old house—he was afraid it could take him some time to find. At least he hadn't undressed for bed. He clutched the presents to his chest and hurried onto the balcony, beyond which a greyish light was starting to take hold of the world. He gazed at his door until he succeeded in fixing at least the shape of the number in his mind. "You're the one with your tail hanging down," he said.

It was daylight now, however grey, and he did his best to hasten through the streets. He shouldn't be distracted by trying to count Christmas trees in windows, let alone Christmas lights. Today's date ought to be enough for him. "Two and five and you're alive," he told some children before they fled across the road. He mustn't frighten anyone. Among the reasons he'd retired had been the fear of needing to resemble Smart so as to teach.

He came to his old road at last, only to feel as if someone had gone ahead of him to jumble all the numbers. He just had to locate his old home, not remember which number it was. He didn't have to count his way to it, and he was surprised how soon he found the wrought-iron porch. He hugged the presents—one, two and another—as he thumbed the bellpush. "Two and five and you're alive," he carolled until the boy ran to open the door. Summers was about to hand him the presents when the boy turned his back. "I don't know what he wants," he called. "It's some old man."

The Address

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Fraith did his best to stay amused as long as he could. At the car park into which he wandered almost before realising he had, nobody even knew there was a railway station. Presumably this meant it wasn't along the road, and he tramped back into the forest, where the rusty colours were starting to lose their appeal. An October wind cold enough for winter met him, and then a muddy couple tugged by two Labradors did. They disagreed over directions while the dogs joined in, and eventually the man tried to send Fraith back to the road. Further down the path that was restless with leaves, the mother of two children about the ages of his daughter's daughters took pity on him. "Out by yourself today?" she said.

"I very often am. I'm just giving the family a breather."

"They look after you, do they?"

Fraith wasn't sure how much of her sympathy was reserved for him. "More like the other way round," he retorted.

"I know."

Her tone had turned more soothing, not unlike a nurse's by a bed. Fraith managed to say only "Can you tell me where the station is?"

"Was that the big place, mummy?" the boy said at once.

"That was a school," his sister informed him with all the disdain earned by her age or gender.

"There hasn't been a school for a long time. Be quiet about it." Since the woman was still gazing at Fraith, he could have thought this was addressed to him. "I'm sure I saw the sign you want," she said. "Carry on where we've come from and I think it's the next side path."

"I don't suppose either of you two saw a train."

"They haven't. Not today." With enough force to be rebuking Fraith the woman added "Just do as I said and you'll find what you asked for."

"I hope so." Fraith could sound like that too. "I need to get back to my daughter," he said. "She hasn't anybody else."

He hoped his return would be as welcome as his decision to go walking by himself had seemed to be. Were there really no walks closer to the house than a train ride away? Perhaps Carla had wanted a few hours by herself with the girls. He was doing all he could to help—enough for two people now her mother wasn't with them—but perhaps he seemed too interfering. He would ask Carla once the girls were in bed, though she disliked admitting to feelings like those, just as her mother had. Before he knew he meant to speak he said "Have you anyone like me?"

"We had," the woman said.

"He went to live with all the other granddads," the boy informed him.

Fraith could do without knowing what this might be a euphemism for. "I won't be doing that just yet," he said and strode into the woods.

He must have overlooked the sign she'd mentioned. Though the sun was lying low behind the trees, it wouldn't be dark for hours. The light transformed foliage into masses of orange flame and spilled between the trees to lend leaves on the path a tinfoil glare. The concrete path wasn't admitting to its destination; every few hundred yards another curve obscured the way ahead. While he hadn't counted the bends, it took more of them than he remembered to bring him back to the next junction, where nothing like a signpost was to be seen.

The woman must have mistaken the place, which surely ought to mean the next path wasn't far. He knew the station wasn't to the left—he'd come that way earlier—and the trail ahead curved rightwards. He zipped up the last inches of his padded jacket against the wind despite starting to sweat with exertion. "Best feet forward. You've a pair each," he would have said if Carla's daughters had been with him.

Soon the path straightened out, levelling the sunlight at him. For minutes he was as bad as blind. At last the path strewn with leaves like shards of mirrors veered to the right again, and he blinked his patchy vision clear, to be rewarded by the sight of a junction ahead. Or were those only gaps

between the trees on both sides of the track? No, there was a transverse path, but it was entirely unmarked.

He halted at the crossing and stared around him. His skin was as clammy as his mouth was dry, and at first the reverberations of his heart wouldn't let him think. Where had he gone wrong? He'd set out to follow a circular route from the station, but one of the bridges across the railway had been fenced off, and since then he'd lost the main path. If only Carla had reminded him to take his mobile phone, except that even if he hadn't left it by his bed he didn't suppose it would have helped him now. Should he return to the car park while he still knew where it was, in case someone could direct him? He was turning back when he heard voices on the right-hand path.

They weren't speaking English. Like many people in the street these days —sometimes enough to make him feel he was losing his grasp of his own language—the young men were from somewhere in the heart of Europe. They looked friendly enough, and stopped at the junction when Fraith held up a hand. "Did you come by the railway?" he said.

Two of them smiled while their companions frowned, and all four shook their heads. "Railway," Fraith repeated to the same effect and pumped his arms like pistons while puffing as hard as he could, only to realise that he could have been portraying an exhausted athlete. "Choo choo," he tried hooting and shoved his fists out hard enough to pummel an opponent. "Choo choo."

The men gazed at him as if they wondered where he'd been let out from— as Carla's daughters did too often while he was exerting himself to amuse them. "Station," he urged, shading his eyes to peer along each path in turn. "Station."

Three men shrugged. Their companion, the oldest, sketched a cross on himself before kissing his thumb, and Fraith wondered if this was a gesture to greet the deranged. He'd thought of nothing more to say by the time the men turned along the path he had been following. As he hesitated the oldest man looked back and waved him away. "No," he said and jabbed a finger at the path to Fraith's left. "Station."

He pronounced it so deliberately it might have been two separate words. Surely that could be the right path—if the men had passed the railway they would have figured out Fraith's performance. All the same, as he turned that way he felt as if he were being dragged by his shadow. His heart sounded

like a cheap effect in a film, and his mouth was growing parched again. He'd reached a bend that showed him more path and trees with their tips ablaze—his crooked silhouette was jerking along the unkempt verge, putting him in mind of the second hand of a decrepit clock—when he heard another voice.

Though it was blurred, not just by distance, he knew where the woman was. The man's voice that had greeted the train at the station had been distorted too. "Keep talking," Fraith urged and tramped faster along the path.

She fell silent at once. He could almost have fancied she was as contrary as Carla's girls. His shadow was veering around a bend as if in search of the direction by the time she spoke again. As far as he could make out she was publicising a special service, which seemed unlikely to concern him. Straining his ears only turned his heartbeat up, and he did his best to breathe more evenly as the bend showed him another deserted stretch of path. Wasn't that the red-brick station beyond the furthest trees? He was halfway to it before he could be sure it was a mass of autumn foliage.

He'd seen no other path since meeting the four men, but he'd begun to wonder if he was still right for the station until he heard the voice apparently announcing the first train due and the next ones. The wind threw the words about like a young animal worrying some kind of toy, so that Fraith couldn't locate the voice. At least he was closer to it. Surely that wasn't just an effect of the wind.

He'd passed another extended bend before she spoke again—something about the track and a delay. At least that should give him more of a chance to catch the train, but he kept on almost fast enough to lose his footing on the sodden leaves. As the wind flung the words away from him he could have imagined the treetops were groping to retrieve the message, not necessarily on his behalf. All at once a phrase made him falter. Could she just have announced the last train?

It shouldn't be due for hours yet. There was still enough light to trap his silhouette among the glistening shadows of trees. He made for the voice almost fast enough to leave his breath behind, though not the uneven drumbeat of his heart. Was he hearing about a mail train now—one that carried sacks? Presumably the public was being advised that it didn't take passengers. Fraith could see the building through the trees at the next bend,

at least until he came close enough to realise it wasn't solid enough. The distant shape wasn't overgrown with leaves, it was composed of them. He was almost at the bend by the time the voice spoke again. It was behind him.

It was to his left as well, among the trees. As he strained his eyes to find a path he'd overlooked, he heard a rhythmic clatter and a brief high sound. The mail train must be racing through the station, whistling to warn commuters. He'd thought the voice had just mentioned relaying the track, but this couldn't be affecting the trains. He was facing the sounds now, and he shouldn't waste any more time looking for a path.

The way through the trees wasn't as straightforward as he hoped. The forest was humpy with mounds of earth much taller than he was. None of the trails leading over or between them looked man-made, even inadvertently. The first route he followed brought him into a muddy hollow full of stagnant pools disguised by leaves, and he was on his knees by the time he clambered out of it. After that he did his best to stay on the mounds, no matter how treacherous they proved to be. Would they never let him glimpse the station? He might have thought its voice was mocking his progress, not least since it had grown even less comprehensible. Perhaps the bits of it that reached him on the wind were talking about prices and the next train, but what had it said about some form of support? "Doesn't matter," Fraith panted, "just don't shut up," and almost lost his balance on a scree of leaves as he laboured up a slope. He grabbed a scaly tree-trunk to haul himself onto the top of the mound, and a soggy lump of bark crumbled in his grasp. He sucked in a breath so as to release it, letting out a sound he would have preferred not to make. He could see where he'd been hearing from, and it had no connection with the railway. The building obscured by trees was a school.

The main building was long and wide and red. Two wings extended from it to enclose a schoolyard, beyond which distant figures stood around the edges of a field, watching others run. At once a great deal made sense. It was a sports day, nothing to do with support. The voice had been talking about prizes, not prices—about a sack race and a relay, and announcing the winners in numerical order.

For an irrational moment Fraith was tempted to retreat to the main path. He'd already begun to feel like a child lost in a maze, and besides, he had

loathed sports at school. "Don't blubber, Blubber," the gym master took delight in saying, though Fraith hadn't been especially overweight and had never let anyone see him weep. Only sweat had trickled down his face, not to mention down the rest of him, as he'd panted to the finish in everybody else's wake, urged on by the teacher's ironic cheers that too many spectators had emulated. They surely weren't allowed to treat children like that now, even in a school as remote as this one. If the way Carla's girls behaved was any indication, there were no longer many rules at all.

Someone at the school would be able to direct him to the railway, and he slithered down the mound. Now he couldn't see the building, but the announcer—no doubt the games mistress—was still audible with some words about the head. If the organiser of the games was anything like Carla, the competitors would be having an easy time. She could very well be firmer with his grandchildren, but perhaps she thought he'd been too strict with her at their age.

He wasn't going to risk the shortest route to the school—he couldn't afford a broken bone or even a sprain just now, if ever—and so he settled for the least hazardous. From the top of a mound the school blocked his view of the playing field. The next time it rose into sight, only the roof was visible above the high thick hedge that boxed the grounds in. He had to find his way around a copse webbed with ivy before he was able to reach the hedge.

A track led beside it, or at least a penumbra of mud that fringed the shadow of the forest. The hedge was several times Fraith's height and at least twice as thick as the width of his rotund stomach. It was far too thoroughly entangled for even the smallest child to squeeze through, and not just full of vicious thorns but bristling with them. Surely nothing like it would be allowed on school property these days, and he wondered how long ago it had been planted to have grown so much.

Since he couldn't see the school gates, he made his way along the soggy track towards the field. The windows he glimpsed through the hedge were as dark as the depths of the woods. Either the woman with the microphone hadn't often used one or her shrillness was distorting the transmission. Perhaps she was pretending to be excited, because Fraith couldn't see much to inspire her as he came in sight of the field.

The sack race was over. Several man-sized bags were propped against the schoolyard wall. Fraith's head was swimming with exertion, and he might

have imagined that the contestants had stayed in their sacks, which were jerking with the wind. In fact the bags couldn't have been used in the race—they must be full of rubbish, given how stained they were. He was glad to see that the sports day wasn't too rigorously organised; some of the young spectators on the far side of the field were playing a game of their own, throwing a ragged rugby ball or baseball to one another. Perhaps the amplified voice had grown shrill in a bid to reclaim their attention for the official event, such as it was. Fraith could see just one runner on the field, dashing along a track composed of muddy footprints in the not especially neat grass. Whatever kind of competition this might be, Fraith hadn't time to wait for it to finish. "Excuse me," he shouted through the widest gap—thinner than his thumb—he could find in the hedge. "Can you help?"

Perhaps nobody could see him, but none of the spectators facing away from him turned to look. Surely the hedge couldn't have made him inaudible. Perhaps the children had been told to ignore anyone outside the grounds. In any case he would do better talking to an adult, and he advanced along the unofficial track. He hadn't identified a single grown-up, not even the one with the microphone or loudhailer, when he caught sight of the gates past the front of the school.

They were open, though not fully. He would have to make his way around two sides of the grounds to them, but at least he wouldn't be yelling through the hedge. As he turned away he glimpsed the solitary runner stumble and fall. Half a dozen spectators ran to help him up, quite the opposite of how Fraith would have been treated at school. Fraith was alongside the brick wing that enclosed the schoolyard when he thought he heard the amplified voice calling him back.

It was saying somebody was back at school, although surely not the competitors. Now that Fraith thought about it, the lone runner hadn't looked too youthful. Might that explain what Fraith had heard earlier? Perhaps this was a special day, the kind schools sometimes put on, where roles were reversed and it was the teachers' turn to compete. Even the amplified voice might belong to an adolescent boy, since Fraith heard it crack as it enthused about a game of catch.

Sunlight poked jagged holes in the hedge as he came abreast of the front of the school. A drive led through the woods to the gates, but it was blocked by fallen trees. In any case the gap between the spiky wrought-iron gates was

too cramped for any vehicle to pass through. Twigs were entangled around the hinges, and the ground was stained rusty where the gates had settled into the mud. Fraith was wondering if he'd chanced upon a reunion at a defunct school, in which case the spectators might well be the children of the pupils, when he was distracted by a rhythmic clatter and a terse shriek that resounded across the field.

It had to be the railway. So it was beyond the far side of the playing field, but he still didn't know the way to the station. Someone must, and Fraith hurried through the lockjawed gates and up the weedy gravel drive. The low sunlight met him with such a fierce glare that all the windows through which it was shining looked unglazed. Once he was past the front of the school he had to fend off the light with his hand. Even shading his eyes didn't give him much of his sight back. He blinked like an animal just rousted from its lair as he stumbled alongside the school.

He could almost have fancied the commentator was talking about trains—about laying the track. Perhaps his confusion had lent the voice a mocking quality unless, since it was speaking of teachers now, that was how it actually sounded. Fraith dabbed at his eyes and then held the hand in front of them, but had to raise it to see the field, where another isolated runner was sprinting across the grass. He was heading for a gap between the spectators, some of whom appeared to be edging towards it; no doubt they were preparing to welcome the competitor. Fraith raised his hand beside his face and turned to peer along the schoolyard edge of the field.

He couldn't see a single adult among the spectators, insofar as he could make them out at all. The large sacks tied up with frayed cord and propped against the schoolyard wall were continuing to twitch, although he couldn't feel a wind. Not just the sacks but the untended turf around them were stained a colour that he did his best to find autumnal, and he was surprised if not uneasy that the watchers hadn't moved away from them. He was straining his eyes to distinguish even one face when all the onlookers leaned forward to gaze across the field.

Fraith peered under his hand into the sunlight and still had to narrow his eyes. There was no longer a gap in the mass of spectators along the far side of the field. At first he couldn't locate the runner, and then he saw a figure sprawled on the muddy grass, apparently having veered towards one corner of the hedge. In a moment several onlookers converged to haul him to his

feet and march him out of competition, so enthusiastically that Fraith thought he glimpsed the man's feet attempting to run in the air.

Were they presenting him with a trophy just for joining in? Someone by the distant hedge stepped forward, holding up a slim item against the sun. A dismayingly familiar sound greeted the gesture—a rhythmic clatter somewhere in the audience. Fraith had to peer about to locate a group of boys who were knocking cricket stumps together in a salute that seemed not merely improvised but primitive. The clatter continued as the pointed object rose high and parted its hefty blades before swooping at the figure held by spectators. The savage drumming ceased, isolating another sound—an exhausted shriek that was cut off at once. Spectators closed around the activity, which appeared to involve a good deal of exertion and repetition. Perhaps Fraith hadn't been wholly mistaken in thinking of a trophy, because in a while a group of boys darted away, lobbing their prize to one another. It was about as rounded as the other ragged ball had been.

Fraith tried to concentrate on just one thought in the hope it was the truth: that all the onlookers were so intent on the spectacle they hadn't noticed him. His mouth tasted sour and dusty, every heartbeat seemed to make his entire body quiver, but as two boys dragged a limp incomplete shape to join several more beside the far hedge he managed to free himself of his appalled fascination and set about backing towards the school. He was still in the open when he saw movement by the schoolyard wall.

The metal object glinted as it rose to shoulder height and higher. It was an old loudspeaker held by someone halfway along the line of figures beside the wall. The sunlight must be interfering with Fraith's vision, since the face behind the built-in microphone had a distinctly makeshift look. Its words were plain enough, despite a shrillness that sounded no less senile than childish. "Teach them," it screeched while the megaphone added a rusty distortion. "Pay them back."

At once too much else that Fraith had heard it saying became clearer. Perhaps it was the school rather than the day that was special, though he would rather not learn how. If he'd chanced upon some kind of reunion or revival, it was best left uninvestigated until he could alert the authorities. The sun had started to hide its face behind a forest mound beyond the playing field, and he could have wished it weren't restoring his eyesight as the figures by the schoolyard grew more distinct. He even had the grotesque

fancy that the harsh shrill voice belonged to the megaphone itself, given how temporary the commentator's mouth looked. As if provoked by the thought, the figure swung the megaphone towards him. "There's another," it cried in a voice that seemed to scrape the loudspeaker.

All the spectators along the wall turned to find Fraith, who struggled not to see their ramshackle faces clear, because he had a sense that doing so would leave him unable to move. "I'm not," he protested, having understood too much. "I'm like you. I was, I promise."

This earned him a response, not just from all the onlookers beside the wall. He'd never heard anyone laugh in unison before, a piercing noise that sounded as much like a chant as mirth. It almost blotted out the answer of the megaphone. "Aren't now," the strident voice said.

Fraith thought he had one chance to run for it, and swung around. Half a dozen former pupils of the school had made their stealthy way behind him. Whoever used to look after the grounds must have had quite a collection of implements, from which the figures waiting for Fraith had brought an impressive selection. If this wasn't daunting enough, he could see the figures in detail now—their torn muddy clothes, their toothless childish faces that put him in mind of rotten fruit. They weren't simply in danger of wizening; wrinkles kept appearing and being swallowed up like ripples in a pool, along with patches of discolouration. He backed away, almost falling in his haste not merely to keep his distance but to make a last appeal to the organiser of the events. "I'm only looking for the train," he pleaded.

He was afraid to hear the laughter again, but silence answered him—how eager or expectant he couldn't tell. The figure lifted the megaphone without speaking and thrust it forward, indicating the farther left-hand corner of the field. Perhaps that concealed a short cut to the station, invisible at such a distance. Fraith knew only that he mustn't run, or they might think he was like all those who had. He took a breath that pumped up his heartbeat and parched his mouth, and then he set off along the trampled course across the field. He mustn't look at the spectators—mustn't meet whatever they might have for eyes—but he found himself wondering whether Carla's daughters would have cheered him on if he'd given in to running. If he'd ever been too harsh with them, he prayed he could take it back, supposing that would save him. Then the sun went out, and he felt as if the world had.

2012

The Moons

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I might have seen the children once again.

I never wanted to see them at all. I would have been happiest up in my room, but my mother said "You haven't seen your chums since Christmas."

She'd only taken to talking about chums since we moved house, as if she had to bring her language up in the world. She used to call my friends in our old neighbourhood a gang. "I saw Claude and Ludwig on Sunday," I tried saying.

"Only on their way to church. You know what I mean." I thought she was about to say I should follow their example until she added "You've spent no time with them since your party."

As far as I was concerned it hadn't been mine, and I didn't want to be blamed for it. She kept saying how polite all the guests had been, though I wondered if she knew. The party had been her idea for earning me new friends, and she'd served the kinds of refined sandwiches and cakes her parents used to dish out when they owned the house. I'd told her nobody would bring a present, but all four of them did, and to my hot-faced embarrassment she gave each of them an envelope containing a ten-pound note. They'd thanked her so profusely that I'd felt even worse. "I was going to write a story," I said. "Or I might read. Don't you want me to read?"

"Stories aren't the whole world, Stuart," she said, though she worked as a book bunny at the local branch of Texts. "You need to play out as well."

At thirteen I was far too old to do anything of the sort or at least to call it that. "Maybe they're out," I said. "Maybe they've gone to some church thing."

"Don't start taking after your father. He would never make an effort if he wasn't certain he'd succeed." She was searching the carpet for scraps of needles that the Christmas tree might have left behind. "Give them a ring if

you can't just walk along the road," she said, "and then you won't be under my feet."

She was always cleaning in case any of the neighbours came to call. I hoped she might have cleared away the cordless phone somewhere we wouldn't find it, but it was among her mother's china cats on the granite mantelpiece. She'd stored the number for Claude's and Ludwig's house, and far too soon I heard the kind of music business phones put on while you wait for anyone to answer. It meant somebody at the house was listening to music. "It's Stu," I said.

"Don't say that, Stuart," my mother said. "You're not a plate of food."

"Stuart." Mr Smith might have been correcting me as well. "Did you have a splendid festival with all the trimmings?"

"It was good." When he didn't find this worth answering I had to say "Are Claude and Ludwig there?"

"Indeed they are, and their friends you so kindly invited to your celebration. Do give us our turn to play host." Before I could speak he called "Young Mr Armstrong is imminent, everyone" and was gone.

"I didn't even speak to them," I complained. "It was just their dad telling them I was going."

"Off you go where you're wanted, then."

I don't suppose she meant I wasn't wanted at home, but it gave me an excuse to flounce out of the room before snatching my padded anorak from the stag's horns her father had made into coat hooks. "Let me know when you'll be back," my mother said, having hurried to see me off.

The sun was just above the detached houses across the road, as high as it would rise this early in the year. The stone menagerie in our garden had shadows more than twice their size lying down behind them. I never knew if my mother kept the ornaments because she'd inherited them from her parents or in case the neighbours expected it of her. The shadow of her Mini on the drive was almost the size of the car I wished we had. The pines beyond the houses opposite clung to the roofs with dozens of shadowy fingers. A path between two houses led through the forest to the beach. The face of a ranger on the path was blurred by the low fierce light, but I thought he was watching me. I wasn't going to let a ranger make me feel out of place, and I stared at him before turning away from the path.

The Smiths lived in front of a magpie's nest a quarter of a mile away down the long straight road, past gateposts with marble bowling balls balanced on them and bushes politely clipped into sculptures. A Mercedes kept a Renault company beside the Smiths' weedless turfy lawn. A local artist had designed the ceramic plaque that said WELL-TEMPERED beside the solid oak front door. As I pushed the marble button in its shiny brass surround, all of which put me in mind of fingering the kind of nipple you saw on magazines, a magpie's chatter seemed to answer for the bell. I dragged a comb through my unruly hair and was about to thumb the button harder when Mr Smith opened the door. "Stuart," he enthused before he lowered his plump ruddy face on its swelling jowls towards me. "See if you can make a difference."

It sounded like a test, and I didn't know what kind. I kept my mouth shut as I followed him along the wide hall, which was panelled like an old museum and hung with paintings of naked people in groves. He opened a door at the end and announced "Ladies and gentlemen, the newcomer."

Sunshine through the windows that were most of one wall found me like a spotlight in an interrogation room. I had to narrow my eyes to see the boys and the Turner sisters, Verona and Valencia, who lived between the Smiths' house and mine. Besides the floppy suede chairs where everyone was sitting there was a jigsaw half made up, and an electronic keyboard, and a sketch pad on a table by the windows. I thought someone had drawn a cage on the pad until I saw it was the view of the pines beyond the back garden. For a moment I fancied a ranger was watching from the top of the slope above the garden wall, but I couldn't locate him, and the trees were too thin to hide a man. Mr Smith shut the door and went back to his music, and I realised that everyone was gazing not at me but at eight-year-old Valencia. "What's wrong?" I said.

The others stared at me in distaste, though I was only trying to fit in. "I lost my bracelet," Valencia wailed.

"It was only cheap." Verona was three years older and determined to show it. "It wouldn't have fallen off otherwise," she said.

"You bought it for me." Valencia blinked wet-eyed and said "It had all the moons."

This seemed to be my chance to join in. "All which?"

"The phases of the moon," Ludwig said with a fourteen-year-old's haughtiness. "They're what it was made of."

"For purgatory's sake," Verona said to her sister. "If it means that much to you I'll buy you another."

"It won't be the same. I coloured all the moons," Valencia said and burst into sobs.

Ludwig sighed like a parent. "Well, now nobody's going to be able to work."

"Not us." Claude seemed to think I needed to be put right, even though I was a year older than him. "Mother and father are writing their lectures," he said, "and Mr and Mrs Turner are doing their day with the homeless. And father's already asked Valencia if she could be quiet once."

"Does she know where she lost it?" I said.

Valencia stopped sobbing long enough to mumble "On the beach."

"Couldn't we go and see if it's there?"

Ludwig shoved himself off his chair and marched out to knock on a door. "Father?"

In a moment the door opened, spilling a wave of music. "What is it going to be this time?" Mr Smith seemed not to want to know.

"Stuart's proposing a search party to look for Valencia's jewellery."

"There can't be any harm in it if they take their phones," a woman said, "and see they're back well before dark."

"Mama has spoken," Mr Smith said. "Harmlessness is guaranteed."

Ludwig came back and stared at me before saying "We're to go down to the beach."

"What do you say, Valencia?" Verona said.

"Thank you, Stuart," Valencia said, which didn't seem to please anyone but me.

I was wearing my coat. While they all went to fetch theirs I remember wondering if I still felt watched because I was unwelcome—I'd decided that Mr Smith had meant I would make a difference by being out of place. Ludwig opened the windows and locked them again with a code on a keypad, but I didn't look in case anyone thought I was planning to rob the

house. He keyed more numbers at the gate in the wall at the end of the long garden, and then he led the way up a slope so strewn with needles that I imagined my mother complaining if I brought any home on my shoes. A magpie uttered its rattling call, and Valencia laughed as it soared out of its nest. She'd stopped crying as soon as Ludwig said we were going to the beach. Now I wish that nobody had listened to me—that I hadn't been there at all.

Just then I was only uncomfortable with hearing Verona nag her sister. "Don't slide," she said as we went down the far slope, and "Don't kick the needles, you'll spoil your shoes." Once she'd been told not to run either, Valencia looked about for something else. "We're walking on a big tiger," she said.

"It's a bit like one, isn't it?" I saw she meant the shadows on the brownish slopes. "All the stripes," I said.

To my surprise she took my hand. Hers was hot despite the winter chill, and sticky as a sweet. "The trees," she said before she had to pause for thought, "they're insects standing up."

As I saw the stubby branches protruding like insect legs from all the pines Verona said "Who are you trying to impress, Valencia? Paul and Diana aren't here." Apparently those were their parents. "Hurry up if you're looking for your bracelet," she said without even glancing at me.

Perhaps she hoped her sister would leave me behind, but Valencia pulled me along with all her strength, to a road along which a ranger's truck was hauling a cart piled with used Christmas trees. Nobody else passed us on the road, where the trees on both sides put me in mind of a cage like the sketch on the pad. I could have imagined someone peering between the bars, waiting to be let out. Beyond the dunes at the end of the road rangers were using Christmas trees to build a barrier against erosion, and a few people were throwing sticks for dogs beside the sea. "Where are we supposed to be going?" Verona asked her sister.

"Where everybody is."

All our shadows helped Valencia point along the beach. Half a mile away a crowd was bunched together near a car park among the dunes. People were throwing balls or kicking them or riding fat-wheeled motor tricycles or

trying to fly kites that soon fell flat as if their shadows had brought them down. "You don't imagine they'll have left it, do you?" Ludwig said.

He meant the people who used the other road. I felt Valencia's fingers struggling to make a fist. Her eyes were turning wet again, so that I was in a hurry to say "Why don't we ask if anyone's handed it in?"

"I'm asking," Claude declared and marched over to the rangers. "Excuse me, has a bracelet been given in?"

All of them shook their heads, and one said "Is it valuable?"

"It is to her," I said.

The ranger gave Valencia a sympathetic look. "Keep asking if you like, love, and we'll keep an eye out."

The last high tide had brought shells and seaweed almost to the edge of the dunes, and I was afraid it might have carried off the bracelet. As Valencia tugged me along the beach the crowd ahead receded like a mirage. The distance had made them seem closer together than they were, and the people with kites were leaving the beach in defeat. Once I fancied someone had carried off a recycled Christmas tree, but when I looked up at the dunes above us there was no sign of the green shape I'd seemed to glimpse. I could have thought Valencia was moving not much faster than the shadows of the dunes, except when she darted to pick up objects that always turned out to be shells. Her sister kept telling her to keep up but never spoke to me. She and Claude and Ludwig had almost reached the entrance to the car park when four boys who'd been chasing birds at the edge of the sea converged on them.

They wore track suits and trainers. Some of them might have been old enough for their tattoos, and even those who weren't had them. The oldest and bulkiest boy was about as old as Ludwig. "What you lost?" he said.

"Nothing that need concern you, thank you," Ludwig told him. "We'll manage by ourselves."

"Can't stop us looking," said a wiry boy in a baggy mauve suit. "Snot your beach."

Valencia hauled at my hand so fiercely in her haste to head them off-that she almost pulled me over. "Don't let them get it, Ludwig," she cried.

Another stringy boy stared at him and laughed so hard he spat. "You called Ludwig?"

"Will you please leave us alone," Claude said. "You've been politely asked."

The boy wiped his mouth to some extent and looked ready for a bigger laugh. "What's your name, then?"

"It's of no possible interest to you," Ludwig said. "Now for the last time will you please be on your way."

The fourth newcomer said nothing, and I wondered if he was as beside the point as me. Ludwig glanced at the crowd, but there wasn't one; the tricycles had sped away, and the scattering of adults still on the beach were too distant to help. A truck started its engine near the Christmas trees, and then another did. Ludwig beckoned to the rangers, who must have thought he was waving, unless they found the gesture too presumptuous. The trucks vanished into the dunes, taking all the rangers with them, and Valencia yanked at my hand as if she wanted me to intervene. My only thought was that if I didn't try to sound like Ludwig he might think I sounded too much like the intruders, or even if I tried. I did my best not to make too much noise in clearing my throat, but everyone stared at me—everyone except Verona, who suddenly bent double. I thought nerves had made her sick until she straightened up and slipped an object into her pocket. "I've found it," she said.

"Oh, let's see," Valencia cried.

"Oh, do let's," said the boy with spit around his mouth.

"It's safe now," Ludwig told Valencia. "Let her keep it for you till we're home."

As soon as he made for the road where the rangers were, the boys in track suits followed him. He turned at once and headed in the opposite direction. "That's the wrong way," Valencia protested.

"It's where there'll be grown-ups," I said.

I thought my remark might drive away our unwanted companions, but it only earned a scowl from Ludwig. As they followed us Verona told them "You weren't going this way."

"Changed our mind," the bulky boy said.

Ludwig twisted around to confront them. "Would you like me to phone someone?"

"Go for it," the bulky boy said like a gunfighter. "Mobiles don't work down here."

'You don't know if ours do," Claude blurted.

"They'll be worth having, then," said the boy with the wet mouth.

Ludwig might have glared at Claude for giving them more reason to come after us, but he was striding to the car park. The boys fell behind as we hurried to keep up with him until he halted on the path between the dunes. Fewer than a dozen vehicles were parked in a gravelled area the size of a football field, and not a single human being was to be seen.

We were halfway across the car park when gravel clattered at our backs. While the boys weren't throwing it yet, they were following us at speed. As we carried on towards the road through the woods we heard a car on it. I hoped it was a ranger's truck, but it was a jeep full of more big dogs than people. Ludwig stood in its way and held up one hand like a policeman. "Will you tell these people to go away, please?"

"What's wrong with them?" the driver said. "They've as much right to be here as you, son."

"We live round here."

"We don't," the woman with the driver said, "so you'll just have to put up with us all."

"I shouldn't have expected any better," Ludwig said.

I wanted to tell the couple in the jeep that it was only how he'd been brought up, but I don't suppose it would have helped. The driver revved the engine to make Ludwig step aside, and as the jeep coasted alongside the boys I heard the driver say something to them. He sounded as though he was joking. Ludwig looked ready to remonstrate with him, but Claude said "Look, there's someone who'll help."

I was just in time to glimpse a figure in green who'd emerged from the pines at the bend. He vanished beyond it before anyone could attract his attention. "Quick," Claude said even more urgently and demonstrated how we should run.

Ludwig didn't quite, instead stalking after Claude with exaggerated strides that earned him sniggers from the boys in the car park. The rest of us followed, running whenever Verona told Valencia to keep up. We turned the bend to find Claude and Ludwig stranded in the middle of the road. "I saw him," Claude complained.

The road stretched straight for at least half a mile between mounds of sandy earth. There was no sign of anybody on it or among the trees that occupied the mounds. I heard footsteps leave the car park and start along the road. "This way," Ludwig said at once.

He stuck his arm out like a guard at a school crossing while we dashed up the nearest piny slope. From the top I saw pines beyond pines beyond pines, and hollows strewn with needles between the long high irregular mounds. The sun was so much in my eyes that I hardly noticed all the outstretched shadows until I slithered with Valencia down the further slope. For a moment I'd thought someone had abandoned a topiary sculpture in the woods, but when I looked for it I couldn't even locate the green shape. Ludwig tramped up the next mound and frowned to make everyone follow. As I helped Valencia down that one I checked my mobile for a signal. Because of the dazzle I had to hold the phone close to my eyes before I was certain it was useless. Everyone else's was more sophisticated, even Valencia's, but they had no signal either. By the time this was established we'd left several mounds behind, but we still heard the boys on the road. They'd stopped at the bend to wonder aloud where we were, and threateningly too. "Keep quiet," Ludwig muttered. "Keep down."

I don't believe I was alone in holding my breath. Valencia's fingers squirmed to take a firmer grip on mine. We heard no more from the direction of the road, and eventually Ludwig pointed downhill. He might have been playing a platoon leader in a war film. I thought he was enjoying himself, and even I began to until I heard a whisper in the chill piny silence. "They're there."

Whoever was speaking must have crept up on us. Ludwig brandished his hand at the platoon and stiffened into a crouch. Valencia was digging her small nails into the back of my hand by the time anyone relaxed. It seemed the boys hadn't found us after all. We stole down the slope and were equally careful about climbing another. From the top the road was entirely out of sight, and so were the boys. We were in the next hollow, where the shadows

looked unnaturally pallid with the dazzle that stuck to my eyes, when the soft voice repeated "They're there."

It sounded secretive but also somehow lulling, so that I could have fancied it was saying "There, there." Claude sprinted up the next mound and grabbed a fallen branch. "Come on," he shouted.

He might have been challenging the boys or urging Ludwig if not me to do so—perhaps even all of that. "Stay with your sister," I whispered to Valencia and ran to join Claude as his brother frowned at both of us and then tramped after us. The sun glared into my eyes, and I was peering about not much better than blindly for a weapon when a voice said "Now who's this who's lost in my woods?"

At first I couldn't see him. His voice came straight out of the low sunlight that seemed to pinch the trees as thin as blackened matches. As I wiped my eyes he appeared between the trees and descended the mound opposite ours swiftly but silently. He was a ranger in uniform, taller and broader than he'd looked at first, with unexpectedly small and delicate features in a broad jowly face. His short black hair wasn't much less spiky than the pines, and his lips were almost as pale as his cheeks and ridged forehead. By the time he climbed up to us he'd developed a puckish grin. "Why, it's you," he said.

Ludwig's eyes narrowed. "Do we know you?"

"You're the Smith boys, aren't you? And these are the Turner girls." The ranger cocked his head and gave me a bright-eyed blink. "And here's Mrs Armstrong's lad."

"I'm sorry," Ludwig said, "we still don't know who you are."

"Don't I look familiar?" The ranger seemed disappointed. "Woodward by name and by nature as well," he said. "I'm just up the way from you."

"I've seen you," Valencia said and let go of my hand.

"There's one pair of sharp eyes for me," Woodward said and turned to Claude. "Who did you think you were going to fight?"

"Some boys are chasing us," Verona told him. "They want to steal our phones."

"And my bracelet," Valencia protested.

"Don't bother Mr Woodward with that now. You know it's safe."

"As safe as you all are," Woodward said. "Shall I show you the quickest way home?"

"We aren't supposed to go anywhere with people we don't know," Claude said and seemed unsure what to do with his stick.

"You won't be," Woodward told us. "I'll be busy making sure nobody finds you."

"Can't you come with us?" Valencia pleaded.

"Don't worry, they'll never know where you are." Woodward's voice was growing softer as if to ensure that the boys wouldn't hear. "Nobody can find my way if they're not shown," he said.

This sounded like a fairy tale to me, but it impressed Valencia. "Is it the rangers' special way?" she said.

"It's anyone's who belongs there. Straight through and carry on in that direction," he said, pointing all the long thin fingers of one hand at a gap between two mounds. "Just see you don't stray from the track if you want to be where you should be before dark."

I was wondering what accident had left him so little in the way of fingernails—not even indentations where the nails should be. When Ludwig tramped down to the gap we trooped after him, and Valencia took my hand again. I glanced back to see Woodward perched on the ridge, clasping his long hands together. "Homeward bound, the famous five," he said in a low voice that nevertheless reached us. "Leave everything to the lone ranger."

The path beyond the dunes wasn't quite as straight as he'd made it sound. It led between mounds several times the height of the tallest of us—Ludwig. Whenever it turned a bend it confronted us with the sun, which seemed to have grown even colder and fiercer as it sank. The mounds never cut off the sunlight long enough for my eyes to recover, but I glimpsed side paths wandering into the unnaturally pallid gloom. "We're in a maze," Valencia said.

She was trotting beside me, though there was barely room. "Just concentrate on keeping up," Verona told her if not me as well.

This silenced Valencia for a few turns of the path, and then she said "We're in his cage."

Perhaps not being able to see the way clearly had put her sister on edge. "What are you prattling about?" she demanded.

"The tiger's cage. See all the bars."

She meant the shadows, but perhaps Verona didn't care to understand. "Can't you just walk instead of trying to make things into things they aren't?" she said rather than asked.

Valencia stuck out her tongue at her sister's back as Ludwig led the way into a glade hemmed in by mounds. The sun was lying low among the trees and almost blotted out the ground we were walking on, where all the fallen needles glared like tinfoil. The trees framing the sun looked charred to the bone, except they weren't even that substantial—more like their own shadows standing on end. "It's scaly," Valencia whispered.

I supposed she meant the ground, but I wasn't especially anxious to know. Ludwig shaded his eyes and stared ahead. "Mr Woodward said straight on," he reminded everyone. "He must have meant there."

"It's the nearliest," Valencia said.

Neither of the gaps between the mounds on the far side of the glade was exactly opposite us. When we followed Ludwig through the right-hand gap it seemed not to matter that he'd chosen that path, since it soon veered left between the hillocks. The sun was beside us now, sending shadows even longer than the trees were tall down the slopes to mark the path like a board for some game. Valencia held my hand so that she could hop from patch to patch of the track boxed in by shadows. The path curved until the sun was at our backs, but she kept hopping as if she could still see the pattern. Her shadow hopped alongside Verona, who swung around. "Oh, it's you," she said with an odd edge to her voice. "Just try and walk like an ordinary person."

Valencia performed a defiant hop. "Give me my bracelet and I will."

"When we're home, so that's why you should hurry up."

"I want to see it," Valencia said, staying where she was. "Show me."

"There isn't time now," Verona said and turned her back. "Wait till we're home."

"You haven't really got it, have you? You just pretended so those boys would go away."

Ludwig glanced at Verona, and I saw he'd already known the truth. I was afraid that Valencia would burst into tears or run back the way we'd come, but she marched forward. "I don't care," she said. "I'll find it. We're going to the beach."

"We can't today," Claude told her. "It'll be dark."

"Well, we are," Valencia said not stubbornly but with satisfaction. "It's taking us."

I thought she meant the path, and I couldn't judge if she was right. I had no idea how long we'd been following it, and yet I felt we should have been home by now or within sight of home. "Of course it isn't," Ludwig said and tramped more purposefully along the path.

The sun was directly at our backs now. The shadows of the pines stretched ahead as if they were helping the mounds wall in the path. Every individual needle underfoot seemed to have its own shadow. The practically supine light emphasised the outline of each footprint, Ludwig's and Claude's and Verona's and whoever's had preceded them. "They're my stars," Valencia said.

Verona turned her head without looking around. "What are you making up now?"

"I'm not. I don't. They're my shoes." Valencia stood on one leg and tugged at my hand. "Aren't they, Stuart?"

She was showing me the sole, which bore a pattern of two large five-pointed stars. There was no mistaking the prints of her shoes, and they weren't only behind us; they extended out of sight ahead. "We've already come this way once," I had to admit.

"That's just—" Ludwig peered at the sole and the prints behind Valencia, and at last stared at the prints ahead.

"That's—" he said before lurching up the nearest slope to shade his wincing eyes and narrow them. "I see where we must have gone wrong," he said. "Let's go back."

The sun was still glaring in our eyes when we came to a place where the path forked. I supposed I must have been too distracted by Valencia to notice it before. Ludwig took the right-hand path and we followed him almost blindly. On the mounds caged by shadows the lurid pines looked as

artificial as Christmas trees, and too insubstantial with the dazzle that still lay across my eyes. All at once Ludwig halted in a gap between two mounds. "There's my stars again," Valencia said.

There were footprints on a track that crossed the one we were following, and some were unmistakably hers. Ludwig stared both ways along it and swung around. "We turned off too soon, that's all."

I felt as if the sunlight had blanked out my brain as I trudged after him. The path curved, and a mound cut off the light. The dazzle clung to my eyes, so that all I could distinguish were the huge recumbent shapes that loomed above the track. Around the bend I almost collided with Verona, who'd stopped because the Smith boys had. "This can't be right," Claude protested.

"I know that," Ludwig said more savagely than he might have liked their parents to hear.

We were back at the glade, and yet we hadn't passed the fork, unless we'd been too dazzled to notice. The glade was strewn with fallen needles and with footprints, which seemed so numerous that I could have imagined we'd crossed it more than once. Against the sun, which was only just above the mounds, the trees looked like sketches waiting to be filled in. I'd had enough of Ludwig's leadership; I was almost the oldest one there, after all. "Wait here, Valencia," I said and ran up the nearest mound.

I thought I'd find the way from the position of the sea, which had to be close. It was nowhere in sight, nor even audible, and I couldn't see or hear anything like a road. On every side mounds crowned with trees receded into an impenetrable distance. The forest seemed far larger than it ought to be, and it was as silent as a picture of itself. I couldn't panic when I'd taken the lead. "We'll have to phone," I said. "There must be a signal by now."

Ludwig gave me an unimpressed look. "Whom do you suggest calling?"

"Your parents will be closest, won't they? If they shout from the house we'll hear them."

"Maybe Stuart's right," Verona said.

Ludwig performed an extravagant shrug as if he was sloughing all responsibility. When he saw Claude reach for his mobile he snatched out his own, and then a voice intervened. "I didn't think you were the sort to make a noise in our woods."

Verona squealed and tried to look as if someone else had, while Claude and Ludwig stiffened to make sure nobody thought they'd been startled. Woodward was striding out of the sunlight across the glade, but I couldn't see where he'd come from; I hadn't even heard him until he spoke. It left me feeling useless as an observer or a pathfinder. Only Valencia seemed delighted. "How are you being so quiet?" she cried.

"You can be too. I'll show you how."

Valencia ran to take his hand. "Have you found my bracelet?"

"Don't bother Mr Woodward with that now," Verona said.

"The other rangers said we had to ask," Valencia protested with some pique.

"It wasn't there, Valencia," her sister said. "We all had a good look."

I didn't think I had, and I felt more excluded than ever. "Then someone must have taken it," Valencia said.

"Or something from the woods did," said Woodward.

"A magpie," Valencia cried.

"Something like that. They'll steal your eyes if you don't watch out. You won't believe what you find in the treetops."

"I'm sure it's very interesting, Mr Woodward," Ludwig said, "but we need to get home before dark."

"I'll take you. I'm going there now," Woodward said, and the sun went out behind him.

It felt as though the woods had swallowed the light. The sun was still behind the mounds, of course. At once the green of Woodward's uniform was several shades darker. As he led Valencia to the next path out of the glade, her sister and the Smith boys trooped after him. It was the path Ludwig had rejected, which was the best reason I could think of to use it. The track snaked between mounds too high and too close together to see beyond. Darkness appeared to be seeping out of the mounds to creep up the spiky trees, which might almost have been glowing from within. Valencia gazed up at them and said "Are we going to find my bracelet?"

"I'll make sure it shows up for you," Woodward said and gazed at her. "There are jewels everywhere in the woods if you look."

When I glanced about I seemed to see what he had in mind. Patterns had begun to glimmer on the mounds that flanked the path. The fallen needles were spangled with frost and beads of icy dew. The more I looked, the more the glittering patterns grew visible. They might have composed a single design too vast and complicated to grasp, leading away into the darkness that was closing in. The impression made the woods feel boundless, and I couldn't help blurting "Are you sure we're going home?"

Woodward turned his head so smoothly that I was reminded of an owl, by his round-eyed gaze as well. "I'm seeing you do," he said.

Perhaps I was jealous because Valencia had so readily transferred her trust from me to him, but I no longer liked the look of him. His face seemed more heavily jowled, almost froglike, and his diminutive features looked somehow separate from it, as if they were emerging from a lair of flesh. I could almost have imagined that the dusk had added to his bulk. I was keeping up with him and the others only because I didn't want to lose sight of them. As I tried to concentrate on the path and ignore the patterns in the twilight I had the notion that although the shadows of the pines weren't visible, they were all around us-—that we were walking into a cage we couldn't see. I couldn't have said so or anything like it, not least because I would have sounded like Valencia. There was silence except for muffled footsteps until a chatter as dry as a rattle of bones came from the treetops. "Magpies," Valencia cried. "Can we see if they've got my bracelet?"

The trees had given up their hold on the last of the light, and she peered towards the noise, looking for a side track. "Not there, Valencia," Woodward said.

I wasn't sure why I blurted "How do you know?"

Verona and the Smith boys scowled at me as if I'd betrayed how tactless I was. "That isn't the way home," Woodward said. "Come along, Valencia, or you won't see the secret way I take my friends."

"Do as Mr Woodward says," Verona told her. Valencia raised her eyes to him and then turned back to the path. Everyone seemed relieved that she'd decided to go along with him—everyone except me. They must have been happy for him to say whatever might take us home quickest. As I watched the thickset figure lead Valencia along the twisted path between the looming mounds into the woods that appeared to be drawing the dusk towards us, I had the notion that his ranger's uniform was greener than it ought to be—as

green as moss, and glowing like it in the dimness. I even thought his jacket had too much of the texture of moss. Suspicion or confusion made me call out "Aren't you supposed to have a badge?"

"Am I being questioned?" Woodward let go of Valencia's hand while he reached inside his jacket to lift out a rectangular plaque on a cord around his neck. "Here I am for all to see," he said.

I barely glimpsed the badge before it swung against his chest. All I'd seen was his last name and a blur where a photograph should be—a blotch like moss or fungus. "I didn't see that properly," I objected.

"We did," said Ludwig, "and we don't want any more delays."

He was making me sound as young as Valencia. I wasn't even sure that he'd had time to examine the badge or that anyone else had. Woodward recaptured Valencia's hand before he led the way beyond a mound. As the others followed him I noticed that the trees beside the path were carved with names. That ought to have made the path feel more frequently used, but then how could it be a secret route? I was about to draw everyone's attention when I heard Woodward say "There it is for you, Valencia. There, up high."

She cried out, and I ran around the hillock onto a crooked stretch of path. Valencia was clinging to Woodward's hand while she tilted her head to gaze into the treetops. "It's just like my bracelet," she cried.

The full moon was nesting among the highest branches ahead. It was as pale as Woodward's face but growing brighter, as though only the sun had held it back. At first I thought it was all Valencia meant, and then, as I followed the twisted path, I saw something that choked off my breath. Other shapes in the treetops had crept out of hiding. Lined up behind the silhouetted branches were all the phases of the moon.

There were crescents at each end of the pallid parade, and gibbous moons on either side of the full one, and every incomplete form of the moon in between. "Can you see?" Valencia urged everyone.

"It's the moon," Ludwig said, and Claude agreed with him.

"Don't stop," Verona told her. "You can look at it while we're walking."

I almost wished that I could borrow their unawareness if it would somehow keep me safe. I might even have tried to believe that Valencia's imagination

had inflamed mine if Woodward hadn't murmured "Wait till they're up there, then they'll see."

While I didn't understand this, it disturbed me even more than the sight of all the thirteen moons. I was opening my mouth with no idea what to say when I heard a sound I would never have expected to welcome—a clash of glass. It came from the direction where we'd heard the chatter of the magpies, and it meant that the recycling bins full of Christmas bottles all along our road were being emptied. "We're going the wrong way," I said not as loud or as steadily as I would have liked. "There's home."

Everybody had to stop and turn to see where I was pointing, but Woodward only swivelled his head. It looked as if an extra moon had sunk to earth and was spinning slowly in the air beside Valencia. Nobody moved to join me, even when another clatter of glass came through the woods. "You can hear that," I almost begged. "They're collecting bottles on our road."

"Nothing of the kind," said Woodward. "They'll be boys like the ones who were chasing you, dumping rubbish in my woods."

"Then you'd better go and stop them," I dared to say. "We'll come too."

"I'll see to all of you first," Woodward said and turned owards the frieze of moons entangled in the branches. "Come along, Valencia. We don't want you anywhere near that sort of boy."

"Hold my hand, Valencia," I called in desperation if not panic. "You did before."

"Keep hold of Mr Woodward's," Verona said at once. "He's in charge."

She and the Smith boys gave me a backward glance that felt like a dismissal. Too late I realised that I should have taken Valencia's hand without announcing my intentions. "I'm going this way," I declared in the hope that my determination would infect the others, but I must have sounded childishly petulant. As I stalked off the path I was met by the chattering of magpies and the clash of a binful of bottles landing in a wagon. Behind me Woodward called "They're all waiting for you." I kept on and didn't look back, and then I heard no sound of any kind.

I told myself that if Valencia cried for help I would go back—if anybody did—but I felt shamefully relieved when the woods stayed as silent as the moon. When I looked back at last I couldn't even see the path. The moon—just a full one—outlined the mounds and showed me the way ahead.

Eventually I found that the rattle of bottles had brought me to the track that ended almost opposite my house. I sneaked across the road like a burglar. I was hoping to retreat to my room and put off any questions, but as I opened the front door my mother silenced the vacuum cleaner. "Did you have a good time with your chums?" she said.

"They went off in the woods with a ranger."

"Wipe your feet, Stuart." When she was satisfied at last she said "Why didn't you stay with them?"

"I didn't like him." My face felt capable of betraying my feelings, and my words almost let me down. "They didn't like me," I blurted on the way to my room.

Apart from the last remark, all this was some of what I told Mr Smith when he rang hours later, and Mrs Turner when she came to the house, looking like the headmistress she was and determined to establish the truth. At first she didn't seem to think it could be serious. The police did by the time they visited the house, because they interrogated me at length. I told them I'd been suspicious of Woodward and had tried to warn the others, who hadn't wanted to listen to somebody like me. I did my best to describe him, growing more nervous as I realised what I was describing—a face as jowly as the Smiths had but with features as small and delicate as Verona's and Valencia's. He didn't look like any of the photographs the police showed me. The sketch they made looked more like him, but it didn't help. Nobody called Woodward or of his description had ever worked as a ranger. The police never found a trace of him, nor any of the children who'd followed him into the woods at dusk.

For a while we had quite a few visitors, and then we had none at all, and nobody even spoke much to us. I felt blamed for returning alone from the woods, as if I didn't already blame myself enough, but what was I supposed to have done? I think everybody's mute reproof made my mother feel worse still, and by the summer she'd put the house up for sale. Before Christmas we were living in a house not much more than half the size in the next town.

She kept encouraging me to make new friends, but I was afraid to. I'd seen what happened when I tried. I did my best to lose myself in schoolwork instead, and aside from that I wrote stories in my room. I did well enough at my new school to come to university, hundreds of miles from the woods,

but that hasn't helped me either. Everyone regards me as an outsider, because I've made sure I am. My room in the hall of residence is several storeys higher than my bedroom at home, but it makes no difference. It hasn't stopped the dreams, if that's all they are. I still hear the voice at night, just outside my window.

I want to think I never heard it, even on the day before we moved house—especially then. I don't know what I hoped to achieve by returning to the woods. I only knew I had to look, and I told my mother I was going for a last walk on the beach. I left her in the house so full of cartons that it felt as if she'd tried to box up every trace of clutter and only made another kind. I was glad nobody was in sight as I headed for the path.

I wandered through the woods for hours and found nothing at all. I couldn't even find the glade from which Ludwig had led us onto the path that turned back on itself. The woods were as silent as a secret waiting to be discovered. The only sign of humanity was the occasional name carved on a tree-trunk. The late October sun sank towards the mounds as if the pines were lowering it into its grave, and I turned homeward before nightfall. All that kept me peering about at the multitude of trees was the notion that I'd overlooked something in the dusk. Where had I seen it, or had I heard it? I could think of nothing I'd encountered that day—and then, with more unease than relief, I knew what I'd heard. It hadn't been that day, however. I was remembering Woodward's final words: "They're all waiting for you." At last I realised that he hadn't been talking to me.

As if the realisation had opened up my mind I glanced to the left and saw a path where I'd thought there were only random gaps between mounds. Names and dates were carved on the trees that flanked it, which seemed to prove that ordinary people used it. In any case it appeared to lead homeward. It took me around a series of hillocks, each one more steeped in darkness than the last. The declining light inked in the letters and numbers carved on the trees, and I saw that each name was followed by two dates—two years separated by a hyphen. Directly ahead of me were four names I knew all too well, the boys to the left of the path, the girls on the right. The second of their years was the same for everyone—that year.

As the sight held me as immobile as any of the trees I sensed that I was being watched. Perhaps my dread had brought him. He was almost hidden by a mound—I could have thought he was sprouting from it—but I saw

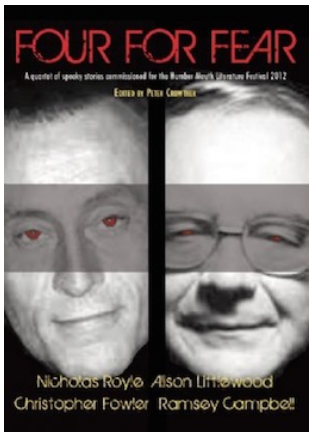
enough of his greenish silhouette among the trees. This time he was only starting to have a face, and I guessed he still hadn't bothered with fingernails. I might have been forced to look closer if I hadn't heard a voice.

It wasn't his. It was Valencia's. "Up here," it called so softly that I might not have heard it except for the silence. I was afraid that if I raised my eyes I would see the multiplied moons, but what I saw when I couldn't keep my gaze down was yet more terrible. Valencia and Verona were there, and Claude and Ludwig too, in the midst of many other bodies turning sluggishly in the treetops.

I didn't know if they were dangling like the contents of some creature's larder or hovering of their own unnatural accord. I couldn't grasp the expression that every face bore—in the gathering twilight I couldn't even tell whether they were blind. They were aware of me in some way, because as all the bodies swung in unison towards me they stretched out their arms to me. I was struggling to believe I'd seen none of this as I let out a savage cry and fled.

I don't know how I found my way to the road—perhaps because I'd been let go for the moment. I was able to take refuge in my room before my mother saw me, and I managed to pretend at dinner that nothing was wrong or at least not to say what was. The next day I started trying to forget, and years later I practically had until I heard that vandals had destroyed the woods—set fire to them during this summer's drought. None of the things I remembered were found, but where does that mean they've gone? The trees outside are as high as my room, and the wind in them sounds like a voice. If I look out, will I see the faces turning blindly in the air? "Up here," the voice whispers, but I already am. I would only need to step onto the sill and out of the window into the moonlight to be one of them at last. Perhaps then my mother would be proud.

The Callers



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Mark's grandmother seems barely to have left the house when his grandfather says "Can you entertain yourself for a bit? I could do with going to the pub while I've got the chance."

Mark wonders how much they think they've entertained him, but he only says "Will grandma be all right coming home on her own?"

"Never fret, son. They can look after theirselves." The old man's hairy caterpillar eyebrows squirm as he frowns at Mark and blinks his bleary eyes clear. "No call for you to fetch her. It's women's stuff, the bingo." He gives the boy's shoulder an unsteady squeeze and mutters "You're a good sort to have around."

Mark feels awkward and a little guilty that he's glad he doesn't have to meet his grandmother. "Maybe I'll go to a film."

"You'd better have a key, then." His grandfather rummages among the contents of a drawer of the shaky sideboard—documents in ragged envelopes, rubber bands so desiccated they snap when he takes hold of them, a balding reel of cotton, a crumpled folder stuffed with photographs—and hauls out a key on a frayed noose of string. "Keep hold of that for next time you come," he says.

Does he mean Mark will be visiting by himself in future? Was last night's argument so serious? His mother objected when his grandfather offered him a glass of wine at dinner, and then her mother accused her of not letting Mark grow up. Before long the women were shouting at each other about how Mark's grandmother had brought up her daughter, and the men only aggravated the conflict by trying to calm it down. It continued after Mark went to bed, and this morning his father informed him that he and Mark's mother were going home several days early. "You can stay if you like," she told Mark. Was she testing his loyalty or hoping he would make up for her

behaviour? While her face kept her thoughts to itself his father handed him the ticket for the train home like a business card, one man to another. Mark's mother spent some time in listing ways he shouldn't let anyone down, but these didn't include going to the cinema. Wearing his coat was among the requirements, and so he takes it from the stand in the hall. "Step out, lad," his grandfather says as Mark lingers on the pavement directly outside the front door. "You don't want an old crock slowing you down."

At the corner of the street Mark glances back. The old man is limping after him, resting a hand on the roof of each car parked with two wheels on the pavement. Another narrow similarly terraced street leads into the centre of the small Lancashire town, where lamps on scalloped iron poles are stuttering alight beneath a congested late April sky. Many of the shops are shuttered, and some are boarded up. Just a few couples stroll past deserted pristine kitchens and uninhabited items of attire. Most of the local amusements have grown too childish for Mark, though he might still enjoy bowling or a game of indoor golf if he weren't by himself, and others are years out of bounds—the pubs, the clubs waiting for the night crowds while doormen loiter outside like wrestlers dressed for someone's funeral. Surely the cinema won't be so particular about its customers. More than one of Mark's schoolmates has shown him the scene from *Facecream* on their phones, where the girl gets cream squirted all over her face.

As he hurries past the clubs he thinks a doorman is shouting behind him, but the large voice is down a side street full of shops that are nailed shut. At first he fancies that it's chanting inside one of them, and then he sees an old theatre at the far end. While he can't distinguish the words, the rhythm makes it clear he's hearing a bingo caller. Mark could imagine that all the blank-faced doormen are determined to ignore the voice.

The Frugoplex is beyond the clubs, across a car park for at least ten times as many vehicles as it presently contains. The lobby is scattered with popcorn, handfuls of which have been trodden into the purple carpet. A puce rope on metal stilts leads the queue for tickets back and forth and twice again on the way to the counter. When Mark starts to duck under the rope closest to the end of the queue, a man behind the counter scowls at him, and so he follows the rope all the way around, only just heading off two couples of about his own age who stoop under. He's hoping to avoid the

disgruntled man, but the queue brings Mark to him. "*Facecream*, please," Mark says and holds out a ten-pound note.

"Don't try it on with me, laddie," the man says and turns his glare on the teenagers who have trailed Mark to the counter. "And your friends needn't either."

"He's not our friend," one of the boys protests.

"I reckon not when he's got you barred."

Mark's face has grown hot, but he can't just walk away or ask to see a film he's allowed to watch. "I don't know about them, but I'm fifteen."

"And I'm your sweet old granny. That's it now for the lot of you. Don't bother coming to my cinema." The manager tells his staff at the counter "Have a good look at this lot so you'll know them."

Mark stumbles almost blindly out of the multiplex. He's starting across the car park when somebody mutters behind him "He wants his head kicked in."

They're only words, but they express his feelings. "That's what he deserves," Mark agrees and turns to his new friends.

It's immediately clear that they weren't thinking of the manager. "You got us barred," says the girl who didn't speak.

"I didn't mean to. You oughtn't to have stood so close."

"Doesn't matter what you meant," she says, and the other girl adds "We'll be standing a lot closer. Standing on your head."

Mark can't take refuge in the cinema, but running would look shameful and invite pursuit as well. Instead he tramps at speed across the car park. His shadow lurches ahead, growing paler as it stretches, and before long it has company, jerking forward to catch up on either side of him. He still stops short of bolting but strides faster. He's hoping passers-by will notice his predicament, but either they aren't interested or they're determined not to be. At last he reaches the nightclubs, and is opening his mouth to appeal to the nearest doorman when the fellow says "Keep walking, lad."

"They're after me."

The doorman barely glances beyond Mark, and his face stays blank. "Walk on."

It could be advice, though it sounds like a dismissal. It leaves Mark feeling that he has been identified as an outsider, and he thinks the doormen's impassive faces are warning him not to loiter. He would make for the police station if he knew where it is. He mustn't go to his grandparents' house in case they become scapegoats as well, and there's just one sanctuary he can think of. He dodges into the side street towards the bingo hall.

The street looks decades older than the main road and as though it has been forgotten for at least that long. Three streetlamps illuminate the cracked roadway bordered by grids that are clogged with old leaves. The glow is too dim to penetrate the gaps between the boards that have boxed up the shop fronts, because the lanterns are draped with grey cobwebs laden with drained insects. The only sign of life apart from a rush of footsteps behind Mark is the amplified voice, still delivering its blurred chant. It might almost be calling out to him, and he breaks into a run.

So do his pursuers, and he's afraid that the bingo hall may be locked against intruders. Beyond the grubby glass of three pairs of doors the foyer is deserted; nobody is in the ticket booth or behind the refreshment counter. His pursuers hesitate as he sprints to the nearest pair of doors, but when neither door budges, the gang closes in on him. He nearly trips on the uneven marble steps as he stumbles along them. He throws all his weight, such as it is, against the next set of doors, which give so readily that he almost sprawls on the threadbare carpet of the foyer.

The caller seems to raise his voice to greet him. "Sixty-three," he's announcing, "just like me." The pursuers glare at Mark from the foot of the shallow steps. "You can't stay in there," one girl advises him, and the other shouts "Better not try."

All the gang look determined to wait for him. If they don't tire of it by the time the bingo players go home, surely they won't dare to let themselves be identified, and so Mark shuts the doors and crosses the foyer. The entrance to the auditorium is flanked by old theatrical posters, more than one of which depicts a plump comedian with a sly schoolboyish face. Mark could imagine they're sharing a joke about him as he pushes open the doors to the auditorium.

The theatre seats have been cleared out, but the stage remains. It faces a couple of dozen tables, most of which are surrounded by women with score cards in front of them and stumpy pencils in their hands. The stage is

occupied by a massive lectern bearing a large transparent globe full of numbered balls. Mark might fancy that he knows why the posters looked secretly amused, because the man in them is behind the lectern. He looks decades older, and the weight of his face has tugged it piebald as well as out of shape, but his grin hasn't entirely lost its mischief, however worn it seems. Presumably his oversized suit and baggy shirt are meant to appear comical rather than suggest a youngster wearing cast-off clothes. He examines a ball before returning it to the globe, which he spins on its pivot. "Three and three," he says as his eyes gleam blearily at Mark. "What do you see?" he adds, and all the women eye the newcomer.

At first Mark can't see his grandmother. He's distracted by a lanky angular woman who extends her speckled arms across the table nearest to him. "Lost your mammy, son?" she cries. "There's plenty here to tend to you."

For an uneasy moment he thinks she has reached for her breast to indicate how motherly she is, but she's adjusting her dress, her eagerness to welcome him having exposed a mound of wrinkled flesh. Before he can think of an answer his grandmother calls "What are you doing here, Mark?"

She's at a table close to the stage. He doesn't want to make her nervous for him if there's no need, and he's ashamed of having run away. The uncarpeted floorboards amplify every step he takes, so that he feels as if he's trying to sound bigger than he is. All the women and the bingo caller watch his progress, and he wonders if everybody hears him mutter "I went to the cinema but they wouldn't let me see the film."

As his grandmother makes to speak one of her three companions leans forward, flattening her forearms on the table to twice their width. "However old are you, son?"

"Mark's thirteen," says his grandmother.

Another of her friends nods vigorously, which she has been doing ever since Mark caught sight of her. "Thirteen," she announces, and many of the women coo or hoot with enthusiasm.

"Looks old enough to me," says the third of his grandmother's tablemates, who is sporting more of a moustache than Mark has achieved. "Enough of a man."

"Well, we've shown you off now," Mark's grandmother tells him. "I'll see you back at home."

This provokes groans throughout the auditorium. The woman who asked his age raises her hands, and her forearms sag towards the elbows. "Don't keep him to yourself, Lottie."

The nodding woman darts to grab a chair for him. "You make this the lucky table, Mark."

He's disconcerted to observe how frail his grandmother is by comparison with her friends, though they're at least as old as she is. The bingo caller gives him a crooked grin and shouts "Glad to have another feller here. Safety in numbers, lad."

Presumably this is a joke of some kind, since quite a few women giggle. Mark's grandmother doesn't, but says "Can he have a card?"

This prompts another kind of laughter, and the nodding woman even manages to shake her head. "It's the women's game, lad," the caller says. "Are you ladies ready to play?"

"More than ever," the moustached woman shouts, which seems somehow to antagonise Mark's grandmother. "Sit down if you're going to," she says. "Stop drawing attention to yourself."

He could retort that she has just done that to him. He's unable to hide his blazing face as he crouches on the spindly chair while the bingo caller elevates the next ball from the dispenser. "Eighty-seven," he reads out. "Close to heaven."

The phrase earns mirth and other noises of appreciation as the women duck in unison to their cards. They chortle or grunt if they find the number, grimacing if they fail. Nobody at Mark's table has located it when the man at the lectern calls "Number forty, old and naughty."

"That's us and no mistake," the moustached woman screeches before whooping at the number on her card.

"Number six, up to tricks."

"That's us as well," her friend cries, but all her nodding doesn't earn her the number.

"Forty-nine, you'll be fine."

The third woman crosses out the number, and flesh cascades down her arm as she lifts the pencil. "He's that with bells on," she says, favouring Mark with a wink.

He has to respond, though the smile feels as if his swollen lips are tugging at his hot stiff face. "Three and twenty," the man at the lectern intones. "There'll be plenty."

Mark's grandmother hunches over the table. He could think she's trying to evade the phrase or the coos of delight it elicits from the rest of the players, but she's marking the number on her card. She seems anxious to win, staying bent close to the card as the bingo caller consults the next ball. "Six and thirty," he says, and a roguish grin twists the left side of his mouth. "Let's get dirty."

He pokes at the grin with a finger as if he wants to push the words back in, although they've raised appreciative squeals throughout the auditorium. The fleshy woman falls to her card so eagerly that every visible part of her wobbles. "That'll do me," she cries.

Presumably she means his suggestion, since she hasn't completed her card. Mark sees his grandmother glance nervously at it and then stare at her own as though striving to conjure up a number. "Four and four," the caller says and almost at once "There's the door."

The moustached woman rubs her upper lip so hard that Mark fancies he hears the hairs crackle. "Never mind that," she tells the caller.

He blinks at her and stares around the hall. Mark feels more out of place than ever, as though he's listening to jokes too old for him—beyond his comprehension, at any rate. The caller's drooping face grows defiant as he identifies the next ball. "Ninety-five," he says. "Leave alive."

This brings no laughter, just a murmur that falls short of words. At least Mark's grandmother has found the number on her card. She needs three more to win, and he's surprised by how much he hopes she will. He puts the wish into his eyes as he gazes up at the stage. "Number fifty," the caller says in a tone that seems almost as mechanical as the dispenser. "He'll be nifty."

"Aye," several women respond, and the quivering woman gives Mark another wink.

"Eighty-one, nearly done."

"That's me," the nodding woman agrees, bowing to her card as if the motion of her head has overtaken the rest of her.

Perhaps she means her age, since the irregular cross she makes doesn't finish off the card. "Twenty-nine," the caller says, keeping his eyes on the ball he's raised between the fingertips of both hands. "See the sign."

If the players do so, they keep quiet about it, not even greeting the number or bemoaning their luck. The caller displays the next ball like a magician and puts a finger to the edge of a grin that's meant to appear mysterious. "Sixty-three," he says. "Time to flee."

The murmur this provokes is unamused, and he concentrates on the ball that rolls out of the dispenser. "Twenty-four," he says. "Can't do more."

His gaze is drifting towards Mark when the fleshy woman emits a shriek that jabs deep into the boy's ears. "We're done," she cries. "It's mine."

The caller shuts the globe and extends a hand. "Give us a look."

As she mounts the steps to the stage a series of tremors passes through her body, starting at her veinous legs. Having checked her numbers against those that came up, the caller says "We've a winner."

She snatches the card and plods back to the table, where Mark sees how the crosses resemble sketches of gravestones, at least until she turns the card the right way up. She lowers herself onto her creaking chair and says "I claim the special."

The caller doesn't look at her or anywhere near her. "It's not time yet," he tells whoever needs to hear.

While he leans on the lectern to say so he puts Mark in mind of a priest in a pulpit, though the comparison seems wrong in some way Mark doesn't understand. He's distracted by his grandmother, who lays down her pencil next to the card scattered with the kind of crosses all the women have been drawing. "I'll do without my luck tonight," she says and grasps his arm to help her stand up. "Time someone was at home."

"Don't be like that," the fleshy woman says. "You can't just go running off."

"I won't be running anywhere." As Mark wonders whether that's defiance or the painful truth his grandmother says "I'll see you all another night."

"See us now and see yourself." The speaker nods so violently that her words grow jagged. "You're still one of us."

"I'm not arguing," Mark's grandmother says and grips his arm harder. "Come along now, Mark."

He doesn't know how many women murmur as she turns towards the exit. While he can't make out their words, they sound unhappy if not worse, and all of them are closer than the exit. Nobody moves as long as he can see them, and he finds he would rather not look back. His grandmother has almost led him out, clutching his arm so tightly that it throbs, when the lanky woman who first greeted him plants a hand on her breast again. Though she could be expressing emotion, Mark has the unwelcome fancy that she's about to bare the wizened breast to him. His grandmother hurries him past, and the doors to the foyer are lumbering shut behind them when a woman says "We aren't done."

Mark hopes she's addressing the man on the stage—urging him to start the next game—but he hasn't heard the caller by the time he and his grandmother emerge onto the steps. The street is deserted, and he suspects that the couples who followed him from the cinema are long gone. Outside the clubs the doormen keep their faces blank at the sight of him and his escort, who is leaning on him as much as leading him. She's quiet until they reach the shops, where she mutters "I wish you hadn't gone there tonight, Mark. We're meant to be responsible for you."

He feels guiltier than he understands. She says nothing more while they make their increasingly slow way home. She's about to ring the doorbell with her free hand when Mark produces the key. "Isn't he in?" she protests.

"He went to the pub."

"Men," she says so fiercely that Mark feels sentenced too. She slams the door by tottering against it and says "I think you should be in your bed."

He could object that it isn't his bedtime—that he doesn't know what offence he's committed—but perhaps he isn't being punished, in which case he isn't sure he wants to learn her reason for sending him to his room. He trudges up the narrow boxed-in stairs to the decidedly compact bathroom, where every item seems too close to him, not least the speckled mirror that frames his uneasy face. The toothpaste tastes harsher than usual, and he does his best to stay inaudible while spitting it into the sink. As he dodges into the smaller of the two front bedrooms he sees his grandmother sitting at the bottom of the stairs. He retreats under the quilt of the single bed against the wall beneath the meagre window and listens for his grandfather.

He doesn't know how long he has kept his eyes shut by the time he hears the front door open below him. His grandmother starts to talk at once, and he strains to catch her words. "Did you send Mark to fetch me tonight?"

"I told him to stay clear," Mark's grandfather says not quite as low. "What did he see?"

"It isn't what he saw, it's what they did."

"Are you still up to that old stuff? Makes you all feel powerful, does it?"

"I'll tell you one thing, Len—you don't any more." Just as righteously she says "I don't remember you crying about it too much when it was your turn."

"Well, it's not now."

"It shouldn't be our house at all." This sounds accusing, especially when she adds "If there's any talking to be done you can do it."

Apparently that's all. Mark hears his grandparents labour up the stairs and take turns to make various noises in the bathroom that remind him how old they are. He finds himself wondering almost at random whether they'll take him to the celebrations tomorrow on the town green; they have on other May Days. The prospect feels like a reward if not a compensation for some task. The door of the other front bedroom shuts, and he hears a series of creaks that mean his grandparents have taken to their bed.

For a while the night is almost quiet enough to let him drift into sleep, except that he feels as if the entire house is alert. He's close to dozing when he hears a distant commotion. At first he thinks a doorman outside a club is shouting at someone, perhaps a bunch of drunks, since several people respond. There's something odd about the voice and the responses too. Mark lifts his head from the lumpy pillow and strives to identify what he's hearing, and then he realises his efforts are unnecessary. The voice and its companions are approaching through the town.

Mark does his best to think he's misinterpreting what he hears. The voices sound uncomfortably close by the time he can't mistake them. "Seventy-four," the leader calls, and the ragged chorus answers "Knock on his door." Mark is additionally disconcerted by recognising that the caller isn't the man who was on the stage. However large and resonant it is, it's a woman's voice.

"Number ten," it calls, and the chant responds "Find the men." The chorus is nearly in unison now, and the performance puts Mark in mind of a priest and a congregation—some kind of ritual, at any rate. He kicks the quilt away and kneels on the yielding mattress to scrag the curtain and peer through the window. Even when he presses his cheek against the cold glass, all of the street that he can see is deserted. His breath swells up on the pane and shrinks as the first voice cries "Sweet thirteen" and the rest chant "While he's green."

They sound surer of themselves with every utterance, and they aren't all that troubles Mark. Although he knows that the houses opposite are occupied, every window is dark and not a single curtain stirs. Is everyone afraid to look? Why are his grandparents silent? For a few of Mark's breaths the nocturnal voices are too, but he can hear a muffled shuffling—the noise of a determined march. Then the caller announces "Pair of fives," and as her followers chant "We're the wives" the procession appears at the end of the road.

It's led by the fleshy woman. As she advances up the middle of the street she's followed by her moustached friend and the nodding one, and then their fellow players limp or trot or hobble in pairs around the corner. The orange glow of the streetlamp lends them a rusty tinge like an unnatural tan. Mark doesn't need to count them to be certain that the parade includes everybody from the bingo hall except the man who was onstage and Mark's grandmother. As his grip on the windowsill bruises his fingers the fleshy woman declares "Ninety-eight."

She has a handful of bingo cards and is reading out the numbers. "We're his fate," the procession declares with enthusiasm, and Mark sees eyes glitter, not only with the streetlight. The moustached woman wipes her upper lip with a finger and thumb while her partner in the procession nods so eagerly that she looks in danger of succumbing to a fit. "Eighty-nine," their leader intones as if she's reading from a missal, and the parade almost as long as the street chants "He'll be mine."

They're close enough for Mark to see the fleshy woman join in the response. He sees her quivering from head to foot with every step she takes towards him, and then his attention is caught by the lanky woman in the middle of the procession. She's by no means alone in fumbling at a breast as though she's impatient to give it the air. That's among the reasons why Mark

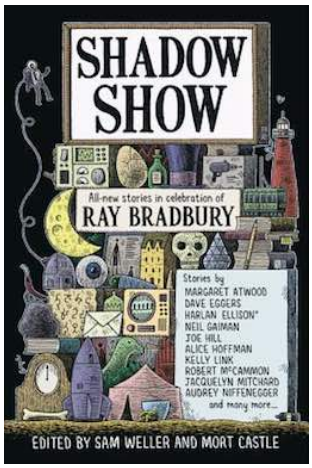
lets go of the curtain and the windowsill to huddle under the quilt. Once upon a time he might have believed this would hide him, but it doesn't even shut out the voices below the window. "Twenty-four," the caller shouts and joins in the chant of "Here's the door."

This is entirely too accurate for Mark's liking. It's the number of the house. As he hugs his knees with his clasped arms and grinds his spine against the wall he hears a muffled rumble close to him. Someone has opened the window of the next bedroom. Mark holds his breath until his grandfather shouts "Not here. Like Lottie says, you've been here once."

"That was a long time ago, Len." Mark can't tell whether this is reminiscent or dismissive, but the tone doesn't quite leave the fleshy woman's voice as she says "It's either you or him."

After a pause the window rumbles shut, and Mark finds it hard to breathe. He hears footsteps padding down the stairs—whose, he doesn't know—and the front door judders open. This is followed by an outburst of shuffling, first in the street and almost at once to some extent inside the house. As it begins to mount the stairs Mark hears the caller's voice, though it's little more than a whisper. "Number one," she prompts, and a murmuring chorus responds "Let's be mum." Is it proposing a role to play or enjoining secrecy? Mark can't judge, even when the procession sets about chanting in a whisper "Mum, mum, mum..." The repetition seems to fill the house, which feels too small for it, especially once the front door closes behind the last of the procession. The chorus can't blot out the shuffling, which sounds like the restlessness of an impatient queue. All Mark can do is squeeze his eyes so tight that the darkness throbs in time with his pulse, and he manages not to look until he hears a door creep open.

The Page



"...my wife and I spent two weeks in Rhodes. As we sunbathed I turned over ideas in my mind for a Bradbury tribute, and on a windy day one blew along—the sight of a man in pursuit of a page that a gust had torn out of the book he was reading on the beach. Thank heaven I always take a notebook with me!"—Ramsey Campbell, *Afterword to the story* in *Shadow Show*

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That day the Aegean might have been a nest of dragons with teeth of white foam. The leaping waves were scaly bodies blue as metal, and the noonday sunlight lent them glittering reptile eyes. The wind from the sea was their breath so hot it turned its spittle into a desiccated spray of sand. "The dragons are back, Joyce," Ewan said.

"That's right, dear."

He couldn't tell if she recalled her flight of fancy here on the beach all those years ago or was simply humouring him. Perhaps she hadn't even heard him for the wind, which flapped his shirt and her long silken shawl on the backs of the sunbeds as though equipping the couple with wings. It had already felled several umbrellas, strewing them alongside the tideless sea. Just a few determined tourists were staying on the beach, fat novels clamped open in front of their faces with both hands, while the most adventurous souls braved the waves. Surely Joyce wouldn't, and Ewan was sinking back with an obese best-seller when he heard a cry. "Stop there, stop."

The voice was almost indistinguishable from the wind. Ewan had to sit up to locate the man, who'd dashed onto the beach at the westward end of Ikonikos, where the sunbeds gave out and the clusters of clifftop apartments fell short of a few isolated villas. The wind tugged a linen suit taut on the man's thin frame and made an unruly halo out of his white hair. He was chasing a page that the wind must have torn out of a book. "Joyce," Ewan said.

She peered at him while the wind disarranged the greyest of her locks before hitching herself around on the sunbed. "What do you want me to see?"

"It was just a chap running after a bit of his book."

The man and his papery game had disappeared around the rocks that screened the next inlet, and Joyce settled back with a sigh. "That wasn't worth it, Ewan."

He would rather feel accused than risk emphasising the effort she'd had to make. He was silent as she retrieved her book, which needed to diet as much as his did. The wind tousled the pages, and before long Joyce let her novel drop on her venerable canvas bag. "I'm going in."

On days like this Ewan was all the more aware of never having learned to swim. "I wouldn't mind some lunch."

"Don't you ever think of anything except your stomach?" Joyce gave the sagging bulge a wearily indulgent glance. "Jump up, then," she said. "Give it a chance to behave."

No doubt she meant the weather. Ewan struggled to his feet and managed to wriggle into his playfully fluttering shirt in time to offer Joyce his arm. She mustn't want to seem to need it, since she let go too soon, almost falling on if not across the bed. "I can manage," she protested when he clutched her yielding waist, and wouldn't let him carry the bag.

At least the Philosophia was just above their section of the beach. The waiters had lowered a plastic sheet to protect the taverna from the wind. The sheet blurred the view like a cataract and palpitated loudly throughout the meal. Joyce helped finish several dishes and more than half of the carafe of wine, by which time the sea was rearing as fiercely as ever. "Will you get the towels?" she said. "I think I'll have a nap."

Once she would have done so on the beach. Ewan retrieved the towels and clambered up the unequal steps embedded in the cliff. On the road that had sprouted apartments and hotels since the couple had last stayed in Ikonikos, Joyce took his hand. He suspected she needed more support than she would admit on the uphill road.

The Mnemosyne Apartments were near the middle of the village. Children too young for school or absent from one were keeping the play area beside the bar alive. Ewan knew Joyce hoped to see the grandchildren there or

somewhere similar. As he fumbled in the bag he experienced the familiar panic at losing a key. "For heaven's sake let me," Joyce complained.

She took longer than he already had. A good deal of heat was occupying their room. Ewan switched on the air-conditioning as Joyce lay down. She reached out a hand for him to squeeze while he took his place on the other narrow bed. As soon as he closed his eyes he saw the man chasing the page along the beach. How important had it been? Had its owner recaptured it? The questions kept sleep well out of reach, and before long Ewan swung his legs off the bed. "I'm just going out. You rest."

Joyce put out a slack hand and thought of opening her eyes. "Can't you wait for me?"

"I only want to try and find the shop that had our favourite olives."

She released a breath so protracted he heard it begin to give out—the kind that always made him breathless until he heard another. "Don't be long," she eventually said.

He didn't mean to be. They weren't often apart now that they'd retired, but whenever they were he grew anxious until he saw her again. She stirred as he let a blaze of sunlight in. The sight of her frail shape under the thin sheet was dismayingly suggestive of a memory he was trying to commit to mind. "Go if you're going," she mumbled, and he had to close the door.

He made for the cliff path where the running man had come from. In the past the dusty roads had boasted just a few tavernas, but now those were outnumbered by bars full of Brits watching football on huge flat screens like paintings brought to life. The wind had ripped blossoms from trees and shrubs and vines, strewing the roads with them—even cactus flowers had been torn loose, and the spiky clubs of leaves. The spectacle put Ewan in mind of the wake of a parade—not of a funeral, not that kind of wake.

He couldn't see the man at any of the villas outside Ikonikos, all of which were white as tombs and gave as little sign of life. Instinct, if even that, took him down the cliff path. The sea was still helplessly restless, although at the horizon it appeared to be promising peace. The wind drove Ewan along the beach and unfurled veils of sand for him to walk on. Beyond the rocky outcrop the next bay was unpopulated. Nothing moved except the waves and, trapped by the wind in a crevice of the cliff, a lively piece of paper.

Ewan picked his way to it as the wind set it beckoning. More than once his sandals missed a foothold on the slippery rocks, so that he was afraid of twisting an ankle or worse. His bare legs were stinging with sand and salt spray by the time he grabbed the piece of paper. It was the last page of a book called *Sending Them to God*.

Other than the title it contained just four words: "but there is none." Why had the man been so desperate to retrieve it? How reassured would he have felt if he had? The words had no such effect on Ewan, who was inclined to give the page back to the wind. He might encounter the man, and he slipped it into his shirt pocket. He was peering at some odd marks in the crevice—they looked as if fingers had been groping ineffectually for the page, though they must have been made by the wind on the sand that was plastered to the cliff face—when the phone in his hip pocket emitted a clank. The message was from Joyce. *where*, it said.

Coming back. Ewan typed this as swiftly as he could without misspelling, and added *Thought asleep*. Even using less than complete sentences felt like abandoning responsibility—the kind they'd both shown while they were teaching. As he sent the message he wondered if Joyce could have been asking where she was. Surely neither of them had reached that state yet, if they ever would, but the thought revived his panic at being separated from her. He would have dashed up the cliff path if he'd felt capable. Instead he struggled into the wind along the beach.

As he opened the apartment door Joyce turned over beneath the sheet to welcome him—but her bed was empty, and the sheet was stirring in the wind. Ewan managed to postpone some of his consternation while he lurched across the room. She was on the balcony, gazing between two hotels at the sea. "Were you successful?" she said.

"I didn't find the shop." For fear of straying any further from the truth he said "I found the page the chap was after on the beach."

Joyce sighed and turned her hands up as though weighing the wind. "What do you think you have to prove to me, Ewan?"

"What would you like me to?"

"Don't make it sound as if it's my fault."

They were on the edge of the kind of argument that would take them beyond knowing where it had begun. Perhaps Joyce saw this, because she

said "Show me what's so important, then."

She seemed indifferent to holding the page safe and gave it an unimpressed glance before letting Ewan retrieve it from her and the wind. "I don't see how that could mean much to anyone."

"I'll keep it with me in case we see him."

"You aren't going to spend our holiday looking when I don't suppose he even cares about it anymore."

"I won't be taking time to look for him."

"You did for that and never even told me you were." Before Ewan could think of an answer to risk she said "I was looking forward to those olives."

He should have realised this might be important to her when so much else had changed. "We'll look for them together."

They tried on their way to dinner. Perhaps the shop had turned into one that sold leather or T-shirts or silver or trinkets, some of them Greek. Several tavernas had become Chinese or Indian for the benefit or otherwise of British visitors. Last night Joyce and Ewan had located an old favourite, but the years appeared to have shrunk the portions and dried up the food while extracting much of its taste. The wind dropped as they decided which taverna to chance. The slitted sun peered like a dragon's solitary eye over the horizon, and a final breath ruffled the sea.

They were right to trust the restaurant, but Ewan felt Joyce didn't trust him. Whenever he glanced at passersby she gave him a sharp look. He did his best to talk about places they could revisit, though the discussion felt like a show they were performing, a sketch of a marriage. Later they sat on their balcony as the sky grew stars. Two nearby discos were competing at full volume, and Ewan couldn't grasp the peace the sky seemed to offer. When he and Joyce retreated into the apartment, the thumping beyond the window sounded even more like a pair of irregular hearts.

He waited until Joyce drew the sheet over herself before he hid the page beneath his pillow. Some instinct, unless it was just an effect of the retsina at dinner, made him feel he should keep the page safe. He switched off the light and found Joyce's hand. When it slackened he turned over. The wind fumbling about the balcony didn't keep him awake, and the disco beats seemed to fade into the distance. When he drifted out of sleep they'd fallen silent, leaving the wind to make what little noise it could. It wasn't the

wind, since it sounded closer to him than the window, which he saw under the curtains was shut tight. The hint of activity wasn't enough to rouse him, but perhaps it disturbed Joyce, since as he settled back into slumber she tried to take his hand. He might have imagined the wind was attempting to do so, and how could she have found the hand when it was resting on his pillow, closer to the window than to her? Before the sensation was able to grow more substantial it left him, and he lacked the energy to drag himself awake.

Hours later the impression wakened him in daylight. Who had been groping at the pillow? He sat up and twisted around to lift it. The last page of the book was lying slightly crumpled on the wrinkly sheet, but he couldn't judge whether the page or the pillow had already been moved. Joyce levered herself up on a shaky elbow to gaze at him. "Why were you keeping that there?"

"So I knew where it was."

She might think him forgetful or worse, if she didn't assume he was making sure she didn't steal the page. He limped to the safe and locked up the page with the passports and travellers' cheques. "Now we know where it is."

During breakfast on the balcony a pair of magpies did most of the chattering. Joyce was first onto the beach, having let go of Ewan's arm, and soon in the sea. He was grateful to see other swimmers near her in case she needed help. Between looking for her in her swimsuit as orange as a sunset he tried to immerse himself in the novel at least two other people were reading on the beach, but even once Joyce returned he couldn't concentrate. "Will you be all right for a while?" he eventually said. "I just want to look something up."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

He glanced back until he could no longer see her as he made for Zorba's Bar. A few customers were drinking beer with their English breakfasts while their children played on computers. Ewan bought time on a terminal and searched the Internet for *Sending Them to God,* but there was very little information. The novel was by Jethro Dartmouth, a name that meant nothing to him. It seemed to be the author's only work, and nobody was offering a copy for sale online. Insurgery Books, who had published it at the

end of the previous century, no longer existed—they appeared to have brought out just that book.

This wasn't much for Ewan to tell Joyce or to justify leaving her alone on the beach. He took his time on the road but failed to think of anything to add. The concrete grew soft underfoot with the ragged rug of sand that yesterday's gale had spread over the end of the road. Joyce was on the beach to his left—she ought to be, but he couldn't see her.

Nobody seemed interested in his panic as he stumbled between the sunbeds. There was his meaningless book, a lump of paper lying inert on the bed draped with his towel, and within arm's length of it Joyce's paperback occupied her empty lounger in the shadow of the umbrella. He was staring apprehensively at the swimmers in the sea, none of whom was wearing orange, when somewhere above him her voice said "Ewan."

As he swung around he had the disconcerting notion that he still wouldn't be able to see her. She was gazing down at him with amused impatience from a table in the Philosophia. Before he'd finished clambering up the path he gasped "What on earth are you doing in there?"

"I fancied some olives, since you didn't get any." Quite as defiantly she said "It's like being away all on my own."

He mustn't argue. Too many of their recent disagreements were so trivial that he felt they were reducing him and Joyce, shrivelling their intelligence and drying up their affection. "Are you ready for lunch, then?"

"I've been ready for a while. Were you looking at your bit of paper all this time?"

"No, finding out about it."

A waiter bringing olives interrupted him. Ewan thought Joyce was content to be quiet once they'd ordered lunch until she said "Get it over with if you're so anxious to tell me."

"The author wrote just that one book. I wouldn't be surprised if he published it himself."

"What's it supposed to be about?"

"Nobody was saying."

"Do you even know who it's by?"

"A person by the name of Jethro Dartmouth."

"Never heard of him."

"I got the impression pretty well nobody has."

"Excuse me, some have, yes."

This came from the waiter, and Ewan thought one of them must have misheard. "Sorry, I don't think I caught what you said."

"Mr. Dartmouth came to live here in Ikonikos."

"How do you know that?" Joyce asked or objected.

"His daughter told us who he was."

Ewan waited while the man poured two glasses of wine and set down the carafe. "Would you happen to know which his house is?"

"He called it Villa Biblion," the waiter said, gesturing beyond the village.

Joyce emitted a snort at the name. Otherwise she was silent until the waiter moved away, and then she murmured "You aren't thinking of giving him that bit of paper."

"If you'd seen him you'd understand how much he wants it."

"Well, I don't understand," Joyce said, making sure Ewan knew this included him.

During lunch he felt as though Dartmouth was loitering close by, all the more insistent for being unseen—the subject of him and his page, at any rate. It followed them to the beach in the form of their uneasy silence. Joyce spent some time in arranging herself and her various items on and around the sunbed before glancing at Ewan as if she'd forgotten he was there. "Go on your mission if you're going."

"I don't like to leave you down here by yourself."

"For pity's sake," she cried and dragged her legs so vigorously off the bed that it almost toppled over. "Take me to the room if you need to think I'm safe."

He hadn't meant that, or perhaps he had. On the uphill road he thought she resented having to take his arm. As he let them into the apartment he caught sight of the safe at the back of the doorless wardrobe. For an instant he was certain the display above the keypad said ERROR. The letters vanished as he stepped into the room. "Did you see that?" he blurted.

"What now, Ewan?"

"It looked as if someone just tried to open the safe."

"I didn't see anything like that at all."

Perhaps the sunlight had outlined the message, although when he tried to recapture the illusion it stayed stubbornly invisible. He typed the year of their marriage and opened the safe. Hadn't he laid the page flat? Part of it was resting against the door, and unfolded to meet him. Rather than point this out to Joyce he said "Are you sure you wouldn't like to come with me?"

"I'm very sure, Ewan. You do whatever you feel you have to."

"I'll try not to be long."

"We've plenty of time. We've eleven days yet." With a frown that seemed to tug the corners of her lips towards a smile she said "Just stop worrying about me."

When he glanced back from the doorway she looked defiant, close to insulted by his concern. As he made all the speed he could uphill the page fluttered in his hand. He might have imagined someone was trying to snatch it, and he slipped it into his breast pocket, where it struggled to unfold before lying still.

The Villa Biblion wasn't on the outskirts of Ikonikos. Every house he passed took him another minute's walk or more from Joyce. He was on the edge of going back to her when he saw the name on the gatepost of a villa in an olive grove beyond high spiky railings. He thumbed the bellpush below the nameplate, and in time a grille emitted a metallic rattle and a woman's voice. "Hello?"

"I've something that belongs to Mr. Dartmouth."

The response was a clatter that sounded ominously final. As Ewan looked for a security camera to show the page, the door of the villa opened and a woman strode down the wide marble drive. She was tall and thin with a long face and cropped pale hair. She wore shorts with many pockets and a T-shirt that bestowed on her small breasts the slogan NET ASSETS. Ewan was swallowing a giggle when she demanded "What was it you said?"

"I found this on the beach. I brought it back."

She gazed at the page and then at him for some moments before opening the gates. "Come and tell me about it," she said, extending a hand several degrees cooler than the afternoon. "I'm Francesca Dartmouth."

"Ewan Hargreaves." As he followed her up the drive he said "Your father must be doing well to live here."

"I bought it." She turned to point at the words on her T-shirt. "There's a fortune to be made in properties abroad."

She led the way through a broad marble hall into a large white room furnished with a plump black leather suite. "What will you have to drink?"

"Do you mind if I don't? I'd rather not leave my wife on her own longer than I have to."

"Just let me hear your tale, then."

"I saw someone chasing this on the beach in all that wind and later on I found it. Am I right to think he was your father? I believe his book's quite rare."

"Pardon me a minute," Francesca Dartmouth said and hurried out of the room.

Ewan heard her open a door across the hall and utter a muffled cry. A window slid shut, and her footsteps hesitated before she reappeared, carrying a book as carefully as she might have handled a baby. The bulk of the pages had been torn away from the rear flyleaf, exposing their bandaged spine. "The wind got in," she said almost to herself. "It blew this off his desk."

Ewan held out the loose page, hoping it might lessen her distress. "Your father can get it bound again, can't he?"

She gazed at the page and clutched the book harder. "He can't, Mr. Hargreaves."

Ewan wasn't sure he wanted to establish why. Instead he asked "What's the book about?"

Francesca Dartmouth raised her eyes to his and held out the book. "See for yourself."

Ewan was moved to be trusted with it. He laid the page on a low table before carefully leafing through the book. It was the tale of Tom Read, a man with a mission to change those who were doing most harm to the world—to persuade them or, failing that, execute them. Was he inspired by God or deranged or both? Some of his intended victims were political leaders, others ruled religions, and one was a media mogul. Read never

learned who sent an assassin to kill him in the end, where Ewan thought another page might be missing, but there was only the one he'd retrieved. "I'm not sure I understand," he said.

"My father didn't either. He didn't realise the people he was satirising had so much power. The media man made sure nobody would stock the book, and then he used one of his companies to buy up all the copies and destroy them. My father sent out the ones he had left to the media the man didn't own, but nobody so much as mentioned them. He kept just that one copy and hid himself here. He didn't want anyone to find out where he was living. He was afraid they might try and do away with him as well as the book."

"But you told someone in the village he lived here."

"Not while my father was alive."

Ewan felt he'd already known that answer. He shut the cover, which bore just the author's name split by the title on a black background. The letters were in various fonts, the most prominent of which could be read as spelling TO SEE GOD. He turned the book over and gazed at the photograph on the back. "That's the man I saw chasing the page on the beach."

"I believe you." Francesca Dartmouth took a long breath and said "He used to say he wouldn't really be destroyed while there was still even one of his books."

At once Ewan realised "The last line needn't mean there's no God. It could be saying there's no end."

"I never thought of that before." Even more gratefully she said "I think you've seen the truth."

Ewan was making to replace the page in the book when she said "Why don't you keep that? I'd say you've made it your own."

In some confusion he protested "Don't you think—"

"I think you should have it when you've given it a meaning. Maybe it means something special to you, or it will." She held Ewan's gaze while she said "If it does, my father won't be altogether gone."

Ewan could find nothing to say to this. As she saw him onto the drive he said awkwardly "You won't be short of olives."

"Would you like some? They used to sell ours in the village till the shop turned into a bar." She went into a side room and returned with a little wicker basket heaped with chubby olives. "You and your wife enjoy them," she said. "And your lives."

She waved as the gates met behind him, and he was hurrying past the railings when he seemed to glimpse a man among the trees. In a moment the figure was gone, as if it had needed only to turn sideways to vanish. Ewan looked for it as the villas gave way to apartments, but there was no further sign of it. The page from the book lay quiet against his heart.

He thought better of knocking at the door of the apartment in case Joyce was asleep, and eased it open, lifting the wicker trophy to show her if she was awake. He needn't have taken so much care, because she wasn't in the room.

The balcony was deserted too. He called her number, only to hear the phone start to ring in the room. It was next to her bed, pinning down a scrap of paper on which she'd written *Gone for swim* followed by a single *X* with one bar practically upright. He ran to the balcony and peered between the hotels. Far out to sea a figure no larger than a charm on a bracelet was swimming. Except for the orange swimsuit he wouldn't have known who it was.

He closed the window and stood the basket on Joyce's bedside table. He read Jethro Dartmouth's last words as he laid the page in the safe, and then he made for the beach. Though the little swimming charm was as distant as ever, the sight seemed to concentrate a peace he hardly dared express to himself. He left his sandals next to Joyce's under the sun-bed occupied by her book. Every step took him deeper, but ripples kissed his skin. "There's none," he murmured as he forged onwards to tell Joyce. "There's none."

At Lorn Hall

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Randolph hadn't expected the map to misrepresent the route to the motorway quite so much. The roads were considerably straighter on the page. At least it was preferable to being directed by a machine on the dashboard, which would have reminded him of being told by Harriet that he'd gone wrong yet again, even when he knew where he was going. Although it oughtn't to be dark for hours, the April sky beyond a line of lurid hills had begun to resemble a charcoal slab. He was braking as the road meandered between sullen fields of rape when he had to switch the headlights on. The high beams roused swarms of shadows in the hedges and glinted on elongated warnings of bends ahead, and then the light found a signpost. It pointed down a lane to somewhere called Lorn Hall.

He stopped the Volvo and turned on the hazard lights. The sign looked neglected except by birds, which had left traces of their visits, but Lorn Hall sounded like the kind of place he liked to wander around. The children never did, complaining to Harriet if he even tried to take them anywhere like that on the days he had them. They loved being driven in the rain—the stormier the better, however nearly blind it made him feel—and so he couldn't help feeling relieved that they weren't with him to insist. He could shelter in the mansion until the storm passed over. He quelled the twitching of the lights and drove along the lane.

Five minutes' worth of bends enclosed by hulking spiky hedges brought him to a wider stretch of road. As it grew straight he glimpsed railings embedded in the left-hand hedge, rusting the leaves. Over the thorns and metal spikes surrounded by barbs he saw sections of an irregular roof patrolled by crows. Another minute brought him to the gateway of Lorn Hall.

He couldn't have given a name to the style of the high broad house. Perhaps the stone was darkened by the approaching storm, but he thought it

would have looked leaden even in sunlight. At the right-hand end of the building a three-storey barrel put him in mind of a clenched fist with bricks for grey knuckles. Far less than halfway from it on the unadorned frontage, a door twice as tall as a man stood beneath a pointed arch reminiscent of a mausoleum. Five sets of windows each grew smaller as they mounted to the roofs, where chimneys towered among an assortment of slate peaks. Even the largest of the ground-floor windows were enmeshed with lattices, and every window was draped with curtains that the gloom lent the look of dusty cobwebs. Apart from an unmarked whitish van parked near the front door there was no sign of life.

The signpost had surely been addressed to sightseers, and the formidable iron gates were bolted open, staining the weedy gravel of the drive. One of the gateposts in the clutch of the hedge had lost its stone globe, which poked its dome bewigged with lichen out of the untended lawn. Ivy overgrew sections of the lawn and spilled onto the drive. The shapes the topiary bushes had been meant to keep were beyond guessing; they looked fattened and deformed by age. If Harriet had been with him she would have insisted on leaving by now, not to mention protesting that the detour was a waste of time. This was another reason he drove up to the house.

Did the curtains stir as he drew up beside the van? He must have seen shadows cast by the headlamps, because the movements at all three windows to the left of the front door had been identical. Nobody had ducked out of sight in the van either. Randolph turned off the lights and the engine, pocketing his keys as he turned to face the mansion. The sky had grown so stuffed with darkness that he didn't immediately see the front door was ajar.

To its left, where he might have looked for a doorbell, a tarnished blotchy plaque said LORN HALL. The door displayed no bell or knocker, just a greenish plaque that bore the legend RESIDENCE OF CROWCROSS. "Lord Crowcross," Randolph murmured as though it might gain some significance for him if not summon its owner to the door. As he tried to recall ever having previously heard the name he felt a chill touch as thin as a fingernail on the back of his neck. It was a raindrop, which sent him to push the heavy door wide.

The door had lumbered just a few inches across the stone flags when it met an obstruction. Randolph might have fancied that somebody determined but

enfeebled was bent on shutting him out, perhaps having dropped to all fours. The hindrance proved to be a greyish walking boot that had toppled over from its place against the wall. Several pairs grey with a mixture of dried mud and dust stood in the gloomy porch. "Don't go any further," Harriet would have been saying by now, "you don't know if you're invited," but Randolph struggled around the door and kicked the boot against the wall. As he made for the archway on the far side of the porch, light greeted him.

Little else did. His approach had triggered a single yellowish bulb that strove to illuminate a large room. Opposite the arch an empty chair upholstered in a pattern so faded it wasn't worth distinguishing stood behind a bulky desk. Apart from a blotter like a plot of moss and earth, the desk was occupied by a pair of cardboard boxes and scattered with a few crumpled pamphlets for local attractions. The box that was inscribed HONESTY in an extravagantly cursive script contained three coins adding up to five pounds and so thoroughly stuck to the bottom that they were framed by glue. The carton marked TOUR in the same handwriting was cluttered with half a dozen sets of headphones. As Randolph dug in his pockets for change, his host watched him.

The man was in a portrait, which hung on the grey stone wall behind the desk it dwarfed. He stood in tweed and jodhpurs on a hill. With one hand flattened on his hip he seemed less to be surveying the landscape in the foreground of the picture than to be making his claim on it clear. The wide fields scattered with trees led to Lorn Hall. Although his fleshy face looked satisfied in every way, the full almost pouting lips apparently found it redundant to smile. His eyes were as blue as the summer sky above him, and included the viewer in their gaze. Was he less of an artist than he thought, or was he meant to tower over the foreshortened perspective? Randolph had guessed who he was, since the C that signed the lower left-hand corner of the canvas was in the familiar handwriting. "My lord," Randolph murmured as he dropped coins in the box.

The clink of metal didn't bring anyone to explain the state of the headphones. They weren't just dusty; as he rummaged through them, a leggy denizen scrabbled out of the box and fell off the desk to scuttle into the shadows. "That's very much more than enough," Harriet would have said to him in the way she did not much more often to their children. If you

weren't adventurous you weren't much at all, and the gust of wind that slammed the front door helped Randolph stick to his decision. Having wiped the least dusty set of headphones with a pamphlet for a penal museum, he turned them over in his hands but couldn't find a switch. As he fitted them gingerly over his ears a voice said "You'll excuse my greeting you in person."

Nobody was visible beyond the open door beside the painting, only darkness. The voice seemed close yet oddly distant, pronouncing every consonant but so modulated it implied the speaker hardly cared if he was heard. "Do move on once you've taken in my portrait," he said. "There may be others awaiting their turn."

"There's only me," Randolph pointed out and stared with some defiance at the portrait. If Lord Crowcross had taught himself to paint, he wasn't the ideal choice of teacher. The landscape was a not especially able sketch that might have been copied from a photograph, and the figure was unjustifiably large. The artist appeared to have spent most time on the face, and Randolph was returning its gaze when Crowcross said "Do move on once you've taken in my portrait. There may be others awaiting their turn."

"I already told you I'm on my own," Randolph protested. The headphones must be geared to the listener's position in the house, but the technology seemed incongruous, as out of place as Randolph was determined not to let the commentary make him feel. "I'm on my way," he said and headed for the next room.

He'd barely stepped over the stone threshold when the light went out behind him. "Saving on the bills, are we?" he muttered as he was left in the dark. In another second his arrival roused more lights—one in each corner of an extensive high-ceilinged room. "This is where the family would gather of an evening," Crowcross said in both his ears. "We might entertain our peers here, such as were left. I am afraid our way of life lost favour in my lifetime, and the country is much poorer."

The room was furnished with senile, obese sofas and equally faded overweight armchairs, all patterned with swarms of letters like the initial on the portrait. A tapestry depicting a hunt occupied most of the wall opposite the windows, which Randolph might have thought were curtained so as to hide the dilapidation from the world. Several decanters close to opaque with dust stood on a sideboard near a massive fireplace, where cobwebbed lumps

of coal were piled in the iron cage of the hearth. Had the place been left in this state to remind visitors it had fallen on hard times? Everyone Randolph knew would be ashamed to go in for that trick, whatever their circumstances. Quite a few were desperate to sell their homes, but all his efforts as an estate agent were in vain just now. He turned to find his way out of the room and saw Lord Crowcross watching him.

This time his host was in a painting of the room, though this was clearer from the positions of the furniture than from any care in the depiction. Sketchy figures sat in chairs or sprawled languidly on the couches. Just enough detail had been added to their faces—numerous wrinkles, grey hair—to signify that every one was older than the figure in the middle of the room. He was standing taller than he should in proportion to the others, and his obsessively rendered face appeared to be ignoring them. "Do make your way onwards whenever you're ready," he said without moving his petulant lips. "I fear there are no servants to show you around."

"No wonder the place is in such a state"—or rather the absence of servants was the excuse, and Randolph was tempted to say so. By now Harriet would have been accusing him of risking the children's health. He loitered to make the voice repeat its message, but this wasn't as amusing as he'd expected; he could almost have fancied it was hiding impatience if not contempt. "Let's see what else you've got to show me," he said and tramped out of the room.

All the lights were extinguished at once. He was just able to see that he'd emerged into a broad hallway leading to a staircase wider than his arms could stretch. He smelled damp on stone or wood. By the dim choked glow through doorways on three sides of the hall he made out that the posts at the foot of the steep banisters were carved with cherubs. In the gloom the eyes resembled ebony jewels, but the expressions on the chubby wooden faces were unreadable. "Do continue to the next exhibit," Crowcross prompted him.

Presumably this meant the nearest room. Randolph paced to the left-hand doorway and planted a foot on the threshold, but had to take several steps forward before the light acknowledged him. Fewer than half the bulbs in the elaborate chandelier above the long table lit up. "This is where the family would dine in style," Crowcross said, "apart from the youngest member."

The table was set for ten people. Dusty plates and silver utensils stained with age lay on the extravagantly lacy yellowed tablecloth. Like the upholstery of all the chairs, every plate was marked with C. Doilies to which spiders had lent extra patterns were spread on a sideboard, opposite which a painting took most of the place of a tapestry that had left its outline on the stone wall. Although the painting might have depicted a typical dinner at Lorn Hall, Randolph thought it portrayed something else. Of the figures seated at the table, only the one at the head of the table possessed much substance. The familiar face was turned away from his sketchy fellow diners to watch whoever was in the actual room, while a servant with a salver waited on either side of him. "Subsequently the situation was reversed," Crowcross said, "and I made the place my own."

Was the painting meant to remind him of the family he'd lost—to provide companionship in his old age? Randolph was trying to see it in those terms when the pinched voice said "By all means make your way onwards." He could do without a repetition, and he made for the hall. As the chandelier went dark he glimpsed somebody turning the bend of the staircase.

"Excuse me," Randolph called, moving the earpiece away from his right ear, but the other didn't respond. If they were wearing headphones too they might not have heard him. He'd only wanted to ask whether they knew what time the house closed to the public. At least he wasn't alone in it, and he picked his way along the hall to the kitchen, where part of the darkness seemed to remain solid as the weary light woke up.

It was a massive black iron range that dominated the grey room. A dormant fragment of the blackness came to life, waving its feelers as it darted into one of the round holes in the top of the range. How long had the kitchen been out of use? Surely nobody would put up with such conditions now. Chipped blotchy marble surfaces and a pair of freezers—one a head taller than Randolph, its twin lying horizontal—might be responsible for some of the chill that met him. A solitary cleaver lay on a ponderous table, which looked not just scored by centuries of knife strokes but in places hacked to splinters. Randolph looked around for a portrait, but perhaps Crowcross felt the kitchen was undeserving of his presence. "My father enjoyed watching the maids at their work," he said. "Red-handed skivvies, he called them. I did myself. Since then the world has changed so radically that their like have been among the visitors. Perhaps you are of their kind."

"Not at all," Randolph objected and felt absurd, not least because he suspected that Crowcross might have disagreed with him. He was searching for some trace of the people who'd worked here—initials carved on the table, for instance—when Crowcross said "There is no more to see here. Let us move on."

He sounded like a parody of a policeman—an officious one used to being obeyed. Randolph couldn't resist lingering to force him to say it again, and might easily have thought a hint of petulance had crept into the repetition. The light failed before Randolph was entirely out of the kitchen, but he glimpsed a door he'd overlooked in the underside of the staircase. As he reached for the heavy doorknob Crowcross said "Nothing of interest is kept down there. I never understood its appeal for my father."

Perhaps Randolph did, assuming the servants' quarters were below. He wondered how his guide's mother had felt about the arrangement. The scalloped doorknob wouldn't turn even when he applied both hands to it. As he looked for a key in the thick dust along the lintel Crowcross spoke. "I have told you nothing has remained. Let us see where I was a child."

His petulance was unmistakable. No doubt the basement rooms would be unlit in any case. Randolph was making his way past the stairs when he heard whoever else was in the house shuffling along an upper corridor. He wondered if there was more light up there, since the footfalls were surer than his own. They receded out of earshot as he pushed open the door of the turret room.

The room was lit, though nothing like immediately, by a single bare bulb on a cobwebbed flex. The round aloof ceiling caught much of the light, and Randolph suspected that even with the curtains open the room might have seemed like a cell to a child. It was furnished with a desk and a table in proportion, each attended by a starkly straight chair. While the table was set for a solitary meal, it had space for a pile of books: an infant's primer on top, a children's encyclopaedia many decades old at the bottom. Even when Randolph made the children read instead of playing, Harriet rarely agreed with his choice of books. The stone floor was scattered with building blocks, a large wooden jigsaw depicting a pastoral scene, an abacus, a picture book with pages thick as rashers, open to show a string like a scrawny umbilical cord dangling from the belly of a pig spotted with mould. The desk was strewn with exercise books that displayed the

evolution of the omnipresent handwriting; one double page swarmed with a C well on its way to resembling the letter that seemed almost to infest the mansion. "This is where I spent the years in growing worthy of my name," said Crowcross. "In our day parents hired their delegates and kept them on the premises. Now the care of children is another industry, one more product of the revolution that has overtaken the country by stealth."

Above the desk a painting showed the room much as it was now, if somewhat brighter and more insubstantial. Crowcross stood between rudimentary impressions of the table and the desk. His arms were folded, and he might have been playing a teacher, except that nobody else was in the room—at least, not in the picture of it. "If you have learned everything you feel entitled to know," he said, "let us go up."

Did Randolph want to bother going on, given the condition of the house? Harriet certainly wouldn't have, even if the children weren't with them. He'd had nothing like his money's worth yet, unless he retrieved the payment on his way out. Perhaps the person upstairs might know more about the history of Lorn Hall, and Randolph didn't mind admitting to a guilty fascination, not least with the companion at his ear. "If you have learned everything you feel," Crowcross said and fell silent as Randolph left the room.

He was on the lowest stair when he noticed that the cherub on the banister had no wings. Somebody had chopped them off, leaving unequal stumps, and he couldn't help suspecting that the vandal had been Crowcross, perhaps since he'd found himself alone in Lorn Hall, the last of his line. He had the uneasy notion that Crowcross was about to refer to if not justify the damage. "If you have learned," the voice said before he could let go of the shaky banister.

From the bend in the stairs he saw the upper corridor, just about illuminated by the dimness beyond several doorways. Whoever he'd glimpsed on the stairs wasn't to be seen, and no light suggested they were in a room. Presumably they were at the top of the house by now. Barely glancing at a second mutilated cherub, Randolph made for the nearest room along the corridor.

Its principal item was an enormous four-poster bed. Burdened by plaster sloughed by the ceiling, the canopy sagged like an ancient cobweb. More plaster glistened on an immense dressing-table and an upholstered chair that must once have looked muscular. Most of the light from the few live bulbs

in the chandelier fell short of a side room, where Randolph was just able to distinguish a marble bath with blackened taps and a pallid hand gripping the side to haul its owner into view, but that was a crumpled cloth. "You are in the master bedroom," Crowcross said tonelessly enough to be addressing an intruder. "Would you expect the master to have left more of a mark?"

His portrait showed him gripping the left-hand bedpost. As well as declaring ownership he gave the impression of awaiting a companion—watching with feigned patience for someone to appear in the doorway at Randolph's back. His imperiousness was somewhat undermined by crumbs of plaster adorning the top of the picture frame. "Will you know what robs a man of mastery?" he said. "Pray accompany me along the corridor."

Randolph couldn't help feeling relieved not to be given the tour by his host in the flesh. He suspected the commentary had been recorded late in the man's life—when he was turning senile, perhaps. The chandelier in the next room contained even fewer bulbs, which faltered alight to outline another bed. Its posts were slimmer than its neighbour's, and the canopy was more delicate, which meant it looked close to collapsing under the weight of debris. Had a fall of plaster smashed the dressing-table mirror? Randolph could see only shards of glass among the dusty cosmetic items. "Here you see the private suite of the last Lady Crowcross," the voice said. "I fear that the ways of our family were not to her taste."

He held a bedpost in his left fist, but it was unclear which bedroom he was in. His depiction of himself was virtually identical with the one next door. A figure identifiable as a woman by the long hair draped over the pillow lay in the sketch of a bed. Randolph couldn't judge if Crowcross had given her a face, because where one should be was a dark stain, possibly the result of the age and state of the painting. "Please don't exert yourself to look for any signs of children," Crowcross said. "They were taken long ago. My lady disagreed with the Crowcross methods and found another of our fairer counterparts to plead her case."

"I know the feeling," Randolph said, immediately regretting the response. There was no point in being bitter; he told himself so every time he had the children and whenever he had to give them up. As he caught sight of the bathroom shower, which was so antiquated that the iron cage put him in mind of some medieval punishment, Crowcross said "You'll have none of

the little dears about you, I suppose. They must conduct themselves appropriately in this house."

While Randolph thought his and Harriet's children might have passed the test, at least if they'd been with him, he was glad not to have to offer proof. As he made for the corridor he glimpsed a trickle of moisture or some livelier object running down a bar of the shower cage. "That's the style," said Crowcross. "There's nothing worthy of attention here if you've taken in my work."

It almost sounded as though the guide was aware of Randolph's movements. To an extent this was how the commentary operated, but could it really be so specific? He was tempted to learn how it would react if he stayed in the room, but when the lit bulbs flickered in unison as though to urge him onwards he retreated into the corridor.

The adjacent room was the last on this side. Shadows swarmed and fluttered among the dead bulbs as the chandelier struggled to find life. All the furniture was stout and dark, the bedposts included. One corner of the laden canopy had almost torn loose. The room smelled dank, so that Randolph wouldn't have been surprised to see moisture on the stone walls. "This was the sanctum of the eldest Crowcross," the voice said. "His wife's quarters were across the corridor."

Presumably the portrait was meant to demonstrate how the room had become his. He was at the window, holding back the curtain to exhibit or lay claim to a version of the landscape in summer. His eyes were still on his audience; Randolph was beginning to feel as if the gaze never left him. He was meeting it and waiting for the next words when he heard a vehicle start up outside the house.

The bedposts shook like dislocated bones as he dashed across the room, and debris shifted with a stony whisper. The gap between the curtains was scarcely a finger's width. They felt capable of leaving handfuls of sodden heavy fabric in his grasp, and he knew where at least some of the smell came from. As he dragged them apart the rings twitched rustily along the metal rail. He craned forward, keeping well clear of the windowsill, which was scattered with dead flies like seeds of some unwelcome growth. The grid of cramped panes was coated with grime and crawling with raindrops, so that he was only just able to make out the grounds. Then, beyond the misshapen bloated topiary, he saw movement—the van near which he'd

parked. Its outline wavered as it sped along the drive and picked up speed on the road.

Was Randolph alone in the house now? In that case, how had the driver sneaked past him? As the van disappeared into the rainswept gloom Crowcross said "Will you see the woman's quarters now? Everything is open to you, no matter what your pedigree."

How distasteful was this meant to sound? Randolph might have had enough by now except for the weather. He felt as if he was ensuring he outran the voice by hurrying across the corridor. A few bulbs sputtered alight in their cobwebbed crystal nest to show him yet another dilapidated bed. A hole had rotted in the canopy, dumping plaster on the stained bedclothes. Crowcross was holding a bedpost again, and a careless scribble behind him suggested that someone had just left the sketched bed. "Any little treasures would be barred from all these rooms," he said. "Have any found their way in now? Do keep an eye on their behaviour. We don't want any damage."

"I think you're having a bit of a joke," Randolph said. How senile had the speaker been by the time he'd recorded the commentary? Had he been seeing his home as it used to be? The light stuttered, rousing shadows in the bathroom and enlivening a muddy trickle on the initialled tiles above the marble trough. "If you have had your pleasure," Crowcross said, "the eldest breathed their last next door."

"My pleasure," Randolph retorted, and it was a question too.

The chandelier in the adjacent room lacked several bulbs. In the pensioned light a pair of four-posters occupied much of the cheerless space. Although the canopies were intact, the supports showed their age, some of the thinner ones bowing inwards. "They came here to grow as old as they could," Crowcross said. "Tell any little cherubs that, and how they had to stay together while they did."

Randolph thought the commentary had turned childish in the wrong way, if indeed there was a right one. He'd begun to feel it was no longer addressed to him or any listener, especially once Crowcross muttered "And then older."

The beds were flanked by massive wardrobes almost as dark outside as in. Both were open just enough to let Randolph distinguish shapes within. The

figure with a dwarfish puffy head and dangling arms that were longer than its legs was a suit on a padded hanger. Its opposite number resembled a life-size cut-out of a woman drained of colour—just a long white dress, not a shroud. Nobody was about to poke a face around either of the doors, however much Randolph was reminded of a game of hide and seek. He'd never prevented the children from playing that, even if he might have in Lorn Hall. As he did his best to finish peering at the wardrobes Crowcross said "Are you still hoping for diversions? They await your judgement."

Randolph was starting to feel like the butt of a joke he wasn't expected to appreciate, since Crowcross didn't seem to think much of his visitors, let alone their views. When a pair of the lamps in the next room jittered alight, a ball on the billiard table shot into the nearest pocket. Of course only its legs had made it look as large as a billiard ball. Packs of battered cards were strewn across a table patched with baize, and cobwebs had overtaken a game of chess, where chipped marble chessmen lay in the dust beside the board. "This is where games were played," Crowcross said, "by those who had the privilege. Mine was waiting, and in the end I won."

He might have been talking to himself again, and resentfully at that. "We haven't seen your room yet," Randolph said and wondered if all of them had been. "You aren't ashamed of it, are you? It's a bit late to be ashamed."

He was heading for the turret room when Crowcross said "Eager to see where I was visited by dreams? Since then they have had the run of the house."

After a pause the room was illuminated by a stark grubby bulb. A bed with no posts and less than half the size of any of the others stood in the middle of the stone floor. The only other furniture was a wardrobe and a comparably sombre dressing-table with a mirror so low it cut Randolph off above the waist. Perhaps the soft toys huddled on the pillow had at some stage been intended to make the room more welcoming, but that wasn't their effect now. The pair of teddy bears and the lamb with boneless legs had all acquired red clownish mouths that contradicted their expressions. So much paint had been applied that it still resembled fresh blood.

They were in the portrait, where their sketched faces looked disconcertingly human. Perhaps the alterations to the actual toys had been a kind of preliminary study. Crowcross stood at the sunlit window, beyond which a distant figure stooped, hands outstretched. "I used to love watching

the keepers trap their prey," Crowcross said. "They are put here for our pleasure and our use."

As Randolph turned away he saw what the painting didn't show. The toys on the pillow almost hid the clasped pair of hands protruding from beneath the quilt, which was blotched with mould. No, they were wings, none too expertly severed from the body—a pair of wooden wings. "This could have been a child's room," Crowcross mused. "We always raised our children to be men."

"Don't we talk about girls? I thought I was supposed to be unreasonable but my dear lord, my wife ought to listen to you," Randolph said and seemed to hear a confused violent noise in response. The window was shuddering under an onslaught of rain. He turned his back to all the eyes watching him —the portrait's and those of the disfigured toys, which were exactly as blank—and heard soft rapid footfalls on the stairs above him.

They were shuffling along the top corridor by the time he reached the staircase. "Excuse me, could you wait?" he shouted, raising the other headphone from his ear as he dashed upstairs so fast that he couldn't have said whether one cherub's face was splintered beyond recognition. Whenever he grabbed the banister, it wobbled with a bony clatter of its uprights. In a few seconds he saw that the top corridor was deserted.

None of the rooms showed a light. Perhaps whoever was about was trying to fix one, since otherwise their presence would have triggered it. Perhaps they were too busy to answer Randolph. Had the driver of the van been in the house at all? Presumably the person Randolph had glimpsed earlier was up here now. They couldn't have gone far, and he made for the turret room in the hope of finding them.

He saw he was alone once the meagre light recognised him. A lectern stood beside an imposing telescope that was pointed at the window. Astronomical charts—some crumpled, others chewed or torn to shreds—lay on the floor. "I never saw the appeal of the stars," Crowcross said, more distantly now. "I've no wish to be reminded of the dead. They say that's how old their light is. I preferred to watch the parade of the world. The glass brought it close enough for my taste."

He could have used the telescope to spy on the grounds and the road. Beyond the blurred fields Randolph saw an endless chain of watery lights being drawn at speed along the horizon. It was the motorway, where he

promised himself he'd be soon, but he could finish exploring while he waited for the rain to stop, particularly since the family wasn't with him. He left the turret room with barely a glance at the portrait in which Crowcross appeared to be stroking the barrel of the telescope as if it were a pet animal.

The next room was a library. Shelves of bound sets of fat volumes covered every wall up to the roof. Each volume was embossed with a C like a brand at the base of its spine. More than one high shelf had tipped over with the weight of books or the carelessness with which they'd been placed, so that dozens of books were sprawled about the floor in a jumble of dislocated pages. A ladder with rusty wheels towered over several stocky leather armchairs mottled with decay. "This might be tidier," said Crowcross. "Perhaps that could be your job."

What kind of joke was this meant to be? Randolph wondered if the last lord of Lorn Hall could have pulled the books down in a fury at having nowhere to hang his portrait. He couldn't have done much if any reading in here unless there had been more light than the one remaining bulb provided. It was enough to show that Randolph was still alone, and he dodged across the corridor.

An unshaded bulb on a cobwebbed flex took its time over revealing a bedroom. All four bedposts leaned so far inwards that they could have been trying to grasp the light or fend it off. The canopy lay in a heap on the bed. Although Randolph thought he'd glimpsed clothes hanging in the tall black wardrobe as the light came on, once he blinked at the glare he could see nothing except gloom beyond the scrawny gap—no pale garment for somebody bigger than he was, no wads of tissue paper stuffed into the cuffs and collar. "This could be made fit for guests again," Crowcross said. "Would you consider it to be your place?"

He sounded as furtively amused as he looked in his portrait, which showed him standing in the doorway of the room, gazing at whoever was within. It made Randolph glance behind him, even though he knew the corridor was empty. "I wouldn't be a guest of yours," he blurted, only to realise that in a sense he was. Almost too irritated to think, he tramped out of the room.

Next door was a bedroom very reminiscent of its neighbour. The fallen canopy of the four-poster was so rotten it appeared to have begun merging with the quilt. The portrait beyond the bed was virtually identical with the last one, and the light could have been competing at reluctance with its

peers. Nothing was visible in the half-open wardrobe except padded hangers like bones fattened by dust. Randolph was about to move on when Crowcross said "This could be made fit for guests again. Would you consider it to be your place?"

The repetition sounded senile, and it seemed to cling to Randolph's brain. As he lurched towards the corridor Crowcross added "Will you make yourself at home?"

It had none of the tone of an invitation, and Randolph wasn't about to linger. Whoever else was upstairs had to be in the last room. "Have you seen all you choose?" Crowcross said while Randolph crossed the corridor. "See the rest, then."

The last room stayed dark until Randolph shoved the door wider, and then the lights began to respond—more of them than he thought he'd seen during the rest of the tour. The room was larger than both its neighbours combined, and graced with several chandeliers that he suspected had been replaced by solitary bulbs elsewhere in the house. They were wired low on the walls and lay on the floor, casting more shadow than illumination as he peered about the room.

It was cluttered with retired items. Rolled-up tapestries drooped against the walls, and so did numerous carpets and rugs, suggesting that someone had chosen to rob Lorn Hall of warmth. Several battered grandfather clocks stood like sentries over wooden crates and trunks that must have taken two servants apiece to carry them, even when they were empty of luggage. Smaller clocks perched on rickety pieces of furniture or lurked on the floorboards, and Randolph couldn't help fancying that somebody had tried to leave time up here to die. Crouching shadows outnumbered the objects he could see, but he appeared to be alone. As he narrowed his eyes Crowcross said "Here is where I liked to hide. Perhaps I still do."

"I would if I were you," Randolph said without having a precise retort in mind. He'd noticed a number of paintings stacked against the wall at the far end of the room. Were they pictures Crowcross had replaced with his own, or examples of his work he didn't want visitors to see? Randolph picked his way across the floor, almost treading on more than one photograph in the dimness—they'd slipped from unsteady heaps of framed pictures which, as far as he could make out, all showed members of the Crowcross family. Even the glass on the topmost pictures in the heaps was shattered. He'd

decided to postpone understanding the damage until he was out of the room when he reached the paintings against the wall.

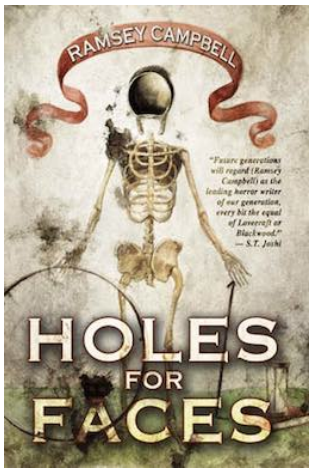
Though the light from the nearest chandelier was obstructed by the clutter, the image on the foremost canvas was plain enough. It portrayed Crowcross in a field, his arms folded, one foot on a prone man's neck. He looked not so much triumphant as complacent. The victim's face was either turned away submissively or buried in the earth, and his only distinguishing feature was the C embossed on his naked back. It wasn't a painting from life, Randolph told himself; it was just a symbol or a fantasy, either of which was bad enough. He was about to tilt the canvas forward to expose the next when Crowcross spoke. "The last," he said.

Did he mean a painting or the room, or did the phrase have another significance? Randolph wasn't going to be daunted until he saw what Crowcross had tried to conceal, but as he took hold of a corner of the frame the portrait was invaded by darkness. A light had been extinguished at his back—no, more than one—and too late he realised something else. Because the headphones weren't over his ears any more he'd mistaken the direction of the voice. It was behind him.

The room seemed to swivel giddily as he did. The figure that almost filled the doorway was disconcertingly familiar, and not just from the versions in the paintings; he'd glimpsed it skulking in the wardrobe. It wore a baggy nightshirt no less pallid and discoloured than its skin. Its face was as stiff as it appeared in any of the portraits, and the unblinking eyes were blank as lumps of greyish paint. The face had lolled in every direction it could find, much like the contents of the rest of the visible skin—the bare arms, the legs above the clawed feet. When the puffy white lips parted Randolph thought the mouth was in danger of losing more than its shape. As the figure shuffled forward he heard some of the substance of the unshod feet slopping against the floor. Just as its progress extinguished the rest of the lights it spoke with more enthusiasm than he'd heard from it anywhere else in the house. "Game," it said.

2013

Holes For Faces



"*Holes for Faces* was one of those ideas that clamour to be written and seem to come with an almost ready-made development. Some years ago we visited Naples for a few days. I think it was on the first full day that we found the catacombs of San Gaudioso under the church of Santa Maria della Sanità, which is located as described in the tale. The corpses are indeed displayed in that fashion. Need I say more? I was writing notes as soon as we left the tombs. Pretty well all the excursions we made in and around Naples appear in the story, macabrely transformed. The restaurant is based on our favourite, the Osteria da Antonio on Via Depretis. Writing all this makes me want to book us the next flight back."—Ramsey Campbell, Introduction to the story in *The Mammoth Book Of Best New Horror 25*

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As Charlie turned away from the breakfast buffet his mother gave a frown like the first line of a sketch of disapproval. “Don’t take more than you can eat, please.”

He didn’t know how much this was meant to be. He put back one of the boiled eggs that chilled his fingers and used the tongs to replace a bread roll in its linen nest, but had to give up several round slices of meat before her look relented. “Come and sit down now, Charles,” she said as though it had been his idea to loiter.

His father met him with a grin that might have been the promise of a joke or an apology for not venturing to make one. “Who wants to go to church today, Charlie?”

It wasn’t even Sunday. Perhaps in Italy it didn’t have to be. “At least we won’t be robbed in there,” his father said.

“You’re safe in Naples, son,” the man at the next table contributed. “We’ve always been.”

“How old will you be?” his equally bulky wife said.

“I’m nearly eight.” Since the frown looked imminent, Charlie had to say “I’m seven and nine months.”

“That’s three quarters, isn’t it,” the man said as if Charlie needed to be told.

“Just you stay close to your mummy and daddy and mind what they say,” said his wife, “and you’ll come to no harm.”

It was Charlie’s mother who was fearful of the streets. When they’d arrived last night after dark she’d refused to leave the hotel, even though it didn’t serve dinner. His father had brought Charlie a sandwich in the room, and the adults had made do with some in the bar. He’d been too nervous to finish the sandwich, instead throwing it out of the window and hoping birds would carry off the evidence. Going back to the buffet might betray what he’d done, and he did his best to take his time over his plate while the adults introduced themselves. “Don’t miss the catacombs,” Bobby said as he pushed his chair back.

“Unless anything’s going to be too much for someone,” his wife Bobbie said.

“Nobody we know,” said Charlie’s father.

“Teeth,” his mother said to send Charlie up to the room, where she inspected herself in the mirror. She’d plaited her long reddish hair in a loop on either side of her face, which was almost as small and sharp as his. His father’s hair reminded Charlie of black filings drawn up by a magnet that had tugged his father’s face close to rectangular. His mother gave Charlie’s unruly curls a further thorough brush and insisted on zipping his cumbersome jacket up, all of which struck him as the last of her excuses to stay in the hotel.

The street was just as wide as it had seemed last night, and many of the buildings were as black, but shops at ground level had brought most of them to life. While the broad pavements were crowded Charlie couldn’t see any criminals, unless any if not all of the people chattering on phones were arranging a crime, since even the women sounded like gangsters in cartoons to him. Reaching the opposite pavement was akin to dodging across a racetrack—no traffic lights were to be seen. Charlie’s mother tried to hold his father back, but she was already clutching the boy’s hand with one of hers and her handbag with the other. “It’s how the locals do it,” Charlie’s father said. “We won’t get anywhere if we don’t show a bit of pluck.”

There were bus stops around the corner near the harbour, and gusts of April wind that made Charlie’s mother zip up the last inch of his jacket. On the bus she clung to her bag with both hands and sat against him. At least he was by the window, and had fun noticing how many cars were damaged in

some way, bumpers crumpled, wings scraped, side mirrors splintered or wrenched off. His father looked up from consulting the Frugoguide to say "Underworld next stop."

Wasn't that where gangsters lived? A pedestrian crossing proved to lead across the road to a lift beside the pavement. A face peered through the little window as they reached the lift, and Charlie's mother didn't quite recoil. "We'll be fine down there, won't we?" Charlie's father asked the attendant. "You wouldn't be taking us otherwise."

The man waved his hands extravagantly. "No problem."

When the lift came to rest at the foot of the shaft the doors opened on a view like a secret the city was sharing with the visitors—a street of shops and tenements hidden from the road above. Between the tenements clothes on lines strung across the alleys flapped like pennants. "Come on, Maur," Charlie's father urged. "It doesn't get any better than this."

Charlie didn't know if she was frowning at the prospect or at disliking the version of her name. As they followed his father out of the lift she took a firmer grip on Charlie's hand. "Is that the church you brought us to see, Edward?"

Charlie thought his father was trying not to sound let down by her response. "I expect so."

The stone porch under a tower that poked at the pale grey sky was at least as tall as their house. Beyond the lumbering door a marble silence held the flames of dozens of candles still. At the far end of the high wide space a staircase with carved babies perched on the ends of the banisters framed the altar. The floor looked like a puzzle someone must have taken ages to complete, and Charlie wondered what a puzzle was supposed to have to do with God. His mother released his hand and seemed content to stroll through the church, lingering over items he couldn't see much point in. As he tried to keep his footsteps quiet his father came back from consulting a timetable. "We need to go down now," he murmured.

A pointer that didn't quite say CATACOMBS sent the family along a corridor. An old woman with a face like a string bag of wrinkles was sitting by a door. "No English," she declared and shook her head at Charlie, who thought she was barring him and perhaps his parents too until he realised she meant they didn't have to pay for him and couldn't expect her to speak

their language. As his father counted out some European coins a man rather more than called “Don’t go without us.”

“Well, look who it never is,” his wife Bobbie cried. “We thought we’d take our own advice.”

As soon as Bobby handed the guide the notes he was brandishing she stumped to open the door. At the bottom of a gloomy flight of steps a corridor led into darkness. “Will you look after me, son?” Bobbie said. “Don’t know if I can trust him.”

Charlie wasn’t sure whether this was one of those jokes adults made. While the corridor wasn’t as dark as it had looked from above—the round arches supporting the brick roof were lit the amber of a traffic light—the illumination didn’t reach all the way into the alcoves on both sides of the passage. “You could play hide and seek if nobody was watching,” Bobby told him.

Hiding in an alcove didn’t appeal much to Charlie. Suppose you found somebody already was? Dead people must be kept down here even if he couldn’t see them, and who did Bobby think was watching? Charlie stayed close to his parents as the old woman shuffled along the corridor, jabbing a knuckly finger at plaques and mosaics while she uttered phrases that might have been names or descriptions. The movements in the alcoves were only overlapping shadows, even if they shifted like restless limbs. “You’ve not seen the best yet, son,” Bobby said.

This sounded less like an adventure than some kind of threat, and Charlie was about to ask whether it was in the guidebook when Bobby whispered “Look for the people in the walls.” As though the words had brought it to a kind of life, Charlie saw a thin figure beyond the next arch.

It was standing up straight with its hands near its sides. He thought it was squashed like a huge insect and surrounded by a stain until he made out that it seemed to be a human fossil embedded in the plaster. There was more or rather less to it than that, and once he’d peered at the ill-defined roundish blotch above the emaciated neck he had to blurt “Where’s its head?”

The old woman emitted a dry wordless stutter, possibly expressing mirth. “Maybe it’s hiding in the hole,” Bobby said. “Maybe it’s waiting for someone to look.”

The skeletal shape implanted in the wall had indeed been deprived of its skull. Perched on the scrawny neck was a hole deep enough for a man's head to fit in. "Don't," Bobbie said as if she was both delighted and appalled.

Charlie had to follow his parents under the arch as the old woman poked a finger at the gaping hole and let out a stream of words he might have taken for a curse or an equally fervent prayer. Now he saw bodies in both walls of the passage, and wished he didn't need to ask "Who took all their heads?"

"Maybe it was someone after souvenirs," Bobby said. "I don't suppose this lot were too tickled with losing their noggins. Watch out they don't think we're the ones that did it."

"They can't think. They've got no brains left."

"You tell him, son," Bobbie enthused just as his mother said "Charles."

He'd felt as if his words had robbed the figures in the walls of power until her rebuke gave it back to them. He could imagine the headless bodies peeling themselves loose from their corpse-shaped indentations and the stains that must have been part of them once, to jerk and stagger rapidly towards him. Far too soon some of them were at his back while others surrounded him, and there were surreptitious movements in the holes they had for heads—glimpses like animals retreating into their burrows to hide until people had gone by. Surely those were just the shadows of the visitors, and Charlie was making himself look closer when Bobby said "Don't stick your hand in, son. You never know what's waiting."

"Don't touch, Charles," his mother said at once.

"I wasn't going to."

"And," she said, "please don't speak to your mother in that fashion."

"Take no notice, son," Bobbie advised. "He was just having a joke."

"I'd like us to leave now, please," Charlie's mother said. "I think everyone's seen enough."

When Charlie turned to follow her he caught sight of a movement above the neck of the embedded body beside him, as if a face like a featureless stain had swung to watch. She must be causing it, there and in the cavities the other fleshless bodies had in place of heads. He tried not to look, especially back, while he trotted after her. It was only his father who was

close behind him. The church was meant to be a refuge, and no footsteps other than the family's were clattering across the stone floor to the exit, however many echoes there might be. Outside all the clothes on the lines might have been miming agitation that his mother was trying to conceal. "I think we've been down here long enough," she said.

Long enough for what? Rather than ask, Charlie hurried after her to the lift, where the sight of a face peering through the small window had lost some of its appeal. As the lift creaked upwards his father consulted the guidebook. "They took the heads somewhere for safety," he said.

As Charlie wondered who was being kept safe and from what, his mother said "I'd like to put them behind us, thank you, Edward."

"How far?" Charlie blurted.

"I've been surprised at you today, Charles. I hope you won't let us down any more."

She strode to poke the button for the traffic lights, and his father hung back to murmur "They thought something might be catching, Charlie. That's why they took the heads off, to protect people."

Who might something catch, and why? As Charlie made to ask, his mother doubled her frown at them. "Come on, Charlie," his father muttered. "We don't want you ending up in more trouble."

Once they'd joined the queue at the bus stop Charlie's mother grasped her handbag every time a moped raced through the increasingly gridlocked traffic. The bicycles buzzing like wasps didn't bother Charlie, but he could have done without the face that kept looming at the window of the lift across the road. Very eventually a bus appeared in the distance, and less than ten minutes later it arrived at the stop.

From the bus he watched cars inch past one another, their drivers reaching to pull side mirrors inwards. The ruse would have amused him more if he hadn't seen one reflected face swell up like a worm emerging from a hole as the driver hauled at the mirror. Having leafed through the guidebook, his father said "Who'd like to go up to a park?"

"Let's," Charlie's mother said at once.

The picture in the book showed a railway platform made of steps alongside an equally steep train. When the bus came to an official stop at last and his

father led the way to the station, however, Charlie saw an ordinary horizontal platform leading to a tunnel, where he tried to enjoy the sight of a blank-faced train worming its way towards him out of the dark. At first there wasn't much to see when the train moved off, though a toddler in the next carriage kept poking her head up to peer at him. Her breath on the window between the carriages blurred her face and turned it grey. He tried to focus his attention on the tunnel, where he couldn't see any holes in the walls—nowhere that anything could creep or struggle or bulge out from.

A wind boarded the train when, having escaped into the open, it reached the stop of a hill, and Charlie's mother tugged his zip under his chin. At a restaurant between the station and a park they had a pizza big enough for the three of them. Plastic sheets around the dining area didn't just obscure the view but made the face of anybody who came near seem to take shape only gradually and not quite enough.

There were views from all sides of the park. The guidebook fluttered like a captured bird while Charlie's father named buildings and piazzas and streets. The boy was more taken with Vesuvius, a hump the colour of its own dark smoke across the bay. "Would you like to use the telescope, Charles?" his mother said, but the notion of looking through a hole that brought things closer didn't tempt him. As she pocketed the coin for the slot machine he saw a face struggling through a gap in a mass of foliage behind her. Only the leaves were active, and the statue was on the far side of the bush.

"We can take a ferry tomorrow," Charlie's father said on the way back to the hotel, "to somewhere your mother should like." Charlie thought she'd heard more than was intended—perhaps a rebuke. Nobody spoke much until they were up in their room. As soon as his father started looking in the Frugoguide she said "I'd like to eat wherever's nearest."

"I hope that won't be its only merit," said his father.

"I hope some things mean more to you than your stomach." Her glance at Charlie made it plain what should. "Time for a rest before we go out," she said to bring all discussion to an end.

Charlie tried to lie still on his bed while his parents did on theirs beside him. He might have liked to see their faces, which were turned away from him. His father's hand lay slack on top of the side of his mother's waist, and Charlie had a sense that it was inhibited from moving, just like him. He

struggled not to think this might be how it would feel to be embedded in a wall. You'd have to move eventually, however you could. He strained to keep his restlessness discreet, but once his bed had creaked several times his mother said wearily "We may as well go for dinner."

The nearest restaurant was just two doors away from the hotel. It was an *osteria* which sounded too much like a word for panic. Two mirrors the length of the side walls multiplied the room full of small tables. A waiter set about befriending Charlie, calling him signor and pouring him a sip of lemonade to taste as Charlie's father sampled the wine. He told Charlie that his choice of spaghetti Bolognese was the best dish on the menu, so that the boy felt obliged to finish it, though it wasn't much like his mother's recipe. As his parents drank the liqueur that came with the bill she said "I'll be happy to come here every night."

"Seconded," Charlie's father said, though Charlie didn't think she had been inviting a vote.

The boy might have shared their enthusiasm except for the word for the restaurant. It was engraved on the frosted window, and the O was a transparent oval like a hole a face would have to squash itself through. From the table at the back of the restaurant the letter resembled a hollow full of the darkness outside, and Charlie had glimpsed more than one face in it during the meal. Perhaps they'd belonged to people with an eye to dining, though they hadn't come in. "And I'm sure you'll want to see your friend again, Charles," his mother said.

She hurried him back to the hotel and up to the room, where she said "Face and teeth." Once he'd washed the one and brushed the others she dealt him a kiss so terse it was barely perceptible, and his father squeezed his shoulder. As Charlie lay under the quilt with his eyes shut he heard his mother say "I'm quite tired. You go down to the bar if you want, of course."

"No need for that," his father said before the low voices moved to the bathroom, where Charlie heard him murmur "Don't keep making that face." He imagined putting a face together like a jigsaw, a fancy preferable to the dreams he felt threatened by having. Eventually his parents finished muttering and went to bed. They weren't with him as he tried to find his way home through the town, where all the signs were as incomprehensible as the answers people gave him. In any case he didn't like speaking to anyone he met, however expensively dressed they were; they looked too

thin inside their elegant costumes, and he couldn't make much of their faces. Perhaps there were none to be seen—not yet, at any rate. When they began to squirm up from the holes in the collars he stuffed the quilt into his mouth to mute his cries. Having to explain to his parents would be even worse than the dream.

At breakfast the English couple came over. "Bobby has something to say to you," Bobbie said.

"I'm sorry if I caused any upset down below."

"Don't be saying things like that at breakfast. In the catacombs, he means," Bobbie said as though apologising for a child. "Did he go too far, son?"

"He was joking. You said."

"So long as you don't forget," Bobbie said and turned to Charlie's mother. "We've been putting you down for a teacher."

"We both are," his father said.

At least all this helped distract them from how little the boy ate. After breakfast the family walked down to the harbour, to find the sea had grown so boisterous that the ferries had been cancelled. Now that Charlie saw all the windows in the boats he was happy to stay on land, even though he hadn't noticed any faces at them. "There's always Pompeii," his father said.

Opposite the main railway terminal was a kind of market, men hoping to sell shabby items that cluttered the pavement. One peddler had a dog, presumably not for sale. Its bony piebald face poked out of a discoloured plastic cone around its neck, and it bared uneven yellow teeth in a silent snarl. On the train Charlie tried to forget it and anything it brought to mind. The clocks on the stations were some help, since every one showed a different incorrect time. "They've stopped time," his father said as Charlie imagined he might have told the delinquents he taught creative writing in the unit at the school. Perhaps because modern history was her job, his mother didn't seem to think much of the idea. Charlie wasn't sure how to feel about the notion, but then this was true of much in his life.

Beyond the gates to Pompeii, where a woman's face nodded forward in the ticket booth, was an entire ruined town. Sightseers clustered like flies around the nearest buildings, where the open fronts were covered with wire mesh as if to cage the occupants—figures that Charlie wished he could

mistake for statues lying on shelves. “Not more mummies,” his mother protested.

“They aren’t, Charlie. They’re just casts.”

Weren’t those the husks worms left behind where they crawled out of the earth? “What does that mean?” Charlie had to ask.

“They’re plaster.” This seemed reassuring until his father added “They’re the shape of whoever was there when the volcano caught them. All that was left were hollows where they’d been, and that’s what the plaster was put in.”

Too many if not all of the contorted figures looked about to writhe and creep towards their audience, and the idea of dead shapes that had grown in holes didn’t appeal to Charlie either. He followed his parents into the town, where the streets were the colour of bone—of the shapes in the cages. The face that poked out of an unglazed window belonged to a girl somebody was photographing. After that Charlie kept alert for cameras, which often brought faces out of holes in the walls. He was glad his parents had forgotten to bring their cameras because of disagreeing over what to pack.

Lunch was no excuse to leave, since they’d bought sandwiches and drinks on the way from the station. They picnicked in the amphitheatre, where Charlie’s father attempted to entertain him with a speech about someone called Spartacus who’d lived in Vesuvius and set people free. The passing spectators seemed more amused than Charlie’s mother did, and Charlie didn’t know which of his parents to side with. “Sorry if that was too much like school,” his father eventually said.

“Perhaps Charles thinks it hasn’t anything to do with him.”

“All history does, Charlie. It isn’t just behind us, it’s part of us.”

Charlie didn’t care for either of his father’s notions, which stayed with him as he trudged through the crumbling skeleton of a town. His father wanted to show him and especially his mother frescoes and mosaics recommended by the Frugoguide, but the boy was distracted by more faces at windows than there were amateur photographers. He wished he’d thought sooner to unzip his jacket, since as soon as he did his mother said “I think that’s the best of the day.”

He hoped that didn’t mean worse was to come. He felt as if the clocks on the stations were holding time back. He couldn’t see the dog in the market

opposite the terminal, but if it was about, what else might he have overlooked? Despite the gathering dusk, his father made a detour on the way to the hotel.

The inside of this church was high and pallid, with pillars like polished bones. As the twilight blurred the figures outlined in the windows, their blotchy faces seemed poised to nod forward. Did he glimpse a face beyond the door of a confessional? The box made him think of an upright coffin in one of the kinds of film he wasn't allowed to watch. When he peered towards it the face was snatched into the gloom, and he heard a bony rattle. "Have you had enough for one day, Charlie?" his father said.

In a number of ways the boy had, but he confined himself to admitting "I'm a bit tired."

In the hotel room he felt as if his parents were waiting to catch him not just being tired, and he turned his back so that they couldn't see his face. At the restaurant the waiter gave them the same table and asked if the signor wanted his favourite. Charlie thought it safest to say yes, along with please when his mother's frown began to gather. A different dish might have been even harder to finish while he was aware of the O on the window. He kept thinking a face was about to peer in at him, and far too often faces did, retreating into the dark before he could distinguish any features they might have. When he tried to ignore the gaping oval he began to fancy that one face too many was hidden in the repetitive reflections on both sides of him.

"Face and teeth," his mother said upstairs with a toothy grin as a demonstration if not a joke. As well as the mirror on the bathroom wall a round one stood on a shelf above the sink. It magnified Charlie's reflection, and when he lurched to turn it away he saw his face swell up like a balloon, baring its teeth. He couldn't help taking the sight to bed, where he was visited by faces that grew bloated, parts of them bulging out of proportion as the heads struggled to emerge from their lairs. Each time he woke he had to jam the quilt into his mouth.

He might have left his plate at breakfast empty if his parents wouldn't have wanted to know why. When he returned to the table four people were watching him. "Were you disappointed you couldn't go on your boat?" Bobbie said.

He wasn't sure how much of a lie to tell. "A bit," he said.

“It’s your last day, Charles.” Perhaps his mother didn’t mean this to sound ominous, because she added “Would you rather not spend five hours on a ferry? Tell the truth.”

“Don’t mind.”

It was rather that he couldn’t think what he would prefer. When his mother raised her hands like a weary victim of a hold-up his father said “Would you like a surprise for your last day, Charlie?”

The boy wished they wouldn’t keep using the phrase. “If you like,” he couldn’t avoid saying.

“Aren’t I allowed to know either, Edward?”

“We don’t want to give it away, do we, Maur?” Charlie’s father covered the side of his face while he mouthed at her, and Charlie hoped she’d winced only at his dropping half of her name. “That’ll be a thrill for him,” Bobbie said.

Surely the surprise wasn’t more of Pompeii, though the family boarded that train. The clocks on the stations made Charlie feel as if time had abandoned him. His father stood up when the train reached Herculaneum. Weren’t there supposed to be mummies there too? It was only when his father bought bus tickets from a bar outside the station that Charlie realised his treat was Vesuvius.

As the bus climbed out of the town he saw a fair beside the road and felt guilty for wanting to be there instead. The nearer the volcano came, the less of an adventure it seemed likely to be. It loomed above the road like a storm rendered solid while his father read out from the guidebook that the Romans used to believe volcanoes were entrances to hell. Why would he take Charlie anywhere like that? Did the boy deserve it somehow?

Beyond a ticket booth a man was handing out sticks at the foot of the route to the crater. Much of the track consisted of loose flat stones, which made footsteps sound bony and thin, especially all those at Charlie’s back. The path kept promising and failing to grow less steep, and whenever he tried to take more of a breath the wind assailed him with the stench of the volcano. It smelled as if the earth were farting, and if he’d been with other boys he might have been able to laugh.

Near the summit the path led between souvenir stalls. Among the trinkets Charlie noticed skulls, which gave him the unwelcome notion that someone

might have brought the heads up from the catacomb to sell. The crater wasn't reassuring—a vast hollow in which fumes crept out of the black earth, he couldn't see exactly where, to crawl about as though groping for their own shapes. Charlie didn't like to wonder what kind of creature Spartacus had been to live here, never mind what he'd set free.

He did his utmost to look pleased with the treat for his father's sake and to give his parents one less reason to disagree. At last his father asked if he'd seen enough. As they passed between the stalls again a cloud like an emanation of the crater massed overhead. Charlie felt walled in by skulls, which were no less ominous for being plainly manufactured. When a wind followed him down from the summit he could have thought more than the stench of rot was after him. Some of the people toiling uphill had tugged hoods around their faces against the wind, which yanked at the material so that their features thrust up at Charlie. More than one of them bared their teeth, surely only at the wind.

The bus had almost reached the station when Charlie's father turned to him. "I know something else you'll like."

He meant the fair. It had a roundabout Charlie went on twice, and a dog with a ruff around its neck, prancing on two legs while its front legs clawed at the air. There was a target gallery where neither Charlie nor his parents could shoot quite straight enough, and a stall where you flung wooden balls to knock grinning faces backwards, leaving dark holes. He didn't want to try that, and he hurried past to an attraction screened by trees. At once he wished he hadn't seen it, but his parents already had.

Two life-size figures were painted on a board taller than his father. No doubt they were meant to be comical. The man sported a clownish costume so baggy it made him look puffed up by gas, while his partner wore a spangled dress that bared her bony hirsute legs. They had no faces, only holes for them, filled just now by the dark swollen sky. Charlie was about to thank his parents for the treat and flee towards the road when a man bustled over, gesticulating with a camera. "Go on, Charles," his mother said. "Put your head through, then at least we'll have one photograph."

The surge of dread was worse for being undefinable. The prospect of causing an argument between his parents dismayed him as well. "You and dad first," he said in desperation.

As soon as they stepped behind the board he felt he'd risked them to save himself. They seemed unconcerned when they put their faces through; they even produced grins, though his mother's resembled her habitual patient expression, while his father's looked hopeful. The boy was able to respond, having thought of an excuse not to go near. "I won't reach."

"Of course you will," his mother said, letting her grin subside now that the camera had whirred twice. "Lift him up, Edward."

She pulled her face out of the hole to watch until he had to venture behind the board, to see only his parents and its unadorned back. His father took Charlie's waist in both hands and raised him like an offering to the hole in front of them. "Gosh, there isn't much of you," he murmured. "We'll have to feed you up."

Charlie saw his mother give them both a resentful look. He kept his head back until the photographer motioned vigorously for him to bring it forward. As the edges of the skull-sized orifice loomed around his face he saw the blurred misshapen body he'd acquired. The camera whirred and whirred again, and he thought the ordeal was over until his mother said "I'll take him, Edward. You deserve a turn."
He couldn't let her see him hesitate to go to her. "You aren't so skinny," she said as she hoisted him with her arms under his armpits, so that he wondered if she'd just wanted an excuse to weigh him. When his head came level with the hole she said "Don't do what you did with your face."

Had she noticed his reluctance? He jerked his head forward and did his best to grin. As he realised that his body had become the scrawny thing in a dress, the camera went off. He struggled to hold his face still while the shutter sounded once more, and then he made himself heavy so that his mother put him down. The photographer beckoned them all to a caravan, where he indicated a printer and moved his hands apart to specify the size of photograph. The machine quivered and rattled and eventually disgorged six large prints. Only the pictures of Charlie's parents were clear. In the rest, presumably because nervousness had made him move without realising, the boy's face was an indistinct bulge with a bony slit for a mouth.

"I think that's quite enough expense," his mother said when the photographer flourished the camera. His father paid and was handed the pictures in an envelope. The way out of the fair led past the painted board, and Charlie almost managed not to look, but couldn't resist glancing over

his shoulder. Although nobody had been behind or even near the board, two swollen blotchy faces were dangling through the holes. They looked as if the process of emerging had come close to pulling them apart, given how much of them drooped over the edge of the holes. In the instant before he succeeded in wrenching his gaze away, Charlie saw that the effort had bared not just their teeth.

He clutched both his parents by the hands, apparently to their surprise, and dragged them towards the road. On the train he sat next to his father, away from the window, and couldn't tell where it was safe to look. The walk to the hotel felt like an omen of worse—the pavement market where the dog with its head in a hole might be lurking, the church with the box for faces to peer from, the restaurant where a head ducked towards the O of the engraved sign to grin out at him. He just managed to suppress his cry, having recognised the waiter who'd befriended him.

As his father unlocked the room Bobbie looked out of the one across the corridor. "Having a good last day?"

"I'd say so," Charlie's father said.

"We've an early start tomorrow. If you two want some time to yourselves after dinner we'll be in our room."

"You can ring us if there's any problem, son," Bobby said.

"You don't mind, do you, Charlie?" said his father.

Admitting his fears out loud seemed likely to make them more real. Perhaps only his silence about them was keeping them away. Besides, he felt responsible for the tension between his parents, especially since they couldn't discuss it in front of him. "I'll be all right," he prayed aloud.

"He'll behave himself, don't worry." He gathered Bobbie meant her husband. To Charlie's parents she said "We'll keep an eye."

He was unwillingly reminded that the faces in the holes hadn't been too good at keeping theirs. Once he was in the room he knew he wouldn't be able to lie still; trying would only make him shiver. "Can I read?" he pleaded.

"I said he ought to have brought some of his books, Edward."

"Can't I read the one about here?"

"I certainly don't see why not," his father said not even mainly to him, and passed him the guidebook.

Charlie was looking for reassurance, but there wasn't much. Spartacus had been a rebel slave who'd set up camp on Vesuvius six years before it erupted. Lot's wife in the Bible had probably been turned into a kind of mummy by a volcano. Charlie could have lived without learning this, never mind that some of the headless remains in the catacomb had been painted on the walls where the bodies used to be. Even if this explained the uneven outlines he'd mistaken for stains, it made the figures far too reminiscent of the ones at the fair, and what had happened to the bodies? The guidebook left that out as if it would do people no good to know. He was gazing at the page rather than read on when his father said "Too much for you, Charlie? Time for a feed."

In the restaurant the task of grinning at the waiter made the boy's face feel as constricted as it had by the board at the fair. He managed to avoid looking whenever anything loomed at the oval in the window. He took all the time he could over the meal the waiter assumed was his favourite, and succeeded in eating some of it as long as he forgot how the mirrors could be hiding an intruder. Eventually his mother said "Time to say goodbye, Charles."

The other couple must have heard them come upstairs, because Bobby called "Ready" as if he were playing hide and seek. Charlie hurried to the bathroom, hoping to outdistance his mother's night-time phrase, but she called through the door "Face and teeth." At the sink he shut his eyes so as not to see his bulbous face in the magnifying mirror. His parents delivered their signs of affection and waited for him to climb into bed. "We won't be any longer than we need to be," his mother said.

As soon as he couldn't hear their footsteps Charlie lurched out of bed to switch on the nearest light and then the rest of them. He tried watching television with the sound turned low, but he couldn't find any programmes in English, which made him feel as if the people on the screen were saying things it was vital for him to understand. They reminded him of his parents and the secrets he suspected were about him. He didn't want to read the guidebook in case it contained more information he wouldn't want to be alone with, and the sight of the photographs from the fair would be worse. He read every word in the folder about the hotel and tried to avoid looking

at the spyhole in the door; every glance at it felt too much like inviting a response. He'd lost count of how often he'd read through the folder by the time he heard a fumbling at the door.

Was it one of his parents? Whenever they drank a lot they seemed to have trouble climbing the stairs at home—but the noise was too shapeless, almost not there and yet more present than he liked. With more reluctance than he'd ever previously experienced Charlie tiptoed to the door and stretched up to peer through the spyhole. When he glimpsed a shape so ill-defined it looked incomplete, vanishing from sight like a worm withdrawing into the earth, he managed to stay at the door long enough to jam the end of the chain into the socket. Once he'd shot the bolt as well he retreated to his bed and dragged the quilt over the whole of himself.

He was in a nervous fitful doze when he heard the fumbling again. He pressed the quilt against his ears so hard that he didn't hear the voices and the rapping on the door until they must have gone on for some minutes. He floundered off the bed and ran to let his parents in. Bobbie and her husband were watching from across the corridor. "Who on earth do you think you are, Charles?" his mother demanded. "This is our room."

He thought of an answer he hoped would placate her. "I didn't want any robbers to get in."

She only shook her head as if she had an insect in her hair and gestured him into the room, not even glancing at the other couple as his father murmured to them. From his bed Charlie heard his parents muttering at length in the bathroom. If they'd resolved their differences while they were without him, he'd spoiled that now. He heard his father declare "I'm not saying what I think has made him like this."

Eventually his parents went to bed. Their silence felt as ominous as the cloud above Vesuvius, and weighed on the dark. Charlie listened for signs that they'd fallen asleep, which might relieve at least some of the foreboding even if it left him by himself, but he didn't know whether they'd drifted off by the time he did. He dreamed they were at the door again, although when he managed to unchain it and open all the bolts and locks, the faces that poked at him out of his parents' heads weren't theirs. He clutched at the pillow to blot out his screams as his jolt awake almost flung him off the bed. The quilt dragged the pillowcase back so that the pillow bulged into his face. The pillow was lumpier than he remembered, and the

irregular padding that covered the lumps was unhelpfully thin. Feathers must be spilling out of the pillow to make it feel as though fragments were flaking off. Charlie was pulling his head back, disliking the dry sour taste, when his thumbs dug into the contents of the linen sack—into something hinged, where an object stirred like a worm. In the faint light from the corridor he saw that his bed-mate had widened its withered eyes and bared its mottled teeth.

His shrieks brought Bobby to pound on the door while Bobbie blinked across the corridor. "Just a nightmare," Charlie's father said, perhaps with desperate optimism. Charlie's mother rubbed the boy's shoulders with more vigour than affection, not looking at his face. There was nothing in his bed or under it, which only made him wonder where the extra guest had gone. His mother shook the pillow when it was clear that she thought it was time he lay down. He almost hoped some unexpected contents would appear for his parents to see.

Even when he held the end of the pillowcase shut with both hands under the quilt he was afraid something would wriggle forth if he slept. Whenever he jerked awake from a few seconds' forgetful doze he clutched the pillowcase harder. At last it was time for breakfast, where he felt as if Bobby and Bobbie had left early because of him. He took as little from the buffet as he thought he could get away with taking while everyone in the room seemed to be aware of him, but he couldn't even eat that much. "I expect you're eager to be home," his father said, not really as if he believed it himself.

The day was so sunlit Charlie might have thought it was celebrating his departure. The light was pretending there was nowhere anything he dreaded could hide. In the taxi to the airport a face spied on him through the mirror. Knowing that it was the driver didn't comfort him, any more than the way the women at the check-in desk and the boarding gate scrutinised him. Very eventually he and his parents were allowed to shuffle onto the plane, where he stared at everybody seated further down the cabin until his mother said "Sit down, Charles. That isn't how you've been taught to behave."

He watched people filing along the aisle to sit behind him and in front of him. The procession was slow enough for a funeral, and made him feel breathlessly trapped. The face that had followed him out of the catacombs could hide anywhere—wherever his parents wouldn't believe it was. He

craned around to peer between the seats at his mother, hoping she'd forgiven him for causing last night's scene, but she met him with a frown. "Turn round, Charles, please. You've shown us up enough."

"Look out of the window," his father urged, and Charlie couldn't let them sense his fear. As he ducked towards the cramped pane a blotch of a face swelled up to meet him—his own. At once he understood everything. His mother kept telling the truth about him, about the face and teeth, and his father didn't want to say what had made him how he was. The past was indeed part of him. The ground moved began to move before his eyes as the plane headed for the runway, and when he sat back the blurred face retreated into hiding—into him. He closed his eyes in the hope his father wouldn't make him look again, but it didn't help him forget. He couldn't leave behind the horror his parents were bringing home.

The Last Revelation Of Gla'aki

First published as the novella *The Last Revelation Of Gla'aki*, June 2013

For Steve and Mandy—
Have you room on a shelf?

The most famous Victorian rarity may be a stamp—the Penny Black—but it is several times more common than the rarest Victorian book. It is possible that no copy of *The Revelations of Gla'aki* still exists anywhere in the world.

The only printed edition was published in nine volumes in 1865, by the Matterhorn Press of Highgate in London. A spurious "Liverpool edition" is unrelated to it, and consists of text fabricated by modern gamesters for use in role-playing games. The Matterhorn set was published for subscribers, supposedly numbering fewer than two hundred, most of whom are thought to have belonged to cults or occult fellowships. It appears to have been the only work published by Matterhorn Press. The founder of the publishers may have been connected with the Ghost Club of Cambridge University, revived in London in 1862.

The nine volumes are described as "edited, organised, and corrected by Percy Smallbeam." The name is almost certainly a pseudonym. The text is reputedly founded on the contents of eleven volumes composed over an indeterminate period by members of an obscure cult founded at Deepfall Water near Brichester in Gloucestershire. While the original text is said to have been understandably haphazard, it is uncertain how much the Matterhorn edition was rewritten rather than simply reorganised. For instance, the occult writer John Strong claimed that Smallbeam dropped the apostrophe from the name Gla'aki to make for ease of reading.

The original content was apparently provided by an unidentified defector from the Gla'aki cult, though some sources maintain that the man responsible had been charged with propagating the material. He appears to have approached the Ghost Club for help with publication but was turned down by religious members of the society. Among its founders was E. W. Benson, later Archbishop of Canterbury and father of several writers of supernatural tales, including E. E and A. C. Benson. In his *Life* of his father, A. C. comments that he "was more interested in psychical phenoemna (sic) than he cared to admit, but would have no truck with the dissemination of occult secrets. A dupe who approached him for aid in the publication of a grimoire or the like was swiftly shown the door." Some have cited this as a reference to the cultist from Brichester.

The Matterhorn edition attracted no significant comment at the time. It would not be noticed by the public until the 1920s, when the campaign against Aleister Crowley ("the wickedest man in the world") by *John Bull* and the *Sunday Express* was at its height. A set of the books had been observed in Crowley's library, and Crowley described it as "an inspiration, the source of many secret truths." *John Bull* proceeded to attack it as "the most evil book ever published" while the *Express* exhorted its readers to burn every copy they could find. While the attacks were very largely if not entirely speculative, showing no acquaintance with the content of the books, the journalists were able to condemn the titles of two volumes, *On the Purposes of Night* (which was reviled as betraying the furtiveness of anyone associated with the books) and in particular *Of the Uses of the Dead.*

Most of the edition may have been destroyed as a result of the campaign. Subscribers who were still alive no doubt felt vulnerable and could have been easily influenced, and few if any descendants of the original owners would have cared to be associated with the books. Since then no copies have come to light, and in an unrelated incident the set held by Brichester University was among the volumes destroyed by a student at the turn of the last century. The most evil book, or a lost contribution

to the literature of occultism? Like the contents of the Library of Alexandria, it may have passed into legend.

Leonard Fairman
Archivist, Brichester University
(guest columnist, *Rarae Aves: Bookhunter Monthly*, May 2012)

As the coast road brought him in sight of Gulshaw, Fairman thought this was how a writer must feel: you never knew where anything you wrote might lead you. The fat grey bricks of the small town looked as though the September sky had settled to the earth and grown solid. Beyond a wide church with tall thin arched windows and a squat tower, a line of stocky hotels overlooked a half-mile curve of beach. Behind them houses crowded uphill towards a wood, both ends of which reached down almost to the shore. At the near end of the promenade a town sign stood on stilts over an arrangement of large shells embedded in the pavement. WELCOME TO GULSHAW—SO MUCH MORE THAN SEA! There certainly was, Fairman thought, for him.

Just now the town seemed to be slumbering. A few families lay on towels on the beach as if they were hoping to bring out the sun. Old folk in wheelchairs drifted along the promenade while parents pushed children in buggies at the pace of the somnolent waves. At the ends of several pedestrian crossings Belisha beacons exchanged somnolent blinks. A Crazy Golf course was in use, though the players weren't much livelier than the statue that appeared to be shading its eyes to watch them as it gazed stonily out to sea. Beyond the hotels Fairman saw amusement arcades jittering with multicoloured lights, souvenir shops wearing bunches of hats, a fish standing as tall as a man to hold a menu in its fins. Close to the far end of the woods a string of cars crawled up the incline of a roller coaster, and a big wheel turned sluggishly for a few seconds before reverting to stillness.

Fairman slowed down as he passed the Church of the First Word. Though he hadn't been speeding, he felt as if he had, and in any case he needed to find his hotel. There was the Staymore, the Toprooms, the Seaside Dreams, the Kumbak... Eventually he located the Wyleave, a hefty structure with three storeys and a stained-glass awning, near the middle of the row. Across

the road graffiti were attempting to bring a Victorian shelter up to date. Fairman drove around the Wyleave to the car park, where half a dozen vehicles took up almost half the space, and trundled his overnight bag into the hotel.

He suspected that the wallpaper along the corridor leading to Reception had been there before he was born. It was embossed with a pattern of fish leaping out of equally stylised waves, an image no doubt meant to evoke the seaside. The pattern flocked into the lobby, where a woman with silvery curls and a long heavy suntanned face sat behind a massive counter of dark wood. For an instant she looked drowsy, and then she stood up from her desk, her pearl necklace emitting a tiny chatter as it shifted on her embroidered white blouse. "Mr Fairman?" she said, and with a widening smile "I'm Mrs Berry. Call me Janine. Welcome to the Wyleave."

She held out a hand that proved to be soft and moist and possibly frail, so that Fairman refrained from taking too much of a grip. "I've given you a view," she said. "Can you put your details down for us?"

He was surprised by how much the registration form required: not just his name and address and the registration number of his car but date of birth, occupation, even next of kin and where to phone them—his father's name and the number of the retirement home. "Such a lot for just one night," Janine Berry said. "Won't you give us more of a chance?"

"I'd be happy to, but my holiday's arranged."

"So what's brought you to us?"

"Books."

"Of course," she said as though it had been less a question than a joke.

"We librarians do have other interests too, you know."

"I expect so," she said, though with a blink that looked a little puzzled, and slapped the nipple of a bell on the counter. "Tom, can you show Mr Fairman up to six."

The porter was a pudgy youth whose tan put Fairman in mind of batter on a fish, quite possibly a staple of Tom's diet. As he carried Fairman's luggage up a staircase enclosed by the omnipresent wallpaper Fairman tried asking "Been away for some sun?"

"Not likely," Tom said without turning to him.

Did Fairman sense resentment? Perhaps the tan was artificial. Tom was silent until he unlocked a room on the first floor. "We've got you here."

As soon as the door opened Fairman could see all the way to the watery horizon. Heavy purple velvet curtains scragged by bands of the same material framed the extensive window. A mauve plush chair sat by a dressing-table surmounted by a wide oval mirror, which was flanked by massive wardrobes of the same dark wood as the reception counter. The double bedspread and the plump headboard kept up the empurpled look. At least the wallpaper was pale blue, and decorated with stylised waves but no fish. While Fairman could live with all this, he was taken aback by the absence of a bathroom. Perhaps the porter saw him frown at the sink in the corner, because he pointed along the corridor at a pair of doors marked WC and BATH. "You'll not be sharing long," he said.

Once Tom had dumped the case at the foot of the bed Fairman pressed a pound coin into his hand. The clammy palm yielded so much that he thought he'd been too forceful, but the porter didn't react. "Call us if you need us," he muttered before retreating into the corridor.

Fairman sat on the bed, which emitted a creak and a scent of lavender. As he took out his mobile he heard the sea, a sound like a great protracted sleepy breath. The breath was held while a phone rang somewhere in Gulshaw, and then a mellifluous male voice said "Home of the Gulshaw Players. How can we help you?"

"Could I speak to Mr Lunt?"

"I'm your man and no other, and I believe I may be speaking to Mr Fairman."

"That's so," Fairman said, wondering if he had more of an accent than he imagined. "I'm in town. When might it be convenient for me to come by?"

"No better time than now. Toddle over whenever you're ready. Anyone will tell you where we are."

Fairman rather hoped the fellow wouldn't prove to be even more effusive in the flesh. He let himself out of the room and dawdled on the stairs to search for a pocket that might accommodate the brass baton attached to the key. "Don't go lugging that about with you," Mrs Berry protested. "We're always here. If you need us, wake us up."

"Could you direct me to the Shaw Theatre?"

"Our only one. Along the front and turn up by the Goodnight. You're on your mission, then." As Fairman granted that, she said "You'll have a look round too, won't you? There's so much more to see."

Was that a joke about the town slogan or a slip of her tongue? Fairman forgot about it before he reached his car. He couldn't recall having passed a Goodnight, and he found it at the far end of the row of hotels, on the corner of a street that separated them from the amusement arcades. The theatre was halfway up the street, which it divided into lanes that passed on either side. As Fairman parked below it, a couple leading their children by the hand plodded uphill towards him. The boy and the equally sleepy-eyed girl watched him feed coins into a machine that performed a routine of clicks and whirs before producing a coquettish ticket. The children even seemed to find him worth watching while he stuck the ticket inside the windscreen, and he wasn't unhappy to leave them behind as he made for the Shaw.

A dormant neon sign identified the squat grey building, but not by its original name. The lingering outlines of letters betrayed that it had once been called the Gulshaw.

On either side of the glass doors a poster advertised THE GULSHAW PLAYERS *IN* FOR YOU TO SEA, which Fairman thought made no sense. As he tried to open the nearest door a young woman crossed the foyer to admit him, miming more speed than she achieved. "Mr Fairman?" she said with a smile that multiplied creases on her plump tanned face. "Mr Lunt is ready for you. You're to go straight through."

Beyond the ticket counter a corridor was decorated with posters older than Fairman. He'd squinted at just a couple—the grudging light and the befogged glass within the frames blurred the outlines of the faces—when the door at the end of the corridor swung inwards. "Mr Fairman," the manager boomed. "Frank Lunt. Welcome to the Shaw."

He was a small man capped with glossy black hair. He wore a lounge suit and a white shirt stretched so tight over his prominent stomach that dark hairs peeked between more than one pair of buttons. His bow tie was as black as his neat moustache, which appeared to be sharing its gloss with his round face. His handshake was somewhat prolonged for Fairman's taste, since it was damp and pliable. "Step in," he urged. "Will you have a drink to celebrate?"

"I'd better not when I'm driving. Being here is enough of a celebration for me."

"Not for you alone, sir." Lunt lowered himself into a venerable leather chair behind his broad squat desk while Fairman sat on a pudgy stool. "It's good to meet someone who knows all about our book," Lunt said.

"I wouldn't say quite all. Only what you read." When the manager looked politely unconvinced Fairman added "Do you mind if I ask how you came by the book?"

"Father gave it me."

That was brusque enough to be a warning, especially since it didn't sound like the man's style. Perhaps Fairman had touched on a family secret, in which case he shouldn't pry. "I don't doubt he was right to trust you," he said.

"I'll say as much for you."

Fairman supposed he should feel vindicated, but he said "Would you like to see some identification?"

"No need." Lunt might even have been offended. "Nobody's doubting who you are."

"Well then, may I see what you've been looking after?"

"My privilege." Lunt stood up as if he were stretching after a rest, but gestured Fairman to stay seated. "It's here for you," he said.

Fairman had expected to be taken somewhere else. The safe to which Lunt turned behind his desk seemed hardly large enough to hold nine books, though Fairman had learned from a nineteenth-century auction catalogue that the volumes were small quartos. Having typed on the keypad, the manager pressed a final key so hard that his thumb appeared to swell and flatten, and then he stood back as the door swung ajar.

The safe was full of papers and, as far as Fairman could make out, nothing else. He had to restrain himself from craning for a better view as Lunt hauled the door wide and reached in. For a few moments that felt longer than a breath Fairman had the odd impression that the man was extending his arm quite a distance. He let out the breath as Lunt produced a small black volume from the safe. "All yours now, Mr Fairman," he said.

Fairman must look as if he were bowing in obeisance as he rose in a crouch to take the book that Lunt passed him with both hands. It was bound in soft black leather, with a colophon embossed on the front cover. At first Fairman took the image for a spider clutching a ball of its eggs, and then he saw that it showed the world held aloft by a claw with many digits, unless those were meant for the limbs of some creature lurking on the far side of the globe. He was cataloguing the volume in his mind—it was indeed a small quarto, measuring about seven inches by a little over three—but despite his attempt to stay professional, his pulse was quickening. The spine was devoid of any title, and as he turned the cover towards him again the colophon appeared to rise out of its own blackness. "Thank you, Mr Lunt," he said. "You can't know how much this means to me."

"Just so it's in the right hands, Mr Fairman. That's all we need."

As Fairman opened the book a musty odour reminiscent of stagnant water rose to greet him. In a breath it dissipated, giving way to the familiar aroma of old paper, though the pages had hardly yellowed. He seemed to taste both smells on the long breath he took as he read the title page.

Of the World as Lair
Tome III of the Revelations of Glaaki
edited, organised, and corrected by Percy Smallbeam

His hands grew a little clammy, and the covers felt as if they had, while he turned to the first page.

> How many secrets hath the world! Some are hid by water, and so Glaaki may be known to few men but in the dreams He sends ...

It occurred to Fairman that scarcely anyone alive might have read these words. He could imagine himself reading to the end without looking up, but he mustn't presume on Lunt's hospitality. He regained some professionalism by noting that while the subscribers weren't named or numbered, this volume belonged to the sixty-first set. He shut the book and saw Lunt closing the safe. "May I have the rest now?" he said.

"A rest," Lunt said and gazed at him.

"All the rest." Fairman added a laugh to take responsibility for the mistake. "The others," he said. "The other books."

"There's what I told you I had, Mr Fairman."

For a moment Fairman was as bewildered as the fellow seemed to be, and then he was able to laugh afresh. "I don't mean different ones. Forgive me, I'm talking about the rest of this set."

"We know that."

"You mean," Fairman said more sharply than he was able to control, "this is all?"

"I hope you don't think you'd have been brought here if it wasn't worthwhile."

"Please don't think I'm ungrateful," Fairman resigned himself to saying. "It's a more than welcome acquisition. I'll see that you're named as the donor."

"No need to single me out, Mr Fairman."

"Whatever you're comfortable with, Mr Lunt." When this brought no response Fairman said "I suppose we'll never know what happened to the rest, then."

"You will."

Fairman had to take a breath before he asked "How shall I?"

"Go to Dr Stoddart. He's got something for you just like me.

"You don't mean the rest."

As Lunt gave him a slow grin Fairman felt as if he'd been made the butt of a ponderous joke. Perhaps it was a local brand of humour if not simply Lunt's, and Fairman couldn't really call it malicious. A number of questions came to mind, but he only said "Would you know his number?"

"It'll be the surgery, but he's shut for the night."

"I'd like to try calling to be sure."

"It's your time." Lunt intoned the number and said "Tell him you're at Frank's."

A receptionist answered, though only on a tape that hissed like waves. Once she'd recited the surgery hours she provided an emergency number. Fairman didn't feel justified in using this, especially when it mightn't connect him with the person he was after. "Dr Stoddart, I'm Leonard Fairman of the Brichester University archive," he said. "Mr Lunt has just

presented me with his valuable addition and says you'll be able to complete it. Let me leave my number and I'd appreciate your giving me a call."

He looked up just too late to interpret Lunt's vanishing expression. He would have felt presumptuous to call him Frank after so brief an acquaintance. "Thank you once again for your generous bequest," he said and stood up.

"We've another present for you," Lunt said and handed him a slip of paper that had been lying on the desk.

It was a ticket for the Gulshaw Players on Thursday night. "That's very kind of you, Mr Lunt," Fairman said, "but I don't imagine I'll be here by then."

"You mustn't run away from us, Leonard. There's so much more to see."

Fairman didn't know which peeved him more—the lurch into familiarity or the mangling of the slogan. He thanked Lunt once more as the manager held the door open for him. In the foyer the young woman did, and gave Fairman's prize a look not far short of reverential. Presumably Lunt had told his staff about the book. Outside the theatre Fairman might have fancied that everyone trudging uphill towards him was aware of it. Of course he was simply mindful of how vulnerable it was out here in the open, and he hurried to unlock the car.

He'd brought nine stout cartons filled with excelsior. As he made space in one for the book and covered it up, quite a few passers-by stared at him. At least one man slowed down to watch, humming some old melody under his breath. Was Fairman betraying how valuable the book was? He made haste to stow the carton in the boot and lock the car before driving back to the hotel.

Janine Berry glanced over the reception counter at the solitary item in his hands. "I hope you don't think Gulshaw's let you down, Mr Fairman."

"Don't worry." He'd told her he was here for more than one book, of course. "I've more to look forward to before I go home," he said.

In his room he opened the safe that was hidden in the left-hand wardrobe. While there was nowhere near enough space for nine cartons, of course he wouldn't need it; he would be driving back to Brichester as soon as he took charge of the rest of the books. He laid the carton in the safe and typed his

birthday—5475—on the keypad. Once he'd made certain the safe was secure he went out for dinner.

He didn't want much. He was eager to spend time with the book. He walked along the promenade, overtaking the occasional stroller. The sun had gone down, though he couldn't judge exactly where, given the grey haze that merged the horizon with the sea. Beyond the hotels he was met by the clamour of the amusement arcades: the electronic jingles of fruit machines, the repetitive ditties of toddlers' rides, the robot voices of video games. Between two of the arcades a giant fish stood on its tail in a pool of mossy light from the green tube in the window of Fishing For You. As Fairman let himself into the fish and chip shop the proprietor, an unexpectedly scrawny woman in a white uniform not unlike a nurse's, said "The word's out, then."

"Sorry, I'm not with you."

She gave that a look he could have thought was skeptical. "The word about the best fish dinners," she said. "You've come a distance."

Presumably Fairman's accent had betrayed him again. "Everybody's favourite," she said as she perched a battered fish on top of a heap of chips on a sheet of greaseproof paper. "See if you aren't back for more."

He didn't bother saying that he wouldn't be in Gulshaw long enough. She wrapped the package in a page of the *Gulshaw Gannet* and wiped her glistening hands on a towel before she gave Fairman his change. He took the hot package across the road to a bench overlooking the beach. Could people really still be swimming in the sea? He had to squint into the gathering dusk to be sure that the restless shapes were large jellyfish. As he unwrapped his dinner a wind fluttered the newspaper; in the dimness it looked as if the fish was struggling to demonstrate some kind of life. The batter was crisp, and though he might have called the fish a little rubbery, it tasted as he remembered cod tasting in his childhood. He ate most of it and nearly all the chips, and stuffed the remains into a concrete bin that appeared not to have been emptied for some time. He was turning back towards the Wyleave when an old phone began to trill.

Although he wouldn't have been surprised to see a vintage phone box on the promenade, the sound was in his pocket. He was hoping Dr Stoddart had returned his call, but the phone display showed him Sandra's name. "Sorry," he said. "I ought to have called you by now."

"You're there, I take it."

He heard affection underlying that, but he didn't know if anybody else would have. "I have been for a little while," he said. "It feels longer, somehow."

"That's a bit imprecise for you, Leonard."

"I'm sure it's because I'm away from you." He imagined her making the face she kept for compliments—almost too deprecatory to betray appreciation—but when he heard no response he said "It reminds me of the kind of holiday I never had as a child."

"I didn't realise you preferred that kind."

"I don't. I'm looking forward to ours. Art galleries and churches are fine as far as I'm concerned."

"So have you acquired your prize?"

"I've made a start."

"You either have it or you haven't, Leonard."

"I thought the chap who emailed me had all nine volumes. You saw yourself what he said." When she gave him a silence to interpret, Fairman told her "It turns out he just had one."

"So you'll be on your way after breakfast, I suppose."

"Not quite so soon. I'm waiting to hear from the fellow who has the rest of the set."

"Why on earth would they split it up?"

"To tell you the truth, I didn't enquire. I don't think the chap I saw was anxious to discuss its history. We can't expect everyone to care about books as much as we do, can we? I'm just happy it still exists."

"Don't let them take advantage of you, Leonard."

"How is anybody going to do that? It's not as though I'm being asked for payment. We ought to appreciate how generous that is."

"Unless they're glad to see the last of it. Perhaps the man who gave you the book didn't want too much of that kind of thing in his house, and that's why he had only one volume."

"It wasn't in his house, it was in his office safe."

"There you are, then."

She could be imprecise when it suited her, Fairman thought as he retorted "It doesn't matter what he thinks of it, does it? It's our job as archivists to preserve books like those."

"That doesn't mean we have to promote what they represent."

"Nobody's promoting anything. I've hardly even started reading it."

"Do you really need to, Leonard?"

"I wouldn't be much of a librarian if I didn't know my stock."

"In that case I'd better leave you to get on with your job."

"I'll give you a call when I'm about to start back if you like." When she let him assume her response he said "Have a good night."

"I expect I shall." As he began to think the call was over she said "I hope you do as well."

He'd learned to find fondness in her voice, since she hadn't much time for nicknames or other expressions of intimacy. The conversation had brought him to the shelter opposite the Wyleave. In the open cabin four benches formed a cross. On the bench that faced the sea the names MELANIE and SETH were united by a heart so inexpertly rendered that it looked malformed. Another seat bore misshapen figures merged by the enthusiasm of the cartoonist, while the bench facing the hotel was covered with initials bunched closely enough to resemble words, especially since they could have been scrawled in a single hand. Fairman found himself attempting to pronounce the gibberish in his head, if only to prove the graffiti weren't words, as he crossed the promenade to the hotel.

Mrs Berry was rising from behind her desk when he stepped into the lobby. He might have thought she'd been waiting up for him. His key gave a hollow rattle as she retrieved it from its pigeonhole. "Ready for bed, Mr Fairman?"

"I've some reading to do first."

"Of course," she said as though he'd reconfirmed her notion of the typical librarian. He was heading for the stairs when she murmured "Dream well."

"I don't really go in for it."

"We all do, Leonard." She touched her forehead, and the patch of brow as well as her fingertip grew momentarily pale. "If you don't," she said, "you'll never know what's in there."

That was the kind of observation Sandra had least patience for, he thought as he climbed the stairs. She hadn't even let him finish telling her what he knew about Deepfall Water, although it wasn't a great deal. He'd found none of it worth mentioning in the essay that had ended up online.

Had a cult ever really made its home beside the unfrequented lake? In the 1960s the notion had been revived after Thomas Cartwright, a minor artist specialising in fantastic and occult themes, moved into one of the lakeside houses and died as the result of some kind of attack. A police investigation had proved inconclusive, and a family who were supposed to have abandoned the house before Cartwright took it over had never been tracked down. If the houses had at some stage been served by a private graveyard, no identifiable trace was found, though some tales suggested that the stone tombs had been pulverised beyond recognition. *We Pass from View,* an occult book by local author Roland Franklyn, even claimed that they'd been destroyed by the police.

Fairman had thought this unsuitable for mentioning in *Book Hunter Monthly,* and Sandra hadn't wanted to hear any more. She would have liked his other anecdotes even less—schoolboy stupidity, he imagined she would call them. They dated from his days at Brichester High, a quarter of a century after the Cartwright business. The lake had become a place you dared your friends to visit after dark, and he'd assumed his fellow pupils had borrowed the idea from films, though the originator of the challenge had lived on the edge of Brichester nearest the lake. Those who ventured there brought back increasingly extreme stories: the lake had begun to throb like an enormous heart, or a procession of figures as stiff as bones had been glimpsed among the trees on the far side of the water, or a globular growth on a stalk in the middle of the lake had turned so as to keep a party of teenagers in sight, and they'd realised it was an eye. How could any of this have been visible at night? At the time Fairman hadn't been surprised that the adventurers had ended up with nightmares, but once the headmaster learned of the visits to the lake he'd forbidden them. Apparently his fierceness was daunting enough, since the lake reverted to the status of a rumour. Since then, so far as Fairman knew, it had been visited mostly by

the kind of people who tried to plumb the depths of Loch Ness, and they'd found just as little evidence of anything unnatural.

He didn't think he would ever tell Sandra that he'd visited Deepfall Water. He'd hoped to bring his essay more to life, but perhaps he also meant to prove that he wasn't quite the bookish introverted fellow his schoolmates had thought him. He could see no reason to go at night, and even on a February afternoon the place had seemed unnecessarily dark, no doubt because of the trees that stooped close to the unpaved track from the main road as well as surrounding the lake. They overshadowed the row of three-storey houses that huddled alongside a cobblestone pavement at the edge of the water. All six roofs had caved in, and some of the floors were so rotten that they'd collapsed under the weight of debris. Great leaves of blackened wallpaper drooped off the walls of a house in the middle of the terrace, and Fairman had wondered if this was the one most recently occupied, nearly half a century ago. None of the windows contained even a fragment of glass, and he suspected his old schoolmates might have been at least partly responsible. The buildings seemed to gape at the expanse of water like masks lined up to demonstrate they had no identity of their own. He'd found the thought oddly disturbing as he went to the edge of the lake.

The murky water stretched perhaps half a mile to the trees where some of his schoolfellows had claimed to see a procession that shouldn't have been walking. He doubted you could see that even with a flashlight, given how close together the trees grew. The depths of the lake were even harder to distinguish. It was fringed by large ferns, but he'd made out just a few inches of the stalks beneath the surface, which was so nearly opaque that he might have imagined the mud was being stirred up by some activity in the lake. In fact the water had been absolutely stagnant, and he'd peered harder into it as though he was compelled to find some reason to have visited Deepfall Water. He'd had the odd impression that around it all the trees were craning to imitate him, enclosing the lake with an iris of darkness that was capable of shrinking the sky overhead. That must have been an effect of his concentration, along with the idea that his scrutiny could waken some presence in the depths; in fact, a sluggish ripple had begun to spread from the middle of the lake, followed by another and another. They'd advanced so slowly that their lethargy had seemed to take hold of him; he could have fancied that the waves of his brain had been reduced to the pace of the hypnotic ripples. The thought had jerked him back to consciousness, not

least of the unnaturally premature dark. As the ripples grew audible he'd turned his back and retreated to his car. He'd heard water splashing the edge of the pavement by the time he'd succeeded in starting the engine. Of course the ripples must have been caused by a wind, since all the trees around the lake had bent towards the water.

Besides these impressions, he'd seemed to take something else home. Like Sandra, for whom it was a reason to be proud of her rationality and control, he didn't dream or at least never remembered having done so, but for some nights after visiting Deepfall Water he'd been troubled by wakeful thoughts. Whenever he drifted close to sleep he'd found himself thinking of the investigators who had tried to search the lake. The notion of sounding it had brought to mind a disconcertingly vivid image of a vast shape burrowing deeper into the bed of the lake, raising a cloud of mud so thick that it blotted out the denizen. No doubt this betrayed how preoccupied he was with the impossibly rare book, but he'd been assailed by the vision several times a night, until he'd begun almost to dread attempting to sleep. If dreaming was like that, it wasn't for him.

By the time he'd completed his essay the vision had left him, which surely proved they were related. He didn't mention it to Sandra, and he supposed he should be grateful that they'd been living apart. Perhaps this might change soon, along with her view of his find here in Gulshaw. Surely no librarian could be unaffected by the sight of one of the rarest books in the world.

He locked the door of his room and hurried to the safe. When he typed his birthday digits he was assailed by a panicky notion that the safe wouldn't open, as though the book might be too precious to release. But the black door edged open, and he reached into the dimness to cradle the box in his hands, laying it on the bed to lift the book out of its papery nest. The leather covers felt unexpectedly chill, as he thought a reptile's hide might feel. He sat on the solitary chair and opened the book as carefully as he might have handled an infant. "How many secrets hath the world..."

Was he exhausted after the long drive from Brichester to the northern coastal town? Perhaps not only tiredness was affecting his concentration. Whatever the incantatory prose might be meant to achieve, he wouldn't call it lucid. To what extent had Percy Smallbeam rewritten the material? Certainly the style read like a single author's. Fairman felt as though he

wasn't so much interpreting the text as waiting for it to take shape in his brain, an experience that seemed unnecessarily similar to dreaming, and he turned the stiff pages in search of some reference his mind could fasten on. What was Gla'aki meant to be, for instance? Perhaps that was made clear in an earlier volume, but around the middle of this one he found a reference to Brichester.

The theory appeared to be that certain areas of the world were foci of alien or occult forces—the book made no distinction. Whether this was a result of magical practices performed there over many centuries, or whether the sites had initially attracted the practices, was left unclear. Massachusetts around the town of Arkham was such a place, and other American locations included the Sesqua Valley and the Castle Rock area of Maine. In Britain the Yorkshire moors near Marske were mentioned, along with Caerleon and Liverpool, where the chronic overcrowding of the slums at the time the book was published "allowed the ancient denizens to flourish unremarked save by those who had carnal recourse to them." As for Brichester, the book suggested that the surrounding Severn Valley area was a node of occult activity and the lair of creatures far older than humanity. Supposedly some of the latter had survived beneath the village of Clotton, a name no longer on the map, "where they ape the voice of the blind waters that pour into the abyss beneath the earth." Other legends spoke of Temphill, where an attempt to render an ancient site Christian had merely given sustenance to the forgotten things that were drawn to a subterranean vault, and Goatswood, in Roman times a place of worship of an inhuman entity the Romans called the Magna Mater. In the forest that gave Goodmanswood its name you might encounter a man composed of insects that would swarm into your brain. And here at last was a reference to Gla'aki, although spelled in Percy Smallbeam's way. "So steeped in arcane power was the valley that it acted as a beacon to which Glaaki guided His stone cocoon across the gulfs of space."

Fairman hadn't realised that the area around his home town had given rise to so many myths. Perhaps they were simply delusions of the cult that had written the original text, or Percy Smallbeam might have elaborated on them; who was to know? Nevertheless Fairman had an odd elusive sense that he'd already been aware of some of them. It felt as he imagined trying to recall a dream would feel, and he was gazing into his own bemused eyes

in the mirror when his phone rang. He might almost have been jerking awake as he saw the number was unidentified. "Hello?"

"Leonard Fairman? I believe you want me."

"I might if I knew who you were."

"It's Dennis Stoddart, Leonard. You left me a message."

"Dr Stoddart." Fairman couldn't quite bring himself to match the familiarity, and hoped this conveyed that he didn't welcome it either. "Thanks for calling back. Mr Lunt said—"

"I'll bet he said a lot and at least half of it worth hearing. That's our Frank and it's how we all like him." The doctor cut a chortle short and said "But if he told you where to find your sacred item, that's the truth."

While Farman might have demurred about the sacred-ness, especially if Sandra had been there, he said "When could I—"

"As soon as you like in the morning. Sleep sound," the doctor said—it could almost have been medical advice— and rang off.

No doubt Mrs Berry would be able to direct Fairman to the surgery. The front cover of the book he'd placed on the dressing-table had begun to twitch upwards as though it and its reflection were beckoning to him. He no longer felt sufficiently awake to concentrate, and returned the book to its carton, which he locked in the safe. Slinging a towel over his arm, he ventured into the corridor.

He might have preferred the hotel to be somewhat less quiet. He'd been inhibited in public toilets ever since his childhood. He flushed the shared toilet before using it and hoped that his uncontrollably intermittent pouring would be drowned out by or at least indistinguishable from the filling of the cistern. He waited for that to finish so that he could pull the chain, the handle of which wore a mauve sheath that matched the shaggy cover of the lid and the curtains at the dinky window. At last he was free to dodge next door to the bathroom.

Apparently the previous user had left the light on beyond the frosted glass that was additionally obscured by condensation. Fairman pushed the door open and recoiled so hastily that he lost his grasp on the handle. "Sorry," he gasped.

"My fault." It was a woman's voice, though until she spoke he wasn't sure it would be. "Forgot to bolt," she said. "Just getting in shape for the night."

"You carry on. Don't hurry for me. I can do without the bathroom."

He still couldn't see her except as a blurred shape under the steam on the mirror. The bathroom had an oddly stagnant smell; perhaps she had lingered too long in the bath. Fairman was retreating when the door shut, though the imprecisely outlined figure in the mirror hadn't seemed to move. No doubt she'd used her foot to close the door, though it must have been quite a stretch. Presumably the door was still unbolted, a thought that hastened him back to his room. He washed his face and brushed his teeth at the sink, above which a small mirror showed him his back above the dressing-table. He could do with keeping himself in better shape; perhaps he ought to use a gym, as Sandra did.

Outside the window the streetlamps blanched the promenade and blackened the graffiti in the shelter. The pale glare illuminated just a narrow strip of the beach, so that he couldn't be sure whether there were jellyfish in the receding sea. He unlatched the sash and pushed it up, which didn't help him to distinguish the indistinct restless shapes from the movements of the waves. As he leaned over the sill a wind brought him the smell of the sea—at least, the smell of Gulshaw beach. It hadn't previously occurred to him that the place didn't smell as the seaside should; he was reminded of the stagnant smell he'd noticed in the bathroom. Although he believed it was healthier to sleep with the bedroom window open, he dragged the sash all the way down.

The stagnant odour seemed to linger in the dark. It held him back from sleep, and so did thoughts of the book. The reference to a stone cocoon kept catching at his mind, and he found himself visualising an enormous stone oval suspended in outer space, an object that resembled a monstrous egg or an island torn loose from its world to wander among the stars. As it plummeted towards a familiar planet he had a sense that it was being held together from within and reinforced against the friction that would have consumed a lesser meteor. What kind of entity could exert so much control over matter? The vision troubled him like the one he'd experienced after visiting Deepfall Water, and made him feel as he had while reading the book—that he was reaching for memories he hadn't known were his. He

was glad the image of the cocoon went no further, and eventually it let him sleep.

Daylight wakened him, and so did an idea. While it might be too much to hope that each volume was indexed, he ought to check. He opened the safe and the carton, and leafed to the end of the book. "Good God," he said with very little sense of what he was expressing.

There was no index. The text was followed by the flyleaves, which were covered with handwriting. However nearly illiterate the sprawling script looked, it might be senile or written under some influence. Fairman didn't think it could be Lunt's, though it must be relatively recent, having been written with a ballpoint. *Do not trust all which is herein,* it said. *Some visions were imperfectly set down, and some came damaged at the source. Some were spoiled by the minds employed to convey them, while others were misinterpreted by the editor. Not the bible nor the Quran is so worthy of restoration.*

By the time Fairman had read this he no longer thought the book had been defaced. If anything the comments seemed to make the copy rarer still, but how could anyone establish what the original text had been? The set would be available for experts to decipher if they could, and Fairman was content to be its guardian. He closed the book more carefully than ever and returned it to its nest in the safe before he emerged from the room.

A smell of breakfast greeted him in the corridor, and he heard voices murmuring downstairs. He flushed the toilet and then used it while the fattened lid nestled against his lower back. The stagnant smell had departed from the bathroom, and the shower he took didn't revive it, though condensation turned the mirror into a block of fog. Once he was dressed he reassured himself that the safe was locked and went down to the breakfast room.

Two teenage girls in grey track suits were on their way out while their parents told another family "See you next year." The seated party were the only breakfasters just now. They were a stocky lot, consisting of a dumpy son and daughter who resembled their parents so much that Fairman was reminded of those wooden dolls that unscrewed to produce miniatures of themselves. As he sat by the window, beyond which a whitish haze was curtaining the sea off from the beach, the mother twisted her top half around on the chair to face him. "First time?"

"Forgive me, I'm not sure what you mean."

Her husband squirmed around to stare at him. "We've not seen you before," he said in a Lancashire accent at least the equal of his wife's, "she's saying."

"Just here for the night," Fairman said.

The man gave a grunt that might have been doubling as some kind of laugh. "There's not many do that in Gulshaw."

Fairman was wondering if this deserved an answer when Mrs Berry bustled into the room, though not at much speed. "Good morning," she cried. "Any dreams?"

As the boy and girl opened their mouths in unison Fairman said "Nothing I'd call one."

"What would you call it, then?"

The question seemed all the more unwelcome for coming from the stocky man. "Just night thoughts," Fairman resented having to explain.

Apparently it was the mother's turn to speak. "It can bring them, right enough."

"We'll leave them there for now, shall we?" Janine Berry said. "Are you having our big breakfast, Leonard?"

"That'd set anyone up for the day," the stocky man declared.

"Thank you, Mrs Berry," Fairman said. "I'll indulge myself this once."

The parents turned their back to him as Mrs Berry left the room, but the children continued to gaze at him as if he were some kind of specimen until they were told to eat up. As soon as they'd both wiped their glistening mouths the family took leave of Fairman. "Make the most of your stay," the man advised him, and his wife added "So much more to see."

Was everybody in on that joke, supposing it could be called one, or was nobody capable of reading the slogan? The family plodded away before Fairman could find a response. He watched people tramp down to the beach, vanishing into the haze that the sunlight had turned more opaque, until Mrs Berry brought his plateful. "There's a Gulshaw breakfast for you," she said.

It certainly seemed regional. The yolks of the pair of fried eggs were unusually large and pale, and oddly irregular. Both sausages were almost

the colour of the slices of white pudding, and all these were tinged patchily purple, like the mushrooms and the bacon. Fairman mightn't have been ready to sample his breakfast if Mrs Berry hadn't lingered to watch. In fact it tasted as it should, so that he was able to reward her with an enthusiastic smile, and then he thought to say "I need to see your Dr Stoddart."

"Already?" Mrs Berry said and rubbed her mouth as if to erase the word—rubbed so hard that the skin around her lips looked bruised. "Oh, you mean —"

"He has something for me."

"Of course. I'm going to say it's a book."

"I hadn't realised I was so predictable."

"Nobody's laughing at you, Mr Fairman. You mustn't think you're anything but welcome."

She seemed close to offended. As she turned away he said "I was going to ask if you have a directory I could find him in.

"I can tell you where he is, of course. Eat up," she said not unlike a mother, "and I'll show you where you have to go.

Fairman was surprised to find how hungry the mouthfuls he'd taken had made him for more. People stared towards him as they lagged along the promenade, possibly looking for vacancy signs. He'd just laid down his knife and fork when Mrs Berry returned. "Here's what you need," she said.

It was a map of Gulshaw with the slogan from the town sign along the upper margin. On the back were advertisements for local attractions: the Shaw, the Bywood Zoo, the Promenade Ballroom, the Woody Ramble forest trail, the Ridem amusement park. "That's his surgery," Mrs Berry said, flattening a fingertip close to the sketch of the woods. "Past all the fun and up Bywood Road."

"I should think he might be keeping what he has for me at home."

"That's where he lives as well, Leonard," Mrs Berry said with an indulgent smile. "He's always there. We have to go to him. Dennis will do all he can for you, never fret."

"I'd better see him before I overstay my welcome with you.

"Don't you bother giving that a thought," Mrs Berry said.

Bywood Road was at the opposite end of the promenade from the church. As he drove past the Ridem rides Fairman saw how the haze that fringed the sea was helping the woods to enclose the town. At the ballroom he turned uphill past a number of large houses with their backs to the trees. The doctor's house displayed a nameplate on a gatepost, where the name was followed by so many unpronounceable clumps of letters that Fairman was reminded of the graffiti in the shelter. He parked on the street and let himself in through the grey stone porch.

In the wide hall beyond the massive door that gleamed white as marble, a receptionist sat behind a desk outside a closed room opposite an open one. She wore a voluminous flowered dress that covered nearly all of her without disguising how disproportionately small her head and hands were. Cropped spiky silver hair framed her face, which might have been more delicate until it had grown padded. "Mr Fairman," she said in a familiar voice rather younger than she looked—of course, he'd heard it on the answering machine. "You're here already, then."

He was bemused by being recognised, and spoke more sharply than he meant to. "The doctor said I should come as soon as I liked."

"He'd have meant before surgery. He's got his patients now."

Fairman felt as if he had to struggle past the professionally bland expression that hadn't changed since he'd come in. "What am I supposed to do? I haven't much time left."

"I'm sure you have more than some of us, Mr Fairman." Before he could clear up her mistake, if indeed she had made one, the receptionist said "You can wait with the others by all means."

"Couldn't you ask the doctor if that's what he wants?"

She was giving this her fixed expression when a man lurched out of the doctor's office behind her. His patchily empurpled face and the disconcerting flexibility of his gait suggested that his trouble might have to do with drink. As the man fumbled to open the front door Fairman said to the receptionist "Can't you ask him now?"

While her expression didn't waver, she pressed the key on a vintage intercom, an action that pulled back her cuff and sent a quiver up her pale inflated arm. Fairman heard a rasping buzz, and then a muffled voice said

on both sides of the door "I'm afraid Mr Fairman will have to follow my patients, Doris."

"Doctor says—"

"I understood what he said," Fairman informed her, the nearest he could come to expressing his dissatisfaction, and tramped across the hall into the waiting-room.

All the people seated on straight chairs against the walls stared at him as a harsh metallic rattle appeared to announce him. The buzzer above the lintel was summoning the next patient, a young woman whose baby squirmed so vigorously in her arms that its one-piece suit had almost abandoned its shape. The infant favoured Fairman with a sleepy blink that he would have been foolish to mistake for recognition, and he was working on a responsive smile when the mother carried her exuberant burden out of the room.

A solitary table strewn with copies of the *Gulshaw Gannet* squatted in the middle of the dun carpet. Fairman took one to a chair, but the content was so trivial—graffiti on the seafront shelters made the front page under the headline RESIDENTS CONDEMN VANDALISM—that the paper might have been designed to reassure visitors that nothing very untoward ever happened in Gulshaw. He'd read all sixteen pages and forgotten virtually every one by the time the buzzer called the next invalid, a pasty-faced man who flattened his hand against the wall at each step he took. That left nine patients, and Fairman found some of them difficult to ignore—a woman with grey swellings reminiscent of fungi on her legs, a man whose chin seemed to merge with his spongy throat whenever he was overcome by an apparently uncontrollable nod, a woman whose every protracted breath sounded like a renewed task. If everyone was seated in order she would be the last to see the doctor, and Fairman didn't think he could endure her sounds for however long that would entail—perhaps an hour. He dropped the newspaper on the table and made for the hall. "I'm nearly at your zoo, aren't I?" he said. "I think I'll kill my time there if you don't mind."

There was no reason why the receptionist should, and her unassailable expression might have been telling him so. "Would you mind letting me know when the doctor's free?" he said. "I'll give you my number."

"We have it, Mr Fairman."

As he stepped out of the porch he saw the zoo at the top of the hill. He thought he wouldn't care to live so close to it, but perhaps the neighbours took it as part of living in a holiday resort. Or perhaps they were determined to ignore it, since all the windows he passed were curtained, as if there had been a death or the houses were occupied by night workers catching up on their sleep.

The signboard for the zoo had broken out in lumps of moss, one of which transformed the name into Byword. Beyond a small gate in the wire fence a man sat in a wooden booth that was piebald with lichen. His long pointed chin rested on his gloved hands, and he wore a floppy hat so nearly shapeless that he might almost not have known how to fit it to his cranium. As he saw Fairman he lifted his head, which seemed to elongate while his eyes took their time over widening, and the hat sagged backwards to reveal the slogan GULSHAW BY GUM. Fairman was reaching in his pocket for the fee posted on the booth when the man waved at him so vigorously that his fingers appeared to writhe—just the glove, of course. "Sorry?" Fairman said.

"Keep it." The fellow poked a greyish tongue between his lips as if rediscovering his mouth and muttered "It's on the town."

Perhaps this was a concession they made at the end of the season. Before long Fairman thought he wouldn't have been too happy if he'd paid. The exhibits weren't identified by signs, so that he couldn't tell what he was supposed to look for in the cages and concrete pits beside the winding mossy paths. Did the pits contain bears or big cats? None of those were visible, and the trees along the paths blocked off so much of the hazy sunlight that he could see nothing except darkness inside the bunkers in the pits. If the cages were for apes or monkeys, why weren't the enclosures roofed? Fairman could imagine their occupants leaping from the trees into the forest to make their escape. Even the windowless aquarium and reptile house didn't offer much; once his eyes adjusted to the dimness he had to conclude that most of the glass cases were presently disused, unless their tenants were lurking behind the rocks inside. Several panes bore large greyish fingerprints or more probably some other kind of marks, since they lacked whorls and appeared to be on the other side of the glass. He couldn't help recoiling when a boneless hand stretched out its pallid fingers to him from behind a submerged rock, but of course it was a squid or octopus, even

if he couldn't see any suckers on the tentacles that darted back as though imitating his retreat. He shivered with the stony chill of the building and made for the open air.

It was less open than before. The haze had crept closer, dousing the grey sun. No wonder the animals had taken refuge wherever they could. He'd pretty well abandoned looking for them, and had begun to think of returning to the surgery, when he glimpsed movement in a cage. An ape was hiding behind a tree, gripping it with a large grey hand disconcertingly reminiscent of the object that had seemed to gesture at him from the tank in the aquarium. As he peered at it the fingers wormed away around the trunk. He watched for it to reappear until he grew cold with the dank stagnant air, and then he headed for the exit. He'd taken just a few steps when he seemed to hear a murmur behind him. "So much more to see," it said.

Nobody else was on the path. Were those fingertips or fungi on the glistening tree trunk in the cage? He needn't care, and he was making rather faster for the gate when a voice called out somewhere ahead. "Mr Fairman."

"Yes?"

"Leonard Fairman."

"Yes," Fairman yelled and put on speed until he saw the pay booth. The man in the misshapen hat was craning his top half over the counter and around the side of the booth at an angle that looked decidedly painful. "There you are," the man said. "Doctor's ready for you now."

Fairman could only assume the receptionist thought it was cheaper to phone the zoo than call him on his mobile. "Thank you," he said as the man's upper body shrank with a sinuous motion into the booth. "I'm afraid I didn't see very much."

"They're shy, some of them. You mightn't want to be seen in that kind of a shape." When Fairman frowned at this the man said "They're getting on or they're not well."

Fairman hadn't time to question this. He hurried past the dormant houses and let himself into the doctor's. When he thanked the receptionist for the call her expression didn't change, and he could have thought it was hiding bemusement if not convicting him of sarcasm, though he didn't see why it should do either. She bent her dwarfed head towards the intercom. "Doctor __"

"That's all right, Doris. Send in our visitor."

The moistness of the brass doorknob reminded Fairman of the atmosphere at the zoo. Beyond the door, chairs and a sketchy bed with a screen beside it faced a desk across a large white room. The man behind the desk rose from gazing at a computer monitor to extend a hand to Fairman. His bald head was rendered more egg-like by jowls, and his shoulders were so broad that Fairman had a grotesque sense that they'd slumped outwards. Presumably he'd acquired his tan abroad or in a studio. "Glad to meet you in the flesh, Leonard," he said. "What did you make of our zoo?"

His handshake was resolutely firm but clammier than Fairman cared for. "I couldn't see much," Fairman said and at once felt unreasonable; the doctor had nothing to do with the menagerie, after all. "Don't tell me," he said, "there's so much more to see."

The doctor raised his almost hairless brows, and his heavy eyelids crept back from his pale protruding eyes. "So much more than sea."

"I know that's how it's meant to go."

"We'll let it lie for now." Dr Stoddart wrinkled his wide nose, an action that twitched his thick lips. "What would you like me to prescribe?"

No doubt this was a sort of joke. "Just the books," Fairman said. "They're why I'm here."

"Nobody's forgetting that, Leonard. You don't know how much you're appreciated."

Embarrassment made Fairman change the subject. "Can you tell me anything about them?"

"They've been waiting for someone just like you."

Fairman had meant where the books had come from, but it needn't matter. "May I take possession, then?"

"All yours," the doctor said, reaching for the left-hand drawer. The desk quivered as the drawer emerged with a prolonged cavernous creak, and he lifted out a book that was the twin of the one Fairman had. The black cover was embossed with the image of a hand contorted in an occult gesture, the second and fourth fingers curving inwards while the others arched bonelessly backwards and the thumb jutted up from the palm. Fairman opened the book to find it was the first volume, *On Conjuration.* "The

tongues of men reduce the world to words..." He shut the book before he could be tempted to linger over reading and looked up at the doctor, who was resting his hand on the open drawer. "Forgive my haste," Fairman said, "but may I trouble you for the others?"

The doctor shut the drawer and gave him an oddly distant look. "That's my contribution, Leonard."

Fairman tried not to feel let down; he had two considerable rarities for the archive, after all. "You mean there are just the two volumes."

"Just that one. That's all I ever had."

Fairman didn't bother to clear up the misunderstanding. He held the book in both hands as he rose to his feet. "Was it in your family?"

As Dr Stoddart made to open the door he said "Father gave it me."

He had his back to Fairman, who could almost have imagined that the doctor had borrowed someone else's words. Perhaps they betrayed how local he was, much as Fairman's accent seemed to place him. "Do you know your way around our town yet?" Dr Stoddart said.

"I don't mean to be rude, but why should I need to do that?"

"Because now you'll want to see Don Rothermere."

Fairman waited until the doctor turned to face him, having opened the door. "To what end?"

"For the same reason you've seen me."

"Another volume of the book?" Less enthusiastically and with some unease Fairman said "Just one?"

"That's how it's going to be, Leonard."

"But why has it to be? Why do I need to go through all this?"

His outburst was unprofessional, and he regretted it as Dr Stoddart and the receptionist gazed distantly at him. "It isn't for you, Leonard," the receptionist said.

Fairman might have expected her to be rebuked for being too familiar. He supposed she must think she was defending her employer. "So who's this Mr Rothermere?" he said. "Where shall I find him?"

"It's Suit Your Book on Station Road," the doctor said. "If you ask anyone —"

"I've got a map. I assume he's a bookseller."

"Our only one," Dr Stoddart said, and the receptionist added "Your kind of person, Leonard."

Fairman hoped so. Most booksellers would surely have completed the set of books by now and sold it for a considerable profit. Once the first volume was safely boxed in the car boot he consulted the map and drove uphill. Below the menagerie he turned right along Tree View, a name that made him feel as if he were following some kind of diagram. Beyond a sloping junction the twin terraces of small houses, which looked as if they'd been squeezed fat and grey, met Station Road. Cast-iron awnings set with coloured glass overhung the shops, and halfway along the road a railway station was composed of the omnipresent stone. Families were dragging luggage across the forecourt with a ponderous thunder of wheels while they did their best to hasten for a train. Suit Your Book was almost opposite the station, next to a doorway bristling with nets on canes and hung with plastic buckets. Fairman parked in a side street, where Vacancy signs dwindled downhill to the hazy promenade, and tramped up to the bookshop.

The window display wasn't encouraging. All the books— hardcovers of various sizes and a scattering of paperbacks—had plainly spent years in the sun, leaving them almost as pale as the haze above the sea. As Fairman stepped into the shop a bell sprang its clapper above his head, and a man hastened over to him. "Leonard Fairman?" he said, if it was even a question. "Don Rothermere. Kindred spirits, eh?"

Presumably the doctor had phoned ahead. The bookseller was a lanky man who moved as loosely as his grey suit hung on him. His face looked as if the dewlaps at his throat had drawn it narrower, and it was topped by an outburst of hair that might almost have leached colour from his skin so as to stay reddish. Prodigious glasses magnified his blinking eyes, and his pale lips kept twitching at a smile. "I'd hope we are," Fairman said.

Rothermere thrust out a long hand to hold Fairman's in a clammy grasp while he jerked his head to indicate the contents of the shelves—new or at least unread volumes along the side walls and in the middle of the floor, secondhand books at the back. "We don't read many books in Gulshaw," he said.

"Not the best place for you, then."

"I've got all I want to read." Apparently grasping that Fairman hadn't meant this, the bookseller said "And it isn't much of a trot to the post office."

Fairman wondered how much postal business Rothermere could do, given the state of his stock. "Have you been reading much here?" the bookseller said.

"Just the new acquisition."

"Of course." Rothermere's eyes widened, filling the lenses. "How's it affecting you?" he said.

"I wouldn't say it is."

"We mustn't deny it, Leonard."

Fairman was uneasily aware of being in the presence of some kind of believer. It hardly seemed possible for the eyes behind the lenses to have opened further, but he had the unpleasant fancy that they weren't far from touching the glass. "Have you read yours?" he felt compelled to ask.

"How couldn't I? It changes everything."

Fairman was loath to enquire into this. "Could I have it, then?"

"It's yours," the bookseller said and made for the back of the shop.

His office was between the shelves of second-hand books. Most of these were jacketless, a state Fairman used to describe as in their shirtsleeves until Sandra made her unamusement plain. The office was unlit, but he was able to distinguish a large heavy desk surrounded by piles of books. Without switching on the light Rothermere retrieved a volume from the desk. "Yours," he said again.

Fairman stayed in an aisle of shelves to bring the man out of the gloom. With the book held in both hands Rothermere looked rather too much like the celebrant of a ritual. As he came forward Fairman could easily have imagined that some of the darkness had clung to the book. The colophon represented a hand that bore a lantern from which black rays were streaming. "Which one is this?" Fairman said.

"On the Purposes of Night" Rothermere said with reverence.

Fairman had asked so as not to linger over examining the book, but he couldn't help adding "Did you never want to find out what you could get for it?"

"I got everything it needs, Leonard."

"I meant," Fairman said more sharply, "had you no interest in discovering what it could fetch?"

"We did." Before Fairman could think of any answer he might risk, the bookseller said "If you're asking whether I'd have sold it to the highest bidder, that wouldn't have entered my mind."

"Would you care to say why?"

"The book says it for us."

When Rothermere stretched out his hands as though yearning to reclaim the book, Fairman said "Never mind, I'll look into it later."

"I can tell you what it says." The bookseller's gaze seemed to turn inwards if not somewhere else entirely. "Let none read who will not understand," he said like a priest intoning a sermon. "Let the great secrets be kept close lest they grow blurred by the unshaped minds of the uninitiated."

"That's what Percy Smallbeam said, do you think?"

"One solitary mind speaks through the book." It wasn't clear if the bookseller was still quoting, nor when he said "The world will know the book once it has done its work."

"What work would that be?" Fairman demanded.

"You'll come to know it, Leonard. Will you promise one thing?"

"That will have to depend."

"Never put any of it online, will you? You heard what it said."

"I've no intention of scanning it," Fairman told him and was so anxious to be gone that he almost forgot to ask "Can you tell me whom I need to see next?"

"Heidi Dunscombe. She represents our town."

"Represents in what way?"

"I thought you'd know more about us by now. She's our tourist officer."

"And where can I find her? No, don't tell me." Fairman saw Rothermere take this for an admission of knowledge, and felt bound to add "I have to get back."

Rothermere's earnestness seemed to befog his glasses. "You aren't leaving us, Leonard."

"Back to the hotel. They can direct me. Thank you for keeping this safe." Having reached the door, Fairman couldn't resist adding "You haven't told me there's so much more to see."

"There's no need." The lenses looked not merely blurred now but smeared. "You're beginning to," the bookseller said.

Fairman let that go. As he stepped out of the bookshop, triggering the bell again, he glanced back. The bookseller had withdrawn into his office and was fitting the spectacles to his face, no doubt having wiped the lenses. Fairman barely glimpsed the naked eyes, but they appeared to glimmer at him out of too much of the face, so that he could have imagined that the lenses were plain glass. He had an unwelcome impression of a creature watching him from the depths of its lair. Then Rothermere emerged from the gloom, blinking through his glasses at the light, and Fairman reassured himself that the illusion had been brought on by too little sleep. It wasn't why he hastened to his car.

He was tramping up the passage to the lobby of the Wyleave when Mrs Berry called "Don't put yourself out, Mr Fairman. No rush at all."

She was waiting at the counter. "We've given you another day," she said. "We knew you couldn't leave us so soon."

"I don't mean to be any longer than that."

"We'll have to see, won't we?" Mrs Berry said and gave the cartons he was cradling a slow nod. "More for our collection?"

This was a different kind of familiarity, one that he found patronising too, but he only said "Can you tell me where to find your tourist office?"

"Up in the square," Mrs Berry said and spread out a map on the counter. He supposed she had recently painted her nails, since the one she was using to point glistened like the surface of a lake. "Heidi will see to you," she said. "She'll give you what you need."

Fairman wished that were the case rather than just a single book. He hurried upstairs in time to see a chambermaid leaving his room. She wheeled a trolley next door as he let himself into the room, to find she'd been so eager to finish her work that she'd left the wardrobe open an inch—

the wardrobe that contained the safe. The sight made him feel worse than careless, unworthy of the trust that had been placed in him, however irrational his reaction was. He planted the cartons on the bed and threw the wardrobe door wide.

The safe was locked, but as he typed the combination he saw marks on the black metal beside the keypad—the prints of a pair of moist hands. He could only think the chambermaid had left them, although they were larger than he'd seen her hands to be, as if they'd been pressed so fervently against the door that they'd spread to nearly twice their size. Presumably their clamminess had magnified the prints, which faded and vanished as he peered at them. He thought of confronting the girl or informing Mrs Berry, but what could he possibly say? Surely all that mattered was for the book to be there in the safe.

It was, and he unpacked it to make sure. The three cartons darkened the inside of the safe so much that he could almost have imagined there was space for nine of them. He wouldn't need it—he would be going home tomorrow. When he shut the safe he thought he heard a stealthy movement, as if the books were settling into their nests. He typed the code and was on his way out of the room until he remembered there was a call he ought to make. However important his search was, he shouldn't let it occupy quite so much of his mind.

The distant phone took some time to respond, which was how the head librarian treated any question. "Nathan Brighouse," he said at last.

"Nathan, it's Leonard Fairman. I thought I should report in.

"So glad you have, Leonard. All secured?"

"Up to a point, certainly."

"That'll be a negative, will it? Where's the hindrance?"

"I've acquired several volumes but the set has turned out to be somewhat scattered."

"Yes, Sandra Byers was telling me as much. Odd business, I must say. You haven't made the opportunity to assemble the set, then."

"I'm sure I will have by tomorrow."

"I'd be glad if that were the case. I'm sure the archives can survive without you for another day, but much longer and it may have to be put down as

annual leave. You know how strict I'm forced to be in these straitened times."

"I assure you I'm doing all I can," Fairman told him, by no means as resentfully as he felt entitled to, and hurried downstairs to leave the key at Reception, where Mrs Berry was waiting. "Keep up the good work," she called after him.

As he drove onto the promenade Fairman saw that the haze had receded across the sea, giving the impression that the horizon had been drawn closer to the town. Before he came abreast of the theatre he turned uphill to the town hall, a massive grey edifice as plump as the statues of dignitaries that stood guard on either side. Perhaps the town didn't have much of a budget for the upkeep of monuments, since the stone faces were fattened by masks of lichen. He parked on the forecourt in front of an annexe, where the automatic doors of the tourist office deferred to him with a faint glassy squeal.

The walls were decorated with vintage posters, all of which showed the seafront very much as it still was. IMMERSE YOURSELF IN GULSHAW and BREATHE IN GULSHAW were two of the slogans that caught Fairman's eye, but the one that provoked a wry laugh said SO MUCH MORE TO SEE. So the townsfolk hadn't been mistaken after all, and perhaps he should take more notice of them. He was making for the counter at the far side of the room when a woman called "With you right now, Mr Fairman."

She was beyond a door at the end of the counter, applying makeup or retouching it so vigorously that she might have been trying to squeeze her cheeks smaller. They looked as carelessly expansive as the rest of her, most of which was contained by a loose blouse and a capacious overall. Unruly auburn curls framed nearly all of her round face, which stayed sleepily jovial as she waddled to the counter, sticking out a hand. "Heidi Dunscombe," she said, "as if you didn't know."

Her grasp felt slippery, no doubt with makeup. "What have you made of our town so far, Leonard?" she said.

"I should think that's your job."

It had taken her so little time to turn familiar that his reply was sharper than he liked, but she only said "What's that?"

"Making the most of your town."

"We'd love to have your thoughts."

Did she think he was being too unfriendly? Though her face stayed so genial that she might almost have been lost in a dream, Fairman said "Forgive me. I've been having rather an odd day."

"There's the night to come as well."

He might have expected such a comment from the bookseller, not from her. "May I have the book you're holding for me?" Of course.

Fairman thought for a moment that she was repeating herself, except that someone else he'd met had used the phrase. She waddled to a wall safe behind a desk in the office and then swung around languidly to ask "What do you think was odd?"

For a disconcerting moment Fairman had a sense of being watched from an unexpected distance, not just across her room. "Someone I met," he said.

"You'll get used to us, Leonard," Heidi Dunscombe said and turned ponderously away to spin the wheel on the safe. "What was odd about him?"

"He seemed to believe in the book he had. I don't imagine you do."

The safe lumbered open, gaping with darkness, a lump of which Heidi Dunscombe brought forth. She hugged it to her breast while she shut the metal door and twirled the wheel. As she advanced to the counter she said "It's belief that makes us what we are, Leonard."

Despite her equable expression, he assumed this was a rebuke. When she handed him the book, her breasts seemed to swell as if she were taking an enormous breath. The cover of the volume was imprinted with unfamiliar constellations, presumably somehow illustrating the title, *Of the Secrets behind the Stars*. "Thank you," Fairman said and hesitated. "May I ask how you came by it?"

"The same as everybody. From our father."

The wording unsettled Fairman, and so did the remoteness of her gaze. "Can you tell me whom I should see now?" he said.

"Of course." Her pause might almost have implied that he should know as well. "Rhoda Bickerstaff," she said. "She looks after our old folk."

"Not all of them, surely."

"Just the worst ones, Leonard." Her face suggested she had taken his bemused comment as a joke. "We like to think our town's a healthy place," she said.

She added a heavy nod, not just for emphasis. When Fairman looked where she was indicating he saw a brace of joggers down on the promenade. He assumed she had them in mind rather than the people plodding uphill, though even the joggers didn't seem especially energetic. "You'll find Rhoda at the Leafy Shade," Heidi Dunscombe said.

"Would you happen to have the number? I ought to let her know I'm coming."

"If you think so," Heidi Dunscombe said and told him the number.

As he keyed it he was conscious of her watching him across the dormant book on the counter. Her gaze seemed as remote as the bell that began to ring in his ear—to ring at considerable length. He was preparing to leave a message on a machine when at last a woman's voice said "Leafy Shade."

She sounded at the very least harassed. "Could I speak to Rhoda Bickerstaff?" Fairman said.

"Who is it?"

"Don't you know?" Fairman almost retorted, having come close to thinking everybody knew about him in advance. "I'm from the Brichester University archive," he said. "Is that Ms Bickerstaff?"

"What do you want, Mr Fairman?"

So she did know who he was, in which case she didn't need to ask this question either. "I believe you have a book for me," Fairman said.

"I can't talk about it right now."

Her voice was growing more agitated, while her breath seemed in danger of falling short of her words. "No need to," Fairman said. "Just tell me when I can collect it. I'd appreciate the soonest you can manage."

"I told you, not now."

Although he didn't think she had, arguing would waste time. "Forgive me if I've caught you in the middle of a crisis, but when is it likely to be convenient?"

"I don't know. Not today."

"It really won't take long at all." When this failed to earn a response Fairman said "Couldn't you leave it with someone for me to pick up and then I wouldn't need to trouble you?"

"Who?" This came out not unlike a gasp, but she found enough breath to add "I can't. You'll have to wait for me."

He supposed whatever problems were preoccupying her could involve her staff as well. "Then could you just tell me whom else I can see while I'm waiting?"

"I can't. You'll have to wait. You've got enough to occupy your mind."

"You mean you—" Fairman said, only to find he was talking to waves of static.

Heidi Dunscombe hadn't even glanced away from him. "Isn't she ready?"

"Apparently not," Fairman said and couldn't restrain his frustration. "She won't give me a time and she won't say who else there is to see. Can you?"

"She's next, Leonard."

"Yes, but I can get the other volumes in the meantime. Who has them, do you know?"

"I can't tell you."

He was angered not just by her words but by the jovial expression that seemed independent of her distant gaze. "Can't or won't?" he blurted.

"You'll understand us better soon, Leonard."

He was almost furious enough to give this the answer it deserved. The glass doors had squealed shut by the time he muttered "I hope I never need to." Perhaps his muted outburst was the reason people stared at him as he marched to his car. While he drove along the promenade he looked out for signs of the healthiness Heidi Dunscombe had wanted him to notice, but he couldn't see much. A man sitting rather less than upright in a wheelchair was waving one floppy hand beside a wheel as though to urge it to turn faster. Several people were walking dogs whose faces seemed almost to scrape the pavement, and at least one owner's could compete for pendulousness. There were joggers, but none of them appeared to be capable of overtaking the walkers or the chair. Their energy seemed to flag even further as they came abreast of his hotel.

The thump of the club attached to his key greeted him as he made for the reception counter. "Another one for the vault?" Janine Berry said, pressing her brow pallid with a fingertip.

"You could put it that way if you like," Fairman said despite thinking that somebody other than her might have—Frank Lunt, for instance, or the bookseller. All the way to his room the key rattled against the carton as though eager to unlock the secrets within. The wardrobe and the safe inside it were shut tight, and no marks were visible on the metal door. It didn't matter that the safe had space for just one more carton; he was determined to be back at the archive tomorrow with the entire set of books. He removed the four volumes from their cartons and lined them up on the dressing-table, where they seemed to bring too much darkness into the room—because the mirror doubled them, of course. Presumably this was what people called daydreaming, and he ought to be examining the books, but not until he'd made a call.

By the time Sandra answered he'd begun to wonder if she had switched her mobile off. "Are you only just starting out?" she said.

"Hasn't Nathan kept you informed? I hear you've been discussing me."

"It was library business, Leonard. You surely don't object to that"

"Not in the slightest. Keep him posted by all means. He already knows I won't be back today, though."

"You mean you told him but not me."

"I'm telling you now, Sandra." Fairman wasn't going to be made to feel unreasonable. "And he might have passed the information on to you," he said.

No doubt her pause was a form of rebuke. "So what's keeping you where you are?"

"What else except the books?" He'd turned towards the window, but seemed to feel their massed blackness behind him, making him impatient to read. "I still have to lay my hands on some of them," he said. "I will tomorrow."

"I don't understand. How many are you leaving until then?"

"About half. Well, just more than half." With mounting irritation Fairman said "I told you they're being held by a number of people. The one I have to

see next isn't available today."

"I'm not grasping this at all. Why can't you deal with the others while you're waiting?"

"Because apparently it isn't done like that. Don't bother asking me why." This left him feeling so inadequate that he blurted "If you talk to Nathan you might like to know he's suggesting I'll have to take my time here as leave."

"But you haven't any left this year, Leonard. Our holiday is all you have."

"You don't need to tell me that." In a bid to make up for his abruptness Fairman said "You might try to use your wiles to change his mind."

"I really don't believe we have that kind of relationship."

"Then maybe you should work on having one for both our sakes." When she gave him another silence to construe Fairman said "I'll call you tomorrow as soon as I'm done here."

"Meanwhile you'll be enjoying the sort of holiday you wish you'd had, will you?"

"No," Fairman said, not seeing why he should feel accused. "I'll be doing my job."

He gazed through the window as he ended the call. Several old folk had their backs against the graffiti in the shelter on the promenade, hiding the unreadable clumps of letters. Dozens of people were sitting or lying on the beach, and there were even swimmers in the sea despite the greyish haze that enclosed it. The haze made the more distant ones hard to distinguish, but the most unstable of the shapes among the waves had to be jellyfish. In any case he ought to be attending to the books.

It made sense to start with the first volume, but he found himself lingering over the colophon. He wasn't far from imagining that the inhumanly distorted hand could conjure up some idea in his mind, and perhaps this had been the book designer's aim, since the volume was *On Conjuration.* "The tongues of men reduce the world to words..." Was that supposed to mean that gestures achieved something else? In that case, what was the point of this book entirely composed of words? Surely he oughtn't to expect it to make too much sense. Ah, here was some kind of enlightenment further down the page. "Let no man utter the secret words who has not first

prepared his mind and spirit in the occult ways, for otherwise the words shall batten on him and shape him to their liking..."

"No chance of that," Fairman said and was glad that Sandra couldn't hear him talking to himself. He stared at his reflection as though holding it responsible, and it stared at him across the inverted volume in its hands. He glimpsed it ducking its head to read "The beliefs to which the mass of men cling are the foes of revelation" and imagined it reading not just the words but all the letters in reverse. "The prating of the prophets chatters down the centuries without beginning to encompass the truths which shape the world. Still less can the gewgaws of religion challenge forces older than the universe we know. In his enfeebled Christian travesty of Al-Hazred, John Dee speaks of a glowing cross which appeared above the sabbats to confound the summoned powers. Say rather that the sabbats were no more than puerile parodies of ancient rituals, so mired in the tradition of the celebrated Jew that the biblical bauble could be misapprehended as a talisman..."

Fairman took a few moments to consider the Dee allusion. It referred to the alchemist's unpublished English paraphrase of the *Necronomicon,* which survived only in the form of fragments held by the British Museum, together with a fifteenth-century Latin translation, and Fairman couldn't have said why it left him feeling oddly vulnerable. His reflection gave him a conspiratorial nod as he bent his head once more to the book.

"And what shall be said of the star-signs which some claim as protection against entities no less immemorial than creation? How blurred the ancient truths become in the minds of the uninitiated What are these signs but imperfect renderings of a stage in the formation of the universe? None but the ignorant seek to invest them with power, and only the most imbecilic of the old survivals may mistake them for a hostile charm, to be cowed by them for a short while. Let the star-signs never be confused with the secret gesture of the Children of the Moon, whose true nature is disguised in many a fairy-tale. Whereas to the rudimentary minds of lesser entities the star-sign may appear to threaten a return to primal chaos, and on occasion may temporarily interfere with the ethereal sendings of the dormant masters of our world, the gesture of the Children recalls that paradisiacal state of fluidity which the Bible bids to deny with its fabricated tales about the father of the Jew. Even these betray their imperfectly veiled secrets to the

initiate, for the serpent in the garden is but a symbol of fluidity, an occult promise that the upstart race and its beliefs cannot wholly trammel the potential of the world..."

Was the image on the cover meant to illustrate the gesture? Fairman had the irrational thought that it was just a human approximation; perhaps that was the kind of thing the book was meant to put into your mind. He held up his left hand and could only laugh at his pathetic attempt to describe the sign. His reflection did no better, but at least its fingers didn't twinge. It watched him until they bowed their heads over the book.

The more he read, the less he seemed to grasp, and yet he felt close to understanding, as if the incantatory prose were leading him in that direction. Of course this wasn't the original text, it was whatever Percy Smallbeam had made of it. How much did that matter? Why should it matter to Fairman at all? He could almost have imagined that he was dreaming the material, letting it take shape in his head. He had no sense of how long it took him to read to the end, where he found he was eager to continue, in case the next volume helped him understand. He shut the book and saw that darkness had gathered behind him.

Night was at the window. It had fallen more than an hour ago, according to his watch. He couldn't recall switching on the standard lamp beside him, though why should a librarian feel troubled by having been engrossed in a book? He should at least eat, and he returned the books to the safe without boxing them up. Once he'd pressed his hands against the metal door to reassure himself that it was locked, he let himself out of the room.

Janine Berry was waiting at the counter by the time he came in sight. "Will you be having our dinner?" she said.

"Would you excuse me if I just nip out for something quick so I can get back to work?"

"The work you're doing here, you mean."

"Examining what I've acquired." In case this was unclear Fairman added "Yes."

"Then we've nothing to excuse." As she took hold of the bludgeon attached to his room key her fingernails glistened, and he thought the skin around them did; she must have been painting them again. "There won't be much difference," she said. "It's all our own produce."

The glare of the streetlamps blanched the promenade and blackened the cars parked outside the hotels but left the buildings as grey as the fog that had crept back across the sea. For the moment the seafront was deserted, though Fairman heard a metallic rattle that might have belonged to a restless car on the roller coaster or a shutter at a shop window, if it wasn't the sound of the bars of a cage. He made his way past Fishing For You to another such establishment among the noisily wakeful arcades. "Trying us tonight?" said the blubbery man at the counter of Fish It Up, dabbing the infirm pallid ridges of his brow with a paper napkin. "It's the only thing to have while you're here."

"Seaside food, you mean? I expect you're right. Fish and chips for me."

He was relieved not to see the man touch the food, instead using a spade like a child's seaside toy to scoop chips out of the fryer and employing tongs to crown them with a fish. At first he'd thought the man was wearing plastic gloves, since his rudimentary nails were virtually indistinguishable from the stubby fingers. He was careful not to touch the man's hand when he paid—he still remembered vividly how the coin with which he'd tipped the porter had seemed to sink into the moist palm—and took the package from the sweating metal counter.

When he crossed the promenade to a bench he was surprised to see how many people were still on the beach, but he supposed he wasn't behaving entirely unlike them. Most were seated, which made them look as if they were protruding from the pebbly sand, and a few were lying down. He saw none of them move even slightly while he ate his dinner; in the pasty light he could have taken them for dummies that had strayed out of a waxworks. The meal was very much like last night's, with the same odd texture to the fish, but he felt as if he wasn't quite able to grasp the familiar taste. Perhaps he was too anxious to be back at the books, though he was also distracted by the sight of a supine figure on the beach lurching upright at the waist as though roused from a dream. The man's face was covered by a floppy hat, which had slipped so far down the head that Fairman could easily have imagined it had taken the face with it; there certainly appeared to be an unreasonable amount of greyish brow beneath the glistening hairless cranium. He finished his dinner as quickly as digestion would allow, while the figure stayed half upright with the hat dangling from the unseen face, and then he made some haste to the hotel.

As he reached it a chorus bade him good evening from the shelter opposite. The voices were feeble enough to add up to a single one, and they belonged to several old folk— surely not the same ones he'd seen earlier—who sat facing the Wyleave. For an absurd moment he wondered if they were about to address him by name. "Good night," he called and felt as if the chilly fog had lurched across the seafront after him.

The thump of the metal club on the counter reminded him of a gavel. "Here for good now?" Mrs Berry said.

"In for the night, if that's what you mean."

"That's good." As Fairman took the key she said "You know who to ring if you need anything at all."

Perhaps he was making too much of this, but he blurted "Isn't Mr Berry with you?"

"We don't leave Gulshaw, Mr Fairman. I think you saw him at the zoo."

Fairman was so embarrassed by his own question that he could only protest "I didn't see very much."

"The season's over for this year." As if she were reassuring a disappointed child Mrs Berry said "We promise you won't miss them."

"I appreciated your husband's help," Fairman said to leave his peevishness behind. "Please do thank him for me."

He wasn't expecting this to be met with a stare so distant he couldn't identify an expression. "Dream well, then," she said as he moved away. "Try and lose yourself."

He wondered if the state of the man in the booth at the zoo was her excuse for seeking solace elsewhere. In any case she mustn't look to Fairman. Once he'd checked the safe he hurried to the bathroom. He couldn't hear a sound in the hotel, and the silence seemed so expectant that it made him even more conscious of the noise he tried to muffle by flushing the toilet. As soon as he was able he retreated like a culprit to his room.

He left the first book in the darkness of the safe and lined up the others in front of the mirror before opening the second volume, *On the Purposes of Night.* "What is daylight but the ally of brutish creation, the progenitor of mindless growth? Let the night be celebrated as friend to the true possessors

of the world. Let its powers be roused that it may reveal the nocturnal truth which lies even within men."

Did this refer to dreams? It would take more than a book to rouse any within him, although while reading he did feel as if the night was growing not just darker but more substantial—the fog, of course. The book wasn't capable of persuading him that the night was pregnant with secrets, let alone teeming with creatures best left unseen, but he was quite glad to reach the final page. He'd finished the third volume last night—however little of it he recalled, he felt as though its burden had lodged somewhere in his head—and so he turned to *Of the Secrets of the Stars,* the fourth book. "Cry out the names of the ancient constellations ..."

The night was always beyond the sky, however bright the sun strove to appear. The infinite darkness was older than time, and the stars were simply playthings that its avatar had shaped and scattered in patterns to which the universe was in the process of reverting. Fairman understood this much; at least, he saw the meaning of the words, although the further he progressed the more he felt that the book was a kind of reverie, incomprehensible to a waking mind. By the time he reached the end he was little better than asleep, and the reflections of the trinity of volumes in the mirror made him feel as if the books were dreaming of companionship. He laid the books to rest in the safe and stumbled to the window.

The old folk in the shelter raised their heads as he dragged up the sash. The beach was still peopled as well. Most of the occupants were supine, but Fairman saw a woman stand up and waddle away from the edge of the sea, leaving a rubbery cushion on which she'd been seated. The roundish object glistened and stirred feebly, having been caught by a wave. As Fairman shut the window and turned away, unenlivened by the stagnant smell he'd let into the room, he saw a man carrying a large plastic bucket down a ramp to the beach.

Fairman went to bed expecting to be kept awake by thoughts of the books, but the vision that was waiting for him to lie down in the dark came from somewhere earlier. Once more he was beset by the image of the stone cocoon, but this time he imagined the end of its wanderings. He saw it blaze like an enormous coal as it plummeted into the depths of a forest, blasting a crater many times its size and setting fire to the surrounding trees. He had to watch as it cooled and split open, a spectacle too reminiscent of the

hatching of an egg. Through the fissure he glimpsed a whitish spongy lump that must be some species of face, since eyes reared up from it to peer in all directions from the crack in the meteor—two eyes and then another. He managed to avoid imagining its size until the meteor tumbled apart in huge fragments to let its contents crawl forth. The ovoid body was as vast as a cathedral, a similarity that was brought to mind by the spines protruding all over the ponderous bulk. As it used the spines to scrabble deep into the earth Fairman could almost have been watching a cathedral bury itself, and he had an uneasy sense that the idea was how his mind coped with the vision, which surely derived from one of the books he'd read. He was relieved not to see more of the face as it sank into the earth; the other sight was bad enough—the eyes withdrawing like a snail's out of the glare of the forest fire. Then there was only the expanse of disturbed earth surrounded by great flames, but it was imbued with a dreadful sense of waiting. At last the notion of settling into the earth merged with the prospect of subsiding into sleep, and that was all he knew.

A thumping sound roused him. It seemed to gain definition, growing less large and loose, as he struggled awake. Somebody was at the door. "What is it?" Fairman demanded, trying to control his slack voice. "What's wrong?"

"It's only Janine, Mr Fairman. Just wondered if you wanted to miss breakfast."

Fairman fumbled at the bedside table for his watch. From the greyish light that seeped into the room he would have taken it to be not much later than dawn, and he had to blink his eyes clear before he could believe it was almost eleven o'clock. "Good God, I've slept in," he called. "I meant to be up hours ago."

"Don't you worry even the tiniest bit. It's ready when you are."

Did he have time for breakfast? As his panic faded he saw that he would almost certainly need to stay overnight to complete the set of books. It might very well have been necessary even if he'd wakened when he should have. The thought left him feeling almost lethargically calm, no doubt because he hadn't quite woken up.

Nobody was in the bathroom or the toilet, and the corridor was deserted, though he seemed to recall having heard quite a few people come upstairs last night while he was intent on the books. Of course they would have been up and about today long before him, unless he'd imagined hearing them,

and could he really have seen anybody lying or otherwise occupied on the beach last night? The breakfast room was empty, and just one couple was checking out at the desk. "See you next year," the man told Fairman, and the equally rotund wife joined in.

Fairman mumbled ambiguously and made for his breakfast table by the window. A thick curtain of fog was trailing its hem in the sea about half a mile from the promenade, and he couldn't locate the sun. Just now the sea looked no wider than a lake. As he saw that the fog had sent the old folk away from the shelter, Mrs Berry arrived with a plateful very similar to yesterday's. "Here's your favourite," she said.

He thanked her before saying "I'm afraid I'll need the room tonight as well."

"No need at all to be afraid."

She closed her mouth and then rounded her lips, suggesting that she'd realised she had more to say. If she meant to bring up dreams again, Fairman wasn't anxious to discuss them. "Would you excuse me?" he said and took out his phone. "I should make some calls."

"You do what you have to, Leonard."

The bell shrilled in his ear and continued shrilling. At last a reluctant voice said "Yes, Mr Fairman."

"Good morning, Ms Bickerstaff. Have things improved for you today?"

"Some have and some haven't. It's always like that for us here."

"Well, I'm glad to hear some have. When should I pay you a visit?"

"I still can't say."

"I thought you said the situation—"

"Nothing's changed there."

"I'm sorry to hear it. I'm obviously sorry, but I really do need—"

"Don't attempt to bully me, Mr Fairman. Some of our residents have tried that on, but it doesn't work."

"I give you my word I don't mean to, Ms Bickerstaff, but I would ask you to appreciate that I've come quite a long way on the understanding that these books will be made available to me."

"That isn't what Frank said, is it? He just wrote to you about his one."

"It's what I've been led to believe by everybody else." Fairman felt as if the argument had grown as slow as trying to run in a dream. "The sooner I take charge of the book," he said, "the sooner it'll be one less responsibility for you."

"I don't shirk any of my responsibilities, Mr Fairman."

"I'm sure I didn't say otherwise. I'm simply trying—"

"I haven't got time for this. As you say, I have responsibilities," Rhoda Bickerstaff said and immediately rang off.

As Fairman listened to the hiss of static, which he could have mistaken for the long breaths of the sea, Janine Berry came into the room. "Have you gone past your appetite?" she said like a reproving mother, and when he frowned at her "Don't keep it to yourself. We don't do that in Gulshaw."

"I'm finding someone isn't as forthcoming as everybody else has been."

"That won't do at all. We mustn't have anyone giving you trouble."

"It's Rhoda Bickerstaff. She's in charge of your Leafy Shade Home."

"I know that." With a look so distant it made her face resemble a mask, Mrs Berry said "Don't let her use that as an excuse. You go up there and don't take no for an answer."

"She does have plenty to deal with as it is, I suppose."

"Then like you said, she'll have less when you take what's yours." Before Fairman could object to having been overheard, Mrs Berry turned maternal again. "Just you eat up," she said, "and then I'll show you where to go."

Fairman gazed out at the fog while he ate, and had the fanciful notion that he was tasting it. A watery hint seemed to underlie every mouthful, though the textures were firm enough. The taste grew more indefinite as he fetched his coat and took the town map to the reception counter. "You go straight there now," Mrs Berry urged, but called him back as he headed for the car park. "You'll be thinking we don't trust you," she said and twisted the key off the ring on the metal club, so vigorously that her fingernails became indistinguishable from the flesh around them. "Now you can come and go like all of us."

Fairman pocketed the key on his way to the car. He was glad to leave the promenade where the stagnant greyish light appeared to seep into every face, not that the pavements were anything like crowded. He drove up a

lane between the Kumbak and the Seesea, across the shopping streets to Edgewood Row, where several large houses had apparently lost their boundaries to form the Leafy Shade. While the single garden wall they shared beside the pavement had been cared for, the wall that backed onto the hazy colonnades of the woods was in some disrepair; more than one gap was wide enough for residents to wander through. As Fairman parked on the road, he saw that one of the vehicles in the grounds was a police car.

Presumably the crisis was at least as serious as Rhoda Bickerstaff had made it sound. He couldn't justify adding to her problems, however frustrated he might feel; surely even Nathan Brighouse wouldn't expect it of him. He was restarting the engine when a woman hurried out of the central building of the Leafy Shade complex. "Mr Fairman," she shouted. "Leonard Fairman."

Her gangling run emphasised how tall she was. Her head was disproportionately large, though with a small mouth and miniature chin. She wore a padded coat over a billowing black dress that exposed ankles thicker than he would have thought to see and black shoes too big for the elegance they aimed for. As Fairman left the car she unlocked the tall iron gate. "Mrs Bickerstaff," he said. "I'm sorry, I didn't realise—"

"No call for an apology. I'm not Rhoda Bickerstaff."

"Even so, I'm sorry if I'm adding to your difficulties."

"You're doing nothing of the kind." This sounded closer to an accusation than a reassurance, and her tone didn't change as she said "I'm Eunice Spriggs."

Her gaze went with the tone, but in a moment it relented—receded, at any rate. "I'm the mayoress," she said.

Did a wig come with the title? The hairline above the chubby brows that overshadowed her sizeable eyes seemed unusually regular, while the black hair that hung straight down beside her cheeks looked as inert as the grey light through the ceiling of fog. As she offered Fairman her disconcertingly small hand she said "Thank you for everything you're doing for us."

"I'm just doing what's expected of me."

"I wish some others of us would. Please accept my apologies on behalf of the town for the hindrance." Before he could tell her they weren't necessary the mayoress said "Do come and take over."

Fairman refrained from wiping his hand until she turned along the gravel drive. "Are you visiting someone?"

"Regrettably I had to," she said and stalked loosely although purposefully towards the central building. "Rhoda Bickerstaff."

Beyond a wide hall a pair of broad staircases not unlike pincers framed the entrance to a room full of old folk in armchairs. French windows let in the murky daylight, which seemed to tint all the ageing flesh. One old man was opening his mouth wide and circular to expose his greyish gums, and several of his companions joined in, as though they were competing to produce the roundest mouth. An old woman was dangling her arms on either side of her chair to touch the carpet, and Fairman might have thought her hands were too long for the arms. Outside the windows a number of apparently unsupervised residents were shuffling and wobbling about the grounds; several had gathered to stare through a gap in the wall into the ill-defined depths of the woods. Fairman didn't want to distract anyone from keeping an eye on the residents, but Eunice Spriggs was gesturing him towards a room to the left of the stairs. She didn't bother knocking on the door.

A dumpy woman stuffed into a suit not much greyer than her face and hair sat behind a desk on the far side of the office. If she wasn't grimacing, a good deal was wrong with the left side of her face. Her lips were drawn towards it, and that eye was half shut, while the cheek harboured a purplish tinge. She was flanked at a distance by a policeman and a woman in the identical uniform. Fairman could almost have taken them for twins, not least because their rounded faces bore the same blank determined look. "Here he is at last," Eunice Spriggs said. "I believe someone owes you something, Leonard."

She gazed at the woman behind the desk, and then the police did. Since none of this broke the silence, Fairman felt he should. "Thank you for making time for me, Mrs Bickerstaff."

The woman sat forward and folded her arms with a thump on the desk. The sound seemed to echo, but the repetitions grew louder as they continued to reverberate. Fairman felt as if the floor were growing unstable, even when he realised that she was drumming a heel beneath the desk. "Rhoda," the mayoress said.

Rhoda Bickerstaff dug her fingers into her upper arms as she raised her head. "I've got to say I'm sorry, Mr Fairman."

"I'm sure I understand." When her eyes denied it Fairman said "Why should you?"

"For not scurrying to let you have your book like everybody else."

"I don't think anybody's quite done that."

"Then you don't know much about our town."

Fairman almost retorted that he knew there was so much more to see; it was like hearing a chorus in his head of all the voices that had told him. This time the mayoress brought a silence to an end. "Safe, Rhoda," she said. "Safe." Though it could have been a reassurance, Fairman thought it was an order. Rhoda Bickerstaff's eyes remained defiant while the drumming of her heel seemed to dissipate through the floorboards, and her gaze seemed to retreat without leaving him. She lurched to her feet so abruptly that her suit bunched up around her midriff, and Fairman could have thought her flesh had. The floor shook again as she paced to the safe behind the desk. She spun the combination wheel and hauled the door wide, leaving the interior in darkness, so that Fairman couldn't see the book until she clutched it to her breast. As she swung around her face twisted further to the left, and she seemed to find it hard to work her mouth. "I hope you're ready, Leonard," she said indistinctly. "There's your next step."

He had to extend both hands—he might almost have been reaching to take charge of an infant—before she relinquished the volume. As he took it she let out a breath that sounded capable of leaving her entire self hollow, and he saw the mayoress relax. It was the sixth volume, *Of Things Seen by the Moon,* with a colophon depicting a full moon where a lunar sea resembled the pupil of an eye. "Thank you," Fairman said, which seemed inadequate. "I hope your crisis will be resolved soon."

Rhoda Bickerstaff's face twisted leftward so convulsively that it seemed to drag the hairline of her greying curls askew. "Don't you really know what's going on here, Leonard?"

"The book was the only crisis," Eunice Spriggs told him. "Rhoda got a bit too used to looking after it, that's all."

"Is all this necessary?" Fairman said and stared at the police. "You mustn't think I'm being unprofessional, but when it comes right down to it, it's just a

book."

"You're the last one I'd hope to hear saying that, Leonard."

He was disconcerted not just because it was Rhoda Bickerstaff who told him so but by a sense that at least one other person in the room might have. "I assure you I'll take care of it," he said, not without resentment. "Who's next on my list?"

"Eric Headon. He's our local historian."

This time it was the mayoress who spoke, but Fairman kept his eyes on Rhoda Bickerstaff. "You couldn't have told me that yesterday."

"That's not how things are done here, Leonard," Eunice Spriggs said.

"Why not?" Fairman demanded and turned on her. "How much do you know about all this?"

"All I need to," she said with an odd faraway look. "You will when it's time."

He oughtn't to be loitering, not least since the police had brought blank looks to bear on him. "Can someone give me Mr Headon's number?"

He had no idea who might respond until Rhoda Bickerstaff scrawled the information on the back of a Leafy Shade card that bore the slogan REST IS BEST. He was hurrying along the drive, and acutely relieved to have left the episode behind, when he glimpsed movement out of the corner of his eye. Had one of the residents fallen out of bed? Beyond a ground-floor window to his left a quilt was sprawling towards the floor. The pale shapeless object floundered out of sight beneath the low sill before he could distinguish it more clearly, but he couldn't have seen arms and legs protruding from it; nobody's limbs could be so unequal, in length as well as thickness. All the same, the bed was empty, and an occupant might have been entangled in the quilt. As Fairman thought of alerting someone, a uniformed nurse came into the room. His face grew blank as he saw what was there, and Fairman headed for his car.

He boxed up his prize and locked the boot, and then he hesitated. However uncomfortable the intervention of the mayoress and the police had made him, they'd helped him secure the book. Suppose the historian was as unforthcoming as Rhoda Bickerstaff had tried to be? Fairman might appreciate some official help, and so he phoned from outside the Leafy

Shade. A somnolent hiss gave way to the simulation of a bell before a man mumbled "Yes."

There were fewer consonants to it than there might have been—perhaps none. "Mr Headon," Fairman said.

"Miss a fair un."

Was Headon drunk? He seemed to find it hard to shape his words. "That's who I am," Fairman nevertheless said.

"Goo to he fum you. Reach me alas."

"Good to speak to you. I'm sorry that I couldn't reach you sooner. Is it convenient to see you now?"

"Seem eel layer. Attach oh."

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

"Lair. Lair." With a distinctly peevish effort Headon succeeded in pronouncing "Later. You'll be at the show."

"I may be, but couldn't you possibly—"

"I have Tourette's." As Fairman wondered how much this might explain, Headon added a resentful translation. "Have to rest before the show."

"You're involved in it, you mean."

"I'm image all wry." Headon's words were growing worse than blurred again. "Arrest him," he muttered, "when you caw."

"Forgive me, I didn't catch that either."

"I said," Headon complained, "I was resting when you called."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realise." Fairman had a distinct impression that Headon thought he should have. "I don't suppose," he said, "before I go you could tell me who else—"

"Seethe am altar night. See you deny," Headon said so indistinctly that his voice seemed to merge with the static as he rang off.

Had he really believed Fairman was asking who else would be onstage tonight? At least Fairman had done all he reasonably could, and he had a book to examine. As he drove downhill he saw that the haze had advanced to the near edge of the sea and blocked off both ends of the promenade, which the grey light helped to resemble an old faded image of itself. Near

the Wyleave the people on the seafront reminded him of the posters in the tourist office, since they appeared to be moving hardly at all.

Not to be met by Mrs Berry felt like a form of acceptance, though not one he needed to welcome. He unpacked the carton once he'd checked the contents of the safe. From the window he saw that despite the fog on the beach, people were sitting at the water's edge. They were so blurred that he couldn't be sure how scantily dressed they might be. Were those the same old folk as yesterday in the shelter? It was impossible to tell, given the scarves they'd wrapped around the lower sections of their faces, presumably to keep out the fog. Fairman ought to be making a call, and he took out his phone. "Leonard," Brighouse said. "Surprise me.

"I'm past the halfway mark."

"You mean you've nearly as far to go? What's the obstacle this time?"

"Some of the people with the books have been keeping me waiting."

"Perhaps you shouldn't let them. Do you think they're sufficiently aware of the importance of our acquisition?"

"I don't believe that's the problem. I'm sure they know how much the books mean."

"And what about the other people? Have you contacted them all?"

"I can't do that." Fairman braced himself for the reaction as he said "I have to collect the volumes in a certain order."

"Why on earth are you bothering to do that?"

"Because that's what everyone wants me to do."

"And you're letting yourself be dictated to in that fashion? It sounds to me as if somebody is amusing themselves at your expense."

Fairman felt defensive not just on his own behalf. "I honestly don't think that's the situation."

"Well, perhaps you know best." Brighouse's tone fell short of supporting the notion. "Is there any point in asking when you'll have completed the task?"

"I don't think I can say just now," Fairman said and heard himself echoing some of the townsfolk.

"I'd remind you what I mentioned yesterday about leave."

"If that's all the university thinks these books are worth—" For a breath Fairman was on the edge of threatening to resign. "They're the most significant acquisition we'll ever make," he said.

"No need to proselytise, Leonard. I'm just as aware of their rarity as you."

Fairman felt as if he'd meant more than this but couldn't put it into words. Either this or Brighouse's attitude infuriated him so much that he blurted "Would you mind not telling Sandra I'm further delayed?"

"I can't imagine why you'd think I would."

"You've been discussing me, haven't you? I'd prefer to let her know myself."

After quite a pause Brighouse said "I'd like to see you here as soon as practicable. There are issues that may need to be clarified."

Had Fairman jeopardised his position after all? "I'll be back as soon as the books let me," he said, and once he was rid of Brighouse the situation at the university seemed too remote to trouble him. Surely his acquisitions would protect him against dismissal, and he sat down with *Of Things Seen by the Moon.* "How many fools dismiss the moon as borrowing its illumination from the sun! In truth its light reveals more to the mage's eye than the sunlight of midsummer..."

The book went on to peer behind lunar myths. The transformation of the werewolf was "but the brutish display of the changes which are wrought on every aspect of the world by the illumination the night brings." Some old tales of the fairies named them as the Children of the Moon because their shapes mutated with its phases. At the time Percy Smallbeam compiled the edition, some women were apparently still afraid to conceive or give birth on nights of the full moon in case they produced a mooncalf, "a thing whose shape betrays how life was formed in the infancy of the universe." Other sections of the book suggested that "the mage shall learn to see as the moon does", but if the pages that followed were meant to instruct, Fairman seemed incapable of grasping so much as a word. The prose grew meditative and mystical, presenting the dark side of the moon as a symbol of concealment; surely the notion that it "swarms with monstrous and inhuman life, as does the underside of any stone" was metaphorical, despite the unappealing detail in which it was discussed at length. Then the book proposed that "what is closest is most hidden", but Fairman felt as if the

paragraphs that followed were taking refuge in his mind without entering his consciousness. Whenever he glanced up he was met by his own gaze, so remote that it must be betraying the incomprehension that lay like a weight in his brain as he finally closed the book. He didn't need to understand; his mission was simply to keep the books safe. Wasn't there something else he ought to do? He let out a sigh like one of the waves at his back as he realised who he'd neglected to call.

She sounded wearily resigned. "I won't ask, Leonard."

"Nathan hasn't spoken to you, then."

"Not about you, no." When Fairman only gazed into the depths of his own eyes Sandra added "What would he have said?"

"I'm still where you've gathered I am, and he's talking about leave again."

"You don't seem very anxious about it."

"I'm anxious to be with you, if that's what you mean." With an inspiration that hardly felt like his Fairman said "Of course if you wanted I could be soon enough."

"How are you proposing to achieve that?"

"You've the weekend off, haven't you? If I haven't finished here by tomorrow you could join me."

"I'm sure you'd be surprised if I did."

"Pleasantly so, yes."

"It sounds to me as if you're having a pleasant enough time by yourself. You certainly don't seem to be in a hurry to leave."

"We can't hurry these books."

Fairman saw a hand besides his own come to rest on the black volume. No, it was his hand in the mirror, where he looked as if he were about to swear an oath or use the book in some other solemn ritual. "Then I won't try to hurry you any more," Sandra said with nothing like enthusiasm.

He could speak to her again tomorrow. Perhaps sleep would bring some kind of change. Once they'd said their goodbyes he saw that he had nearly an hour to spare, though he wouldn't have guessed that from the muffled light outside the window. He had the irrational notion that it might be hard to judge when the moon replaced the sun behind the fog. He had time to

walk to the Shaw and for a quick dinner as well. He returned the book to the safe and took an empty carton with him.

Joggers were trotting doggedly along the promenade. They looked as if they were struggling to forge their way through the befogged twilight, and Fairman could have imagined that he felt the medium weighing him down. Certainly the joggers needed exercise; some were so obese that every step sent a flabby wobble upwards through the whole of them, even quivering their faces. Each of them raised a hand to greet Fairman, and more than one used theirs to mop their foreheads with such vigour that he could have thought the flesh was quaking like tripe. He was surprised that any of them could find breath to hum snatches of an old tune, whatever it might be.

The Shaw appeared not to be open. The lobby was as dim as any of the glass cases he'd seen at the zoo. As he crossed the junction with the promenade he had to dodge a pushchair wheeled by a young but pudgy mother. The plastic cover that protected the chair from the elements blurred the occupant's wide flat face so much that it looked featureless apart from the eyes, which the plastic distorted until the left one seemed twice the size of the other. Fairman could have thought the toddler was naked as well; presumably the plastic and the clogged twilight were lending its skin and its one-piece suit the same greyish pallor. He'd seen people complimenting parents on their offspring when they met them in the street, but he couldn't think of anything appropriate to say. In any case the woman's distant stare didn't strike him as inviting a remark.

The machines in the arcades were jingling and prattling, while video games carried on shouting in unnatural voices meant to pass for human. Fairman could have fancied that the show was being put on just for him, to persuade him that Gulshaw was lively even so late in the season. The plastic eyes of a horse outside an arcade glistened with moisture, and as its innards burst into electronic song he might have been reminded of the kind of life that swarmed in corpses or on the hidden side of the moon, according to the *Revelations*. Was that still the sun behind the fog? He was growing unduly fanciful—he didn't need to think that the murk was capable of hiding a vast presence—though as he tramped past the arcades their mindless clamour crowded all thoughts out of his head.

The proprietor of Fishing For You was in her hospital uniform, or at least the outfit that made her resemble a nurse. "Decided in our favour?" she

said.

"I've had no better since I've come to town."

"You won't, either." Presumably this was a boast, even if her eyes held back from admitting to it "The usual?" she said.

He supposed this meant everybody's preference, since she could hardly know his. "That's fine with me."

As he sat at a picnic table on the tiled floor she said "Eating in? You've not got used, then."

"To this weather? I don't think I'd want to be."

"Don't be too quick to think."

No doubt that kind of advice went with her blunt accent. He'd found no more to say by the time she brought him fish and chips in a squeaky polystyrene container. As she planted it in front of him, leaving moist marks on the table, the lid shuddered upwards as if some of the contents were making an ineffectual bid to escape. Fairman was disconcerted to observe that her thinness ended well above the waist, suggesting that much of her flesh had sunk to be held up by her extensive hips. Once she returned to the far side of the counter he fed himself a mouthful with the plastic fork. The increasingly familiar taste made him ask "Is this actually cod?"

"It says fish, doesn't it?" Having poked a long finger at the menu on the wall, she said "It's our kind."

"Don't think I'm complaining, but what kind is that?"

"The kind we have here. The kind that brings everyone back."

Fairman gave up and reverted to eating while the proprietor hummed under her breath. It sounded like a folk song, especially once she added a few words about someone coming home from the sea. When he heard shuffling he glanced up to see that the woman was performing a kind of dance on the spot. He found it disconcerting, not least because her eyes were shut, revealing how flat the lids were, hardly distinguishable from the skin around them. He left quite an amount of his dinner and was easing himself off the bench when her eyes sprang open, bulging at him. "We'll be seeing you," she said.

Fairman nearly asked who else she thought she was speaking for. The streetlamps had come on, appearing to draw the fog inland. He felt as if it

was shutting him in with the arcades, where the shrill piping of the fruit machines and the challenging roars of the games had begun to put him in mind of a zoo. As he turned uphill towards the theatre the lights were switched on in the lobby, and Frank Lunt emerged onto the marble steps to wait for him. "Here's our audience," the manager announced.

"Not all of it, I hope."

"Enough for us." Lunt's black moustache and clipped hair glistened as if they shared the moistness of his unavoidable handshake. "So long as we don't disappoint," he said.

"To be truthful, I'm mostly here for Eric Headon."

At once Fairman felt tactless and ungrateful for the complimentary admission, but Lunt's face remained enthusiastic. "They're all the stuff stars are made of," he said releasing Fairman's hand at last. "You'll see."

He made for the auditorium with a wallowing gait that reminded Fairman of a sailor just home from the sea. Beyond the double doors a wide aisle divided at least thirty rows of seats, every one of them unoccupied. "Have I got the time wrong?" Fairman blurted.

"Nothing's wrong that shouldn't be." Lunt bowed towards the curtained stage like a priest making obeisance to an altar. "Sit wherever you like," he said. "The closer the better. You won't be on your own long."

Despite if not because of having slept so late, Fairman felt less than entirely awake. He would prefer not to be singled out from the stage, and so he chose an aisle seat halfway down the auditorium, which he hoped was close enough to placate Lunt without being too conspicuous. "Now we'll let you see some of our gifts," the manager said. "We aren't just a sleepy town."

"I've never said you were," Fairman protested, but Lunt was already making for the foyer. The doors shut with a muffled plushy thud, and then Fairman heard a noise somewhere ahead of him. It sounded oddly reminiscent of the murmur of an audience before a show, but it was beyond the curtains. Or was it more like a chant—some formula to inspire the performers? He was straining to identify any words—he could have thought they were too unfamiliar to grasp—when the lights went out, flooding the auditorium with blackness dense as earth.

Fairman sucked in a breath that felt like inhaling the dark. As his eyes began to ache with his bid to see even a hint of light, he heard a sluggish

movement ahead of him. Something of considerable size was being dragged across the floor, and the idea that it was advancing towards him robbed him of breath. It had split in two, dividing like some primitive form of life, and the halves were crawling to either side of him. They hadn't halted when lights blazed up to reveal that he'd been hearing the curtains, between which Frank Lunt stepped forward, holding out his hands as though to present the struggle of the buttons of his dress suit to restrain his midriff. "Welcome to the last show of the season," he said. "I give you the Gulshaw Players. A century and half another one of artfulness."

Fairman assumed this meant the skills had been passed down the generations, though the observation wasn't addressed just to him. As the curtains stumbled to a standstill, light from the foyer had spilled into the auditorium, and he heard people taking their seats at the back. The movements subsided as Lunt wallowed backwards and a performer sprang onstage to either side of him.

They were acrobats in white leotards, and they brought a merry march with them. Presumably the band was recorded, because a technical problem was warping it out of tune, if so slightly that Fairman couldn't quite grasp where the music had gone wrong. Another pair of acrobats joined their fellows as Lunt swayed into the wings. No doubt all the pale faces were meant to resemble pierrots, though their costumes failed to sustain the notion. Despite the tightness of the leotards, Fairman couldn't identify their gender, and the identical caps of cropped black hair didn't help. The acrobats leapt and tumbled and stacked themselves on top of one another while their small brightly smiling faces remained as changeless as four masks from the same mould. He was unsettled by their sinuousness, which along with their pallor reminded him rather too much of the squirming of grubs, and he had to fend off the idea that whenever they stood on one another's shoulders, their toes grasped like fingers, extending to sink into the flesh. His need for sleep must be forcing fancies that resembled dreams into his waking mind. Now the topmost of the tower of acrobats was bending backwards in an arc, and one by one the others did until the performer who'd stood highest was able to flatten his cranium against the stage. Each of them regained their feet with a somersault, and as Fairman applauded he heard moist puffy handclaps break out behind him. "So much more to see," the acrobats chorused as they ran in pairs into the wings, and he thought they were echoed from the back of the auditorium.

As soon as the stage was deserted a newcomer lurched into view. Was he meant to be drunk? Having floundered to the centre of the stage, he tried to tell a joke about falling into water that he'd thought was solid ground, but by the time he reached the punch line, which involved telling his wife where he'd been, he was so effortfully incoherent that Fairman couldn't understand a word. The comedian's struggles with articulation seemed to drag his lanky body more lopsided, and his helpless gestures grew increasingly extravagant until they unbalanced him, throwing him on his face. Apparently this was the joke, and Fairman felt a duty to laugh, which prompted everyone behind him to join in. He was disconcerted to see the comedian leap to his feet and go through the entire routine again, not by any means just once. Each time his language ended up less speakable, until Fairman was reminded of the graffiti in the shelter opposite the Wyleave. At the end of every repetition the man fell flatter on his face, and took to pointing at the pallid slab it appeared to have become. Fairman had to laugh in order not to be dismayed, especially by the finale, where the comic wiped his hand across his face to demonstrate how level the surface was. "So much more to see," the mouth in it declared as he made way for a juggler.

At first she seemed conventional enough, if almost painfully thin. The indefinably dissonant band had fallen silent during the comedian's act, but now it was back. Surely only the juggler's swiftness made her arms appear to stretch to unequal lengths to catch the airborne objects— balls, skittles, knives—unless the illusion was another symptom of sleeplessness. At times Fairman imagined that her hands had grown unduly long as well, perhaps an effect of the light, which was dimmer than he would have expected stage illumination to be. She ended with the Gulshaw slogan, and her place was taken by a pair of contortionists so unnervingly supple that Fairman wondered why they needed to contort their faces too. He wished their mouths and nostrils and especially their eyes wouldn't gape so wide; less than half would be more than enough. He was glad that the contortionists were eventually ousted by a mind-reader with a black cloth covering the top half of his face, though less happy to be chosen as a subject by the man's assistant, who extended her forefinger quite some distance towards Fairman. He was putting together something very large, the blindfolded man told him. Fairman supposed that was true—the set of books, not to mention their importance—as true as the suggestions that he couldn't tell when he was dreaming and that his head contained more thoughts than he

knew. He wondered why the performer needed to be blindfolded to come up with all this, until the assistant who had led him onstage untied the cloth to reveal that above the man's mouth was a single nostril twitching in a featureless expanse of pallid flesh.

Fairman was acutely relieved to see the man ushered into the wings once he'd uttered the familiar slogan. He'd scarcely vacated the stage before it was occupied by a troupe of singers, the foremost of whom swelled his chest like an amphibian to perform a solo. Was it a folk song or an unfamiliar hymn? Fairman had heard it before, but now he realised he hadn't quite caught the words; the refrain was "Thou great inspiration, come in from the sea." The woman behind the counter at Fishing For You might also have been practicing the dance with which the troupe supported the soloist. Fairman took it for a folk dance, a spiky jig interspersed with tortuously fluid movements and describing patterns on the stage too intricate for him to follow. The melody seemed related to the tune the band had played, and as hypnotic as the dance was proving to be—so mesmeric that when the performance ended, having grown slower on the way to stillness, he wakened himself by starting to clap. How long had he been asleep? Longer than he'd realised, to judge by the faces of the performers who crowded onstage to bow to him; they might almost have been honouring him, though surely that would have to be ironic. At least his having dozed must explain some of the spectacle he'd imagined he was seeing, even if he wasn't sure how much. As the players made their various ways offstage, the blindfolded man resting his fingertips on his assistant's arm, Fairman heard the audience depart, isolating uneven imprecise footsteps close behind him— Frank Lunt's footsteps. "What did you make of us?" the manager said.

"Most impressed." Fairman might have liked to leave it there but added "I hope everyone will forgive me. I've been up late with the books and I did nod off a little."

"So long as you dreamed of us."

Fairman wasn't about to admit it. He could have asked why the manager was counting himself in—it seemed to be a local trait—but said only "I wasn't expecting so much home-grown talent."

"Some of it is. Some came and stayed." Lunt motioned to him, crooking or rather curving a forefinger. "You'll be wanting Eric," he said.

Fairman could have thought they were alone in the building. Certainly the audience had gone, unless they were keeping quieter than made any sense. He couldn't help wondering somewhat uneasily which of the players he was about to meet. Lunt preceded him into the office and beckoned him again with that uncommonly flexible finger. "Eric, this is Leonard."

The man who rose with ponderous suppleness from a chair in front of the desk was the solo singer. Up close his expansive whitish face looked as though it needed all its chins to prevent it from collapsing out of somnolence. As he swallowed, his throat swelled so much that Fairman could have thought he was about to burst into song. "Leonard," he said. "Allow me to thank you personally for the part you're playing."

His handshake was as moist as any Fairman had been offered—perhaps that had something to do with the Gulshaw air—and oddly imprecise. At least his voice was more defined than it had sounded on the phone. "You were the stars, not me," Fairman told him. "And I apologise if I wasn't as attentive as I should have been."

"We entirely understand." Headon gazed at him with some kind of appreciation and said "Shall we walk? It's close."

Lunt shut the glass doors after them and stepped back into the sudden darkness of the theatre. Headon turned uphill past the Shaw and then along another deserted street, this one running parallel to the promenade. It included a number of clothes shops: Tall Boy, Lots of Woman, Stout Fellow, Skinny Girl, Fat Lad. Fairman reflected ruefully that he might have to patronise some outfitters like the last one if he ate many more Gulshaw dinners. The shops gave way to terraces of houses, all of them unlit despite the relatively early hour. "People seem to like their sleep round here," he said.

"We all need it, Leonard."

Fairman hadn't meant to seem to be referring to their earlier conversation. Now that Headon's voice was more distinct it was apparent that he wasn't local. "How long have you lived here?" Fairman said.

"Long enough."

"You aren't a native, I mean."

"I am now."

If Sandra had been there she would certainly have queried that use of language, but Fairman only said "What kept you here?"

"The same as you." Before Fairman could address this Headon said "I'm retired."

"I understand you were a historian."

"I still am." With some pique Headon added "It's all in here."

He was poking his forehead to demonstrate. In the inert greyish light, which resembled a luminous distillation of the fog beyond the promenade, Fairman could have imagined that the fingertip had sunk into the ridged flesh. He looked away before saying "You ought to write a book."

"Soon we'll have no more use for those."

Sometimes Fairman was afraid this would indeed be an effect of the internet, but not so long as he worked in the archive. "Better not let Don Rothermere hear you saying that," he said.

"He knows. Everybody has to."

Fairman stopped short of demanding to be left out, instead saying "So what can you tell me about Gulshaw?"

"It's shaped by its history."

"We all are, I should think."

"That's the truest word so far," Headon declared and turned his head to him.

It felt like being watched from an unreasonable distance, and Fairman was grateful to be distracted by noises ahead. Around one uphill corner of a junction he heard a series of soft irregular thuds reminiscent of the impacts of the dancers' feet onstage. When he reached the crossing he saw children at hopscotch in a floodlit schoolyard. Apparently in this version of the game they had to hop simultaneously about various sections of the yard. "Is that peculiar to this part of the world?" he said.

"A lot of things are."

Fairman was on the edge of demanding why the man's responses were so absurdly guarded, and then he wondered if they were. Might Headon be crediting him with too much local knowledge? The schoolyard railings and the shadows of the players confused his vision, so that he could have

thought the children were hopping higher than they should and adopting grotesque postures too. The patterns of the game seemed increasingly reminiscent of the Gulshaw Players' dance, and weren't the children chanting a rhyme under their breaths? As he strained to make out the jagged whisper, which reminded him less of the song than of the comedian's unknown lingo, Headon said "Don't put them off, will you? Not far to go now."

In fact his house was just across the junction. Like its neighbours, it was so tall and thin that every front window appeared to have been squeezed narrow. A haphazardly paved path wandered between rockeries, unless they were overgrown heaps of rubble, to the front door. When Headon switched on the hall light, it seemed reluctant to respond. Presumably it was designed to conserve energy, but the glow reminded Fairman of old paper and left the reaches of the house in darkness. The hall and the stairs that climbed from it stretched further than he could see, and the grudging light from a room on the left didn't help. In the room faded armchairs faced a black iron fireplace, and dozens of images of Gulshaw hung on the drab brownish walls—presumably old photographs, unless they owed their sepia tinge to the illumination. "It doesn't change much, does it?" he commented as Headon ushered him into the room.

"It does where it counts. You'll be seeing." Headon stayed in the doorway and murmured "Shall I fetch it to you?"

Fairman found the conversation a good deal too ambiguous. "The book, you mean."

"And everything it brings."

More sharply Fairman said "What are you saying that is?

"Knowledge, Leonard. What we're all waiting for," Headon said and turned away, though not with his whole body at once. Fairman heard him pad into the depths of the house, presumably switching on at least one more light. The large soft footfalls receded into silence, and then a muffled noise might have denoted the opening of a door. Fairman had grown far too used to the moist stagnant Gulshaw smell, but it seemed more apparent in this house, and he felt oppressed by the dimness that resembled an emanation of old paper. He wasn't sure if the smell was intensifying as slow footsteps advanced towards the room, sounding furtive and yet heavier than he would have expected or invited. Apparently all of this signified the care Headon

was taking with the book, which rested on his outstretched hands as he paced into the room like a priest approaching an altar. He watched Fairman lay it in its excelsior nest, having ascertained that it was the seventh volume, *Of the Symbols the Universe Shows.* Headon's throat bulged with swallow after nervous swallow, which made Fairman blurt "You aren't a believer, are you?"

"We're of the same mind, Leonard."

"Speak for yourself," Fairman almost retorted. He wasn't sure what daunted him—surely not the distant gaze that seemed bent on including him. "Well," he said awkwardly, "I'd best be off to keep it safe."

"Nobody would dream of taking any of them away from you." Headon paused to let this gain more weight before he said "And you're going to see the little ones."

"The little ones," Fairman said and felt as though he'd been overtaken by a local tendency to repeat other people's words.

"Our youngsters. The ones at the nursery."

"Why should I need to see them?"

"I expect they'd like to see you." As more of an explanation Headon added "Phyllida Barnes runs the Sprightly Sprouts, and she's got the next book."

"I'd better find out when she can accommodate me."

"I wouldn't trouble yourself, Leonard. Just go over in the morning. Nobody's going to give you any more problems."

Could Headon really undertake this on behalf of the rest of the town? Certainly he didn't seem to be giving voice just to himself. As Fairman emerged into the hall he avoided glancing into the dark that felt unpleasantly like a lair, but sensed it massing at his back all the way to the front door, an impression far too reminiscent of being spied upon. Outside the house he thanked Headon and peered along the deserted street. "Don't worry," Headon told him. "Nobody can be safer than you are."

The children were still hopping or dancing about the schoolyard. The surrounding silence magnified their footfalls, which sounded oddly loose, insufficiently defined. Fairman didn't look towards the yard as he turned downhill to the promenade, beyond which the fog hung like a vast curtain the colour of a dusty cobweb. He was put in mind of a stage with the

streetlamps for footlights, and couldn't help recalling the restless anticipatory sounds he'd heard behind the curtains at the Shaw. Of course any presence behind the fog could only be the moon.

The arcades were dark and silent now. The lunar glare of the streetlamps seemed to lend more substance to the fog, which blotted out a good deal of the beach. The visible stretch was deserted apart from a scattering of plastic cushions. Could people have left them to keep their places on the beach? He remembered seeing a woman leave one near the hotel—and then, with a not especially mirthful laugh at his mistake, he saw that the objects were jellyfish.

They didn't belong to any species he recognised. Perhaps it was rare enough to be represented in the Bywood aquarium, if such creatures ever were. They glistened in the pallid light as if they'd just crawled up from the veiled sea. Obviously they were being moistened by the fog, which appeared to trail over them as Fairman advanced along the promenade. It revealed dozens of them, every one as broad as his midriff. They put him in mind of exposed flattened greyish brains, which wasn't their only unappealing aspect; each of them had stretched out gelatinous tendrils as if to help them crawl, tendrils that resembled spines gone translucent and flabby. Quite a few of the tendrils seemed to have ambitions to gain more of a shape, swelling to form excrescences reminiscent of embryonic hands. When Fairman started to fancy that he could distinguish small splayed fingers, in some cases fewer than a hand should have and in others an unpleasant profusion, he did his best to fix his attention on the promenade as he tramped faster towards the hotel.

At last all the inert misshapen lumps were behind him. He refused to imagine that he'd seen tiny greyish nails on any of the finger-like protrusions, still less that he'd glimpsed one gelatinous slab beginning to extrude features that suggested a rudimentary face. He needed sleep, that was all, once he'd spent time with the book. Just now he could hardly control his thoughts, which was why he needed to fend off the notion that all the creatures washed up on the beach were only playing dead. The prolonged slithering noise somewhere behind and below him must be a wave on the beach, but it made him look over his shoulder. As the fog surged towards him, hiding the stretch where he'd seen all the jellyfish, he was sure he glimpsed an utterly deserted beach.

He was about to hurry onwards when he heard the movement again. It sounded close enough for its source to be hidden at the base of the sea wall. Fairman gripped the chilly railing and made to crane over, and then he dodged across the promenade instead. As he hastened past the hotels, all of which were lit only by the streetlamps, he kept glancing behind him. Were lumpy greyish shapes crouching almost flat on some of the ramps that led up from the beach? While he couldn't be sure about that, he was glad to see people seated in the shelter opposite the Wyleave, though the scarves around their faces made them unidentifiable. "Sea wall," their muffled voices called—no, surely they were telling him to sleep well, not even to see that way. As they raised their left hands to wave to him if not to dab at their glistening foreheads, he let himself into the hotel.

Apart from the lobby and the upstairs corridor, it was dark. The silence felt as expectant as a held breath, and prompted him to make even more noise with the plumbing than usual. He was shutting himself in his room when he thought he heard a restless movement, too large and undefined to be anything except a wave, not an indication that all the neighbouring rooms were occupied. Just the same, he couldn't help reminding himself of Headon's reassurance as he sat down with the latest book.

"We are all but symbols of the vagaries of the becoming of the universe. May a symbol read a symbol?" Presumably the book was setting out to convey how that was possible, but Fairman found the text at least as obscure as the colophon, a circle that appeared to be blank until his fingertips traced a series of irregularities that might form a secret diagram or motif. "The old dances conjure the ancient patterns and celebrate the imminence of revelation..." This was among the more intelligible sentences, and even then he felt he hadn't entirely grasped the point. "Most potent are the words of becoming, which shape the voice and the mouth when spoken, and mould the brain which seeks to comprehend them. No wholly human lips may pronounce the language of creation, and the brain must yield its customary form to rediscover the making of the universe..." Beyond this the book might as well have been composed of the language it regarded as unfathomable by the ordinary reader. When Fairman shut the book at last he felt as though it had been a dream he was already forgetting, its details sinking out of reach in the depths of his mind.

He might have liked to think the view from the window was a dream. The denizens of the shelter had entirely covered their faces with scarves, and their hands lay so slackly on their knees that there might have been no fingers inside the whitish gloves. The clumps of hair perched on their heads accentuated their resemblance to waxworks. People were still sitting on the beach in the restless fog, which blurred their outlines so much that he couldn't even tell which way they were facing. Perhaps all the pallid heads were bald, but he had the odd notion that every figure had its back to the sea. The view was enough to send him to bed.

His night thoughts were waiting for him. He saw the monstrous shape as vast and spiky as a cathedral burrowing into the earth, and then all sense of time deserted him. As the passing of ages reshaped the landscape a lake was formed, and perhaps it remained unvisited for at least as long before the inhabitant was roused from its monstrous torpor by wanderers whose dreams had been touched by its reverie. It found a crude way to bind the intruders, injecting them with a trace of its essence through its spines. Fairman had heard rumours of this relatively modern legend, which he'd assumed to be a variant on tales of alien abduction, but now it felt as if the volumes of the *Revelations* were carrying on a dialogue in his head, composing annotations there. At some point the entity was injured and retreated to its sanctuary beneath the lake. Over the ages it had withered to little more than a seed of itself, but now it rediscovered its primal substance, extending its spines through the land. Or was this yet another symbol—a veiled account of how it was reaching for the world? It was just a dream, Fairman reassured himself, or rather it would have been one if he were asleep. At some point he was, since daylight wakened him.

Not just the greyish light did, nor even the suspicion that he could have been mumbling in his sleep. He'd had an idea during the night, and his gaze drifted towards the safe. Had he been less thorough than he ought to be? He lined up the books on the dressing-table before he opened the first volume at the rear flyleaf. The breath he released felt like starting awake once again, and he saw his eyes widen in the mirror. The book and all the others had been annotated on the flyleaf.

The addition that he'd previously seen wasn't in the same handwriting as the others, although they looked similar. They were even more loosely scrawled than the first example had been. Perhaps the writers had been

drunk or half asleep, which might explain the vagueness of the annotations too. "The mage need not speak the words nor shape them in his mind, for reading them has made of him a conduit for their power." This had been added to *On Conjuration*, while *On the Purposes of Night* now ended by exhorting "Embrace the night, that the old dreams may walk by day" and *Of the Secrets of the Stars* had acquired an extra scrap of wisdom. "Gaze not upon the stars but into the gulf beyond, where you may glimpse the eternal watchers whose sport is the shrivelling of worlds." Fairman was distracted by a knocking—more a series of loose flat thumps—at the door. "Mr Fairman?" Janine Berry called. "Leonard?"

His lips were unexpectedly difficult to wield, and he saw his mouth try out shapes beyond the books. "One moment," he said indistinctly.

"Don't go hurrying yourself. We know you're busy. Only wanted to make sure you know breakfast's whenever you're ready."

He couldn't have guessed the time from the clogged daylight, but his watch showed it was nearly ten o'clock. "I shouldn't be long," he called, and his lips mimed the words in the mirror.

He hadn't heard the landlady depart when he turned to the next book. The *Revelations* told how Gla'aki roamed the universe, the annotation said. "His great mind guided the vessel, but even He could not revive the denizens of the dead city which formed its carapace. The city and its secrets far older than humanity were destroyed as the vessel fell to our earth." The scrawl at the end of the following volume seemed to continue the theme. "The disciples of Gla'aki have described the dead city which lies in the depths of Deepfall Water, yet none of His evangelists have understood the greater wonder. What is the apparition of the vanished city but a token of His power to shape His domain through His dreams?"

"What indeed," Fairman muttered. He turned his back on his twin once they'd both shut their books, and carried a trinity of volumes to the safe. Had he learned anything at all from the annotations? They felt to him as if the books had been talking to themselves. He locked the other volumes in the safe and headed for the bathroom.

Someone had been in it recently. The mirror was befogged, and a trickle of water was snaking into the plughole of the bath. Fairman made the plumbing muffle his noises next door and ambled downstairs once he was dressed. He'd hardly taken his place by the window, outside which the fog

hovered wakefully above the beach, when Mrs Berry appeared with a trayful of breakfast. As she transferred the plate and the other items to his table she said "We saw you at the theatre last night."

Fairman was distracted by the sight of the occupants of the shelter opposite the hotel. Could they really have been there all night? Their faces were still hidden, suggesting that they could be asleep if not worse. When he saw one of them stir, flexing his floppy gloved fingers on his knees, Fairman said "What did you think of the show?"

"What you did, that's all that matters."

"Surely not all." His response seemed to drive her gaze further back in her eyes, and Fairman said "You have to be impressed by how much they can do."

"You've not seen the half yet."

He had no idea what to say to this. The empty tables all around him prompted him to murmur "I'm sorry to be putting you to trouble."

"You aren't at all, Leonard. None of us."

"Eating after everybody else, I mean."

"You're not. You're our only one."

"Haven't your other guests eaten? Someone was in the bathroom before me."

For an instant Mrs Berry hesitated. "What makes you say that?"

"It was steamed up."

"I expect the fog got in." Before he could argue she said "Look at me keeping you from your meal. That isn't what I'm for."

She stumped away softly but rapidly, returning as Fairman downed the last pliant mouthful. He was gazing at a bunch of sluggish joggers who might almost have been imitating animals from the zoo, some with their fists raised in front of them like paws while others dangled their arms from a simian crouch. "We all need to keep ourselves in shape," Mrs Berry said.

Rather than admit this Fairman said "Could you tell me where I'll find Phyllida Barnes?"

"You'll be seeing our littlest ones, of course. She has them up on Haven Way."

"Not quite the smallest, surely? They'll be at your hospital."

"We've none of those in Gulshaw."

"The nearest one, I mean. The nearest maternity."

"We like to keep it here. Us Gulshaw women don't need all that paraphernalia."

"Some people must, surely."

"If what we drop can't get on without that kind of help, it isn't meant."

Fairman wasn't anxious to learn how much she might be drawing on her own experience, and made haste to fetch his coat instead, together with a carton for the next book. The old folk in the shelter had partly uncovered their faces; the scarves had sagged below their eyes, at any rate. "Good day," they called, two syllables so muffled that he could easily have thought a less commonplace word.

The light was more stifled than ever. The icy disk of the sun gleamed for a moment before vanishing into the wall of fog above the sea as if it had been engulfed by gelatin. No jellyfish were visible beyond the promenade, though at first he had the grotesque fancy that some of the people standing about on the beach were ankle-deep in them. Of course the people were wearing plastic beach shoes, which made their feet look translucent and discoloured and swollen.

A side street led uphill past Gulshaw Face & Body, apparently both a beautician's and a gym. Perhaps this was where the local folk acquired their tan, though Fairman hadn't seen much of that lately; even the ones he'd previously encountered—Janine Berry's, Frank Lunt's—had begun to fade as if there was no further need for such a sham. Though the slope wasn't especially steep, he felt sluggish by the time he reached the top. Not far around the corner was Sprightly Sprouts, a long grey single-storey building that might originally have been some sort of hall. The exterior was painted with large animals so cartoonish that they hardly seemed to belong to any species Fairman recognised. As he closed the gate of the yard, which was provided with miniature climbing equipment and infantile rides, he heard a woman cry "Here's our visitor. Let's see you all shape up."

He felt abashed and resentful of being used as some kind of threat. As he made for the merrily yellow doors, they were flung open by a buxom woman. Her voluminous dun gown hung straight to her feet from her

considerable bosom, which quivered visibly inside the material when she took a step towards him. He might have thought her chubby face quaked too, twitching the tips of her fierce smile and almost closing her small eyes, not to mention jerking her greyish nostrils wider. Though her russet hair was parted well to the left, it framed her face with identical waves. "Phyllida Barnes," she said not much less vigorously than she'd addressed the children. "Good to meet you at last, Mr Fairman."

Once he'd accepted the clammy Gulshaw handshake, she made a tremulous bustling movement with her entire body to urge him over the threshold. "No ceremony, Mr Fairman. They're all waiting for you."

He could hear the children beyond the lobby, where dozens of miniature jackets and overcoats hung in an alcove. As he shut the doors behind him the hubbub seemed to swell up, growing shriller. Perhaps his face betrayed some nervousness, because Phyllida Barnes blinked at him. "Don't you care for children?"

"I've had very little to do with them."

"Maybe you should see to that," she said and appeared to realise to some extent that she was being presumptuous. "We know how much you're doing already, but still."

Without waiting for an answer she opened a door opposite the cloakroom. The babble of children subsided, isolating a few wordless sounds, as Fairman ventured into the room. Most of the toddlers were behind dwarfish desks, though a few children, not necessarily the smallest, lay on plastic mats on the wooden floor. Every child was gazing at Fairman, who had an unsettling sense that he was the focus of attention of a single mind. "We like to start them young," Phyllida Barnes declared. "You're never too young to learn, or too old either."

He supposed she was referring to the classroom ambiance. Quite a few of the toddlers were unduly plump while others were equally unhealthily thin. He was restraining any comment when Phyllida Barnes said "Diane?"

Diane was just as stout but more sluggish, and wore a gown like hers. Fairman was disconcerted to observe how similar her hair was to her colleague's, virtually a mirror image with the parting on the right. "Show Mr Fairman your pictures, everyone," she urged.

Perhaps they had recently been to the zoo or gone walking in the woods. He could just deduce that the paintings were meant to represent something like a hedgehog. Even the prostrate infants held up spiky daubs on large sheets of paper. "What do you think of that, Mr Fairman?" Phyllida Barnes cried.

"Very nice." In case this sounded insufficiently enthusiastic he said "All of them."

"There you are, children. See who thinks you're developing." Nevertheless she seemed disappointed by his reaction. "What else would you care to see?" she said.

"If you don't mind, what I came for." When she and Diane added their stares to the children's, Fairman said "The book."

"I'll bring it to you. You'll occupy him while I get it, won't you?

Fairman couldn't tell whether she was speaking to her colleague or the children. As Phyllida Barnes left the room Diane said "What would you like to show Mr Fairman now? What shall we do for him?"

After a general murmur that might have included some words a boy or else a girl piped "Walk."

"That's right, you're good at that," Diane said so instantly that he wondered if she found them daunting. "Show Mr Fairman how well you can."

The children at the desks stood up at once with a flapping of dun overalls, and he was disconcerted by how tall some of them proved to be. Did they have difficulty in walking?

Was that why the woman had made an issue of it? Or perhaps they were demonstrating as they came towards him how complicatedly they could walk. The children on the mats had raised their heads, and now they began to squirm, rustling the plastic. "Yes, go on," Diane told them. "You crawl."

They set about it as the other children shuffled and hopped and sidled to him. All of them wore slippers not unlike the beach shoes he'd seen earlier, and the room resounded with slithering. All their eyes were on him, widening with eagerness if not bulging with some effort, especially those of the infants around his feet. The children only just stopped short of touching him, instead taking elaborate steps backwards. It put him in mind of some sort of dance—even the crawlers on the floor were finding different ways to

wriggle—and he heard a whisper of a song or chant that sounded nearly familiar. "Keep that up and you'll be on the stage," he said.

This didn't seem to be what they wanted to hear, since they continued to encircle him while murmuring the chant their soft loose footfalls almost drowned. Quite a few of their eyes had grown so protuberant that he was put in mind of gouts of liquid. He glanced at Diane, but she was standing well back and watching him as distantly as all the children seemed to be. He was about to appeal to her or even call a halt himself—the intricate movements were confusing him so much that he could hardly distinguish the shapes of some of the players—when they all grew still in unison, even the ones on the floor. Phyllida Barnes had come into the room. "Here's his book," she said.

Did she really need to give the pronoun so much weight? He was still more thrown by the children's response. All their mouths grew round as they stretched out their hands to the book—even the crawlers did—and almost deafened him with a cry that might have greeted a present somebody had just unwrapped on their behalf. "It isn't for you," he couldn't help blurting. "There'll be other books."

A shudder took him unawares. He felt as if he'd been assailed by a denial so concerted that its force was close to physical. As the sensation faded Phyllida Barnes gave him a blink that he could have taken for reproach. "Mr Fairman has to put it with the others," she said. "That's where it's going to live."

"Back to your places now," Diane said.

The outstretched hands sank, and the toddlers shuffled to their desks while the prone children slithered to their mats. Fairman couldn't have said whether every child resumed the same position they'd been in when he'd entered the room. He made for the door, but as he held out his hands for the book Phyllida Barnes murmured "Do you want to say something?"

She didn't let go of the volume when he took hold of it. In her grasp the cover felt clammy, even yielding. "Thank you for taking care of it," he said —presumably he was meant to set the children an example. "I'm grateful to everyone who has."

Phyllida Barnes gazed at him so distantly that he couldn't read her feelings. "I expect you'll say more when it's time," she said and relinquished the

book.

She was still in the doorway, and there wasn't room to squeeze past her. As he wondered none too happily if more was expected of him, Diane said "What do we say to Mr Fairman?"

He heard an indrawn breath behind him. It was so enormous that he had to remind himself he was hearing a roomful of children. After a pause they spoke almost in chorus, some of them distinctly enough that he couldn't mistake the words. "So much more to see."

"That's right," Phyllida Barnes said. "We don't know how much."

Fairman had no idea what this was supposed to mean or whether it was addressed to him. When she stepped back, twitching her eyes even smaller and quivering her straightened lips towards some kind of smile, he dodged around her. As he lingered to package the book he said "Do you know where I'm going next?"

"Of course we do. You want Bernard Seddon at Stillwater."

"What sort of place might that be?"

"Where we all go in our time." She appeared to think this was plain, and only eventually said "The funeral parlour."

"I imagine you'll be directing me."

"Maybe you should call him first if you don't mind. We know you're not meant to be put to any more trouble, but just in case he's occupied with someone. We've had a few go lately."

Fairman supposed he should be grateful to the mayoress for making arrangements on his behalf. Phyllida Barnes recited the number for him to type on his phone. Before a bell started to ring he heard the murmur of a song or chant in the room he'd just left. A woman's voice interrupted the bell. "Stillwater. How may we be of assistance?"

"Could I speak to Bernard Seddon?"

"Is this Mr Fairman? Bernard's engaged with the departed at the present."

"When could I see him, do you know?"

"As I say, he's at the church. He'll be to and fro with the deceased till this afternoon. He asked me to tell you he'll be here for you by three."

"Three it is. If by any chance he's delayed, here's my number."

"He'll be waiting, Mr Fairman. We know better than to let you down."

Perhaps the hushed respect that had crept into her voice came with the job. As Fairman pocketed the mobile, Phyllida Barnes said "You could have asked him to put them off for you."

"I don't think I should when they can't speak for themselves."

He was trying to lighten the inexplicably oppressive mood, but he thought he'd failed even before she said "We all have a voice, Leonard."

If this was a rebuke it was beyond him. He was emerging into the yard, where the climbing frames and tiny rides were so bedewed with fog that they looked as if they'd been dredged out of water, when Phyllida Barnes murmured "It's yours now."

"It's the university's," Fairman said, but her distant look left him more confused than ever.

His route to the promenade took him past Gulshaw Face & Body, where several bald customers were exercising in the gym. They had plenty of reason, given their lumpy shapes. Some were throwing themselves backwards and forwards on bicycles to nowhere, stretching their arms and then their legs in some form of therapy unfamiliar to him. Others were running or striding on conveyor belts, and Fairman could have thought they were elongating their legs rather too vigorously at each pace. He might even have imagined that the indistinct chant that drifted down from Sprightly Sprouts was accompanying if not driving the exercises. Through another window he glimpsed a woman lying supine on a bed for some kind of facial treatment. A hulking overalled masseuse had laid a towel over the customer's face, of course, however much it looked as though she was kneading the pallid surface in order to squeeze features up from it. Fairman didn't linger over the sight but hurried downhill.

The sea had crept out of the fog. Quite a few people were ankle-deep in the water—he could have thought they hadn't moved since he'd passed that way earlier—while others clustered closer to the promenade. The greyish light looked as if it were being strained through gelatin, and lent all the flesh on display a tint unpleasantly reminiscent of jellyfish. A faint song seeped through the fog, and Fairman was near to imagining that it originated somewhere out to sea until he deduced that it came from the church beyond the murk. The congregation must be singing at one of Bernard Seddon's

funerals, but could the mourners be dancing as well? Perhaps this was the activity that made the song too intermittent for Fairman to be sure how familiar it was.

As he crossed the road to the Wyleave, the denizens of the shelter raised their left hands, and one man called out. Surely he hadn't used Fairman's name, but Fairman demanded "What did you say?"

"We're saying no need to rush there, lad."

Fairman couldn't tell who had spoken first or now, and it might have been a third participant who said through his scarf "We'll all be there soon."

"The whole lot of us," another said.

Fairman had an unwelcome impression of being not just watched but addressed by a solitary senile consciousness. Presumably they had the funeral in mind. "You're right, no hurry," he said but made swiftly for the hotel.

There was nobody at Reception, and the building was quiet as fog, yet it felt no more deserted than the view from his room. As soon as he looked out of the window, the oldsters in the shelter saluted him. Waves were crawling forward on the beach as if determined to drag the fog closer to the promenade. He wasn't going to imagine that all the figures in the restless murk were facing him. He left the window and took his latest acquisition out of its papery nest. "Nearly whole," he said.

It was the fifth volume, *Of Humanity as Chrysalis*. At first glance he took the colophon for an anatomical diagram, showing a muscular skeleton next to a body parted down the middle. The stance of the bones suggested that they might have burst forth of their own volition, however, and the bony grin seemed more conscious than it ought to be. Were there eyes in the sockets? They reminded him of the distant gaze he seemed to have encountered too often in Gulshaw, and he turned to the end of the book. The flyleaf was blank.

It made the book feel oddly unfinished. He was so eager to read the text that he grudged the call he had to make. "Leonard," Nathan Brighouse said. "I hardly like to ask."

"I think I'd better plan on being done by tomorrow."

"That's Saturday." Brighouse might have been saying so in case Fairman had lost all sense of time. "Please ensure you're here on Monday," he said, "and we'll see what needs to be talked over."

"I'll do my best, of course."

"I'd expect no less." Brighouse let him interpret this for a few moments and added "I wouldn't like to think it needs assessment at this stage of your career, Leonard."

"Then don't," Fairman said, but only after ringing off. He was more aware of the book on which he and his twin were resting their hands than of still holding the phone. He should let Sandra know the situation, and as soon as she answered he said "It's me."

"I see it is, Leonard." As he grasped that she was referring to the display of his number she said "You aren't on your way, are you?"

"Who told you I'm not?"

"Nobody had to. It's in your voice."

"As it happens you're right." In a bid not to feel at the mercy of his circumstances Fairman said "I'm on my way to putting it together."

"How much do you still have to collect?"

"Just a couple of volumes. Nathan said I might as well stay the weekend."

"I shouldn't think you'll need any company when you have your books."

"I do have some reading ahead of me." Just in time he saw how she might have wanted him to interpret her remark. "You'd be most welcome if you cared to make the journey," he said hastily, "and I'm sure I wouldn't be alone in saying so."

"You can speak for the town, can you, Leonard?"

"I believe they pay someone to do that. But I think I've a pretty good sense of the place by now, yes."

"It's still the kind of place you dreamed of as a child, is it?"

"It's a lot more than whatever that was. There's so much more to see." If that was a joke, he should have known it was beyond her. "Not least the people," he said.

"What are you saying about them?"

"I started off thinking some of them were a little odd, but maybe they're no more so than I am. I'm sure you'd find them welcoming, all the ones you'll meet."

"I wonder if that's because their town is out of season."

"I'm sure they're genuine enough. They speak their mind round here. I was lectured this morning by one of them."

"Good heavens." Sandra sounded amused or ready to be. "What about, Leonard?"

"A lady told me I ought to care more about children."

"Well." Apparently this wasn't a source of amusement. "Maybe you should," Sandra said.

"I didn't know you felt that way."

"Maybe it isn't all you don't know about me."

"Then if you came here for the weekend I might have a chance to find out."

"I wasn't doing much tomorrow." She paused, perhaps to let him wonder about her decision or to attempt to persuade her, and then she said "All right, I'll take the first train in the morning."

"I'll meet you at the station. I'll make sure I'm free," Fairman said but thought it best to add "If the book should hold me up I'll let you know." That made him even keener to resume reading, and his distant gaze out of the mirror seemed to double his impatience. "Looking forward to it," he said and freed his hand to open the book.

"What need of flesh has the sorcerer? Nightly his essence springs forth and capers for glee..." He was surprised how unsatisfactory he found this and the pages that followed. Even if the content was meant only for the initiated, it felt unnecessarily withheld from him. "More curious still is the transformation which overtakes the child of sorcery, a change often too impatient to wait upon the death of the flesh..." This seemed yet more remote from his experience—as remote as the gaze that was waiting to meet his whenever he glanced up. Perhaps the whole book was symbolic, in which case he lacked the knowledge to interpret it; could that be in the volume he had yet to obtain? He was surprised how frustrated he felt by having read them out of order. "Some of the transformed owe their change to pronouncing the words of power, which shapes the body of the speaker to

produce them." Might reading aloud help him understand? It seemed only to make him feel overheard inside the hotel and, if he let himself dream anything so absurd, outside too. "Most potent is the transformation which overtakes those who dwell within a territory which an Ancient One has made His own. As He occupies their minds, so the very landscape may revert to the age of primal shaping..." Fairman read to the end and shut the book at last, and as he and his counterpart each rested a hand on the cover he was put in mind of a priest who'd delivered a sermon without having grasped a word.

It was almost ten to three. He added the book to the blackness in the safe and saw the moist print of his fingers vanish from the metal door. As he padded downstairs his footsteps sounded like a muffled heartbeat he'd brought to life. Mrs Berry was behind the counter, but she appeared to be asleep. Her head was tilted back so far that he couldn't immediately distinguish her face. Surely it was only the perspective that made her eyes appear to have sunk inwards, rendering the lids concave enough to fit a thumb in, but there was also the illusion that her features had sunk into the flesh. He was attempting to steal away when she sat up, rubbing a hand over her face so violently that she might have been embarrassed to have been caught sleeping at her post. He could have fancied that he glimpsed her face quivering with emotion or with her treatment. She gazed hard at him before she said "Was there something you wanted to ask me, Leonard?"

For a moment he wondered what she might have been dreaming, and then he didn't want to know. "Just a passing thought," he said.

"All the same."

That could scarcely be an answer to the question he hadn't voiced, and so he said "Actually, it seems I'm to be joined for the weekend. I hope that won't cause any problems."

"Your lady couldn't be more welcome," Janine Berry said with a look he could have taken as coquettish. "We'll see to it she is."

He felt as if his thoughts were too obvious, hardly his own any more. "Thank you for all your hospitality," he said.

He wanted to be in time for his appointment, but he also didn't mind avoiding the tenants of the shelter on the promenade. He drove along the street behind the Wyleave towards the church and came to Stillwater

Funerals at a junction above the promenade. As he caught sight of it he realised that he hadn't asked for directions. He must have noticed the place or the name on the map at some point, though he didn't remember. In any case he no longer seemed to need the map.

The funeral parlour was a single-storey building not unlike an elongated vault with windows, and as grey as the light doled out by the fog above the sea. It was overlooked by the backs of hotels, and as Fairman left the car on the forecourt he saw people seated at several hotel windows. All of them were gazing in his direction, but he couldn't distinguish what was in their eyes, even when they each raised a hand to greet or acknowledge him. While they could hardly have been waiting for him, he would rather not imagine that they spent their days watching the funeral parlour.

Beyond a glass door with a black border, a venerable desk faced an expanse of carpet that yielded underfoot like moss. Two obese black leather couches rested against the walls, where the dark wallpaper seemed to hint at a pattern like stars almost too distant to see. A table scattered with dog-eared brochures bearing the slogan A Better Place squatted in front of each couch. The reception area was deserted, but a hymn hung like mist in the air. At least, Fairman took it for a hymn, so muted that he couldn't grasp the melody. As he strained to identify it and perhaps put words to it he heard soft heavy footfalls approaching down a corridor, and a man in a suit as grey as discretion plodded into the room. "Mr Fairman," he said, rather loudly for the setting. "Bernard Seddon."

His oval face tapered to not much of a chin, and his shoulders sloped so precipitately that his jacket seemed in danger of slipping off. Perhaps that was why he finished buttoning it before he gave Fairman an unctuous handshake, which came with a deferential nod that offered a view of the pallid central parting of his almost monkish tonsure. "Beg pardon for the wait," he said. "The girl's gone for a lie down. Big day tomorrow."

"I should be the one apologising. I wasn't quite on time." As the undertaker's large eyes widened while his small mouth worked on an expression, Fairman said "What kind of congratulations are in order?"

"For the girl?" Seddon's eyes grew wider still, elevating his hairless brows, and seemed to betray some kind of uneasy amusement. "She doesn't need any," he said. "If anyone does it's you, Leonard."

"I'm only doing my job."

"That's us, not you. You don't want a look at mine, do you? See how we all finish up in Gulshaw."

"I really don't think that's necessary, thank you."

Did Fairman sense disappointment before Seddon recaptured his humour? "I don't get many complaints from my customers," the undertaker said. "Even the ones that aren't from here."

"I shouldn't think you would."

Fairman saw his bid to join in the joke fall flat; certainly Seddon's gaze retreated deep into his eyes. "Shall I bring it you?" the undertaker said.

"The book." Since the undertaker seemed to think this didn't call for a reply, Fairman said "By all means."

"I won't be two shakes."

Perhaps this was more of his notion of wit, since he was gone considerably longer. Once the soft footsteps faded along the corridor Fairman reverted to trying to identify the music that seemed to permeate the room. Was there a whisper of voices as well as the murmur of the organ? He didn't know how long he had been left alone when he thought he heard his name. Or might the words have been "Let us see him"? In any case they took him into the corridor.

There were three doors in either wall. Just the furthest on the right and the nearest left-hand door were open. From somewhere came a sound like long slow effortful breaths— the noise of some kind of suction. Fairman couldn't help feeling relieved when a glance through the first doorway showed him no more than a viewing room, where two rows of straight chairs faced an open coffin. Or was it meant for viewing? The underside of the lid reflected the contents; he could make out details of a dark suit, including a breast pocket, but surely other parts of the image were distorted, since the collar and the ends of the sleeves sported greyish masses with nothing he would call a shape. The figure must be part of some kind of display too macabre for Fairman's taste or, he would have hoped, anybody else's. He needn't wonder what the swollen greyish wads resembled, and he was resisting an urge to look in the coffin when a figure with a blurred face and hands lurched into the corridor.

They had to be blurred because they were at the edge of his vision. When he looked he saw Seddon with a book in his hands. "Want to see after all?"

the undertaker said. "We can show you what happens if you like."

"No. No thank you." Fairman turned away from the room, only to sense the contents of the coffin behind him. "I just wondered if you were having difficulty finding the book," he said as he retreated down the corridor.

"Saying goodbye, that was all." Seddon plodded softly after him into the reception area and passed him the book. "I didn't need to, did I?" he said as though he'd seen another joke. "There's no goodbyes round here."

Fairman refrained from interpreting this. As the marks of moist fingertips faded from the cover of the book without exhibiting their prints he saw that the colophon depicted a coffin framed by a pair of open hands that might have been offering it to the reader. The volume was the ninth, *Of the Uses of the Dead.* Without taking time to think he blurted "You're the man to know."

"What are you making me, Leonard?"

"The chap who'd know about their uses." Fairman was thrown by how eager if not anxious the question had sounded. "That's supposing you think they have any," he said.

"We all have here. You most of all."

"Well, thank you," Fairman said, rather hoping Seddon thought he had the book in mind. "So who's my last custodian?"

"The father. Father Sinclough."

At once Fairman wondered how much was about to grow clearer. "The father," he said. "Did he give you this book?"

"All of us."

Fairman hadn't really needed to be told. "Why?" he said.

Seddon's face quivered as if the question had hurt him. "Seems like he thought he could trust us."

"You've proved him right, but why did he give them out at all?"

"Maybe he'll say. It wasn't up to us to ask."

Fairman suspected that the undertaker was being less than honest, but there was no need to interrogate him. "I'll call now if you have the number."

"It's here," Seddon said, poking his forehead.

Fairman glanced aside as he reached for his mobile. He'd thought Seddon's forefinger was significantly longer and thinner than the glimpse had made it seem. As he typed the digits Seddon intoned he had an odd sense of already knowing them. Of course he'd already encountered the Gulshaw prefix several times. The electronic trilling of a bell invaded the hushed music of the parlour, and eventually a man's uneven voice said "Sinclough."

He sounded short of breath if not of words. "Father Sinclough," Fairman said. "This is—"

"Mr Fairman. It couldn't be anyone other."

"And how about your people with the books?" Something like resentment of being taken for granted so much provoked Fairman to demand "Couldn't they have been either?"

"It should all be clear to you tomorrow, Mr Fairman."

"Why do I have to wait till then?"

"Preparing, Mr Fairman." The priest had begun to sound as if he grudged the breaths he was expending. "I've still got to," he said.

Fairman assumed he was thinking of the Sunday sermon. "You're telling me I can't have the book today."

"I'm sure you'll have enough to digest tonight as it is." Weightily enough to be quoting a sacred text, Father Sinclough said "All shall be ready for you in the morning."

"Where do I find you? What time?"

"My house is in Forest Avenue. Shall we say nine?"

At least Fairman would have the book well before he had to meet Sandra. As he agreed the time he heard the priest take a stuttering breath. "Don't drive, will you?" Father Sinclough said. "There may not be room to park."

"I expect the walk will do me good."

In a moment Fairman thought that a walk in the fog was scarcely likely to improve his health. As the faint music seeped into his ear he realised he was alone on the mobile. He shoved it in his pocket and was opening his mouth when the undertaker said "Don't thank me, Leonard. It's us should be thanking you for bringing it all together."

Did he think the addition to the archive would earn the town some tribute? At least one of the townsfolk preferred not to be named for the donation. "Let's say we all did," Fairman said and saw a response flicker in Seddon's eyes— appreciation, surely, but too distant to own up to its nature.

As he made for the car he felt as if the gelatinous light was gathering on his skin. By the time he'd shut the carton in the boot his skin was crawling clammily enough for fever. Along the route to the hotel all the windows looked as though the surrounding stone had expanded like fungus to coat the panes grey—condensation, of course. Nobody had rubbed them clear, but there wasn't much to see in the deserted glistening streets. He could have thought the entire town had succumbed to slumber, though he didn't blame anyone for staying indoors in this weather.

He was crossing the lobby when Janine Berry came out of the office behind the counter, massaging her cheeks as if to revive their lost tan. "Just fixing my face," she said, though for a moment her vigour had made it look alarmingly lopsided. "Will you do us the honour tonight, Leonard?"

He wasn't sure if he wanted to learn "Which one would that be?"

"Will you dine with us? No charge. Our privilege."

While he didn't relish the prospect of another walk in the fog, Fairman said "With whom?"

"Just our hotel. You're on your own till tomorrow."

"That's very kind. When would you like me?"

"Whenever suits you," Mrs Berry said and gave the carton in his hands a deferential nod. "Before you lose yourself or after if you prefer."

"These aren't the kind of books you lose yourself in." When she looked unconvinced he said "Before might be best."

"Can you give us twenty minutes? If it's less I'll let you know."

He could have thought she was eager for him to begin reading. Though it seemed early for dinner, he didn't like to protest when it was complimentary. Upstairs he transferred the book to the safe, where the mass of blackness reminded him of a lightless void. The tenants of the shelter might have been waiting for him to appear at the window so that they could salute him in unison. He couldn't tell how crowded the beach was in the fog, where every figure appeared to glisten whenever they grew visible. The

sight made his mind feel incapable of grasping what was there, and he lay down on the bed until the phone rang beside it— rattled, at any rate. "We're ready for you," Janine Berry said.

She wasn't alone in the dining-room. She was flanked by Tom the porter, whose tan had grown patchy enough for a disease, and the chambermaid. All three bowed to Fairman while keeping their united gaze on him, so that he had to suppress a nervous laugh. Since Tom still wore the suit he'd worn while conducting Fairman to his room, it was perhaps not entirely surprising that the girl was dressed in her chambermaid's uniform. "Here you are by the window," Mrs Berry said as if he mightn't notice the only table that was set. "Wine, Dora," she said. "You'll have red, won't you, Mr Fairman?"

While that was his preference, he would rather not have had it taken for granted; somebody had even pulled the cork in advance. Once he'd tasted it and pronounced it fine despite an underlying ferrous tang, Mrs Berry said "Soup, Tom."

This was a greyish broth that resembled stagnant water with gelatinous fragments floating in it. "Is this seafood?" Fairman said in an attempt to prepare for a mouthful.

"Our very own," Mrs Berry said with some pride. "Brought up from the sea."

When he risked a spoonful Fairman found that it did indeed taste marine, in fact very reminiscent of meals he'd previously eaten in Gulshaw. He might have found it easier to finish if the staff of the Wyleave hadn't watched each mouthful, Dora shuffling forward to replenish his glass whenever he took a sip while Tom was equally dutiful in wielding a jug of water. When at last Fairman laid his spoon to rest in the bowl, Janine Berry said "Ready for our special?"

Fairman said he was but felt somewhat less so once Tom brought it in. The roundish steak was the same grey as the soup, and slithered towards the edge of the plate as the porter playing waiter stumbled on the threshold of the room. "Steady, son," Mrs Berry said.

Tom paid this so little attention that he might have thought she wasn't addressing him. He tilted the plate on its way to the table, and when the action threatened to dislodge the vegetables—potatoes not much more

whitish than the beans and carrots—he grabbed Fairman's fork and used it to hook the dangling dewlap onto the plate. "Gently, Tom," Mrs Berry blurted.

"Could I ask what the meat is?" Fairman said, if only to delay the encounter.

"Gulshaw's best," Mrs Berry said. "Our own produce."

He supposed it would be impolite to enquire further. The knife sliced it readily enough once he'd dragged the meat across the plate with the fork. The rubbery texture suggested seafood, and it did taste rather like fish, though he wasn't able to identify the underlying flavour. He could have thought that not just his hostess and her staff but the occupants of the shelter across the road were watching him. The more conscious he became of being observed, the vaster the attention seemed, and he did his best to make short work of the fillet and the vegetables to which it lent its taste. As he laid the utensils together on the glistening plate Mrs Berry said "Pudding?"

"I'll turn into it if I eat any more." Since this failed to amuse his audience, whose gazes grew distant in unison, Fairman added "Thank you enormously, but I honestly don't think I could find room."

"You've done us proud," Mrs Berry said. "You go and finish what you're here for."

Had he drunk too much? Though he'd left wine in the bottle, having gestured Tom away, Fairman's legs felt a little rubbery on the stairs. In the upper corridor he had to support himself for a moment against the wall, leaving a moist handprint on the fishy wallpaper. His skin kept turning clammy, and when he dabbed his forehead with a hand, both of them felt infirm. Perhaps the fog had given him a touch of fever, in which case he might benefit from a bath.

As he stepped into the corridor with a towel over his arm he thought he heard activity in the bathroom. Nobody was visible through the frosted pane, but he was easing the door open when the fluid restless sound was repeated. Surely it was only water trickling into the drain. The bath glistened with moisture, and he saw movement in the plughole. A greyish substance was withdrawing out of sight, and he could have imagined that as it vanished it blinked at him. That was enough to send him back to his room, where he confined himself to splashing water on his face.

He couldn't hear Janine Berry or her staff. He wasn't far from fancying that they were still where he'd left them, standing side by side to watch him plod away replete. The idea seemed to magnify the stillness, which felt as if it were focused on him. He dragged the curtains together without glancing through the window and released the book from the safe. "All life is the instrument of the mage, and remains in his power after the process men call death..."

The volume seemed to promise formulas to revive the dead, to conjure forth their wakeful thoughts, to inhabit their bodies so as to use them as disposable vessels in some form of arcane exploration, even to prevent the newly dead from departing as long as they were useful to the sorcerer. None of these were promises Fairman was anxious to see kept, but he couldn't resist reading on; that was why he was here, after all, though perhaps he was glad not to be able to interpret much of what he read. "The mage shall be known by the summoning of the remains..." Which was the summoned, and which the summoner? If there were occult formulas they must be lying low in the midst of the text, and he found himself trying not to hear his own voice, though the peripheral sight of a mouth shaping every word didn't help. He released a breath as long and slow as any of those he'd kept hearing—the waves outside his room— when the blank flyleaves brought the volume to an end.

Once it was locked away he ventured into the corridor, where the stillness made him feel more observed than ever. Perhaps he ought to blame the eyes of all the fish that were embossed in the wallpaper. He didn't simply flush the toilet as an aid to using it but sang to cover up his activity: "Thou great inspiration, so much more than sea..." Back in his room he couldn't resist going to the window. The tenants of the shelter raised their sluggish floppy hands, but their faces were so much in shadow that he could have thought the featureless grey expanses below their eyes weren't scarves. In spite of the hour and the fog, more people than he could count were on the beach. Some were sitting with their backs to him, but surely it was fog, not the sea, that kept drifting over their outstretched legs. Far too many of the motionless figures, both the seated ones and those on their feet that rubbery shoes had enlarged, were facing the hotel. All their eyes were so wide that they made the other features seem to have dwindled if not shrunk into the flesh.

He couldn't be sure of that—couldn't even tell whether any of the people on the beach had been among those he'd encountered in Gulshaw. He felt as if he were dreaming the sights beyond the window; perhaps he would prefer to be. When he retreated to bed and switched off the light he was afraid that worse fancies were waiting in the stagnant dark—more visions of the denizen of Deepfall Water. He found he was nervous of sleeping, and he didn't think he had by the time Janine Berry's voice roused him.

She was singing or more accurately crooning. At first he thought she was in the lobby beneath his room, and then he realised she was outside the hotel. He floundered out of bed and sprawled towards the window. The watchers in the shelter saluted him before growing as motionless as almost everybody on the beach. He caught Janine Berry in the act of rising to her feet at the edge of the waves. As she stooped to cradle a flabby greyish almost shapeless object in her hands her left breast emerged from her blouse, to such a disconcerting extent that it might have been reaching for the prize she lifted to it. The sea fell silent between waves, so that Fairman was just able to make out her words. "You'll shape up," she said. "You'll last. You won't be like your brother."

So this was what dreams were like, Fairman thought as he found himself back in bed. Another showed him a horde of dancers emerging from the ballroom along the promenade to take their bewilderingly elaborate dance onto the beach. While they chanted a celebratory version of a familiar tune they kicked up their legs, which were bare and unnervingly long. Beyond them, through a momentary break in the fog, he glimpsed gelatinous lumps sidling crabwise towards the woods or crawling with a caterpillar motion. His bedtime reading must have given rise to the sight of the dead slithering out of their coffins through any crack they could find and worming through the earth to cluster at the edge of the sea, extending their arms and their hands that were at least as elongated towards the fog. He might have expected this to waken him—certainly he would have hoped for that to happen—but a nagging impression did. He felt as if he'd been talking in his sleep, and to an audience.

Although he seemed to be flaccid with exhaustion, another thought sent him squirming out of bed to wobble over to the safe. Outside the window the fog was engulfing the dawn. He fumbled to switch on the light once he'd transferred his two most recent acquisitions to the dressing-table. He

opened *Of Humanity as Chrysalis* at the rear endpaper and then, with resignation that felt dreamlike, *Of the Uses of the Dead.* The pages were no longer blank.

The writing was less recognisable than ever. It looked as though an intruder had been struggling to guide Fairman's hand. The words seemed wholly unfamiliar, having left no discernible trace in his brain. "While Cthulhu makes Himself known to men through their dreams, Gla'aki fastens on their minds so as to make their dreams His own and shape them to His will..." This had been added to the volume on humanity, and Fairman couldn't tell whether it referred to the shaping of dreams or of minds, if not both. Beneath it the sentences were increasingly skewed across the page. "The Ancient Ones are not restricted to Their lairs, since a simple thought of Them may summon Them to seep through the very substance of the world. As Gla'aki came to know the minds of men, so He ceased to need to bind them physically to Him..." In the other volume the handwriting was even less controlled, wandering awry and almost off the flyleaf. "Where the power of Gla'aki has been concentrated He uses all life for His dreams. In these places shall be seen the eldest ways, where whatever lived was uncertain of its form and consumed its like in a bid for vigour..."

This read like an imitation of Percy Smallbeam's prose, Fairman tried to think; all the annotations did. Certainly he found them just as incomprehensible. He wondered if he'd spoken them aloud while scrawling them, and in what voice. As he resisted an urge to try reading them out, the bedside phone emitted its unmelodious clatter. "You're up, aren't you, Leonard?" Janine Berry told him. "Are you breakfasting before you go out?

Fairman was assailed by an excessively familiar taste that rose from somewhere in him. "I think I'm still fed from last night."

"You know best. You fast if you think you should." Before Fairman could find a response she said "We'll have plenty of the special for your lady friend as well. I made it for you myself."

She sounded oddly wistful. Some undefined thought made Fairman's limbs grow rubbery as he stood up, fumbling the receiver onto its stand. He really didn't need to stay in Gulshaw once he'd completed the set of books; he could pick up Sandra at the station and drive straight back to Brichester—it was too late for him to phone and tell her not to come. As he hauled the curtains wide he braced himself to be greeted by the tenants of the shelter,

but then his body sagged. The promenade was deserted and so was the beach, as far as he could see for the stagnant fog that made the sea resemble an artificial lake.

Had the weather proved too much for everyone at last? Even the shelter opposite the hotel was empty, and the graffiti glistened as if they had only just been painted; the incomprehensible words appeared to writhe with moisture or with eagerness to be grasped until Fairman looked away. The sense of an unseen audience seemed to have left the hotel. Perhaps he needn't put Sandra off after all, he thought with vague relief. While he wasn't entirely alone— Mrs Berry at least was presumably still in the building—he felt sufficiently at home that he didn't use the plumbing to cover up his noises. Once he'd showered in the already damp bath he dressed and made his way uphill from the car park.

The fog had been waiting for him. The moisture seemed not simply to cling to him but to permeate his glistening skin, which felt feverishly unstable. He climbed the street as fast as he could, though that made him even clammier. The fog might have been ushering him to his destination, leaving its murky mark on every window as it fluttered sluggishly backwards just a few paces ahead of him. All the houses looked as dormant as the empty cars resting half their wheels on the pavements. Did Gulshaw shut down on Saturdays out of season? He could have thought the town was not so much resting from its summer labours as reverting to its ordinary state.

Forest Avenue was indeed beside the woods. Some of the houses on the inland side were so close to them that Fairman couldn't tell where their gardens ended and the woods began. There were no buildings on the opposite side, just a line of trees bordering the cracked uneven road. The priest's house was separated from its neighbours by walls that had partly collapsed, weakened by vines that stretched out of the forest to overgrow most of the garden and clutch at the house. Even the porch between two tall thin grimy windows was adorned with dripping tendrils and beaded leaves. Fairman felt the stone step crumble underfoot as he stepped into the porch to thumb the rusty bellpush.

He had to press so hard that his thumb swelled up around his nail. He was close to trying again by the time he heard footsteps shuffling towards the door, which wavered open to reveal a man whose age had bent him almost a

head shorter than Fairman. His floppy slippers must be why his feet had sounded unduly lacking in shape. His black robe emphasised the livid tints of his skin, and his wrinkled face put Fairman in mind of a balloon that had started to deflate; even his bald whitish scalp seemed in danger of subsiding. His large eyes were virtually colourless, and gleamed up at his visitor while his thin faded lips groped for a smile. "Mr Fairman," he said. "Thank you for gracing my house."

His handshake was the loosest yet. His lank fingers writhed in Fairman's grasp as if they were trying to give him a sign, unless they were betraying how age had made them uncontrollable. "Will you sit with me for a little while?" he said.

The hall and the stairs that divided it not quite in half grew darker still as Father Sinclough shut the door. The carpets and the wallpaper weren't much less sombre than his robe, and the additional darkness felt like a weight that had settled into the house. The priest shuffled effortfully into the nearest left-hand room and grabbed the arms of a chair before lowering himself. "Please be at home," he said with the last of a breath.

He hadn't switched the light on. Fairman couldn't even make out the nails of the fingers gripping the chair. The stifled glow through the grubby windows made all the furniture look steeped in fog, though surely it was dust that had risen from the chair when the priest sank into it. A radio that might have been as old as its owner squatted on a chipped marble mantelpiece above a dark hearth strewn with dead leaves that must have fallen from the vines that enshrouded the chimney on the roof. The gloom of the walls was relieved only by a dull glint of glass in frames, all of which had been divested of whatever pictures they'd contained. As Fairman headed for the armchair closest to the window he saw a blurred version of himself slither from glass to glass like an inhabitant of an aquarium.

Having sat down, he edged gingerly forward. The chair felt soft and bloated, and he could have thought it was moist as well, perhaps from its proximity to the fog that loomed at the window. He might have moved if it hadn't given him the best view of the room. Father Sinclough seemed content to be almost somnolently quiet, but Fairman was anxious to be done with any interview. "So," he said, "I understand you're the gentleman responsible."

"I tried to be," the priest said like a sigh. "Mea culpa, I was wrong."

"In what way?"

"I thought the books were best kept apart." With another breath the priest said "You'll appreciate I've learned my error."

"You don't mean the people you gave them to." When Father Sinclough shook his head—in the dimness the pale scalp seemed to wobble—Fairman said "Why those people in particular?"

"I never questioned it." The priest held out his hands as if they were cradling a burden. "We're all one here," he said.

Fairman wanted to protest that he wasn't, whatever the priest's words were supposed to mean. Instead he demanded "And why me?"

"It becomes you, my son." Father Sinclough clasped his hands together; in the gloom they looked near to merging into a single pallid mass. "When Donald Rothermere read your essay we knew you'd take all the care that was called for," he declared. "Do you know what Eunice Spriggs said?"

His eyes were wide enough to be expecting a yes, but Fairman was disconcerted to learn that the mayoress had been involved at such an early stage. "Please say."

"She said she was sure you'd live up to your name."

All this had taken quite a few breaths out of the priest, but Fairman was provoked to try another question. "Forgive my asking, but is Sinclough really yours?"

The priest shook his head slowly, and Fairman told himself its outline hadn't shifted in the process. "It was the first change I made," Father Sinclough said.

Fairman didn't feel the need to interrogate him further, even to learn how it might be spelled. "Anyway, could I trouble you for the book?"

The priest laid his hands on the arms of the chair. "We've led you quite a dance, haven't we."

"Never mind, it's over now."

"Not entirely, Mr Fairman." Father Sinclough took a breath and said "Not here."

Fairman found he had to take a breath himself. "I'm sorry?" he said but didn't feel. "You're telling me the book is..."

"It's at the church."

"Because it's safer there, would that be?"

"It would be safe anywhere in Gulshaw, Leonard."

However much Fairman was failing to understand, it surely didn't matter. "Well then, shall we go?" he said and stood up.

The priest sagged if not sank back into the chair. It looked as though the stagnant gloom had donned a pallid face and hands. "It's waiting for you," he said.

"Perhaps you could tell me where to find it."

"Where else but the pulpit, my son."

"Thank you for your time," Fairman said, which seemed sarcastically inadequate. "Thank you for everything you've done," he tried saying, but the priest's face had grown even less distinguishable. Surely only the dimness was engulfing its features. Just the same, Fairman wasn't slow in letting himself out of the house.

The street was still deserted. "Not a soul," he heard himself murmur before his voice sank without a trace into the fog. There weren't even many cars on Forest Avenue; he could have driven after all. The lethargic fog receded ahead of him as if it was about to unveil the world, and he felt it leave a residue on his skin. The windows of the houses were hardly distinguishable from the grey walls that framed them, and yet he felt watched—enormously so. The street wasn't entirely silent apart from his footsteps; moisture kept dripping from the trees, spattering the wet road and occasionally drumming on car roofs. The shrouded woods put him in mind of a jungle, as if they and the line of trees opposite were reverting to the primitive. He was resisting an urge to sing if not to talk to himself— to add some sound to his muffled footfalls and the intermittent plop of condensation haphazardly accompanied by hollow metallic thumps—when he heard a noise behind him.

It was high up in the trees. It might have been a bird, although he was belatedly aware that he'd seen none in Gulshaw, not so much as a seagull. When the foliage rustled again he glanced back. The branches of more than one tree were shaking against the unseen sky, as if some creature had leapt from one to the other. Fairman couldn't help thinking of the zoo, which—together with the Leafy Shade and Sprightly Sprouts—was somewhere in

the murk beyond the priest's house. Another treetop quivered, and at the same time one shook on the opposite side of the road. Whatever was on the move up there sounded larger than a bird, but it was indistinguishable from the clumps of greyish branches. Fairman turned away, and as his suddenly unstable legs threatened to let him down he grabbed the nearest tree. His fingers recoiled, and he tramped faster towards the church. Surely the trunk hadn't squirmed like a wet scaly limb in his grasp, but he didn't touch any more trees. Even when the floppy sounds in the treetops multiplied he refrained from looking back.

The trees gave out as the road brought him to the Church of the First Word. He could have fancied that the grey stone walls puffed up at his approach, just as the fog seemed to swell with a vast breath as it withdrew across the empty promenade and the deserted beach. He lingered between the mossy gateposts to examine the signboard, having noticed that the definite article had been inserted in smaller letters between the two lines of the name. Patches of lichen obscured parts of the sign, but he thought the last two words had been altered, though he couldn't be sure whether they had originally been Saint Mark.

The same grey lichen had run riot on the gravestones surrounding the church. Some of them were so distorted that Fairman could have imagined the fog had infected them with its amorphousness. A stone urn seemed to be sprouting tendrils like a giant seed if not a tentacled denizen of the sea, and the pale mass dangling from an angel's bowed head was less devoid of features than Fairman liked, as if it was on the way to forming a new face. As he hurried down the path from the rusty gate he saw that quite a number of the mounds that extended from the memorials had crumbled seawards. That needn't remind him of anything, and he tramped to grab the encrusted ring on the door within the grey stone arch.

The door lumbered inwards on its massive hinges, scraping the uneven flagstones, and the stagnant Gulshaw smell came to meet him as though the church had let out a moist breath. The interior was so dim that he left the door open. All the arched windows in the side walls and flanking the altar were at least partly overgrown by a greyish fungoid substance, but Fairman couldn't judge whether this or the fog was responsible for leeching all the colour from the stained glass, where the outlines of the figures were so malformed that it was impossible to tell who or what they were meant to be.

As he made his way along the aisle between the pews, all of which were empty even of books, he saw that the form on the cross that overlooked the altar seemed bloated, its ill-defined grey shape drooping forward as though poised to plump on the floor. Whatever Father Sinclough had said, the church was surely no longer in use, at least not in any conventional sense. Had the priest espoused a new faith? That needn't concern Fairman so long as he retrieved the book.

The pulpit stood to the left of the altar. As Fairman climbed the creaky steps, the banisters seemed to turn moist in his grasp. A book was resting on the lectern, and he could have thought it quivered a little with eagerness—his own. The embossed colophon showed a night sky in which unfamiliar constellations hinted at the features of an inhuman face. A stagnant smell that Fairman recognised rose from the pages as he opened it to confirm that it was the eighth volume, *Of the Dreaming of Creation.* He felt his eyes bulge with the strain of reading in the dimness. "All creation is a dream of itself. The universe dreamed itself into being and continues to do so..."

In that case, he thought, the book must be a dream as well. Perhaps he was on the edge of understanding why his time in Gulshaw had grown to resemble one—and then another thought overtook him. At last he grasped something Father Sinclough had said. Although he no longer had the street map, he could visualise the layout of the town, and he had indeed been led a dance. The route he'd followed to collect the books had described the first steps of the dance he'd watched at the Shaw.

At once he felt as if more than the insight had taken hold of his mind. He heard a huge prolonged dribbling breath behind him. It was surely just a wave that had sprawled onto the beach and lingered over retreating, but it felt like a symbol or an omen. So was the book, unless it was more than that. As he read on he could have taken it for a dream he was having, even if not on his own behalf, and was about to waken from. "Who hath shared the dreams the old stones dream, or those of the earth or the sea? Who hath beheld the sleeping visions of the mountains, or been a party to the reveries of the moon? The Ancient Ones partake of the dreams of the farthest stars, where universe and void consume each other for eternity. Let the mage prepare himself before venturing to invite them into his mind..." This and much more seemed to sink past Fairman's comprehension to root itself in his brain. The unchanging dimness gave him no sense of how long he had

been at the lectern when he became aware of activity in the churchyard. A crowd was advancing on the church.

Father Sinclough led the procession, and the mayoress supported him on her arm. Though their progress seemed so furtive that Fairman hadn't noticed them until they were past the gate, their faces suggested that they meant to be respectful. They were followed by everyone who had taken care of the books, even Rhoda Bickerstaff, who looked not quite resigned nor yet just nervously expectant. Behind them came people Fairman had encountered in the town— Janine Berry and her staff, the proprietors of Fishing For You and Fish It Up, the Gulshaw players apart from Eric Headon—and then people he thought he had passed in the street or seen on the beach. It occurred to him that while he was reading at the lectern he'd heard a good deal of traffic on the promenade but hadn't realised its significance. By the time Eunice Spriggs and Father Sinclough crossed the threshold, much of the crowd was still outside the gate.

The priest shuffled to the front pew with the mayoress, where they sat and gazed up at Fairman. As they entered the church he'd thought Eunice was doffing her hat as a mark of respect, but did women do that? Now he saw that the object she'd stuffed into her handbag hadn't been headgear in that sense. Everyone in the crowd uncovered their bald heads as they stepped into the church, the women included. Nobody was wearing beach shoes, despite their appearance and the way their rubbery feet slithered over the stone floor. Too many eyes to count were gazing up at Fairman now; it felt like being observed by a single consciousness, and not only from within the church. He ought to have suspected something of the kind, given all the phrases they had in common. He was watching the church fill up—all the pews were occupied, and newcomers were crowding three deep along the walls—when the priest raised an unstable hand. "Read, my son," he murmured. "Read to us."

To some extent Fairman was glad to return to the book. He'd caught sight of a group of familiar figures in a pew at the back of the church. As they tugged their scarves down, he could have thought they were dragging their faces lopsided or otherwise awry. The townsfolk who couldn't find space inside the church were massing around it, although not at his back, where the waves had grown slower and louder. Some of the spectators had managed to clamber up to the side windows, though he didn't know what

they were able to see; the faces flattened against the panes were so blurred that he could have taken them for lumps of the fungus that clung to the stained glass. He did his best to ignore all these sights and concentrate on the book, beginning where he'd left off. Perhaps it conveyed more to the listeners than he was aware of understanding himself, because there was rapt silence except for his voice and the sluggish progression of waves behind him on the beach. At last he came to the end of the printed text and turned to the flyleaf.

"The grimoire is a tool for the unmaking of the world. What are these volumes save a nexus of ancient power? Happy the land which is bounded by them, for it shall be irradiated and transformed. Happy the denizens of that land, for they shall renew the oldest ways of shaping, when all that lived partook of a single creation. More powerful still is the mage through whom the old words find their voice, and happiest is he whose lips Gla'aki uses to address the world. Wherever He is heard He shall manifest Himself to His worshippers..."

Fairman was no longer reading aloud, since the page was blank. He felt as though he was hearing someone else preach—as if the book had found a voice that wasn't his. He had to speak up, because the ponderous slithering of the waves had grown louder. He was about to continue, though he'd no idea what he would say, when he glimpsed a concerted movement in the church.

Everyone in the congregation had bowed their heads. Until he looked at them he was able to take this as a gesture of respect, and then he clutched the pulpit so hard that it seemed to sweat in his grasp. Although every head was lowered so far that he could see the back of every neck, all the faces were still turned up towards him, as if their raptness had dislodged them. They were no longer intent on him, however. All the wide dislocated eyes were gazing past him.

As the protracted cumbersome sound that he'd kept hearing was repeated at his back, he could no longer avoid realising that it wasn't the noise of waves, because it had left the beach. He felt himself tremble, and the pulpit shivered; he thought the entire church did. Perhaps the tremor that spread through the floor and rose up the walls to the gloomy timbers under the roof betrayed how massive the presence was, so weighty that it shook the earth, or perhaps the vibration was a sign of its power. Then the church grew as

still as the multitude of unblinking eyes, and Fairman had to turn and look behind him.

He was being watched from beyond the altar. An eye was peering through each of the windows that framed it— an eye as large as Fairman's head. They looked as if they were using the church for a mask. He found himself struggling to feel equal to the sight; perhaps he could survive it, since the eyes were no less blurred than the vast pallid face out of which they were craning. Then a third eye swelled like a moist fleshy balloon through the wall above the crucifix and stooped towards him on a flexible greyish trunk the thickness of a tree. It was followed by the face, which absorbed the cross as it seeped through the stones around it—a whitish spongy moon-shaped face twice Fairman's height, featureless except for the stems of the eyes and a circular thick-lipped mouth. It was followed by a sample of the body, an oval mass bristling with restless spines as long as Fairman's arm, as the face leaned over the altar towards him.

He couldn't move. His hands might have been fastened to the pulpit, and his legs felt as if they would give way if he tried to flee. He did his desperate best to tell himself that he could bear the scrutiny if he closed his eyes, but worse was to come. A breath that smelled like the essence and the source of the stagnant Gulshaw odour overwhelmed him as the face descended to bestow a kiss that engulfed his head.

It made his skull feel malleable, close to gelatinous. As the sensations expanded through the whole of him he felt his flesh squirm like a grub. He even thought his brain shifted wakefully inside his cranium, an insect in a chrysalis. As long as the cold spongy lips lingered on him he seemed to forget how to breathe. At last they withdrew, and he heard a vast body shuffle backwards out of the church.

Was it dread or some other factor that made it hard for him to open his eyes? When he succeeded in raising the rubbery lids he saw that the windows beside the altar were empty, the wall bare except for the figure lolling off the cross. As he turned to the congregation he felt as if something apart from himself was looking out through his eyes; he might even have thought there was movement within them. The sensation wasn't quite enough to distract him from the spectacle before him—the sight of everybody in the church raising their heads to let the faces resume their positions on the skulls like jellyfish sliding down rocks. In a few moments

he was almost able to think he couldn't have seen that, since the congregation was so innocently intent on him, as though waiting for a sign. He had no idea how to respond, but perhaps the sight of him was enough, because Father Sinclough was rising to his feet, helped by his companion. The priest shuffled forward and stooped lower still, bowing not to the altar but to Fairman.

Eunice Spriggs followed his example before supporting him along the aisle. His fellow keepers of the books stepped forward to bow, and the other occupants of the front rows did. By the time the entire congregation had done so and left the church Fairman had no sense of how long he'd spent in the pulpit, resting his loose hands beside the book. Even the crowd in the churchyard had bowed in his direction or otherwise inclined their shapes towards him. He'd glimpsed the most uncontrollably misshapen at the back of the crowd before they flopped away towards the woods, he guessed, or wherever else they hid.

When he emerged from the church with the book in his hands he found Father Sinclough waiting outside the porch. He wondered if the priest was clinging to a remnant of his old vocation until Father Sinclough said "We were guided in our choice, my son. I was never the man for the task."

Fairman moved his unwieldy tongue around his mouth until they felt more familiar. "What task?"

"When your books were entrusted to me I wasn't sure how to proceed. I confess it, I was afraid to keep them with me, to take all that upon myself. Until you spoke today I didn't realise why I was guided to distribute them." He seemed to be apologising for some presumption as he said "I'm sure I haven't got your calling. You're the one who can restore the word."

"Edit the books, do you mean?" Fairman felt as if he was trying to recapture his old self too. "You'll want to keep us in Gulshaw, then."

"Not at all." The priest shook his head so vigorously that his scalp wobbled, and so did the bald woman beside him. "We'll still have the benefit," Father Sinclough said. "You go forth and seed the world."

The last cars were departing uphill or along the sea front. The newborn sea glittered beneath a piercing sun all the way to the horizon. While the fog had dissipated as if Gulshaw no longer needed to be veiled, Fairman seemed to feel it on if not within him. Had it impregnated everything it

touched? When he made his way along the promenade, clutching the book in both hands like a talisman, he thought he saw the hotels and the buildings beyond them swell up almost imperceptibly as a greyness merged with them.

Perhaps it was just the angle of the sun, although this didn't quite explain how they glistened while his flesh prickled in a feverish response.

In his room at the Wyleave he opened the safe, even though it seemed unnecessary to protect the book. He sensed how the darkness welcomed the newcomer. He shut the door and gazed at the marks his fingers left, moist blotches without whorls. He plodded downstairs to find Janine Berry behind the counter, adjusting the hair on her head. "Would you like us to move you to the honeymoon suite?" she said with nervous coyness.

"I think that might be most appropriate."

"You'll be in there when you've fetched your lady."

"It's appreciated," Fairman said and was accosted by a thought. "Whoever moves me will need the combination of the safe."

"You don't think anybody still needs to be told that, Leonard."

He might have produced some kind of a laugh at his thoughtlessness if his mobile hadn't clanked with an incoming message. "Well," he said, having read it, "Gulshaw does it again. Think of someone and they come."

"You go and get her. Everything will be ready when you're back."

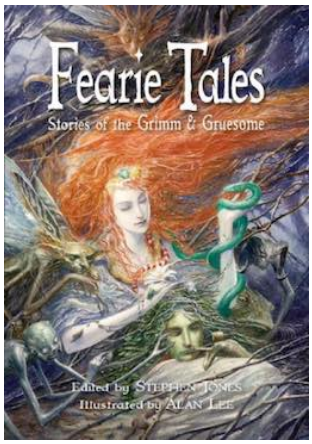
Sandra's message said that she was fifteen minutes from Gulshaw. Coming to collect you, he responded on his way to the car. As he drove uphill he saw that all the shops were open, and the streets were peopled too. It occurred to him that the Gulshaw Players weren't the only townsfolk to put on a performance. He didn't need to tell any of the inhabitants that the town had a new visitor.

He parked on the station forecourt and was on the platform in time to meet the solitary figure who left the train.

She looked unexpectedly vulnerable—too slight and slim by local standards—while the profusion of red hair that framed her small delicate determined face seemed unfamiliar after his days in Gulshaw. He felt himself swell with a new emotion as he strode forward, stretching out his

arms, not far enough to daunt her. "Sandra," he said. "Welcome to our town. There's so much more to see."

Find My Name



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Doreen was awake at once and trying to hear why. A dog barked on the far side of the tennis courts, and another yapped from the direction of the golf club, and then she heard noises from Anna's old room. Benjamin was shifting in his crib, a sound both blurred and amplified by the baby monitor. As Doreen prepared to stumble to the next room the sound rustled into silence, and she let her head sink back onto the pillow. Before she closed her eyes she glimpsed midnight on the bedside clock. At the very least she was dozing when she heard a low voice. "You're mine now, Benjamin," it said.

Though she felt as though the night had settled a suffocating weight on her, she managed to open her cumbersome lips. "He never will be. Stay away, Denny, or I'll call the police."

"I'm not the boy's father. His mother had her wish and now it's time for mine."

This had to be a dream—nobody could hear Doreen through the monitor—but she felt pierced by anguish. "What wish did Anna have?"

"Her son till he was a year old."

"And his father abusing her for half of it. You think she'd have wished for that too?"

"That's what she wished away, and I'm the one that made it go. She knew there was a price."

Doreen felt her eyes spill her grief. "She paid for her mistake all right."

"We aren't talking about that." The voice had turned peevish. "Maybe she thought she could cheat me that way," it said. "Nobody swindles me, so don't try it. It's my time."

Doreen couldn't tell if she was struggling to understand or waken. "What time?"

"You've almost had your year of him, so say good-bye while you can, Doreen."

"And what do they call you as long as you know my name?"

"Nobody ever knows." She heard a snigger or the slither of a tongue across the plastic microphone. "I'll see you on his birthday," the voice said. "I'm leaving you a sign."

The dogs began to bark again, and more of them joined in. They were real, and they made her aware that the night was otherwise silent, which allowed her to lapse into sleep. A late April dawn coaxed her awake, and she lay pondering her dream. Was she afraid Benjamin's father would come looking for him while her husband was at the managers' conference? The court had kept Denny away from the child, and if necessary the police would. Perhaps she was uneasy because Benjamin had lost his mother on his only birthday. That ought to be another reason to make his imminent birthday special, and Doreen was thinking of ways when she heard him begin to stir.

His morning ruminations always sounded as if his language was taking time to wake up. "Bid honor revert efforts," she could almost have imagined he was mumbling, not to mention "Font of our reserved birth." Most of thirty years ago she'd enjoyed overhearing Anna's infant monologues, but she tried not to be reminded too much. Now Benjamin was talking to Nosey and Stuffy, the bears that shared his cot. When he started clattering the wooden bars, either playing at percussion or demanding freedom, Doreen made for his room.

He was standing at the bars that faced the door, and she couldn't help being reminded of Anna. His face was almost a miniature of his mother's—blond hair, high forehead, bright blue eyes, small snub nose, full lips, determined chin. In Anna's case the brow had left too much room for brooding, and she'd dyed her hair any number of colors, none of which had placated her partner; apparently few things did. Her eyes had grown dull as stones last year, and the few times Doreen saw her smile it looked more like a plea, even once she'd rid herself of Denny. At least she'd been sufficiently determined to take him to court, but had that left her more afraid of him? Doreen vowed she wouldn't be. "Ready for adventures?" she said to Benjamin.

"Avengers."

“Come on, little parrot,” Doreen said, only to falter. The microphone she always planted on top of the blue chest of drawers was lying on the floor. She’d thought the wire was well out of Benjamin’s reach, and was dismayed to think she hadn’t heard the fall. She felt insufficiently vigilant on his behalf, as if she might be growing too old for the task. As she returned the microphone to the shelf she said “You mustn’t do that, Benjamin.”

He stuck his lower lip out. “Didn’t, Gran.”

“Don’t tease, now. If you didn’t, who did?”

“The man.”

“Which man?”

“Comes to see me.”

“Who does, Benjamin? Not your—” Nervousness had made her blurt that, and she couldn’t avoid adding “Not Daddy. Not your father.”

“Not Daddy,” the toddler said, and laughed.

Doreen wondered if he was simply repeating her words. “Who then, Benjamin?”

His face grew puzzled before he said “Dark.”

“You can’t see him, you mean. You know why, don’t you? He isn’t real. He’s just a dream.”

“Just agree.”

“Sometimes I don’t know when you’re teasing,” Doreen said but didn’t really mean.

Surely he could have dislodged the microphone while he was waking up. He put his arms around her neck as she lifted him over the bars. He was warm as sleep, and eager to walk downstairs and run through all the rooms. Doreen caught him in the kitchen, where she helped him off with his sleeping suit. Once she’d praised his potty performance she gave him a hand with dressing while letting him believe he’d done it virtually by himself. She strapped him into the high chair and readied herself for the day, and then she watched him deal with cereal, spilling very little and hardly daubing his face. As she played the game of mopping him while he tried to squirm out of reach she said “What shall we do this morning?”

"See the trains."

He found plenty to chatter about on the half a mile of wide suburban road. "They're jumping for the ball," he said by the tennis courts, and "There's the little hill car" beside the golf course. "Gone in to read," he said beside the deserted schoolyard, so that Doreen knew he was recalling what she'd told him he would do at school. "Robber jugs," he declared outside the antique shop, and she gathered he was thinking of the tale of Ali Baba she'd read him. He called the hairdresser's customers space ladies because of their helmets, and outside the florist's he said "Where the flowers go," which Doreen tried not to find funereal. As they reached the railway she took a firm grip on his small warm trusting hand. "Red bell," he said.

The bells were indeed jangling as the red lights flashed. The traffic halted as the barriers descended on both sides of the level crossing, and Benjamin's fingers wriggled eagerly in Doreen's clasp. When a train left the station she couldn't resist asking "What does it look like?"

"Lots of stamps."

He was still remembering the ones he'd put on envelopes last Christmas—the strips the train windows reminded him of. At his age Anna had loved licking Christmas stamps. These days you peeled them off the backing, and Doreen wondered if the generation after his mightn't even recall that, if every greeting would be sent by computer. Six trains passed, framed by three performances of the barriers, before he was ready to head home.

Doreen saw to lunch and dinner while he had his nap. After lunch they walked past the Conservative Club and the Masonic hall to the Toddling Tiddlers playgroup. "Here's another of our talkers," Dee Maitland cried as he ran to compete with his friend Daisy at garrulousness. While Doreen wouldn't risk entrusting him to a stranger—she'd taken early retirement so as to care for him—she asked Daisy's mother Jonquil to look after him while Doreen made his birthday cake. "There's nobody I'd rather have," Jonquil said, and Doreen was fleetingly reminded of her midnight dream.

She hadn't realised Benjamin had left quite such a mess at home, where toys were scattered through all the downstairs rooms. He helped her clear some of them away before he set about redistributing them, and Doreen reflected that all too soon he would outgrow them. She would even miss his messiness, and after dinner she was in no hurry to finish cleaning his

indignant face. She relented when Hubert rang. “How’s the man of the house?” he said.

“Being looked after by the woman just now.”

“Sorry,” Hubert said, sounding surprised if not defensive. “Something’s wrong?”

“Just used to having you about.”

“I will be on the day that matters most, won’t I? You’re all right otherwise, both of you.”

“Pretty much as you left us.” She could tell that was what he hoped if not felt entitled to hear. “You?” she said.

“Not especially looking forward to three more days of hearing how we can improve the public image of the banks. I’d rather just get on with actually improving them if we can,” Hubert said loud enough to be heard by colleagues who were audible nearby. “Enough of my grumbles. Shall I say good night to the bedtime boy?”

“He isn’t quite that yet,” Doreen said as she switched on the loudspeaker. “Who’s this, Benjamin?”

“The man.” Once Hubert greeted him Benjamin said a good deal more enthusiastically: “Grandad.”

“How’s the youngest and the best? Only three more nights and you’ll be seeing me.”

“Free nights.”

“That’s more or less it, yes. Are you being good for Granny? You look after her and see nothing bad happens to her while I’m at my conference.”

For an instant the toddler looked worried. “Nothing bad.”

“Nothing’s going to,” Doreen reassured him. “Better say good night to Grandad now. I can hear he’s anxious to relax.”

“Good night, Grandad,” Benjamin said so enthusiastically that both his grandparents laughed.

He helped tidy up his toys before bath time. “Hot,” he said gravely as Doreen tested the water, and then “Not.” While she couldn’t call herself religious—even less than her parents, which was why her prayers for Anna had seemed so desperate, falling short of defining their goal—whenever

Benjamin came out of the bath he looked and felt as she imagined someone newly baptized would. She toweled him and kissed him and vowed to keep him safe as long as she lived, however much that sounded like a fairy tale.

She helped him into his sleeping outfit and laid him down in the cot. She was turning the pages of Anna's battered old book when the title of a story caught her eye. Of course, that had been Anna's childhood favourite. No wonder Doreen had dreamed something of the kind, but she didn't want to read that tale to Benjamin just now. "'Once upon a time,'" she began instead, "'there was a woodcutter and his wife who had children called Hansel and Gretel...'"

She omitted the oven and the children's threatened fate. The children were rescued just before Benjamin fell asleep. She turned out the light and took the monitor downstairs, keeping it on the kitchen table while she ate dinner. A day of Benjamin had tired her as usual, not that she would want it to be otherwise, and she was soon in bed.

She wakened to find the zeros of the bedside clock staring out of midnight. She was hoping her body hadn't adopted a routine, having been roused at the same time last night, when she heard the voice. It was so muffled that it could have been inside her skull. "It's you again, is it?" she said or thought. "What do you want this time?"

"What I always get."

"You didn't in the story, did you? Not when they found out your name."

"That old thing? Don't believe everything you read."

"Why, isn't your name Rumpelstiltskin?"

"That's just the tale they told." With a snigger not unlike the rattling of small teeth the voice said "Some of it's true. I know when I'm wanted."

"Then you ought to know you aren't."

"Your girl did when she needed a witness."

"Don't you talk about her," Doreen protested before managing to laugh. "Why am I getting worked up? You're just a dream."

"Still think you're dreaming, do you?" The voice sounded grotesquely resentful. "You'll see," it said, "there'll be another sign," and left her alone.

As far as Doreen was concerned there hadn't previously been one. She found she was trying to remember the witness who'd come forward on

Anna's behalf. He'd lived below the apartment she'd shared with Denny, and he'd testified that Denny had abused both her and their child. Despite her efforts Doreen was unable to recall his name or even his appearance, except for an impression of somebody smaller than average, close to dwarfish.

The sun was up by the time Benjamin wakened her. She lay enjoying his soliloquy until she began to wonder why his words were even harder to make out than usual. He couldn't very well be muttering "I drub hens for tot forever," nor yet "Her son for furtive debtor." He sounded oddly distant, that was it—so remote that she could imagine he was being carried away from her. She lurched out of bed and almost fell headlong in her dash to the next room.

The door swung inwards just a few inches before meeting an obstruction. At least Benjamin was in the cot, and gave Doreen a sleepy smile as she edged into the room. The plastic microphone was trapped against the door, yards from where she'd placed it on the shelf and at the limit of its wire. When she picked it up she found her hand was shaking. "Who put this here, Benjamin?" she said as gently as she could.

"The man," he said with a touch of defiance. "Man with all teeth."

"What do you mean?"

"Teeths." As if to demonstrate how plural they could be, the boy opened his mouth wide and dug his fingers into the corners to tug it wider still. "Lots," he said.

Doreen wanted to think he was boasting about his own. "What did I tell you the man was?"

"Comes when I'm asleep."

She was making for the cot when a thought halted her. "Can you climb out for me?"

Benjamin stood up but gave her a reproachful look. "Like you lifting."

That needn't mean he was incapable of clambering out, but when he held up his arms Doreen lifted him. She had to restrain herself from hugging him too fiercely; that wasn't how to protect him. She stayed close to him as he stampeded through the rooms, and found she didn't want to leave him alone at all. Once she'd secured him in the high chair she performed her morning

necessities as fast as she could. “What would you like to do today?” she said when she’d recovered her breath.

“Change books.”

“That’s a good idea,” Doreen said, having realised what else she could do.

The library was in the opposite direction from the railway, past the nearest of the parks, which she had to promise Benjamin they would visit later. Doreen signed a petition against closing six libraries and watched him grab books from the table in the children’s section. Once he was installed in a miniature chair she hurried to a computer. She could have thought she was growing delusional as the anniversary of her loss came closer, but she found the details for the landlord of Anna’s last address.

At home she read three of Benjamin’s library books to him before he fell asleep. She succeeded in carrying him upstairs to the cot without rousing him, and took the monitor into her room. She listened to her heartbeats, having keyed the phone number, until a woman said “Wesley Properties.”

“I’m trying to find out the name of a tenant of yours.”

“We can’t give out that information, I’m afraid.”

“I see you wouldn’t normally, but he was a witness in court for my daughter Anna Marshall. She lived in the same building. She died nearly a year ago.”

Doreen heard two more of her urgent heartbeats before the woman said “And you were asking for the gentleman’s name because...”

“I can’t remember it and I need it to help me keep custody of my grandson.”

“I’ll have to speak to somebody. Please hold on.”

Doreen’s pulse grew more strident for at least a minute before she was asked to continue holding, after which she heard murmurs that she had to reassure herself weren’t in the monitor. More than another minute was measured by her not entirely constant heartbeats, and then a new voice said “Mrs. Marshall, is it? Tony Wesley. Sorry for your loss.”

“I still have my grandson, Mr. Wesley.”

“So Jane was saying. I do remember your daughter and the sad circumstances. I’d like us to be of assistance.”

"Please do."

"As I say, I wish we could be. I can only think we've suffered a small problem with the system. We've no record of the tenancy you were inquiring about."

For several beats her heart was louder in her ears than his voice. "What do you mean, no record?"

"The period of the letting shows up blank. It was only a few weeks while the lady who lived there had moved out and the lady who has the apartment now took up residence."

"But he was there, wasn't he? You know he was there."

"Of course he was." Wesley sounded defensive, however. "You'll forgive us, but nobody here can remember his name," he said. "Not really anything about him."

Doreen felt as if Wesley had robbed her of more than words—of certainty if not worse. She mumbled thanks she didn't feel and held the empty cell in her unsteady hand. Should she phone the court? Suppose there was no official record of the witness? The possibility deterred her more than she understood. Surely she oughtn't to delay, or was her anxiousness just a symptom of age? She hadn't made the call by the time Benjamin left her in no doubt he was awake.

After lunch they walked to the park. In the deserted playground a seesaw was twitching as though someone had sneaked away at their approach. Doreen thought she closed the gate securely, but more than once it proved to be unlatched after she turned her back. A notice said dogs weren't allowed, and she had the distinct impression that one was somewhere nearby, perhaps lying on its belly and baring all its teeth. She pushed Benjamin on one swing after another and bounced him gently on the seesaw and dodged around the climbing frames to be ready if he fell. Far too often she had a sense that a toothy intruder had crawled into or otherwise invaded the playground and was waiting at her back.

When she took Benjamin home she could have fancied that a visitor was lying low somewhere in the house. Perhaps it had curled up in the oven to peer through the glass door, or was poised to poke its head out from behind a piece of furniture. She might be even more dismayed to find it sitting in a chair like an uninvited guest or, worst of all, in Benjamin's high chair. Of

course it was nowhere except inside her feverishly buzzing head, but she found herself urging Hubert to call, and almost dropped the phone as she hastened to answer it. “How was your day?” she said as if this might return hers to normal.

“Oh, professional enough.”

“What have you had to put up with this time?”

“Plenty of ideas that can be put to good use.”

It was plain to Doreen that he didn’t want his real thoughts to be overheard. She felt prevented from reaching him, all the more so when he said “And how was yours?”

“Our day?” She couldn’t admit to her fears or how they’d caused her to behave. “I’m sure you can imagine it,” she said. “Library and park.”

“So long as everything’s in order,” Hubert said, and she heard how much he wanted that. “Shall I speak to the man himself?” When she brought up the loudspeaker he said “Are you looking after Granny for me?”

“Yes, Grandad,” Benjamin said so earnestly that Doreen had to suppress a nervous laugh.

“You make sure you carry on, then. Two more nights and I’ll take over.”

Once he’d gone Doreen said to Benjamin “Would you like to look after Granny a little bit more?”

“Yes,” he said more solemnly than ever.

“You can sleep in my room while Grandad’s away, then. We’ll be company if anyone wakes up.”

Was she being too protective? Sometimes she felt she had been with Anna —felt she’d left Anna vulnerable, even helped to cause her death. Nevertheless Doreen dragged the cot into the main bedroom while Benjamin gave it an energetic push. After his bath she lowered him into the cot and sat on the bed to read him Cinderella’s tale divested of any ugliness, and then she went downstairs with the monitor.

She couldn’t read. She was too aware of the silence in the monitor and throughout the house. Before long she was nervously ready for bed, but she found herself switching on her laptop. Rumpelstiltskin wasn’t the only name to figure in versions of the old tale, and she repeated all the names until they were fixed in her head. She felt close to senile for carrying on like

that, but would she really rather think she'd neglected some method of protecting Benjamin? When she was certain of recalling the names she tiptoed up to bed.

Benjamin murmured and grew still as she slipped under the quilt. Doreen suspected she would be unable to sleep, but she opened her eyes on the far side of a darkness that had lasted until midnight. As she read the time she heard the voice. "You've been trying to find my name out, have you? Try all you like."

It was closer to her than the cot—perhaps as close as the inside of her head. When she blinked at the dimness, the cot was the only unfamiliar object she could see. "You'll leave us alone if I name you, will you?" she said so softly she could barely hear herself.

"Try me."

"It wouldn't be Whuppity Stoorie, would it?"

"Not in your lifetime," the voice said in a mockingly Scottish falsetto.

"Tom Tit Tot, then."

"Not on your tits and not on your tot."

"Ruidoquedito."

"Not even if you say it right." Having rejected the rest of the names as well, the voice said "Aren't you going to ask them at the court?"

Doreen was instinctively suspicious. "Why would you want me to?"

"Let them see there's no name in their records and maybe they'll have to reopen the hearing."

That was why she'd felt she oughtn't to call, Doreen realised now. "What difference would that make?"

"Maybe they'd have to tell the father and give him another chance."

"Or," Doreen said in a rage that made her reckless, "you could tell him."

"No chance of that. Nobody else can hear me." As Benjamin shifted in his cot—perhaps Doreen's outburst had roused him—the voice said "I'll leave you a sign, though. Or do you think you're doing it all?"

"I don't—" Doreen began without knowing how to continue, only to realise she was talking to herself. Listening for an intruder in the room kept her apprehensively awake, but at some point exhaustion put out her

vigilance until she heard Benjamin's morning murmur. She had to waken fully to recall why it was closer than usual, though that didn't help her to grasp what he was mumbling—hardly "Observe or differ on truth" any more than "Run forever, tots, be hid" and still less "Bred introvert, ooh, suffer." He started chatting to her once he met her eyes, but she couldn't help glancing away in search of a sign. Perhaps it hadn't been left in the room, if indeed the threat wasn't just an elderly woman's fearful dream.

She could see nothing wrong downstairs either. Benjamin was eager to walk to the trains again, though he was untypically mute on the way, so that she wondered if he didn't find anything worthy of a comment. Wouldn't he have remarked on a dwarfish shape that seemed to peer over a net in a tennis court before somehow hiding behind the mesh? Perhaps the tuft like greasy unkempt hair that poked above at least one mound on the golf course was too insignificant, but how about the childish shape that dodged out of sight around the school? Doreen wouldn't have expected to glimpse an apparently unaccompanied child in more than one of the shops, but surely these impressions were symptoms of sleeplessness, like the face that glared out of the antique dealer's window before sinking into a vase. "Robber jug," Benjamin said, having found words at last, and Doreen rather wished he hadn't rediscovered those.

The red lights at the level crossing blazed in her eyes while the clangor of the bells jerked her nerves. Though the trains were almost empty, Benjamin kept repeating "He's looking." Surely he meant the toddler on the opposite side of the tracks—a real child, not one of Doreen's fancies, wheeled in a stroller by his mother. All the same, the phrase Benjamin kept parroting worked on Doreen's nerves. Each train reminded her of a strip of film being drawn through a gate, because she could easily imagine that a face was peering over the lower edge of every window—just the top of a face, but the same one. Six trains had to pass before Benjamin had had enough, by which time Doreen certainly had.

Once he was safe in his cot she lay down on the bed. She didn't mean to fall asleep, but she jolted awake to find him at the bars and more than ready for his lunch. As soon as he'd devoured it and she'd cleaned him up she drove to Jonquil's. "Don't worry and don't rush," Jonquil said as he ran to find Daisy. "You take all the time you need with his surprise."

At home Doreen set about making the cake. It wasn't quite enough to distract her from being alone in the house or from recalling how she'd felt last year. She had been on the train to London when her phone had jangled with Anna's final text:

Sorry, Mommy. You won't understand but he'll get in.

Doreen had certainly never understood how Anna could have left Benjamin with a friend and overdosed on drugs she'd obtained somewhere to supplement the ones the doctor had prescribed. Did Doreen understand at last, or was the memory undermining her mind? She left the cake in the oven and went up to lock the wardrobe; she needn't risk Benjamin finding his presents while he was sharing the room.

The stunted figure that peered out of the cot was only one of the bears. She opened the wardrobe to glance at the presents, and her hand clenched on the wood. She'd arranged the wrapped packages along the back of the wardrobe, but now they were piled in a ramshackle stack against the left-hand corner. So this was the sign, or had she done it herself in her sleep, if not in some more distracted state? Suppose instead that the doubts had been planted in her mind as a distraction? She ducked into the wardrobe to line up the presents and made sure the door was locked. She'd begun to think there was something else she needed to recognise.

Though she took her time icing the cake, the middle of the big blue digit on the yellow sugar carapace betrayed an inadvertent shiver. The day was growing dark when she hurried to the car, so that she didn't immediately notice the small figure in the child's seat. It was all the more unobtrusive for the absence of a head. It was a toy, either a plastic baby or a toddler, and its head had been chewed off; the tooth marks were still glistening. The door was unlocked; perhaps Doreen had been so distracted she'd left it that way. She flung the doll into the rubbish bin on her drive, and once she was able to control her hands she started the car.

Jonquil met her with a momentary frown. "Has everything been all right?" Doreen blurted.

"We've all been having fun. Maybe some of us a bit more than others. He's got a funny notion of hide-and-seek, hasn't he?"

"How funny?" Doreen said without expecting any mirth.

“He kept telling Daisy somebody was doing it. She wasn’t too fond, to tell you the truth.”

“You mustn’t upset Daisy if you want her for your friend.” Doreen waited until Benjamin was in the child seat, which she’d vigorously wiped, before she added “Who was hiding, Benjamin?”

“Mr. Toothy.”

Doreen did her best to withhold a shiver. “Is that his name?”

“I call him it.”

She oughtn’t to have bothered asking. It was pointless to expect Benjamin to give her the real name, supposing one even existed—and then, with a jerk of her whole body that made her stall the engine, she knew what she’d been struggling to realise. “Benjamin,” she said, “what are those things you’ve been saying when you wake up?”

“Can’t remember.” Somewhat indignantly he said “Asleep.”

“I mean,” Doreen said, praying that she would be able to bring them to mind, “where did you hear them?”

“Don’t know. Asleep.”

She was almost sure, and she sped the car home. Nobody was waiting in the high chair, and even Benjamin’s toys seemed not to have been touched. She played with him and watched him dine and cleared up the remains while her head swarmed with words that tumbled over one another to adopt new shapes. They hadn’t revealed anything she would call a secret by the time Hubert phoned. “What are you doing with yourself tonight?” he said.

“Just thinking.”

“Try not to miss anyone too much, yes? I’ll be with you tomorrow as soon as I can.”

“What will you be doing in the meantime?”

“I may take the chance to relax.” He sounded apologetic. “I’ll see to it you can soon,” he said, and when she switched on the loudspeaker: “You take special care of our favourite lady till I’m home, Benjamin.”

There was no sign of an intruder in the bathroom, and the wardrobe was still locked. Doreen’s mind was chattering with words and unmanageable fragments of words, and she read Benjamin the shortest story in the book,

about the emperor who didn't know he was exposed. He looked solemn when she'd finished, even while she gave him a good night kiss and another. As she watched him fall reluctantly asleep she thought of staying upstairs—and then she realised how the clamor in her brain had prevented her from thinking. She fetched the monitor and hurried down to the computer.

Had her inspiration given her false hope? The websites that created anagrams didn't deal with groups of words as long as the ones she was desperate to reshape. Eventually she found a site that did, and typed in one of the sets of words she remembered overhearing. In a few seconds she was shown a rearrangement that made her feel both sickened and triumphant. "That's it," she whispered. "There's still magic somewhere." She tried some of the other bunches of words to be certain, and then she got ready for bed.

She didn't expect to sleep, but in case she did she set the alarm and hid the clock under her pillow. She was wakened by activity that felt as if someone was groping for her face. It was the vibration of the alarm. As she fumbled to turn it off a voice came out of the dark. "Are you ready for me?"

She didn't answer until she had quelled the alarm. "Who are you talking to?"

"Who else but the woman that thinks she knows."

"It could be Benjamin, couldn't it? When you said nobody else could hear, you didn't mean only I could."

"Clever woman. You all think you are."

"It's you that thinks he is," Doreen retorted so fiercely she almost forgot to keep her voice down. "You're worse than a child. You thought you could tease Benjamin—you've got so much contempt for us—but you didn't think he could let me know even if he didn't realise."

"Do you even know what you're talking about? Just listen to yourself. Your mind's gone, Doreen."

"Not while I know my own name. Shall I tell you why nobody knows yours?"

"Amaze me. I'm in no hurry now he's mine."

"Because you haven't got one."

She heard a shrill giggle mixed with a grinding of teeth. “Then you can’t tell me and save him.”

“I can tell you what you’re called, though.”

“I’m waiting. I’m all ears except for a mouth.”

“Is it hurt for reversion of debt?”

“That’s not even a name,” the voice said, sounding as sharp as bared teeth.

“I said you’ve never had one. Do they call you furtive horror? Often beds?”

“You’re raving, woman. You’re as mad as your daughter.”

“Because you and Denny made her.” Doreen’s grief came close to robbing her of control, but it mustn’t while she was protecting Benjamin. “Trove of birth ensured for,” she murmured.

“Not even a sentence,” the voice scoffed, but it was growing ragged. “I’ve had enough of you. It’s time.”

“Yes,” Doreen said. “It’s my time and my family’s.” She was tired of taunting him with words the computer had shown her. “They call you devourer of the firstborn,” she said.

A shape reared up beside the cot, howling like a beast of prey. While it wasn’t much taller than Benjamin, it was as squat as a toad. In the dimness she couldn’t distinguish much more, especially about its face, perhaps because it had so little of one. She saw a gaping mouth and the glimmer of far too many teeth, and then the jaws yawned more enormously still. The head split wide as though it was being engulfed by the mouth, and another convulsive gulp made short work of the body. The howl was cut off as though it had imploded, and Benjamin wakened with a cry. As he started whimpering Doreen hurried across the deserted room to hug him. “Happy birthday, Benjamin,” she said.

The Pretence

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As the taxi drew up outside the terminal the driver said "What time's your flight?"

"In about an hour."

"Where are you flying?"

"To the mainland. Just to Liverpool."

"You'll be home before tomorrow, then."

"I expect so." Though he didn't see why this should concern her, Slater said "I'm sure I shall."

An April breeze like a reminiscence of a summer holiday set palm leaves chattering above him while he paid the fare. As he made for the terminal the glass doors slipped apart, letting out a young woman so wide-eyed that her stare seemed to render her pale face even thinner. She thrust a glossy brochure at him, and he took it for a special offer until he glanced at it, having trundled his suitcase into the departure hall. The cover of the pamphlet showed a clock without hands and urged **SEE YOUR TIME** in type as thick as blackened matchsticks. It could almost have been directing his attention to the matrix sign that showed his flight was delayed. He wouldn't be home by midnight after all; he mightn't even be on land.

Having failed to locate a handy bin, Slater crumpled the pamphlet in his fist as he led his luggage to the security gates. On the far side of the electronic barrier he retrieved his watch and cash and mobile phone from the tray that emerged from the scanner like a car at the end of a fairground ride. He was putting on his shoes when the guard beside the conveyor belt beckoned to him. "Excuse me, sir, we don't need that."

She meant the brochure he'd left in the tray. "Can you bin it for me?"

"I can't." Apparently he'd ceased to be a sir. "Please take it," she said.

It was her reproachful look that made him blurt "You're a Finalist, are you?"

"We aren't permitted to discuss our faith, sir." Though she'd reverted to professionalism, her eyes hadn't quite caught up, and she leaned across the dormant belt to murmur "If I were you I'd read what you have there."

He already knew what they believed—he imagined nobody could avoid knowing—and he tramped away so fast that his shoelaces lashed the tiled floor. He sat down to tie them before wadding the brochure to lob it into the nearest bin. As he made for the bar through the duty-free court, sunglasses gave him a host of black looks while a multitude of watches showed him the time, the time, the time. Nobody was seated at the bar itself, though a few of the tables were occupied. Slater perched on a stool at the bar and ordered a glass of merlot. "A large one," he said.

The barman was a broad slow fellow with a tentatively amused expression. As he brought Slater the glass he said "Another one held up."

"Me, you mean." The barman could have been referring to the plane, but when he didn't admit to it Slater said "No point in fussing over it. I'll be home when I am."

"You're not holding your breath for the end of the world, then."

"I can't believe anybody is. It's not as if this is the first time that was supposed to happen. It's been meant to end a dozen times in this century alone."

"Maybe it did."

Presumably this was the style of joke the barman had been waiting to deliver. "I don't know why so many people have got it into their heads this time," Slater complained. "You'd think by now they would know better."

"If you ask me it's all the computers. They're meant to be giving us more of a mind but it's got stuff like that in it."

"The internet, you're saying. It contains everything, that's the problem."

"So none of us know what the world's like any more."

"I shouldn't think it's quite as bad as that. My mother has no time for computers but she knows what the Finalists are saying will happen."

"It's like I say, they get in everybody's head."

"She's why I was over here. She and her friends have been working themselves up so much that she had an attack."

"Better now, is she?"

"She is since I got her to talk about it. I did think the care home staff might have."

"I couldn't put my folks in one of those places."

"My parents came to live on the island," Slater said with some resentment, "and that's where she says she wants to stay."

"What we say isn't always what we think. Won't she be fretting about not seeing you tomorrow?"

"I'd already booked the flight. I could have stayed longer with her if I'd known it was going to be late."

"Thought you weren't bothered about that," the barman said as if he'd been presented with a reason for amusement. "Well, it'll all be over by tomorrow."

Slater saw people at the tables lift their heads as if they'd sensed danger. He took hold of his glass, only to find he'd drained it while talking. "Same again," he said. "I'll just find something to read."

As he made for the bookshop, such as it was—the first items he saw in it were earplugs and blindfolds—he took out his mobile and sent Melanie a message. **Plane late. Don't know how long.** He leafed through the newspapers, which felt oddly out of date, containing not a single reference to the Finalists and their dogged prophecy, though of course that was hardly news any more, if it ever had been. Too many of the paperbacks on display seemed designed to resemble one another—he could almost have taken them for the products of a single mind—and in any case he didn't expect to have time to finish or even get far into one. He bought a music magazine that reviewed new releases, and was returning to the bar when his mobile emitted its version of Beethoven's pastoral hymn. "Hold on," he told Melanie and paid the barman before carrying his glass to a table. "Here I am."

"Where's here, Paul?"

"Still at the airport. On the island, I mean."

"Oh dear. Well, it can't be helped." She let out a breath like a delicate sniff in reverse and said "What's the situation, do we know?"

"Do we know what the delay is?" Slater called to the barman.

"The way I heard it, some of the crew didn't show up for work."

"Let's hope they're ill, then," Melanie said.

This was a decidedly untypical wish, and then Slater understood. "Rather than nervous of flying tonight, you mean."

"So long as there's someone who isn't."

"Of course I'm not," Slater said before he grasped that she wasn't referring to him. As he looked away from a woman who was staring reproachfully at him he felt prompted to ask "How are Tom and Amy?"

"Asleep, I hope."

"You may as well be too. That's to say don't wait till I come home."

"You know I'll be waiting even if I'm asleep." As if she hadn't changed the subject Melanie said "How's Eileen now?"

"I think I've put her right. I just wonder if any of the staff at the home believe that rubbish. Well, they won't for much longer."

"That'll be strange for them," Melanie said. "See you however late you are, then."

"Absolutely, yes. See you then."

He would have added some endearments if he hadn't felt overheard in the bar. He ended the call and was pocketing the mobile when a voice behind him said "Anybody here think we're all stopping at midnight?"

The speaker—a small man who appeared to have concentrated most of his bulk in his stomach—was at a table by himself. A scowl clenched his mottled reddish face, which was decorated with a fading false moustache, a strip of foam from his latest pint of beer. "Don't be shy if you're one of that lot," he urged so vigorously that he left some consonants behind.

Slater supposed his phone call had provoked the outburst. He turned away as other customers lowered their heads or resumed their conversations, but the man wasn't so easily ignored. "Don't any of us read the Bible? Me neither, but they've told us what they say it says."

A sinking movement drew Slater's attention to the window, but it was the reflection of the man's tankard, not a plane. "The Koran too," the man said less distinctly, "and the rest of them fairy tales. Shows how much crap they are when that's all they can agree about."

Was everyone as embarrassed as Slater? The lack of a response only antagonised the man. "Who's keeping quiet?" he more or less pronounced. "Don't tell me there's none of you here. My lad's computer says you're everywhere."

Slater felt the man's gaze on the nape of his neck, though he couldn't tell from the reflection where the fellow was looking. Perhaps the sensation simply proved how much that you took for the external world was happening inside you. It dissipated as the man said "Come to think, they won't be travelling tonight. They're all praying the rest of us are wrong, I shouldn't wonder."

As the man's reflection slumped back in its chair Slater finished his drink. He oughtn't to have any more when he didn't know how soon he might be driving. He leafed through the magazine, but the names of favourite composers and their works didn't sound many notes in his head. He shut his eyes to rest them for a moment—at least, that was all he intended, but he was wakened by the man behind him. "It's here."

A plane was coasting past the window, with Slater's heartbeat for its soundtrack. It glided out of sight, and he felt as if he were a member of a chorus all holding their breaths. Certainly he wasn't alone in breathing aloud when a voice from above invited passengers for John Lennon to the gate. Several people raised a feeble if not ironic cheer, and as the barman called "Safe home" Slater found himself humming a snatch of *Imagine* as a reminiscence of the singer who'd lent the Liverpool airport his name.

While the bar and then the passage to the gate resounded with a prolonged drumroll of luggage, the elevated voice advised passengers to have their boarding cards and passports ready. No doubt the airline was attempting to make up for the delay, since a uniformed woman had already opened the exit to the airfield. "Come straight to me," she said.

She barely glanced at Slater's documents before she scanned his boarding card. A boxy corridor reverberated with his luggage and led him out beneath a black sky, in which he imagined more stars were visible than he had time to glimpse. At the top of the steps to the plane a woman in a larger version of the airline uniform looked impatient for the passengers to cross the tarmac. A man in a suit that identified him as a pilot ushered Slater to a seat halfway down the aisle, not the place he'd been assigned. "There's just a few of you tonight," the pilot said. "We're seating you for balance."

"Thanks for taking the trouble for us."

"Someone had to. The job's the job."

Slater hoisted his suitcase into the overhead locker and was fastening his safety belt as the pilot found a seat for the last passenger to board, the small big-bellied fellow. The larger stewardess oversaw the man's audibly peevish struggle with his seatbelt while the pilot shut himself in the cockpit, and then there was silence apart from a murmur of music that sounded reluctant to take much shape or to make clear which if any instruments were involved. The steps hacked away from the plane as the pilot's voice set about directing the cabin crew. As soon as the plane began to taxi he apologised for the delay, and then a recorded message prompted the cabin crew to perform their safety mime, which was so familiar that Slater could easily have dreamed it. The small man gave it a loose round of applause while the plane gathered speed, and the tarmac fell away as the plane sailed up into a larger darkness. The wing tilted as if the earth were calling it back, and Slater watched a few illuminated roads dwindle to filaments before the island drifted down the inclined sea into the dark.

He could have been gesturing at the night as he flourished his wrist-watch. It would be midnight in not much over a quarter of an hour. Waiting for the slimmer stewardess to wheel a trolley down the aisle used up several minutes, and obtaining a bottle of water took one more. He sucked at the plastic nipple and then picked up his magazine, but leafing through it felt like trying to recapture information. Did he need to stay awake? Wouldn't it be wiser to catch a little sleep before he had to drive? He closed his eyes and felt the magazine sliding out of his hands until he fumbled it onto the seat beside him. His head drooped and jerked up and sank again, and the low unchanging chord of the engines seemed to expand to meet him. Then they cut out, or rather his consciousness did, and he knew nothing until he came back to himself with a violent lurch.

It felt worse than any panic he'd experienced in his life—worse than the endless minutes he'd once spent searching for baby Tom and lost toddler Amy in the retail park where he worked. He felt as though his innards had dropped out of him, and he was just a shell that ached with emptiness. He wasn't even seated any longer; he'd plummeted into the dark so violently that it had snatched away his vision along with his ability to breathe. He was utterly alone in the midst of a vast silence unrelieved by so much as a

heartbeat. He couldn't have said whether it lasted for an instant or longer than he had the means to comprehend before he heard a voice. "Just someone expected word you meant," it said.

Or was it saying that he'd sent someone a worm or that they expected a firmament? He had to struggle to grasp who was speaking, and then he managed to deduce that the pilot was apologising for some unexpected turbulence. As he risked opening his eyes his sight returned, unless the uncontrollable lurch of the aircraft had put out the lights in the cabin at the moment he'd jerked awake. How could the voice be declaring "Police state sees to damned"? No, it was telling the passengers "Please stay seated and keep your belts fastened. Justify caution. No cause for alarm."

The last words let Slater understand that the pilot had said it was just a precaution. He could have thought the turbulence had dislodged his perceptions, which might explain why he felt so alone in the cabin. The lights were dimmer than he remembered, and they appeared to be showing him row after row of empty seats. He was absurdly grateful to hear a blurred voice. "Christ, give us a drink."

The tops of heads rose above half a dozen seats, and Slater glanced around to see faces leaning into the aisle like cards displayed by a cagey player. The stewardess who'd been at the boarding gate appeared from behind a curtain near the cockpit to murmur "We're only serving water now, sir, and could you please watch your language."

"Holy water, is it? We'll be needing more than that if you keep on chucking us about."

"We've started our dissent," Slater heard her say until he thought about it. A glance at his watch showed him that the time was several minutes after midnight. He'd no idea how much time had passed since the plane had encountered the turbulence, and there was certainly no reason to ask. All that mattered was that they would be landing soon, and he strained his eyes at the blackness that appeared to have become the substance of the window. At first he wasn't sure that he was seeing tiny lights lying too low for stars, and then the pattern like a distant constellation resolved itself into a set of grids. They were marking airstrips, and he didn't need the announcement that the plane was about to land.

Perhaps the pilot was resolved to make up for the turbulence, since they touched down as if the plane weighed nothing to speak of. It came to a

virtually imperceptible halt while noises almost too undefined to resemble music hovered in the cabin, and then a staircase lumbered out of the dark. The more substantial of the stewardesses opened the door to it, and her colleague waited on the tarmac to point the passengers towards the terminal. Slater made for the entrance so fast he hadn't time to notice any stars in the black sky, but when he stepped into the extensive bare white room he had to join a queue for the solitary operating immigration booth.

He'd never seen anyone so apparently determined not just to do but to look like their job. The officer's long face was an all-purpose warning, and jowls resembling a bloodhound's made it even more morose. He questioned a woman at length before sending her on her way and beckoning the next passenger forward. He was still quizzing her when the man with the prominent stomach began to complain. "What's the holdup this time? Some of us want to get home."

The immigration officer sent him an ominous look that only provoked him to raise his voice. "We're all Brits here, aren't we? Don't treat us like we've landed somewhere else."

Before he'd finished speaking two men in identical sombre suits appeared from behind a partition beyond the booths and converged on the protester. "Please come with us," one said Slater couldn't tell which.

"That's more like. You don't get anywhere if you don't kick up a row."

One official led the way between two empty booths while the other followed close behind the passenger. When they reached the partition the man turned to the queue as if his belly was swinging him around. "You want to kick up as well," he told them. "Hang on, where are you taking—

As his escorts ushered him behind the partition, each with a hand on one of his arms, his voice ceased. The only sounds were at the booth. At last the officer handed back the woman's passport and beckoned Slater with a gesture reminiscent of a fighter summoning an opponent. Slater tried offering a generalised smile along with his passport, but the overture might as well have been invisible. "Name?" the officer said.

"Paul Slater. Derek Paul, if you want the whole thing."

"Which are you?"

"I was born Derek Paul. Not born it, obviously, but that's what they called me when they did. I left Derek behind a long time ago."

"You've changed your name."

"Not officially, no. It's still in there if you look."

The officer opened the passport at the identification page and glanced away at last from Slater's face. "Date of birth."

'Just had my birthday last week. Twenty-third of April." Since this apparently wasn't enough Slater added "Seventy-six."

"Age."

For a moment Slater didn't know, or at least had to remember the date. His answer only made way for another toneless question. "Place of birth."

"Right here in Liverpool."

"Citizenship."

"British." With a surge of the irritation that had seized the protester in the queue Slater said "Can't you tell?"

"Date of expiry."

"Not for a long time yet, I hope." This went unappreciated too. "The passport, you mean," he said. "I'm not really sure without looking. Since when were we expected to be?"

If there was any answer in the unwavering pale gaze, it was just an admonition. "Wait a minute," Slater said with no idea of what he was preventing. "It's, don't tell me, no, I see you wouldn't. It's, hold on now, yes, it's next, next March."

The man shut the passport without another glance. "You are advised to leave sufficient time for the renewal."

As Slater took hold of the passport he said "Do you mind if I ask what you're looking for?"

"Why should you want to know that?"

"I don't suppose I need to. In fact I'm sure I don't." Slater was about to risk tugging at the passport—the man's grasp felt like a confirmation of the warning in his eyes—when he found he was alone in holding it. "Thank you for," he said and couldn't leave the word dangling. "Thank you for your time."

He expected to find a door behind the partition on the far side of the booths, but there was just a blank wall. The partition must cut off any

sounds; he couldn't even hear the interrogation that would be following his. The arrivals hall was deserted, and the shops were blanked out by metal shutters. As he hurried to the exit the high roof seemed to shrink his footsteps until they were no more substantial than their echoes. His reflection was growing on the glass doors when they parted with a gasp like the last of a breath.

Above the lamps that glared down on the car park the sky could almost have been a roof they were set in. No doubt they were helping to render it so black. The multitude of cars appeared to be forgetting their own colours, and if he hadn't memorised the location of the Astra—section E for Eroica and for the key of the symphony as well, third row like the number of the symphony—he might have panicked. He had to rouse it with the key fob before he was sure that the grey car was his gold one. He rested a hand on its hollow metal pate while he gazed at the sky until he succeeded in conjuring forth a star attended by three other intermittently visible gleams. He found them oddly reassuring, and so were the headlamps once he switched them on, and the dashboard lights that Tom and Amy used to pretend were the lights on the control panel in a cockpit. Some if not all of this felt like a promise of the lights of home.

The barrier raised its arm to point at the sky. Along the empty four-lane road that led away from the airport, the branches of thin trees netted scraps of the blackness. Single-storey blocks of grey corrugated metal flanked the road, and Slater hadn't previously realised how little the route offered for the mind to grasp. Miles later he came to the first houses, in which every window was as black as the sky. Beyond the houses ranks of headstones stretched away on both sides of the road into the dark, and he couldn't recall ever having taken so long to leave the cemetery behind. At last the road widened, and soon the grassy strip between the pairs of deserted lanes was as broad as a road itself. The elongated grove that stood on it, and the fields that kept interrupting the parade of unlit houses, had begun to feel as if the land was reminiscing about itself. No doubt the night was giving Slater thoughts like these, along with a sense of isolation.

As he turned along St Peter Street he couldn't immediately see the house; the trees standing in square plots on the pavements blocked his view. He was nearly home by the time he saw that the windows were full of the sky, like mirrors with nothing to show. He parked beside Melanie's Viva on the

drive and carried his suitcase to the front door rather than risk disturbing anyone with the sound of the wheels. He was finding his keys when the four panes in the door lit up as though he'd triggered an alarm.

He saw Melanie's silhouette descend into the hall with a flickering movement reminiscent of an old film. Her shape was snagging on the frosted panes, which made her look intermittently atomised. She must mean not to waken the children, since he couldn't hear her footsteps. The glass tried to recompose her features as she opened the door, and then her large generous face seemed to brighten the night with a smile. She stood on the threshold and hugged him with all her strength, whispering "Is it really you at last, Paul?"

"I can't imagine who else it's likely to be," Slater murmured. She was in just her dressing-gown, which fluttered as a chill wind reminded him of the hour. "Let's get you inside," he said. "I don't want to lose you, do I?"

She tilted her head back without letting go of him, and her glossy black hair trailed over her shoulders as her oval brown eyes seemed to deepen with a question. "How are you going to do that?"

"I'm saying I'm not. You aren't dressed for out here, that's all."

She shook her head, presumably at herself, as they retreated into the hall, and he was managing to shut the door without a sound when Amy called "Is that dad?"

"Is it, mummy?" Tom contributed at once.

As he appeared at the top of the stairs Amy joined him. They looked like sleepy versions of their images that lined the hall and climbed beside the stairs, framed photographs of the family holidaying in half a dozen European countries. Yet again Slater found himself thinking how his and Melanie's features had been displaced: the nine-year-old boy made his mother's face male with hair cropped almost as short as he would like, while Amy's extra pair of years hadn't altered her resemblance to her father —blue eyes set wide, rounded face except for the prominent chin, small mouth. "Now you've seen him you can both go back to sleep," Melanie said. "You've school and rehearsals as well."

"Can't we stay up? It's nearly time to go."

"Nowhere near, Tom," Slater said before he saw what time the pincers of the hour and minute hands were closing on. "We aren't even close to four,"

he said.

"Can't we wait anyway? I don't feel like going to sleep."

"And I don't," his sister declared.

"There's nothing to keep you awake, is there? I'm sorry if I did, but it's not my fault I was held up. It's your last rehearsal today and we want to be proud of you both. I'm sure you want that as well."

"You know we both are," Melanie said.

"That's right," Slater said, which seemed inadequate. "Just remember you two and your mother are all I need in my life. You can think about that while you go to sleep."

As he hefted the suitcase Melanie switched out the hall light, and he saw the children's eyes grow dark. When Tom lingered beside the highest photograph Slater felt he had to ask "What were you saying you wanted to wait for?"

"The sun." With some defiance the boy said "It won't be today till it comes up."

"You mean it won't stop being yesterday," Amy said.

While Slater thought she was doing her best to scoff, he was uncertain whether she secretly shared the idea. "Come on, you two," he said. "Don't tell me you're still bothered by that nonsense. I didn't think you ever were."

Was that too rough? They seemed less than reassured. "If you were worried because I wasn't here when—

"Can we leave it, Paul? This isn't the time for it, especially if you want anyone to sleep."

"All I'm saying," Slater said, "is we're all here and it's the day after, and that shows there was no reason to worry in the first place."

"Well, you've said it now, and it's time everyone was in bed."

When the children headed for their rooms as if they were competing to mime reluctance Slater said "If the sun doesn't wake you we'll tell you when it's here."

He followed Melanie into their bedroom to leave his suitcase by the bed, and felt her watching him all the way out of the room. In the bathroom the electronic buzz of the toothbrush filled his skull while his reflection

grimaced at him. He had the odd notion that the sight and its monotonous two-note chord—the high whine of the motor, the low drone of bristles against teeth—had a message for him, but he was too aware of the series of meaningless expressions his mouth was adopting. He used the toilet and found his face with soap and water and a towel, and then he hurried to the bedroom.

Melanie lay facing the door, and stretched a hand across the white cloudscape of the quilt to him. As soon as he'd eased the door shut she murmured "You were a long time."

"I didn't think I was." In fact he couldn't tell, and so he said "I didn't mean to be."

"Then don't be any longer."

She turned on her back to watch him undress and leave his clothes on the chair beside the window, beyond which the trees were as still as the streetlamps that drained them of colour. When he joined her beneath the quilt she gave him a soft lingering kiss and captured his hand to draw his arm around her as she nestled her back against him. As he reached for the light-cord she intertwined their fingers, the way she did on planes when they were taking off or about to land. He could almost have fancied that she was bracing herself, which made him feel oddly apprehensive. He yanked at the cord, and as the dark fell on them she clasped his hand tighter. "You aren't going away again, are you?"

"Not that I'm aware of." When her grasp didn't relax he said "No reason to think I am."

"I wish it were the weekend."

"The concert will be done and we can all unwind, you mean."

"Don't give me any more to fret about, Paul. I meant we'll be together, the four of us."

This so plainly confirmed how he'd suspected she was feeling that he said under his breath "That rubbish about yesterday got to you, didn't it."

He'd meant to speak too low for Melanie to hear, but she said "It was being on my own that did."

"You aren't now, so it can stop." He wasn't going to apologise for having had to reassure his mother, even though Melanie was gripping his hand as if

to keep him there. "I wonder what they can be thinking now," he said, "the Finalists."

"I'd rather not."

"Maybe it's better to think than feel sometimes," Slater retorted, but with less than a breath on her neck. "Then don't," he said more audibly. "Just sleep."

Since she was unwilling to release his hand, he used hers as well to rub her stomach. She'd liked him to stroke it when she was pregnant, and this was still a way of bringing her some calm. She thought it was related to meditation—the diaphragm was—but it felt as though he was moulding her to him as she settled more closely against him. Soon he couldn't distinguish her body or her breathing from his own, presumably because he'd gone to sleep.

The inclination of the seat helped. It had reclined all the way to horizontal. His breaths had grown so even that they were indistinguishable from the unwavering note of the Jetstream, which sounded like the voice of the featureless dark outside the window. Some detail seemed capable of troubling him, and eventually he remembered that he'd dumped his luggage in the aisle beside him rather than stowing it overhead. Surely it wasn't worth waking up for when there appeared to be no cabin crew to stumble over it, but he was jerked awake by an urgent bleeping and a voice that identified it as an alarm.

Why was she saying there was no cause for it when it was so nervously insistent? He felt as if the violent jolt had dislocated his ability to grasp language—as if he'd left too much of his intelligence behind in the dream. The incessant repetition of the note seemed capable of driving every other sense out of his mind, and he had no idea how long he took to grow aware that Melanie was still clasping his hand. It allowed him to recognise that he'd heard her saying "Now there's the alarm."

How could it still be dark at this hour? If it wasn't, where had his sight gone? Perhaps some of his perceptions needed to catch up with him, but he had to grip Melanie's hand more fiercely than she was holding his before he felt able to risk opening his eyes. She was lying on her back, waiting to meet his gaze. "What were you thinking?" she said.

It might have been a gentle accusation, and he wasn't going to admit that he'd been unaware of her. "I can't with this," he said and stretched out his hand to shut off the racket, which had begun to put him in mind of a very young child at a keyboard. The abrupt hush let him notice how flat the light appeared to be, but he managed to recall his promise. "I'll tell them the sun's up."

"We both will."

Why might he have a problem in reaching the door? Because he could fall over his suitcase, of course, which was where he remembered leaving it. On the door his and Melanie's dressing-gowns looked shrunken by emptiness, or at least they would if he let them. He gave Melanie a vigorous hug once he'd shoved his fists through the synthetic silk sleeves and tied the slippery cord. As she crossed the landing to waken Amy he made for Tom's room.

The curtains framed a sky so featurelessly white that it could have been last night's in negative. Its muffled pallid light showed him the familiar chaos of the boy's room, clothes and books and computer games strewn on and around the desk overlooked by football posters. While the bed was thoroughly rumpled, it was unoccupied. Not seeing Tom filled him with a panic that he heard in Melanie's voice as well. "Amy?" she was pleading.

Slater twisted around to see that the girl's bedroom was deserted too. As his mind seized on the extravagant disorder she'd left behind and posters for pop stars stared back at him, he might have been making a desperate bid to cling to some sense of his daughter. She and her brother amounted to far more than that, and as Slater told himself so he heard Amy call "We're here."

"We've had our breakfast," Tom shouted.

"You can't have had much," their mother said.

There was certainly no smell of breakfast, which might have wakened Slater. "Who's going in the bathroom?" Melanie asked him.

"Why don't we both?"

They hadn't often shared it since Amy was born, but he wondered if he'd been alone in wanting to do so now. "Wash up if you've finished," Melanie called down the stairs, "and then these rooms are overdue for tidying if you're ready for school."

How anxious was she to restore a domestic routine? Sharing the bathroom wasn't quite as Slater thought it used to be. Although they kept touching and following that with a smile, Melanie seemed distracted by listening for the children, wherever they were in the house. Slater felt compelled to strain his ears and saw her relax when they were rewarded with domestic sounds offstage. As he and Melanie returned to the bedroom Amy called "Hurry down, we want you."

"We're making you toast," Tom shouted.

Now that he'd said it Slater could smell it. No doubt the steam that had turned the bathroom mirror as blank as the sky had prevented him. "Save your voices. Remember the concert," he told the children.

Melanie was straightening hastily up from the dressing-table mirror. She was in one of her business outfits—metallic grey suit, polo-necked blouse. He'd never known her to dress so fast, which seemed to urge him to be at least as quick, especially since she lingered at the top of the stairs while he did his best. She kept him in sight but started downstairs before he emerged from the room. "Here come your customers," she called.

Amy was wielding tongs to pass Tom slices out of the toaster. He was diligently buttering them—at least, applying a synthetic substitute—all the way to every corner, as if they were outlines he had to fill in. He and his sister were wearing their St Dunstan's uniforms, the green of which had been putting Slater in mind of spring for weeks. He should have known the children would have made coffee too, and the white mugs on the equally colourless table were exuding steam like their own substance rendered vague. He sat opposite Melanie and heard her crunch a piece of toast, delicately echoing the sound inside his head. "Compliments to the kitchen," he said once his speech was clear.

"And the people in it," Melanie said as if this needed establishing. "Are you two ready to go when we've finished?"

Slater glanced at the clock on the cooker to see the matchstick puzzle of the digits adopt a new shape. "I'll run them to school," he said.

"We both can."

Surely Melanie's first job of the day wouldn't take her in that direction, and he thought of reminding her until he glimpsed determination in her eyes. If she had to deal with some anxiety, he was sure that she was strong enough

to do so by herself—she was clearly not inviting discussion, especially in front of the children—and so he said "Who's travelling with whom?"

"I will with mummy," Amy said at once.

"The men will lead the trek, shall we?" This aimed to be more of a joke than it seemed to end up, and he confined himself to the sounds inside his head until he and Melanie had cleared their plates. "Let's see what the day has in store," he said.

It seemed to have little enough for the moment. All along the street the trees were as motionless as the pallid slab of the sky, which turned the windows of the houses into blank rectangles that might almost have been waiting to be written on. Presumably the neighbours who went to work had already gone or were yet to emerge. The cars yipped like electronic puppies at each other, and as the children climbed in Tom called to his sister "See you at school."

His voice sounded not just dwarfed by the silence but muffled, as if the sky had shut it in. The doors shut with four hollow thuds, and Slater swung the Astra out of the drive. Beyond St Peter Street the houses grew taller while the spaces between them demonstrated how low the sky had grown. Soon a park seemed to bring it even closer, and Slater saw how bare the trees still were, as if the leaves had found too little light to coax them forth. As he glanced in the mirror to remind himself where Melanie and Amy were, Tom said "Did you miss the earthquake, dad?"

Was this another reason for Slater's mother to be worried? It reminded him that he had to call her. "On the island, do you mean?" he said. "When did that happen?"

"It woke me up when we were waiting for you to come home. Everything was shaking. Me as well."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there." Slater wasn't sure if he was apologising or just regretted not having shared the experience. "Did anything break?"

"I don't know." The idea seemed to take the boy unawares. "I didn't see."

"Then I expect it didn't. I haven't noticed anything," Slater said, only to wonder if he should. "Did Amy or your mother?"

"It wasn't just me. It was everything."

Slater had to work out the question Tom thought he'd asked. If the rest of the family had been unaware of any tremor, perhaps the boy had dreamed it but was determined not to think so. The road had brought them to an even wider one that was flanked and divided by trees, and it led to a profusion of green—not leaves but the uniforms of children trooping into St Dunstan's. Slater watched Tom and Amy until they were lost in the uniformed crowd, and then he noticed Melanie waving at him in the mirror—how insistently before he'd realised, he couldn't say. "Stay in touch," she mouthed.

As he pulled away from the kerb she followed him. He was wondering how far she meant to accompany him—as he recalled, her first job was downtown—when she found a gap in the tree-lined strip and turned away out of the mirror. His own route took him back towards the cemetery—almost home—but he stopped short of it and took out his mobile. After several measured trills of a bell that sounded more than usually artificial, a woman's voice said "Aurora House. Constance speaking."

"How are you?" He meant this as a greeting more than a question but couldn't tell if it was taken as either. "Is Mrs Slater available?" he said.

"Available."

"To speak to. This is her son."

"Son."

Until Constance had identified herself he could have thought she was a recorded message, and she still didn't sound much more vital. "Her son Paul, yes," he said. "She wanted me to call. I was there just yesterday but it seems longer."

"A lifetime."

So she was capable of finding words of her own, though he didn't especially care for the odd choice of phrase. Might she have been a Finalist? He didn't see how they could still cling to their faith, and yet he didn't like to think that any of them were looking after his mother. "So could I have a word?" he said.

"Mrs Slater."

"Yes, Mrs Slater. Eileen Slater, yes."

He thought his impatience had driven the woman away until he wondered if she had been addressing his mother, not parroting him yet again. He

didn't know how long the silence, which felt like the aural equivalent of the sky, gave no hint of activity before he heard his mother's voice. "Is that Derek?"

It sounded vague and so, he was unhappy to recognise, did she. Both his parents had called him Derek when he was too young to have much of a sense of himself, but once he'd seen he had a choice he'd settled on his present name. "It's Paul," he said.

"Paul." He could have thought she'd picked up a trait from Constance, especially when site repeated "Paul." At least this seemed to have helped define her voice as she said "Are you there at last?"

"I have been for a while. I didn't call in case you were asleep."

"I was."

"Then I'm sorry. Constance should have said and I'd have called back."

"Constance."' This earned no response that he could hear. "I didn't mean now," his mother said. "I was asleep when, you know."

With a sense of being made to join in the game of echoes Slater said "When..."

"When nothing happened."

Somehow this wasn't as reassuring as it ought to be, but he said "That's fine then, isn't it?"

"It woke me up. I didn't know where I was."

He was close to asking what had wakened her, and then he was as far away from it as possible. "So long as you do now," he said.

"I'm better for hearing from you, Derek."

He kept his protest to himself and found something else to say. "Is everyone else all right?"

"Everyone."

Surely he could take that for a yes. "And they're looking after you," he said. "The staff."

"Constance."

Was this addressed to the woman? Neither its tone nor anything it brought about was telling. He couldn't recall meeting Constance; at best he had a generalised impression of people in uniform. "Her and the rest," he said.

"That's what I need." Perhaps this was a play on words, unless his meaning hadn't immediately reached her, because she added "They're not the same as you, Derek."

"He isn't either."

He didn't say this aloud, and yet he had a disconcerting sense of having failed to keep it to himself. He held his breath until his mother said "Anyway, you've your family to think of. Will I be seeing them soon?"

"I'll talk to Melanie about when."

"Melanie." As he wondered if he needed to explain his mother said "Remember her. Your wife."

She was saying that she did, of course, not that he should. "And the young ones," she said.

"Tom and Amy."

"That's right." She could almost have been commending his memory, praising him as if he'd reverted to the child whose name she kept using. "Amy and Tom," she said as though testing whether the sequence was equally valid. "Let's try and be together soon."

Too much of the conversation seemed to consist of repetitions, in slow motion too. "We'll be in touch," Slater said. "Now why don't you catch up on the rest you were saying you needed."

"The rest." She might have forgotten what she'd meant or somehow changed her mind. "There's plenty," she said.

"Then you should treat yourself to a helping," Slater told her, only to feel he'd misunderstood. He had to trade several endearments before he felt comfortable with ending the call. He left the mobile on the seat beside him as token company, and was casing the Astra forward when he noticed a police car in the nearest entrance to the graveyard.

Had the police been watching him? Now he recalled that you weren't expected just to switch off the engine if you used your mobile in a car, you had to remove the key from the ignition too. As he drove towards them, not too fast but surely not slowly enough to arouse any suspicions, he saw that both the occupants of the white vehicle were disconcertingly young. Perhaps that was one reason why their smooth scrubbed faces looked so tightly closed around a purpose, determined not to let in any doubt or

humour, but he was reminded of the Finalists. He straightened his tips and gave the police a terse nod of acknowledgement before he let them see him focus on the road ahead.

He was alongside the cemetery entrance when he glimpsed twin items at the edge of his vision, a pair of roundish objects as blank and white as the sky. Of course they weren't faces; the driver had flashed the headlights, and now he saw her stretching out a hand towards him and then patting the air as if dealing with some article he couldn't see—a child's head, perhaps, or a mound of earth. She was gesturing him to pull over, and he braked so quickly that he blocked the way out of the graveyard.

It seemed advisable not to move on in case they took him to be trying to escape. The driver stayed in her seat while her colleague ducked out of the car, tugging his official headgear down as though to consolidate his small stiff face. He paced to the front of the Astra and scrutinised the number plate before raising his pale gaze to inspect Slater. When he came to the driver's door at the speed of Slater's pulse, Slater lowered the window. "How can I help?'" he said.

He couldn't tell if the policeman was considering the question or Slater's face, even once the man said "Where have you been, sir?"

"Just dropping the children off at school." Slater would have hoped this might earn him at least a hint of approval. "Mine and my wife's," he said in case this solved the unidentified problem. "We both did."

"Where is your wife now?"

"On her way to work if she's not already there."

"What work would that be, sir?"

Slater was close to laughing at the vintage phraseology, which could have been designed as a badge of maturity. Certainly the man seemed more like a memory of a police officer than today's version. "She fixes computers," he said.

"And what work do you do?"

"I'm in charge of music at Texts in Speke."

"In charge."

"Of the department, yes. I'm your classical man in particular." Slater thought he could risk showing a trace of impatience as he added "I'm on my

way there now."

This didn't change the man's blank gaze, but neither had anything else. Slater could almost have imagined that his interrogator knew the answers and was testing him to find out if he did. The policeman closed one hand on the lowered window and held out the other. "May I see your licence, please."

"Here I am." Slater unfolded his wallet to exhibit the driving licence in its plastic window. "Nobody else would have that face," he said.

The policeman might have been miming the absence of any response. Admittedly it hadn't been much of a joke, especially considering Amy's resemblance to her father. "Please hand it to me, sir," the policeman said.

Slater removed the licence from the wallet and planted it on the man's palm, which was disconcertingly soft as well as pale and smooth enough to put him in mind of a cloud. "Wait here, sir," the policeman said.

Slater wasn't too far from enquiring where the fellow thought he might have gone. He watched the man return to the police car and sit beside his colleague while she consulted a small computer. They didn't speak—the deserted road was as silent as the multitude of stones—and he didn't see them communicate in any way before the policeman came back to him, so deliberately that Slater would have expected his footfalls to be noisier. "All in order, then?" Slater said. "I'm who it says and this is my car and it's taxed and insured."

The policeman lowered his head as if the monologue had weighed it down. "Where were you last night, sir?"

"Good God, how much else do you want to know?" Having kept this to himself, Slater said "On the way home from visiting my mother."

"That's confirmed. Tell anyone who wants to know."

Slater didn't speak until he had his licence back. "Such as who else?"

"Anyone who asks you, Mr Slater. Please be sure to remember."

He had even less sense of what he was being told to do or why, and he blurted "Just how much do you know about me?"

"Everything you are is in the system."

He didn't care for the notion at all. "May I ask what this has been about?"

"You'd be advised to forget about it, Mr Slater."

"How can I forget it when I don't know what it is?"

While he didn't feel quite confident enough to say that, he wouldn't be the first to blink. The policeman was staring at him as if searching for Slater's thoughts, although his eyes looked as dully vacant as the sky. Then his face appeared not just to flare up with the same pallor but to flatten as his surroundings did. His colleague must have been flashing the headlights, and once Slater blinked his vision reverted to normal. "You can forget this ever happened," the policeman said.

Slater barely managed not to retort that he'd had enough of being told what to forget and to remember. As the policeman turned away at last Slater shut the window. At the sound of the engine the man glanced over his shoulder, but Slater had the unsettling impression that both officious faces were fully turned to him. He must need to catch up on his sleep, though perhaps he ought to be glad that the police hadn't tested his breath. He sent the Astra forward and saw the white car shrink to the size of a toy in the mirror. Stones and trees closed around it, and then it was gone as though it had been too transitory to have a place in the venerable landscape.

The cemetery fell behind at last, and houses in which the windows were suffused with no colour flanked the road. Soon it narrowed, and the sky seemed to press the houses closer to the earth before they gave way to blocks of shops. These looked dingy and anonymous, as if the secondhand goods dimly visible beyond the windows had infected them with staleness, and Slater was glad to reach the main road.

It led him towards the airport, though there weren't any planes in the sky, and then to the retail park. Apart from the outsize writing of their names the buildings weren't much more individuated than the sky. The sign for **texts** was in computer type and as devoid of capitals as the average message on a mobile. Slater found a space not too many ranks of cars away from the store and felt as if the sky was pacing him while he hurried across the car park.

Beyond the shop entrance and the displays of books he shouldn't have to glance towards to recognise, music was in the air. It reminded him of the vague tentative murmurs he'd heard on the plane, and he couldn't name the composer. He was straining to hear it more clearly so that he could identify it when Shelley Blake came over to him.

He'd never known how much the manager's name had to do with literature. Her taste in reading didn't seem to extend beyond her lifetime, if even that far. Perhaps she wouldn't be able to attribute the Text for Today, this month's quotation that was printed on the staff T-shirts: *Had we but world enough and time*... Either she was wearing more makeup than usual or he was more aware of the mascara that outlined her grey eyes, the pink lipstick that helped shape her full lips. Even the silvery blonde hair that framed her snub-nosed oval face might have had its tints touched up. She waited while he abandoned trying to recognise the music, and then she said "Put something else on when you're ready, Paul. Something everyone will know."

Was that a criticism of his selections? "Any requests?" he said.

"It's your department. We'll leave it to you."

He might have preferred her to say what she thought the customers might like. He nodded at the trace of music in the air. "Whose idea was that, then?"

"Whoever made it up, I should think."

He'd already had one conversation that resembled a series of ill-defined traps in a dream. She was gazing at him as though she expected more of him, but all he could think of to say was "Sorry, am I late?"

"Nobody's saying so."

"I think I lost track of the time. Don't ask me why, but some police pulled me up."

"I wasn't asking, Paul."

"I know, but if you were..." Even if he felt as though he was talking to himself, it needed to be put into words. "You wouldn't believe how much they wanted to be told," he said, "and they already had it on the computer."

"I expect we're all there."

"I don't know about you, but I'd like to think there was more to me than some electronic information."

"You should then, Paul."

"I just don't know what they were trying to do."

"No need to say. Really, there's no need."

Perhaps her urgency was meant to suggest that he would soon be late after all. "I won't waste any more time, then," he said.

As he made for the staff quarters he found his name tag in his pocket and pinned it above the Marvell. At the door he extended the plastic rectangle on its lead to fit it to the plaque on the wall. He thought the anonymous murmur in the air had muffled the click of the door release until he found that the door didn't budge. He peered at the tag, only to wonder how anyone could expect the system to recognise RETALS LUAP, which sounded like a misspelled retail outlet. Then he managed to laugh, though not before he felt as if looking down at his transformed name had seized him with vertigo. He applied the tag again and heard the lock acknowledge him.

The staffroom was a large white concrete box in which straight chairs huddled against a table opposite a gathering of seats padded with slabs of imitation leather. Under the fluorescent tubes the room looked not just empty but impersonal. Slater clocked on with his tag, triggering a ding that put him in mind of winning an electronic game, and glanced at the memory board on the wall. Was that his handwriting? Presumably whatever task he'd written up had been dealt with, since the words had mostly been erased. Just a few letters were faintly distinguishable: RE A L, too widely spaced to be spelling the word. He couldn't make sense of them as he hung his jacket in the nearest of the lockers in the kitchen beyond the staffroom. Once he'd switched off his mobile he went back to the shop.

The music section was at the back, past a multitude of books. Perhaps it was his lack of sleep that made their covers look oddly imprecise in the artificial light, which had as little colour as the sky that glared through the long windows. Even the cases in the racks of compact discs seemed less familiar than they had to be. The prospect of relinquishing his own taste so as to reflect everyone else's felt oddly threatening, and at first he couldn't even think how to do it. If the music was supposed to exemplify the shop, he might as well select from the label that their multinational owners had caused to be created. Perhaps in some sense that music represented the world.

The Primest discs had their own prominent display, where the timidly classical compilations were shelved behind the more unashamedly popular. *Beathoven* emphasised the rhythms of the composer's best-known melodies, while *High Din* did the same for his contemporary, and *Lud Wig* showed

Mozart topped by an extravagantly elaborate hairpiece composed of notes. On reflection Slater didn't think he could live with any of those performances, let alone *Bach with Bite* or *Poochini* or *Un-Ravel*, and so he slipped Beethoven's Pastoral—the symphony, he thought, not the sonata—into the player. "Is this all right for everyone?" he called.

"We've heard it before."

He couldn't tell which of the staff had spoken. They were deployed throughout the shop, shelving books or arranging displays or checking stock against lists on handheld monitors or serving customers, although the day had brought out few of those. He heard a murmur of agreement, either with his question or with the response. He propped the compact disc case on the Now Playing stand on the Information counter, and looked up to find that somebody was waiting to be seen.

He was a large balding man in a grey track suit that made his shape vaguer. His roundish face looked blurred by fat and to some extent defined by hair—eyebrows overshadowing the small eyes, a moustache and a restrained beard framing the mouth, uneven stubble poking out of the broad nose. As Slater met his gaze he raised his shaggy eyebrows, which appeared to expand. "Have you remembered yet?" he said.

Slater felt rude for gazing at him, especially since it didn't make the man look any more familiar. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm not sure..."

"You were finding a tune for me. You thought you were the man to know."

Slater couldn't recall being asked. He was hoping for some help, but when the fellow only stared at him he had to ask "Which tune was it again?"

"Something like this."

The man lifted his gaze heavenwards, suggesting that the melody resembled the one in the air. Certainly the tentative notes he hummed weren't too distinguishable from it. Slater would have been embarrassed to ask him to repeat them, but had to admit "I haven't found it yet, I'm afraid."

"Where did you look?"

"In the catalogues online." That had to be the answer, even if he couldn't recall doing so. How badly was his lack of sleep affecting him? At least he was able to say "It does sound rather familiar."

"That's what you thought." Perhaps this was a reproach, but the man added "I think I've remembered some words."

"It's a song, you mean."

"Didn't you say?"

Slater had no idea, and his forgetfulness had started to make him feel lacking. "What words are those?" he said, trying not to sound nervous.

"It starts off with the town where I was born."

"That should help." The man's accent prompted Slater to add "I'd say Liverpool."

"Like you by the sound of it. You're best ending up where you came from."

"Some of us have never left." That wasn't true visiting his mother was enough to give it the lie—and Slater felt as if he was trying too hard to manage his memories. "Are you thinking of the Beatles?" he said.

"You've got to if you think of Liverpool."

"Yes, but do you have their song in mind? The one that starts the way you said."

All at once he was afraid of being asked for the title. How could he have forgotten it, even if he specialised in other kinds of music? Perhaps the man knew it, because he said "I'm not thinking of that, no."

It sounded unnecessarily reminiscent of a guessing game. "Is it more recent?" Slater said. "One of Dylan's, could it be?"

"Isn't he the poet?"

"Not the one from Wales, the singer who took his name."

"You shouldn't do that." Slater felt no less bewildered than accused, even once his customer said "Take a name. Don't they say never take one in vain?"

"That's just God."

"It ought to be the rest of us as well. Take it away and you won't be able to get to yourself. You know yourself you can't look anything up without a name."

"So, Dylan the singer," Slater said in a bid not to think about any of that. "Was it his song?"

"Doesn't sound like him."

"Then I'm guessing it's the one he based his song on. Barbara," Slater said and then "Barbara."

"Barbara Barbara. Don't know that one."

"Not Barbara Barbara," Slater said and tried to laugh, despite feeling like an echo of an echo. "Barbara. Barbara..." With an effort that strained not just his mind but the whole of him he succeeded in recalling "Barbara Allen."

"Hey," the man said in surprise if not indignation, "that's my name."

Slater was on the edge of laughter now, unless it was hysteria. "What is?"

"It's not going to be Barbara, is it? Not Barbara Barbara either. Have a go at Alan."

Perhaps that was how he spelled it, whichever of his names it might be. "As you see, mine's Paul," Slater said.

The customer peered at his badge—indeed, scrutinised it so closely that Slater was reminded of immigration or the police. "If you say so," the man eventually said.

Slater glanced down to see that the badge was inverted, turned up towards him as though to remind him of his name. Even once Slater reversed the badge the customer didn't look especially convinced. "Can you sing it for me?" the man said.

For a disoriented moment Slater thought he was being asked to perform his own name, a notion that seemed capable of driving the ballad out of his head. With an effort he succeeded in retrieving a pair of lines: "He turned his face unto the wall, and death was drawing nigh him..." He would rather not sing that just now if ever, and he struggled to recapture the words that the man had more or less told him. He took a breath that he couldn't hear for the hovering music, and sang "In something town where I was born..."

"How's that again?"

Slater did his best to raise his voice while he repeated the line, but couldn't prevent the rhythm from fitting itself to the symphony, and the melody fared not much better. The customer had him rehearse it once more, and this time he joined in. As Slater saw his colleagues duck towards their work, quite possibly to shut out the duet, the man said "That's something like."

"Shall I see if I can find it for you?"

"If you want."

The song wasn't on any of the albums by the Neaps. It wasn't among the Only Folk compilations, and it didn't seem to have been recorded by Maurice and His Men. Slater searched through all the likely discs and then the increasingly unlikely ones before he had to tell his customer "I'm afraid we don't have it in Folk just now."

"Doesn't have to be."

Presumably he meant he would accept a composer's interpretation, and Slater moved to the classical racks. Volkswagen came to mind until the initials yielded Vaughan Williams, who didn't seem to have gone anywhere near the ballad. Britain was a thought—Britten, to be more precise—but he hadn't set it either. Holst had stayed clear along with Grainger, and there was no trace of a version by Beethoven, whose rustic dance was leaving very little room in Slater's head for any other musical thoughts. At last he said "It looks as if I'll have to order it for you."

"If it won't be too much trouble for nothing."

"It's none at all. We're here for you. Without you we wouldn't exist," Slater said and typed his name to log onto the computer at Information. The screen flickered for an instant, unless his vision did, before responding. Invalid, it declared.

The customer glanced at the screen and then gazed at Slater. "Aren't you well?"

"I'm fine. It's the system that isn't."

"I wouldn't say that too loud if I were you."

"I don't care who hears." This was no more defensive than his remark about the computer. "Slater," he hissed as he put in the name again, just as unsuccessfully. He was about to page the manager, though it made him feel worse than incompetent, when a thought saved him. He typed Paul and was acknowledged at once, which would have reassured him if he weren't so aware of having forgotten the routine. "I'm in," he said. "What sort of version would you like?"

"Of you? The one you are will do, I'd say."

However plainly this was a joke, Slater didn't find it appropriate. "Of the music," he said.

Since Slater hadn't even hinted at a grin, his customer's face stayed blank. "Whichever you think."

"Traditional?" When the man raised no objection Slater brought up the title, but the onscreen repetitions were so numerous that he had to search for a reason to single one out. "The Final Family," his instincts eventually prompted him to say. "I believe they're supposed to have caught the spirit."

"Let's have them, then."

Slater patched the details into an online order form before he had to say "And your name again..."

"Allen."

"Mr Allen," Slater said, almost sure he'd heard that spelling, and in the absence of any contradiction he entered it on the form. "And your postcode."

He had to ask to hear it again, which didn't lessen how it made him feel. "Sorry," he said. "It was just a surprise. It's the same as mine."

"You'll be looking for me at home."

Slater couldn't help wishing he were there right now—him, not the customer. "What number's yours?" he said.

"Don't tell me that's yours too."

Slater suppressed his unease, since the idea was absurd. The mumbled number was a teen, but certainly not his. "Close," he said, though he wasn't sure how much. "You must be just round a corner."

"You'll be seeing me again before you know it."

"It ought to be here soon," Slater said, as that was all the customer could mean, and printed out the information. "If you could bring that with you it would be helpful."

"It'll help you remember, you mean." As he took the flimsy slip the man said "Thank you for your time, Mr Player."

"So long as you care about names, this is me," Slater said and extended his badge on its lead.

He might have been making a bid for admission at an invisible threshold. The man didn't even glance at the badge before he turned away, murmuring "I'll leave you alone then, Mr Later."

"Slater," Slater protested but had no idea who heard him. Everyone had their backs to him, and he couldn't tell how much of his voice the discreetly boisterous music had absorbed. "I'll be in the office if anyone needs me," he said rather louder than he'd proclaimed his name, and made for the plaque on the wall.

The office was the second room along the concrete passage. It was a windowless bunker much like the staffroom but with desks, each of which was occupied by a computer, their screens as blank as oblivion. As Slater sat in front of his the unadorned white walls reminded him of the sky; it felt like being surrounded by slabs of solidified cloud, or else the walls seemed less substantial than they ought to. He would leave once he'd checked for any calls; he didn't even know why he was so anxious to do it—but as soon as he switched on the mobile it clanked and trembled in his hand. Melanie had tried to reach him.

At least she had left him a message, and he fumbled for the key. A woman told him he had one new message and gave him instructions on how to retrieve it, which he couldn't do until he had finished being told. He'd forgotten to wait for the anonymous artificial voice to finish before he poked the appropriate key, and had to go through the ritual again. Once he'd jabbed the key a second time he heard a whisper of static not too distinguishable from silence, and then it produced Melanie's voice—the memory of her call. "Don't worry if you're there," she said. "Well, of course you are. Just checking all is as it should be. The children tried and so I said I would. We'll all be fine till we're back together."

What did she mean about the children? He thumbed the button to recall her number and pressed the phone against his car, and heard silence as blank as he imagined the unseen sky must be. He didn't know how long he waited to hear an unnecessarily remote bell, which seemed to be summoning more of the silence as it echoed itself. Then the bell faltered like a musician who had missed a note, and Melanie said "Hello?"

It shouldn't be a question. She ought to be seeing his name. Did her voice sound artificial? Perhaps it was her answering message, which he couldn't

recall ever having heard. Before he managed to respond or even take a breath she said "Who's calling me?"

"It's me. It's only me."

"Not only at all, unless you're saying you're the only thing that matters."

"I'd never say that. There are you and the children for a start."

"Matters to them and to me. You ought to know I meant that."

"I'm sure other people do as well. Matter, I'm saying." The sense of artificiality hadn't left him; the conversation felt like rummaging in his mind. "Why couldn't you see me?" he said.

"What do you mean. Paul?"

That sounded genuine enough—her unease did. "Just now," he said. "When I rang. You couldn't see my name."

"I wasn't looking. I wanted to hear."

Had he aggravated her unease? He still had to ask "Why did you call? What was wrong?"

"Nothing is now."

"That's a relief, but what were you saying was the matter with the children?"

She was certainly uneasier now. "What did I say?"

"That they'd tried to get in touch with me, I thought. There's no trace on my phone."

"That explains it, then." Her relief seemed to let her add "Mind you, there are always traces. If there weren't I couldn't do my job."

She was talking about computers, but he was anxious to learn "Why did they want me?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"I'm asking why they tried to call."

"I really couldn't tell you. I expect it can wait till tonight if I let them know I've spoken to you." She sounded eager to say "We'll pick them up after their rehearsal, shall we? I should be finished by then."

"I can get them if you like."

"No need to be apart any longer than we have to be." As if to leave the thought behind she said without a pause "How's your day shaping up?"

"I don't know how long I was dealing with a customer. One of our neighbours or not far from it. A Mr Allen, I believe."

"He does sound a bit familiar, but let's concentrate on us."

At least their conversation had lent her voice some substance, and she sounded close enough to be in the room. "And our work," Slater said.

"That's us as well, and the children are."

"I should think we ought to let them be themselves." Just in time Slater grasped that whatever was behind Melanie's words, she wouldn't want to hear that kind of comment, and so he gave her a silence to prompt her to speak. "I can't wait to see them, can you?" she said.

"We'd better get back to work so we're in time."

"I expect so." As Slater made to say something other than farewell she said "See them performing, I meant."

"That as well," Slater said and was anxious for the day to be done. The shop felt like a stage in his return to the family, and he seemed to need to keep them in his mind. By the end of the workday he could scarcely bring to mind how he'd spent it—checking stock, removing items from the shelves to send back where they'd come from, finding music for a customer, serving at the tills, which emitted notes like rudimentary attempts to join in the melodies overhead if not to diminish them or take their place—and he left all that behind as he made for his car.

Beneath the white sheet of the sky the dormant vehicles might have been forgetting their colours. Perhaps the sunless light was muffling his perceptions, because he had to use the key fob to locate the Astra. He heard an electronic sound that seemed to be transformed into a flare of light, but he had to rouse the car again, having lost it once more in the maze of empty metal. He fell into his seat and grabbed a water bottle to suck at the plastic nipple, feeling vulnerable and isolated. It must show how incomplete he was without his family, and he twisted the key to bring the car back to life.

The traffic lights at the exit from the retail park looked blanched by the sky. Although the main road was anything but busy, the lights took their time about releasing him. Such traffic as there was stayed on the main road

when he turned away between the faded shops. He couldn't help looking for the police at the graveyard, but except for trees there were only stones like extrusions of the rock beneath the grass.

He saw St Dunstan's before he was expecting to, though he couldn't recall when he'd last approached it from this direction. At first the white blocks of the school consisted mostly of a mass of stripes, the railings of the schoolyard. The bars moved lethargically apart as he drove closer, as if the view beyond them was gradually taking shape—the buildings practically indistinguishable from the sky, their windows blank as cataracts, the empty yard. No, there was a glimpse of green, and then the gaps between the bars let him see Amy and Tom. Melanie was with them, and he should have noticed her car on a side street ahead, especially since no houses were in the way. "Now we're all together again," Amy cried as he opened the passenger door.

"We'll always be," said Tom.

Slater would have expected her to give that a big sister's look, but for a change she seemed not to feel superior. "Who's coming home with me?" he said.

The children's faces wavered, and he could have thought Melanie seemed taken aback too. "We all are," she said.

"No, I mean who's travelling with me." When even this appeared to fall short Slater said "In my car."

"It can be the boys again." Melanie said.

Tom apparently understood this before his father did, and climbed in the Astra. Amy and her mother hurried to the Viva, which swerved at speed out of the side road as if Melanie couldn't wait to see the rest of the family in her mirror. As the Astra came up behind her she moved off so deliberately that Slater assumed she wanted him to stay in the reflection. He grew aware that Tom was gazing at him. "Well, Tom," he said and for a disconcerting moment didn't know how to continue. "Are you prepared?"

The boy's gaze flickered, surely not with nervousness. "What for, dad?"

"What else could it be? Your concert, of course."

"I think we are." Even more gravely Tom added "I hope."

"No need for that, I'm certain." When the boy looked less than reassured Slater said "I believe in you and Amy."

"And mummy."

"She does too."

Tom's gaze retreated, leaving his eyes blank, so that Slater wondered if he'd misunderstood the boy somehow. He could have thought he was forgetting how to talk to his family. Was this another indication that he needed to catch up on his sleep? Even that prospect made him uneasy, and he concentrated on following the Viva, meeting Melanie's eyes in the mirror whenever she looked for him. He was barely aware of having a passenger, and had to keep glancing at Tom, who was intent on the other car.

As he followed Melanie into St Peter Street the trees closed in. Was even the vegetation confused by the unemphatic light? He could have thought all the buds were taking their leaves back, having concluded that spring had proved to be an illusion. The pallid sky appeared to have settled into every window of the house, and until he left the car he couldn't see a single room. Melanie opened the front door, revealing the hall and the photographs climbing towards the sky. Once Slater crossed the threshold he could see the photographs weren't blank. As he shut out the inhibited trees and the unforthcoming sky he said "We'll have dinner when you two have done your homework."

"We haven't got any," Tom said.

He looked oddly lost, and Amy did until she said "They let us off because of rehearsals."

Slater was disconcerted to feel that the domestic routine had been undermined. How regulated did he need their life to be? What did he think would happen otherwise? Before he could ponder this, if indeed he wanted to, Melanie said "Come and read while we get dinner ready then."

He had the odd notion that she meant the children to read aloud to them. He wouldn't have encouraged reading at the table—surely that used to be regarded as rude—but at least it meant the family was all together. As he made a salad to accompany the lasagne Melanie had taken from the refrigerator he saw that the children's books must be old favourites, revisited so often that they'd shed their presumably disintegrating jackets.

He was doing his best to identify them—it felt like a memory exercise—when Melanie said "If you're ready we are."

The children shut their books at once. The blank pages Slater glimpsed were the flyleaves, of course. He poured drinks—lemonade for the children, wine for him and Melanie—while she loaded everybody's dishes, and then he remembered a question he'd wanted to ask. "Who's going to tell me about the earthquake?"

Melanie frowned, and Amy produced a smaller but fiercer version. "Which one?" she said before her mother could speak.

"How many have there been?"

"None at all that I'm aware of," Melanie said. "Now why doesn't everyone —"

"I believe there was a bit of one, wasn't there? Tom said you had it while I was on my way home."

"Tom would," Amy said.

"You must have felt it too," the boy protested. "You woke up like me."

With all the loftiness her extra years had conferred upon her Amy told him "That wasn't an earthquake."

"What was it, then?"

"I don't know what woke me." As their mother made to intervene Amy said "I went all shivery. It was like having ripples in my tummy and my head."

"That's the same thing. It wasn't just us, it was—"

"You were worried about your father being late, that's all," Melanie said. "You can forget all about it now. Don't go getting yourselves worked up when you have your big day tomorrow."

The children looked frustrated if not more thoroughly dissatisfied, and Slater did his best to divert them. "That's enough earthquakes for one day," he said, and when their faces stayed stubbornly baffled "Your mother's excelled herself today, hasn't she? I can't remember when it tasted so good."

He was confusing himself if not them. Melanie hadn't made the lasagne today, and he couldn't even recall which of the two of them had been the cook. Soon enough everyone's plates looked as if they mightn't have held

food at all, and the children left the table. "Don't go far," Melanie said and seemed to wonder why she had.

"We're only going to watch," Amy said.

As Slater passed Melanie items to put in the dishwasher he couldn't hear the television in the next room. When he and Melanie left the kitchen he heard sounds too rapid to identify, and the flat screen in the living-room met him with a series of random images like frames in a chaotic film. Tom was switching channels, only to complain "There's nothing on."

"It looks as if there's far too much," Melanie said.

"Let's have the control, please," Slater said.

He lingered on some of the channels long enough to be sure what they were offering, but in no case was it much. The fragments of news seemed bland and overly familiar—predictions of prosperity, forecasts of employment, prognoses of technological developments, assurances of better times in store. Slater hoped all this would come true for Tom and Amy, but he saw it wasn't reaching them just now. Otherwise there were cartoons —"Seen it," Tom and then Amy announced—and quiz shows—"Seen it," the children chorused—and episodes of comedies— "Seen it" in every case. "Well then," Melanie said with impatience that Slater thought wasn't too far from nervousness, "what do you want to see?

"The film with all the music in," Tom said, very nearly at once.

"The one that's made of music," Amy seemed to deduce he had in mind.

"I'm sure you know which that is, Paul."

He could have thought the family was imitating one of the quiz shows. If Melanie knew the title, why couldn't she say? It must be quite a few years since they'd all seen the film. No wonder the children couldn't put a name to it, and as the title came to mind at last he saw the disc where it should be, under F on the shelf. "*Fantasia*," he said for anyone who needed to know. Thumbing the disc out of its case, he slipped it into the player.

The screen grew blank, unless it had already been, as the player engaged with the monitor. In a few moments a star described an arc like the skeleton of a rainbow on the screen. While the image was familiar— the Disney logo —Just now it seemed more like an omen of unnatural light. At least the disc menu lent Slater some control, and he started the film.

He remembered it well enough, and he saw that the family did. A master of ceremonies introduced the conductor and the orchestra, whose instruments began to glow as they performed a reworking of Bach. As Slater recalled, the children had been captivated, but now the transformation of the music into an extra sense unsettled him, especially once the orchestra was reduced to abstract patterns that were supposed to represent the music. They reminded him how it was composed of electronic impulses translated by the system, and how his perception of it consisted of electronic disturbances in his brain; all his perceptions did—even the thought itself, not to mention the self that was having it. Although music often sent him into a reverie, he didn't care much for this one. Since trying to make his mind blank offered no reassurance, he did his best to confine his awareness to the patterns on the screen and in his head.

Next came Tchaikovsky, and the children still giggled at the balletic vegetation. Slater could have thought their amusement was a little nervous, and the sight of flowers and mushrooms dancing as though they had faces and brains had lost its appeal for him. It seemed to suggest that music could bring the mindless to some kind of life—that other forms of electronic activity might as well. The music that followed took the shape of a mouse but also formed itself into a broom that executed a prancing march and multiplied into countless replicas of itself, enough to people a world. Slater might have imagined the world had collapsed from the artificiality of the situation, because now the images turned primordial, depicting chaos before they showed the birth and death of all life—no, just the prehistoric kind, too distant to be remembered. Why couldn't he stop thinking? What would happen if he did? The thought felt even more unwelcome, not least because it appeared to turn the monitor blank. The film had reached the intermission. "Have we had enough?" he said.

The children only stared at him. but Melanie said "Why, have you?"

Or was she asking why? Slater couldn't own up to the truth when he didn't know what it was. "Not unless you have," he said.

He wasn't even sure if this was a plea. As he reached for the control Melanie said "It's something we're doing together."

The orchestra returned before he would have been able to head them off, and then the master of ceremonies coaxed the soundtrack onstage. The sight of the unstable line creeping out of the side of the screen to cavort in time

with various instruments roused all Slater's unwelcome thoughts. Eventually Beethoven drove it back into hiding, but the symphony felt like a recent memory Slater was trying to recapture, and not too accurately either. In the past he and Melanie might have exchanged winces at all the inappropriate portamento and pointed out the conductor's eccentricities to the children, but now the slithering of the violins from note to note seemed inseparable from the sinuous movements of the mythical creatures onscreen. They weren't memories, even ancient ones, but concepts that had never really existed, a thought that he found less than reassuring. A thunderstorm flung down by Zeus was sent packing by the sun, but soon the night was drawn over the land, an event rather too reminiscent of the sky outside the window, where the featureless expanse had turned black at some point Slater couldn't recall. Now what point was the film making about time? Hours didn't dance, and they certainly didn't take the form of ostriches or hippopotami. He felt as if the spectacle was undermining his grasp of the nature of time, but closing his eyes only made him nervous of what he might see when he opened them. Suppose there was nothing to see? He had to make himself hear the music in his head, and once he recalled what shapes it would be taking now—elephants and alligators—he was able to look. Another night was still to come, bringing a gigantic demon that reached down from a mountain to toy with its resurrected victims. Slater wanted to remember that it was conquered by daylight, but that didn't happen; a procession of vague figures carried feeble lights across an uncertain terrain where even the trees were indistinct, and at last the procession merged with an obscure pale radiance. "Well," Slater said and was anxious to find more to say. "I hope that lived up to our memories."

"It was a bit different," Tom said.

Since nobody else spoke, Slater couldn't avoid asking "How?"

Tom seemed to wish he'd kept quiet, and glanced at his mother and sister as though for some kind of support. It was Amy who said "I thought the sun came back at the end."

"Don't you think it does?" Melanie said, less like a question than a bid for reassurance.

"That isn't the sun," Tom objected.

"Maybe it was better," Slater tried suggesting while he wondered if they were talking just about the film. "I tell you what," he said. "If we don't see

the sun tomorrow we'll go and try and find it at the weekend."

Melanie pressed her lips together as if she might have liked him to have kept the notion to himself. "Why won't we see it tomorrow?" Tom protested.

"I'm not saying we won't. There aren't any prophets here. I only meant if it carries on like this."

Tom glanced at the window, where the gap between the curtains was apparently too thin to admit even a hint of light from the street. "For ever?"

"Of course not for ever. Nothing lasts that long." Once again Slater thought he'd said too much, and now not enough. "Apart from us," he felt compelled to add.

Amy seemed not to know where to look. "Just us?"

"Now I said I'm not a prophet. They've all gone away till next time."

"Which time, dad?"

That was Tom, but Slater suspected the boy wasn't alone in wondering. "Whenever some other crowd thinks we're all due to come to an end," he said and saw this didn't appeal much to anyone. "But there are more like us who don't, aren't there? And we won."

"How did we?" Amy said.

He might have liked them simply to accept the notion, but perhaps he could hold it together. "By believing," he said and felt unexpectedly inspired. "That's all we have to do, and that answers your other question as well. Believe in whatever matters to you and it'll stay with you for ever."

He hoped that made sense or at least felt as if it should, but he didn't need any more questions. "Now I'm for an early night," he said as he shut the system down, having extracted the disc, "and I shouldn't think it would do the rest of us any harm."

Presumably they agreed, since they followed him. He could have thought they meant to queue outside the bathroom, extending the procession of family images that climbed out of the past and up the stairs. Instead they disappeared into the bedrooms as he shut the door, and he felt as if he was bursting into or at least venturing into song on their behalf, because he'd remembered a few more words to do with Barbara Allen. "All in the merry month of May, when green buds they were swelling... " It was a surely a

promise that life would always revive and an explanation of why the trees were keeping back their leaves until then. Otherwise he made do with the melody, interrupted by brushing his teeth, which let him retrieve another line: "Young man, I think you're dying." He was too old for it to relate to him, and Tom was certainly too young, but as soon as it was uttered he regretted having loosed it. He sang louder without bothering with lyrics, as if deedledum and doodledum could make retrospective nonsense of the line. He was playing the concerned father, not reverting to a state before he'd acquired language, and fell silent as he made for bed.

He might have inadvertently started an audition. While Melanie watched him undress and slip under the quilt they heard Amy recommence the song, though without any words that Slater could distinguish. Tom was next and just as apparently wordless, followed by his mother. As Slater listened to her contribution with his eyes shut he could have thought the family were signalling to one another, establishing where they were. He must be close to dreaming, and he fought to be aware when Melanie came to bed.

The melody she was murmuring trailed off as she returned to him. He couldn't recall turning out the light, but he must have, given the dark. As she nestled against him and captured his arm she whispered "Don't let it be like last night."

Her voice was so muted that he might have fancied he was hearing it just in his head. He didn't even know whether she had been speaking to him, but he said "Like what?"

"We'll be able to sleep now you're home," Melanie said, taking a firmer hold on his arm.

Did she mean them or the children as well, or perhaps not him at all? How could she know whether he'd slept on the plane? The flight and in particular the lurch it had suffered seemed to be his most vivid memory just now, which made him feel as though it might be repeated if he fell asleep—the lurch, at any rate. His awareness of hugging Melanie began to dissipate, consumed by the dark, and he felt threatened by sleep, but why should he feel that? Melanie was asleep—her breaths were as regular as her pulse, keeping time with it and his own—and she wasn't going anywhere so long as he kept hold of her, any more than he was. His consciousness lapsed for a moment, unless it was much longer, since as he struggled back to sentience he had to recall that he was holding Melanie. Singing under his breath

might help him stay vigilant, but it was singing in his sleep that wakened him, although the man's voice didn't sound quite like his, however close it was. The words it seemed to have been finding weren't altogether accurate: not Allen but panic, and had he really heard "Young man, I think you're flying"? Perhaps the young man could be Tom after all, an idea that roused Slater to brave the vague dark, having left Melanie a hug he hoped would linger on his behalf. The boy was safe in bed; Slater was sure of it once he'd inched the quilt back from the dormant shape to reveal the dim still face. He mustn't stoop any closer—by the time he was near enough to feel Tom's breath, his own might wake the sleeper—and he contented himself with murmuring a scrap of the song like a lullaby; perhaps he'd heard it used that way somewhere. On his way back to Melanie he was dismayed to think he'd left someone out, a thought that felt like being seized by the dark, and he was in Amy's room so fast that he was afraid of waking her. When he succeeded in making out her face it was as peaceful as her brother's, and once he'd whispered the lullaby Slater retreated to his bed.

Hadn't he undertaken something else for them? Yes, he'd promised them the sun. Though he needn't alert them when it came up, he wouldn't mind seeing it do so. He regained his hold on Melanie and remembered to caress her midriff while he waited for the night to begin to grow paler. His caresses found the rhythm of the breaths he could think he was sharing with her, and perhaps his brainwaves were adopting that pulse as well, because for an instant he seemed to feel everything merge before he felt nothing at all.

The implosion of his consciousness wrenched him awake, and he clutched at the arms of the seat to save himself from plunging into whatever void awaited him. He found no arms, only a soft flatness that he couldn't even grasp. No, he was lying on his back, not flying after all. He was home in bed—alone in bed. His eyes flickered open to be met by darkness so apparently total that they winced shut at once. He was attempting to breathe when he heard Melanie say "Don't go off again, Paul. We're waiting for you."

They were at the end of the bed. Although he felt he'd only blinked, it was daylight now, the same version as yesterday's. The children were wearing their St Dunstan's outfits, and Melanie was in her business uniform. "Stay awake, dad," Amy urged.

"Then we can have breakfast," Tom said with enthusiasm.

Slater had to laugh, affectionately enough. Surely nothing could be wrong if the most vital issue was breakfast. "Give me a chance to breathe," he said.

As he heard their footsteps like a succession of heartbeats on the stairs he made for the bathroom. He did his best to sing in there, though the lyrics of the ballad kept eluding him. How was his reflection dealing with the few lines he brought to mind? In reverse or in some other kind of transformation? Obviously it was voiceless, but the sight made him feel threatened with the same lack, so that he went downstairs as soon as he could.

Three slices of toast sprang up to greet him, and Tom brought them for Amy and himself to butter while Melanie poured coffee. Slater might have protested that he could do all this, or was the routine important to the children? Perhaps it was helping them not to be nervous—about tonight's concert, of course. "Did everyone have a good night?" he said.

The pause might have implied they knew his answer would be no. After somewhat more than a moment Amy admitted "It was better."

"We heard you singing," Tom informed him.

Slater couldn't tell if this was meant to support Amy's observation. "I'm glad we're all musical," Melanie said. "Whatever can bring us together."

Surely he could take this at face value. He was working on his breakfast, though the muffled crunching in his skull sounded rather too much like some kind of collapse, when Tom said "What's that on you, dad?"

Had he seen an insect or a blemish? Slater swallowed his abruptly dry mouthful as an aid to saying "What do you have in mind?"

"The words you're putting in our heads."

Slater supposed he ought to laugh, having realised Tom was thinking of the quotation on his Texts shirt. "Maybe they were there already, Tom. They're from a famous poem."

"It's not famous to me," Tom said and gazed a challenge at his sister.

"I don't know them either. Do you, mummy?"

"Had we but world enough and time— " Melanie hesitated and then said "Had we but world enough and time... "

"You're just being an echo," Tom protested. "We can see those."

"I'm trying to think what should come next." With a reproachful look at Slater she confessed "Well, I can't."

"You know it really, though," he was anxious to remind her.

"If you say so, Derek. Now can we try and concentrate on what's important?"

Using his old name had to be a rebuke for telling her what she ought to recall, but it made him feel misperceived. Tom giggled at it, though not as if he understood, and Amy said "Who's Derek?"

"Just who I was when I was both your ages. As your mother says, it's not important. Not worth remembering at all."

"So what's the rest, dad?" Tom said. "You have to know."

"So do you. You all do." When they only gazed at him Slater said fiercely "Paul Slater."

"Not of you," Tom said with a giggle that surely had no reason to be nervous. "The rest of your poem."

"It isn't just mine. It isn't even mostly." Slater glanced down at the inverted words, only to feel as if he was plummeting into meaninglessness. *emit dna* made a certain amount of sense—it suggested leaving some kind of coded trace—but how was he to interpret *hguone dlrow* or even *tub ew daH*? He could have imagined that language had begun to disintegrate or that his grasp of it had. Even when he looked up, the deranged words clung to his mind, and he couldn't think how to drive them away except by speaking. "Had we but world enough and time..."

The children giggled, but Amy said "What happens if we haven't?"

"Look, I can't think of it just now, all right? Your mother's already told you it isn't important." The outburst left him nervous, and he turned on Tom. "Why are you asking me now, anyway? You've been seeing it all month."

"Then why does it say it's the text for today?"

"Don't ask me that either. I don't do all the thinking for the shop." In an attempt to find some humour in the situation Slater added "I wouldn't blame anyone if they thought I'm not much good at doing it for myself."

"Nobody does, Paul," Melanie said, and he thought he heard an unspoken apology for having used his abandoned name. "Now let's take each day as it comes, you two. And this one's your special one, so let's keep our minds on that."

The argument had distracted him so much that he couldn't recall clearing his plate. "Your mother's right," he said, "and it's time we saw you to school."

He didn't realise that he hadn't looked out of the windows until he opened the front door to find the world too white. Of course frost had drained the parked cars of colour and turned their windows blank. All the houses had grown as pallid as ice and looked no less brittle, and the dull uncoloured sky had taken up residence in every one. How cold must the night have been to make the buds shrink back into the trees? The twigs and branches were so black that they resembled fissures in the sky. The Astra and the Viva blinked and yipped as if they were starting awake, and then the only sound was a harsh tuneless duet—Tom and Amy scraping the windscreens with the plastic implements they'd taken from the cars. As the noises ceased in unison Slater said "Who's going first?"

The children looked uneasy before their mother understood. "You lead if you like," she said. 'Just don't go too far."

"Dad," Amy said, "can I come with you today?"

"To the school, you mean, obviously." Since she didn't deny it he said "Certainly you may." He climbed into the Astra as she did, and when they slammed the doors the world went out around them.

The vibration that reverberated through the car felt unduly reminiscent of the lurch he'd experienced on the plane. It seemed to pass through him like a wave as he managed to see what had turned the world blank. "It's just condensation," he said before Amy could speak.

As he twisted the key in the ignition he was suddenly afraid that the computer at the core of the vehicle would let him down. The engine came alive, however, and he switched on the wipers and the defrosting system. The car surrounded him and Amy with its unremitting artificial breath while the wipers cleared arcs of the windscreen, revealing samples of the street, a process that put Slater in mind of a change of scene in an old film. He turned the car out of the drive, only to wish he'd waited for the back

window to clear; the image of the Viva in the mirror was so faint that he had to strain his mind to perceive it at all. It gained definition as he drove along the street at a speed that wouldn't have disgraced a funeral, so that by the time he reached the main road he was able to see Melanie and their son. As he accelerated gently—tenderly, he might have called it—Amy kept her eyes on the mirror and said not much louder than the murmur of the car "Can I tell you what happened yesterday, dad?"

"Why shouldn't you be able to?"

"Maybe we aren't supposed."

"You can always tell me anything, Amy." He felt as if he was having to remember to add "And your mother."

The car behind them had grown no clearer by the time Amy said "Some of the girls in my class had the thing with their tummy."

"Ah." However old-fashioned he sounded, Slater had to say "That might be best discussed with your mother."

"I don't think she likes people talking about it." With what he could have taken for eleven years' worth of reproachfulness Amy said "You were there."

He felt forgetful and disoriented. "Where, Amy? When?"

"When I told you both about it, and Tom was there too." Having apparently needed to establish all this, she said "About how it woke me up when you were coming home."

"And now you're saying your classmates noticed it as well. Nothing too odd about that, is there? And if any of them didn't, well, some people can sleep through an earthquake."

"Who says it was one?"

"You haven't forgotten your brother."

"I wouldn't," Amy said without even a hint of the loftiness Slater might have expected, "but we're not sure it was."

"I really don't know what else it could have been."

"See, we aren't supposed to talk about it."

"I've already said you can with me." Less brusquely Slater said "What makes you think you can't?"

"My friend asked a teacher what she thought it was."

"And the teacher said..."

"She didn't." As though she resented or was made uneasy by having to expound Amy said "She took my friend to see someone and we haven't seen her again."

"To see someone how? I mean, why? To see whom?"

"The teacher wouldn't tell us. She said we better hadn't ask."

"And you really haven't seen your friend at all since?" He was sounding too much like an interrogator, but he had to say "Hasn't anyone been in touch with her?"

"We can't."

"Perhaps she was upset by being singled out like that." Slater saw that Amy thought as little of the explanation as he did. "I suppose it might be best," he said, "if you don't bring up the subject today."

"My friend, you mean."

He hadn't, and was disturbed to wonder if he should have. "Perhaps she'll be there." he tried saying. "Perhaps she's waiting to tell you all what happened." When Amy gazed harder at the mirror he said "If you like I'll see what I can find out while we're at the school." There was no response beyond the blurred murmur of the car, even when he added "Or if you'd rather I didn't I won't."

Presumably this was how she might increasingly behave at her age. They were already in sight of the school; he seemed to have forgotten there was so much open land along the route. As he drew up outside the schoolyard the Viva swelled up in the mirror, and he could have thought it was growing more solid. Amy leaned over for him to kiss her forehead, and he said almost without thinking "That'll keep your mind alive."

She gazed at him as intently as she'd watched the mirror. "Dad, will you do something for us?"

"Anything I can."

"Will you leave your phone on?"

Perhaps it was just her fervency that disconcerted him. "Why would you like me to do that?"

"Then you can see if we send you a message." She seemed not too far from pleading as she said "Just in case."

While he wasn't going to ask the question that he sensed would only make her nervous, he said "Are you meant to have your phones on at school? You don't want to get into trouble after what you were saying about your friend."

"We can put them on in the breaks. Don't you want us to call you?"

"Texts mightn't." At once he felt he was letting his family down. "You're as important," he said. "No, you're more. It'll stay on."

"Thanks, dad. You'll always be our dad." She lingered to say "And mummy's husband" before straightening up from the car to call "Dad's going to leave his phone on."

Slater hadn't noticed Tom leaving Melanie's car. At first he was unable to locate the boy's face among the dozens if not hundreds that turned towards him, and he could have imagined they'd grown as homogenous as the St Dunstan's uniform. His bad night must be catching up with him, because it wasn't until Amy went to Tom that Slater singled out his son. Didn't the two of them usually join their friends? Slater was distracted by a clank not unlike the snapping of a trap—the sound of a message. He wondered if the children were making sure he'd kept his word until he saw that the sender was Melanie. **That should help**, the screen said.

She flourished her mobile when he found her in the mirror. Perhaps she'd concluded as he had that the children might be seeking reassurance before the concert. He brandished his phone and then responded **You as well**. While this could have been clearer, she gave him a smile, and he sent her one before looking away from the mirror to see the schoolyard was deserted.

He wished he'd seen the children going into the school, especially since the reflection of the sky rendered every window blank. As he drove off Melanie followed him. He oughtn't to be so conscious of her that he failed to focus on the road, and he looked ahead to see there was traffic to be kept in mind. He was nearly at the graveyard before he realised that he didn't know when her car had vanished from the mirror.

The Astra wobbled as though it had been overwhelmed by a gale. He'd caused the turbulence; his hands jerking at the wheel had. Surely he had no reason to panic, but the car wavered again as his phone uttered its clank. He

pulled into the nearest entrance to the cemetery and read Melanie's new message. **Love you**, it said. **Still here**.

He was troubled by her having needed to add the last words, and he couldn't think how to respond except by copying her message back to her, which he'd never done in his life. As he put the phone away he saw the police car lurking among the memorials. Had the police seen him use the phone while the engine was running? No, the white shape beneath the unproductive trees was a tomb, not a vehicle, and he did his best to leave the error behind along with the graveyard.

The road shrank between the huddled shops, which looked more forgotten than ever. Beyond them cars were halted on the main road, but moved off as he caught sight of them. No doubt traffic lights had released them. In the retail park the sky seemed to be on its way to leaching every vehicle of colour. Was he parking in yesterday's space? When he glanced back at the Astra he could have thought the windscreen had already grown as frosted as its neighbours, but that must be the reflection of the sky as well.

Another reflection met him at Texts, though when the pallid glass doors slipped apart he saw that to some extent it had been composed of Shelley Blake. He wondered how long she'd spent in emphasising her features, outlining her grey eyes as if to stop them growing paler, pinkening her lips. Even her silvery blonde hair looked more metallic, exhaustively touched up. Since she appeared to expect him to speak first, he felt as if he should have prepared a remark. "On time this time," he said.

"Let's hope it's every day now." Surely she didn't need to think before adding "Paul."

"Let's hope they aren't all like this one." Perhaps that sounded too unenthusiastic, and he jerked his head to indicate the sky—it felt not unlike lurching awake. "How much longer do you think we're going to carry on like this?"

"I think we'd better carry on just as we have been. That's why we're here."

She either hadn't understood or chose not to understand. The doors met behind him, shutting in an almost inaudible vaguely musical murmur. When he raised his eyes in its general direction Shelley Blake said "Is that still you?"

"Don't you know?" In case this seemed too combative he said "I mean, didn't someone start it off today?"

"It's whatever was here overnight."

"Then I expect I'm responsible." Since her expression didn't waver, not that there was much of it, Slater said "Would you like a change?"

"We don't want anything out of hand. Just be sure you play it safe."

As he wondered how much less adventurous she imagined a choice of music could be, she said "And then can you put everything in order?"

"Everything," Slater said and risked a laugh.

"All the discs." She stared at his badge as if this would remind him of his job. "All your music, Paul." As he thought of retorting that it was by no means all his she said "Make sure it's the right order."

"Which one is that?"

"The one everybody wants. There's only one." She plainly felt it was unreasonable of him to make her add "The one everybody can see."

She had to mean whichever was easiest to understand. Slater went to the racks to find the shop its music. He was disconcerted by how complicated the arrangement of the discs seemed, even to him: composers, performers, conductors, symphonies, concertos, operas, oratorios, songs. .. He felt incapable of making a selection until film music came into his mind, but *Fantasia* ought to strike a chord with everyone. No sooner had he thought of it than he saw the album in the rack. As the Bach prelude that conjured up innumerable macabre films began a muted thunder overhead, Slater made for the staff quarters, tugging out his badge to meet the plaque. "Paul Slater," he snarled under his breath in case the system was reluctant to acknowledge him, and felt as if he might have to say more until he heard the mechanism find in his favour.

The music followed him into the staffroom—notes that kept mounting towards a peak to fall back and recommence their climb. On the way to his locker he caught sight of the memory board, which still displayed the remnants of the message in his handwriting. How could there be more to it than he'd previously seen? He must be viewing it from an angle at which the overhead glare didn't blot out quite so many characters, faint though they were. ERE PA LATE—he still couldn't reconstruct the words, which

left him feeling inadequate. He raised a hand to wipe out the meaningless fragments but instead hurried to his locker.

The metal door shut with a clank like the amplified sound of an incoming message. The children would be in their classes by now, and Melanie might be on the road. He wished he'd thought to ask where she was working. The music had risen into a blaze of sound suggestive of an unquenchable light, unless the film had put that into his head. It couldn't dispel the pallid blankness that surrounded him—the concrete walls—and once the time clock had contributed a random note to the music he made his way out of the room.

He didn't know how long he gazed at the racks, trying to see how the discs could be better arranged—long enough that he began to feel in danger of forgetting what the sight meant. It was music rendered solid; no, it was a kind of memory of music, fragments of the past stored in the form of impulses. He needn't dwell on that, because the idea seemed to leave him less able to read the names and words. Surely it was best to use the ones that were poking up on tags above the discs for customers to see, not that there were many of those in the shop just now. Composers had to come first, or there would be no music, or had folk music come before any composer? On second thought the alphabet must be the solution; it was the order most people knew. So a performer like Glenn Gould preceded Handel after all, and Angela Hewitt took precedence over Holst, but did she over Bach? Surely last names counted most, since some people mightn't know the others. For a moment Slater could have imagined that the racks were already in the order he'd thought up, but he had to remember that wasn't how he'd just seen them. He took hold of the handful of cases behind the letter A composers insufficiently prolific to have name tags of their own—and moved them to the beginning, and then he set about following them.

The cases and the tags clacked like counters in a game. The sound kept driving the music out of his head, and soon he'd lost all sense of time and even of the shop around him. He mustn't grow unaware of Melanie and the children, wherever they were just now, and he was fixing as much of his mind on them as he could spare when a voice he ought to know said "Trying to put it all back together?"

He turned to be met by a blur, hardly even a sketch of a face. It regained its features as he confronted it fully—the eyes peering from beneath the

overstated eyebrows, the mouth that seemed to need defining by its hairy frame, a few surplus strands accentuating the nostrils. The sight made Slater wonder when he'd last shaved: presumably this morning, since however hard he rubbed his chin he couldn't feel any stubble. "Doing my best," he said. "What can I do for you today, Mr Allen?"

"Maybe you have. You remember."

"Your order, you mean. It may be a bit soon," Slater said but made for the Information desk. "Let me see for you."

"Thank you, Mr Slayer."

Although Slater must have misheard, he hesitated at the computer. What name had he needed to type last time? The Bach hovered over him again—four notes tramping upwards, three of them outdistancing the fourth—as he remembered that the system called for his first name: no, not Derek. He keyed the four letters and brought up the customer's order. "As I say, Mr Allen ..."

"Close enough."

"I'm afraid it hasn't come for you yet."

"Not a problem and maybe the opposite. Any chance you can take it off the computer?"

"I should think we'd be in time. You're saying you don't want it now."

"I think we may have remembered it wrong, the both of us." As Slater attempted to feel less incompetent the man said "It was a poem, not a song."

"It could still have been set to music."

"Maybe everything can be." Allen tilted his head towards the music that was following Bach—the Tchaikovsky suite. "Like the funguses," he said.

He must have the film in mind. Slater might have pointed out that he had the process back to front—the music had produced the mushrooms— but only said "Do you recall the poem?"

"I remember, I remember." It wasn't clear that these were the opening words until the man added "It wasn't the town where you were born, it was the house."

Rather than attempt to recall where that had been in his case Slater said "I'm afraid I don't know any music for that."

"Nobody's expecting you to. Do you know how it goes on? But now I often wish the night had borne my breath away."

Slater reminded himself that this was only a quotation. "Shall I get rid of this, then?"

"May as well. You don't want too much stuff on the system."

As Slater cancelled the order he saw his postcode vanish from the screen, and was disconcerted by how vulnerable this made him feel. He found himself taking hold of the phone in his pocket like some kind of talisman. A glance showed him it hadn't received any messages, which seemed reassuring enough to let him say "You'd have felt what my family did the other night."

"Why," Allen said with an oddly guarded look, "what did they do?"

"Nothing." The word seemed too bare, not to mention defensive. "They didn't do anything at all," Slater insisted. "I'm saying what they felt."

"Which other night?"

"Not the last one. The one before."

"The last one." Perhaps the man was simply sampling the phrase. "Nonesday, you mean," Allen said. "You're telling me I know what they felt."

"I'm assuming you must have felt it as well, knowing where you live."

"Didn't you just blank that out? What are we meant to have felt?"

"I'm told it was an earthquake."

"I don't think I'd have felt one of those."

Slater couldn't very well not ask "Why, what else was happening?"

"I don't know what you'd call it. Maybe a bit of a seizure. First one I'd had in all my life."

Though the man was visibly reluctant to talk about it, Slater felt compelled to learn "What did it do to you?"

"Put me out like a light. I don't know how long I was. Next thing I knew it was starting to be the next day."

Slater wasn't sure that he wanted to ask "Have you any idea what time it happened?"

"I'd say about midnight." Some kind of resolution made the man add "No, midnight it is."

"It sounds like what some of my family felt." Having said that, Slater was driven to add "Someone at my children's school was talking about it as well."

"What did they say to you?"

"I wasn't there. They were asking a teacher." Although he felt as if he'd already said too much, he told Allen 'Apparently the teacher didn't like it much and took them to see someone."

"A doctor, would that be?"

"I don't know." In a moment Slater blurted "Nobody seems to. That's what bothers me."

"You needn't let it. They weren't one of yours by the sound of it."

"I oughtn't to be concerned just with my family."

"You want to watch what you let in your mind these days."

Before Slater could enquire what this had to do with Allen or anyone outside the family, Shelley Blake said "When you're in the shop it should be on the shop."

Slater had no idea how long she had been listening or even where she'd come from, though Allen looked unsurprised enough to suggest he'd been aware of her. "I think it is," Slater objected, "if I'm dealing with a customer."

"I'd better stop pretending to be one then, hadn't I?" Allen took his leave by adding "Thanks for looking for me."

Shelley kept her glaze on Slater, who said "I believe he's a neighbour of ours."

She might almost have been giving him a minute's silence before she said "Some thoughts are best kept to yourself."

"You don't mean that one."

It wasn't much of a joke, and even less once it was out. As if he hadn't spoken Shelley said "A lot better if you don't have them at all."

"Forgive me, what are we talking about?" When she gave him a stare as blank as the sky—it looked like a refusal to think—he said "I've never been

a Finalist, if that's what you're getting at. I'm even less likely to be one now."

He wouldn't have thought it possible for her eyes to grow blanker. "I wish you hadn't brought that up," she said. "Try keeping your mind on the job."

When she moved away he turned his attention to the racks, and his awareness of her vanished like a breath, taking his rage at her admonition with it. Where had he been before he was interrupted? Best to start again at the beginning in order not to be distracted by the hours that were dancing in the air. Even if they were invisible, were they rendering time more substantial? He didn't quite know what he meant by that, especially since he'd forgotten whether they were elephants or hippopotami. Besides confusing him, this made him think he ought to recall something else. There was just his family, and a surreptitious glance at his mobile confirmed that they still hadn't sent him a message, although why should he feel reassured that there was no sign of them? Perhaps they were waiting for some word from him.

As he brought their names into the destination window he wished his mother had a mobile too. Was Melanie keeping in touch with her parents? He assumed she must be, but he hadn't room for any more people in his mind just now; he was too busy thinking of a message. **I'm all right**, he typed and added **so long as you are**, holding the phone as low as he could reach. Every letter emitted a muted bleep that reminded him how electronic the communication was, and he couldn't help feeling spied upon, even though he wasn't visible in any of the security mirrors, at least not to himself. He launched the message and watched the icon blink to indicate that his words were on their way. The instant the symbol subsided he put away the mobile, and looked up to see a man and woman entering the shop.

Though he didn't recall having seen them before, he knew they were security. They were so identically watchful that their expressions seemed to sum up the whole of them. He could easily have fancied that their vigilance had clenched their compact faces. He glanced about in search of a shoplifter or some other kind of criminal, but couldn't even see a customer. Those of his colleagues he could see were keeping their heads well down. He managed not to realise who the quarry was until the newcomers paced around either end of the music racks to close in on him.

They were in uniform, twin outfits so thoroughly grey that they looked close to denying any colour. The woman's cropped hair was only slightly longer than the man's, and her eyebrows were even less defined than his, as though to compensate. Their lips and eyes were nearly as pale as their skin, which had all the smoothness of the sky. The woman opened her mouth, but it was her partner who said "Mr Derek."

Slater did his best to feel misidentified. "That's not me."

Their attention seemed to converge on his badge. "It's on the record, Mr Slater," the woman said.

"I am, am I?" he said and felt as if his words were playing with him. "What's the trouble?"

"You won't want to discuss it here," the man said.

Slater wasn't far from panic. "Is it to do with my family?"

"It doesn't have to be."

He would have liked to hear more reassurance in the woman's voice. "You want somewhere private, do you?"

"We think you may," the man told him.

Though Slater didn't know why he should feel responsible or even if he should, he made for the staffroom. At the plaque the guards loomed on either side of him. "You know who I am," he muttered, "don't start pretending you don't," and dragged his name out from his chest to fit to the reader. The door gave, and the solid pallor of the staffroom closed around him. As he found a chair at the head of the table, which appeared to have been scrubbed completely featureless, the man sat on his left while the woman sat opposite her colleague, and Slater could have thought their faces were adding to the blankness of the room. "So," he said in an attempt to regain some sense of the situation, "what can I do for you?"

"Better do it for yourself," the woman said.

"And your family."

"A bit of a task," Slater retorted, "if I don't know what I'm doing."

They met this with a look that put him in mind of pincers gripping him. "We hear you've been having doubts," the man said.

"Hear from whom?" When their eyes grew blank as a silence rendered visible, Slater said "Has someone here been talking about me?"

"No need for that."

He wasn't sure whether the man was rebuking him, even when the woman said "We've observations of our own."

"You've been observing me, have you?" He felt as if their inexpressiveness was swallowing his rage without a trace. "And all you've found," he said, "is I've been having doubts."

"And disturbing other people," the woman said.

"Which other people?" Slater had a disconcertingly undefined sense that he shouldn't have asked that, or indeed "Doubts about what?"

"The state of things," the man said like a warning.

"Since when haven't we been allowed to question that, whatever it is? I didn't think that was the kind of place I was living in."

"Perhaps it's time it was," the woman said.

"If it's for everyone's good."

"My god, you sound like Finalists. They couldn't see beyond their own beliefs either."

"No," the woman said, "we're the opposite."

"And they're one thing you should forget about," the man said.

Slater wasn't going to be told what he ought to remember. As incredulously as he could manage he said "Is this really all because I was asking about the earthquake?"

Nobody spoke. Their eyes might even have been trying to deny that he had and to convince him of it as well. Anger indistinguishable from panic provoked him to blurt "Are you the same people who take children away for asking too much?"

He didn't need their eyes to tell him that he had. They could hardly arrest him for it, and he demanded "What happens to them?"

"They see the truth." Just as tonelessly the woman said "Exactly what do you think you're going to achieve?"

"You're doing nobody any good," the man said, "least of all yourself."

Slater had a grotesque sense of listening to parents. He'd found nothing to say when an electronic clank resounded through the room. "Better see what you have," the woman said.

The phone clanked again as he took hold of it, and once more as he fumbled it out of his pocket. "Take your time," the male guard said.

This infuriated Slater almost too much to let him finger the keys. **We are**, he saw at last, and then **We are** and **We are**. Of course that didn't mean the senders were together. Tom and Amy might be, and presumably Melanie felt able to speak for them all. "It's my family," he said.

"Are they as they ought to be?"

Before Slater could respond to her question the woman's partner said "Best concentrate on keeping them that way."

Slater was on the brink of enquiring what kind of threat this was meant to be, but only said "How do you suggest I should do that?"

"You might try responding to them." the woman said.

He barely held back from retorting that he didn't need this kind of advice. How much did she think she knew about him and his family? How closely could they have been observed? He did his best to think he was saving them as he replied **Then we all are**. He looked up to find the guards were gazing in the vague direction of the subdued music, Bach tramping eternally uphill. "Are you giving us that?" the woman said.

Had they even watched him choose the disc? Slater couldn't quite ask but said "It's part of my job."

"We'll let you get back to the rest," the man said.

Slater couldn't risk believing they'd finished with him until they stood up in unison. They stood aside to let him touch his badge to the inner plaque, and then they led or at any rate accompanied him to the music section, where they lingered to watch him start putting the Adams albums in sequence. "That's more like it," the man said. "Order keeps the world in shape."

"That's what you should be about, Mr Paul."

"Mr Slater," the man added or amended.

While resenting their praise Slater was disgusted to find that it came as a relief, all of which he kept to himself in the hope they would leave him alone. He concentrated on his task until he realised they'd gone away, and

then he did his utmost to forget them and whatever they represented. He couldn't afford any more distractions; he had to finish before it was time to leave for the concert. The clatter of plastic reminded him of tiles in a gambling game, and he was struggling to focus only on the names when he became aware that Shelley Blake was watching him. "Don't let me take your mind off it," she said.

"I'm afraid our visitors did." Having managed to recall that she hadn't been responsible for them, Slater said "Sorry if they bothered you."

"They shouldn't bother anyone."

"They rather did me. If you're wondering—"

"I'm not, Paul. I don't want to know, and nobody else does. So long as they're happy, that's all that matters."

"I'd say at least a few more people do."

"Nobody's saying you shouldn't keep them in mind."

The conversation had begun to feel as indefinite as a discussion in a dream, and he went back to rearranging names. He hadn't time for lunch, and he could do without dealing with customers too, not that he was aware of any. The light of the sky seemed as artificially constant as the glow of the fluorescents overhead, all of which robbed him of any sense of the passing of time. When he became aware of Shelley Blake once more he could have thought she had never moved away, but his watch showed him he'd come to the end of his shift. "Well, Paul," she said.

This sounded no less neutral than the sky looked, and he strained to find some meaning in it. "I think I'm finished for the day," he said.

"Is it as it should be?"

Someone else had said the like of that recently, but he couldn't recall any more. "It is for now. I'll come back to it next time."

"Tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow." Her word felt altogether too possessive, and he had to reclaim the day. "Sunday," he said. "I'm with my family tomorrow. I should be with them now."

"I must have forgotten you weren't here." With a look that seemed to want to hold him where he stood she said "We will be."

He would have supposed so without being told, and he didn't understand her emphasis. Outside the shop the parked cars seemed more faded than ever. No doubt the daylight was too muffled to dispel the frost, which helped to give them an abandoned look. The yip with which the Astra greeted him sounded enfeebled, surely because so many vehicles were in the way; he needn't panic over thinking the electronics had run down. He started the engine and set off the wipers to bring the world back into some kind of focus. While it wasn't yet time for the concert, he couldn't help growing nervous while he waited for the windows to clear.

He would have expected to find more people heading home on the main road. Where he turned towards the school the dilapidated shops looked grey as ash and hardly more substantial, as if they might collapse before his eyes. In the cemetery the trees were propping up the sky, and he couldn't make out a single inscription; the stones might as well have been blank. An open space showed him St Dunstan's ahead. The mass of railings edged apart, letting the long blocks of the school regain their shape, and he saw a solitary figure in the yard.

It was Melanie. He parked behind her car in the line of frozen vehicles alongside the featureless slabs of the pavement and hurried into the schoolyard. "Am I late?" he called.

"You just aren't," Melanie said, already heading for the main entrance.

Beyond the doors, which were as silent as they were imposing, a corridor that apparently had no time for colours led towards the blurred murmur of an audience. A stretch of the left-hand wall was occupied by overcoats unnecessarily reminiscent of abandoned wings. As Slater hastened after Melanie the tuneless mass of voices kept any identifiable words to itself, and he had an odd sense of overhearing a rehearsal. The murmur rose as though to greet him when he opened the door to the assembly hall, where the sight of hundreds of backs of heads seemed to render the dialogue even more secretive. As he hurried ahead of Melanie in search of unoccupied seats he felt no less anxious than he had in the car park. He didn't think he'd breathed for a while by the time he located a pair of empty seats near the middle of the third row from the bare stage. "Excuse me," he called above the blur of voices, "are those anyone's?"

Every face between him and the spaces turned to gaze at him. Of course only their movements were identical. "They'll be yours," someone said.

All the watchers faced the stage and stood up in unison to make way for Melanie, and Slater was reminded of illustrations popping up from a book he'd owned as a child. They stayed on their feet until he passed along the row, keeping Melanie in sight, which meant the series of faces on the edge of his vision lost any individuality they had. As he sat down, the line of figures did, but he couldn't hear the folding seats for the omnipresent murmur, which had begun to seem as indistinct as the sky that was the entire content of the high windows. He found the murmur breathlessly oppressive, and was struggling to think of some conversation when it faded into silence as though a volume control had been turned down. The headmistress had taken the stage. "Welcome to St Dunstan's," she said.

He was thrown by her resemblance to Shelley Blake, though he was unable to recall how else he might have expected her to look. Her fingers were loosely intertwined like a reminiscence of a prayer, which made him feel guilty, singled out at school. He and Melanie had professed enough of a belief to have the children enrolled at St Dunstan's, but only because of its musical reputation. At least their lack of a belief was strong enough to fend off the likes of the Finalists, he told himself as the headmistress said "You know how much time we've spent getting ready for you and I know you'll agree it has been worthwhile."

She had more to say while some of the pupils carried music stands and chairs onstage, to be followed by the orchestra with their instruments. Slater wondered why all this had been left so late, although he hadn't realised when he'd seen the stage was bare. The muted activity seemed to merge into an undifferentiated blur that distracted him from the speech, but he managed to hear the headmistress say "You've come for the music, not to hear me. Here's some I'm sure you know."

Slater did before the orchestra had played five notes. It was the Pastoral, and performed a good deal more to his taste than in the film or at the shop. The cartoon images seemed to be leaving him alone, and he found himself waiting for the hymn after the storm. It wasn't actually a hymn; Beethoven hadn't been naive enough to think it would bring back the sun, and it couldn't hold off the night either. Slater was reminded of the Finalists; suppose their belief had been the strongest in the world, however briefly? They had certainly managed to convey it to everyone he could bring to mind. It might have been too powerful to have gone away, in which case

what had happened to it? Of course it was irrational, but then so were its adherents, and mightn't that add to its power for them? Where had they all gone? There was no point in glancing at his neighbours—that wouldn't show him whether they were among the faithful—but the line of faces dwindling towards the walls troubled him, especially the faces at the far end, where he could have thought they were merging with the pale blurred surface. At last the symphony disintegrated into an explosion of applause, and as Slater stopped clapping the headmistress said "Now it's time for voices."

She was somewhere out of sight on the front row. The renewed murmur of the audience covered up any sounds the choir made in gathering onstage. Their faces put Slater in mind of pale flowers blooming from a mass of foliage. At first he couldn't see Amy or Tom, and then he was aware only of them. They looked at least as intent as several other people he'd encountered recently, an earnestness that didn't falter even when the children met his eyes. As they shifted it to the conductor who had taken up her post in front of the choir, she raised her hands, reviving the silence. Slater saw Tom and Amy take a breath or at any rate part their lips, and found he couldn't breathe himself. He'd heard less than the first phrase when he was overtaken by the notion that he'd already known what they would sing. "In this fair town where I was born..."

Did the man who'd tried to order it have a child at the school? Slater wasn't sure the explanation could bear too much scrutiny, but surely it would let him concentrate on the performance. "All in the merry month of May..." He wasn't about to look for Allen in the audience; just the thought made the faces beside him seem far too reminiscent of an identity parade. 'And death was drawing nigh him..." As he saw their mouths shaping the syllables he wondered if this was what somebody had in mind when they'd said a word was made flesh. He supposed he shouldn't think that here, and perhaps anywhere else, not least because it felt like a threat to perception. "As she was walking o'er the fields, she heard the death bell knelling..." Words were information, and he might easily conclude that all life was a form of it—a set of electronic impulses—but where did that lead him? Nowhere he thought he would choose to go, and he tried to drive the reverie out of his mind by only hearing the ballad. "Farewell..." This wasn't the last word, it was the first one of the final verse, but it seemed capable of doing away with everything that came after.

The hush that followed the final word of the choir—"Allen", which Slater could imagine was trying to remind him of someone—immediately splintered into applause that saw the children off the stage. As soon as he couldn't see Amy and Tom he was anxious to know where they were. He twisted around until he found them by the back wall, among other members of the choir. When he faced the stage again he was dogged by an impression that he'd recognised more people in the audience than he would have expected, even if he couldn't bring them to mind now. "Nothing's wrong," he muttered in case Melanie was about to ask, as well as on his own behalf.

It would disrupt the occasion too much if he were to take the family and leave. He felt as if he'd been warned not to cause disorder. Remembering that soon they would all be together helped him sit through the rest of the concert—a young pianist playing a transcription of Bach's famous prelude and fugue, a selection from Tchaikovsky's best-known ballet arranged for a chamber group whose percussion sounded oddly electronic, a soprano singing Schubert's Ave Maria, an orchestral finale that took the listener up the mountain to meet the demon. At last the frenzy of the resurrected sank back into the graves, and the music had scarcely faded to its final note when someone burst into applause as if they couldn't bear the silence.

Slater wasn't slow to follow. Melanie joined in, and he saw pairs of hands rise up on both sides of him like a startled flock of winged creatures. As the clapping subsided and the row began to empty, Tom and Amy came to find their parents. "You really brought it alive," Melanie said. "You were stellar."

"You deserve to be up in the sky," Slater said.

Perhaps this went too far, which might explain why Amy was gazing hard at him. "Dad."

"Amy," he said and wondered why he had an impulse to add her brother's name.

"I can't see her."

More nervously than he could recall ever having heard her speak, Melanie said "Who?"

"The girl I told dad about. The one they—"

"Not now, Amy." Slater had a sense that far too many people were listening; he could even have fancied that the entire audience had halted on

its way out of the hall—that if he looked he might see someone who had interrogated him. "Later," he said.

"When later?"

"Tomorrow."

It was the only answer that came into his mind, but he felt as though he'd made a promise, especially when Tom's eyes brightened. "We're going to see the sun, aren't we? You said."

"I don't know how far we may have to go."

"That doesn't matter, does it, mummy?" Amy said. "We'll all be together."

"That's all it's about," Melanie said.

Slater looked away to see that the hall was deserted, though he hadn't heard anyone leave. Being confronted by the rows of unoccupied seats made him feel like a show that had come to an end or at least to an interval. "Time we were home," he said.

The corridor wall was bare of coats. Tom and Amy had theirs— indeed, they'd put them on. The empty schoolyard felt as if the walls and the equally blank ceiling of the corridor had opened out and risen, but not enough. "Who's in my car?" Slater said as he made for the gates.

"I wish we'd just used one."

He didn't need to understand why Melanie felt that way. "We will tomorrow."

"It's my turn," Tom declared and turned to his sister. "You be with mummy."

Slater couldn't see why the boy thought he had to tell her. No doubt if Tom didn't have some strange ideas he wouldn't be a child, and the same must be true of his sister. Slater supposed he'd entertained a few odd notions when he was either of their ages, but it wasn't worth attempting to remember. He climbed into the Astra and let his son in while Melanie and Amy carried out their version of the routine. Once he'd followed the Viva away from the kerb he glanced in the mirror but couldn't see the school. All that mattered was to keep Melanie and their daughter in sight, though of course not to the exclusion of Tom. The boy seemed as intent on them as Slater was, and his voice sounded no less concerned. "Dad?"

"Tom."

"What was Amy saying happened to some girl?"

"She was spirited away for asking too much." While Slater meant this for an amiable warning, it seemed to have turned more ominous. "I don't really know and Amy doesn't either," he said. "I think it's best forgotten."

"You said you were going to talk about it tomorrow."

"I'm sure we'll have better things to do then, aren't you?" More urgently than he understood Slater said "Don't remind her and perhaps she won't remember."

Tom stared ahead so fiercely that Slater wondered what he thought he saw. There was just the other car beneath the sky that seemed to weigh on the trees, which looked close to sinking into the open spaces that bordered the road. As the Viva led the Astra into St Peter Street the trees closed in, and so did the sky as though its supports had begun to give way. Everything outside the car looked attenuated by the pallor that lingered on the windows, and even when Slater ducked out of the car in the drive the dull glare of the sky seemed to have diminished his vision. "Let's get inside," he muttered, blinking at the family to bring them into focus.

He couldn't judge how much of a difference the hall light made to the pallor that appeared to have settled into the house. "What are we having for dinner?" Melanie said.

Slater supposed she was asking for preferences, but Amy said "I'm not very hungry."

"I'm not," Tom said.

"Did you have something before the concert? Hasn't it left any room?"

When they'd finished nodding and the opposite Melanie said "Then you'd better say, Paul."

"I wouldn't say no to an early night if we don't know how far I'll be driving tomorrow."

"One of us can." She might have been about to tell him not to leave them so soon, but whatever she saw in his eyes seemed to change her mind. "I shouldn't think you'll need singing to sleep," she said.

"I never have," Slater told her and was unable to recall ever having sung Tom or Amy to sleep. He didn't think he ever would. A sharp pang of loss

that he didn't want to understand, never mind letting his family suspect, made him retreat to the bathroom.

As he foamed at the mouth or at any rate the teeth he wondered what was troubling him. Was there a word he ought to find significant? It wasn't retails nor yet relates, though it might be related to both. Of course, it was his name in the mirror. He couldn't have said why the rearrangement of the name made him feel vulnerable, but he dropped the badge face down beside the sink. The vibration of the toothbrush resounded through his head until the electronic roaming felt indistinguishable from him. Laying down his badge hadn't prevented the image in the mirror from continuing to bemuse him. What exactly did it consist of? What did he? If it was a projection of himself, what else might be? He didn't want to be alone with it or his thoughts, and he barely lingered to grab his tag. The family came to their doors as he made for the bedroom. "We'll be early too," Melanie said.

"We won't be late," Amy told him.

Presumably this was a bid at a quip, but it sounded somehow ominous. It hung in the air until Tom pointed at the badge his father had taken off. "Now you aren't a text, dad."

Slater wasn't sure how to welcome this or even if he did. He left Melanie a hug as he slipped past her into their bedroom. As he took his place in the bed he planted his badge on the table beside it, only to feel as if he was making sure he would be identifiable in the night. Who would need to identify him? He closed his eyes and felt they were shutting out too much of the world. He thought he'd closed them for scarcely a moment, but when he opened them he saw that the window was dark. Surely that meant he could sleep, and he would let himself once Melanie joined him. In fact she was beside him, and the room was dark as well. He slid a hand around her to be gripped hard and closed his eyes to help him concentrate on her presence, but his mind had a question for him. Had he overlooked a name? Which was the one that came first? He ought to solve the problem before he tried to sleep, so as to be ready for Sunday—not the day of the sun, which would be tomorrow. Sunday didn't mean that putting the names in order had anything to do with religion, but it seemed to be his kind of ritual, and wasn't religion an attempt to bring order to the world? Wasn't any belief? Names—his mind felt in danger of being overwhelmed by them, and there might well be a composer before Adams, perhaps someone called Abbot,

though surely not Abate. And did Bach lead the Bs? Babbitt sounded possible, but Babel was something else, conceivably the mass of names in his mind. Babel had been the outcome of reaching for heaven, and he hadn't realised how many scraps of religion had lodged in his consciousness. Did he need singing to sleep after all? He mustn't disturb his family, but perhaps he could simply imagine the music. If he could just bring to mind a phrase by each composer in order, that might be better than a lullaby for him.

He didn't know how long he had been straining to think of a melody of Abbot's by the time he heard the music. At first he thought it was a man's voice—perhaps he was asleep after all, and singing—until he managed to distinguish that there was more than one, so muffled or so distant that he'd taken them for a solitary murmur. It was the ballad again; the children were breathing it, possibly in their sleep. Their voices proved they were still there in the dark, which meant he needn't go to look, let alone imagine that they were using the song to remind themselves of their own existence. Or could he be dreaming the voices? Dreams were disordered memories, after all, that adopted new shapes in the mind. He mustn't let them do that—he didn't even want to think why not—and he redoubled his hold on Melanie's waist in the hope of regaining control of his thoughts. He might have asked if she could hear the children, supposing she was awake, but she wasn't there at all.

That and his silent struggle to cry out snatched his eyes open. She was standing at the end of the bed, hand in hand with the children. "Back in the land of the living?" she said. "We're ready whenever you are."

They were indeed dressed for an outing. As he sat up, Slater peered at the window but could see nothing beyond the glass. It took him some time to grasp that the sky had stayed blank. "Still no sun," he mumbled.

"You said we'd find it," Tom reminded him.

"We'll go up if we have to, won't we?" Amy said.

"We may." Slater found he was groping about the bedside table, but he didn't need the time, never mind his name badge. "Anyway, let me get going," he said. "Someone can bring me a coffee if they like."

"There's nothing in the house, Paul."

"Nothing," Slater said and tried to sound only jovially incredulous. "Haven't we been to the shops?"

"I've had other things on my mind just like everybody else." Her desire not to worry the subject was plain as she said "We can look for something on the way if anyone's bothered."

She and the children moved towards the stairs as Slater made for the bathroom. Once the door was shut, if not sooner than that, he couldn't hear them. He was tempted to call out, but it was enough to know they were close. There was no harm in reminding them that he was, though he couldn't remember the words of the ballad. He set about humming melodies at the top, such as it was. of his voice—the various themes of the Pastoral. He needed to be sure they were in order, though weren't the notes themselves a form of order? What sort did they bring to the world? He was uncertain whether he could hear an echo or a voice if not more than one joining in. None of the sounds could belong to his reflection, however animated by the music it appeared to be, swaying if not dancing to the rhythms and conducting them as well. Of course this meant that he was doing so, even if it felt like mimicking an image of himself. The idea didn't appeal to him, any more than the pallor that had settled on the glass to attenuate his reflection. He left the bathroom as soon as he could, to see the family sitting on the stairs. They looked like three descending stages of a life, not unreminiscent of the photographs above them. "Was anyone singing?" he said.

"You were," Amy said, and Tom confirmed it with a giggle.

Melanie came to stand in the bedroom doorway while Slater dressed, and he couldn't decide whether she was playing a guard or a go-between. Perhaps she simply meant for some reason to encourage him to be quick. She sent the children to make a last use of the bathroom, and he had an odd sense that she'd remembered a scrap of their domestic ritual. As she opened the front door he thought at least one of the children murmured "Goodbye house."

In the street the trees looked worn down by the pallor that seemed to have descended into them, and Slater could have fancied they were forgetting how to bud. The windows of the Viva and the Astra were blank slabs set in the pallid metal. "Who's going to drive?" Melanie said.

"I expect you two will in time." Having extracted tentative smiles from the children, he told Melanie "Let me and you can take over if we need you to."

The Astra emitted its puppyish yip and gave them a coquettish blink, a performance that he seemed to recall amusing Tom and Amy once upon a time. They climbed in the back as Melanie sat beside him, and he saw that the windows weren't too frosted after all, however uncertain of its substance the world beyond them looked. "Ready for the big adventure?" he said and when he'd found the children in the mirror "Where do we all want to go?"

"Where the sun's gone," Tom said.

"That'll be through the tunnel," Amy told them.

"She's right, isn't she?" Slater said. "We're best going under the river if we want to catch it up."

"You're the driver," Melanie said.

As he swung the car out of the drive he lost sight of the house. By the time they reached the main road he could have thought the street had reverted to a grove; certainly that was how it appeared in the mirror, but he didn't look back. At least today's route wouldn't take him past the graveyard, where he imagined the stones and the trees deep in a secret colloquy like silence rendered solid.

There was very little traffic. He would have said all the cars they passed were parked if not abandoned, except that the occasional vehicle seemed to acknowledge his attention by moving off. Was there a fog—the frost in a less substantial form? He found it hard to make out houses, all of which appeared to be occupied by the sunless sky. Any faces he might have glimpsed at windows looked oddly nominal, more like images on screens, even if they were watching him and the family. As for any shops, it must be too early for them to be open, and their shutters left them so blank that they mightn't have been there at all.

The road had left all the buildings behind by the time it led down to the tunnel. Beyond the slanting ramp each of a pair of arches stood over two deserted lanes. As soon as Slater drove beneath the left-hand arch the pale ceiling and its apparently sourceless glow closed over the car. He couldn't judge when the weight of the earth above it gave way to the burden of the invisible river, but it felt as though the blank surface that straddled the car was growing more oppressively present while the enclosed road sank lower, pressed down by the roof. The sight of the unrelieved vista that stretched more than a mile to a subterranean bend seemed to have silenced the family

and, he could have thought, the car as well. Unable to think of anything he cared to say, he began to hum the reminiscences of the Pastoral. Before long Melanie joined in, and then the children did. Beethoven had never meant the music as a vocal quartet, but there was nobody except the family to hear. Slater didn't know how often they'd rehearsed the themes when they came to the bend, which appeared to lead up to an unrelieved pale blankness. No, there was a line of tollbooths, and he was suddenly afraid he'd come all this way to no avail. "Have we got some money?" he said not unlike a prayer.

"We couldn't forget that, could we?" Melanie said.

He wasn't sure how much of a question this might be until she displayed the coins, which reassured him for as long as he failed to notice what was odd about the tollbooths. Surely most of the barriers beyond the narrow booths used to be automatic, but now every cabin was occupied, and every face turned in unison to watch the car. He had an uneasy sense that he was close to recognising some of them—far too many if not all—or was that a result of their expressionless official look, which was identical not just among themselves but with everyone who'd interrogated him since he'd come home? He had to choose a booth before anyone could find his hesitation suspicious, and he drove towards the exit in the middle of the line. "Nobody say anything," he almost didn't think to mutter. "If anyone has to talk I will."

The attendant was a woman or a man with long nondescript hair—the smooth bland inexpressive face gave no indication of gender. Slater was on the way past the booth to the toll basket when the window above him slid back and the attendant leaned over the sill. "A moment, please."

The pale voice seemed sexless too. The lack of any character made the attendant seem to sum up all the officials Slater had encountered recently—an ominous summation. He saw the barrier twitch like a warning not to proceed. "What's wrong?" he blurted.

"What do you think is?"

"Nothing if you say so."

He didn't care how much this sounded like a plea so long as it let them past the barrier. The eyes gazing at him were so pale or so reflective of the sky

that he couldn't distinguish the pupils. "May we ask where you're going?" the attendant said.

Retorting that it was nobody's business but the family's wouldn't make the attendant go away. Slater didn't know when all the faces in the other booths had turned to watch him. "Out for a run," he said.

"Not running away, are you?"

"What would I be running from?"

He had a nervous sense of having said too much—that the trick was not to suggest anything was amiss, even by implying that it couldn't be. The blank gaze rested on him for an indeterminate time before the attendant said "What are you taking where you plan to go?"

"Where am I, back at immigration?" Instead of demanding this Slater said "Just my family. You can see."

The attendant didn't look away from him. The blankness seemed to spread out of the eyes as the face withdrew into the booth, and Slater could have thought the features had grown altogether too indefinite. "Can we go now?" he blurted.

"Wherever you think."

He couldn't even tell which booth the muffled voice came from. Melanie handed him the coins to throw into the metal basket, and as the barrier wavered upwards he thought he heard a sound on both sides of the car, a murmur less than words—less than a sigh. A glance in the mirror as he drove onto the motorway showed him the row of narrow boxes, each peopled by a figure that looked as if it was propped up. While all of them appeared to be gazing after the car, he couldn't make out an expression or indeed a face. Then the windows of the booths turned pallidly opaque as if a single breath had settled on them, and he fixed his attention on the way ahead.

There was very little to distract him from the road. Either frost or fog must be rendering the fields so pale. In the distance, far beyond the point at which perspective pinched the road invisible, he saw how the land rose against the sky at the horizon. It put him in mind of an act of defiance—whose, he didn't know. However remote it seemed, they had to reach it long before dark. When Tom spoke Slater stared ahead as if the boy had held his peace. "Dad," Tom insisted, "there's somewhere."

"We don't need to eat, do we? Wouldn't we rather be where you asked for?"

"We don't," Amy said. "If we stop we'll never see the sun."

In any case the Traveller's Return was shut if not abandoned, and Slater didn't spare the inn another glance. "See where we're heading?" he said. "That'll bring us closer."

Perhaps this was premature. Even if the motorway could hardly lead straight to the mountain, driving as fast as he felt able to risk didn't appear to be reducing the distance. No doubt the mountain was too far away to begin to gain stature just yet, but it looked as if the dull sunken sky was holding it down. He'd lost all awareness of gripping the wheel and treading on the pedal when Tom said "How far is it now, dad?"

"As far as you see." Surely Slater could do better than that, and he said "Don't worry, we've plenty of time."

At least he'd stopped short of claiming they had all the time in the world. For the moment the sullen sunless glow looked permanent enough, but how instantaneously had darkness fallen last night? He couldn't help reflecting that the sky was just the underside of a vast blackness. He hoped nobody would ask what time it was, not least since this would show that he wasn't alone in having forgotten a watch. When he peered at the clock on the dashboard, the digital fragments that ought to form numbers had collapsed into chaos. If he'd gone in for praying he might have begged for the computer not to let the family down any further. He found the children in the mirror and saw Amy opening her mouth. "I know what should bring it, Tom."

"What?" the boy said as though he would have liked to trust his own skepticism.

"If we sing."

Slater took her to mean it would pass the time. Her brother seemed to want to be convinced, and when she set about humming the melody he added words. "In something town where I was born ..."

Slater was too intent on the road to think how to make the words more precise. Once Melanie joined in he supposed he ought to, though only with the fragments he could bring to mind. "All in the merry month of May" was the line that appealed most to him, and he sang it whenever it came around, and did his best to fend off some of the other words by humming over them.

"And death was drawing nigh him..." While he didn't want to ask if anybody knew another song, especially since he couldn't think of one himself, he was long past judging how often they'd revived the ballad by the time they came in sight of a road that led off the motorway towards the mountain.

The side road meandered between fields that lay low in a mist, if frost wasn't holding them down. The route reminded Slater of any number of places he and Melanie had taken the children when they were younger, unless they'd visited the places before the children were born. Why was the mountain taking so much time to rise ahead? "Oh mother, mother, make my bed, for I shall die tomorrow..." Melanie had fallen silent, and only the children were pronouncing the words. "Here we are," she said as if she was advising not just them but the landscape.

The bulk was indeed a mountain now, blocking off the way ahead. The slopes weren't much less pale than ice and spiky as an enormous uncontrolled crystal. The road appeared to peter out beyond it, sinking into a frozen field. Alongside the road at the foot of the mountain was an extensive car park. "It's just for us," Tom said.

Slater parked the Astra and waited for the family to join him on the deserted expanse of bare earth. The car emitted a sound he could almost have found plaintive as he activated the electronic locks. Impulses like those had no emotions or sentience, he thought, and looked hastily for something else to think. The notice beside the car park was largely illegible, and he couldn't deduce what it would have said. **ME TO MY PA**—he couldn't even judge where the clumps of letters would have fitted into the disintegrated message. The signpost indicating the path up the mountain said only **I AM TO LATE**, which he found just as incomprehensible. Perhaps it had never been in a language he recognised. "There's our way," he said.

The path took the route of a vanished stream. It bent almost at once, but he didn't bother glancing back at the car, which was already out of his mind. The smooth pale rock walls were at least twice his height, and the low sky added to the sense of climbing up a tunnel. For the moment the ascent was gentle. As Tom and Amy raced ahead Melanie called "Don't go too far."

"Can't we go to the next bend?" Amy protested.

"To see if we can see," Tom cried.

"Just stay in sight," Slater told them, finding Melanie's hand. He didn't think they would be able to see the sun from the bend ahead, where the walls were higher than ever. Was he helping Melanie climb, or was she aiding him? He couldn't recall when they had last been up a mountain, but they seemed to be equal to the task. Quite soon they caught up with the children, who were waiting impatiently at the start of the next few hundred yards of path. "It's still not there," Tom complained.

"It just means we need to go higher," Melanie said and gazed at Slater until he agreed.

Tom scrambled up the path with Amy at his heels, and their parents followed hand in hand. Were the walls growing paler as the path approached the sky? Slater mustn't imagine that the children were borrowing the pallor—at least, not unless they were climbing into a portent of the clouds, which seemed to be threatening to make them look less substantial. "Be careful," he shouted.

The walls flattened his voice, and Tom's came back even flatter. "There's nothing to be careful of."

He might have been complaining. Perhaps he was dissatisfied with the uneventfulness of the climb if not its apparent lack of a goal. The next bend led to another quarter of a mile of track between walls not much more detailed than the sky. "We'll be there before you know it," Slater vowed, which at once struck him as careless, since it seemed to urge the children up the slope. He and Melanie were on the way to matching their speed when music caught up with him—the Beethoven that wasn't quite a hymn.

Amy swung around so fast that the dust she stirred up seemed to render her and Tom momentarily immaterial. "Who is it?" she said.

She sounded as uneasy as she and her brother looked. Of course nobody could summon the family back from their mission, but Slater wished he recognised the number on the screen. He couldn't think of a question other than Amy's. "Who is it?" he demanded.

He heard a sound that was less than a breath—just electronic restlessness—and then it seemed to form into a voice. "Who else do you think it could be, Derek?"

"It might be someone who isn't called Derek," he said and mouthed at Melanie "My mother."

"Don't upset anyone, Paul. We're here and we know who you are."

Though Melanie spoke so quietly that he almost didn't hear her, his mother apparently did. "I know you like to be Paul. I was only— Her pause admitted static before she said "Just wanting to see how you were."

"I still am." This seemed unnecessarily clever, and he said more gently "Fine."

"Well, that was all I wanted. I should think you'd expect your mother to."

"Of course I would. How is it where you are?"

"Just the same as you remember."

"They're looking after you." In case that seemed patronising he added "They'll be there if you need them, Constance and the rest."

"I've got everything I need." This sounded final, especially when she said "And what are you doing with yourself?"

"We've gone out for a run on my day off."

"Where are you running to?"

He mustn't let this recall the interrogation at the tollbooth. "To the sun, we hope."

"I'll hope it too, then. I wouldn't mind another look at it. What about the grandchildren?"

The question seemed so vague that he felt as confused as he took her to be. "We've none."

Melanie frowned at him, and he was afraid he shouldn't have had the thought, let alone spoken it aloud. "Amy and Tom, you mean," he said hastily. "Your grandchildren. They're here with us, of course."

Or had they passed out of sight while he and Melanie were intent on the call? No, they'd halted on the path above their parents, and as he found them they stirred, waving at the phone. "They're saying hello to you," he said.

"It'll be that or goodbye, won't it? Say goodbye for me." With enough deliberation to be making it her last word she added "Paul."

"Grandma sends her greetings," Slater said and brought the phone back to his face, only to glimpse a movement like an insect's on the screen. At once it vanished, and he realised he'd caught sight of its dwindling— the last of

the icon that denoted network coverage. "I haven't got a signal any more," he said.

Melanie and the children took out their mobiles. "We've gone too," Amy said.

"Make that all of us," her mother said. "It doesn't matter, does it? We're all here."

"Granny isn't," Tom observed.

"She'll be where she wants to be, Tom." No doubt Melanie sensed that Slater couldn't help feeling responsible, because she added "Everyone wanted you back with us, Paul."

"Or we couldn't have done our concert," Amy said.

This was surely an exaggeration, however affectionately meant. As the children recommenced their climb he put away his mobile, and thought he saw that the screen was entirely blank. Not least in order to put that behind him he murmured "I suppose she just didn't want to feel on her own."

"Maybe she's missing Allen," Melanie said.

Slater felt as if the sky had lurched towards him, bleaching his vision nearly blank. "Who?"

"Paul." This was a rebuke and incredulous as well. "Your father," she said. "That was another reason we felt you should go and see Eileen."

Slater had a panicky sense of not knowing where his mouth was or how to use it. When he felt his lips part he had to say "I don't remember."

The children had climbed out of sight— no, they were waiting again, and when Slater focused his attention on them Tom turned to say "What don't you remember, dad?"

"About—" Slater didn't know how much he risked by admitting "About my father."

"He used to call us funny names," Amy said. "Ours but not quite."

"And he'd tell us poems," Tom said.

"And sing us songs like the one we sang for you."

As Slater gazed uphill he was no longer sure what he was perceiving. He was hardly even aware of Melanie until she said "Is that enough?"

In some way it seemed to be. He had an almost indefinable impression that he could leave the memories behind, as if they were no longer necessary to him. He felt close to weightless with shedding the burden that he hadn't even realised he was carrying. What else might have to go? He could have thought his sense of liberation had released the children, who ran with no visible effort up to the next walled-in bend. "Come and see," Tom shouted, and Amy called "We're nearly there."

In a moment they were hidden by the bend. "Wait for us," Melanie protested.

Slater did his best to keep panic out of his voice, as he thought she had with hers. "You heard your mother."

"You can hear us," Tom responded, and from further off Amy contributed "We'll sing."

"In what's its name where we were born..." Their voices were muffled by the walls if not the sky, and Slater had no time to wonder how they could have come up with the identical alteration of the lyric. He didn't try to grasp what else they sang; he was too concerned with holding on to Melanie as they followed the memory of a stream. In too little time to be worth mentioning they were at the bend, from which he saw Tom and Amy at the top of the path with their backs to him. Beyond them there appeared to be nothing at all.

Before he could take a breath to call out, the children vanished off the path. "It's all right,"* he blurted, clutching Melanie's hand. "I can still hear them." Surely he could, even if no words were audible as he urged or was urged by her up the path. The sky didn't recede, and he could have thought the blank surface was waiting for them. When he stepped off the end of the path onto the summit the landscape seemed to fall away on every side, and he could have fancied that it brought the sky closer. All that mattered was seeing the children ahead.

They were standing on the peak, which was flat and oddly regular, practically a rectangle, with as little colour to it as the sky. There was room on it for Slater and for Melanie as well. From the height the fields that extended in every direction looked paler still, and might have been competing with the sky for featurelessness. He couldn't recall when he'd last seen a colour. He was trying to think that only the distance was robbing the world of its details when Tom said "How did we come?"

"Dad drove," Amy said with a laugh, not as lofty as she might have wanted it to be. "Don't you remember?"

For some moments Slater was able to believe that nothing was wrong except their inability to see the road. Their ascent could have led them around the opposite side of the mountain, after all. The trouble was that he could see no roads anywhere, and searching for them had brought another issue to his notice. The horizon was unnaturally close, no more than half as remote as it should be, if even that. The flatness of the land gave it nowhere to hide, and he didn't know how far or how often he'd turned around in the hope of seeing he was somehow mistaken before Melanie said "What are you looking for?"

"I don't need anything else," he said, fixing his gaze on her and the children. "You're all here."

Although he was determined to make that the answer, he couldn't help glancing away from them. At once he wished he hadn't, because the horizon was visibly shrinking towards the mountain. His panic felt as if his insides had dropped out of him, leaving him empty of any resource. If the family weren't seeing what he saw, might that provide any reassurance? He was struggling to think how to distract them when Tom said "It's snowing, isn't it?"

While he didn't sound entirely convinced, he seemed willing to be. Slater gripped Melanie's hand—perhaps he had never let go of it—and strove to see as Tom was seeing. Surely the blankness that was advancing all around them could be an uncommon species of snowstorm, however much it looked as if the sky was consuming the world. He had to strain his vision to distinguish that the oncoming mass consisted of innumerable flakes. He was about to risk telling Tom he was right when Amy said "Suppose we'd better go back before it gets us."

At that moment Slater saw too much. Yes, the vast inexorable mass was composed of countless fragments, but they weren't snowflakes. Only their pallor had misled him. They were shards of the landscape, which was disintegrating. They put him in mind of pixels into which the world was splintering, an image reverting to its simplest components. It left them nowhere to go, but how could he tell Amy or anyone? Before he dared to speak, Tom complained "We haven't seen the sun."

Slater felt Melanie take a firmer grip on his hand. "We don't need to," she said. "We can feel it."

"I can't," Tom declared in some kind of triumph.

"I don't think I can either," Amy said.

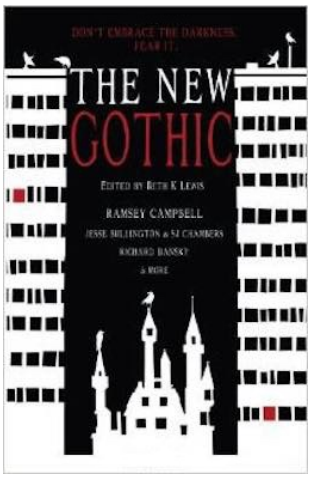
Melanie turned towards their father and squeezed his hand. "Close your eyes and you will."

For an instant he glimpsed that she'd seen the same as he had. How could he have imagined otherwise? "Hold our hands, you two," he said with an urgency that he knew was prompted by the shrinking landscape. "We'll all close our eyes and feel the sun together."

As they faced the children hand in hand, Amy and then Tom turned to meet them. Slater found Tom's hand, which felt disconcertingly small and frail, hardly even there. Melanie took Amy's, and the girl fumbled for her brother's. The last thing Slater saw was the trust in the children's eyes. "All shut now," Melanie said, and he thought he did begin to feel the sunlight. Surely that explained why, despite the altitude, he hadn't been able to see anyone's breath. He remembered hearing that no amount of cloud could entirely block off the sun.

What else ought he to recall? Something about children—perhaps that someone was supposed to be like a little child, though weren't you also meant to put childish things away? He was glad the children were there, at any rate. Perhaps their beliefs, whatever they were, would carry the day somehow; they could well have more beliefs than he'd retained, though he couldn't speak for Melanie. Was he thinking too much in a desperate bid to cling to some sense of himself? What would happen if he failed? Suppose you couldn't feel the light if you thought about it? He had an idea that someone might be singing wordlessly, but couldn't tell whether it was him. Then the impression seemed to be overwhelmed by if not transformed into light, which was pervading every sense. He didn't know whether he was seeing it or experiencing it in some way that left words behind, but it might have been all there was to the world.

Reading The Signs



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When Vernon came to a roundabout with no diversion sign, he saw he'd gone wrong. He lowered his window in the hope of hearing where the motorway was, but the night was as silent as the February sky that looked close to sagging onto the roofs of all five streets. He drove back to the last sign, which stood on another roundabout, and then he noticed what he'd previously overlooked. The four metal legs supporting the sign had gouged erratic tracks through the dewy grass. Plainly someone had thought it would be fun to move the sign.

Five roads met at this intersection too. Vernon had been driving for at least ten minutes through the moorland town, and surely he ought to be close to the route back to the motorway. He might have phoned Emma to say he was delayed, except that she was generally asleep by midnight; he hoped she was now. Instead he turned along the road between the pair he'd already followed. If it didn't bring him to a sign, he would come back.

The terraced streets were deserted. The low sky appeared to have squashed every colour besides grey out of the ranks of narrow houses. The wan glare of the streetlamps blackened the window frames and the curtains that blinded the panes, the front doors that opened onto the street. He glimpsed movement among the vehicles parked half on the pavement, but it was only a cloud of fumes seeping from under the hood of a car. Beyond the car the road bent sharply, and when it straightened, he saw somebody trudging ahead.

Even from several hundred yards away, Vernon saw the walker was unusually tall. As he put on speed for fear that the man might turn aside before Vernon could ask for directions, he became aware that the fellow's head was disconcertingly small. It turned to peer towards the car, and the upper portion of the body slipped askew. The light of the next streetlamp found it as it righted itself, and Vernon realised that a child was perched on

the man's shoulders. He was relieved to see it but unnerved by having imagined anything else. He could only hope that he was safe to drive—that he wasn't too much in need of sleep.

The boy had regained his hold on the man's shoulders by the time Vernon drew alongside. The small face looked scrubbed shiny, gleaming under the streetlamp, and the wide eyes were alert despite the hour. His long nose twitched, perhaps with nerves, as his lips pinched inwards. The father's long face had been dragged thinner by the weight of his jowls, and his dull tired eyes were underscored by skin that looked bruised, while his loose lips drooped under a bulbous nose. In his indeterminately coloured suit and with his shirt collar open, he scarcely seemed dressed for the night, and the boy's outfit wasn't much more suitable—a waspishly striped jumper inside a dark overall, both of them a size too large. Vernon lowered the passenger window and shivered at the chill that met him. "Will this bring me back to the motorway?" he called.

The man sidled between two parked cars and stooped to the window, but didn't speak until he'd lowered himself almost to his knees as if his burden had brought him to them. Vernon heard the boy's hands thump the roof, presumably for support. The man's breath glimmered in the wintry air as he said "What are you asking for?"

"I'm looking for the motorway. I was wondering if I've gone wrong."

If the man seemed unhappy with this, perhaps that was his habitual condition—the flatness of his voice would be a local trait. As the boy's hands clutched at his shoulders, he gave the road ahead a dull glance. "You're no more wrong than me."

"We were going that way, weren't we?" The boy's voice was shrill and rendered tinny by the roof. "You have to say," he said.

The skin beneath the man's eyes twitched while his lips chafed each other. No doubt he was embarrassed to be prompted to hitch. "Look for a lift by all means," Vernon said, and when the fellow's face grew blanker still "I mean with me."

The boy kicked up his legs, displaying trainers that reminded Vernon how much Tom's used to cost, and as the cuffs of the overalls flapped they revealed the boy wasn't wearing socks. "I'll give you a ride, son," Vernon

called and told the man "You don't want him out like that at this time of night in this weather."

Even if this was presumptuous, he thought it needed to be said. The man's face stayed expressionless as the boy leapt down from his shoulders like an acrobat. The trainers struck the pavement with a plump thud that set a dog barking in a house, and the boy released one of the man's hands. "Where you going?" the man said.

Did he think the boy was about to run off? The man had straightened up, and Vernon couldn't see his face. Perhaps Vernon had misunderstood the question, since the man added "You can't stay sat on me."

The boy's thin lips sucked inwards, losing any colour, as if his teeth or something else had pained him. "Would you like to sit in front?" Vernon said.

The man ducked to stare at Vernon. "Who'll be telling you the way?"

"I expect you should." Vernon leaned over to tip the passenger seat forward. 'You do as your dad says," he said. "Better sit in the back."

As the boy clambered in, he gave Vernon quite a look. Vernon remembered earning glares whenever he told Tom not to do something at that age. When he pushed the seat upright the boy made a face, though in the dimness Vernon couldn't see what kind. Once the man had slumped onto the seat and fumbled the safety belt into its socket, Vernon said "Straight on?"

"That's where."

The man seemed to resent having to say so. No doubt he was as weary as he looked. As he shut the window, Vernon sent the car forward. Talking ought to help him stay wakeful, and he said "What's kept you both out so late?"

The man's breath clouded the air as he muttered "Broke down."

"Was that your car I saw back there?"

"No idea what you've seen."

Perhaps the boy would be better company. As Vernon glanced at the small indistinct face, he saw the empty street fleeing backwards. "Have you been somewhere good?"

"Playing."

Vernon took that for an affirmative. He tried giving the man the kind of look adults shared on the subject of children, but the fellow was staring dully through the windscreen. It was hardly polite to seem amused by how the boy took after him, and Vernon stayed quiet until the street ended at a junction. "Left?" he suggested.

"That's us," the man just about said.

From previous journeys Vernon had a sense that the motorway curved in this direction several miles ahead. The road he turned along was wider than the one he left but no less deserted. Cars occupied the concrete drives of houses frozen by the frigid light. He saw the boy's eyes flickering from side to side as though to take everything in, which prompted him to say "I'll bet my son would have thought this was an adventure at your age."

A shadow fluttered over the boy's face as he peered out of the mirror. "How old's that?"

"You tell him."

Vernon thought the man was addressing the boy, then wondered if he was. "Eight?" Vernon said, which was apparently an insult, given how blank the small face grew. "His name's Tom," Vernon said in an attempt to placate him. "What's yours?"

"Tell the man your name, son."

"I'm me."

"I'm sure you are and nobody else." Vernon made another bid to share the adult viewpoint, but the man was keeping his thoughts to himself. "I'm Jack," Vernon said.

Neither of his passengers responded with a name, though the man uttered a breath that bloomed grey. Vernon thumbed the button on his side of the car to ensure the passenger window was shut and turned the heating up to full. The mans gaze had begun to dodge back and forth as though he was imitating his son, and his thick tongue poked his lips apart. "Time to play," he said.

The boy sat forward. "Try telling, pop," he said and grinned as if he was no less proud of his teeth than of the answer.

"Sit back, son," Vernon told him. "You need to put your belt on." As the boy's face withdrew into the dimness, his grin was the first thing to vanish.

"That's no fun."

"I can't drive unless everyone is strapped in. I don't want the police telling me I can't, do I?"

"You don't."

Perhaps the man's voice was so toneless because he didn't like to see his son rebuked, in which case he should have done the parental job, though Vernon felt guilty for neglecting to check the boy had used the belt. He braked and waited for the boy to yank it across himself in a mime of resentment. As the car regained speed he said "Time to play what?"

The man's eyes flickered, but not in his direction. "You'll see."

"If it's a secret, just say so."

"Don't be like that."

Could the fellow actually think Vernon was being unreasonable? Before Vernon could make his feelings even plainer, the man turned his head away from him. "See the signs," he mumbled.

Vernon saw the small head swing that way too. "So that's safe," the boy said.

In a moment Vernon thought he understood, but said only "Intelligent chap, isn't he?"

The man expelled another ashen breath. "Likes to think so."

Did he resent his own son's intellect? That might explain why the boy seemed somehow to be holding back, but Vernon wasn't about to be daunted from showing concern. "Are you cold there in the back?" he said. "I've a blanket in the boot if you'd like to wrap up."

"Last thing he wants," the man declared.

"It really won't be any trouble."

"You're right, it won't."

Vernon was ready to ignore if not to argue with the man until the boy spoke up, shriller than ever. "I'm how I like."

"If you say so," Vernon said but felt inadequate. "If there's anything else I can do for you, just let me know."

"No call for that." The man nodded at the windscreen as though to indicate he was leaving the subject behind. "I'm miserable tired," he said.

The boy was looking where the man had looked. "It's my turn."

"I believe I see what you're up to," Vernon said.

"Is that a fact."

It sounded like a question the man lacked the energy to raise. "Can anybody play?" Vernon said.

"Depends." Even less encouragingly the man added "Depends what you reckon the game is."

"I'll make tea." As the man gave him a look that might have been convicting him of feeblemindedness, Vernon found the next number plate ahead. "Owls own banks," he suggested.

"You're as clever as him." This didn't much resemble praise, but the man contributed "Our own business."

"Out of bounds," the boy said.

Vernon felt oddly relieved to have identified the game, as if he'd recovered some kind of control. "Do you play it whenever you're on the road?" he asked the man.

"Got to keep your brain going somehow."

"So you don't nod off at the wheel, you mean." When the fellow kept any response to himself, Vernon found inspiration on a number plate. "Weariness is fiendish."

The man thumped his forehead with the fingertips of one hand as though to enliven his mind. "What it's for."

The boy seemed to need no time to ponder. "What I found."

Was the man scowling at his quickness? Perhaps it was up to Vernon to carry on the game, and a registration number let him say "Gee up. Trigger."

The boy's giggle was even higher than his voice. His father glowered at it, unless he was making sure his turn came next. He looked away from the mirror before he said "Get us thinking."

"Gone up there," the boy said at once.

Vernon had the odd notion that the game had turned into a dialogue from which he was excluded. He was glad to see they'd reached the edge of town. The houses ended several hundred yards ahead, and beyond them the road stretched into empty darkness. "Where shall I drop you?" he said.

The man shook his head as if to rouse himself or to dislodge some unwelcome burden. "Not round here."

"I thought you said you were on my way."

"Never said different. Not yet, that's all "

Vernon almost laughed aloud at the man's brusqueness, since there seemed to be no other way to take it. "So long as you let me know when you're where you want to be," he said as the last of the light slipped from the boy's face in the mirror.

The streetlamps receded while the moor loomed around the car. The long low slopes were in no hurry to reveal themselves, and even once they gained some definition the ragged crests were scarcely distinguishable from the drooping sky. Although they hid the motorway, the strip of illuminated road that ran between the sprawling verges led in the direction where Vernon assumed it to be. Otherwise the headlamp beams only blurred the dark that hunched around and ahead of the specimen of road. He needed more than the monotonous sight to keep him vigilant, and he tried saying "So what do you do, Mr..."

"Mister is right." Just as dully the man added "You've seen."

"That's what we get for being fathers, isn't it?" When his bid for good humour fell short of the man, Vernon said "I was thinking of the other kind of job."

"After one of them, are you?"

Even by the man's standards the retort seemed unnecessarily harsh, and then Vernon wondered if he was unemployed. "Isn't there much work hereabouts?"

"Here?" The man waved a hand so sluggishly that it looked hampered by the darkness. "See if you can think."

Vernon might have countered that the man didn't seem especially capable of it. Instead he concentrated on the lit stretch of road as it veered from side to side. A protracted curve led so far out of the way he thought he should be taking that he let out a dimly luminous breath when another elongated bend corrected the deviation. All this made him say "Don't you mind leaving your car all that way back?"

"Doesn't matter what I mind."

"Couldn't you call someone?"

Presumably he didn't belong to a motoring organisation, and the local garages would have shut down hours ago. Vernon was aware of talking for the sake of it as he said "I wouldn't like to break down out here and not be able to get help."

"Better hadn't, then."

"No, I mean if I did I'd be able to call."

"Not here you'd not. Nothing gets out," the man said with morose triumph.

"I think my phone would. It's pretty well up to date, not like its owner."

Vernon slowed the car to a walking pace and found his mobile in the fat pocket of his padded coat. As he touched the illuminated screen he glimpsed the boy's face blanching in the mirror. "Expect you've never seen the like, son," the man muttered.

Vernon blinked at the phone and brought it closer to his face before pocketing it. "I'm afraid your dad was right. I can't pick anything up."

"Want to watch out what you're picking," the man said so indistinctly that he might almost have been talking in his sleep.

"He's right again, son," Vernon said, the only way he could make sense of the remark. "Be careful."

The boy lurched forward, not far enough for the dashboard lights to illuminate his face. "What about?"

"Who you get involved with," Vernon said and glanced at the man for agreement. When the fellow kept his gaze on the dark, Vernon added "What they're up to as well."

The boy fell back as if the belt had recaptured him. If his father had glanced at him in the mirror, the man's expression was too fleeting for Vernon to catch. As the car put on speed once more, the grass and weeds that framed the headlight beams twitched to greet them. The dim outlines of the slopes shifted as a wind rattled the passenger window, emphasising the chill. "Would you really have walked all the way up here?" Vernon said.

The man shrugged as if trying to work off the last traces of his burden. "No choice."

"Well, I think we always have those. It's up to us to decide what's best to do."

That was aimed at the boy, even if Vernon couldn't have explained precisely why—it was the kind of thing he still said to Tom—but the man mumbled "Try saying that round here."

Vernon might have pointed out that he just had. He assumed the man was referring to the kind of life he had to lead, the poverty he believed he'd made plain. He was relieved to see a pair of headlamp beams sprout above a slope against the sky ahead; at least the number plate would provide a distraction. The beams groped back and forth as if they were reaching vainly for the lightless clouds, and then they fell to the road as the car appeared around a bend. Vernon sensed his passengers readying themselves, but it seemed he was the first to read the plate. "Three nice eggs," he said.

He heard the man part his sticky lips, but the boy was faster. "That's not easy."

"There's no escape," the man said and stared at the mirror.

The other car sped past, and the boy's face went out like a dead bulb. It was dimly silhouetted by a pair of red lights that shrank to embers before the darkness doused them. Vernon was realising how devious a route the other vehicle had followed. "This can't be the only road, can it?" he said.

"It's that all right," the man said without looking away from the mirror. "You'll see."

In that case it must be the diversion, and Vernon had to admit he wouldn't be unhappy to leave his passengers along the way, together with the tension they'd brought with them. It and the chill were afflicting him with shivers, and he was tempted to offer the blanket again. Perhaps the boy was inured to the local weather, and as the headlights revealed yet another extended bend Vernon said "Are there still schools round here, then?"

"Still."

The man might have been aiming the word at the reflection in the mirror. "I was wondering where he goes to school," Vernon said.

"Try asking."

Though this sounded quite unlike an invitation, Vernon said "Where do you, son?"

As the boy inched forward, the man demanded "Who's saying he does?"

Improbable as it seemed, could the boy have been taught at home? At least that might explain the man's resentment. "I'm saying he seems educated," Vernon said. "Literate for his age."

"He's good at that. Good at a lot else as well."

This seemed more discontented than Vernon understood. How could anyone deplore their own child's intelligence? He was determined to involve the boy now, and as the road straightened out further than the headlamp beams could reach he said "What should I be looking for, son?"

"Don't know."

"What sign, I mean."

"Sign."

Was the boy imitating his father to placate him? "For your village, if that's what it is," Vernon said.

"There's none."

Vernon wished he could make out the boy's face. Might the child be afraid to display too much intelligence around his father? "Your house, then," Vernon said.

"Can't see."

Perhaps he was protesting about having to sit in the back, and yet Vernon wondered if he'd misunderstood. "Will I know it when I come to it?"

"You'll be put right," the man said.

He sounded weary of the conversation if not resolved to end it. Vernon wasn't going to he silenced, and not just because chatting would help him to stay awake. "I'm guessing you're a reader, son."

"Reader."

"Of books, yes. Is that where you've picked up some of your way with words?"

"Here's where."

If he was trying to sound like his father, it didn't quite come off, and the uninhabited night all around them didn't lend his answer much credibility. "I'm asking because I travel in books," Vernon said as much to the man as to the child.

"Thought you were travelling in a car."

Vernon couldn't judge from the boy's shrill tone whether this was a joke, and the man's dull face gave no assistance. "The publishers send me around to show the shops their books," Vernon said doggedly. "A few of us still do that even with all the modern developments."

The boy leaned forward far enough that Vernon saw his indistinct face was blank. Surely no child could be unaware of computers and the Internet and how they'd changed the world. Perhaps, having grown up with it, the boy simply took it all for granted. I've some books in the boot you might like," Vernon said. "The kind my son used to."

"He'll want none of them," the man said so fiercely that his breath glimmered with each word. "Nobody's getting out."

"I didn't mean up here. Hardly the right place."

"Right for some things."

Vernon wasn't about to enquire which. For several reasons he welcomed the sight of headlamp beams ahead. They ranged about beneath the clouds until the night appeared to cut them down, and he felt as if more than the dark and the huge smudges of moorland had closed in. Only the moor had obscured the beams, and soon they were brandished above a lower slope. As the lorry swung into view around a bend he grew tense, surely just anticipating the game. The headlamp beams dropped to the tarmac as his did, and he squinted at the registration number. "Call general assembly," he said.

"Child goes a-roving "

Vernon was reflecting that the boy had proved his point about literacy when the man said "Can't get away."

The lorry roared past, and Vernon glanced at the mirror. Had just the headlamps turned the boy's face so white? As the rear lights shrank into the darkness, the boy sank back as though he wanted to emulate them. Vernon didn't like to think the child could be so afraid of his father—and then a worse notion came to him.

He could only drive while he struggled to think. His mind felt frozen by the chill and weighed down by the dark, as if he mightn't be able to use it until he left the desolate emptiness behind. A wind blundered against the car

and set the passenger window jittering, and he found he didn't want to look towards the man beside him. The dim slopes of the moor were trembling, and he wondered if the boy was fighting to restrain a shiver, just as Vernon was. He did his best to peer into the mirror without betraying that he was, but the boy's face had retreated into indistinctness. He was trying to discern its expression when he glimpsed a light ahead, and then another and a third —an irregular series of them following a line beyond a gap between the slopes. He didn't dare hope too much until the car was nearly at the gap, through which he saw more lights speeding both ways on a straight road close to the uneven horizon. They were on the motorway, and the intervening land was almost flat. He took a breath and swallowed, and then he had to speak. "I don't think I'm seeing a house."

The man stared ahead. "Keep looking."

"What am I likely to see?"

The man seemed no more eager to respond than Vernon had been to ask. It was the boy who said "Nothing you'd call one."

What was he trying to convey? Even by narrowing his eyes, Vernon still couldn't see the boy's face. He might have thought the child was trying to stay out of reach of the man's gaze. Before Vernon could think of a comment to risk, the man muttered "You'll have us for a way yet."

Vernon saw the miles of deserted moorland he had yet to cross, and the lights shuttling along the motorway as if to remind him how distant they were, and then he saw another light, a dim but undeniable glow on the clouds beyond the spot where the motorway disappeared rightwards over the horizon. He was sure the glow denoted a service area, and it prompted him to say "I can take you to the services, and then you're on your own."

He sensed unease so palpable it sent a shiver through him. The man raised his sluggish head as if he was confronting the mirror. "Depends what happens on the way," he said.

Too late Vernon realised he shouldn't have spoken. His first mistake had been to bring his passengers up here, where nobody else could see them. Now he would have been taking them among other people, but what chance had he left himself? Why had he taken so long to grasp how little the man knew about the child he pretended was his son? Not his name or his age, not where he lived or went to school... No wonder he hadn't owned up to a

name either, although perhaps that gave Vernon some faint hope, since it suggested that the man might leave him capable of talking. Then the hope went out as if the darkness had seized it, and the car seemed to grow cold as the depths of a cave. The man had withheld his name before Vernon's phone had turned out not to work.

He was overtaken by a shiver so convulsive that his foot slipped off the accelerator. The car lost speed at once, and the man's head swung towards him. "What are you trying to do?"

"I'm not trying anything," Vernon protested, and instantly knew what he should. Using just his toes while he dug his heel into the rubber mat on the floor of the car, he pressed the pedal down. He let the car surge forward and then lifted his foot from the accelerator. His ankle and his shin ached from the strain, but his leg hadn't moved, and surely the man couldn't see what Vernon was doing. The head at the edge of his vision loomed towards him once more, and he didn't dare meet the fellow's eyes. "What's happened now?" the man demanded.

"I don't know. I'm not sure." Vernon managed not to grit his teeth at the pain in his leg before he'd finished speaking. He waited for the speed to drop so far that the car began to judder, and then he went down a gear, and another. He inched his foot higher, slowing the car enough to turn it shaky again. Before he could speak, he had to swallow a cry at the dull agony in his leg. "Something's wrong with the engine. I don't know the first thing about them. Do you?"

He hadn't said half of that when he realised how useless his plan was. If the man was able to fix cars he would have fixed his own. The pain made his foot lurch off the accelerator, and the car wavered to a halt and stalled. The man was staring at him, but it took Vernon some seconds to turn his head. The man's eyes were so dull that his emotions were unreadable, even when he spoke. "I'll give it a look."

"I'll need to open the bonnet."

The man's sagging face came so close that his greyish breath settled on Vernon's skin. "How'll you do that?"

"I'm doing it now," Vernon said and leaned towards the floor in front of his seat. "It's done."

He was unable to breathe until the man had sprung the buckle of the belt out of its socket and scrabbled at the handle to open the door and sidled in a crouch onto the road. The fellow twisted around in that position and stared into the car. "Shut the door for heaven's sake," Vernon urged. "It's cold enough in here."

The man slammed the door hard enough to shake the car. Vernon had been afraid he would demur. As the man tramped into the headlight beams, Vernon said low but urgently "Is your dad—"

"He's not my dad."

That was all the confirmation Vernon needed, and he blurted "What can you tell me about him?"

The boy leaned forward as the man stooped to the bonnet, and Vernon saw that the child's face was pale as ice. "Never mind," Vernon murmured. "You're safe now. Where do you want me to take you?"

"Over there," the boy said and pointed beyond the man, who was attempting to lift the bonnet that Vernon hadn't actually released. "Past all the lights."

Vernon was distressed to think that the child might be almost too scared to breathe; certainly his breaths weren't visible. "The far side of the motorway, you mean."

"That's where he got me from."

The man thrust his head towards the windscreen and thumped on the bonnet. "Can't get in."

"Stand back a moment. Let me try the engine again," Vernon shouted before lowering his voice. "Sit back, son. Hold on tight."

As the man straightened up, the boy did the same. "Have you got your belt on?" Vernon was anxious to learn.

"Never took it off."

How had he managed to crane forward so far? Vernon hadn't time to think about it now. The glare of the headlights mounted the man's body as he retreated several steps, which left his face harder to read. "Stay there," Vernon shouted and twisted the key in the ignition.

The starter motor rasped, and the engine emitted a shrill stuttering cough, but that was all. He felt the key grow slippery with perspiration as his

mouth grew dry as ash. He mustn't release the key yet; you could keep it turned for ten seconds before you had to leave the engine dead for thirty more—and then the engine sputtered into life. He seized the gear lever and struggled to manipulate it into reverse, but it only jerked into the slot for fourth gear. The man was growing restless, swaying forward in the headlights, and Vernon realised that he hadn't locked the passenger door in case the fellow heard. Even if he did, what could he do about it? Vernon thumbed the button, and the door locked with a loud click just as the lever found reverse gear. The car lurched backwards with a squeal of the tyres, and as Vernon threw it into first gear to swerve around the man, the headlights illuminated his entire figure. His hands were jerking towards his face, and Vernon thought he was miming dismay until the man cupped them around his mouth to yell a solitary word. "Moorchild."

For a confused moment Vernon thought the fellow was giving his name at last. The hands sank, and he saw the man's expression. If the long face had slumped even further, it was with relief; he looked as though he could scarcely believe his own good fortune. Perhaps that was what seized Vernon with an icy chill, unless it was the sight of his small passenger escaping the restraint of the safety belt with a sinuous reptilian motion, or even just the way the temperature dropped with the cavernous iciness the boy brought with him. His neck was owning up to its length as his head swayed towards the man, who had retreated to the verge of the road and was thrusting out his hands to fend off whatever he saw. "He's yours now," he yelled. "You chose him. You're welcome to him."

He sounded hysterical with delight, and perhaps this was too much for Vernon's passenger. Before Vernon could flinch the boy scrambled over the back of the empty seat and slithered head down to unlock the door. He darted out of the car on all fours and leapt to his feet with a cry that sounded less like a child than a night bird. All the same, it was a word. "Carry," he was demanding.

Vernon had a last glimpse of his face, which was as white as the underside of a slug. The eyes dwindled as the lips gaped with a grin that reached around the sides of the head. The man had staggered backwards as the door swung wide, and now he whirled around to dash along the road. He hadn't reached the limits of the headlights when the pursuer caught him. Clothes

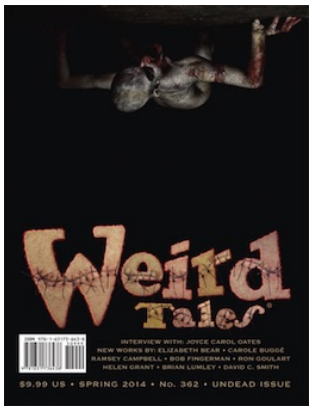
flapping about its elongated limbs, it sprang onto his shoulders and dug its fingers into the top of his head.

Vernon didn't know if the shrill sound was a cry of triumph or the man's wail of despair or both. He saw the man flee out of the headlamp beams as if he could somehow outdistance the burden on his back. Then the man stumbled off the road and rushed into the night as the rider kicked his chest to spur him onwards. It was a game, Vernon thought wildly—a childish game if not a senile one. Quite some time after the figure pranced helplessly into the wilderness, Vernon managed to shut the passenger door and lock it, and eventually his shaking fingers let him control the car. He eased it forward and then drove as fast as he dared, because the lights on the motorway seemed as distant as stars. Until he reached them, if he ever did, he would be more aware of the darkness at his back.

Note: In *The New Gothic*, the man's solitary word is clearly printed as 'Moorchild.' However, at the World Fantasy Convention, Brighton 2013, where Campbell reads the tale aloud, he uses the word 'moonchild'.

2014

The Impression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Alan was nearly at the schoolyard gates when he saw his grandmother. She was wearing the ankle-length kaftan that shared more than one tint with all the rusty hair trailing down her back. Her large broad face looked proud of him in his new uniform, and he hoped she wouldn't make her feelings any more apparent while he was with his classmates. "Is that all your mother gives you?" Boyd was asking. "Mine gives me twice that and my father does when I see him."

"So do mine." Eagerness to compete raised Hall's voice even higher. "And my mother's partner, she does sometimes too."

"I earn my pocket money," Alan instantly regretted saying, because Boyd demanded "What do you have to do?"

"Just help her clean the house."

Hall emitted a hiss that stressed his similarity to a balloon. "My mothers have men in for that. They've taught them at the university and they say at least it's a job for them."

"My mother pays a woman," Boyd protested, "otherwise it wouldn't be done right."

"You're just as conscientious, aren't you, Alan? Your mother appreciates it now you're on your own." As if seized by inspiration his grandmother added "Wait till tomorrow and I'll show you how to have some fun with rubbing."

Hall uttered a stammering hiss that did duty as a laugh, while constellations of pimples flared on Boyd's cheeks as he spoke without looking at her. "What kind's that?"

"Wait and see," she said, mostly to Alan. "You can tell your friends all about it next week."

He thought they weren't friends so much as interrogators, but they were the best he'd found in his first few days. At least she'd parked her battered

Micra out of sight of the schoolyard. The ample houses around the school gleamed white in the September sunshine. A mile down the wide avenue their relatives split in half, and along a side road was a half where Alan lived. It felt bigger since his father had married the Thai girl and stayed abroad, not to mention emptier since they'd had a son. Alan's grandmother parked outside and murmured

"Have they given vou homework already? I'll come in for a few minutes."

She cooked vegetables to accompany the casserole his mother had left in the microwave. While he interrupted his homework with dinner she busied herself with dusting and polishing the pale pine kitchen. "I'd best make sure I'm out of Margaret's way" she said at last, having glanced approvingly at his English work. "I'll take you for your treat tomorrow."

The smell of breakfast didn't waken him, since muesli had so little of a smell, but his grandmothers arrival roused him. Today she was in a kaftan like a flattened patch of jungle, while his mother wore shorts and a T-shirt that said Fit For Purpose, the women's gym she owned and worked in as a trainer. He tried not to dwell on the sight of her breasts apparently announcing they were fit, because it left him feeling guiltier than he cared to understand. Her red hair was tied into a pony-tail that helped her face look tugged into a compact version of her mother's, and she greeted him with a smile not unlike levelling her lips. "You really needn't do so much for him," she had just said.

"I've plenty of time on my hands, Margaret, and now he's got homework I don't mind picking up a duster."

"I didn't know you had," Alan's mother said and gave him a weighty look.

It took his grandmother most of an hour to drive to the next town, where she parked by the cathedral and retrieved a large leather case from the back seat. As they paced along an aisle of massive foot-worn flagstones under arches tall as any dinosaur, Alan saw he was treading on names and dates. "Watch and I'll show you how it's done," his grandmother murmured, but she'd hardly started cleaning a brass memorial with a duster from the case when a priest closer to Alan's age than hers bustled over, black robes fluttering. "Excuse me, you mustn't do that."

“I used to bring my history class here."

“That must have been some time ago. It's no longer permitted."

"Well, Alan, there you are. God doesn't want you having fun or even a reward."

"Please don't involve God." Perhaps the priest felt this left the responsibility with him, because his eyes closed for a possibly prayerful moment. "If you want unsupervised memorials," he said, "I believe there's something at Perlston Manor."

She had driven about hallway home when she turned along a side road and then another, which was so overgrown that it resembled a track through a field. It wound between immense grey trees that had cracked open as they crumpled to the earth. Eventually the trees on the left gave way to the low uneven remains of a thick stone wall with bits of an old house beyond it. "It'll be worth it" Alan's grandmother told him. "Remember the story about the magic lamp? It's like that but instead of a genie you get a picture to keep."

As she steered the car through a gap in the wall onto a relatively bare patch of earth beneath the open sky, Alan had the odd notion that the gloom the trees had cast on the road was waiting somewhere ahead. When he followed his grandmother through the ruins—arched windows with their tops lopped off, half a doorway, grey mossy lumps of inner wall—he kept being touched by a chill he would have expected to feel inside a stone house. "That's where it must be," his grandmother said.

She meant the remnant of a smaller building beyond the main one. A shattered cross half buried in weeds showed it had been a chapel. She stepped through an arched doorway that had survived upright and then through its shadow. As she made for a long grey object that was lying low in the grass, it seemed to stir as if its lid were shifting. Just the grassy fringe was, in the wind. 'We call that a sarcophagus," she said.

It was a stone coffin no higher than her ankles. For a moment Alan imagined its contents had been pressed as flat as the white face on the lid, an elongated face so thin that it might have been sucking its hollow cheeks inwards. The scrawny lips were as unbending as the long sharp nose, and if the blank eyes beneath extravagantly high brows weren't lidded they were stretched so wide that it appeared to have erased the pupils. Either the model for the plaque had been bald or the artist had no room to portray hair, since the face was raised less than an inch. Below the aggressively pointed chin were the man's name—Lord Ranulph Perlston, dead so many centuries

that they made Alan feel belittled—and some words in a language the boy didn't know. "What does that mean?"

"Pray God doesn't find him wanting," his grandmother said after some consideration. "Just let me start and show you what to do."

Planting a hand on the slab of a forehead, she sank to her knees. Alan could have fancied she was about to pray, but as far as he knew she didn't any more than he did. The moss that grew in patches on the lid had stayed clear of the plaque, and so it didn't take her long to clean it. She took a roll of heavy paper from the case and snipped off a length that she laid like a sheet over the still face. Once she'd secured it with tape to the upper edge of the plaque, she gave Alan a stick of wax to hold. 'Don't ever do this in church," she said and knelt on her case on the lid of the sarcophagus.

She tugged the paper smooth before taping the sides and lower edge to the plaque as if to hide the face. When she began to rub the wax over the section of paper concealing the forehead, Alan didn't think it would achieve much, but the high flawless brow swelled up on the paper like an old-fashioned photograph developing in a tank. His grandmother conjured up the right half first, framing it with her left thumb and index finger, and did the same with the other half. When she moved her hand to the right eye Alan said "Can I do some now?'

"He's yours if you want him," his grandmother said, though not before she'd glanced around the ruin as if hoping to locate another memorial. "Be careful. No going back."

Once she'd used his arm to help her up he knelt on the case. It reminded him of the kneelers he'd seen in front of pews in the cathedral, but he didn't think the ruin contained much that was holy. Cornering the right eye beneath the paper with his thumb and forefinger, he began to rub the hidden face. Soon the eye took greyish shape, and he could have thought it was gazing up at him, unless it was ready to open as soon as he'd rubbed it enough. He might almost have left it alone, except that you weren't supposed to abandon any task, and before long both eyes were waiting for the rest of the face to join them. The cheeks felt so hollow it seemed well on the way to becoming a skull, while the nose reminded him of a long sharp bone. As he completed the face with the left side of the lips and chin, a dusty wind tugged at his sleeve and tried to lift the paper. He thought the lips had writhed into a sneer—the paper had shifted, at any rate—but when

he sat back on his heels to look at his work the mouth was as severely straight as ever. "Let me lift him for you," his grandmother said. She stooped to peel off the tapes and stuff the handful into the case before slipping the waxed page into a transparent folder. The plastic turned the face grey as a slug, and perhaps that was why she frowned at it as she handed Alan the folder. "I think that's as good as he's going to be," she said.

"Aren't you going to get him?"

"To tell you the truth I'm not that fond," she said and made quite swiftly for the car. As Alan followed her he heard a restless movement in the grass within the chapel—a bird or small animal, though he hadn't noticed any near the ruins. Or had his grandmother dropped the bunch of strips of tape? In a moment the twisted brownish object was hidden by the grass along the edge of the lid, if he'd seen it at all. "I'd better deliver you home, had I?" his grandmother said. "I'll take us all to the seaside tomorrow."

Alan laid the picture on the desk in his room but found it distracted him from his school homework. The face put him in mind of a dissatisfied teacher, and even when he moved it to the bed he sensed it at his back. He was dusting the china on the dresser in the dining-room when his mother came home. "Did you bring anything back from your expedition?" she said, and met the eyes of the picture Alan brought to show her. "He looks like a lot of men to me."

Alan felt she was somehow blaming his grandmother, and so he tried saying "Gran says she'll take us to the beach tomorrow."

"There's no need to make her think you do so much. If you did everything I have to you might have some reason to complain."

He took himself early to bed, stowing Lord Perlston's face in the shallow drawer of the desk, which only made him wonder what lay under the stone lid in the ruined chapel. Surely that face couldn't still be gazing up after so many years, but he didn't want to imagine how it might look now. If he could have thought of somewhere else to keep the picture he would have taken it out of the desk.

Sunlight and the aroma of breakfast wakened him. His grandmother was scrambling eggs, and Alan thought she might have come early so that his mother couldn't put him to work. On the drive to the beach he shared the back seat with three folding chairs in bags. She'd brought a hamper too, and

Alan swam after they'd had the picnic lunch as well as for most of the morning. He hoped that showed his mother he was fit enough and persuaded his grandmother that he was enjoying himself. He mostly was, especially so long as he ignored some children who were burying their father in a mound of sand, leaving just his upturned face clear. Further down the beach he saw a woman drying a girl's face with a towel, and beyond them a man appeared to be imitating them by using some material to hide his face. The late summer haze made his thin body waver, and he vanished into the dunes before Alan could focus on him. The boy shivered, because the sea felt as though it had grown cold as stone.

A wind was rising, and he retreated to the beach to towel himself. He hadn't realised that the long mound where the children had buried their father was so close. Where the man s head had been, the wind was making a lump of sand adopt various shapes, and Alan found he didn't care much for the spectacle. He put up only a token protest when his mother decided it was time to leave as the wind began to dash sand along the beach.

That night he dreamed of trying to erase a picture rather than see what it was. Every stroke of the eraser emphasised the gathering outline, and he couldn't shut his eyes. He was barely able to flounder awake before the eyes of the picture would have met his. Perhaps he'd been thinking of the art class, which would give him the excuse to take the trophy of the coffin into school.

Mr Granger was a towering but stooped man with untamed silver hair and emphatic eyebrows. His quick grey eyes caught sight of the picture at once. "What's this you've brought us, Dalton?" he enquired as though addressing the whole class. "Why, I do believe you've been out rubbing."

Hall let out bits of a hiss while Boyd snorted, and the art master scowled at them. "I'm glad to see it hasn't quite died out," he said and slipped the page out of the folder to hold it up. "Can you talk us through the process, Dalton? Do be on your feet."

Once Alan had managed to describe the method without embarrassing himself too much Mr Granger said "It always reminds me of how you see more details the longer you look at a painting." He sighed when nobody owned up to sharing the experience. "Where did you collect this fine fellow, Dalton?" he said.

"My gran took me to Perlston Manor, sir."

"Then this must be the lord of the domain. Don't take it personally, but he wouldn't have welcomed you if the stories are accurate." Before Alan could risk a question Mr Granger handed him the rubbing in its folder. "Let's start by getting to know one another," the teacher said. "I want you all to draw yourselves. Show me how you think you look."

Alan did his best but was distracted by the faces gaining definition everywhere around him. Perhaps that was why Mr Granger leaned down to mutter "Pitiful"— except that when Alan glanced around, the teacher was several desks away, and nobody else was close enough to have leaned over Alan. The whisper must have been in his head, along with the sensation like a shadow growing solid at his back. "Is that how you see yourself, Dalton?" Mr Granger said once he'd appraised Alan's sketch. "No call to be so hard on yourself."

Alan tried to feel praised and to take the feeling home, but he seemed to have taken something else instead. Once he'd shut the rubbing in the drawer of the desk in his room he kept thinking that somebody unimpressed by his homework was about to loom at his shoulder. He finished as fast as he could and hurried downstairs to his chores, but he'd only just donned the glove that was really a duster when his mother came in. She gave him a blink that was also a frown. "Haven't you done your homework?"

"I've finished it," he said and less accurately "There wasn't much."

"We'll give you a night off," she said with a kind of defiance. "I'll take you to that film you've been wanting to see."

Alan had been saving it for the weekend, perhaps even hoping Hall and Boyd might go with him—he still regretted neglecting to tell them that his father sent him money every Christmas, which helped him think his father hadn't needed another son because Alan had somehow disappointed him—but he saw his mother was determined, possibly to prove she didn't ask too much of him. As she parked her dumpy domed Volkswagen near the Frugoplex he noticed a loiterer beside the cinema. The man's face was concealed by a fluttering piece of material, but Alan thought he was leaning against the billboard to wait for someone. No, the figure was part of a torn poster, a photograph of people queuing for a film.

Alan wished he could concentrate on the one he went to see. Even once the boy acquired his superpowers, having been bullied at school and mugged by the local street gang, Alan had to keep glancing away from the screen to

dispel an impression that somebody was sidling towards him along the row of seats. He kept thinking that he wouldn't have to stand up to let the newcomer pass, since they were so thin, but suppose they meant to sit next to him? The prospect made him peer harder into the gloom. The nearest person on the far side from his mother was several seats away, and his face only gradually took shape in the dimness. That recalled Mr Granger's comment about paintings; Alan needn't be reminded of anything else. Whenever he stared along the row he had to wait for the face to take shape again, to persuade him that nobody had stolen closer in the dark. He glanced all around him as the credits began to crawl up the screen, triggering the house lights. His mother was silent until she had started the car, and then she said "Well, I don't think that was worth paying for."

Alan suspected that she meant both the film and his behaviour. He couldn't think of an answer, especially while he was unable to locate the figure with the face that had looked as though it was piecing itself together from scraps; the poster of the queue appeared to be wholly intact. Surely that showed it had been repaired, but he kept thinking about it in bed, not to mention feeling that an upturned face was lying far too close to him, even though he'd left the picture in his desk at school.

Before going to bed he'd searched online for references to Lord Ranulph Perlston, but found none. He gobbled his breakfast and tramped so fast to school that his rucksack persisted in nodding over his shoulder. By the time he arrived he had sweaty sodden armpits, but at least Mr Granger was on yard duty. "Ah, here's our collector of old things," he said. "Have you turned up anybody else like him?"

"No, sir." Having gathered a breath, Alan said "Can you tell me about him?"

"Good gracious, what a winded fellow. Not running away from anyone, are you?" When Alan shook his head Mr Granger answered him. "The story goes that he was disappointed in his sons."

"Oh," Alan said and could think of no reply worth a breath.

"He had quite a few with different ladies and didn't think any of the poor chaps measured up. Apparently they all met with accidents that nobody was anxious to examine too closely, and the ladies tended to go that way too."

"So that's why you said what you said about me."

"I also told you not to take it personally." Mr Granger said and stooped to gaze harder into the boys eyes. "That's what you should keep in mind. Do your best and nobody should carp."

For a moment Alan wanted to have his picture of himself back in case he could improve on it, but all the portraits were adorning the wall of the art room. As soon as he was at his school desk he raised the lid. The face gazed up through its plastic veil, but had it changed somehow? Even when he removed it from the folder he wasn't sure. The eyes seemed slyly wider or about to be, and the callous mouth might have been on the edge of writhing into a sneer if not baring its teeth at him. He thought that was how the face in the coffin might look—eyes wide as holes, teeth grinning with no humour and without lips as well—although shouldn't it be dust by now? That wasn't reassuring, and he shoved the page into the folder before slamming the desk lid so hard that some of his classmates jumped and laughed at him. He leaned his elbows on the desk until the geography master told him to sit up, and then he pinned the lid down with his folded arms whenever he could, but still sensed eyes staring up at him. At the end of the school day he made himself put the picture in his rucksack. Surely his grandmother would tell him if anything was wrong with the face.

On the avenue the trees tossed like sleepers unable to waken, and he felt as if he were being urged home by an insubstantial yet powerful captor. When he turned along the side road the wind strengthened behind him, and the rucksack twitched up every time a gust caught it, as though its contents were determined to crane over his shoulder. The only distraction was somebody ahead, almost hidden by the trees that sprouted from the pavement. Was the man making a joke of the sheet of newspaper the wind had plastered to his face? As he receded, too distant for Alan to see his legs move, he left the paper flapping at his head. The rank of trees in front of Alan's house cut off the sight, and when he reached home nobody was to be seen.

He left the rubbing downstairs while he tried to do his homework, but he was aware of the empty house around him and below him. He threw the folder with the picture on his desk before he set about cleaning the hall. He had to shake the duster glove, because it made the banister feel uneven. Though there was nothing inside the glove, the smooth wood still felt wrong, as if it had grown embossed. However hard Alan rubbed he couldn't

crush the sensation, and he was afraid his mother would notice that something was amiss. When she let herself in she only said "Your grandmother will be here soon.'

As she laid the table in the dining-room he dabbed at the sideboard. There was hardly any dust, but he seemed to feel an object writhe like an insect under the glove—an insect, or an eye coming to life, or lips squirming to form an expression. He remembered thinking that Lord Perlston might be dust, and he didn't quite stifle his cry as he recoiled. "Good God," his mother cried, "what's wrong with you now?"

As he searched for an answer he might dare to give, the doorbell shrilled. "I nearly knocked a plate off," he blurted.

"Everyone all right?" his grandmother said, and Alan felt as if they were putting on a show for her. He mimed how much he enjoyed dinner between answering question after question about his new school. Once dinner was finished and cleared away the family made for the front room, where his mother protested "Do we have to have company?"

She meant the picture Alan had brought downstairs, not him. "I wanted gran to see," he said.

"I should think she's seen quite enough of it. I have." When he let it settle on the low table piled with fitness magazines she said "I hope that isn't going to stain."

"I'm sure it won't, Margaret," his grandmother said, which encouraged Alan to say "It isn't really like rubbing a lamp, is it? There isn't really any magic."

"Not that kind," she said and looked wistful. "Why, would you rather there weren't any?"

"Its just Mr Granger said that man killed boys and ladies because he didn't think they were good enough for him."

"I'm surprised your teacher would tell you such things," Alan's mother declared. "And I don't like you bringing anybody like you said into our house."

"I didn't," Alan cried and felt he was denying more than he cared to acknowledge.

His grandmother looked dismayed by his outburst, but his mothers stare kept her feelings to itself. "Don't you want to keep it, Alan?" his

grandmother said.

"I'd be happy if he didn't," his mother said, "if it's responsible for getting him into that state."

"You have it, gran." So as not to seem ungrateful he added "You never got one of him."

She would be safe. Lord Perlston hadn't done anything to grandmothers and besides, perhaps Alan's mother was right to think he was just in a state —the kind his father's dereliction had left him in for months. He was hoping the state would pass away once his grandmother took the picture home, but in the night he jerked awake with a sense that a face was turned up somewhere near him, waiting to be noticed. What was the dim shape that lay next to his head? Only a bulge of the pillow, which meant that the presence he sensed close to him must be under the bed. He made an inexact grab at the cord above him, and when he managed to capture it the light came on just in time to show him an arm retreating into its lair beneath him. It was the shadow of his own arm, but he had to take quite a few breaths before he was able to lurch out of bed and kneel to peer underneath. Nothing unwelcome was to be seen, not even dust. All the same, when he retreated into bed he left the light on.

His fears were lying in wait at school. Whenever he opened his desk he was afraid to be met by a stony gaze and a thin-lipped sneer. More than once when he shut the lid he seemed to hear a breath like a rush of dust. The day grew dark with rain, which kept the boys in the classroom at lunchtime. "Draw us a picture, Dalton," Hall squeaked out of boredom, and Boyd contributed "Just don't draw your ugly face."

The downpour hadn't slackened by the time the bell brought the school day to an end. Outside the schoolyard a man was wiping his face with a cloth. He was a parent, but beyond the gates someone was rubbing a surface to let a face peer out—just a driver clearing condensation from inside a windscreen. Because of all this Alan didn't see his grandmother at first, waving at him across the road.

Or was she waving? She was gesturing vigorously with one hand while she shielded her eyes with the other. She seemed to be warning him not to step into the road, though it was safe. As he darted forward he realised that her fierce gestures were aimed not at him but at somebody behind him. At that

moment a hand, though it didn't feel like much of one, came to rest on his shoulder. "Go," he thought a voice said as he flinched towards the road.

He couldn't help stumbling off the kerb as he twisted around. He heard a screech and then another—one a woman's, one of brakes. The driver who had been clearing the window barely managed to halt the car in time. "Watch out, you damned young fool" she shouted, and Boyd grinned at Alan from beside her while Hall did so from the back.

Alan was still trying to grasp that there was nobody close behind him—everyone around him was staring as if the incident had been wholly his fault—when his grandmother reached him, "It's all right now," she murmured. "It will be, I promise." She was silent while driving him home, but as he left the car she said "I'll see you soon. I'll let Margaret know when."

The rain had stopped, unveiling the sun. Nevertheless Alan dreaded the household tasks—even the feather duster on its stick was too reminiscent of a magic wand, and also reminded him of his grandmother cleaning the face on the sarcophagus. He wasn't anxious to work at his desk while his mother wasn't home, and so he did his homework at the kitchen table. He was afraid she would notice that he hadn't touched his chores, but she was busy being pleased that a rival gym had shut down and sent her some customers. He thought she might be preoccupied enough to overlook how late he tried to stay up, but eventually she said "Time you were asleep."

He didn't expect to be. Lying in bed was worse than wondering what might have used his desk for a lair—but the fears seemed unexpectedly remote, and soon they went away, letting him sleep until his mother wakened him for school. His classroom desk proved to hold no terrors either. Why couldn't he he satisfied with this? He needed to understand what had changed—and then he remembered his grandmother's last words to him. Had she been ensuring he stayed away from her until it was safe?

For the rest of the day he was fearful, but not for himself. When he tried phoning her, it wasn't even her voice that told him to leave a message. He didn't, since he was unsure what to say, and she would be able to see that he'd called. As the final bell let him leave the school the sky grew not much less dark than his thoughts, but no amount of rain would prevent him from seeing his grandmother.

She lived a mile away from the school, in the opposite direction from his home. By the time he arrived at the small russet house she'd shared with her

late husband, the sky was solid black. Trees that overhung the garden added to the dimness, and Alan couldn't see whether her car was in the garage. He dashed to the house and rang the bell.

He heard rapid soft footsteps, but when they stayed muffled without coming to the door he recognised his own heartbeat. He leaned on the bellpush, but once the shrill sound died away the house reverted to silence. His grandfather used to hide a key to the house somewhere behind the garage, and might it still be there? Alan was dodging along the front of the house when a glimpse through the window made him falter. He peered into the front room and then, although the action unnerved him, rubbed the pane with his hand to wipe away his breath.

An upturned face lay on the table in the middle of the room, and the same face lay beside it. Had its owner come to join the image that had called him forth? Alan couldn't breathe until he managed to distinguish that both faces were on paper, and then he understood how his grandmother had tried to keep him safe. The only solution he could bring to mind was destroying the pictures, and he hurried in search of the key. He was past the garage when he halted again. His grandmother was in the back garden.

She was lying on a sun lounger, and didn't move when Alan called to her. She must have fallen asleep while sunning herself before the sky clouded over. She'd covered her face so as not to get sunburned if she dozed; in fact, as he crossed the lawn Alan saw that she was entirely hidden by the sheet, a sight that made him think of hiding under the bedclothes. Might she be sleeping outside because she didn't want to share the house with the visitor she'd invited? Alan called out again and reached to ease the sheet away from her face, but there was no need; spidery movements under the sheet indicated that she was clutching at the lounger to raise herself. She sat up so gradually that the sheet clung to her face, a spectacle that seemed to claim all of his awareness. He was about to plead with her to show her face when a hand took hold of his shoulder. "Come away, Alan. Don't look."

It was his grandmother, and she was behind him. The sheet began to bare the forehead, which lacked not just hair but other elements generally associated with a face. "I said come away." Alan's grandmother urged, twisting him around to shove him past the garage. When he tried to glance beyond her she cried "I told you not to look."

He couldn't be sure if he'd glimpsed the sheet lying flat or a shape, though hardly enough of one to be called a body, outlined beneath it, His grandmother unlocked the garage and made him sit in the car before she drove it out. When he tried to speak she shook her head fiercely and was silent until they reached his house. As he released his seatbelt she said "I told you I'd say when I'd see you. Just try and look after your mother."

He felt as if he hadn't been sufficiently afraid for his mother As he set about dusting he didn't know whether he hoped to sense secretive movements under his hand; at least that ought to mean his grandmother wasn't being visited. "Leave them alone," he muttered, but didn't dare to challenge anything to pay a call on him, and nothing did. After dinner he went to bed as soon as he could, telling his mother he didn't feel well. Though his bedroom was deserted, that didn't let him sleep much. He knew where he had to go.

In the morning he walked to the end of the road and caught a bus to the cathedral town. From the stop nearest to Perlston Manor it took him more than half an hour to tramp along the lanes. Winds swooped into the hedges to make them creak. The ruins of the manor stood still while grass and weeds kept prostrating themselves around the stones, and patches of lichen shivered on fragments of wall. In the midst of the remains of the chapel the sarcophagus lay quiet, and the face on the lid might have been designed to pretend that the subject of the memorial was just as peaceful. It didn't fool Alan, who managed to dislodge from a remnant of wall a chunk almost too heavy to lift with both hands. He staggered to the coffin and dropped his burden on the upturned face.

The forehead caved in, but the eyes gazed up so relentlessly that he was afraid to glimpse an expression. He had to retrieve the lump of stone and drop it several times, shattering a section of the lid, before the face was entirely destroyed. Alan rested the stone on the intact stretch of the lid and began to hurl pieces of the memorial away from the coffin. He needed to see what it had concealed—to see that was destroyed as well.

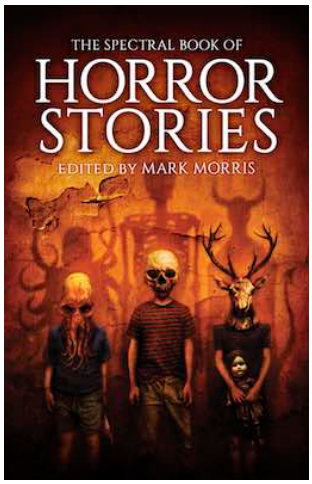
There seemed to be nothing to bother him, just fragments that might have been bits of bone mixed with brownish dust. Shying away a piece of the plaque that included most of the broken mouth. Alan turned back to the coffin to find that a bunch of dried twigs had been blown onto the lid. They were twitching out of the hole he'd made, where they had caught on the

edge. He could have taken them for the legs of a spider, except that even one so large would have scuttled away from him instead of scrabbling to catch hold of his hand if not to fend him off. With a cry of rage and panic he used the chunk of stone to crush the object as it struggled to withdraw into the coffin, and then he devoted himself to smashing the lid.

It took a long time, and so did seizing handfuls of the contents of the sarcophagus and flinging them to the wind. He was desperate to believe that only the wind made the crumbling substance squirm as if it was determined to take shape. At last the coffin was as empty as he could leave it, and he stumbled along the lanes to the main road. The bus driver stared at him before letting him board.

As soon as Alan was home he started cleaning all the surfaces, so hard his hands ached. He was plying the duster on the stick when his mother came home. He could never tell her what he'd done, but surely she would see how meticulous he'd been. She only looked at him as the bus driver had. "What have you got on your hands?' she said. "What have you brought home?"

On The Tour



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As soon as Stu looked into Yesterday's he saw Jaz sitting near the bar. "They've remembered me," Stu told him. "They've got me on the bus."

The smallest man at Jaz's table took a mouthful of bitter and wiped his wry lips with the back of his fist. "Which one's that, pops?"

"The tour bus. The Beatles tour that goes past my house."

"Are we supposed to know who you are?"

"He used to be with Scotty and the Scousers," Jaz said. "He was the drummer."

"Ever meet the Beatles?"

"We were on with them," Stu declared. "Ringo bought us a drink, only John pinched mine and made out it was a joke. Scotty said he should buy me another but John wanted to settle it outside, and then Paul said it wasn't worth it and George got me one instead. We always thought John knew the others wouldn't let him fight and that's why he was safe to start it."

"That's your claim to fame, is it? That's what they'll be saying about you on the tour."

Jaz made to intervene until Stu said "I don't know what they're saying yet. I'm off home to hear."

"Sounds like you're taking after your friend Lennon, not getting us a round."

"I never said he was a friend. He didn't like us being bigger on the bill than they were."

The man was opening his mouth when Jaz said "Stu's right. I've seen his poster."

Just the same, as Stu made for the street he heard the man laugh. The fellow seemed determined to stay unimpressed, and Stu called to Jaz "You know about the band. You tell him."

Early partygoers were already heading for the clubs. All the girls were dressed for a hot night, though it was April. On Church Street, where a police van was the solitary vehicle exempted from the ban on traffic, a musician was picking coins out of his guitar case. Everybody waiting at the bus station appeared to be on their own, and the line Stu joined was as silent as a photograph. At least the homeward bus arrived before the wind through the glass shelter could start his knees clapping together. The downtown hotels gave way to tall Victorian houses that had fissured into apartments, and then the buildings set about shrinking almost as small as his house.

The bus left him at the end of the road next to his. The house where he'd grown up was just his now, and looked as dilapidated as he felt when he let himself. The tree outside the gap-toothed wooden fence smeared the dusty brownish bricks with twilit shadow, which sprawled on the dead leaves strewn across the untended token garden and had settled in both front rooms. Like its neighbours, the house was boxed in by the pair that flanked it, from one of which came the mumble of a television. Stu twisted the key in the rusty lock and barely paused to slam the door on the way to tramping up the variously resonant stairs to his bedroom. He shoved the sash of the window high and dragged the sheet over the corner of the mattress before pulling the quilt up to the pillow as a preamble to throwing clothes off the chair onto the bed. He brought the chair hobbling to the window and propped his elbows on the sill.

At first he wasn't sure that he was hearing the tour guide, especially since he couldn't see the bus. Was the blurred voice coming from the television next door? When the small white single-decker coach appeared at the end of the road Stu succeeded in making out some words, and rubbed his bruised stomach as he sat down from craning over the sill. One of the quirkiest Liverpool bands of the sixties… Their only album was a collector's item… People used to say the drummer was the star. Once Ringo had said he was the better musician, and here was his house.

Stu waved to the passengers who were gazing up at him. Some of those on the far side of the vehicle leaned into the aisle to see him, and several people waved at him as the tree on the pavement set about blocking his

view. He didn't shut the window until the bus had coasted out of sight. As an afterthought he said "Catch us next time"—the invitation the band shouted at the end of every gig.

After dinner from Wong's Pizza round the corner he listened to the album. He'd had his copy made into a computer file, which preserved fifty years' worth of clicks and pops. He didn't mind them; in fact, they meant he didn't regret selling his vinyl quite so much. He sang along with *Annie from Anfield*, matching the falsettos from half a century ago, and *Sally the Scally* and *All the Big Ships*, where the band had used Liverpool street songs they'd overdubbed and he'd performed the riff Ringo had admired. "You could be better on the skins than me, man," he remembered Ringo telling him.

He slept more soundly than he had for weeks. He mightn't have wakened in time for work if his bladder hadn't sent him a message and then a reminder. A bus twice the size of the tour coach and crammed with passengers took him downtown. He had breakfast at the Calorie Counter near both the Philharmonics—the concert hall, which had never booked the Scousers, and the pub—and then marched downhill to Vin's Vintage Vinyl.

Though the shop wasn't due to open for ten minutes, Vin was already staring out between the nostalgic posters on the window. Several turns of a red rubber band secured his greying ponytail and seemed to tug his lined forehead higher, his long glum face thinner. "How's your diddle, Stew?" he said.

"How's yours?"

"Hanging right last time I looked." Whenever Vin made what was presumably a joke his face grew yet more lugubrious. It stayed that way while he said "Get your coat off, then. Let them see where you belong."

Stu could tell he'd only just switched on the heater, which creaked as it lent the shop the smell of burning dust. He thought he saw his own breath as he hung his padded jacket in the mouldering back room that barely had space for a toilet and a sink. Like Vin, he wore a T-shirt printed with an image of a vinyl record that said VIN'S on the label. "Look proud of my twelve-inch," Vin said.

This joke and variations on it were so familiar that his face stayed routinely morose as he opened the shop and looked for an album to attract customers.

Stu didn't recall ever having seen the chosen band; he'd never shared a gig with them. Once the first side of the album—cover versions sung with basic sixties harmonies, standard twangs on two guitars and a bass, doggedly dull drumming—had failed to entice the public, Stu said "Can't we have mine on?"

He didn't need Vin's look to tell him he sounded childish. "Me and the Scousers," he insisted.

"Is that what you're calling it now?" Vin's expression didn't relent as he said "Go on, give it a spin."

Though he could always go straight to an album if it was in stock, they weren't in any order. Stu had a sense where some of them were, but by the time he found the Scousers he was struggling not to ask Vin to find the album for him. He peered at his own youthful face—angular features concentrating on a grin to match the rest of the square of faces, cropped hair bristling with a hint of rebelliousness—and then he picked the arm off the rival album halfway through a track. "Watch it," Vin protested. "What's your rush?"

After just a couple of jittery attempts Stu succeeded in locating the spindle on the turntable with the hole in the middle of the record. As he propped the sleeve against the till he noticed the dog-eared price tag. "Maybe it's worth more now I'm on the tour."

The ageing bell gave a clang or at any rate a clunk before Vin could answer, and a couple wandered into the shop. Stu thought the music was responsible, especially when the man raised his eyes from browsing in the racks to glance towards the till. "That's me," Stu said as he heard himself brushing the cymbal in the fadeout of *Fly Away, Liver Bird*. "That was my band."

"You reckon," the man said while the girl looked no less bored than she did with the shop in general.

"He's saying he was on the drums," Vin said. "That's our era, us."

"You just heard there's more to it than that." When nobody seemed to understand or find the effort worth making, Stu said "They talk about it on the Beatles tour."

"About Ringo," the man told his partner. "Remember, they did."

"Him as well," Stu said and had to raise his voice to be heard over his own drumming. "There's me again. Stu Stewart with the Scousers. That's why they've got me on the tour."

"Don't remember you," the man told him, and the girl took a moment to shake her head.

"Maybe I haven't been there long. I only realised just this week."

Vin was working on a hint of a smirk. "What's he been saying about you on the bus?"

"She," Stu informed him. "They can be, you know."

He might have expected the girl to appreciate that, but he knew how frustratingly unpredictable they were. "You're not saying what they're saying," Vin said.

"How good I was."

"How good was that?" the girl hardly seemed to want to know.

Stu nearly demanded what was wrong with her if she wasn't able to hear. He already resented having been provoked to sound as though he was boasting. "I'll find out," he told Vin. "I'll tell you when I've heard it all."

"Bet you can't wait," the girl said.

"We'll let you carry on," the man said as he hurried her out of the shop.

Stu could have thought the bell had rendered Vin more combative. "Never mind scaring off the customers," Vin said.

"I never. He took her out for being rude. Anyway, I brought them in."

"Not so I noticed."

"Me and the band did. You saw how he wanted to know who we were. You ought to play us more often. Come to think, why don't we make copies to sell?"

"That's not my style and you've been around long enough to know it." Before Stu could decide if this referred to copyright or the vintage image of the shop, Vin said "You don't want to go on about selling. You didn't sell him your disc or any bastard else."

"You didn't either," Stu blurted, not immediately grasping how much he'd antagonised his employer. "I will another time," he promised. "You know I'll do anything I can for the shop."

"Like what, Stew?"

"Anything at all." In some desperation Stu said "Maybe I can get her on the bus to tell everyone I work here."

"That'd be a smash."

Stu couldn't tell from Vin's doleful face how skeptical this was. Perhaps Stu shouldn't have undertaken quite so much, but surely the tour would like to know. He only wished he'd taken time to hear precisely what she was saying about him before he mentioned her, and now he was anxious to listen. Did she vary her commentary? How often would the tour pass his house while he was at the shop?

Vin changed the record as soon as the first side was over, but Stu held back from objecting. He jammed the kettle under the tap in the sink and plugged it in behind the counter, where it hissed at the first tracks on *Rubber Soul*. "That's what the public want," Vin said, though Stu thought fewer people were lingering outside than while the Scousers had been audible. He confined himself to making coffee in the Vigorous Vinyl mugs Vin had ordered before changing the name of the shop. "Fair enough, you're good for something," Vin said as he took his mug.

Stu only just stopped short of retorting that he was good for a lot better. He'd been hired because Vin had seen him with the Scousers, after all. When the next prospects ventured into VVV he asked if he could help and loitered near them to enthuse about whichever album either of them took out of the racks, though he had to commute between them once they moved to opposite ends of the shop. Eventually one man bought a Pacemakers album. "Let's hope we never need one," Stu said, and thanked him and his partner for supporting the shop and urged them to come back.

"Don't get in a stew about it," Vin said with additional moroseness once they were alone. "Give the buggers room to breathe."

Stu tried keeping his distance from a customer and made no sale. He might as well have been at home to listen for the tour guide. He was acutely aware how Vin was observing him while packaging albums the shop had sold online. Vin was at the post office when Stu succeeded in selling three Rolling Stones albums to a man who'd brought just one to the counter. "I got rid of a bunch of Stones," he told Vin as soon as he plodded into the shop.

“Hope you didn’t need an operation,” Vin said, lengthening his face.

After that the shop felt like an obstacle to going home, the way too many of the last hours of a school day used to feel. Stu jogged and then rather less than jogged uphill to catch the bus home. The first one sailed past without stopping, and the next one had standing room only, like a Scousers’ concert —he couldn’t recall which. He lurched about whenever the bus stopped or started or changed speed, and lurched worse as it turned along a road not on the route. “Where are we going?” he cried.

The driver gave him less than a second in the mirror. “Police.”

The road the bus ought to have used was cordoned off as a crime scene, and the mass of diverted traffic wouldn’t have been able to overtake a funeral. By the time the bus reached Stu’s stop he was nearly half an hour later than he’d meant to be home. He ran and trotted and trudged panting to his house, where his hands shook so much that he had to use both of them to aim the key at the lock. He clutched the banister and hauled himself upstairs to fumble the bedroom window open and drag the chair across the room.

Suppose he couldn’t hear the guide even if the tour hadn’t already passed by? The harder he strained his ears, the more they filled up with the pounding of his heart. He’d fallen onto the chair, but as soon as he was able to stagger to his feet he craned out of the window. He could hear no sound beyond the thuds like the action of a pile-driver that felt capable of shaking his skull. He was gripping the sill with both hands so as to lean out another few inches by the time he heard the guide. As he struggled to distinguish words—the effort felt like striving to focus his entire body—he only seemed to squeeze the voice smaller. Once the bus came into sight he did his utmost to relax, and a few words reached him. The guide was saying someone was a legend and a genius, but Stu couldn’t yield to believing whom she had in mind until she described him as Ringo’s favourite drummer.

Was that going a little too far? Perhaps not if the audience accepted it, and as the bus coasted alongside his house Stu saw them begin to smile up at him. When he stuck his fists out of the window and flourished his thumbs, some of his audience returned the gesture. “Visit me at Vin’s Vintage Vinyl,” he called after the bus, and didn’t sink onto the chair until his stomach began to throb.

He only wished he'd heard all the guide's comments about him. Might there be a later tour on Fridays? Enough of last night's pizza was left that he didn't need to go out to fetch dinner, and he hurried back to the bedroom window, where he held the chilly carton on his lap. All the voices he heard were on the street or in the houses, and they could hardly be talking about him. When he started to jerk awake from nodding towards the remains of the last slice of pizza, he sent himself to bed.

The voice that kept wakening him couldn't be the guide's. If it wasn't in Stu's head, it certainly couldn't be on the bus, even once the dawn set about seeping into the room. How early was the first tour? Did he have time to listen to it before he left for work? He waited as long as he dared, finishing off the pizza for breakfast, and then had to dash for the bus into town. At least he had news for Vin, though for a while he wondered if he would ever regain enough breath to tell him.

Vin had made himself coffee, and Stu wasn't sure how to take the departure from the protocol. "Kettle's been on." Vin seemed to think he needed to be told.

As Stu stirred in the contents of one of the cartons of milk Vin pocketed from fast food restaurants—barely enough to turn the coffee even slightly paler—he said "I didn't get the chance to hear everything they say about me yet, but—"

"I wasn't asking," Vin said and raised all the noise he could find in the bare floorboards as he went to open the door.

He put *Abbey Road* on the turntable and gave Stu a warning look that Stu found unnecessary if not worse. By the time the album ended, having abandoned the drummer and the rest of the band, not a single customer had visited the shop. Saturday ought to be the busiest day, and Stu watched Vin growing glummer. Halfway through the first side of the mystery tour Vin said "We need to bring more people in or I may as well trade from home."

"How are you going to do that? Bring them in, I mean."

"Maybe it wants somebody that can."

"Well, there is." When this earned him a stare that scarcely even hinted at a question, Stu said "There's me."

Vin was silent long enough to have thought of quite a few words before saying "I meant a girl."

“We don’t need them. You saw that one yesterday. They aren’t on our wavelength.”

“My wife is.” Almost as ominously Vin said “Not much to look at any more, that’s her trouble. No use to my shop.”

“Well then there’s still me. I don’t need to look like anything except who I am. I started to tell you, I did hear some of the things they’re saying about me. Don’t think I’m boasting, will you, but they’ve got me down as a legend and a genius and Ringo’s fave.”

“That’s what you think, is it, Stew?”

Stu didn’t want to be trapped into making the claims for himself. “What I think, I’ve thought of a slogan for us.”

“Then maybe you’re some use.”

“Visit him at Vin’s Vintage Vinyl.” When Stu didn’t see even a glimmer of recognition he said “That’s me.”

He thought the weary clang of the bell that announced the day’s first customer had robbed him of a response until Vin muttered “Just leave it, Stew.”

Could Vin doubt him, or did he think Stu’s inclusion on the tour wouldn’t help the shop? He wasn’t going to undermine Stu’s rediscovered confidence. Stu kept close to any customers in case they wanted his advice, but managed to hold back from pointing out the Scousers’ album and drawing attention to the drummer. Less than half an hour before the shop was due to close he said “Do you mind if I leave a bit early as long as we’re so quiet?”

“Going on your tour, are you?”

“That’d wow them, wouldn’t it? They wouldn’t be expecting that.” When Vin gave him a look that seemed determined to fend off his enthusiasm Stu said “I want to go and hear. Not just for me, not even mostly.”

“Been telling yourself that, have you, Stew?”

“That’s not my name,” Stu said with a fierceness that, in all the years since his second wife had left him, he’d forgotten he possessed. “I’m not a pan of Scouse.”

“Sounds more like that’s all you think you are, a bit of one.” Before Stu’s rage could find another word Vin said “Go on, go home and sort your head

out. That's what the weekend's for."

Stu had a better use for it, and he'd be bringing the proof to the shop. He reached the homeward stop less than a minute ahead of a bus. The police had restored its usual route, and he was home so early that he only just missed the penultimate tour of the day, which left him feeling prickly with frustration. At least he had time to make sure he heard everything about him on the final tour.

He mustn't risk being unable to hear. He dodged out of the house to stand behind the tree outside the front garden, and wondered how much he resembled a drunk overtaken by a need. Sometimes he'd been like that—both his wives had lectured him about it more than once—but he couldn't afford to be now, financially or otherwise. In any case, his neighbours oughtn't to be watching him; they would have a better reason when they heard the guide. Here was the tour at the end of the road at last, and as the bus turned towards him he put the tree between them.

Suppose it prevented him from hearing? Should he just stroll along the road? It might look as if he was loitering in search of praise—as if he needed that to lend him confidence. He'd begun to tear strips of bark off the tree by the time he heard his name. The bus was on the far side of the tree, and he kept it there by sidling around the trunk. As soon as it was well past he sprinted to the next tree, and thought he glimpsed passengers turning away from gazing at his house. He followed the tour to the end of the road, where he had to let it go, having run out of cover. Whether since the trees were in the way or because his exertions had amplified his heart, he'd failed to hear another word.

When his pulse had finished shaking his body he let go of the last tree and limped back to the house. "What have you been up to now?" he could hear his wife demanding—either of his wives. They'd accused him of making too much of all his Scousers posters, as if both of them weren't doing that themselves. He'd argued all night with the first one after she'd torn a poster on the wall by the stairs—only dusting, she'd said. He'd waited for her replacement to carry on the damage, and she was gone too once she had. Being unmarried had let him have the posters framed under glass, although that left them feeling less alive to him. Now that the tour was bringing it all back to life he shouldn't need them so much.

The light from the street glared out of the frames, and the contents went dark as he shut the door. Might there be another tour today? Even if that was only a hope, a couple of pieces of toast would keep him going while he waited. He kept stopping after just one bite for fear that the crunching that resounded through his head might deafen him to the approach of the bus. When at last it grew too dark and cold for him to imagine there would be one, he brushed the crumbs off his lap and out of the window, then leaned on the sash to haul it down. He drew the curtains before switching on the light, and then he got ready for bed. He wanted to be awake well in time for the first Sunday tour.

His name wakened him, but he couldn't tell how high the voice had been. He thought it might have been falsetto, the way the Scousers sang—and then he realised what it must be, and lurched out of bed. His feet were tangled in the quilt, so that he almost fell headlong as he floundered to the window. The rumble of the sash blotted out the guide's next words, which surely couldn't be responsible for the behaviour of her customers. While Stu couldn't see many people on the bus, as it passed his house they were pointing and laughing at him.

The tour was almost out of sight before he managed to laugh in response. He supposed he might have reacted like them if he'd seen himself standing naked at the window, blinking dozily at the world. He didn't mind being a Scouse joke for once, especially since the wall under the windowsill had preserved his decency. He used the bathroom as speedily as he was able and dressed on his way back to the window. As he fumbled to fasten the strap of his wristwatch he was disconcerted to find it was nearly noon. He'd been roused hours later than he'd planned to sleep.

He still didn't feel awake. Surely he had time to make himself a coffee before the next tour, but he left the front door open so that he would hear the guide while he was in the kitchen. The mug spattered his hand with drops that felt like embers as he tramped down the slippery path to his gate. There was no sign of the tour, but might he have failed to hear it by straining too hard? His shaky hand was smarting in half a dozen spots by the time he succeeded in carrying the mug to the chair at the bedroom window. He didn't know how many bitter sips he'd swallowed when he saw the bus sneaking up the road.

He hadn't been hearing his pulse, but now he did. Could it have deafened him to the commentary, or was the guide waiting until her passengers saw his house? She didn't speak as the bus nosed past the gate, but she must already have mentioned him, since the scattered passengers were gazing up at him. Although their faces didn't change when he waved and stuck his thumbs up, he was overtaken by the notion that they were trying not to laugh.

He had to be mixing them up with the earlier tour, and he just needed to be more awake. He took gulps of coffee that felt as if they were skinning his mouth. His head was throbbing with caffeine, not to mention his attempts to hear the guide, before the tour reappeared. As he watched the bus cruise towards his house she didn't utter a single word, and he was suddenly convinced that she'd been talking about him while he couldn't hear. Was the bus slowing to give the passengers a better look at him? Faces turned up to him, and as his arms shivered with his struggles not to gesture he was sure he saw lips writhing in an effort to suppress mirth.

He heard laughter as trees hid the bus. What had she said about him? He dropped the mug, splashing his ankles, and stalked downstairs, grabbing the banister at every step. She must think he was stupid if she imagined she could prevent him from hearing her remarks. He marched to the end of the road to watch for the next tour.

When it showed up on the main road he withdrew behind the first tree, but he must have taken too long over making sure it was her bus. The tree wasn't quite broad enough to hide him, and as the bus turned the corner a passenger craned to watch him. Stu dodged around the tree, but more people twisted in their seats to spy him. As the bus sped towards his house he heard it trailing laughter. He was unable to catch up with it, not that he knew what he would have done if he had, and so he retreated into the house.

He oughtn't to have let the guide realise he could hear. On the next tour she kept her comments well out of earshot, but he wasn't fooled. Even if the passengers didn't point and laugh, he could see how their faces were hiding whatever she'd said about him. Each reappearance of the bus enraged him further, and when he started breaking splinters off the windowsill he stormed down to stand at the gate. Staring fiercely at one consignment of passengers didn't daunt them; some of them didn't even bother withholding their amusement until they were out of sight, while the guide pretended she

was too busy driving to notice him. His drumming on the gate failed to impress the next group, though the performance scattered bits of wood across the pavement, and his vocals fell short of restoring his image, however high he strained his voice. It left his throat raw, and he'd had enough of trying to counteract her mockery. He snatched out his phone—for once he was grateful to his last wife, who'd nagged him to buy the mobile so that she would be able to locate him—and found the number for the Beatles tour.

He might have known the office would be shut on Sundays. He needn't think they were refusing to answer, having recognised his number. The chilly twilight sent him into the house, but he wasn't about to close the window. How many tours did he still have to watch? It seemed there was just one, and perhaps ending her day made the guide careless of whether Stu heard, unless she wanted to provoke him to put on more of a show. As the bus entered the road she grew loud enough for his neighbours to hear. Scotty and the Scousers had become a cult band, she was saying, partly thanks to the Beatles. John Lennon had told their drummer he was Ringo's favourite as a joke. People in the know packed the Scousers' gigs out because the drummer was the best in the business—the best laugh. He'd earned the nickname Chicken Drumsticks because he played as if he was using them.

"I never heard that," Stu told her passengers. "I never heard any of it. It's not true, none of it. What's wrong with you?" He scarcely knew whom he was addressing, let alone how high his voice had risen; his wives would have been covering their ears by now and telling him not to screech. They'd managed to incite him to put on the wrong kind of show—the guide had. She wouldn't think it was so funny when he told her employer.

The tour was out of sight by now, but who else had it started talking about him? How many of his neighbours might be? Even with the window open as wide as his shoulder could heave the sash, he was unable to decide if the muffled voices were on television. They seemed to be repeating one another's words, but was he the subject they were agreeing about? He shivered whenever he craned out of the window, to be met by another faceful of frosty air. Eventually the dawn became daylight that was just about as grey, and he began phoning Vin's Vintage Vinyl.

If Vin was there he wasn't owning up to it, and the tour firm didn't answer. Stu had been trying both of them for most of an hour by the time Vin made his weariness audible. "What's up now, Stew?"

"It's Stu." Having established this, Stu said "It looks as if I'll have to be late."

"What's keeping you? Don't say your tour."

Stu wasn't going to admit that until he'd dealt with it, and so he said "I think I'm a bit sick."

"You're not telling me anything. Anyway, don't go rushing back. I'm working on a girl like I said."

She wouldn't replace him, Stu promised himself. Nobody could. He cut Vin off without replying and tried the tour firm once again. He was answered so immediately that he almost forgot he didn't want to be identified—not yet, at any rate. He did his best to elevate his voice even higher than the woman's that had greeted him. "Can I ask about someone you've got on your tour?"

"Someone who works for us, do you mean?"

"Not her, no." In some haste Stu added "Somebody you talk about. Stu Stewart."

"Who's that, sorry?"

"Me," Stu was almost provoked by her tone to blurt. "The drummer with Scotty and the Scousers," he said aloud.

"He isn't part of our tour."

"You can't tell me that. You've always gone along my, gone along his road and now you're talking about him."

"Which road is that, sir?"

Her last word nearly robbed him of speech. When he named his road and then told her where it was, hiking his voice higher still, she said "We've never used that route. We don't come within a mile of it."

She'd recognised him, of course. By calling him sir she'd betrayed that she had. He didn't need to hear her start to laugh as he cut her off. How much of an idiot did she take him for? Did she really believe she could trick him into doubting the evidence of his own senses? She and the other one would

have even less of a chance when he took the tour. He would have to go downtown to catch it from the terminus, and he hurried to the bus stop on the main road. A bus was approaching, and Stu hadn't finished fumbling for his travel pass when the doors opened to him. "You're all right," the driver said. "We'll let you on."

For an instant he thought she meant because he was Stu Stewart, and then he recognised her voice. Her accomplice must have been in touch with her, and now they were trying to convince him that he'd caught an ordinary bus. He didn't need to scrutinise the passengers to see they knew better. "That's kind of you," he said through his teeth, and sat behind her as the bus swung into his road.

She wasn't going to deliver her commentary. That was obvious as soon as he met her eyes in the mirror. Perhaps she had already ridiculed him; in fact, when he twisted around to peer at the passengers he was sure she had. The knowledge brought him to his feet, and he grabbed a seat on each side of the aisle as he faced his audience. "Now you're on my part of the tour," he declared. "Stu Stewart, as if you didn't know."

They needn't try to look as though they didn't. The guide who was posing as merely a driver demolished all the pretence by saying "Can you sit down, sir."

Could he have spoken to her on the phone? It hardly mattered; they were all the same. "Ringo's favourite drummer and don't let anyone tell you different," he said louder and higher. "People came to see me right enough, but it wasn't for a laugh."

"Sir, if you don't sit down—"

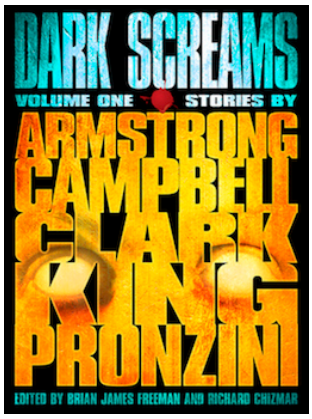
"What'll you do? Tell your lies about me, like you haven't already?" His pitch was rising out of his control, and more than one passenger had covered their ears, though he wondered if they had because they didn't want to hear the truth. The bus was slowing, and he let go of the seats to demonstrate a few riffs on them. "That's just a taste. You know what, I think Ringo learned from me," he said and felt bound to explain the falsetto he couldn't bring down. "And this is how we used to have to sing."

He faltered, because his was no longer the only voice. The other one was repeating the tale about John Lennon's joke at Stu's expense. As the bus stopped outside his gate Stu lurched at the guide, but her lips appeared to be

pinched shut. Was she devious enough to be throwing her voice? “Here’s what you’ve all been waiting to see,” Stu announced, “my house,” but he could still hear the commentary underlying his own. “I’ll find you,” he cried. “I know you’re there. You aren’t hiding from me.”

As he stalked along the aisle he began to recognise the passengers—the man at Jaz’s table in Yesterday’s, the girl who’d been brought into Vin’s shop. He couldn’t see his wives, however many faces he caught hold of. He was well on the way to prying a face wide to grasp the source of the relentless voice before its owner struggled free, having bitten Stu’s fingers, and fled like the rest of them. Several were emitting sounds higher than Stu was making. The guide was the last to flee, and shut him on the bus. He didn’t mind being left when he still had his audience, more of whom were joining them on the pavement. It was completely his tour now, and he took the guide’s seat, but he hadn’t discovered how to start the bus by the time several men drove up to help him.

The Watched



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By the time the bird hide came in sight Jimmy's arms were aching for a rest. The bag of potatoes his grandmother had forgotten to buy when they'd gone to the shops was too heavy to be carried in one hand. It lolled ponderously against his chest with every step he took along the canal path, and whenever he tried to put on speed its irrepressible contents dealt him a thump. In any case, he might have dodged into the hide. Watching his house and its neighbours always made him feel like a spy in a film.

The hide was a hut composed of rounded logs, open on the side that faced away from the canal. The logs were patched with moss and scaly with small leaves. A gap low enough for Jimmy to look through and sufficiently high for a tall person not to have to crouch must have been designed to give a view of any life on the canal and across it before the houses had been built. Now the gap was full of the glare of the lamps in front of the houses, an amber light that seemed to hold the nondescript boxy buildings still and left the inside of the hut as dark as the silent stately water. Jimmy had lurched into the hut before he realised it was occupied. Somebody was skulking in the left-hand corner as if he didn't want to be seen.

Jimmy hugged the bag and was retreating onto the path when a low, hoarse voice followed him. "Come here, son."

The man hadn't turned, and Jimmy didn't know what he might be doing out of sight. "I've got to take these to my nan."

"She'll wait." Still without turning, the man said, "I know where you live."

What kind of threat was this meant to be? As Jimmy tried to ignore it, the man swung around. "I said come here."

His wide jowly mottled face looked as if it was to some extent propped up by the thin straight lips. His eyes were tired but fiercely determined to stay awake. He was brandishing a card in the dimness, and it helped Jimmy to

recognise him—the community policeman who'd come to the school to lecture everyone about drugs. Some of those had killed his daughter, and he'd grown so furious about it that he might have been holding his audience responsible. "What do you want?" Jimmy said.

"I know what's going on over there. Better listen if you don't want trouble."

Jimmy resented feeling accused, especially since this was how too many adults seemed to feel they should treat anyone like him. He slouched into the hide to be met by smells of urine and alcohol and tobacco smoke. He didn't know how many of these belonged to the policeman, who'd grown dishevelled since visiting the school—crumpled suit, tie dangling from a collar that had lost its button, uncombed hair. As Jimmy dumped the bag of vegetables on the shelf under the gap in the wall of the hide, the policeman said, "That's your granny you live with, is it? Where's your parents?"

"My dad went off and the man my mam's with doesn't like me." In case this sounded like a babyish complaint, Jimmy added, "And I'm looking after my nan."

"Needs it, does she?" The man's breath glimmered orange like the fumes of a fire in the November air. "Is she the helpful sort as well?"

"I suppose."

"Looks out for her neighbours, eh? How much does she know about them?"

"You'd have to ask her."

"Don't get cute with me, son. You know who we're talking about. The lot who live next door."

Since his house was squashed between two more of the same, Jimmy felt he could say, "I don't know which."

"I told you about being cute. The ones with all the visitors, and maybe you know why. The Dibbin mob."

So he didn't mean the men who'd married each other. Jimmy had suspected the Dibbin family for a while but hadn't told even his grandmother. "Are they druggies?"

"The worst kind, son. Your local dealers." The man's lips writhed, letting his face droop further. "Too local," he muttered, "for anyone to bother over

except me."

Understanding overtook Jimmy so fast that he blurted, "Are they the ones who—"

"Killed her, the scum." His eyes twitched so tight and narrow that Jimmy thought he saw them bulge. "And how do you know about that?" the policeman said, lower still.

"You told us at my school."

The man's stare hadn't relented when it strayed past Jimmy. "Well, there's someone we're talking about."

Jimmy's grandmother was at the kitchen window, pressing the edge of a hand against her forehead and peering both ways along the canal. "I've got to go home," Jimmy pleaded. "She'll be worried."

"She'd better be." Jimmy's bid for sympathy seemed to have antagonised the policeman, who said, "If you care that much about her, you'd better give me what I need."

Jimmy didn't speak until his grandmother had trudged out of view. "What?"

"Maybe you can't see any more than me, but you can listen. Your bedroom's next to those scum, isn't it? Stick your head against the wall and you can tell me what you hear. I'll let you know when to come across."

The game of spying had lost its appeal. Jimmy was close to refusing when the policeman said, "And you can tip me off when they've got customers."

"How?"

"Do something at the window." As Jimmy wondered if the man was much good at his job—he'd started to sound not much better than childish—the policeman said, "You don't want anybody seeing what you're up to. Here, do this."

Before Jimmy could draw back, the man floundered at him to plant a hand over his nose and mouth. The flabby palm was moist with sweat, and the fingers stank of nicotine. Jimmy was about to struggle free so as to breathe when the policeman let go. "Your old granny won't know what you're doing," he said, less a statement than an admonition. "You don't want anyone knowing I'm here."

"Suppose they find out?"

“Then I’ll be thinking you’re responsible. If you let me down you’ll be assisting criminals.” As Jimmy opened his mouth to protest, the man’s gaze veered away from him. “She’s back,” he muttered, and Jimmy saw his grandmother leaning across the sink to peer through the kitchen window. “You didn’t see me, understand,” the policeman said. “Better trot off home before she wants to know what you’ve been up to. And just remember, if you get done as an accomplice she might be as well.”

Jimmy thought the man was behaving as unreasonably as only adults could. All the way along the path to the footbridge he felt as if he was carrying another weight besides the bag—a lump of resentment and frustrated rebellion. His feet on the metal steps made more noise than the barge that chugged under the bridge. As the long vessel rode its luminous ripples past the houses, Jimmy saw a tiny light glare as red as a laser in the hide. It was the tip of a cigarette, but he could have taken it for a signal or a warning.

He’d hardly knocked on the back door when his grandmother flurried into the kitchen. Some hairs had straggled loose from her greying bun, but her intensely wrinkled face looked determined to fend off anything unwelcome, which in Jimmy’s experience covered a good deal, including most of the news. As she unlocked the door she cried, “Wherever have you been?”

Jimmy hefted the bag of potatoes, which assailed him with an earthy smell. “These are heavy. I couldn’t walk fast.”

“You’re a good boy and don’t let anybody tell you different. Your mother ought to be proud, but I shouldn’t ask so much of you at your age. Blame my old brain for forgetting at the shop.”

Jimmy could have retorted that he was twelve, not to mention wondering why his father shouldn’t also be proud of him, except that he knew his grandmother had never liked the man who’d taken her daughter away. As he let the bag sprawl on the kitchen table she said, “You were such a long time. Don’t say I made you strain yourself.”

She sounded more anxious than he could bear. “I had to stop and talk to someone.”

“Anyone I know?”

Jimmy turned his back on the hide and lowered his voice as well. “Just a policeman.”

“A policeman,” his grandmother cried, raising her face like a shield. “Have you been getting into trouble?”

“It wasn’t me. He’s after someone else that has.”

“I don’t want to know, Jimmy, and you mustn’t get involved, either. You don’t know what their sort could do to us.”

Presumably she meant criminals. Mightn’t that make her their accomplice, at least in the policeman’s eyes? Jimmy heard her dismissing the issue as she said, “You start your homework while I make us a nice dinner.”

He grabbed his rucksack from the narrow stairs and hurried to his bedroom, where he unfolded the laptop on the rudimentary desk before pressing his ear against the wall between posters for two of his favourite singers, each of them dressed in not much more than her underwear. He could hear a woman’s voice—that must be flat-faced Mrs. Dibbin, who always looked close to nodding off—and then her pudgy husband, who wore at least as much jewellery as his wife. Where was their bony bald son Dez, who seemed to consist largely of veins and sinews and restless nerves? Jimmy was trying to identify his voice when the argument grew clear enough to let him realise he was overhearing a television show.

The muffled confrontation distracted him from working on his essay about the history of where he lived, the fields and woods that the housing estate had replaced, a past that had nothing to do with him. When his grandmother called him for dinner in the kitchen he could hear the Dibbin family through the wall, but their television was louder. He ate his burger—a stockier version of the one his grandmother had made for herself, accompanied by twice as many chips—as quickly as he could so as to listen upstairs. “You needed that, didn’t you?” his grandmother said. “Here, I’m not very hungry. Have some of mine I haven’t touched.”

Jimmy was dismayed to think he’d put her off her dinner by making her nervous. She was already thinner than she had been when he’d come to stay, and he felt he was taking too much of her food. He went upstairs, chewing a last mouthful, to bruise his ear against the wall. The ear had begun to throb by the time he heard Dez Dibbin in the hall next door. The teenager was talking about a deal. “I’ll go and get it now,” he shouted.

Jimmy ran to the window and covered his mouth. Did he just look shocked? Even when he remembered to cover his nose as well, he couldn’t

see any movement in the hide. He jabbed a thumb at the house next door and then mimed steering with a wheel, none of which brought a response. How else could he alert the policeman? In desperation he bared his left arm and pretended to insert an object into it. He'd poked at the arm several times when a figure dashed out of the hide.

He saw the policeman run not entirely straight to a car parked on the road that paralleled the canal. The car screeched away so hastily that it travelled several hundred yards before its lights came on. It raced past the footbridge and swerved onto the road bridge, and Jimmy couldn't help being excited by the prospect of a car chase. He darted out of his bedroom, only to realise that his grandmother might want to know what he was doing. As he hesitated at the top of the stairs a muffled discussion came to an end, and someone slammed the front door of the Dibbin house. A car—it would be the hulking Rover that was always parked half on the pavement—sped away, followed by silence.

Jimmy heard nothing else while he tried to concentrate on his essay, unless there was a distant splash. He'd managed to write just a few dogged sentences by the time the front door of the next house slammed again. "Here's the pizzas," Dez shouted. "I got the deal."

Jimmy covered his mouth, but he was giving nobody a sign except himself. So he'd sent the policeman in pursuit of pizza. Yet another argument had broken out next door, and he planted his ear against the wall. He caught the name Blundell and heard Dez protest, "Didn't touch the car." Whatever this signified, the tangle of angry voices moved out of earshot before Jimmy managed to distinguish another word.

He made himself finish his essay, borrowing paragraphs online and changing enough words to let him hope the teacher wouldn't notice, before he ventured to the window. As far as he could tell the hide was deserted, which left him afraid that the policeman might come to the house. Surely he wouldn't when that would betray his presence, and eventually thinking so let Jimmy sleep.

In the morning his grandmother presented him with the man-sized breakfast she kept telling him boys needed to help them grow. She admired him in his uniform as usual and adjusted his rucksack on his shoulders without being encouraged, let alone asked, on the way to seeing him off from the front door. His breath looked like nervousness made visible as he

craned over the footbridge to see that the hide was deserted. He was sure the policeman would return, probably angrier still, not least with him.

The thought made school come as a relief or, at any rate, a postponement—the classroom chaos that he might as well join in as long as it didn't let him work, the schoolyard bullying he'd learned to imitate to protect himself, the teachers who were either simply boring or earnest about it as well, especially the ones who spent half the lesson waiting for everybody to behave. He only ever really learned when he could work by himself. On his way home through the dank twilight he saw that the hide was empty, but when he looked out of his bedroom window the silhouette of a head leaned around the edge of the gap in the logs, a silent greeting from the dark.

It made him desperate to hear something to incriminate the Dibbins. He stayed at the bedroom wall until his grandmother had summoned him twice for dinner. "Do they have to give you so much homework?" she complained. "That is what you're doing up there, isn't it, Jimmy?"

He was close to blurting out the truth, but more anxious to overhear. He heard nothing to compensate for last night's mistake—not much that was comprehensible at all. If he'd seen the policeman in the morning he might have gone to speak to him, but instead his nervous recklessness drove him to approach the headmistress in the schoolyard. She was just his height, and yet she made him feel small. While her round face was placid, her grey eyes were a warning not to underestimate her. "Jimmy Cropper, isn't it?" she said. "What's the problem?"

"Can I ask you something, Mrs. Briscoe?"

"Anything you need to. If you don't ask questions, you won't learn."

"A community policeman, is he a real one?"

"You should do what anyone in authority tells you if it's not against the law." This sounded like a standard answer to a question Jimmy hadn't meant to ask, but Mrs. Briscoe added, "Did you have somebody in mind?"

"The one who came to talk to us about drugs."

"Ah, that gentleman. I hope you've taken what he said to heart." Once again she seemed to follow an official caution with a personal response, murmuring, "But you're right all the same. I'm afraid Mr. Blundell isn't real any longer."

“Why?” Jimmy tried to sound less rude by saying, “What happened to him?”

“I understand he became too involved in a case.” As Jimmy grasped which one she had to mean, Mrs. Briscoe said, “He’s no longer with the police, so if by any chance you should meet him, don’t let him make you think he is.”

Jimmy thought that like any adult she knew more than she was prepared to tell him. Had Blundell tried to convince someone else he was still a policeman? Knowing that he’d lost his power was such a reassurance that Jimmy even felt emboldened to ask questions in class rather than hoping none would be addressed to him.

The hide was empty when he passed it on his way home. Either the dusk wasn’t quite dark enough for Blundell to take up his post or he’d abandoned his vigil. Jimmy went to his room to make a start on his homework before dinner. As he shut the curtains a head loomed into the gap in the hide. The man had ceased to be a threat, and Jimmy didn’t even bother trying to overhear anything next door.

In the morning the hide was still deserted. It glistened with mist like a lingering wintry breath. He’d forgotten about it by the time he reached the school, but Mrs. Briscoe called him over in the yard. “Will you forget what I told you about Mr. Blundell?”

She sounded as conspiratorial as Blundell had. “Why?” Jimmy said.

“I shouldn’t have mentioned it. There wasn’t any need. I’m afraid the gentleman isn’t with us any more.”

Jimmy was ashamed to feel relieved. “You mean he’s…”

“That’s precisely what I mean.” Less brusquely, Mrs. Briscoe said, “When you’re old enough to drive, just you make sure you never drink, and don’t let anybody drive who has. Mr. Blundell drove into the canal.”

Jimmy’s feeling of relief seemed to be in danger of deserting him. “When?”

“Before I spoke to you about him. The previous night, I believe.”

Jimmy was remembering not just how he’d hoped to provoke a car chase but Dez Dibbins' protest that a car hadn’t been touched. “Thanks, Mrs. Briscoe,” he mumbled, turning away to keep his thoughts to himself. He just had to realise that he couldn’t have seen Blundell last night. Either

someone else had been in the hide or Jimmy had imagined the silhouetted head.

He managed to put it out of his mind until he was on the canal path. The late afternoon was dark enough for the lights outside the houses across the water to have come on, except for the pair of lamps closest to the Dibbin house and his. The hide was deserted, but as he reached the house he thought he glimpsed movement in the reflection on the kitchen window. Before he could look his grandmother came to the door almost too hastily to keep her balance. “I’m glad you’re in,” she said, with not much breath. “They’ve been smashing the lights.”

“Who has, Nan?”

“I didn’t look, Jimmy. They might have seen me seeing.”

Jimmy thought he could answer his own question, although why should the Dibbin family feel watched now? He went up to his room, hoping to spend not too much time on his homework. As he drew the curtains he glanced across the canal. Somebody was in the hide.

The occupant wasn’t anxious to be seen. Jimmy had barely made out the shape of a head when it withdrew into its lair. Was there a trickle of moisture on the logs beneath the corner of the gap where the silhouette had appeared? In the dimness between the dead lamps Jimmy couldn’t be sure. He gripped the flimsy plastic curtains and leaned his forehead against the chilly window, and then he dragged the curtains together.

The history project seemed more remote from him than ever. He hadn’t written much by the time his grandmother announced dinner. “What are they making such a row about?” she wondered as the Dibbins carried on an argument in which only all the words she forbade Jimmy to say were audible, and he thought it must be the aftermath of running Blundell off the road into the canal. He was tempted to let his grandmother know, but he shouldn’t make her nervous. He needn’t risk telling anyone at all, because surely the police would track the culprit down.

The murky morning seemed to have cleared the hide, and it was still deserted when he came home, but he saw his grandmother in the kitchen doorway. She was looking for someone, though not him. She gestured at the Dibbin house, and Jimmy was afraid what she might say until she called, “Have you seen the window-cleaner?”

“It isn’t his day, Nan. He came last week.”

“Well, he must have been again, and he didn’t do a very good job. I could do better myself.”

Jimmy tramped across the footbridge and along the towpath to see that a smeary trail led across the kitchen window and the door, ending halfway along the blinded window of the Dibbin house. “He wants to buy himself a new sponge,” his grandmother said.

Jimmy didn’t think the trail looked as if a sponge had made it, and in any case the window-cleaner would have washed it off. It must have been left by an object the size of a man’s face and at about that height. Was the resemblance more apparent where it had come to rest on the neighbouring window? Before Jimmy could risk a closer look, a wind brought a fierce onslaught of rain across the canal, reducing the marks to an indistinguishable blur. “Come in, for heaven’s sake,” his grandmother cried. “We don’t want you catching your death.”

He was in his room when he had to glance out of the window. How could anyone be in the hide? It had been deserted less than a minute ago, and so had that side of the canal for hundreds of yards in every direction. Nevertheless, a head was dimly visible against the glow of a lamp on the road beyond the hide. As it lolled into the gap, the rain on Jimmy’s window made it seem uncertain of its shape. He had the sudden uninvited notion that the watcher had been waiting for him to come home. He shut out the sight and retreated downstairs. “Can I do my homework down here, Nan? It’s cold up there.”

“You do it wherever you like. And if you want the heat up, just you say.”

Working in the front room wasn’t as reassuring as he’d hoped, because he could hear visitors next door. Before long he realised they were all using a signal—two knocks with a long pause after each, and then a pair separated by almost none. He didn’t enjoy feeling like a spy when there was nobody he wanted to inform. After dinner he felt still more uncomfortable, sensing how wary his grandmother was of distracting him from his work. Whenever she turned a page of her library book the timid whisper felt like an apology for making such a noise. He called his homework finished as soon as he could, but he didn’t have much fun watching television. Now that he’d heard the secret knocks he was afraid his grandmother might notice them, and the thought of her ignoring them made him just as nervous.

He had to go to bed when she kept telling him. The only movement at the hide appeared to belong to trickles of lingering rain, and he was letting the curtains sag together when he saw another aftereffect of the storm. A swathe of moisture as broad as a man led from the canal towards his house and disappeared close to if not at the kitchen wall. Jimmy had only to lean out of his window to see how it ended, but instead he made sure that the window was locked before he retreated to bed.

In the night it rained again. On his way to school Jimmy couldn't distinguish the marks on the window or the trail from the canal. The hide was empty when he passed it, although the left-hand corner looked darker than the rest of the interior. He tried to think the stain was just some of the mist that hung around the canal. He'd started to feel anxious about leaving his grandmother alone in the house, and he hurried home from school, though not fast enough to outdistance the dark. As he came to the hide he saw someone within.

He was grateful that the figure in the corner had its back to him. Was it already there because night had fallen earlier, or was it waiting for him? The way it slumped in the corner reminded him of the bag of potatoes he'd dumped on the shelf in the hide, not least because it looked equally capable of losing its shape; more than its clothes appeared to be sagging with moisture. As Jimmy made to sneak past in the hope of going unnoticed, the figure twitched as if it was hitching itself together. Before it could turn and show its face Jimmy fled to the bridge.

His grandmother hadn't even let him in when she demanded, "Is something wrong at school?"

"I've just got a lot of work to do, Nan."

"Well, don't you let them drive you too hard or I'll be in there for a word."

He had to go up to his room, where he stayed well away from the window. Next door he heard raised voices, mainly saying words that always made his grandmother wince and grimace. When he watched television with her he kept hearing the secret knock. Lying in bed felt like not daring to go to the window, and suppose the occupant of the hide came over to the house? What if his grandmother saw it from the downstairs window? Jimmy couldn't even start to fall asleep until he heard her come up to bed.

The nights grew longer, closing like claws around the days, leaving many of them smudged with a twilight of fog along the canal. Jimmy stayed well clear of the path by the hide and used the road instead. Whenever he came home after dark he saw a shape, such as it had, in the corner of the hide. It looked wetter than ever. From the house he sometimes couldn't avoid seeing a roundish object lurch into the gap in the hide as if to remind him that he was being watched, or that he hadn't yet fulfilled his mission, or even that he'd been responsible for a death. He could hardly even work at home, never mind at school, for living in a panic as constant as it was dull. He was afraid what his teachers might say to his grandmother when the school had its evening for parents and people who'd taken their place. He was still more nervous of having to explain, in case talking about the reason for his fears brought it closer.

How close would that be? Jimmy kept seeing a moist trail that led from the canal and finding marks on the window. While he was glad that the marks were increasingly blurred, he preferred not to think why they might be. One murky sunless morning he saw an extra elongated smear at the height where he would have expected the eyes of a face to be, as if they had been squashed blindly against the glass and drawn along it. He would have rubbed it off the window if he could have borne to touch it, so that his grandmother wouldn't see. He was anxious for her all day, and the feeling turned into dread as he came in sight of the hide, because he could hear her calling, "Mrs. Dibbin. Mr. Dibbin."

Jimmy dashed to the bridge so fast that he didn't have a moment to glance towards the hide. As he clattered up the steps he saw that his grandmother wasn't alone. She was knocking on the back door of the Dibbin house. He faltered on the bridge—he was afraid for her, but even more fearful of the situation—and then he ran down the steps three at a time. He was on the towpath when Mrs. Dibbin flung open her door. "What's all the noise for?"

"You make quite a lot yourselves, Mrs. Dibbin." At once Jimmy's grandmother sounded apologetic. "Have you seen somebody out here?"

"I'm seeing you and him."

The other person was the window-cleaner, Jimmy saw. "Someone at the windows," his grandmother said.

"There better hadn't be." The woman's sullen face grew even duller as she said, "Looks like you are."

“I’m only seeing what someone’s done. They’ve been doing it to my house as well. Surely you’ll have noticed, Mrs. Dibbin.”

“We’ve not noticed much about you.”

This was so plainly a threat that Jimmy was afraid his grandmother would respond to it, but she only pointed at the marks on the glass. “Did you do that?” Mrs. Dibbin accused the window-cleaner.

“It wasn’t me and I wouldn’t leave it like that, either.”

“You can stay away in future all the same. Our Dez can do the windows just as good.”

The man stared even harder at Jimmy’s grandmother than at Mrs. Dibbin before tramping away at a pace that seemed meant to express injured pride. “And you can keep clear of our windows as well,” Mrs. Dibbin said.

“I’m sure I only wanted to look out for my neighbours,” Jimmy’s grandmother protested. “It would be a better world if we all did, don’t you think?”

“We can take care of ourselves, so better give up looking,” Mrs. Dibbin said, and slammed the door.

As Jimmy’s grandmother followed him into their house she murmured, “I don’t know why everyone’s acting as if I’m not right in the head.”

“Watch out what you’re saying to Mrs. Dibbin and them,” Jimmy blurted, before he could stop himself. “They’re the ones that policeman was after.”

“Isn’t he still?” As Jimmy heard a more ominous meaning, his grandmother said, “Never mind, I don’t want to know about it. Don’t look for reasons to take against people. You’ve seen what happens with that.”

“What does, Nan?”

He could see that she regretted having to say “What did with your mother and father.”

Once he was in his room Jimmy risked looking across the canal. The outline of the head that peered out of the hide seemed dismayingly unstable. How much notice might his grandmother’s behaviour have attracted? He didn’t know if he was more nervous of the Dibbin family or of the watcher in the hide. He’d done very little homework by the time he was called for dinner.

Tonight's burger was stouter than ever. He managed to finish it and some of his salad and chips before hiding his nervousness in his room. How could he leave his grandmother on her own downstairs, closer to any danger? He'd lost his parents—he mustn't lose her as well. "Leave my nan alone," he muttered. "She never did you any harm. Remember who did."

He had to see if his words achieved anything. As he parted the curtains he braced himself for the sight of a head glistening in the dark. There was certainly movement, but it was closer than the hide; it was in the water. Something like a lumpy sack was drifting across the canal. No, it wasn't simply drifting; despite the current, it was advancing inexorably towards the house. For the moment it was facedown, but Jimmy was terrified that it might raise its waterlogged head. He snatched the curtains together so clumsily that he nearly ripped them from their hooks, and stumbled backwards, recalling words he'd heard: "You didn't see me." Just now they felt like a prayer, and he wanted them to apply to him as well.

He was wondering if he should be with his grandmother, for her protection or his—he was afraid there wouldn't be much of either—when he heard noises beside the canal. A heavy object was being dragged, or rather it was slithering, towards the house. Jimmy couldn't help thinking that it sounded determined to be solid, if not to hold itself together. He held his breath until his head throbbed, and then he managed to distinguish that the sluggish dragging had passed his house. Surely his grandmother couldn't hear it from the front room. He was holding his breath once more when he heard the knock.

It was the secret sign, with two long pauses followed by a short one. He hadn't heard it previously tonight, and now it was at the back door. Perhaps Mrs. Dibbin failed to notice how soft it sounded—sodden, even—because as Jimmy pressed his ear against the wall he heard her grumble, "Is that the mad old bitch again?"

"What's the nosy cow want now?" Mr. Dibbin complained. "Go and sort her out, Dez."

Jimmy flattened his ear against the wall and clenched his clammy fists. His pulse was beating so hard that he thought it might deafen him. He didn't hear Dez Dibbin go to the back door, but Dez's voice came from that direction—his outburst of disgust and worse. "I'm tripping," he cried. "You're not here."

In a few moments his parents added their own protests, consisting largely of a couple of the words Jimmy's grandmother deplored. The sounds fled in some confusion out of the front of the house, and Jimmy heard car doors slamming. In the midst of the screech of tyres, did he hear a fresh outburst of cries? The car raced away into the night, and then there was silence until Jimmy went downstairs. His grandmother came out of the front room to meet him. "I don't know what just happened next door," she said. "I'll do as Mrs. Dibbin told me and mind my own business."

She said nothing further while they watched television. When Jimmy returned to his room he was able to go straight to his window. There was no activity in the hide or the canal. Sleep took him by surprise almost as soon as he went to bed, and his grandmother had to waken him. The silence next door revived his appetite for breakfast, and the desertion of the hide nerved him to use the canal path to school, where he managed to concentrate on his work despite all the clamour around him. He'd had to ignore worse at home, and now he could dare to think that was over.

When his grandmother came to the back door it was evident that she had news. "Well, they've gone," she said, and gave the Dibbin house a disapproving look. "Don't you ever get mixed up with anything like that."

"What happened, Nan?"

"The men next door heard they went in the canal. Whoever was driving, they must have been on some of their drugs."

Jimmy didn't want to ascertain how much she'd known without admitting that she did, but he felt he ought to learn "Who was in the car?"

"All of them. All dead now."

He tried not to think that one already had been. "How many, though?"

"All."

She looked worried for him—presumably she found his insistence odd—and it seemed best to let the subject die. "Time we went shopping," she said.

The journey to the supermarket was even slower than last week's. Jimmy wanted to think she was driving that way so as not to be like their late neighbours, but he suspected it had more to do with her age. When he

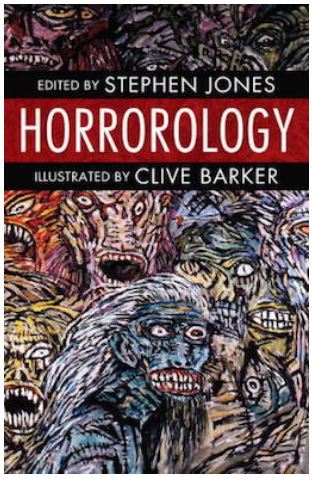
unloaded the groceries at home she realised she'd forgotten to buy apples. "Do you mind going back?" she pleaded. "They're good for your health."

Jimmy didn't want to mind or to dwell on her forgetfulness. He walked back to the supermarket and loaded a carrier bag with enough apples for a fortnight. The burden wasn't too cumbersome, and in any case he didn't need it as an excuse to dodge into the hide when he saw lights in the Dibbin house. The police were inside—the real police. No doubt they were searching for drugs. Everything Blundell could have wanted had come to pass, and so why should Jimmy still feel nervous? All at once he recalled what he'd said last night for the watcher to hear. He hadn't just declared that his grandmother had done Blundell no harm; he'd said, "Remember who did," and it made him clap a hand over his mouth.

At least for an instant he was able to believe this was the case. Certainly a hand was covering his mouth, and now his nose as well. It smelled of stale water and of what was left of itself. It was as cold as he imagined the mud at the bottom of the canal must feel, and in other ways it felt far too much like mud, as if some of it might be capable of oozing up his nose and between his lips. He didn't know what he would have swallowed if he'd tried to scream, but his captor didn't seem to have much strength, and Jimmy managed to struggle free. He reeled out of the hide without looking back as words repeated themselves in his head. "You didn't see me"—he was desperate for that to stay true. All the way to the bridge the bag of apples thumped his chest as if that could bring him back to his ordinary mundane life. He almost dropped the bag, because he was desperate to keep a hand free. He thought he might never stop wiping his mouth.

2015

Nightmare



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They had left the hotel just a few miles behind when Lawrence said ‘There’s somewhere else I used to go.’

‘Striders Halt,’ Violet read on the sign for the next motorway exit. ‘What was that, Lawrence?’

‘A view of the whole valley. I could show you if you like.’

‘Is it far?’ At once she regretted sounding less than wholly enthusiastic. ‘If it means something to you,’ she said.

‘Only if it would to you as well. Maybe we can still salvage a little magic from the weekend.’

‘I thought you thought it was fun.’

‘I think we can do without that kind.’

She’d thought he’d shared her wry amusement. He must have been suppressing his reaction for her sake. The hotel he’d remembered from his childhood had turned out to be mostly occupied by several coachloads of old folk. They’d seemed to overwhelm the place, slowing it down to their speed and adding to its faint stale smell, filling the faded corridors with a mass of sluggish footsteps and effortful breaths. Lawrence might have intended to recapture some of his youth and share it with Violet, but instead they’d been reminded what could lie ahead for them. During the day they’d gone for walks on the hills and ridges, but the hotel was too remote from anywhere else to let them escape in the evenings, and so they’d been trapped with singalongs in the bar or into producing dutiful laughter at superannuated comedies on the television in the crowded lounge, where their neighbours kept turning to them to ensure they joined in. ‘Pet,’ Lawrence added as if this summed up the entire experience.

‘I never knew you disliked being called that so much.’ After all, several of the old folk had used it to Violet as well. ‘I hope you’re mine at least,’ she said.

‘I don’t care to be patronised. I’m more than a little too old.’

Was he complaining or boasting? Since they’d both retired he seemed to have grown unsure of himself and defensive to compensate, as if all the easy authority he’d shown with his students had just been armour for his vulnerable nature. She’d assumed that now they weren’t lecturing they would have time to grow closer. They mustn’t settle into themselves if it meant that they drifted apart, and she signalled to leave the motorway. ‘Let’s see your view,’ she said.

The January sun was lying low behind a vast slab of marble cloud. The icy glow blackened the exposed bones of the landscape. On either side of the road that wound between bare fields, hulking hedges bristled with thorns. Sometimes Violet glimpsed birds in the midst of the tangle of twigs, unless the restless objects were the only remaining leaves, shaken by the wind that sent a chill into the car. As the road straightened between the last of the fields, Lawrence sat forward. ‘What’s that in the way? It oughtn’t to be there.’

A line of wide bungalows blocked the end of the road, beyond a village green – an expanse of grass bisected by the road, at any rate. As the car emerged from between the hedges Violet saw that the bungalows extended out of sight past both ends of the green. ‘I expect someone else must have liked the view,’ she said.

‘Then they should have left it for the rest of us to appreciate.’

‘Do you want to go back?’

‘Back the way it was. Drive around for a bit, will you? Perhaps there’s still a path.’

‘Drive where, Lawrence?’

‘Wherever we’re allowed,’ he said and gestured vaguely at the houses. ‘I’ll shout if anything seems familiar.’

A sign on stumpy concrete legs identified the bungalow road as MEADOW PROSPECT. At least, Violet took that as the name, though a poster about a lost dog obscured more than half of the first word. Another fluttering poster drew her eye to a sign for a side road several hundred yards away – as far as she could make it out, CLIFF ROAD. ‘Yes, try that,’ Lawrence urged before she could ask.

Twin lines of elongated pale stone bungalows curved left and then right without hinting at the presence of a cliff. Violet was coasting around a third curve at a pace even she found sedate when one of the cars parked on the wide drives between the bungalows – a silver Jaguar – backed into the road at twice her speed. As she braked while Lawrence gasped and threw his hands up, the other driver lowered his window, leaving the Jaguar across the width of the road.

His receding hair was the faded brown of a vintage photograph. His eyes looked pinched narrow by wrinkles, more of which appeared to stretch his colourless mouth straight and thin. He apparently felt entitled to be heard with very little effort on his part, and Violet had to roll her window down, letting in a reason for a shiver. 'Sorry, what did you say again?'

'I asked if Fetcher brought you here.'

'I don't believe so,' Violet said, though the name sounded somehow familiar. 'Fletcher, did you say?'

'I quite clearly said Fetcher.' The man frowned as if she'd put him to more trouble than was warranted. 'You can't be lost,' he said.

Was this an accusation or a question that didn't bother sounding like one? Lawrence was lowering his window, presumably to ask for directions, when the man said 'Perhaps you can tell me whom you've come to see.'

'Nobody at all. My husband wanted to revisit some of his old haunts.'

'I don't know you,' the man said, scowling harder at Lawrence. 'I've never seen you here.'

'Nor I you. I was here before you were.'

'No,' the man said with a smile too thin to contain mirth. 'Nobody was.'

'I can assure you my parents and I—'

The man had already returned to scrutinising Violet. 'I should have thought you were too old to be defacing our streets.'

'What the devil do you mean by that?' Lawrence demanded, leaning out of the window so violently that the car shook. 'How dare you say that to my wife?'

'What can your companion be yapping about?' the man said without glancing at Lawrence. 'I should try and keep him under control.'

Lawrence lurched across the metal sill and produced a series of shrill barks. ‘How’s that for yapping?’

‘Don’t, Lawrence.’ Violet had not just to stroke his arm but tug at it before he subsided onto the seat, rubbing his chest where the sill had bruised it. ‘Don’t let him reduce you,’ she murmured.

‘That’s your idea of a joke, is it?’ The man’s face had grown angrily piebald. ‘Is it supposed to be how Fetcher sounds?’

‘We don’t know anything about that,’ Violet assured him. ‘I wonder if you could possibly tell us—’

The man met this with such a glare that she hesitated. ‘I won’t expect to find you,’ he said, ‘when I come back.’

‘Expect what you like,’ Lawrence retorted, but the man had already shut the window as firmly as his lips. As the Jaguar sped past, only just missing the wing mirror of the Viva, Violet saw the driver raise a phone to his face. ‘Tell who you want we’re here,’ Lawrence shouted, twisting around to add ‘Tell your whole damned suburb.’

‘That isn’t necessary, Lawrence. That’s not how we behave,’ Violet said, though she couldn’t help feeling enlivened by how much younger his reaction made him seem. ‘Shall we call it a day?’

‘Not while there’s so much light left. Just say whenever you’ve had enough of indulging me.’

The confrontation with the driver had affected Violet more than she cared for. Her legs weren’t quite steady, any more than her hands were on the wheel. Once she was close to the next street sign she was able to say ‘Fetcher.’

‘Why are you saying that to me?’

‘See, it’s why that person did.’

Another of the posters was stuck to the low sign. It showed a dog standing on its hind legs as though perched on its name, which was written larger than the message underneath. That was why the name had sounded familiar, and someone had scribbled over the animal’s face. So this was the defacing the Jaguar driver had referred to, and she hoped he’d meant that neither she nor Lawrence could have been involved. ‘What’s the matter with these people?’ Lawrence said. ‘Don’t they want anyone to find their way?’

She scarcely had time to put the handbrake on before he unleashed himself from his safety belt and stalked over to the sign. Until he helped the wind to lift the poster, which covered half the first word, the sign appeared to name LEY ROAD. He was letting the poster fall back into place when a woman with disorganised grey hair hurried out of the side road, buttoning her long black coat. ‘Where’s the dog?’ she called.

She was wearing leather slippers, Violet saw. Lawrence didn’t answer until the questioner was staring up at him from less than a yard away. ‘I’m afraid there’s no dog.’

‘Of course there is. Don’t tell me you didn’t hear it.’ Her voice was growing louder with each phrase. ‘You aren’t deaf, are you?’

‘Is it your dog?’

‘Why should it be? We look out for one another round here. We aren’t like the rest of the world.’ Her frown might have been including him in the repudiation. ‘Now will you please finish wasting my time,’ she said, ‘and tell me where it’s gone.’

‘There was never any dog.’ As she took a breath that suggested she was about to raise her voice even further Lawrence said ‘It was me.’

‘Don’t be so childish.’ She had indeed found more of a voice. ‘What do you mean, it was you?’

‘My attempt at imitation.’ When she looked both impatient and uncomprehending Lawrence treated her to a few barks. ‘That kind of thing,’ he said.

Violet heard how apologetic he meant to be, but the woman stared at him as if facing down an animal. ‘Have you really nothing better to do at your age than play tricks?’

‘Excuse me, madam, but you’d have to know the context. I—’

She shook her finger at the poster or at him. ‘Was that you as well?’

‘I hardly think there’s much resemblance.’

‘You know perfectly well what I mean. Are you responsible for the damage?’

‘Do you truthfully think that’s how I look?’

‘I think you look incapable of answering a simple question.’

‘No, I’m not responsible, and I can’t believe you could think for an instant I was. Now here’s a simple question for you. Can you tell us how to get to __’

‘To wherever you ought to be? Just turn right round and scamper back where you came from.’ She stalked away but turned to add ‘And I wouldn’t advise you to do any more pretending.’

As Lawrence yanked at his seat belt so hard that it snagged, Violet murmured ‘We don’t seem very welcome, do we? Shall we give up and go home?’

‘Give up?’ He blinked at her as if he hardly recognised her. ‘We never would have once,’ he said. ‘Unless you’ve had enough of me.’

‘You shouldn’t say such things. You don’t mean it any more than I do.’

‘Then carry on.’ As he succeeded in fastening his belt he muttered ‘They can’t keep the magic to themselves.’

He was speaking figuratively, of course, even if it sounded like rather too determined a bid to recapture childhood innocence. History had been his subject as much as hers, and it had taught them how people were led to believe magic was real, not just an enchanting fancy. As she turned along Valley Road she was relieved not to see the woman who’d accosted him, but there was no suggestion of the view he was seeking, just a succession of long squat houses that looked united in anonymity, resolved to exhibit no personality to strangers. Once the road stopped curving Violet saw a sign for Valley Crescent, or at least as much of the name as the dangling poster didn’t hide, but this road led her away from the direction Lawrence wanted her to take. She’d begun to share his dogged resolve to find whatever was to be found, and she followed Valley Lane into Valley Drive, which brought her to Valley Avenue. Each sign was partly obscured by a poster about the lost dog, and the face in each photograph had been disfigured beyond recognition, a sight that made Violet feel irrationally guilty, too much of an intruder. She had as much right to use the streets as anyone who lived there, not that a single resident was to be seen. A road presumably called Valley Row led to one that must be Valley Terrace, and she was starting to wonder if the names had been chosen to confuse outsiders. Then Lawrence leaned forward, clasping his hands together so fervently that she could almost have thought he was praying. ‘This has to be it,’ he said.

The road was straight, and the houses on the side that was presumably closer to his goal were twice the height of the bungalows opposite. Perhaps they had been built to take advantage of a view. Less than halfway along the street Lawrence said ‘Yes, here.’

She had barely switched the engine off before he escaped from the harness. When she followed him she found him peering at the unfenced grass in front of the houses. ‘I’m sure that’s part of the path,’ he said.

It wasn’t much of one. It was composed of uneven rock almost overgrown enough to pass for an unkempt strip of the lawns it divided, and stretched from a flagstone of the pavement to a solid wooden fence behind the houses. If it was natural, it was unusually straight despite its irregular edges. As Lawrence stepped on it Violet had a qualm of nervousness. ‘It’s on someone’s property,’ she said, though this fell short of explaining her unease. ‘Do you think we should?’

‘It still has to be a right of way. They haven’t dared to cover it up,’ he said and strode along the path.

Once it passed between the houses it was shut in by fences enclosing the back gardens. The fences were at least seven feet high, like the one that blocked off the path beyond its junction with a narrow alley that led behind the gardens. ‘We just need to find the way through,’ Lawrence said.

Violet failed to see where, and he plainly couldn’t either. He tramped along the alley at a speed suggestive of conviction, only to return before she caught up with him. The opposite stretch of the alley defeated him as well, and she saw him clench his fists so hard that they looked close to fingerless. The next moment he crouched and sprang up in a bid to peer over the fence. ‘I think I see—’

Whatever he meant to add was driven into him as his feet struck the ground. Though the impact visibly shook him, it provoked another furious attempt, which allowed him to grab the top of the fence. He was struggling to haul himself up when Violet saw movement at an upstairs window of the nearest house. The woman wasn’t gesturing like a prisoner desperate to attract attention. She had been cleaning the inside of the glass, and now she opened the window to call ‘You there, what on earth do you think you’re doing?’

Lawrence twisted his head around while he clung to the fence. ‘Not pretending I’m a dog,’ he gasped, ‘before you ask.’

‘What’s that? Just you stay where you are,’ the woman said and slammed the window.

Violet had the absurd fancy that the woman was telling Lawrence not to let go of the fence. As his body sagged and began to shiver with the effort of holding on, she clutched at his waist to help him down. When his feet thumped the packed earth hard enough to jar a groan out of him, she felt she had been very little use. Perhaps he was compensating for his frailty and Violet’s by growling ‘Coming for a word, is she? I’ve got a few.’

‘Don’t let’s have another scene. Can’t we leave it now?’

‘I nearly saw. I won’t be happy till you have,’ he said as they heard a gate being unbolted behind them.

The woman pulled it wide and stood in the frame like a guard. She had silver hair as neat as a fur hat, and was so thoroughly made up to look younger or at any rate less wrinkled that Violet felt dishevelled by comparison. ‘What did you say about the dog?’ the woman challenged Lawrence.

‘I’ve been looking for it as you all seem to be.’ Violet couldn’t tell whether he meant to appease the woman or was making a sly joke, even when he added ‘And I was looking for your view.’

‘You can’t see it from here.’

‘Then could you tell us how to get to it?’

‘That isn’t possible. As you say, it’s ours.’

‘I don’t think you can do that, you know. You can’t shut the world off from people.’

‘That isn’t the world.’

Violet had a sense of overhearing a conversation she couldn’t grasp, if indeed Lawrence did. ‘And I asked,’ the woman said, ‘what you’re to do with the dog.’

‘Not a solitary thing. I’m not much of a dog man, and even if I were I don’t think I’d be as obsessed with it as you all seem to be.’

‘In that case you’ve no business being here, and I’d recommend you make yourself scarce.’

‘Not till I’ve found why I’m here.’ Perhaps hearing his own clumsiness made Lawrence blurt ‘If you really think we’re trespassing, why don’t you see what the police say.’

‘We don’t need them.’

If this was a warning, it only antagonised him. ‘Do your worst, then,’ he said, ‘and meanwhile you’ll forgive me if I keep looking.’

As he set off at speed along the alley Violet said to the woman ‘Couldn’t you just let him finish looking? He was here as a boy.’

‘And what’s he here as now? I shouldn’t let him stray,’ the woman said and shut the gate in Violet’s face.

Violet regretted lingering to stare at the gate as if she were somehow confronting the woman, because when she turned away Lawrence was out of sight. ‘Lawrence,’ she called, both an appeal and a rebuke, as she hurried down the alley to a bend, certainly not the dead end that her momentary panic made it seem to be. She was nearly there when she heard him.

He sounded excited, even shrill, although she didn’t catch the solitary syllable that had been startled out of him. ‘Lawrence,’ she repeated, but perhaps he was too preoccupied to respond. She was panting when she reached the corner of the alley, not as promptly as she would have expected of herself. At least she could see why Lawrence must have yelped in triumph. Just around the corner there was a gap in the fence.

He still wasn’t to be seen. He’d crawled through the opening, then. It was an irregularly rounded hole less than four feet wide and not even as high, at the bottom of a section of the fence that looked older and more weathered than the rest. Violet couldn’t help thinking of the kind of aperture some pet owners might incorporate in a door; certainly it might have tempted the lost dog. ‘Lawrence,’ she called more sharply as she crouched towards the gap.

She couldn’t see through it by simply stooping. The posture sent pain flaring up her spine into her skull. She had to lower herself onto all fours on the prickly concrete and duck towards the opening. The low sun met her, shining directly into her eyes, so that she was scarcely able to distinguish that the sliver of fierce light appeared to be resting on the edge of a cliff. Was there a path, either the one they’d followed from the road or another

track crossing it on top of the cliff? Violet squeezed her eyes shut and widened them, which didn't help at all; either the sun had subsided beneath the edge or it had been overwhelmed by cloud, because all she could see through the gap was a pallid expanse as featureless as a void, as if the fence was perched on the brink of the cliff.

Her perspective must have changed. Perhaps she'd crouched lower without noticing. She was about to wriggle through the gap as a preamble to lecturing Lawrence for making her do so when a fiercer stab of pain brought her almost to her feet. She gasped as her hands struck the spongy fence, which felt cold enough for the moisture it exuded to be close to frozen. 'Lawrence, say where you are,' she shouted and heard her voice invade the silence – just her voice, which made her feel more intrusive than ever, as though every resident who could hear her disapproved of her. She didn't need to shout when she had a phone. She wavered to her feet and fumbled the mobile out of the padded pocket of her plump coat, and poked the key to call Lawrence's number.

When she heard the bell inside her phone she tried to hear where his ringtone might be, but the simulation in her phone gave just a single trill before it was cut off. She just had time to glimpse an image on the screen – a figure whose upright stance looked somehow unnatural. Perhaps she was reminded of the posters she'd seen in Striders Halt because the face was disintegrating into a mass of pixels. She had no chance to read the displayed name, which seemed shorter than Lawrence's, as the phone emitted a bleep like the isolated note of an alarm and the screen went blank. She was pressing the power button – squeezing it without result – when she thought she heard Lawrence.

Had he called 'Yes'? The high sharp sound resembled that word more than any other. He was somewhere around the corner – in the alley, Violet hoped, not on the far side of the fence. She hurried to the corner and peered along the alley, which seemed to have grown unreasonably dimmer. Surely the sun shouldn't have taken so much of the light with it, though enough remained to show her that the alley was deserted. 'Lawrence,' she called. 'Tell me where you are.'

Her voice petered out between the fences, giving way to a silence so total that she might not have spoken at all. What childish game was he playing? Even if he wanted to reward her with some surprise he thought she would

appreciate, she wasn't enjoying his behaviour. 'Lawrence,' she called more and more furiously, 'Lawrence,' as she marched along the alley, searching for another gap, even a chink in the fence. She was still looking and, more desperately, listening when the alley brought her to the corner of the road.

The unbroken fence stretched out of sight, presumably following the edge of the cliff. The premature twilight made her aware of the absence of streetlamps. She could have concluded that whoever had developed Striders Halt didn't care to waste any light on visitors, though the street was visible enough, the blank windows of the bungalows competing with their doubles across the deserted roadway to reveal no evidence of life. She was about to call to Lawrence when she was distracted by the street sign. She'd assumed the first syllable of Valley Terrace was covered up, but now that the poster had fallen off as though it was no longer required, she saw the word was only half the length she'd taken it to be.

A chill wind brought the poster fluttering towards her across the arid flagstones. The face of the begging pet hadn't just been scribbled out; someone had tried to substitute a caricature of another face, so vigorously that they'd shredded the paper. Violet might have fancied that the damage had exposed features underlying the animal's face. Why couldn't she read the lines printed beneath Fetcher's name? Even if some computer problem must have been responsible for the repetitive gibberish, she thought it odd that nobody had noticed. All this was distracting her from finding Lawrence. As the poster sank flat on the pavement she called his name, and turned just in time to glimpse a response.

It could only be Lawrence. The movement had been by the Viva, and of course that was where he would have met her, presumably to lead her to the view he'd rediscovered. She thought he'd beckoned her to follow, since it was the only gesture that made sense, before returning to the path between the houses. 'Just wait,' she cried, 'what on earth's the urgency?' Perhaps some aspect of the view was about to disappear with the waning light, and she hurried to the path so as not to disappoint him. But when she reached the alley behind the houses she found it was deserted.

'What are you playing at, Lawrence? Show yourself, for heaven's sake.' She gasped all this as she tramped along the alley, though her voice was too breathless to travel very far. He must have gone back to the gap in the fence – she'd begun to think he had been crouching as he dodged along the path,

as though getting ready to crawl through the hole – but surely he could have waited for her at the corner. ‘All right, show me—’ she urged as she came to the bend, and then her voice died in her mouth. It wasn’t only Lawrence that she couldn’t see. There was no gap in the fence.

The sight seemed to turn not just her mouth dry but her mind, parching it of the ability to think. When she faltered to the section of the fence where she was sure the gap had been, she felt as if she might have to support herself against it – might even discover that it wasn’t solid. But it bruised her fist as she thumped the new wood, which was indistinguishable from the rest of the fence. She was almost bewildered enough to wonder if the fence could have been repaired while she was searching for Lawrence, and then she had the equally unwelcome notion that she had somehow mistaken her way – that the gap must be at the other end of the alley. If her ageing brain had let her down, surely she could bear the possibility so long as she found Lawrence. Perhaps becoming each other’s mental backup would be part of growing old. She needn’t be ashamed to admit she’d lost her way, though wasn’t Lawrence’s behaviour responsible? Once they were reunited she’d decide how much to blame him and how soon she would forgive him. All these thoughts kept her going almost as far as the opposite end of the alley, until she could no longer avoid seeing that there wasn’t so much as a crack in the fence.

As she stumbled out beside the street sign the poster lying on the flagstones stirred, raising its disintegrated face. ‘Lawrence,’ she shouted and was turning towards her car when a figure peered around the house beside the path and ducked back. She was sure it was Lawrence, but how could he act like that? Had senility overtaken him all at once? She called his name over and over, though increasingly feebly, as she made for the path.

It was as deserted as the street, and so was the alley. Violet felt close to releasing a scream of frustration, if not another kind. She was peering wildly about as if her desperation could produce Lawrence when she caught sight of the window she’d seen the woman cleaning. It was blankly curtained now, but it was the only inspiration Violet could find. She limped up the path and along the street to the front of the house. ‘Hello?’ she cried as soon as she’d rung the doorbell.

She didn’t hear another sound until a silhouette appeared on the frosted glass that made up most of the front door. The outline of the figure was

fragmented by the swarming nodules of the glass, which left the face as a pale blur. ‘Why are you making all that noise?’ the woman demanded, barely audibly. ‘Who do you think you are?’

‘I know who I am.’ Saying so wouldn’t help, and Violet said only ‘You saw me behind your house. You spoke to me.’

‘Count yourself privileged. I’ve no more to add.’

‘I’m looking for my husband.’

‘You won’t find him in here.’

‘But you saw him as well,’ Violet pleaded and felt a twinge of hope. ‘You were watching him, weren’t you? Didn’t you see where he went?’

‘He can’t be far.’

‘No, but he could be lost.’ At once this seemed altogether too possible. ‘I’m sure a stranger could get lost round here,’ she said.

‘Not for long.’

Violet couldn’t tell why this sounded ominous: perhaps because that was how the thought of losing Lawrence made everything feel – the empty street as dim as the interior of the house, the figure that seemed disinclined to take shape on the glass. ‘May I use your phone?’ she blurted.

‘You most certainly can not.’

Violet tried to believe she’d mistaken the murmur. ‘I need to call my husband. My phone’s dead.’

‘They aren’t welcome here.’

Violet suspected this meant far more than her phone and Lawrence’s. ‘Just help me find him,’ she begged, ‘and we’ll leave you alone.’

‘He’ll be found.’

Why should this seem threatening? It aggravated Violet’s growing panic. ‘Help me,’ she said furiously, ‘or I’ll make such a noise it’ll wake the whole place up.’

‘No need. It’s awake,’ the woman said, and her silhouette decomposed further as it shrank into the darkness of the house.

‘You can’t get rid of me like that. You won’t until I’ve found my husband,’ Violet cried and was about to create more of a disturbance – however much

would bring the residents out of their houses to help her – when she heard Lawrence call her name.

It was only the first syllable. She'd never liked being abbreviated, but now it was more than welcome, even when it was yipped as shrilly as that. He was further away than the street, but at least the sound hadn't come from the direction of the cliff. 'Lawrence,' she shouted as she swung around, nearly losing her balance. 'Come here. Come back.'

The empty street seemed to capture her voice, holding it in. The unlit houses, where every window was colourlessly blank with curtains, emphasised the gathering darkness. She could have believed the night was cutting her off from Lawrence. 'Talk to me,' she shouted. 'I'll come to you.'

'Don't.'

Why would he say that to her? What would have made him say it to someone else? Surely she'd misheard him. 'I'm coming now,' she vowed and dashed to the car.

As she strapped herself in she was overtaken by a notion that she wasn't sure she welcomed. How could all this be anything except a nightmare? She was asleep in the passenger seat while Lawrence drove them home, and soon she would waken to find they were safe. She was tempted to think so, and yet it dismayed her; it felt like betraying Lawrence, abandoning him to the unlit indifferent streets. She mustn't use the idea that she was dreaming as an excuse not to find him. She lowered both front windows of the car and felt as if she were letting in the icy night to keep her awake. 'Lawrence,' she called as she switched on the headlights. 'Keep talking to me.'

While she turned the car the headlamp beams lit up a bungalow and then its twin, followed by one that could have been either of them. Driving straight on would have brought her to a dead end, and in any case she felt lost enough without venturing into the unknown dark. She coasted to the junction at not much more than a walking pace while she peered ahead hard enough to sting her eyes and called Lawrence's name. As she eased the car out of the road she heard him.

She was about to respond when she realised she was hearing a dog. It was the first she'd heard in Striders Halt, and how long had it been since she'd ceased hearing birds? The yapping sounded not far from articulate, which was why she'd taken it for a human voice, though she didn't want to

wonder why Lawrence would have been protesting ‘No no no.’ If it was the elusive Fetcher, someone else could catch the animal. ‘Lawrence,’ she called louder, but the only answer was another burst of frenzied yapping. She was almost at the next junction when she saw the creature ahead.

It might well be Fetcher, since it was performing the trick all the posters had shown. It was rearing up to beg even though nobody was offering it a treat. Before Violet could distinguish more than a large vague silhouette, it dropped to all fours and dodged around the corner. When she reached the corner both roads were deserted. She mustn’t be distracted by it or by wondering why nobody had come out of the houses to catch it. ‘Lawrence,’ she shouted as if she could dismiss the creature and recall him, but only the dark chill wind came to her through the open windows. She hadn’t seen or heard any hint of his whereabouts by the time she reached the village green.

Had she left the streets behind too soon? Had she managed to miss out some of them? She stared at the dark huddle of bungalows as if by making her eyes ache she might bring Lawrence into the open, and then she fumbled her phone out of her pocket. She was hoping it might have regained some of the power it had lost in Striders Halt, but it was still as dead as the rectangular stone it resembled. She had to believe Lawrence wasn’t out here; he couldn’t have been faster than the car.

She didn’t know how many times she drove through the lightless streets – how often they brought her back to the green. How frequently did she pass the Jaguar, which was once again parked on its drive? There might well be more than one, taunting her with the illusion that she knew where she was. Her voice had grown hoarse and dry with calling out to Lawrence. Even sounding the horn failed to bring any life to the introverted streets, which she could have imagined were dreaming of themselves. She was driving desperately faster now, as though she could overtake Lawrence in the act of losing himself. While she knew that one of them would eventually have to lose the other, she could never have dreamed it would be anything like this. She had the sudden awful thought that he hadn’t been truly lost until she’d told the woman that he might be. If this was in any way possible, oughtn’t it to mean that she could bring him back as well?

She cried his name and leaned on the horn, and saw the only other creature in the streets dodge beyond the limit of her headlights. It was yapping again, however much this sounded like a voice struggling to tell her to go,

go, go. She could even have imagined that it was fleeing the light, as though ashamed to be seen. Suppose it could lead her to Lawrence? She wasn't quite confused enough to believe that, but she saw that she was following it anyway, having forgotten which way she'd meant to drive through the streets, which had begun to seem malevolently unhelpful. She lost sight of the creature well before the streets led her yet again to the green.

She braked with a screech that sounded like her dismay rendered audible, and then she clambered out of the car. She felt as if the mob of lightless houses had cast her out – would continue doing so every time she searched for Lawrence. She strove one last time to think she was having a nightmare, a distorted version of her wish and Lawrence's to bring some magic back into their life. Soon she would waken to find herself in the passenger seat, but she knew that wasn't possible; Lawrence had never learned to drive. Her hands were shaking so much that she could hardly cup them around her mouth. 'Lawrence,' she cried, 'come back.'

Her words were aching not merely in her ears but throughout her entire self when she thought she heard a voice somewhere among the houses. 'Let it go.'

She couldn't tell whether it was addressing her. As she strained her eyes at the mass of bungalows, she saw a figure dart out between them. The headlight beams were splayed across the green towards the larger darkness, making it harder for her to distinguish the shape. It was yapping and panting, and the face on the blurred shaggy head seemed more fragmentary than it ought to be, fluttering in the chill wind. When the figure reared up in front of her she didn't know whether it meant to beg or plant its paws on her shoulders and nuzzle her face. All she could do was cry 'Lawrence.'

Extras

This section contains forewords, afterwords and other relevant material:

Foreword to The Inhabitant Of The Lake And Other Less Welcome Tenants, 1964

Foreword to Dark Companions, 1981

Foreword to Cold Print, 1984

Clive Barker's foreword to Scared Stiff, 1986

Robert M. Price's foreword to Crypt Of Cthulhu #43, 1986

Foreword to Waking Nightmares, 1990

Foreword to Strange Things And Stranger Places, 1992

Introduction to the story The Limits Of Fantasy, 1993

Introduction to Far Away And Never, 1996

Foreword to Ghosts And Grisly Things, 1997

Afterword to Scared Stiff, 2001

Foreword to Alone With The Horrors, 2002

Introduction to Told By The Dead, 2003

Afterword to Told By The Dead, 2003

Foreword to Inconsequential Tales, 2007

Afterword to Just Behind You, 2008

Afterword to Ancient Images, 2011

Afterword to Dark Companions, 2011

Afterword to the story The Page, 2012

Foreword to The Unspoken, May 2013

'A Warning To The Curious', the tale chosen by Ramsey Campbell for the anthology 'My Favourite Horror Story'.

Introduction To *The Inhabitant Of The Lake And Other Less Welcome Tenants*

When I was ten years old I discovered H. P. Lovecraft in *The Colour out of Space*, and was profoundly excited and disturbed by his work, and some years later, after I had read considerably more of Lovecraft's fiction, I turned a bent for writing, which began when I was seven, toward the Cthulhu Mythos. I wrote five stories in nine months; they were little more than amateurish pastiches of Lovecraft's tales, but I had courage enough to show some of them to August Derleth, and, had he not considered them promising and encouraged me to carry on, those tales might have remained in the original draft.

Perhaps even more important, he persuaded me to agree that the Arkham country had been saturated as setting for stories in the Mythos, and that a new milieu for a series of tales might well be originated in Great Britain. He felt certain that even H. P. Lovecraft would approve of such a new setting, and of a sequence of stories taking place there. I considered the Severn Valley a likely milieu. As a Roman-occupied area, it might retain influences of the decadent Roman practices; and some years ago, in the Cotswolds, a supposed witch was executed by persons unknown. With cautious enthusiasm, I set about creating my own towns. Some research was, of course, necessary, and the various towns were not conceived as a whole; their details were added to in each story and so the towns came into being.

Among the stories thus far written, there are six towns in the area. They do not correspond to the settlements in the Arkham country, except insofar as they represent a conscious attempt to parallel Lovecraft's Massachusetts towns; they are primarily my attempt to invent a realistic, detailed background to aid in imparting verisimilitude to my fiction.

Brichester (the Roman 'chester'—*castra*—with a likely prefix) is the most important of these towns. A large modern city, complete with central office buildings, cinemas, stores, and the like, it yet has its regions of alien

influence. It is composed of three sections: Mercy Hill, a raised portion of the town, at the top of which stands a hospital—a one-time prison, while some miles beyond it lies a terribly haunted lake; Central Brichester, an area of offices and large stores; and Lower Brichester, where most trains arrive. In itself, it is a perfectly normal town, and most of the sorcerers living there practise their arts secretly (although there still is a regrettable cult among students at the university), illustrating how underground societies exist in every community.

Camside, on the bank of the river Cam, is a rather unimportant town between Berkeley and Severnford, once visited by a man intent on seeking out the god Byatis, but otherwise undistinguished. Severnford is part dockland, its buildings mostly shabby and dilapidated, including a cinema and several public-houses; beyond it is an island reputedly used as a meeting place for covens. At the centre a group of historic buildings is preserved, among them an inn now closed because of vandalism.

The remaining towns of the Severn Valley at Brichester are rather less than normal. Clotton (a corruption of Cloth Town) is inhabited by unusually superstitious people. In 1931 it was invaded by malefic aliens. Once a fairly large settlement, Clotton is today too small to appear on most maps, and is widely supposed to be haunted, and is thus much avoided.

Temphill (Temple Hill—a reference to the town's being built around a church reported to be other-dimensional) is the only town which is rather completely mapped. It is a small settlement with only one hotel. Most of its buildings are neglected, and its inhabitants seem more interested in old ways, in magic and the outré, than in normal, prosaic life. Temphill is built on a long main road, different portions of which are known under different names—Wood Street, South Street, etc.—it crosses a river, and toward the centre of town rises to a hill on which is built the famous shunned church.

Finally, there is Goatswood, the town lying furthest into the Cotswolds. Surrounded by woods, this town contains a little-used railway station and a fairly modern town centre; but its inhabitants are reputed to be non-human. Goatswood takes its name from the legend that the god Shub-Niggurath is either imprisoned or has at times made his home in a hill near the town.

Like most other writers who have ventured to add to Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, I also invented esoteric volumes to which references could be made. One, *The Revelations of Glaaki*, was written by members of a cult

under the inspiration of the god they worshipped; it was subsequently published in an edition from which many of the more unconventional passages had been cut, now a very rare volume. The other, an untitled and much-banned work by Johannes Pott, was rejected violently by publishers in Jena, circulated in handwritten copies among underground groups, and has never been printed. It contains many repulsive and shocking concepts, among the mildest of which is the theory that all areas of darkness are inhabited by malformed beings.

The reader will notice that I have frequently resorted to cross-references, not only of settings, but also of events. The reader will observe also that I have not directly utilised the beings of the Lovecraft pantheon, I have but referred to them; for I wished to invent my own, or to clarify inexplicit hints left by Lovecraft and other contributors to the Mythos; I wanted, in sum, to add to the Mythos. I hope that readers of this book will find it possible to conclude that in their own modest way these stories reflect the greater wonder and horror of the masterpieces of H. P. Lovecraft.

J. Ramsey Campbell
Liverpool, England
7 January 1964

Introduction To *Dark Companions*

To the interviewers favourite question—why do you write horror stories?—there are many answers, all of them true. Here are some. My most vivid memories of my early childhood are of being frightened: by Hans Andersen and the girl cutting off her feet to rid herself of the dancing red shoes, by the deformed creatures that swarm out of the mine in *The Princess and the Goblin*, by (most unlikely of all) an edition of *The Rupert Annual*, a British children's book, in which a Christmas tree stalks home to its forest one night, creaking away in the dark and leaving a trail of earth through the house. The cinema got to me too: I spent most of Disney's *Snow White* in a state bordering on panic, and then there was the scene (meant as a joke) in Danny Kaye's *Knock on Wood* where a corpse is hung up like a hat and coat on the back of a door. I began to read adult horror fiction when I was eight or nine years old, but I'd already known for years that fiction could be terrifying.

So when I began to write stories, they had to be tales of would-be terror. At the age of eleven I had finished a short book of ghost and horror stories, patched together like Frankenstein's monster from fragments of tales I had read. Most writers start by imitating their favourites. Mine, three years later, was H. P. Lovecraft, now that I'd found a complete book of his stories. Lovecraft's style seemed easy to imitate, and so did his monsters. I wrote half a dozen stories in the manner of Lovecraft, with titles such as *The Tower from Yuggoth*, and sent them to August Derleth of Arkham House, Lovecraft's American publisher. Derleth liked them enough to tell me how to improve them—by describing fewer things as eldritch and unspeakable and cosmically alien, for a start, and by re-reading the ghost stories of M. R. James to learn suggestiveness—and eventually he published a book of them. You can tell I was seventeen when I finished the book—one character thinks nothing of buying a house sight unseen—but all the same, it began my career.

Literary imitation is rather like ventriloquism—trying to say things in someone else's voice—and just about as limited a skill. My next book was a reaction against this, and sometimes so personal as to be wilfully

incomprehensible. By now I'd left school and was working in the tax office, where I wrote stories at my desk in the lunch hour, surrounded by bureaucratic activity and ringing phones. No wonder my surroundings began to appear in my stories, and so did my growing obsession with movies and the dying cinemas where I caught up with films of the previous thirty years. Since my first book was an imitation of Lovecraft's horrors, it had been a way of sidestepping my own fears—I sometimes think that is why so many amateur writers imitate Lovecraft today—but now I was beginning to write about them, perhaps because I was gaining enough confidence as a writer to be more honest about myself.

While the supernatural elements in these new tales weren't autobiographical, the feelings were—particularly the descriptions of how it felt to be afraid. During my schooldays I'd often been terrified of going to the Catholic grammar school, where they were fond of using corporal punishment, but now that I was growing up I found that there were many other things to fear: women, and answering the office phone, and talking about myself, and going to parties where I knew almost nobody... Well, I needn't go on; most of it is in my stories somewhere. All the same, I'm convinced that good horror stories nourish the imagination, and so I hope these stories do.

I had four years of the tax office, and another seven of public libraries. It wasn't until my second collection was published that I decided to try to write full time. I was growing bored with irrelevancies; at least everything you do as a writer is relevant to the job—no cramming yourself for examinations (a pet hate of mine) with facts you will never use again, no dressing up and looking servile at interviews. The first couple of years were hard; if my wife hadn't then been working, they would have been impossible. At least writing for a living persuaded me to make myself clearer, and so, I suppose, did reading my stories to audiences—for me, the most enjoyable part of my work. I use many of the stories In this book.

With the exception of *Napier Court*, all the way from 1967, the stories here were written since that freelance plunge in July 1973. They can more or less speak for themselves, I hope. The very short stories (*Heading Home*, *Vacant Possession*, *Out of Copyright*, *Calling Card*, *Conversion* and *Call First*) are the best of a group of tales I wrote as a kind of tribute to the old EC horror comics, which in fact I never read until my twenties. Horror and humour

have much in common, and it was often difficult to see where the horror comics ended and EC's other comic, *Mad*, began; perhaps these tales of mine are black jokes. *Out of Copyright* is one of my attempts to make myself clearer, since another acrostic tale of mine (*The Words that Count*, where the entire story was an acrostic) left many readers bewildered. *Calling Card* was written (as *First Foot*) in response to a commission from the *Liverpool Daily Post* to write a ghost story for Christmas and the New Year, which the newspaper then refused to publish. *Drawing In* probably belongs with these stories, since I was trying to discover if there was still any terror to be had from the best-known (and most domesticated) horror character of all. Many of the stories grew out of their settings; the setting of *Mackintosh Willy* is real, and so is the graffito that gave me the idea for the story; the location of *Above the World* is real, down to the hotel, a favourite of mine; the cinema in *The Show Goes On* was real until they knocked it down—and so on, for almost all the settings. Of course, they may not look quite like that to anyone else but me.

Three of the stories have been given awards. *Mackintosh Willy* tied with Elizabeth Lynn's *Woman Who Loved the Moon* for the World Fantasy Award in 1980; *The Chimney* took the same award in 1978, again for best short story of the previous year. *In the Bag* was given the British Fantasy Award for best short story in 1978. (The story was published in November 1977. Up to that time the award had been based on the previous calendar year, but after that, for one year only, it was based on the period from July to June. Harlan Ellison's *Jeffty is Five* became eligible for a second time, and this time it won, all of which has caused some confusion in reference books.) All three stories are about childhood in some way; make of that what you will—perhaps that I often return to the theme that deep down, we are all still as vulnerable as we were in childhood; sometimes it takes very little to break through our defences. It's a disturbing thought, but then I believe that horror fiction cannot be too frightening or too disturbing. Too much of it seeks to reassure, often by reinforcing prejudices.

And that's as good a way to end as any. Now you're alone with the stories and yourself.

Ramsey Campbell
December 1981

Foreword To *Cold Print*: "Chasing the Unknown"

The first book of Lovecraft's I read made me into a writer. I found it in the window of a Liverpool sweetshop called Bascombe's. I was fourteen years old then, and went there every Saturday to search through the secondhand paperbacks at the rear of the shop once I'd made sure there was nothing in the window. Sometimes, among the covers faded like unpreserved Technicolor in the window, there would be a bright new book on which to spend my pocket money: an issue of *Supernatural Stories* written by R. L. Fanthorpe under innumerable pseudonyms (Pel Torro, Othello Baron, Peter O'Flinn, Oben Lerteth, Rene Rolant, Deutero Spartacus, Elton T. Neef were just some of them), a Gerald G. Swan *Weird and Occult Miscellany* whose back cover advertised studies of torture and flagellation and execution 'for the nature student.' But that Saturday, among the yellowing molls and dusty cowboys, I saw a skeletal fungoid creature, the title Cry Horror, the author's name I'd been yearning for years to see on a book. For a panicky moment I thought I hadn't half a crown to buy the book, dreaded that it would be gone when I came back with the money. I read it in a single malingering day off school; for a year or more I thought H. P. Lovecraft was not merely the greatest horror writer of all time, but the greatest writer I had ever read.

Some (Stephen King and Charles L. Grant among them) would take that to prove that Lovecraft is an adolescent phase one goes through—certainly a writer best read when one is that age. I can only say that I find his best work more rewarding now than I did then. Grant claims that 'when you grow up you discover that what attracted you when you were fourteen was his rococo style and very little else,' but I don't think it was so in my case; certainly I don't agree that 'the style makes the stories.' Indeed, I think that's precisely the trap into which too many imitators of Lovecraft fall.

I was one of them, of course, having already done my best to imitate Machen and John Dickson Carr. If I avoided the trap to some extent, I did so unconsciously—did so because I didn't merely admire Lovecraft, I was steeped in his work and his vision throughout the writing of my first

published book. I began it as a way of paying back some of the pleasure his work had given me, some of the sense of awesome expectation that even reading some of his titles—*The Colour out of Space*, *The Whisperer in Darkness*—could conjure up. No other writer had given me that so far. I wrote my Lovecraftian tales for my own pleasure: the pleasure of convincing myself that they were almost as good as the originals. It was only on the suggestion of two fantasy fans, the Londoner Pat Kearney and the American Betty Kujawa, that I showed them to August Derleth at Arkham House.

> 'There are myriad unspeakable terrors in the cosmos in which our universe is but an atom; and the two gates of agony, life and death, gape to pour forth infinities of abominations. And the other gates which spew forth their broods are, thank God, little known to most of us. Few can have seen the spawn of ultimate corruption, or known that centre of insane chaos where Azathoth, the blind idiot god, bubbles mindlessly; I myself have never seen these things—but God knows that what I saw in those cataclysmic moments in the church at Kingsport transcends the ultimate earthly knowledge.'

So began *The Tomb-Herd*, one of the stories I sent Derleth. Since his death, a regrettable element of fantasy fandom has devoted a good deal of energy to defaming him. The honesty and courage of these people may be gauged by their having waited until Derleth was unable to defend himself and by the way they often conceal their smears in essays ostensibly on other subjects. For myself, not only did I find him unfailingly helpful and patient and encouraging when I most needed this support, but in retrospect I'm doubly impressed that he could find anything worth encouraging among the second-hand Lovecraft I sent him. Here are a few more choice passages from *The Tomb-Herd*:

> 'The house which I knew as my friend's, set well back from the road, overgrown with ivy that twisted in myriad grotesque shapes, was locked and shuttered. No sign of life was discernible inside it, and outside the garden was filled with a brooding quiet, while my shadow on the fungus-overgrown lawn appeared eldritch and distorted, like that of some ghoul-born being from nether pits.'

> 'Upon inquiring of this anomaly from the strangely reticent neighbours, I learned that my friend had visited the deserted church in the centre of Kingsport after dark, and that this must have called the vengeance of those from outside upon him.'

I suspect most of us would be strangely reticent if a stranger came knocking at our door to ask why his shadow resembled that of a ghoul-born being, but let's go on:

> 'In that stomach-wrenching moment of horrible knowledge, realisation of the abnormal ghastlinesses after which my friend had been searching and which, perhaps, he had stirred out of aeon-long sleep in the Kingsport church, I closed the book. But I soon opened it again...'

Best of all:

> '(Now followed the section which horrified me more than anything else. My friend must have been preparing the telegram by writing it on the page while outside unspeakable shamblers made their way towards him—as became hideously evident as the writing progressed.)
>
> 'To Richard Dexter. Come at once to Kingsport. You are needed urgently by me here for protection from agencies which may kill me—or worse—if you do not come immediately. Will explain as soon as you reach me... But what is this thing that flops unspeakably down the passage towards this room? It cannot be that abomination which I met in the nitrous vaults below Asquith Place... IA! YOG-SOTHOTH! CTHULHU FHTAGN!'

Behold the trap I mentioned earlier—the fallacy by which one can persuade oneself that if one imitates or, more probably, exceeds the worst excesses of Lovecraft's style, one is achieving what he achieved. (One reason Lovecraft and Hitchcock are so often imitated is that both display their technique fully rather than concealing it.) But the hyperbolic passages in Lovecraft's writing (by no means as numerous as his detractors claim) are built up to; as Fritz Leiber puts it perfectly, they're orchestrated. It's easy to imitate Lovecraft's style, or at least to convince oneself that one has done so; it's far more difficult to imitate his sense of structure, based on a study of Poe, Machen (in particular "The Great God Pan'), and the best of

Blackwood. I think that's the point Charlie Grant misses: Lovecraft's style would be nothing without the painstaking structure of his stories.

Derleth told me to abandon my attempts to set my work in Massachusetts and in general advised me in no uncertain terms how to improve the stories. I suspect he would have been gentler if he'd realised I was only fifteen years old, but on the other hand, if you can't take that kind of forthright editorial response you aren't likely to survive as a writer. I was still in the process of adopting his suggestions when he asked me to send him a story for an anthology he was editing (then called *Dark of Mind, Dark of Heart*). Delighted beyond words, I sent him the rewritten *Tomb-Herd*, which he accepted under certain conditions: that the title should be changed to *The Church in the High Street* (though he later dropped the latter article, along with the prepositions from the title of his book) and that he should be able to edit the story as he saw fit. The story as published, there and here, therefore contains several passages that are Derleth's paraphrases of what I wrote. Quite right too: as I think he realised, it was the most direct way to show me how to improve my writing, and selling the story was so encouraging that I completed my first book a little over a year later.

I've included here a selection of tales from that book, *The Inhabitant of the Lake*. Though prior publication never deters me from revising my stories—revised editions of my novels *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* and *The Nameless* are soon to appear, and some of the stories in my collection *Dark Companions* were revised for that book—I've resisted the temptation to improve these earlier tales, partly because I feel too distant from them. Here they are, flaws and all.

The Room in the Castle expands Lovecraft's reference to 'snake-bearded Byatis' (am I remembering it accurately?)—Bob Bloch's originally, I believe. *The Horror from the Bridge* is based, like several of these stories, on Lovecraft's Commonplace Book as it appeared in the Arkham House anthology *The Shuttered Room*. It's based on two entries: 'Man in strange subterranean chamber—seeks to force door of bronze—overwhelmed by influx of waters' and 'Ancient (Roman? pre-historic?) stone bridge washed away by a (sudden & curious?) storm. Something liberated which had been sealed up in the masonry thousands of years ago. Things happen.'

The story is based to some extent on the chronology of events in Lovecraft's *The Dunwich Horror*, but towards the end I found I hadn't the

patience to build as minutely as Lovecraft would have.

The Insects from Shaggai is based on another entry in the Commonplace Book, or rather on my misreading of it. Lovecraft wrote 'Insects or some other entities from space attack and penetrate a man's head & cause him to remember alien and exotic things—possible displacement of personality,' a superb idea I rushed at so hastily that I failed to notice he hadn't meant giant insects at all. (An account of the dream which gave him the idea can be found in the Selected Letters, volume V, page 159.) Of all my stories this is probably the pulpiest. As such it has some energy, I think, but I wish I'd left the note alone until I was equipped to do it justice.

I wrote the first page of *The Inhabitant of the Lake* and developed writer's block. What released me weeks later was writing *The Render of the Veils* in the garden on a summer morning. It's based on a Lovecraft note ('Disturbing conviction that all life is only a deceptive dream with some dismal or sinister horror lurking behind') but it began my liberation from Lovecraft's style, in the sense that it's told largely through dialogue. I was pleased enough with it to want to name my first book after it, but Derleth felt—rightly, I think—that it sounded mystical rather than frightening. I returned to *The Inhabitant of the Lake* (again rooted in the Commonplace Book: 'Visit to someone in wild & remote house—ride from station through the night into the haunted hills. House by forest or water. Terrible things live there') with renewed enthusiasm.

Four stories followed that are not included here. *The Plain of Sound* may be read in the small press journal Crypt of Cthulhu, in an issue devoted to my work. *The Return of the Witch* was suggested by two Lovecraft notes: 'Live man buried in bridge masonry according to superstition—or black cat' and 'Salem story. The cottage of an aged witch, wherein after her death are found sundry terrible things' but it developed as a rewrite, virtually scene by scene, of a Henry Kuttner story I had never read and didn't encounter until several years after my story was published.

My story contains a moderately evocative dream sequence: 'He dreamed of wanderings through space to dead cities on other planets, of lakes bordered by twisted trees which moved and creaked in no wind, and finally of a strange curved rim beyond which he passed into utter darkness—a darkness in which he sensed nothing living. Less clear dreams occurred, too, and he often felt a clutching terror at glimpses of the shuttered room amid bizarre

landscapes, and of rotting things which scrabbled out of graves at an echoing, sourceless call' and a sudden outburst of paranoia that points rather disconcertingly forward to fiction of mine such as *The Face That Must Die*: '(Look at the bastard! He tells you you're possessed, but you know what he really means, don't you? That you're schizophrenic. Push him out, quick! Don't let him come poking round your mind!)' but otherwise I think the story can be allowed to rest in peace.

The Mine on Yuggoth was a thorough rewrite of one of the first tales I showed Derleth, *The Tower from Yuggoth*. I got one of the ideas for the rewrite in church, during mass, and I suspect that was when Catholicism lost its grip on me, though probably never entirely. *The Will of Stanley Brooke* was my first punning title; the story attempted to tell its tale wholly through dialogue, with no Lovecraftian adjectives at all, but I remember congratulating myself on the originality of a theme which in fact was Lovecraft's, from *The Festival*. The next story here, *The Moon-Lens*, has its basis in a Lovecraft note ('Ancient necropolis—bronze door in hillside which opens as the moonlight strikes it—focused by ancient lens in pylon opposite'), as did *The Face in the Desert*, a poorly imagined Arabian tale Derleth rejected from the book and I for this one. More background on the book can be found in *Horrors and Unpleasantries*, Sheldon Jaffery's anecdotal history of Arkham House.

While Derleth was looking at the manuscript of my collection I wrote another story, *The Stone on the Island*. For a change, this was based on one of M. R. James's *Stories I Have Tried to Write*:

> 'The man, for instance (naturally a man with something on his mind), who, sitting in his study one evening, was startled by a slight sound, turned hastily, and saw a certain dead face looking out from between the window curtains: a dead face, but with living eyes. He made a dash at the curtains and tore them apart. A pasteboard mask fell to the floor. But there was no one there, and the eyes of the mask were but eye-holes. What (James wonders) was to be done about that?'

My solution was that it wasn't a mask. The tale may be technically superior to any of the Inhabitant stories, and it reads more like me than Lovecraft, I think. However, I find its adolescent sadism excessive, and so I haven't included it here.

Now began my struggle to leave Lovecraft behind and write like myself—a struggle that caused me to write an article, *Lovecraft in Retrospect*, condemning his work outright (when what I was really condemning was my own dependence on him). I suspect that writing about his creations had been a way to avoid dealing with my own fears. My impatience with trying to imitate the Lovecraftian structure led to the extreme compression of some of the stories in *Demons by Daylight*, my second book. One story in that collection, *The Franklyn Paragraphs*, is based on two notes from the Commonplace Book, and two stories written during that period belong to the Lovecraft Mythos. One, *Before the Storm*, I didn't feel was worth rewriting in order to fit into *Demons by Daylight*; it appears here for the first time between hard covers. By contrast, *Cold Print* was fully rewritten in 1966. Both show my struggles to be myself, I think, and in *Cold Print* the struggle has pretty well been won.

I had nothing more to do with the Lovecraft Mythos until 1971, when Meade and Penny Frierson asked me to contribute to their extraordinarily ambitious (and, on the whole, impressively successful) small press anthology, HPL. I offered them *A Madness from the Vaults*, written in 1962 but, I'd felt, too fantastic to fit into my first book. When I turned up the fanzine in which it had eventually appeared I was dismayed to find that its sadism far exceeded that of *The Stone on the Island*. All I could do for the Friersons was write what was virtually a new story under the same title.

The Tugging was written three years later, in response to a request for a story for a DAW Books anthology, *The Disciples of Cthulhu*. That anthology set me thinking of editing one of my own. Just before his death Derleth had told me that he planned to edit *New Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*. Arkham House agreed that I should, and I contributed the story *The Faces at Pine Dunes*.

Editing that book helped me organise my thoughts about the followers of Lovecraft. The great merit of Lovecraft's mythos was always that however much it showed, it suggested more: it was a way of sketching the unknown in terms that fed the reader's imagination—mine, certainly. Perhaps it was inevitable that writers such as myself would attempt to fill in the gaps. I think the most important question to be asked about any story based on Lovecraft is whether it conveys any of the awe and terror Lovecraft's stories did. I've little time for the kind of story which purports to discover yet

another genealogical link among Lovecraft's entities—this kind of nitpicking may be all right for the fanzines, but hardly a basis for fiction—and much less time for stories that rob Lovecraft's concepts of awe by explaining them away. On the other hand, I admire such disparate stories as Bloch's *Notebook Found in a Deserted House* (surely the most frightening Mythos tale by anyone other than Lovecraft), Wandrei's *The Tree-Men of M'Bwa* and *The Web of Easter Island*, Frank Belknap Long's *The Space-Eaters* (an oddly moving as well as awesome story about the pupil confounding the teacher), Henry Kuttner's *The Graveyard Rats*, T.E.D. Klein's *Black Man with a Horn*, among quite a few others.

My doubts about the overpopulation and overexplanation of the Mythos prompted me to write *The Voice of the Beach*. Lovecraft regarded Blackwood's *The Willows*—in which, as he often pointed out, nothing is shown or stated directly—as the finest of all weird tales. The closest he came to achieving what Blackwood achieved was in *The Colour out of Space*, which contains none of the paraphernalia of the later mythos. *The Voice of the Beach* was my attempt to return to Lovecraft's first principles, to see how close I could get to his aims without the encumbrances of the mythos. Lin Carter looked at the story when he was editing *Weird Tales*, but rejected it as insufficiently Lovecraftian. For my part, I believe it's the most successful of these stories.

Whether I shall return to Lovecraft as an influence I don't know. Some may feel I've never shaken it off. *Blacked Out*, the most recent story in this book, is clearly indebted to Lovecraft, though it wasn't written with that intention. (In a sense *Among the pictures are these* is the earliest piece, a literal description written in 1973 of some drawings I executed in my early teens.) One Edna Stumpf (a name on which I can scarcely improve) rounded off a review of my novel *Incarnate*, which she very kindly described as 'surprisingly good,' with the words 'My dream is that Campbell take ten years to flush the Lovecraft out of his typewriter. And rewriter (sic) it.' I hope she and any others of like mind will not be too distressed if I don't take ten years off from writing. If some of Lovecraft's sense of wonder remains in my work, so much the better. I hope that at least my attempts to repay the pleasure his work still gives me have not lessened his power.

Ramsey Campbell
Merseyside

6 July, 1984

Foreword To *Scared Stiff: Tales Of Sex And Death*: "The Bare Bones", an introduction by Clive Barker

Death And The Maiden. It's an eternally popular subject for painters, and in a sense for writers and filmmakers too. What does the image conjure? A woman, naked perhaps, or nearly so, gazing at us with horror (or, on occasion, with a sublime indifference) while Death stretches a rotted paw to touch her breast, or leans its worm-ridden skull towards her as if to ply her with kisses.

Corruption and sexuality in a marriage of opposites.

The motif is echoed whenever a movie monster takes beauty in its arms, or at least attempts to. Sometimes, of course, the Maiden keeps Death at bay; as often, she's claimed. Whichever, the sexual *frisson* generated by her glamour is increased tenfold by the presence of the foulness that shadows her.

But the drama of the image—with the Maiden representing innocence and life, and Death the joyless evil that threatens her—is only one aspect of a fascinating confrontation. There are countless sophistications of that theme, the most complex of them more readily rendered in prose, I believe, where the writer can describe both the outer *and* inner conditions of his characters, than in any other medium.

Stories that can show us the flesh in all its sensuality, then reveal the bone beneath; or uncover the decay at the heart of an apparently wholesome passion; that take us into the wildest realms of perversion, and into the fever of obsession. It's a fruitful area.

But for a genre that derives much of its power from the trespassing of taboos, horror fiction has been remarkably coy when it comes to talking of sex. In an age when characters in all manner of fiction have forsaken their blushes to fornicate, horror fiction clings to its underwear with a nunnish zeal.

There have been, it's true, many masterworks charged with eroticism (indeed there's an argument that says much of the genre is underpinned by repressed sexuality) but it has remained, for the most part, sub-text. We can take our werewolf with a touch of Freud or without. As long as he doesn't sport an erection (the werewolf, not Freud) as well as snout and tail, we can interpret the image shorn of its sexual possibilities.

For my part, I tend to be of the opinion that such willful naïveté is perverse, and that art is best enjoyed, as it should be made, *to the limit*.

Turning a blind eye to what an image may signify—either because the interpretation distresses or confounds us—is not what good fiction should do, nor should it be the response it elicits. It's doubly regrettable, therefore, that so little horror fiction has taken the challenge of sexuality by the balls.

I've talked of this with writers and fans alike, and many of them evidence some fear that if the undertow of sexual meaning were made manifest the fiction would lose some of its power to persuade. I have argued in return that any fictional forum that requires a willful suspension of the reader's spirit of intellectual inquiry (as opposed to his disbelief) doesn't deserve to survive, and have put my pen where my mouth is (as it were) with sex in a number of my pieces.

Mr. Campbell has done the same, with great success. Here, gathered in a single volume, are several of his stories that marry the horrific with the sexual. I don't use the word *erotic* here, for I think the sexual material in these tales serves a far more complex function than straightforward titillation.

For one thing, it is never a narrative aside—an overheated fuck before the horrors begin afresh—but rather a central and eloquent part of the story's texture. For another, the actors in these scenes (when human) are seldom the deodorised stuff of fantasy, but the same pale-buttocked, stale-sweated individuals we all of us greet each morning in our mirrors. Thirdly, and most pertinently, the sexual material is marked by Ramsey Campbell's unique vision, just as everything in his fiction is marked.

Most of you will know that Mr. Campbell has earned his considerable audience, and countless critical plaudits, by creating a world in which much remains unsaid and unseen, and the fear he creates is as much wed to our individual interpretation of what the prose is implying as derived from anything the author explicitly reveals.

This being the nature of his gift, it might seem that graphic sexual descriptions—and believe me, graphic they are—would not sit happily with such obliqueness. Far from it. One of the delightfully unsettling things about these tales is the way Ramsey's brooding, utterly unique vision renders an act familiar to us all so fretful, so strange, so *chilling*. As elsewhere, his pithy prose responds to the challenge of reinventing experience with subtlety and resilience, never slipping into cliché, but always asking us to make fresh sense of the acts set before us.

And so we should, for sexuality is all too often the territory of the sentimentalist or the pornographer, too seldom that of the visionary. Yet it's a transforming act, literally. It remakes our bodies, for a time; and our minds too. For a little space we know obsession intimately; we are at the call of chemical instructions which sharpen our senses and at the same time narrow our focus, so that our perceptions are heightened and refined.

Horror fiction has traditionally had much to say about all these subjects: transformation, obsession and perception. Sex, with its ecstasies and its *petit mort*: its private rituals and its public corruptions; its way of reminding us that all physical pleasure is rooted in the same body that shits, sweats and withers, is the perfect stuff for the horror writer, and there can be few artists working in the genre as capable of analysing and dramatising such territory as the author of the volume you hold.

As I said earlier, horror fiction has traditionally dealt in taboo. It speaks of death, madness and the transgression of moral and physical boundaries. It raises the dead to life and slaughters infants in their cribs; it makes monsters of household pets and begs our affection for psychos. It shows us that the control we believe we have is purely illusory, and that every moment we teeter on chaos and oblivion.

And to that list of taboos I now add another list: the forbidden substrata of sexuality. The obsessions with parts and people we keep in our private thoughts; the acts we dream of but dare not openly desire; the flesh we long to wear, the pains we yearn to endure or inflict in the name of love.

Here are fictions which unite subjects from both the above lists. In which the dead don't simply rise—they rise to *fuck*.

To some of you, these stories will seem portraits of Hell. But if you're honest, your dreams may tell you differently.

Who knows, maybe the Maiden hasn't been startled by Death at all; maybe that cold touch on her breast is what she's been waiting for all her life.

People desire stranger things, as the extraordinary Mr. Campbell is about to prove...

Clive Barker
London
29th June, 1986

Debatable and Disturbing: Editorial Shards, an introduction to Crypt Of Cthulhu #43, by Robert M. Price

Ramsey Campbell is one of the top handful of horror writers today, and one of the still smaller group that *deserves* to be. It may be hard for some of us oldsters to realise, but there are no doubt some in today's newest generation of Lovecraftians (drawn to the faith perhaps through the Cthulhu role-playing game or *Re-Animator*) who already knew Campbell's mature, non-Mythos work and only later learned that he, like Robert Bloch and Brian Lumley, had cut his teeth writing Lovecraftian tales.

Veterans and neophytes alike rejoiced when Scream Press issued *Cold Print*, a collection of Campbell's Mythos tales, last year. Several were reprinted from the 1964 Arkham House collection *The Inhabitant of the Lake*, but certain "less welcome tenants" were omitted. Besides some from the 1964 volume, other missing Mythos items were stray fanzine stories or discarded drafts.

Where else but in the pages of *Crypt of Cthulhu* is a poor Campbell-ite likely to find these tales? The present issue collects all the *rest* of Campbell's early Cthulhu Mythos stories. *The Tomb-Herd* was rewritten and published as *The Church in High Street*, and though several snipped paragraphs were included in Ramsey's preface to *Cold Print,* the whole tale seemed of sufficient interest to publish here. *The Face in the Desert* was rejected even from the original *Inhabitant of the Lake* and appeared previously only in a fanzine. *A Madness From the Vaults* appears here in its two incarnations, the first having appeared in an obscure fanzine, the second, a completely rewritten version in Penny and Meade Friersons' *HPL* fan anthology (1971). The earlier is taken from Ramsey's handwritten manuscript (as are *The Tower from Yuggoth* and *The Face in the Desert*; all

the early manuscripts are housed in the Local History Library of the Liverpool Public Libraries).

The manuscript *The Tower from Yuggoth* is substantially different from the rewritten and published *The Mine on Yuggoth*, practically a different story. Here are both for comparison. Two more of the tales from *The Inhabitant of the Lake* not included in *Cold Print*, *The Plain of Sound* and *The Return of the Witch* are included here though *The Will of Stanley Brooke*, not a Mythos tale, is not. *The Stone on the Island* first appeared in the 1964 Arkham House anthology *Over the Edge* (reprinted by Victor Gollancz in 1967 and in paper by Arrow in 1976).

The stories are printed here in at least roughly chronological order.

Robert M. Price, Editor
Crypt Of Cthulhu #43, Hallowmas 1986

Foreword To Waking Nightmares

Horror fiction can be many things. The field includes the ghost stories of Sheridan Le Fanu and M. R. James, not to mention the best tales of Russell Kirk. It ranges from the psychological terrors of John Franklin Bardin to the philosophical terrors of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* and *Not I*. It embraces both the supernatural visions of Algernon Blackwood at his best —*The Willows*, *The Wendigo*—and the relentless violence of Joe Lansdale's *The Nightrunners*, the last horror novel I found genuinely frightening. Horror fiction can work as humour, as metaphor, as political allegory, as the imagination's reveille. I won't presume to claim that the present book has such scope, but I'm inclined to be pleased with its range.

I've arranged the stories in the interest of variety, but I'll discuss them chronologically. The earliest is *Jack in the Box* (1974), the first of a group of stories (several of which may be found in Dark Companions) written in emulation of *Tales from the Crypt* and the other E.C. comics, which themselves derived from Poe and *Weird Tales* magazine, and in particular from Ray Bradbury. By sheer carelessness I managed to transpose the words torchlight and daylight in the penultimate paragraph of the original typescript of *Jack in the Box*, an error which destroys the whole point of the story. My apologies to any readers who ended up scratching their heads over a previous printing of the tale.

The Trick (1976) comes next, and it isn't a story I would write now. Jim Herbert told me recently that since he became a father he has tried to steer clear of the theme of children as victims. For my part, parenthood seems to keep sending me back to the theme of the vulnerability of children—Night of the Claw, Incarnate, The Influence—but what bothers me about *The Trick* is its cold-bloodedness. Still, people whose opinions I respect have found the story frightening, and I've included it here on that basis. I think it also contrasts well with *Eye of Childhood*, written two years later. I would have given that story a somewhat more obvious title, but Robert Aickman had already based the name of his second American book on the phrase from *Macbeth*. There's another child protagonist in the next tale, *Bedtime Story* (1980); like *The Nameless*, this was written after our daughter Tammy

was born. Ideally—though in fact, I fear, too seldom—having children reminds one what it was like to be one.

Playing the Game also dates from 1980. At least, this version does, though the first version I sent to my agent was completed in late 1974 as one of my E.C. emulations. My friend Mike Ashley, the anthologist and bibliographer, suggested that the characters in that version were feebly motivated, and I came to agree with him. In 1982 I learned that T. E. D. Klein had bought the tale for *Twilight Zone* magazine—the original version, to my surprise. 'When you rewrite,' he commented to me, 'you really rewrite, don't you?' Later Herb Yellin published my preferred version in an anthology from Lord John Press. Both versions of the tale attempt to convey how parts of the Liverpool docks affect me.

I wrote almost no more short stories until 1983, the year which produced the next four tales in this book. The first, *Watch the Birdie*, carries its own explanation. *Next Time You'll Know Me* can be read as some kind of response to my being sent unsolicited manuscripts. It appeared in Douglas Winter's *Prime Evil*, where one of those copy-editors whom writers abhor tried to change all the narrator's said-bookisms into 'said.' *In the Trees* stems from a walk in Delamere Forest, where I often go to play with ideas for new stories, and *Old Clothes* derives from the idea of apports, one of the very few mediumistic notions odd enough to appeal to my imagination.

Beyond Words (1985) owes something to the comment with which Kenneth Jurkewicz rounds off his essay about me in Everett F. Bleiler's *Supernatural Fiction Writers*: 'For him it is indeed the words that count.' Stanley Wiater suggests this is a tale best read aloud. Just as odd is *The Other Side* (1985), but perhaps the oddness is more studied, insofar as the tale was written in response to a request to write a story based on J. K. Potter's cover for the program book of the 1986 World Fantasy Convention, where J. K. and I were among the guests of honour. On one level the story is about my attempts to write something which would equal, rather than simply quote, Potter's surreal image. I should have liked to use the picture for the cover of the present book, but instead you may find it on the sixteenth volume of Karl Edward Wagner's *Year's Best Horror Stories*.

Second Sight (1985) was produced for J. N. Williamson, who asked me to write a two-thousand-word story for his anthology *Masques II*, and *Where the Heart Is* (1986) was composed for Kathryn Cramer's *The Architecture of*

Fear, an anthology of tales in which the architectural setting is also a metaphor of some kind. I liked this idea, but was disconcerted to find that in her letter describing her requirements to potential contributors she had cited me as having achieved in various stories what she had in mind: I felt as if I were being asked to imitate myself. (In general writers are likely to be truest to themselves when they are trying not to repeat themselves.) However, the family and I had recently moved house before managing to sell our previous home, and I was also losing patience with hearing the perennial claim that no ghost stories were being written anymore—at least, not by writers within the field. Together, these elements prompted *Where the Heart Is*. That kind of synchronism—putting coincidences to use whenever they're useful—I believe in.

Another World (1987) was another tale written to order—a useful discipline—but its readers may not have noticed. I was originally approached by Paul Gamble (*Gamma*) to contribute to an anthology of stories on the theme of a forbidden planet, to be published by the London bookshop of that name. I duly wrote on the theme. Later the editorship was taken over by Roz Kaveney, and the scope was widened to include writers who had signed books at the bookshop and who were allowed their own choice of theme. Almost the opposite happened in the case of *Book of the Dead*, originally an anthology of tales set in the world of George Romero's trilogy of zombie films. I turned down a request to contribute, simply because I felt Romero had himself said all there was to say on his subject, but when I learned that the tales had only to use the theme of the zombie in some way I thought I might have something to offer: *It Helps If You Sing* (1987). Imagine my bemusement at reading on my contributor's copies of the book that each of the stories in this anthology is set in a world where the dead have risen to eat the living, which is certainly not the case with my story. Incidentally, the introduction by Skipp and Spector to the book strikes me as the most persuasive statement I've seen on behalf of the splatter-punks, though I don't think all the stories in *Book of the Dead* live up to its claims.

The Guide (1988) was another story written on request, and one I especially wanted to do right by. Paul Olson and David F. Silva asked me to write a traditional ghost story for their book Post Mortem. Now, I was becoming convinced (and still am) that many of today's horror writers are unaware of the traditions of their field. Indeed, one course on writing horror

advises its students to avoid learning from the old masters, as if there aren't already too many writers who appear to have read no fiction older than themselves. I therefore welcomed the chance to demonstrate that the techniques employed by M. R. James are as valid as ever. Incidentally, the James book cited in the story is genuine, as are the quotations from it.

The idea of being directed by a (probably supernatural) prompter had been lying dormant in one of my notebooks for some time when Chris Morgan asked me to write a story for his anthology *Dark Fantasies*. I suspect that I might otherwise have developed the idea along more comic lines than I did in *Being an Angel* (1988), and perhaps it still retains enough potential for me to do so in another tale.

I believe I can thank Jenny's and my children for generating the last two 1988 tales. It was our daughter Tammy who introduced me to the game of Blocko which prompted *The Old School*, while both she and our son Matty were fond of Jan Pienkowski's pop-up haunted house book, which set me thinking along the lines which led me to write *Meeting the Author*. I should think that you, the reader, have done enough of that for one book by now. British members of any professions or other groups who feel maligned by any of the tales herein should address their complaints to the Fictional Depictions Complaints Commission in the first instance, then to the Royal Commission on Representation in Storytelling. Complainants in other countries should approach the appropriate bodies. Me, I'll blame the copy-editors.

Ramsey Campbell
Merseyside
20 June 1990

Foreword To Strange Things And Stranger Places

The strangest place most of us ordinarily see is the world, but familiarity tends to make us forget how strange it is. One thing good horror fiction—and, I'd suggest, any good fiction—can do is remind us. Of the stories in this book, "Needing Ghosts" certainly did that to me, and much else besides. If everything a writer creates is a stage in the process of getting to what he writes next, then perhaps I can claim that the rest of the contents lead to "Needing Ghosts."

Well, let me leave the exploration of that theme to anyone who finds it interesting. "Cat and Mouse" (1971) was the earliest tale I ever wrote to order, for the first anthology to be edited by a fantasy fan of about my own age with whom I'd corresponded while at school, Michel Parry. The book was, I need hardly say, a collection of supernatural tales about cats. Reviewing it in *Fantastic*, Fritz Leiber criticised my story for coming on too feline too early. As usual in his criticisms, he was right, and his comment was the reason why I introduced the theme of "The Chimney" more gradually, but I don't think it's malicious of me to point out that the feline images in the opening sentences of "Cat and Mouse" were added at Michel's request. I hope they and my comments won't seem too intrusive.

Writing on a subject provided by an editor can be a useful discipline. "Cat and Mouse" now looks to me like one of my more controlled stories from the period after I'd completed *Demons by Daylight* and found myself writing in search of new themes. Some of the results of that process appear in *The Height of the Scream*, and some, to my relief, have never appeared anywhere. One such muffled story was "Property of the Ring," among the few tales I wrote in 1970. Dissatisfaction with it deterred me from even preparing a typescript, but I did feel the basic theme deserved another chance. When I began to write full time in 1973 and the horror markets immediately vanished like so many will-o'-the-wisps, I thought it might do

as the basis for one of the science fiction stories my agent, Kirby McCauley, kept suggesting I should try to write.

The result was "Medusa" (1973), my first novella. Several of my other attempts at science fiction saw even less print than this did, and believe me, no wonder. Whereas I wrote a handful of sword and sorcery tales (not counting the Solomon Kane stories I completed) in order to develop images that seemed too extravagant to be accommodated in my usual stuff, my science fiction stories tried to deal with Themes, too consciously, I feel. "Medusa" is probably the best of them, insofar as here and there imagination surfaces, but I may as well admit that I feel too distant from the story to have any real sense of having written it or of why I did. However, better writers than I have praised it—Dennis Etchison, in his introduction to Bill Minister's three-hundred-copy edition, and T. E. D. Klein—and so they must take some of the responsibility for its presence here.

In 1974 there seemed to be a new market for horror—a bunch of Marvel comics which would include prose tales modelled on the E. C. comics of the fifties. I wrote quite a few that year, appreciating the discipline of having to be terse, even when it transpired that Marvel had decided not to use prose stories after all. "Rising Generation" was my zombie story to go with the other found monsters, and "Wrapped Up" was done for Michel Parry, for a mummy anthology which failed to appear. "Run Through" was based on a dream of seeing a figure repeatedly running towards me, and perhaps the business with the key derives from my own obsessive behaviour: I often have to check several times that I've locked doors or switched off electricity. Writing the story doesn't seem to have helped me stop myself, but the important issue is whether it's a good story. As for "Passing Phase" (also 1974), I've no idea where it came from.

"A New Life" was one of the last of my E. C. pieces. It was written in 1976, the year when much of my energy was devoted to writing novels based on classic Universal horror films. These were published under the house name of Carl Dreadstone—my original suggestion had been Carl Thunstone, but Manly Wade Wellman understandably thought people might assume that pseudonym was his—though in England, to add to the confusion, some were credited instead to E. K. Leyton. I was hoping to reissue my Dreadstone books as an omnibus, but alas, this is not to be. I can at least take this opportunity to make it clear that I wrote only *The Bride of*

Frankenstein, *The Wolfman* and *Dracula's Daughter*. The other novels are nothing to do with me, and by now even Piers Dudgeon, the editor who commissioned the series, can't recall who wrote them.

I suppose both "The Next Sideshow" (1977) and "Little Man" (1978) owe their existence to my liking for fairgrounds and seaside resorts, especially out of season. I live less than half an hour's walk from such a resort, New Brighton. I remember visiting it as a teenager one rainy Boxing Day to see *The Apartment*, Billy Wilder's alleged comedy about attempted suicide, at the moribund local cinema—altogether one of the low points of my life. That I ended up living so close to that setting no doubt says a lot about me.

New Brighton is on the tip of the Wirral Peninsula, and used to be reached by a ferry from Liverpool. "Needing Ghosts" (1989/90) finds a context for my nighttime rides on the ferry, along with much that is stranger. I said at the outset that the story was a stage in a process, and for once that was obvious to me during the writing of it. I'd been having problems with my novels: I'd almost blocked at least once while writing *The Influence*; denying myself a psychologically troubled central character in *Ancient Images* had given me more problems than I'd anticipated; *Midnight Sun* gave me several kinds of hell for most of a year. As I was struggling with the latter, Deborah Beale of Legend managed to persuade me to commit myself to following it with a novella, and "Needing Ghosts" was the result, for which my bookseller friend John Mottershead lent me his surname. It may be the strangest piece I'll ever write.

Some of its energy derives from the excitement of working in a form new to me (as distinct from "Medusa," which ended up as a novella rather than setting out to be one). However, that doesn't quite explain why it was such fun to write. Once I'd written the early scene at the bus terminal—more precisely, the bit with the destination indicators—the story kept coming out so much stranger than I could have predicted that I could hardly wait to write it so as to find out what happened next. The process felt immensely liberating, perhaps because I was able to include elements which had seemed too dark for inclusion in *Midnight Sun*, certainly because the story let me explore the territory where horror and comedy overlap, an exploration which led straight to *The Count of Eleven* and to some extent *The Long Lost* too. Where will those books lead? There's only one way to

find out, and that's why I continue to write. May the reader enjoy the results as much as I enjoyed the process.

Ramsey Campbell
Merseyside
3 August 1992

Introduction to the story *The Limits Of Fantasy* in The Year's Best Horror Stories 21

In the summer of 1974 Michel Parry, an old friend, complained to me that nobody was sending him tales on sexual themes for his black magic anthologies. Aroused by the suggestion, I wrote *Dolls*, which enabled me both to explore what happened to the supernatural story when the underlying sexual theme (not always present, of course) became overt and to write a long short story that was stronger on narrative than atmosphere, a useful preparation for writing my first novel. Michel hadn't expected anything quite so sexually explicit, and I was amused when his publishers, Mayflower, felt compelled to show *Dolls* to their lawyers for advice. They were advised to publish, and over the next two years Michel commissioned several more such tales from me, including two for a short-lived series of anthologies of erotic horror which he edited as Linda Lovecraft, who was, in fact, the owner of a chain of sex shops and who is one more reason why asking for Lovecraft in a British bookshop may earn you a dubious look. Perhaps the anthologies were ahead of their time because *More Devil's Kisses*, the second in the series, was pulped shortly after publication, apparently in response to objections from Scotland Yard. Rumour had it that the problem was a tale reprinted from *National Lampoon*, involving a seven-year-old girl and a horse. I confess to being more amused than irritated by the ban, much as I felt upon learning that my first novel had been seen (in a television documentary) on top of a pile of books for burning by Christian fundamentalists—something of a compliment as far as I'm concerned. On reflection, though, I think I wasn't entitled to feel quite so superior about censorship. Though my sexual tales had been, on the whole, progressively darker and more unpleasant, I'd suppressed the third of them, *In The Picture*. It was the initial draft of the story published here.

At the time (May 1975) I believed I had decided not to revise and submit the story because it wasn't up to publishable standard, and that was

certainly the case. However, the reasons were more personal than I admitted to myself. All fiction is to some extent the product of censorship, whether by the culture within which it is produced or by the writer's own selection of material, both of which processes tend to be to some extent unconscious. Perhaps the most insidious form of censorship, insofar as it may be the most seductive for the writer, is by his own dishonesty. For me the most immediate proof is that it wasn't until Barry Hoffman asked me if I had any suppressed fiction that I realised, on rereading *In The Picture*, that my dishonesty was its central flaw.

One mode of fiction I dislike—one especially common in my field—is the kind where the act of writing about a character seems designed to announce that the character has nothing to do with the author. On the most basic level, it's nonsense, since by writing about a character the writer must draw that personality to some extent from within himself. More to the present point, it smells of protesting too much, and while that may be clear to the reader, for the writer it's a kind of censorship of self. I rather hope that *In The Picture* is the only tale in which I succumb to that temptation.

In The Picture follows the broad outline of *The Limits Of Fantasy*, though much more humourlessly, up to the scene with Enid Stone, and then Sid Pym begins to indulge in fantasies of rape and degradation which I believe are foreign to his sexual makeup and which are contrived simply to demonstrate what a swine he is—in other words, that he is quite unlike myself. Of course nothing could be further from the truth. In response to Barry Hoffman I treated *In The Picture* as the first version of the story and rewrote it exactly as I would any other first draft, and I had the most fun writing Pym's boarding-school fantasy, which is at least as much my fantasy as his. For me his presentation of it is both comic and erotic.

It seems to me that even the most liberal of us employ two definitions of pornography: the kind that turns ourselves on, which we're more prone to regard as erotic, and the kind which appeals to people with sexual tastes unlike our own and which we're more likely to condemn as pornographic. In my case the absurdity is that the group of scenarios which I sum up as the boarding-school fantasy (which is obviously as much fetishistic as sadistic) is the only species of pornography I find appealing, and it was therefore especially dishonest of me to include no more than a hint of it when I collected my sexual tales in *Scared Stiff*. I suppose, then and in my

original suppression of *In The Picture,* I was afraid of losing friends, but that really isn't something writers should take into account when writing. I suspect I was assuming that my readers and people in general are squarer when it comes to erotic fantasy than is in fact the case. Since the publication of *Scared Stiff* I've heard from readers of various sexes that they found parts of the book erotic, and a female reader gave me a copy of *Caught Looking*, a polemic published by the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce, in which one of the illustrations (all chosen by the FACT designers on the basis that they themselves found the images erotically appealing) is a still from a spanking video made in Britain before such videos were banned outright under a censorship that is fast overtaking the equivalent glossy magazines. (The Spankarama Cinema in Soho, rather unfairly chastised in the Winter 1982/83 *Sight and Sound* and touched on by association in *Incarnate*, is long gone; perhaps I should have had a publicity photograph taken under the sign while it was there.) Incidentally, perhaps one minor reason for my reticence was the notion that this sexual taste is peculiarly British, but a day in Amsterdam proved me wrong.

So I trust this hasn't been too embarrassing. I haven't found it so, but then I may sometimes lack tact in these areas: I once greeted a friend I met in a sex shop, who immediately fled. Still, I'm committed to telling as much of the truth as I can, as every writer should be. If we can't tell the truth about ourselves, how can we presume to do so about anyone or anything? Secretiveness is a weakness, whereas honesty is strength.

Ramsey Campbell
October 1993

Click here to return to the story The Limits Of Fantasy.

Introduction to Far Away And Never, 1996

These tales date from my brief stint as a write of pure fantasy. All are set in a mythical word. Of course, the version of New England I perpetrated in my first Lovecraftian stumblings was pretty mythical, not to mention the juvenile sketch of Arabia ("Araby") which I persuaded myself was good enough for *The Face In The Desert*. But the present tales, with one exception, are of the planet Tond, and that's where the problem begins.

Introduction To Ghosts And Grisly Things

Am I old yet? Am I jaded? Have I reached the point H. Russell Wakefield reached, and Nigel Kneale, and any number of commentators on my field, when they declared with all the confidence of ignorance that no good work was being done in it any more? Not while writers who've come after me are adding so much of worth to it—let me exhort anyone who needs convincing to start with Thomas Ligotti, Terry Lamsley, Kim Newman and Poppy Z. Brite, four of my particular favourites. I hope I may add some good stuff yet myself. Meanwhile, here's all this, which I'll reminisce about as the mood takes me, in chronological order of writing.

Through the Walls (1974) was a part—an odd one, you may think—of the process of working myself up to try a major psychedelic. When I dropped acid for the first time soon afterwards, the experience had thankfully little in common with the tale, though the flashback I suffered in late 1976 had far too much. I originally intended the story for *Superhorror*, the first anthology I edited, but several informed friends—Hugh Lamb, Kathy Murray and T E. D. Klein, all of them presently less active in the field than they deserve to be—pointed out flaws in the version I showed them. Later I rewrote it, and here is its final form.

Looking Out (1974) derives, I suspect, from my mother's increasing reluctance to venture far from her house once Jenny and I were living together. It was a trait that chafed her sister and brother-in-law, whom she regularly arranged to visit only to cancel at the last moment. Many were the arguments we had when I tried to persuade her that my aunt and uncle might be inconvenienced, and great was her pique if they proved to have invited a friend the next time she announced a visit. All that had its comic side, but Nairn's plight became hers too, anticipated by the tale. At least, that's my sense of it, though the notes for its development should be in the library vaults of Liverpool University if anybody wants to challenge my account.

As well as addressing its obvious themes of the difficulties of ageing and of the costs of change, *The Sneering* (1975) is a somewhat bitter celebration of an area of Liverpool where I once attended school—Ryebank Private School, to be precise, from 1953 to 1957. I remember being ragged on my arrival by some seniors and declaring with what must have been insufferable precociousness that I wouldn't stand for it. Sit down for it, then, one of my tormentors duly responded. My memory and my eleven-plus results suggest it was a pretty good school, though one Irish teacher, a Mrs Toomey or Twomey, berated me in front of the class for having told someone at a bus stop—I've no idea how the information got back to the school—that I wrote stories (true even then) and wanted them to be published in America. Wasn't England good enough for me? she demanded, and it's only now I retort that Ireland seems not to have been for her. She was fond of telling unruly pupils how she had once spanked a rebellious girl on stage in front of the entire school. My readers must decide why this should have lodged in my memory.

Missed Connection was written in early 1976, and *The Change* immediately after. The year was nothing if not productive, as can be seen from Joshi's and Dziemianowicz's splendid bibliography, *The Core of Ramsey Campbell*. The first of these two stories prefigures the darkness and oppressiveness of the second, I think. These qualities aren't so appropriate in the first instance, which should have been another of my succinct tales written in tribute to the EC comics of the fifties, but I find *The Change* authentically grim—indeed, for me it's my darkest tale, and surely needs no exegesis by the author.

This Time (1978) and *Root Cause* (1979) don't call for much explanation either. The more fiction one writes, I find, the more the slightest incident or passing thought can set about instantly plotting itself. *This Time* began with the idea of counting backwards during the onset of an anaesthetic, and was a tale I worked out pretty fully in advance so that I would have something to write once our first child was born. (*Down There* followed it, and was so intractable that I nearly abandoned it after three days, until a paragraph of the first draft came alive.) The genesis of *Root Cause* must be somewhere in my notebooks, and I leave it to be discovered with a grunt or gasp or cry of triumph by some future researcher. Will that be my spectral finger marking the page for them, or just a length of restless cobweb?

Welcomeland (1987) owes its conception to Alan Moore, one of the contemporary British giants—Bryan Talbot and Neil Gaiman and John Coulthart are others—of the comic book. At a party after a signing we did in Peterborough, Alan told me of an abandoned Northern industrial town that a businessman had sought to turn into a theme park until his money ran out. Substances ingested at the party may have helped me to develop the notion as weirdly as it deserved.

We come to 1990, and four tales herein. *The Alternative* is one of the stories I thought of writing on the theme of a life whose positive qualities depend on dreadful nightmares. Maybe in time I'll write another, though this one also discovers a moral theme. I wrote at length about my actual dreams and nightmares in my regular column in the magazine *Necrofile*. *A Street was Chosen* has at its root the kind of trick writers should play on themselves every so often—requiring themselves to use a style they don't ordinarily employ. My task here was to write in the passive voice without undue repetition, and in the form of a scientific report. I found this virtually impossible until I switched from writing longhand, always my way with first drafts, to composing directly onto the computer screen. That's how I write non-fiction, the present ramblings included, and perhaps that's why the method worked for *A Street was Chosen*.

See How They Run was written for an anthology about psychopaths edited by my old, and now lamented, friend Robert Bloch. Bob was happy with the tale but not the title, which he'd used for a story of his own, and so I retitled mine *For You to Judge*. I still preferred my original title, however, and after Bob's death I used it for a reprinting by another much-missed friend, Karl Wagner. Not many days before Bob died I was able to speak to him on the phone for half an hour and tell him he was loved. He told me that he was able to see a pattern in his life. I hope I shall in mine.

The Same in Any Language was a response to a request too. A resurrected *Weird Tales*, the legendary pulp magazine, was to publish an issue as a tribute to me, much to my delight. My first glimpse of a copy of *Weird Tales* in a shop window when I was six or seven years old started a yearning which only collecting the magazine could begin to satisfy. Darrell Schweitzer, editor of its latest incarnation, asked me to vary the tone and settings of my stories for the tribute issue as much as I could. Given that *The Change* was included, I imagine he wanted me to be less bleak. I'd

wanted to use Spinalonga as a setting in any case, having forgotten that John Ware had already done so in the thirteenth volume of Herbert van Thal's increasingly pornographic Pan books of horror stories, a series later rescued from itself by Steve Jones and his partner in excellence David Sutton. Ware's tale is an old-fashioned ghost story. How about mine?

1991 was the year I finished *The Count of Eleven*—a novel of a serial killer who might have been played by Stan Laurel, as one reviewer delighted me by saying—and the comedy I'd discovered there found its way into that year's short stories. Mind you, there may be some who would take *The Dead Must Die* straight, an unnerving thought. It was written for *Narrow Houses*, Pete Crowther's anthology about superstition, a human failing I take to mean basing one's life on irrationality. Of course my stuff frequently deals with the irrational, but I trust my readers to recognise that I'm writing fiction. Some writers in the field seem happy to increase their sales by pretending otherwise. Mind you, *A Side of the Sea* strikes me now as less fantastic than I took it to be at the time, and in *McGonagall in the Head* I found it difficult to invent worse verse than some of the couplets real people send after the departed. I don't know if any reader needs me to explain that William McGonagall was to poetry what Edward D. Wood of *Plan 9 From Outer Space* was to the cinema. Fans of either will also be rewarded by the poetry and prose of Amanda McKittrick Ros.

In 1992 I had time to complete only one short story, *Between the Floors*. That Easter the annual British science fiction convention was held in a Blackpool hotel, where some of the conventioneers were banished to an annexe served by a lift complete with a lugubrious attendant not at all unlike (except in some ways, one hopes) the figure who haunts my tale. What is it about comedians that makes them recur in my stuff? Even the monstrous Hector Woollie in the novel I'm presently writing has ambitions to amuse children. Perhaps I've never felt the same about comedians since reading the nightmarish chapter fourteen of David Storey's *Radcliffe*.

I saw myself into 1993 by finishing *Where They Lived*. The idea for it, or more precisely the characters, came to me on a coach ride in Turkey. I overheard nobody like the Lunts on it—indeed, the organiser of the tour had the good taste to play a tape of the *Appassionata*—but I suspect my subconscious had been scheming for a while to create representatives of the kind of English tourist who goes abroad in search of Blackpool. (American

readers should understand that Blackpool can be described as a less tasteful Coney Island.) Any number of lines of Luntish dialogue suggested themselves to me all at once. Having scribbled them down, I was casting about for a suitably macabre situation to build around the Lunts when it occurred to me that they were macabre enough in themselves. See if you agree once you've met them—I hope only on the page.

Going Under (1994) was done for Nancy Collins' book *Dark Love*. I know it doesn't fit her title very well. I'd somehow convinced myself she was editing an anthology about obsessions, and the tale can claim that preoccupation, I think. Around the time I planned to write it one of the Mersey Tunnels was closed to traffic for a day so that the public could celebrate its anniversary by walking through. I intended to research the experience, but the story grew impatient to be written, and so I saved myself the walk.

Out of the Woods dates from the same year. The editor of a Belgian journal approached me to write a story about wood or paper or a Finnish legend for a magazine he was to edit in English to be sold to Finns worldwide. I assure you that I don't invent these anecdotes. He tempted me to fit the project into my schedule by offering a handsome sum, but when he received the story his offer turned out to be less than forthcoming, and I haven't heard from him since. Still, the story went down well at readings, and I later recorded it (along with The Guide, Calling Card and The Companion) on an audio cassette, *Twilight Tales from Merseyside*, available from BBC Radio Merseyside and in America from Necronomicon Press.

And so to the chunk of unpublished stuff, *Ra*e*. It was another tale written to an order that proved less firm than it had promised to be. Jeff Gelb and Lonn Friend, editors of the *Hot Blood* series of anthologies, asked various people to write a long story about one of the seven deadly sins. You will have guessed which attracted me. Alas, for whatever reason, the project failed to find a publisher, and so although I completed the first draft of the tale in early 1996, I saw little point in revising such a lengthy piece to be touted elsewhere. For a while a second volume of *Dark Love* seemed imminent, and apparently both Nancy Collins and her publishers wanted me in it, but it too faded and vanished. Now here is a place for *Ra*e*, in final draft at last. My thanks to all those who bought it and the book it rounds off, and who have indulged my determination not to repeat myself, which isn't

to say that I've by any means always succeeded. All the same, here's to keeping on trying. The journey isn't over, and I hope to have some odd things to show you on the way.

Ramsey Campbell
Wallasey, Merseyside
16 September 1997

Afterword To Scared Stiff: Tales Of Sex And Death

Nobody rebels like a good Catholic boy, and I spent quite a stretch of my childhood in fighting the repressiveness of my upbringing. I needed to. At an early age I was infected by my mother's blushes at anything that might conceal a double meaning, and anything more explicit than that made me horribly uncomfortable: I squirmed when Bluebottle and Eccles in the *Goon Show* looked up someone's trousers to see who he was, and felt physically ill when Victor Borge introduced the messy soprano who came in a single pile. I couldn't go through life like that, though I'm sure too many people do, and by the time I reached adolescence at a grammar school run by Christian Brothers I was beginning to grow mutinous. I'd no time for the spinsterish way one master wrinkled his nose at sex in pop songs and denied us a hearing of the Porter scene in a recording of *Macbeth*. No doubt I resented his disapproval partly because pop songs and dirty jokes, some of which would have taken a David Cronenberg to visualise, were all the sexual experience I had. Sex education was thoroughly absent, except for a talk on the ways of the world, delivered on one of my last days at school by a visiting monk who referred to girls' "head-lamps" and boys' "spouts". Still, perhaps the beatings that were frequent at the school were popular with some; in that year's issue of the magazine a school governor reminisces at unhealthy length about them. Myself, I agree with Gore Vidal (and quite a few of its practitioners) in approving of corporal punishment only between consenting adults, a theme I'll return to later.

But my strongest resentment against the church and my upbringing at that time was over the forbidding of books. I had the impression—how accurate I can't say—that as a Catholic I was prevented from reading all sorts of things on pain of some unspecified and therefore daunting penalty. Having persuaded my mother over the years to let me borrow adult ghost books from the library, and eventually, when I was ten, to allow me to buy science fiction magazines and even *Weird Tales*, I now felt ready to confront censoriousness—or at least, I thought I did. This was the year *Lady*

Chatterley's Lover was first published in Britain, and while I don't think any of my schoolmates were brave enough to bring a copy to school, quite a few claimed to have read it; undoubtedly some of them had. The best I could do, however, was to skulk near bookstalls where it was displayed and clutch the three and sixpence in my pocket in a vain attempt to goad myself into picking up the book. It wasn't until I left school that I determined to make up for lost time by reading whatever I liked.

So I bought Nabokov's *Lolita*, having seen it recommended by Graham Greene, and found it liberating in several ways, not least as a writer. In order to write anything lively enough for publication I'd needed to unlearn some of the restrictions I'd been taught at school—you couldn't contract "I had" to "I'd", for instance—but the effect of reading Nabokov was an instant lightening of my style and a greatly enhanced enjoyment of language (a pleasure which, I fear, at least one teacher of English literature had had no apparent time for). Meanwhile my first published stories, imitations of Lovecraft, had begun to appear. Pat Kearney, a friend who published the very first in his fanzine *Goudy*, told me about the Olympia Press, *Lolita's* original publisher. A house devoted to publishing books banned in Britain sounded fine to me, particularly since I was incensed to discover that so many books were banned, and so with the advance paid on publication of my first book, I took my mother and myself to Paris, whence I returned with William Burroughs' *The Soft Machine* and *The Ticket That Exploded* and a copy for Pat Kearney of a book of bawdy ballads pseudonymously edited by Christopher Logue. How I intended to bluff my way through Customs I have no idea, but a rough and protracted Channel crossing came to what I was able to regard retrospectively as my aid. Faced with the sight of me, wavering and pale-faced and be-spattered with remains of that morning's croissants, the Customs officer waved me through. In the introduction to his bibliography of the Olympia Press, Pat Kearney celebrates this incident with a description that makes me think of Anthony Cronin's last grisly sight of Brendan Behan.

Another source of banned books was August Derleth, my friend and mentor and (in the days when Arkham House was pretty well his one-man operation) first professional publisher, who sent me Henry Miller's *Tropics* and Lawrence Durrell's *Black Book*. This led me to assume he wouldn't mind if I introduced a different kind of shock into my Lovecraft imitations, but he took the shit out of a line of dialogue. I still think it's what the

character would have said, but I see that that may not be relevant to such a stylised form as Lovecraft pastiche. I therefore tried writing for the Olympia Press, who were then publishing a magazine. "A Third-Floor Withdrawal" was an attempt to deal with my adolescent sexual turmoil, and the editor of *Olympia* gave me the impression that it might have been published except for its brevity (it was about a thousand words in length). I tried again with "The Folding Socket", a plotless fantasy influenced by William Burroughs, which I wrote at my Civil Service desk in the lunch hours. This, I imagine, was too gross for the magazine, which was aimed at the British and American bookstalls. Both stories are lost, and certainly the latter need not be mourned.

Years later—1969, I think—I had a different sort of experience involving Olympia Press. In the first newsletter of a short-lived Liverpool underground film society, I advertised for sale the Olympia edition of de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, whose three volumes I'd found somewhat tedious. Of course the nondescript fellow who called at the house to examine the books proved to be a plain-clothes policeman, who had no doubt been planted in the film society so as to keep an eye on things, though I didn't realise this until he returned with three of his colleagues and a warrant to search the house. They were unfailingly courteous, and seemed to be impressed by both my naïveté and my having been published. Weeks later I was invited to the police station to be given a cup of tea and the news that the Director of Public Prosecutions had decided not to prosecute, and almost everything they had seized was returned to me, including Kenneth Patchen's *Memoirs of a Shy Pornographer* and Samuel Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine*, in which page 12 had been marked in pencil, apparently because it begins with "the arse" ("the arse against the wall at A, the knees against the wall at B and C, the feet against the wall between C and A, that is to say inscribed in the semicircle ACB..."). I don't think Beckett had previously been regarded as a pornographic writer. I had to sign away my rights only to the de Sade, a book which caused the policeman to wrinkle his nose in exactly the way pop songs had affected my old schoolmaster. *(Footnote: How times change! These days not only the novel but Pasolini's bleak and distressing film of it are openly on sale in Britain.)*

By then I had completed *Demons by Daylight*, my second book, though it wasn't published until 1973. It may not seem especially radical now, but it certainly was then, not least in dealing with characters whose guilts and

fears and sexuality and, especially, emotional clumsiness were based on my experience. Indeed, if I hadn't felt driven by the need to bring horror fiction up to date, in line with the contemporary fiction I was reading, I might not have had the courage to continue; I felt that these stories were unlikely to receive August Derleth's approval—so much so that when I'd finished typing the book I fell into a horrible depression, because I both regarded Arkham House as my only market (as Lovecraft regarded *Weird Tales* as his) and was convinced that Arkham wouldn't touch it. But Derleth bought it, though he never gave me his opinion of it, and I was set on my course.

It is sometimes suggested (by Paul Schrader, for instance, in an attempt to justify his vulgar remake of *Cat People*) that all horror fiction is about sex. This is nonsense, and unhelpfully reductionist even when applied to tales with sexual themes: it's too easy to slide from "that's what the story is about" to "that's all the story is about." But it's true that many horror stories have a sexual subtext, and I think many of us in the field tended to assume that if the underlying sexual theme was made explicit, it would rob the fiction of its power.

It was the anthologist Michel Parry, an old friend, who gave me the chance to test this theory, though I don't think he quite realised what he was helping to create. After editing three volumes of black magic stories for Mayflower, he complained to me that nobody was submitting tales on a sexual theme. Aroused by the suggestion, I wrote "Dolls," which enabled me both to explore what happened to the supernatural story when the underlying sexual theme (not always present, of course) became overt and to write a long short story that was stronger on narrative than atmosphere, a useful preparation for writing my first novel. Michel hadn't expected anything quite so sexually explicit, and I was amused when his publishers, Mayflower, felt compelled to show "Dolls" to their lawyers for advice. The lawyers advised them to publish, and over the next few years Michel commissioned several more such tales, all of which are included here.

My original title for this book was *Horror Erotica*. The one it bears was the inspiration of Jeff Conner at Scream/Press. At least we didn't call it *Wanking Nightmares*. My correspondent Keith B. Johnston of Goshen came up with *Eldritchly Erect*, and Poppy Z. Brite suggested I should write a second such collection set in Liverpool and called *Mersey Beat-Off*, though

admittedly that was after I proposed she call a book *The Phantom of the Okra*.

I don't know if much need be said about most of the following stories. "The Other Woman" has offended some readers, and I probably wouldn't write it that way now if at all, but I think it's a story about fantasies of rape rather than merely being such a fantasy itself. I believe "The Seductress" was filmed for the cable television show *The Hunger*, but although I was paid for it I've never seen the episode. "Merry May" (which was written to tumefy the first edition of this book) became transformed into "Merry Way" on the cover of the American Warner paperback, which also toned the original subtitle ("Tales of Sex and Death") down to "Seven Tales of Seduction and Terror."

"The Body in the Window" was written for the *Hot Blood* paperback anthology series, while "Kill Me Hideously" suggested itself as soon as I agreed at a British science fiction convention to offer as an auction item the chance for the highest bidder to appear in my next novel. That was *The Last Voice They Hear*, but the charming bidder had nothing in common with the unlucky Lisette in the present book.

"The Other Woman" and "Loveman's Comeback" were written for the short-lived *Devil's Kisses* series of anthologies of erotic horror Michel edited as Linda Lovecraft, who was in fact the owner of a chain of sex shops and who is one more reason why asking for Lovecraft in a British bookshop may earn you a dubious look. Perhaps the anthologies were ahead of their time, because the second in the series was pulped shortly after publication, apparently in response to objections from Scotland Yard. Rumour had it that the problem was a tale reprinted from *National Lampoon*, involving a seven-year-old girl and a horse. Michel held on to "Stages" for a possible anthology about drugs, but after the above incident the story went into limbo. I confess to being more amused than irritated by the banning of *More Devil's Kisses*, much as I felt upon learning that my first novel had been seen (in a television documentary) on top of a pile of books for burning by Christian fundamentalists—something of a compliment as far as I'm concerned. On reflection, though, I think I wasn't entitled to feel quite so superior about censorship. Though my sexual tales had been, on the whole, progressively darker and more unpleasant, I'd

suppressed the third of them, "In the Picture." It was the initial draft of the story published here as "The Limits of Fantasy."

At the time (May 1975) I believed I had decided not to revise and submit the story because it wasn't up to publishable standard, and that was certainly the case. However, the reasons were more personal than I admitted to myself. All fiction is to some extent the product of censorship, whether by the culture within which it is produced or by the writer's own selection of material, both of which processes tend to be to some extent unconscious. Perhaps the most insidious form of censorship, insofar as it may be the most seductive for the writer, is by his own dishonesty. For me the most immediate proof is that it wasn't until Barry Hoffman asked me if I had any suppressed fiction he could publish in *Gauntlet* that I realised, on rereading "In the Picture," that my dishonesty was its central flaw.

One mode of fiction I dislike—one especially common in my field—is the kind where the act of writing about a character seems designed to announce that the character has nothing to do with the author. On the most basic level, it's nonsense, since by writing about a character the writer must draw that personality to some extent from within himself. More to the present point, it smells of protesting too much, and while that may be clear to the reader, for the writer it's a kind of censorship of self. I hope that "In the Picture" is the only tale in which I succumb to that temptation.

"In the Picture" follows the broad outline of "The Limits of Fantasy," though much more humourlessly, up to the scene with Enid Stone, and then Sid Pym begins to indulge in fantasies of rape and degradation which I believe are foreign to his sexual makeup and which are contrived simply to demonstrate what a swine he is—in other words, that he is quite unlike myself. Nothing could be further from the truth. In response to Barry Hoffman I treated "In the Picture" as the first version of the story and rewrote it exactly as I would any other first draft, and I had the most fun writing Pym's boarding-school fantasy, which is at least as much my fantasy as his. For me his presentation of it is both comic and erotic.

It seems to me that even the most liberal of us employ two definitions of pornography: the kind that turns ourselves on, which we're more prone to regard as erotic, and the kind which appeals to people with sexual tastes unlike our own and which we're more likely to condemn as pornographic. In my case the absurdity is that the group of scenarios which I sum up as

the boarding-school fantasy (which is obviously as much fetishistic as sadistic) is the only species of pornography I find appealing, and it was therefore especially dishonest of me to include no more than a hint of it when I collected my sexual tales in *Scared Stiff*. I suppose, then and in my original suppression of "In the Picture," I was afraid of losing friends, but that really isn't something writers should take into account when writing. I suspect I was assuming that my readers and people in general are squarer when it comes to erotic fantasy than is in fact the case. Since the publication of *Scared Stiff* I've heard from readers of various sexes that they found parts of the book erotic, and a female reader gave me a copy of *Caught Looking*, a polemic published by the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce, in which one of the illustrations (all chosen by the FACT designers on the basis that they themselves found the images erotically appealing) is a still from *Moral Welfare*, a British spanking video. (The Spankarama Cinema in Soho, rather unfairly chastised in the winter 1982/83 *Sight and Sound* and touched on by association in *Incarnate*, is long gone; perhaps I should have had a publicity photograph taken under the sign while it was there.) Incidentally, perhaps one minor reason for my reticence was the notion that this sexual taste is peculiarly British, but a few minutes on the Internet will give the lie to that. I keep feeling there's a novel in the theme, to be called *Adult Fun*, but who would publish it? Meanwhile "The Limits of Fantasy" adds variety to this collection, which has sometimes struck me as too mechanically including the standard variations in tale after tale.

So I trust this hasn't been too embarrassing. I haven't found it so, but then I may sometimes lack tact in these areas: I once greeted a friend I met in a sex shop, who immediately fled. Still, I'm committed to telling as much of the truth as I can, as every writer should be. If we can't tell the truth about ourselves, how can we presume to do so about anyone or anything? Secretiveness is a weakness, whereas honesty is strength.

If I'm told my field is incapable of something, I'll give it a try—hence these and others of my tales. No doubt the irritation of censorship also has something to do with it: here it seems to have behaved like Spanish fly. On that basis I should like to thank censors, especially the self-appointed, for helping me write. I love them all. After all, as they must recognise, we hate most in others what we can't admit about ourselves.

Ramsey Campbell
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28 May 2001

Introduction To Alone With The Horrors: "So Far"

Some horror stories are not ghost stories, and some ghost stories are not horror stories, but these terms have often been used interchangeably since long before I was born. I'm in favour of this. Many horror stories communicate awe as well as (sometimes instead of) shock, and it is surely inadequate to lump these stories together with fiction that seeks only to disgust, in a category regarded as the deplorable relative of the ghost story. Quite a few of the stories collected herein are ghost stories, and I hope that at least some of the others offer a little of the quality that has always appealed to me in the best horror fiction, a sense of something larger than is shown.

In 1991 I'd been in print for thirty years, and had these thirty-seven tales to show for them—at least, these are most of the ones my editor at Arkham House, the late Jim Turner, and I thought were representative. One of Jim's criteria was that the contents should be stuff only I could have written, a flattering notion that excluded such tales as *The Guide*, which otherwise I would have put in. For the record, the book incorporates my British collection *Dark Feasts*, with the solitary exception of *The Whining*, no significant loss.

I've made one substitution. Previous editions of Alone with the Horrors have led off with *The Room in the Castle*, my earliest tale to be professionally published. The idea was to show how I began. Here instead is something rarer to perform the same service. It too dates from when I was doing my best to imitate Lovecraft, but *The Tower from Yuggoth* (1961) demonstrates how I fared before August Derleth took me under his editorial wing. It was published in Goudy, a fanzine edited by my friend Pat Kearney, who later wrote a greenbacked history of Olympia Press. It was illustrated by Eddie Jones, another old friend but sadly a late one. At the time it felt very much like the start of my career as a writer; now it looks more like a phase I needed Derleth to rescue me from. At least it's eldritch —it keeps saying as much—and it also offers cackling trees and curse-

muttering streams. The reader may end up knowing how they felt, and my notion of how Massachusetts rustics spoke may also be productive of a shudder. Had I conjured him up from his essential salts for an opinion, Lovecraft would undoubtedly have pointed out these excesses and many other flaws. And watch out for those peculiar erections in the woods! I used the term in utter innocence, not then having experienced any of them while awake. No doubt a Christian Brotherly promise of hell if one encouraged such developments helped.

Substantially rewritten as *The Mine on Yuggoth*, the story appeared in *The Inhabitant of the Lake*, my first published book. In 1964 I was several kinds of lucky to find a publisher, and one kind depended on my having written a Lovecraftian book for Arkham House, the only publisher likely even to have considered it and one of the very few then to be publishing horror. In those days one had time to read everything that was appearing in the field, even the bad stuff, of which there seems to have been proportionately less than now, but I'll rant about this situation later. Suffice it for the moment to say that much of even the best new work—Matheson, Aickman, Leiber, Kirk, as vastly different examples—" being published with less of a fanfare than it deserved.

I mentioned imitation. I've made this point elsewhere, and I do my best not to repeat myself, but this bears repeating: there is nothing wrong with learning your craft by imitation while you discover what you want to write about. In other fields imitation isn't, so far as I know, even an issue. It's common for painters to learn by creating studies of their predecessors' work. Beethoven's first symphony sounds like Haydn, Wagner's symphony sounds like Beethoven, Richard Strauss's first opera sounds remarkably Wagnerian, and there's an early symphonic poem by Bartok that sounds very much like Richard Strauss, but who could mistake the mature work of these composers for the music of anyone else? In my smaller way, once I'd filled a book with my attempts to be Lovecraft I was determined to sound like myself, and *Alone with the Horrors* may stand as a record of the first thirty years of that process.

In 1964 I took some faltering steps away from Lovecraft and kept fleeing back to him. Among the products of this was *The Successor*, one of several tales I found so unsatisfactory that I rewrote them from scratch some years later. In this case the result was *Cold Print* (1966/67), whose protagonist

was to some extent based on a Civil Service colleague who did indeed ask to borrow my exciting (Olympia Press) books but found Genet dull as ditchwater, in the old phrase. I had also just read the first edition of Robin Wood's great book on Hitchcock's films, hence the way the tale accuses the reader of wanting the coda, as though I hadn't wanted it myself.

Another 1964 first draft was *The Reshaping of Rossiter*, a clumsy piece rewritten in 1967 as *The Scar*. Looking back, I'm struck by how even at that age I was able to create a believable nuclear family from observation, though certainly not of my own domestic background. Perhaps I can also claim to have been writing about child abuse long before it became a fashionable theme in horror fiction. Certainly the vulnerability of children is one of my recurring themes.

I had my first go at *The Interloper* in 1963 and a fresh one in 1968. In the first version the boy tells his tale to a child psychiatrist who proves to be the creature of the title. My memory is that the psychiatrist was none too convincing a character, even though I was taken to see one at the age of seven or so, apparently because I rolled my eyes a lot and suffered from night terrors. By contrast, the final draft of the tale was a strange kind of revenge on the sort of schooling I'd had to suffer at the hands of Christian Brothers and their lay staff (not all of either, I should add—Ray Thomas, my last English teacher, had a genius for communicating his love of the language and literature); the incident involving the teacher and the poetry notebook actually happened, and the red-haired mathematics teacher was fully as much of a stool as I portray, though the book in question was the first draft of *The Inhabitant of the Lake*.

All this rewriting, and other examples too, had made me surer of myself. *The Guy* (1968) saw just one draft. It was an attempt to use the traditional British ghost story to address social themes. Geoff Ryman has suggested that M. R. James's ghosts were attempts to ignore the real terrors of life; whatever the truth of that, I saw increasingly less reason why my stories should (though it can be argued that my Lovecraft imitations did). My tales were becoming more autobiographical, and *The End of a Summer's Day* (1968) has its roots in a very similar bus trip I took to such a cave with my ex-fiancée of the previous year. I've heard quite a few interpretations of the story. For the record, I've always taken the man in the cave to be a

projection of Maria's fears about her husband, which of course doesn't mean the encounter can be explained away.

The Chicago and San Francisco tales of Fritz Leiber were now my models in various ways. I wanted to achieve that sense of supernatural terror which derives from the everyday urban landscape rather than invading it, and I greatly admired—still do—how Fritz wrote thoroughly contemporary weird tales that were nevertheless rooted in the best traditions of the field and drew some of their strength from uniting British and American influences. One of mine in which I used an actual Liverpool location—*The Man in the Underpass*—has a special significance for me: it was the first tale I wrote after having, encouraged by T. E. D. Klein's exegesis of *Demons by Daylight* and by my wife, Jenny, stepped into the abyss of full-time writing in July 1973. To begin with I wrote only on weekdays. Lord, did I need to learn.

The Companion dates from later that year, and is set in New Brighton, just along the coast from me as I write, in all but name. The town did indeed contain two fairgrounds, one derelict, for a while, but I fiddled with the geography a little for the purposes of the narrative. Of all my old stories—there are many—that I keep being tempted to tinker with, this may well be the most frustrating. The second half seems effective enough to make me wish I could purge the earlier section of clumsiness. Damon Knight looked at the story for *Orbit* and declared that he didn't know what was going on in it half the time. I admit it was one of those tales it seemed more important to write than to understand, but then ever since my first viewing of *Last Year in Marienbad* I've felt that an enigma can be more satisfying than any solution. Too many horror stories, films in particular, strike me as weighed down by explanation.

Admittedly there's nothing enigmatic about *Call First* or *Heading Home*, both from early 1974. They're perhaps the best of a handful of pieces written for a Marvel comic that originally proposed to print terse tales of traditional terrors with a twist as text 'twixt the strips. By the time this proved not to be, I'd had fun writing stories in emulation of the EC horror comics of the fifties. I've long felt that a story that ends with a twist needs to be rewarding even if you foresee the end, and I hope that's true of this pair.

In the Bag (1974) is a ghost story I submitted to the Times ghost story competition, though it wasn't written with that in mind. I rather hoped it

might appear in the anthology derived from the competition, but the judges (Kingsley Amis, Patricia Highsmith, and Christopher Lee) must have decided otherwise. However, it did gain me my first British Fantasy Award. As David Drake has pointed out, the punning title is inappropriately jokey —a lingering effect of writing the horror-comic tales, perhaps—but I try not to cheat my readers by changing titles once a story has been published.

Baby (1974) is set around Granby Street in Liverpool, later one of the locations for *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*. It owes its presence in this book to my good friend J. K. Potter, who designed and illustrated the Arkham House edition. He expressed amazement that Jim Turner and I had omitted the tale, and provided an image to justify his enthusiasm.

The Chimney (1975) is disguised autobiography—disguised from me at the time of writing, that is. Was it while reading it aloud at Jack Sullivan's apartment in New York that I became aware of its subtext? It was certainly under those circumstances that I discovered how funny a story it was, though the laughter died well before the end. Robert Aickman described it as the best tale of mine that he'd read, but his correspondence with Cherry Wilder betrays how little he meant by that. Still, it gained me my first World Fantasy Award, and Fritz Leiber told me this was announced to "great applause." Harlan Ellison (also present, I believe) had no time for it. "It was a terrible story," he wanted the readers of Comics Journal to know, "and should not have won the award."

The Brood (1976) had its origins in the view of streetlamps on Princes Avenue from the window of Jenny's and my first flat, which we later lent to the protagonists of *The Face That Must Die*. When my biographer, David Mathew, recently attempted to photograph me in front of the building, a tenant demanded to know what we were up to. This was one of the rare instances where I found myself assuaging someone's paranoia.

The Gap (1977) indulges my fondness for jigsaws. You'll find me playing cards and Monopoly too, not to mention Nim, at which only my daughter can beat me. Role-playing games (I leave aside the erotic variety) have never tempted me, however, though in my inadvertent way I generated a book of them (*Ramsey Campbell's Goatswood*) published by Chaosium. As for the tale, it depressed Charles L. Grant too much for him to publish, although he did anthologise some of the others herein.

The Voice of the Beach (1977) was my first concerted attempt to achieve a modicum of Lovecraft's cosmic terror by returning to the principles that led him to create his mythos. The setting is a hallucinated version of the coast of Freshfield, a nature reserve almost facing my workroom window across the Mersey. Recently I made a book-length attempt at the Lovecraftian in *The Darkest Part of the Woods*. I continue to believe that the finest modern Lovecraftian work of fiction—in its documentary approach, its use of hints and allusions to build up a sense of supernatural dread, and the psychological realism of its characters—is *The Blair Witch Project*.

Out of Copyright (1977) had no specific anthologist in mind, but Ray Bradbury thought it did, and enthused about it on that basis. *Above the World* (1977) derived much of its imagery and setting from my one wholly positive, not to mention visionary, LSD experience. The hotel is the very one where Jenny and I spent our belated honeymoon and some other holidays. In the early nineties, a short independent film, *Return to Love*, was based on the story, though without reading the final credits you mightn't realise; indeed, the title gives fair warning. *Mackintosh Willy* (1977) was suggested by graffiti within a concrete shelter in the very park the story uses. When I approached I saw that the letters in fact spelled MACK TOSH WILLY. Close by was an area of new concrete, roped off but with the footprints of some scamp embedded in it, and these two elements gave birth to the tale. When J. K. and I were visiting Liverpool locations for the first edition of this book I took him to the shelter, but alas, the legend had been erased from it.

The entire location of *The Show Goes On* (1978)—the cinema, I mean—is no more. It was the Hippodrome in Liverpool, and I thought I'd failed to do it justice in an earlier tale,*The Dark Show*. It was built as a music hall, and behind the screen was a maze of passages and dressing-rooms, as I discovered with increasing unease one night when I missed my way to a rear exit. Eventually I reached a pair of barred doors beyond which, as I tried to budge them, a dim illumination seemed to show me figures making for them. Homeless folk, very possibly—they didn't look at all well—but when, years later, I was able, as a film reviewer, to attend the last night of the cinema and explore its less public areas, I never managed to find those doors again.

Only global warming is likely to do away with the location of *The Ferries* (1978), though the spring tides drive small animals out of the grass onto the promenade—at least, we must hope they're small animals. *Midnight Hobo* (1978) also had a real setting, a bridge under a railway in Tuebrook in Liverpool. As for Roy and Derrick, they were suggested by a relationship between personnel at Radio Merseyside: Roy was my old producer Tony Wolfe, and Derrick—well, I really mustn't say. Roy's grisly interview with the starlet was based pretty closely on one I had to conduct with a member of the cast of a seventies British sex comedy. According to the Internet Movie Database, she made one more film.

Angela Carter has suggested that the horror story is a holiday from morality. It often is, especially when it uses the idea of supernatural evil as an alibi for horrors we are quite capable of perpetrating ourselves, but it needn't be, as I hope *The Depths* (1978) and others of my tales confirm. I've always thought of this one as a companion piece to my novel *The Nameless*. Jaume Balaguero's fine film demonstrates how much of that can be stripped away, but I think the central metaphor of giving up your name and with it your responsibility for your actions and your right to choose is more timely than ever—indeed, perhaps it's time I wrote about it again. *The Depths* is concerned with the process of demonisation, another way of finding someone else to blame. I'm sure I'm guilty of it myself; the worst writing in my field gives me any number of excuses.

Down There (1978) very nearly joined my other unfinished short stories. I tried to write it when our daughter was just a few weeks old. I felt compelled to write even under those circumstances, but my imagination couldn't grasp the material for several days. I was about to abandon the effort when the image of a fire escape viewed from above in the rain came alive, and so did the tale. The early pages of the first draft had to be taken apart and thoroughly reworked, but there's no harm in that—in fact, it has become increasingly my way. Alas, it wasn't when I wrote *The Companion*.

With a little more sexual explicitness *The Fit* (1979) might have found a place in *Scared Stiff* (two stories from which have been deleted from the present book, but you can find them in the expanded Tor edition of my tales of sex and death). Whereas those stories explore what happens to the horror story if sexual themes become overt, *The Fit* may be said to squint at the effects of Freudian knowingness. Fanny Cave indeed! I'd originally written

The Depths for my anthology *New Terrors*, but when Andrew J. Offutt sent in a story that seemed to share the theme, I wrote *The Fit* as a substitute for mine.

My memory suggests that *Hearing is Believing* (1979) was an attempt to write about a haunting by a single sense. *The Hands* (1980) came out of an encounter in the street with a lady bearing a clipboard. I'm reminded of the slogan on the British poster for *Devils of Monza*: "She was no ordinary nun." Indeed, the real lady wasn't one at all—I suppose some lingering Catholicism effected the transformation for the purposes of the tale. This seems as good a point as any to mention my forthcoming novel *Spanked by Nuns*.

Again (1980) appeared in the Twilight Zone magazine under T. E. D. Klein's editorship, although I gather Rod Serling's widow took some persuading. One British journal found the tale too disturbing to publish, while a British Sunday newspaper magazine dismissed it as "not horrid enough." Who would have expected Catherine Morland to take up editing? The story saw a powerful graphic adaptation by Michael Zulli in the adult comic Taboo, which was apparently one reason why the publication was and perhaps still is liable to be seized by British Customs.

Two novels occupied my time for the next three years, to the exclusion of any other fiction. While picnicking with the family in Delamere Forest to celebrate having finished *Incarnate* I thought of the basis for "Just *Waiting* (1983), and the genesis of a new short story felt like a celebration too. My touch here and in *Seeing the World* (1983) is lighter than it used to be, or so I like to think. That doesn't mean what's lit up isn't still dark.

Old Clothes (1983) was an attempt to develop the notion of apports. I'm as loath as Lovecraft ever was to use stale occult ideas, but I think this one let me have some fun. In 1984 Alan Ryan asked me for a new Halloween story, and *Apples* was the result. It became the occasion of one of my more memorable encounters with a copy-editor, though only after the American edition had respected my text. The British paperback version of the tale proved to have suffered something like a hundred changes. The excellent Nick Webb, the managing director of Sphere, had the edition withdrawn and pulped. Had I not written *Out of Copyright* by then, I might well have turned it into a tale about a copy editor. Of course not all such folk are

interfering bloody fools, but perhaps an example of what befell *Apples* is in order. Where I'd written:

> His dad and mum were like that, they were teachers and tried to make him friends at our school they taught at, boys who didn't like getting dirty and always had combs and handkerchiefs.

The copy editor thought I should have written

> His mum and dad were like that. They were teachers and tried to make friends for him at our school, where they taught boys who didn't like getting dirty and always had combs and handkerchiefs.

I rest my case, and my head.

The Other Side (1985) was an attempt to equal the surrealism of J. K. Potter's picture on which it was based. The last thing I wanted to do was end the story with his image, since the combination would have had much the same effect as the infamous *Weird Tales* illustration that gave away one of Lovecraft's best endings. The image can be found on page 97 of J. Kidd's superb Paper Tiger collection *Horripilations*, which also contains (among much else) his illustrations for the aborted limited edition of The *Influence*.

Kathryn Cramer asked me to write a story in which the building in which it took place would (I may be paraphrasing) itself figure as a character. She certainly didn't mean her letter to potential contributors to be disconcerting, but she pointed to several stories of mine as epitomising her theme, which made me feel expected to imitate myself and daunted by the task. I struggled to come up with an idea until circumstances gave me one, as happens often enough to let me believe in synchronicity. The Campbell family had just moved into the house in which I now write, but we hadn't yet sold the previous one, to which I daily walked. I forget how long it took me to notice that here was the germ of *Where the Heart Is* (1986).

Boiled Alive (1986)—a title I hoped folk would recognise was meant to be intemperate—" also conceived in response to an invitation, this time from David Pringle of *Interzone*. When I try to write science fiction my style generally stiffens up, and so I attempted to be ungenerically offbeat instead. That isn't to say I don't think it's a horror story: I think all the stories in this collection are. I'd certainly call *Another World* (1987) one, and it too was invited, by Paul Gamble ("Gamma") when he worked for *Forbidden Planet* in London. His idea was an anthology of tales on the theme of a forbidden

planet, though when Roz Kaveney took over the editorship she chose stories simply on the basis that the author had signed at the bookshop. I had, but I cleaved to the theme as well.

As for *End of the Line* (1991), what can I say? It is, but may also have begun a lighter style of comedy in my stuff. Whatever the tone, though, it's still pretty dark in here. I hope the jokes are inextricable from the terror. However, it was less with laughter than with a sneer that a hypnotist who claimed to reawaken people's memories of their past lives once advised me to study his career for when I "started writing seriously," rather as if those responsible for *The Amityville Horror* had accused, say, Shirley Jackson of having her tongue in her cheek when she wrote *The Haunting of Hill House*. I see no reason why dealing with the fantastic requires one to write bullshit, and I submit this collection as evidence.

In the thirty years covered by this book I saw horror fiction become enormously more popular and luxuriant. I use the last word, as tends to be my way with words, for its ambiguity. There's certainly something to be said in favour of the growth of a field which has produced so many good new writers and so much good writing. One of its appeals to me, ever since I became aware of the tales of M. R. James, is the way the best work achieves its effects through the use of style, the selection of language. On the other hand, the field has sprouted writers whose fiction I can best describe as Janet and John primers of mutilation, where the length of the sentences, paragraphs, and chapters betrays the maximum attention span of either the audience or the writer or more probably both. There are also quite a bunch of writers with more pretensions whose basic drive appears to be to outdo one another in disgustingness. "It is very easy to be nauseating," M. R. James wrote more than sixty years ago, and the evidence is all around us. However, I hope that in time the genre will return to the mainstream, where it came from and where it belongs.

What to do? Nothing, really, except keep writing and wait for the verdict of history. The field is big enough for everyone, after all. I came into it because I wanted to repay some of the pleasure it had given me—particularly the work of those writers who, as David Aylward put it, "used to strive for awe"—and I stay in it because it allows me to talk about whatever themes I want to address and because I have by no means found its limits. Perhaps in the next thirty years, but I rather hope not. I like to

think my best story is the one I haven't written yet, and that's why I continue to write.

Ramsey Campbell
Wallasey, Merseyside
1 December 2002

Introduction to Told By The Dead: "Ramsey Campbell Is The Best Of Us All", an introduction by Poppy Z. Brite

But you needn't take my word for it. The Internet is full of amusing fads. A recent one is the search engine Googlism (*www.googlism.com*) where you can plug in the name of a person, place, or thing and get back a list of results in the form of simple declarative sentences: a sort of sampling of the Mass Mind. Most subjects will yield a mixture of responses favourable and unfavourable, some funny, some catty, some just plain mean. Only when I plugged in the name 'Ramsey Campbell' did the engine refuse to spit out a single nasty response.

> "Ramsey Campbell is one of the most respected writers in the horror genre"
>
> "Ramsey Campbell is such an acclaimed writer"
>
> "Ramsey Campbell is highly regarded for his sensitive use of the language and his ability to create psychologically"
>
> "Ramsey Campbell is one of the finest exponents of the classic British ghost story"
>
> "Ramsey Campbell is not always a nice place"
>
> "Ramsey Campbell is the best of us all"

That last one really seems to sum it up. I don't mean to suggest that Campbell appeals to everyone—you can always go on Usenet and find some bewildered soul complaining, "I just don't get him" but I don't recall meeting another writer of dark fiction who didn't at least admire him. Way back in 1979, when Campbell had published two novels and a good number of short stories, Stephen King devoted a section of his horror overview Danse Macabre to Ramsey Campbell's work. "Good stuff," he wrote. "But strange; so uniquely Campbell that it might as well be trademarked." No

other writer has a voice like Ramsey Campbell's; though he seldom repeats himself, and has grown tremendously as a writer since his early publications, he has maintained a coherent, instantly recognisable voice.

The present collection, Told by the Dead, spans most of his career. The earliest story here ('The Previous Tenant') was written in 1968, the latest ('Tatters', The Retrospective' and 'All For Sale') in 2001. There is a collaboration, 'Little Ones', written with his wife Jenny; though many writers consider their spouses or partners "collaborators" in some sense, it's rare (and interesting) to see a story actually penned by husband and wife.

The book opens with a recent story, 'Return Journey', which may seem like a fairly straightforward horror tale unless you know it's being written by an author born a year after the second World War's end and raised in a city (Liverpool) that still bore the terrible scars of wartime bombing. The image of children ducking into a burial vault during an air raid suggests resilience —life in the midst of death—but the protagonist is ultimately not to be saved from the long arm of the war. The story contains what must be one of the loneliest definitions of adulthood ever written:

> Her parents couldn't keep her safe now; they had never appeared when she'd called out to them in the night to prove they were still somewhere.

Much of Campbell's recent work, in particular, has contained a menacing humour that can make the reader nearly as uncomfortable as the characters. It's seen in several stories here: 'No Story In It', about the futility of the writing life and the terror of trying to care for a family on an author's dwindling income; 'Becoming Visible', which employs Campbell's genius for the paranoid protagonist perhaps first seen in The Face That Must Die (the narrator's imagined description of a rich man's wife—"bristling with jewels and doused in perfume to cover up her smell, her hair glossy as hot tar, the valley of her flesh bared in front of her"—is particularly toothsome); 'The Word', which combines a cruelly accurate send-up of the convention scene with a Salieri-like older writer's hatred for a young, ridiculously successful one.

(I should mention that I had the pleasure of hearing Campbell read 'No Story In It' at Spookycon in San Francisco six weeks before writing this, and I truly think he is the best reader I've ever heard. Particularly when reading one of the blackly humorous stories, his vocal interpretation adds

new depths to the material; If you ever have a chance to attend a Campbell reading, don't miss it.)

Ramsey Campbell has never made a secret of his affection for H.P. Lovecraft, and the New Englander casts his gaunt shadow over several stories here, most notably 'Never To Be Heard'. This recent story about an occult symphony being performed in a church at Easter (also the vernal equinox, the pagan season of rebirth) is Lovecraftian in its focus on terrible mysteries never meant to be revealed, and on the irresistible human impulse to reveal them. Campbell's stroke of genius—something Lovecraft wouldn't have thought of and probably couldn't have pulled off if he had—is in telling the story from the point of view of a pre-pubescent choirboy, one of those performing the symphony. The boy's awakening sexuality seems to make him particularly vulnerable to the insidious effects of the music. The Lovecraftian influence is also evident in 'Slow', a 1975 horror story with science fiction trappings and a monster that—like Lovecraft's "rugose cones"—neither the protagonist nor the reader is sure whether to laugh at or fear. A more surprising influence it suggested in 'Dead Letters', a 1974 tale that put this reader in mind of those short, sharp shockers Robert Bloch wrote during the 1950s and '60s.

Along with the aforementioned 'No Story In It', 'No End of Fun' explores the horror of redundancy, impotence, and uselessness that crops up often in Campbell's recent work. In 'No End of Fun' the sense of redundancy seems to be a payback for a childhood act of brutality. Lionel, a retiree of indeterminate age, forced his female cousin into a frightening semi-sexual situation when they were adolescents. Now his fantasies seem to have condemned the deceased cousin to a hellish version of that same situation. Lionel discovers this when he comes to live in her home, now a boarding house run by her daughter and her daughter's daughter, neither of whom has much time for Lionel. The cousins fate is nasty, but the most painful part of the story is the dialogue between Lionel and his younger relatives: his increasingly desperate overtures, their weary rebuffs. One gets the feeling his whole life has been like this—in cosmic retaliation for one act of cruelty, or simply because he's the sort of person who invites such treatment: Campbell leaves it up to us.

Written in 1973, 'Accident Zone' might be viewed as a precursor of the modern (and mostly media-manufactured) phenomenon of "road rage."

More interestingly, it's a twist on the idea of "bad spots" that have been reported by paranormal chroniclers from T.C. Lethbridge to Colin Wilson. Lethbridge wrote of a seaside cliff in Devon where he and his wife experienced sudden, inexplicable feelings of depression, and where his wife felt some unseen force urging her to jump. Later they learned that a man had leapt to his death from that very spot. Lethbridge theorised that the extreme dampness of the spot somehow created a magnetic field upon which strong emotions could be 'recorded'. The water droplets that figure prominently in 'Accident Zone', as well as the fact that the story is set in England's Lake District, suggest that Campbell may have had this theory in mind.

There isn't a weak story in Told by the Dead, but 'The Retrospective' is probably one of the finest and most disturbing tales Campbell has ever written. (It's also one of the most recent, written in 2001.) Trent, a Type-A architect with little time for anything beyond his career, has an unplanned travel delay in the town where he grew up. He decides to visit his elderly parents, whom he has neglected badly, and finds them confused and helpless. Rather than staying to make things right, Trent cuts short the uncomfortable visit and goes to investigate a new museum of the town's history. The visit home is a heartbreaking exaggeration of the truism that childhood's important sites always turn out to be smaller and more squalid than one remembers, and the museum is a horrible, horrible inversion of that truism, where everything is stretched out, overstated, made abnormal and grotesque. The final paragraph brings the horror home to Trent in a way that won't soon be forgotten by anyone who has ever tried to rise above his past, only to find that its fingers are longer and stickier than he had imagined.

Because he is able to do things like this—because he can horrify us in a way that touches not just our brains or our viscera, but our souls—Ramsey Campbell truly is the best of us all, and his own best is well represented in this collection. As my husband once said, "Ramsey's great—as a writer, as a friend, as a pervert." These stories may be Told by the Dead, but I hope Campbell will be alive and telling more for a long, long time.

Poppy Z. Brite
New Orleans
February 2003

Afterword to Told By The Dead

Did this book live up to its title? In time it will, of course. Who knows, perhaps the odd tale may even survive me as a reprint, and until then I won't know if I'll know. Let me chase away some of the shadows. Everything I write, even this, can be seen as the work of a past self-—dead, if you like, though I'd prefer to regard all those personalities as having helped to make me whatever I am. Certainly I find the experience of reading my old or even not so old stuff increasingly strange: it's like encountering it for the first time, and from someone else's pen. As I sort through these performances in the order of writing, we'll see what memories they rouse.

The Previous Tenant dates from 1968, the year before I met my wife. I'd recently completed *Demons by Daylight*, my first real book, and this story followed. I seem to have felt the need to experiment further (to overcome my sense of having reached an end with *Demons*) rather than consolidate what I'd learned so far. Presumably that's why I denied the characters names. I later saw that the story recalled *The Beckoning Fair One*, which I'd read when I was too young to appreciate its subtleties. On the other hand, I've no idea where the central relationship came from except the depths of my head.

Besides meeting Jenny in 1969, I began to review films for the BBC. I'd already been writing about them for years, mainly horror, after my friend Harry Nadler urged me to. He loved the cinema of the fantastic as much as I did, and used reviews of mine in *Alien* and later in *L'Incroyable Cinema*, both of which he co-edited in Manchester. Among much else, he was responsible for my first encounter with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. It was entirely typical of Harry that when he learned I hadn't seen the film, he invited me back to the house where he lived with his mother and proceeded to screen it with an 8mm projector in ten-minute reels on his bedroom wall.

Well, I digress. I may well again in the course of this piece. *After the Queen* (1969) was based on an idea by John Owen of LiG, the Liverpool science fiction group. As Frank Mace he wrote *The Ideal Type* in *Dark Mind, Dark Heart*, and *The Cuckoo Clock* in *London Mystery Magazine*. The latter journal deftly bought all rights by hiding its contract on the back

of the cheque. Though I'm sure John is too seasoned to fall for that now, he didn't realise that the tale had been filmed for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (adapted by Robert Bloch, no less) until Universal contacted him decades later to inform him it was being remade. It was John who introduced me to Val Lewton's magnificently suggestive horror films, along with the music of Villa-Lobos and Milhaud, and John Collier's splendid novel *Defy the Foul Fiend*. As for *After the Queen*, the setting is based on a real cinema, the Woolton, one of the few suburban Liverpool cinemas not to close in the sixties or seventies.

The Last Hand (1969) also recalls LiG. For years we had our clubroom at 69A Bold Street, above Helen's Leather Goods, an upstairs business capable of various interpretations. Eventually we were cast out, perhaps because Helen valued privacy on Monday nights, and instead met on Sundays at the house of Norman and Ina Shorrock—one of many reasons for the dedication of this book. They set me appreciating good food and wine—Ina wouldn't leave anyone unfed, and Norman never let a glass stay empty in anyone's hand. I often said that he'd lent me his nose, and Jenny that he had a lovely one. More often than not we played cards—chemin de fer, brag, puddle (Jenny's innovation), knockout whist, ranter go round, many variations of poker... Players included Norman Weedall (the late great wine-maker and collector of *Weird Tales*), Eddie Jones (who illustrated my first published story and the cover of Demons by Daylight and any amount of science fiction but died in poverty, alas) and, if he was visiting, Phil Rogers (who specified that at his funeral the coffin should be carried off to the strains of the Radetsky March, and so it was). John Roles tended to sit out the games, though he was the only person other than my daughter who could beat me at Nim, which John and I first saw in *Last Year in Marienbad*. A bookseller and creator of the fanzine *Morph*, one issue of which made history by being edible, he was strangled to death at his home in June 1999 by a postcard collector and charity worker, Andrew John Swift. John's bookshop suggested the one in *Cold Print*, and he introduced me to the actual setting of *The Cellars*. Neither tale is in this book, of course, and so I'd better regain some relevance by mentioning that on trains to science fiction conventions the assembled gamblers of LiG fell to cards. Without this I'm sure *The Last Hand* would never have occurred to me.

The Worst Fog of the Year (1970) was suggested by the experience of watching films at press shows, still the best way to avoid the distractions of

an audience—the stench of their popcorn, the shrilling of their mobile phones, the mutter of their commentaries or conversation. The story first appeared in the British Fantasy Society's journal *Dark Horizons*. Karl Edward Wagner let me know that he would use it in *Year's Best Horror Stories* if the ending were less jokey, and I made it so. Both endings appear in this book, in case you didn't notice.

For several years Jenny and I spent our summer holidays in Cumbria, generally in the hotel that figures in *Above the World* (not included here), *Accident Zone* (1973) derives from some of our walks. The different views of the landscape the two stories take can be ascribed at least partly to the effects of LSD. When I wrote *Accident Zone* those experiences were a couple of years in the future. My agent Kirby McCauley found the tale "slow and not very attention getting", and I'm inclined to agree with him. Still, enough readers have found something in it to give me an excuse to reprint it here.

I don't generally use friends as characters. In *Dead Letters* (1974) I gave two of the cast the first names of stalwarts of LiG, Stan and Marge Nuttall, but none of their characteristics. I hope they were amused. The story was one of a bunch I wrote in emulation of the notorious but subsequently celebrated EC horror comics of the fifties. The market the stories were meant for had second thoughts about buying prose fiction, and they found a home elsewhere. I also wrote some science fiction, my agent having advised me to try, but my style and imagination tended to stiffen at the challenge. *Slow* (1975) was the last attempt, and relatively sure of itself.

In 1990 I was one of six diners in *The Horror Café*, a special extended edition of a BBC television arts programme. Also round the table were Pete Atkins, Clive Barker, John Carpenter, Roger Corman and Lisa Tuttle. As we ate and drank we discussed horror. I recall surprising Clive, the elected host, by suggesting that my tales celebrated the unknown—and eventually improvised a round-robin story. At the end of one of his contributions John Carpenter left me to pick up a concept in quantum physics. "Fuck you, John," I was heard to respond, though not in the broadcast version, edited down from three hours to half the length. True to my constitution, I'd taken every opportunity to eat and drink whatever was on offer, an attitude that drew praise from the television reviewer Nancy Banks Smith. When at last the cameras stopped rolling it proved to be Roger Corman's birthday, and

much champagne was quaffed. The next day I sat very still for not much less than an eternity outside Euston Station before forcing myself onto a train for Liverpool to sit even stiller. Later that year the Radio Times approached me to put the round robin into publishable form to help promote the broadcast, but whoever commissioned the tale felt I hadn't done justice to the material. Is *Facing It* fun in its own right? You'll have judged for yourself.

The Word (1993) owes its existence to Douglas E, Winter, the spectacularly talented author of *Run*. Doug conceived an anthology of tales that would span the last century, one long story to a decade. That much I'm sure of, and memory suggests Steve King was originally to evoke the sixties, but wasn't the underlying theme to be a revelation brought down a mountain? I could swear that's why I included it in my piece. For the rest I leave interpretation to the reader, but I'm reminded that I once attracted some hostility with an article on science fiction conventions in *Blazon*, the journal of the Knights of St Fanthony. It was the idea of the editor, Eric Bentcliffe ("Eric the Bent"), who originally asked me to read the early work of John W. Campbell Jr in order to vilify it. I'd earned a reputation for controversy, but if people thought I would produce it on demand, it was time to think again.

Little Ones (1996) was written in collaboration with Jenny; that is, for once the shared authorship was made plain. My writing from 1969 onwards owes an increasing amount to her and eventually to Tammy and Matt as well. Of course not only the writing does; much of the best of me comes from them. When *Little Ones* appeared in print in an anthology of collaborations between partners it was preceded by our comments, and here they are.

> "When Ramsey spoke of a collaboration, my mind went back to when I had a provisional licence previous to passing my driving test, and needed a qualified driver to sit in with me. I'm glad to say that this experience was a much better one than that.
>
> "It brought home to me the sheer professionalism of Ramsey—his ability to return to a story and hone it over an extended period of time as opposed to ray short period of concentrated effort followed by a triumphant 'It's done!'
>
> "On the debit side some changes he made to my original I would have argued against if time and the pressure of work had allowed. Maybe next time..."

> "As so often, Jenny overrates me and underrates herself. I'd say we have collaborated on virtually all the fiction I've written since we met twenty-eight years ago. She's my first editor, the person who reads my initial drafts and makes suggestions and criticisms. Only she could, because she's the only person who can read the handwriting. Mind you, hers is as bad as mine. She had to tell me that Gill's mysterious possession in our story, a plonte quane, was in fact a plaster gnome.
>
> "Jenny's teaching background often figures in my stuff, and even if I wrote some of the details about teaching in the present tale, they're really all hers. I used her story as a first draft and worked at the motivations until I believed in them. Our readers can play at deciding which of us wrote which scenes and which sentences. Jenny and I are so close that I'll bet we fool you. That's love and marriage."

Twice by Fire (1997) was commissioned for an anthology of tales about James O'Barr's creation, the Crow. I see now that it's a sufficiently universal concept that I didn't need to set it in America. I can only hope that aspect isn't too unconvincing, though I'm by no means as good at producing an American voice as Pete Crowther or Pete Atkins or, before them, my follow Wirralian Eric Frank Russell. From the same year, *Never to be Heard* was another commission, based on a painting by Alan M. Clark. His image helped focus my ambition to write a decent story about music. I was indeed in the choir at grammar school and had to mouth rather than sing when we performed Borodin.

Agatha's Ghost also dates from 1997. I'm dismayed to have to report that I didn't invent the advice Agatha is offered on the air; I heard a lady much like her being told on a Radio Merseyside phone-in to try those solutions—hence the tale. Usually the programme doesn't insult the intelligence. Far worse, to the extent of being horribly fascinating, is Trisha, a British television show very much like Jerry Springer with a veneer of concern. Couples and families rant onstage while the audience jeers and the viewer at home is trapped into feeling superior to them all. To quote an actual subtitle from 19 November 2002: "This family is on self-destruct. What will happen by the end of the show? Don't miss it!" Further drama is always promised "after the break", during *DESPERATE MOTHER v DYING*

DAUGHTERS on 2 December 2002, for instance). You see how guiltily obsessed I am. Body language readers and relationship therapists are often trotted out, but the show's most basic appeal involves lie detectors and DNA tests (neither as reliable as Trisha Goddard wants us to think). "Is he the baby's father? Find out after the break!" It's unnerving when reality catches up with my fiction and I can't invent anything worse, but the reality is one reason why I write.

In 1998 I found time to write four short stories, and they're all in here. *Return Journey* was suggested by a trip to Llangollen, where a vintage railway had been dressed up as a wartime ride for the weekend. *The Entertainment* contains echoes of Robert Aickman's *The Hospice* but is its own tale, I hope, not least in its knockabout and its nervousness about growing old. Aickman professed to find some worth in my stuff, or at least implied as much. His correspondence with the late Cherry Wilder betrays the truth.

No Strings was written for Michele Slung's anthology about strangers, but she found it insufficiently strange. I'm not complaining - without her invitation the story would never have existed, and it has done well for itself. *Becoming Visible* derives from an incident where I lost my temper with a salesman on the telephone, who did indeed make the mistake of enquiring why I didn't want to buy whatever product he wanted to sell. For some weeks after this he kept making deranged calls to the house, and alas, I couldn't remember the name of the firm he had originally identified. Eventually he went away, leaving me with a story idea. As you see, ideas can be the easy part—indeed, I've more of those in my notebooks than I'm likely to have time to develop.

No Story in It (1999) was the second tale I wrote around an image by Alan Clark—the one that haunts the writer in the tale. I had the late John Brunner at the back of my mind, having recently written a memoir of him (which can be found in my non-fiction book *Ramsey Campbell, Probably*). While the unlucky protagonist isn't meant to be him, I fear John would have sympathised with many of his experiences. This was one of several tales of mine to be found wanting on a web site where someone criticises horror fiction from the safety of a pseudonym, a rather asinine genre enterprise. The masked reviewer comments about the story "A difficult read in that I was unable to firmly grasp what might be happening an (sic) any given

moment. The dialogue was barely coherent as was the plot at times and the final resolution, quite hollow. I've never been happy or impressed by anything has (sic) Campbell has done, sometimes I wonder why I even bother." Well, quite, not least since the review (dark green typeface on a black background) is barely legible. I suppose I shall just have to live with not being admired by a Guy N. Smith fan that thinks M. R. James wrote *The Jolly Corner*.

1999 also produced *Worse than Bones*. As far as I'm concerned, inscriptions in second-hand books are a bonus. 2000 saw me complete just one short story, *No End of Fun*, a tribute to a J. K. Potter picture (the mirror, of course, though his image isn't of a mirror). Then came 2001, which felt like living in science fiction, especially to someone old enough to have seen the film originally in Cinerama. I found it a productive year for my short stories; only half of its crop is included here. *Tatters* came from a reference on Radio 3 to satirical street ballads, and gave me some scope to joke. *The Retrospective* felt rather like a tribute to the great Thomas Ligotti, though I'm certain he would handle the notion quite differently. Because of a misunderstanding the last three words were omitted from its original publication and replaced with an ellipsis, an effect I dislike as much as M. R. James did... Here the story is complete. As for *All for Sale*, a street market did indeed spring up overnight around the first hotel where the family and I stayed in Turkey, and a swarthy hi-fi dealer in Tottenham Court Road once palpated my tits and declared "You are nice." Everything can be material, you see.

So I trundle to my latest conclusion. I hope this jumble of observations has been more rewarding than otherwise. For some of my readers it will revive memories; it did for me. Among the reasons I find the film *Hilary and Jackie* so moving (besides our daughter's youthful career as a cellist) is that the first and final scenes are shot on Freshfield Beach. Many were the summer picnics LiG and friends enjoyed there for decades. Jenny and I often still picnic there, and sometimes we return along the same path we all followed years ago. More than once I've seemed to see people walking ahead—Norman, Norman, Harry, Phil, John, Eddie—into that evening glow that feels like perfect stillness, the golden light that transforms everything into peace.

Ramsey Campbell
Wallasey, Merseyside
5 April 2003

Foreword To Inconsequential Tales: "Truth Or Consequences"

I hold Ted Klein responsible, at least for my title. Ted ascribes the name of his recent *Reassuring Tales* to me, but you must discover the reason by reading his book, as you certainly should. However comforting the title and the author may seek to be, let me reassure you that Ted continues to display his considerable talent for terror so quiet that its whispers may go unheard by the careless reader. He's one of the absolute masters of unsettling reticence, and I wish he were more prolific. Where's that second novel? He's unreasonable about his own work in the introduction to Reassuring Tales, and perhaps self-deprecation may be inhibiting his output. As you'll see from what follows, it never stops me. Nevertheless these tales deserve the kind of criticism Ted heaped on his.

The Childish Fear was written in 1963, immediately after I'd completed *The Inhabitant of the Lake and Other Unwelcome Tenants* (as it was meant to be called) and a tale that read less like Lovecraft, *The Stone on the Island*. I'd intended *Fear* to fit into *Inhabitant*, but August Derleth thought not, finding that "it requires too much knowledge of certain films on the part of the reader to make it effective." He was right, and I should explain that Val Guest directed the first two *Quatermass* films. Too much of the tale is straight autobiography, even if my childhood habit of turning over stones in search of insects has some thematic relevance. I used to judge the effectiveness of horror films by how much they quickened my pulse, if they managed to. The narrator's opinions of films were all mine at seventeen years old. I disliked *Them* on a first viewing, although not now, and remain bored by *The Blob*. I shouted at noisy audiences, which would surprise them into silence the first time but not on repetition, and often sat through films twice: double bills allowed this as well as tempting some viewers to come in before the end (alas, my mother would insist on our doing so).

The tale does convey some sense of the period, when the Liverpool suburbs were still full of cinemas in their decline, and perhaps it vaguely prefigures *The Show Goes On* of fifteen years later.

From the same year, *The Offering to the Dead* appears to echo Clark Ashton Smith's *An Offering to the Moon*, though they have only their titles in common. Like *The Stone on the Island*, and just about as awkwardly, the tale does convey a naive sense of an unconsummated office romance. The clumsy introverted swain was of course the author, who did indeed pretend to be asleep if anyone (his mother) entered his room when he was abed. Alas, the prose is clumsy too, and holds the narrative at arm's length, although it has its inadvertent moments: "David found his way into a pair of her father's pyjamas," for instance, and what seems to be the thickest carpet in all literature. Radio Luxembourg was a pirate radio station of the time, and stop press reports in newspapers were printed in thick messy type. None of this took Derleth's fancy, and quite right too. "This one does nothing for me, I'm sorry," he wrote. "It seems to be in the tradition of the olde Gothick rather than in your better vein, though it's told well enough—I've no quarrel with its style, though I think you may be mixing your liking for [Henry] Miller and [William] Burroughs with your penchant for the weird, an insoluble combination, unfortunately."

The Reshaping of Rossiter (1964) is the first version of *The Scar*. It and its much improved rewrite were both produced for Arkham House anthologies, although they could equally well have been destined for *Demons by Daylight* (in which both *Cold Print* and *The Cellars* would have appeared if they hadn't already found other Arkham homes). I completely rewrote several of the *Demons* tales, but this is the only ur-text that was eventually published. It reads as if it was written too soon in my life, given the unconvincing details of behaviour and dialogue. The influence of Alain Resnais may explain the change of viewpoint halfway through a paragraph (an effect better used for the temporal lurches in *Concussion*), and the viewpoint shifts again later on, twice too often for a short story, even if Ambrose Bierce brought it off. Like the protagonist of *The Moon-Lens*, Rossiter at one point falls asleep because the author's imagination did, and the same can be said of the moment when Rossiter's wife faints. The urban wasteland where the finale takes place was the kind of blitzed Liverpool cityscape into which I would venture in search of cinemas, and I appear to have borrowed Rossiter's surname from the film *Circus of Horrors*. Initially Derleth told me that he "rather liked" the tale for *Travellers by Night*, although "would it not be improved by an interpolated clarifying

paragraph? Many of our readers would find it written with such restraint as to be obscure to them, unmotivated, and fundamentally too puzzling."

In having reread it a month later, however, he reported that he had "decided finally against using it in *Travellers by Night*... Little things about it continue to bother me—the change in point-of-view midway from Rice to Rossiter, the 'disgustingly familiar' and unmotivated liquid in the cup, and the like. I fear to you these are integral, but to me they are not." They weren't to me either, as *The Scar* eventually went to prove, but he rejected that version for *Dark Things* as being unpleasant rather than horrible. I assumed this meant he would refuse it for *Demons by Daylight* too, and learned my mistake too late.

Having completed *Demons by Daylight* in 1968, I felt directionless, and it shows in quite a few of the subsequent tales. Some experiments saw print, and some, such as *The Void*, fell short. The French new novel hovers over this narrative, which is oblique to a fault. Shall I give a hint? Read on. There really are no simpler puzzles: literally, a Nabokovian textual secret.

1969 brought *The Other House*. The grey protagonist lurking at the edge of drugs and sex was of course the author himself, and the character carried off my dropped first name. His sense of how he sounds and appears to other people was mine, and in other ways too the tale reports more than it invents. The Ingmar Bergman loudly found wanting by students (at Liverpool University) was one of his greatest films, *The Shame*. By now Brichester hardly bothers to disguise its resemblance to Liverpool, even if I'm not sure that you could find a Chinese restaurant serving sake. Surely the first time I drank that was decades later in Japan.

1969 was the year I became the film reviewer for BBC Radio Merseyside, and it may also have been when I appalled some of the staff at Quarry Bank High School with a lecture on horror. Among the teenage audience was none other than Clive Barker. My BBC producer Tony Wolfe had me invite several of the pupils, Clive included, to discuss horror on the arts programme, and I believe Clive and I did most of the talking. I wouldn't be surprised if this recording was at the back of my mind when I wrote *Broadcast*, since I was still pretty nervous (unlike Clive, as I recall) of the microphone. Perhaps there's also a trace of the first radio interview I ever gave, soon after *The Inhabitant of the Lake* saw print. I was so befuddled to be asked why I'd used the Severn Valley as a location that I mumbled about

"furtive little cottages," which became the caption under my photograph in a newspaper reprint of the interview. Of course even professional broadcasters can be panicked by the prospect of dead air.

That same year I wrote *The Urge* and *The Sunshine Club*. In the first story I made the mistake Robert Aickman thought he made with *Just a Song at Twilight*—writing the tale too soon after the incident that suggested it rather than taking the time to invent. The actual encounter took place in a Liverpool coffee bar, the Masque. These days I would have used the name for its thematic relevance. A timid interest in drugs may underlie the tale, and perhaps paregoric had lodged in my mind from Naked Lunch. As for *The Sunshine Club*, Tom Disch reviewed the anthology in which it appeared and marked the tale, I think, D-. It deserved no better.

The next couple of years were my lean ones. Two of the four tales from 1970 are here. *Writer's Curse* was suggested to me by a neighbour in my birthplace of Nook Rise, Hazel Carline. Her house overlooked the real pavilion, although it wasn't derelict. I can't recall whether any unpublished writers had approached me by then, although Dunn's embittered sense of entitlement rings all too true. The story belongs to the tradition of *The Suitable Surroundings* and *The Un-namable*, but is it worthy? It was called *Talent* until I remembered that Ted Sturgeon had used the title.

Property of the Ring was rewritten as *Medusa*, though you mightn't realise. I can only hope the dialogue was meant to sound pretentious. The sunlight that requires no participation may be a muffled echo from Beckett's novel *Watt*. The signet ring was mine, a twenty-first birthday present from my mother. Not long before her death I injured myself, and the ring had to be sawn off in hospital.

1971 was more productive—all of five stories. *Night Beat* suggests a first attempt to write a horror comic story with a twist in the tale. Later I discovered that Gahan Wilson had already dealt with the idea in a single Playboy cartoon. Perhaps I can comfort myself by reflecting that Steve King's *Lunch at the Gotham Café* reads like a nightmare variant on Monty Python's dirty fork sketch.

Later that year came *The Shadows in the Barn*, eventually improved as *In the Shadow*. It takes us back to my old Cotswold territory, although by now I'd visited the area;, perhaps that shows. This was one of the stories I submitted to the Scott Meredith Agency when they sent me a strangely

impersonal invitation—a booklet about their firm accompanied by a note saying "This will express interest in your work." Once I'd followed with the stories with the fifty dollars they'd neglected to mention they required, they responded with a letter listing reasons why they couldn't sell the tales. Certainly the narrative method of *The Shadows in the Barn* is ineffectually conventional.

We skip ahead to 1973. I'd set out to write full time, supported—propped up, more like—by Jenny. Retrospect demonstrates how untimely my decision was. Kirby McCauley, now my agent, had to tell me that the market for short horror stories was very limited. He tried Damon Knight with *The Companion*, but Knight responded that he didn't know what was going on in it half the time. My solution was to lurch into science fiction as best I could. Little of it sold, but most of it is here.

The Precognitive Trip was my first attempt, and I appear not even to have sent it to Kirby. It may derive from a notion recorded in Lovecraft's commonplace book. "Berger's mind reverted, striking the present with an almost tangible blow." That's an overstated description of the kind of thoughtful trance I used to enter in my youth, when I became wholly unaware of my surroundings and would return to them with a shock. It's depicted better in my novel *Thieving Fear*. Elsewhere in *Trip* the prose gets still more out of hand: "Words she'd spoken tumbled through him, somehow linked". A car tramples someone, and "The whole of him smiled broadly" deserves a place in Thog's gallery of unfortunate writing in *Ansible*. The narrative traps a few potentially interesting ideas in its amber, but I've no idea why it was infected with a rash of colons. I used to lend my typescripts to my mother (most of them, anyway—not the *Scared Stiff* tales, which weren't for her), and I was disconcerted to find while transcribing this story onto the computer for this book that she'd revised one sentence in pencil. I enshrine her additions in square brackets: "... as if [it were] on the other side of a thin[,] almost invisible[,] plastic sheet." Is a ghost here?

Medusa followed, and then *Murders*. The late Ken Bulmer bought this one, commenting that he liked it once he'd found his way past the style, which seems to have seized up whenever I was aware of writing science fiction. It may have been a pity that I hadn't read Brian Aldiss's observation that the prose of the genre was characteristically light and rapid. Whenever the tale is supposed to take place, the future is insufficiently imagined, since its

people still send letters. The name Mounth was nothing but a mistyped word. I don't believe in wasting material.

The last tale of the year was *Point of View*. Like *Through the Walls*, it tries to depict the effects of LSD before I'd taken any; indeed, cannabis is far more prone to halt time. "I knew that the worst response to an acid flashback was paranoia, because that was self-perpetuating. If you rode the experience it would fade away eventually, integrated." Soon I was to learn how mistaken I was. Kirby had doubts about the story's commercial potential and showed it to another of his clients, David Drake. Dave thought it should have been about two thousand words long, and I think he was right. Coincidentally, the next bunch of tales I wrote—my EC Comics group—were each about that length. I should explain that on Merseyside, last is a slang term for useless; hence the line "Gases are last".

After the EC tales of early 1974 I had another fumble at science fiction. I can't find much to say about *The Grip of Peace*, which suffers from too much expository dialogue, not all of it even speakable. Rereading my early work, I often feel as if it's someone else's, but I don't recognise myself anywhere in this tale, although the final scene seems unexpectedly authentic years later. Jenny and I had a blazing row as we tried to find our way around the labyrinth of Birmingham, but once booked into our room at Fantasycon we had some of the best sex we've ever had.

Later that year I tried to recapture the skills I'd discovered while inspired by EC, but they'd deserted me, or good ideas had. *Only the Wind* lives up to its title by containing little else, while *Morning Call* is a minor piece deriving from my mother's distrust of doctors, though she didn't pester them—quite the reverse. It was another tale I didn't let her read, not out of guilt but simply to avoid an argument.

Did this pair dissatisfy me so much that I fled to another field? *Pet* was next—more floundering in the shallows of science fiction. I managed to lighten my style to some extent by using a youthful narrator, but the narrative voice is insufficiently naïve, and the predictable ending—weighed down by sentimentalism too—falls with a dull thud. I've recast one sentence ("He had a little pink face under the fur, that looked old and very peaceful") but otherwise I've restrained myself from some considerable editing of what looks like a transcribed first draft. "My father's voice sounded surprised and

puzzled, like his expression"! Another quote for Thog, I think. Ken Bulmer bounced the story because of the ending, and quite right too.

It was immediately followed by a further lump of science fiction, *Hain's Island.* It's vaguely ecological and vaguely psychological, with too little sense of character, which is obscured by stiffened dialogue. It was written by someone I no longer have any sense of having been, and so I've no idea whether I was aware of pinching a motif from *The Body Snatchers*, if it wasn't from *The Quatermass Experiment*. Perhaps the tale finally prefigures the central issue of *The Long Lost*—a fantastic element used as a scapegoat for behaviour that it was hardly needed to cause.

Although I wrote some better stuff that year, *Bait* mainly goes to show how little interest I had in vampirism, or at least how I felt there was little left to explore. The fissure in the wall might seem deeply Freudian, but I pinched the idea of being spitted on a sword from John Metcalfe. Rounding off 1974, *Snakes and Ladders* is somewhat more original, and gave rise to an interesting editorial disagreement. The tale was originally intended for Mike Ashley, who felt that it was undermotivated. He took *The Gap* instead, and I returned to *Snakes* five years later, reworking it as *Playing the Game*. By now T. E. D. Klein (he of the highly recommended *Reassuring Tales*) was the editor of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone Magazine*. I heard from Kirby that Ted had bought *Playing the Game*, but I only belatedly realised that he'd taken the first version. I offered the second, only for him to prefer the original. "When you rewrite," he commented, "you really rewrite, don't you?" In the cases of some of the contents of this book, not nearly enough.

At least *Snakes and Ladders* is more substantial than my final offerings, but chronology can't be denied. From 1979, *The Burning* is another story written too soon after the incident that gave rise to it, a firework display in Newsham Park in Liverpool. Like *The Stone on the Island*, this one seems to have some roots in M. R. James's *Stories I Have Tried to Write*. Up pops the scapegoat theme again, uninterestingly handled.

In 1990 a theatrical producer in, I think, Los Angeles contacted me for a contribution to his Grand Guignol revival. I'd just written a drabble—a story of exactly one hundred words for an anthology of them, which ultimately didn't appear—and it suggested itself as suitable for adaptation. *A Play for the Jaded* was the result, but the producer rescinded his initial enthusiasm after receiving a supposedly similar piece from someone else.

Whether the revival ever saw a stage I have no idea. Here's the sketch to round off this book.

And perhaps it will do as a way of bringing down the curtain on this motley entertainment. Let these misshapen creatures of my superseded mind shuffle and stumble for your amusement as best they can—poor things but mine own, even if the brain cells that produced them may be long gone. Perhaps now it's the author who is losing shape, but he hopes his prose has grown shapelier instead. Besides, if this book sells just a single copy of *Reassuring Tales*, it will have justified its existence.

Ramsey Campbell
Wallasey, Merseyside
16 July 2007

Afterword To *Just Behind You*, 2008

I'm fifty as a writer. I didn't say a good one. My first book, completed in 1958, was *Ghastly Tales*—at least, it should have been called that. Actually, it was entitled *Ghostly Tales,* but believe me, you don't want to see the ghastly evidence. The world, or at any rate the readers of Pat Kearney's fanzine *Goudy,* saw my first published tale when I was fifteen, and the following year August Derleth anthologised "The Church in High Street", on which he had understandably wielded his editorial pen. At eighteen I had an Arkham House collection to my name, and nine years later Arkham brought out my first good book, *Demons by Daylight.* Perhaps I should date my anniversary from that event, in which case—like the Kenneth Williams character in *Beyond Our Ken*—I can claim thirty-five years. Soon I'll claim more. I don't propose to stop writing until I'm dead, if then.

Here's a selection of my last few years' worth of stories. "Fear the Dead" was my contribution to an anthology of tales about fear. The original line-up *of Just Behind You* would have included a quartet of terrible old women, but I've reduced them by half. The other two will have to await my next collection. As for fear, it may summon the very thing that's dreaded. In my early years I often feared it would as I lay in bed after reading Le Fanu or M. R. James or "Thurnley Abbey" or even "Beyond the Door". I also heard the kind of superstitious warning the young protagonist receives, and my notions of religion were as ill-defined and ominous. In my house they went together.

"Digging Deep" is one of three tales here that involve the mobile phone. Andy Murray, author of an essential book on Nigel Kneale, used the story in an anthology of stories about phobias. As he points out, my piece revives one of the earliest obsessive horrors in fiction, but the idea came from hearing on Radio 4 that quite a few people insist on keeping their mobile with them as Alan Coe does. Old fears don't necessarily go away—our psyches simply bring them up to date.

"Double Room" was one of two tales I conceived during the 2007 World Fantasy Convention at Saratoga Springs. (The other, "The Long Way", was published as a wintry present for subscribers to *PS* magazine.) Conventioneering by yourself can be a lonely business, especially while you're in your hotel room (Bob Shaw was terrified of spending any waking hours in his after his wife Sadie's death). One night in my Saratoga bathroom I heard my neighbour on the far side of the wall, and shortly afterwards I was scribbling ideas in my notebook. Originally the manifestations might have been more inexplicable, but the reasons the tale found for them work for me.

Occasionally I try to repay my debt to specific writers. *Midnight Sun* was my attempt to scale the awesome peak of Algernon Blackwood's achievement, while *The Darkest Part of the Woods* clambered the Lovecraftian. "The Place of Revelation" goes for another giant of the field. If anybody guesses which one, I'll count the tale some kind of a success. The naive voice can be a highly effective way to tell a tale of terror, creating a tension between what's told and how. I hope it works here.

"The Winner" was written in response to Kealan Patrick Burke's request for a new story about a tavern. I've encountered hostelries less unlike this one than you might care to imagine. Back in the seventies, when I was cycling around Birkenhead Park to research "This Time", I went for lunch in a nearby pub. I used to think the moment when a Western bar goes silent as our hero walks in was exaggerated, but let me tell you, that'll be the day, pilgrim.

"One Copy Only" is an example of the tale that got away. Even more than in "Feeling Remains", a character—in this case, the narrator—took hold of the narrative and ran off with it. I hope this enriches it somewhat, though I often look at it and feel as if a slim Ray Bradbury fable is suffocating inside it. A Fantasycon panel chaired by none other than Pete Crowther discussed the discipline necessary to the short story, and it occurred to me too late to contribute the thought that Ray and one of the writers he frequently cites, Ernest Hemingway, have a crucial trait in common. Ray's prose is irrepressibly exuberant, Hemingway's is pared to the minimum, but neither writer ever lets a short story character take on more life than the theme needs. Me, I sometimes feel like a latter-day Frankenstein whose creations stumble off by themselves, having found their own voice.

"Laid Down" was written for an anthology in which each tale was to be exactly one thousand words long. Apparently publishers were unenthusiastic, though I don't know why given the splendid precedent of Fredric Brown's *Nightmares and Geezenstacks.* Writing within specified parameters can be a useful discipline, productive of invention. Here's a bit, I hope.

"Unblinking" takes us back to that old theme of mine, madness. Why do I return to it? Even if I don't think of my childhood, I have only to read postings on the Internet, where the deranged who pass for sane in real life throw their disguises away Insanity is all around us, and we may be required to find a new euphemism—"the norm", perhaps. Me, I'm no more mad than you are.

We're back with the mobile again in "Breaking Up". How often has a technological advance been cited as fatal to the tale of supernatural terror? Electric light was supposed to kill it off, but ghosts weren't daunted. Fritz Leiber even celebrated the menace of defective neon. Equally, the mobile phone may appear to provide safety and reassurance, but its potential for treachery is considerable. I'm not deploring the item—I wouldn't be without mine. Rather, it's another opportunity for sinister invention.

"Respects" was suggested by a local incident in which a car thief in his early teens killed himself while fleeing the police. A lamp standard at the site of his demise still decorated with flowers years after the incident, and the tributes on the obituaries page of one Wallasey paper were at least as grotesque as the ones I've invented— the romanticisation of a petty criminal. How much has this to do with the public hunger for a moment in the media? The tendency has produced its own clichés. There almost seems to be a standard script (created by the demand for sound bites) for grieving parents to deliver at press conferences. A lost daughter inevitably becomes "my little princess", and it isn't uncommon to hear very young children described as "my best friend". Does this cheapen the grief? People may need to express their feelings (although not doing so, at least in public, can be useful too), but how much does banality and inaccuracy express?

"Feeling Remains" was written at Ellen Datlow's request for a frightening ghost story. I hope it's one. A generally favourable review commented that it was let down by too broad a caricature of liberalism. In fact the character

concerned was drawn from life, and I toned down the portrayal. I fear it still rings true to me, although that needn't mean it does to the reader.

"Direct Line"—no, I can't think of any further comments about mobile phones. Watch out for my iPod trilogy (I tease). At least I have an anecdote about "Skeleton Woods". In the mid-nineties, our daughter went to university in York and my British agent of the time convinced me there was no market for supernatural horror— mine, at any rate. I often drove Tammy to York, and every time we left Leeds or returned that way I saw a sign for Skelton Woods (apparently an area of Leeds). The first time I caught sight of it I immediately added the extra vowel and thought what a title it could make, only to reflect that I would never write the book. At the turn of the century, when I returned to the supernatural novel, the title didn't quite fit the book that appeared as *The Darkest Part of the Woods* (or even *Wods*). It hovered somewhere in my mind for years and at last alighted on the ideas that turned into the present tale— indeed, it helped shape them.

"The Unbeheld" is one of those tales that could play like a shaggy dog tale. The reader must decide whether it does—it didn't for me in the writing. There may be comedy in "The Announcement", which is to an extent a sketch for a trick I used in *The Grin of the Dark* and in another novel. I'm cautious about claiming comedy only because while the tale made me laugh now and then, I gave up directing my readers' reactions many years ago. Otherwise I might go in for Graham Greene's method of separating my output into different lists, as he did to distinguish his entertainments from his serious novels. If I were to yield to the temptation I would class several of mine as comedies, which doesn't mean they aren't serious: not just *The Count of Eleven* but *Needing Ghosts* (a novella, of course) as well as *Secret Story* (as *Secret Stories* became after dieting), *The Grin of the Dark, Creatures of the Pool*—perhaps even *The One Safe Place.* At a recent reading at Borders in Leeds I was struck by the muted mirth with which my fellow writers—Mark Morris, Adam Nevill and Conrad Williams—greeted much of the scene in the disused Preston theatre from *The Grin of the Dark.* Maybe it's the way I tell them.

Dragged Down might have done for Ellen Datlow's anthology (forthcoming at the time of writing this) of stories about urban legends, but it had already appeared online by the time she asked me for a new tale. Perhaps I could have elaborated on the Liverpool tradition that if a young

girl stands on a pedestrian crossing on Scotland Road at midnight, the next face she sees behind a steering wheel will belong to the man she'll marry (if anybody gets married these days). *Raised by the Moon* is (like *The Ferries* in another book) one of my Wirral landscape tales, although in this case the setting that suggested it isn't named. In fact it was the West Kirby boating lake, around which you can walk on a stone path. The path is only very slightly higher than the lake and, at the other edge, the river. While following it one windy wave-wracked day I had the notion of being met by walkers from both ends of the path. Steve Jones found hints of Innsmouth in the tale, while others have seen them in *Creatures of the Pool.* It's enough to turn a writer green around the gills.

And so we come to the title tale, generated by a request from Gary Fry for a contribution to his fine anthology *Poe's Progeny.* His idea (splendidly achieved, let me say) was for a collection of new tales that demonstrated the influence not just of Poe but of the best traditions of our field. While each contributor was asked to demonstrate the influence of a specific writer, Gary decided against asking me to do so. I believe I did anyway: as in *The Guide*, I had M. R. James in mind. Equally, I'd taken to heart Geoff Ryman's suggestion that the supernatural element in James sometimes avoids darker emotional themes. Though I don't altogether agree with Geoff, I've never winced from such topics, and I don't see why the Jamesian method can't encompass and express them. Indeed, I've never seen why my field can't, and I've spent most of my career attempting to show that it can. I hope there are a few successes in this book. Here's to the next one!

Safe Words is all I want to salvage from an aborted novel, *Spanked by Nuns,* which never progressed beyond the notebook stage. Even Pete Crowther looked doubtful about the prospect of the novel, and I kept feeling it might have been too perverse for the mainstream but insufficiently erotic for, say, Adam Nevill's Nexus Books. I finally put it to rest on reading Niki Flynn's fine memoir *Dances with Werewolves,* which addressed the issues far more cogently than I imagine I would have. Recently Niki filmed a decidedly personal tribute to my old tale "The Chimney". As for "Safe Words", I thought the verbal problem that beset a character from the novel was too much fun to waste.

The title of this book and of the tale that provides it is decades older than either, by the way. I planned to use it for *Dark Companions* back in the

early eighties until I learned that Manly Wade Wellman had a similar title in mind for a book. He never used it, and so at last I did. Let me make it a tribute to him and his wife Frances in memory of good times in Chapel Hill. I'll include in the memorial another good friend of theirs and mine and Jenny's, sadly missed—Karl Edward Wagner. May they all enjoy an eternal autumn of the kind that illuminates the mountains around Chapel Hill.

Ramsey Campbell
Wallasey, Merseyside
5 December 2008

Afterword to Ancient Images

In writing *Ancient Images* I drew on the history of cinema, and now this has overtaken the novel. It's set in the late 1980s, before DVDs and mobile phones. This was the decade when Britain found a new scapegoat for its ills—uncensored films, particularly horror. A panic akin to the orchestrated outrage that did away with horror comics in the fifties was whipped up by the British media, even most of those that should have known better, and all across the nation police time was wasted on raiding video libraries for the likes of *The Evil Dead*. For years anyone determined to watch, say, Argento films uncut in Britain often had to make do with blurry pirate videotapes. The *Gorehound* chapter in my novel gives you an idea how it was. Now that virtually all the offending films can be had complete on British DVD—*Last House on the Left* was among the last to be reprieved by the British Board of Film Classification, previously the BBF Censors—it's possible for some of us to feel a kind of wry nostalgia for the period. A recent British release (*Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide*) includes a useful documentary as well as reminiscences by critics who lived through it all.

In one more way the novel is historical. The original printings were dedicated to "Joan, my favourite mother-in-law" (A. Bertram Chandler's wife). Since she's gone to the convention party in the sky, I've dedicated this new edition to two old friends and colleagues who love classic horror films as much as Don D'Auria and I do.

At the time some readers of *Ancient Images* were apparently surprised that the book came out for subtlety and restraint against graphic gore. I can only think they didn't know my stuff. I'm certainly opposed to censorship—when I was reviewing films for the BBC I often attacked the campaign against the nasties and took apart official press releases that the media seemed reluctant to question—but freedom of speech isn't an excuse to give up moral choice; nothing is. I should say that Andrew Minihin, the *Gorehound* columnist, isn't based on any particular writer; he's meant to embody an attitude that I suspect is prevalent still. More to the point, Lionel Stillwell wasn't meant to be Leslie Halliwell. While I'm no admirer of Halliwell's guides to film, I don't believe he would have disparaged Karloff and Lugosi. He was also

unhappy to learn that *North by Northwest* had been edited to fit a slot on the television channel for which he bought films. On the other hand, the booksellers in chapter 10 are indeed Dave Gibson and Ted Ball of the Fantasy Centre bookshop, now itself history, alas.

Ancient Images began life as *The Blood Hunt*—that's the first title in my notes for the novel. Later *The Dead Hunt* suggested itself. *To Feed the Stone* came up next, and then almost immediately (while I was staying with Thom and Alice Tessier in Waterbury, I believe) the present title struck me. Originally Giles Spence would have married a Redfield, and casting Karloff as an aristocrat was designed as his insult to the family. The Redfield land was to be used for hare-coursing, but I wanted to avoid making too much overt comment, I think (or perhaps I just didn't have the stomach for the research). Initially I planned *Tower of Fear* to be the last film Karloff and Lugosi made together and the reason for their split, but the British reaction against horror films in the thirties—again, all true—seemed a more productive background. For a while I thought a rock festival at Redfield would provide the final sacrifice, but in Thatcher's England the counterparts of Enoch's Army were being harried by the police, and in time I saw what this would bring to my tale.

Does the book try to include too much? Better too much than too little, perhaps, and I'm inclined to think the various themes shed a mutual illumination. It occurs to me that among other things this is my vampire novel. I did write an overt one—the adaptation of the 1936 film *Dracula's Daughter*—but I admit to not finding the theme of vampirism especially inspiring. In *Ancient Images* we have the aristocratic family that feeds on the blood of its tenants, which could be seen as making explicit one metaphor at the heart of traditional vampire fiction. Or you could argue that the vampire here is the landscape itself, which shares the name of the doomed family in the manner of Poe. In fact I think it was precisely because I was unaware of writing a vampire story that it engaged my imagination so much.

I don't mean to imply that traditional horror movies never did. In the sixties you had to pass for sixteen to see most horror films in Britain, which meant I was fourteen before I could, by which time I'd been collecting *Famous Monsters of Filmland* for years and knew all the classic monsters in the form of stills. (For the record, the first horror film I fell in love with—

among the first I ever saw—was Jacques Tourneur's *Night of the Demon*, and it remains my favourite.) Graham Nolan was originally to fall through a window, to be impaled as victims are in Argento films, but just because it was the kind of fate he would have deplored in the cinema, this didn't justify its excess. I thought readers might spot that the first and ninth chapters are flashbacks to Redfield—indeed, I meant the second one to let us glimpse Giles Spence—but some people took them to be scenes from *Tower of Fear*, although they're surely too gruesome for late thirties cinema. On the other hand, the figures on the corbel in chapter 29 could well exist: you can see equivalents (online if you like) at the church in Kilpeck near Hereford.

Decades later I don't mind this novel. It's a snapshot of its time, and it let me convey some of my love of the cinema. One point came to bother me—the film itself contains no occult element, just an image that refers to one—and so I had a second try with *The Grin of the Dark*. Oddly, one Amazon reviewer of that book thought it was an attempt to imitate Theodore Roszak's *Flicker*. No, only an attempt to improve on my own book, first published two years before Roszak's. Now, like its author, it's more ancient than ever. I hope we both have a few years still.

Ramsey Campbell
Wallasey, Merseyside
7 May 2011

Afterword to Dark Companions

This was my fourth collection to see print, and the first not to appear through the eldritch portals of Arkham House. After imitating Lovecraft in *The Inhabitant of the Lake* I'd spent five years developing my own approach, which was loosed upon the world at book length in *Demons by Daylight*. *The Height of the Scream* was more experimental, too often wilfully so, and less sure of itself. I'd say *Dark Companions* leaves those problems behind. Only the title was a compromise: I'd meant to call it *Just Behind You* until I learned that my old friend Manly Wade Wellman had that in mind for a book of his own. In fact he never used the title, and so I did just a couple of years back.

Let me reminisce as best I can about these tales, written by the long-haired genial freak who appears in a zippered suede shirt on the back flap of the first edition. I'll go at them in the order they appear herein. "Mackintosh Willy" was written in 1977—to be precise, the first draft was begun on 22 August and completed six days later. In those days I kept a diary in a ledger and recorded the progress of my first drafts, though not of the rewriting. Charlie Grant bought the tale for one of his Shadows anthologies but found the punch line understated, even for his taste, and so I substituted the last line we have here. As for the story behind the story, there isn't much to tell. For several years Jenny and I did indeed live across West Derby Road from Newsham Park, where I often took a hashish-eater's stroll. One day I misread the graffiti in a shelter as the narrator does, and noticed footprints set in new concrete around the nearby pond. This was all my imagination needed. Alas, when I took J. K. Potter on a tour of my locations years later, the shelter had been demolished. The tale brought me a World Fantasy Award in the short story category, which I shared with Elizabeth Lynn, and we hugged onstage in Baltimore.

"Napier Court" was the last tale I wrote in 1967, in the midst of the *Demons by Daylight* bunch. Like several of those stories, it was a radical rewrite of a first draft. The 1965 version had a male protagonist laid up in bed, but Alma Napier is based on my solitary ex-fiancée, from whom I'd parted several months before writing this version. Along with "Concussion"

it's among my most nakedly autobiographical tales. Before August Derleth bought it I sent a copy to Kirby McCauley, then a friend and later also my agent. Kirby showed the typescript to J. Vernon Shea, who commented that if I was like Peter in the tale I couldn't be much of a catch. Indeed, and I knew it, which was why I tried to depict myself as honestly as possible: perhaps it was a means of outgrowing that personality as well. Basing the tale on my experience was also certainly a way of bringing it to life.

I've a confession to make about "Down There". It was begun on 9 September 1978, less than three weeks after our daughter's birth. Indeed, four days after she was born I set about writing another tale, "This Time", completed a week later. I may have been afraid that the change in my life might hinder my writing, but was this really an excuse to devote so much time to proving the reverse? The first draft of "Down There" took seven days and is described in the diary as 'laboured'—serve me right, you may think. As I often do, I reassured myself that it could be rewritten, and so it was. It certainly needed it, which I can demonstrate with the opening of the first draft:

> "Hurry along there," Steve called as the girls trooped down the office. "Last one tonight. Mind the doors."
>
> The girls smiled at Elaine as they passed her desk, but their smiles meant different things: just like you to make things more difficult for the rest of us, looks like you've been kept in after school, suppose you've nothing better to do, fancy having to put up with him by yourself. She didn't give a damn what they thought of her, which was part of what irked them, and she was quite content to be alone with Steve—if only he wouldn't make a joke of everything.
>
> Even the lifts, one of which had sunk to the sub-basement every time it was called today. Presumably the sub-basement was no longer so disgusting, but Elaine was glad she hadn't had to go down there, even momentarily. Glancing back through the window that sealed her off from the lobby, she saw that the lift was out of order now. Its twin was stuffing people into itself, closing its doors whether or not they were ready, leaving the girls behind. They loitered near the other lift as though by pretending not to notice it they might persuade it to relent. When one of them

caught her eye, Elaine looked away. She wasn't about to let them think she was envying them.

There was nothing to envy, especially when they would have to face the November night, the downpour. Around the office building the warehouses looked like melting chocolate; the river and the canals were opaque with tangled ripples that almost extinguished the reflections of streetlamps. Cottages and terraces, some of them derelict, crowded up the steep hills towards the disused mines. Through the skeins of water on the glass their infrequent lights looked shaky as the flames of candles.

"Goodnight comrade," Steve said like the title of a song as Mr Williams went by, and Elaine had to stifle a grin. Mr Williams had tried to dissuade Elaine from working tonight, from being exploited as he'd called it, long after the rest of them had desisted. It was all very well for him: his father wasn't an invalid, he earned enough to keep his parents without working overtime. He had only annoyed her by harping on the things that were wrong with the place: she had to work overtime—how could it help to remember what might go wrong?

Still, he'd given up finally [*unlike this turgid prose, its greying author grumbles*], and she was alone on the sixth floor with Steve —alone in the otherwise untenanted building except for the caretaker, wherever he was. Ranks of cabinets like bookcases divided the long room down the middle; they were stuffed with blue Inland Revenue files. Beneath a fluttering fluorescent tube protruding files drowsed, jerked awake [*much like the author as he transcribes this*]. Smells of dust and old paper drifted about the room, which was growing oppressively hot. Through the steamy window above an unquenchable radiator, Elaine could just make out the frame where the top section of the fire escape should be.

"There goes our Red," Steve remarked. "Into somebody's bed rather than under it, from what I hear." She smiled a little timidly across the stretch of desks at him and lit a cigarette for confidence. Being alone with Steve and his risqué joke made her feel queasy and nervous, an odd sensation like the start of an

adventure, but at least the length of the office separated them. She began to compare a tax return with last year's.

"You can understand these union men, especially round here," Steve said. Perhaps he'd taken her shyness for disagreement. "The trouble is, it's never the employers they hurt most, always the public" [*or the long-suffering reader who has to trudge through this mire of dialogue*].

He reminded her of her father: fair, but not too fair. Was Mr Williams a genuine Red? [*Was their author a genuine bore?*] Certainly he'd opposed the move to the building long after the rest of the union had accepted it, very temporarily. Of course his father had lost his job when the mines were shut down, but need that mean employers were always wrong?

Steve was gazing at her, blank-faced again. "Are you feeling exploited again?"

Mr Williams had called her the employers' weapon against solidarity. "No, certainly not." She wished Steve would let her be quiet for a while; she would chat when she felt more at ease. "I'm feeling hot," she said.

"Yes, it is a bit much." He stood up, mopping his forehead theatrically. "I'll go and sort out Mr Tuttle," he said. "Maybe he can do something about this bloody awful first draft we're stuck in…"

Well, you get the idea, probably more than you want. For the record, the story came to me when the light failed in the lift at Radio Merseyside, where I then worked as a film reviewer. Some years ago Guillermo del Toro rang me, enthusiastically proposing to film "Down There" as his contribution to an anthology movie. The project was set up—it would have been something like the Twilight Zone film, I believe—but alas, the production company decided not to back it after all. Such is Hollywood.

"Heading Home" was written on 14 January 1974 and, I suspect, little altered in the rewrite. It was the fourth of six such tales I wrote that month, having heard from Kirby McCauley that Marvel Comics planned to resurrect horror comics, short filler stories and all. They needed tales about 1800 words long on traditional themes, and the idea seems to have fired up

my imagination. Marvel would abort the proposition, but my offerings all found good homes. Later "Heading Home" was reprinted in *Read*, a classroom magazine aimed at grades 6 to 10. Among the suggestions for classroom work was this one, apparently provided by a Junior High School Middle School Assembly: "Presumably, the narrator will have his head back on, but it will be held in place only by the regrown nerves and the thread. That's pretty wobbly. Continue the story, telling what happens next." And they call us horror writers warped!

"The Proxy" started life as "The Bed beyond the Window" on 28 April 1977 but adopted the present title on the first of May, and was finished one day later. I hope it doesn't show senility is creeping up on me because I've absolutely no idea where the idea for the story came from. David Lloyd adapted it with style for the A1 comic.

I spent a couple of days researching the locations of "The Depths" (though the diary suggests it was "an excuse for a day off, really." Certainly I met our old friends Stan and Marge Nuttall, veterans of the Liverpool Science Fiction Group, for a drink in the Crown. Marge is heard to sing on the first page that she's glad she's Bugs Bunny, which she had already done in *The Face That Must Die*. This wasn't a lapse of memory on my part; I'd simply despaired of seeing that book published, given the responses of various editors to its oppressive grimness. I plunged into "The Depths" on 28 July 1978 and surfaced from the first draft on the sixth of August. Again, I can't trace the idea to its source, which may be somewhere in my many notebooks and a quest for someone else to make. I once claimed that the tale was written out of dissatisfaction with my handling of a similar theme in *The Nameless*, but "The Depths" precedes that novel by a year—so much for the chronology in my cranium. I don't think horror fiction has to be a holiday from morality, as Angela Carter once declared it was, and perhaps that's why I keep writing about scapegoats and the rejection of responsibility.

In early July 1977 we had a contingent from Carolina to stay in our little house in Tuebrook—the Wellmans and the Wagners (Karl and Barbara), I believe, and David Drake. I had "Out of Copyright" in mind and asked Dave for a likely Latin phrase, which I used in the tale. When he got back to Chapel Hill he airmailed me his revised thoughts, but too late—I'd written

"Out of Copyright" in three days, starting on 10 July. His off-the-cuff response still seems fine to me, but don't blame Dave for my use of it.

"The Invocation" owes its inspiration to *The Godfather*. Perhaps it was partly because I knew of Coppola's roots in horror (specifically the film he made for Roger Corman, Dementia 13, which was hacked to bits by the British censor at the time) that I thought the Hollywood mogul would find worse than a horse's head when he peeled back the sheets. What I anticipated happens to Ted in my tale. I saw the film at its first Liverpool showing in August 1972, but didn't start the story until 5 September 1975, completing it on the 12th. When the story was reprinted in Dark Voices 2, a copy-editor presumably assuming ignorance on my part changed Mrs Dame's citation of *Finian's Wake* to *Finnegan's Wake*. Sometimes I'm tempted to provide footnotes to make absolutely certain I can't be misunderstood, like so.

"The Little Voice" was apparently to be called "The Playmate" when I made notes for it in early April 1976. I set about writing it on the 30th and finished it on 9 May. Where did it come from? I have no idea—perhaps just a train of thought that made me scribble notes. By now I carried notebooks with me everywhere I went, though previously I'd made life harder for myself by writing notes in the diary ledger. Charlie Grant bought "The Little Voice" for his *Shadows* anthology series but suggested I should prune it a little. I believe I rid it of about two thousand words, and that's the published version.

"Drawing In" was written over the last three days of May 1977. At a guess the idea came out of cracks in the walls of our Tuebrook house, waving its spindly legs as it emerged. I don't mean I actually saw this happen, despite having taken several acid trips in the preceding couple of years. Strangely enough, I'd dreamed in August 1973 of dropping acid, a year before I ever did. That diary entry records a "genuine sense of growing intensity and muted panic" and notes "powerful images which I constructed in the dream and which remained: a silent avalanche of clouds; walking between amber buildings like banks of sand at sunset". Incidentally, elsewhere I've said that "Through the Walls" was written as a kind of preamble to venturing on my first trip, but in fact it was written just a few days after that experience.

A trip I took in the Cotswolds in May 1975 gave me the seeds of "The Pattern", and so did my impression some days later of the Freshfield coast

near Liverpool, which may have echoed the trip. The diary entry describes "green symmetry everywhere, the more complex the more minutely you look: glimpses of larger mandalas" and "a sense that there may be an enormous pattern (only one? or many?)" The next day (the last of May) saw the start of the tale, completed on 6 June. Halfway through I changed the title from "The Screamer". In retrospect I think that the lyricism of the story had to give way to or at least include horror because otherwise its pattern would have struck me as incomplete. In any case lyricism needn't be inimical to horror: see the work of Poppy Z. Brite or Caitlín Kiernan, for instance, or Robert Dunbar, not to mention the father of lyrical horror, Ray Bradbury (too often overlooked as a key writer in my field). Recently I was surprised to learn that Steve Mosby, an excellent writer whose novels are packaged as crime fiction but can certainly be claimed for horror, was fond of the tale—perhaps there's even an echo of it in his brilliant novel *Black Flowers*. Previously Doc Brite chose it as his favourite horror story for an anthology of such favourites.

"The Show Goes On" started out as "The Usher" on 24 May 1978. By the 27th it had the title it bears now, and the next day it was done. The cinema was based on the Hippodrome in Liverpool, converted from a variety theatre (the Royal Hippodrome) in 1929. A maze of dressing-rooms survived behind the cinema screen, and one night I got lost among them while searching for an exit. Eventually I came to a pair of double doors, and as I made to push them apart I seemed to glimpse a large dim room beyond, full of figures that rose or tottered to their feet to await me. Perhaps they were homeless, but the light reminded me of waking from a nightmare in an ill-lit childhood bedroom, and I made haste to find another way out. Need anyone ask why I write as I do?

"The Puppets" returns to the failed relationship that's at the heart of "Napier Court". One crucial disagreement with Rosemary (the real girl) was over horror fiction, which she didn't care for, not least mine. Dentistry represents or at least is substituted for it in this tale, and the village pageant is an objective correlative for a spectacle Rosemary coaxed out of me, perhaps because she thought it was remote from horror. At a performance in Hoylake of Debussy's Prélude de l'Après-Midi d'un Faune she was one of the orchestral flautists (not the soloist) and persuaded me to read Mallarmé's poem as a preamble, in French and then in English, to the hapless audience. When at last I'd struggled through the original in an accent worthy of

Inspector Clouseau I looked up to see the mayor of Hoylake on the front row, clutching his head in his hands. Afterwards, having fortified himself with at least one glass of wine, he described my performance as a tour de force. His accent was better than mine had been. Still, I don't waste material if I can avoid doing so, and a decade later the memory was nothing but fun. According to my diary the writing of the tale (then known as "Curtain Call") was pretty hesitant, stretching from 29 June 1978 to 8 July. On one day, admittedly with a hangover, I wrote just a single paragraph.

I started "Calling Card" on 24 November 1978 and completed it two days later. At that stage it was called "First Foot", a reference to a common New Year's Eve tradition in Britain. It was written in response to a request from the local newspaper for a two-thousand-word ghost story set on Merseyside during the festive season. Alas, the commissioning editor found it too gruesome—presumably he didn't know the kind of thing I wrote. Lin Carter was made of sterner stuff and bought it for *Weird Tales*, but told me on the train from New York to a World Fantasy Convention in Providence that the title wouldn't mean much to his audience. A few minutes later I gave him the title it bears now. Alas, the anthology series died before he could use it, but by a splendid irony a new editor at the local paper asked me for a Christmas tale five years after the original request, and this time the paper published the tale with no changes (except for entitling it "The Calling Card").

Even more than "The Pattern", "Above the World" owes much to LSD, especially once the tale climbs to the heights—specifically, the last acid trip I ever took (in July 1976, up Bleaberry Fell near Keswick) before a nightmare flashback some months later put me off the drug. The following June I researched Knox's ascent to the Bishop of Barf, and the story was written in three days, starting on 18 July. Alas, the Swan Hotel has been turned into apartments. A nearby hotel that closed recently was called Barf House. I wonder if some folk may have found the name ominous, and perhaps a question on the hotel's web site—"Why Barf?"—didn't help.

"Baby" began on 29 November 1974 and drew to a close on 4 December, which is pretty well all I know. The entry for the 25th notes "some rather nightmarish pram images" but doesn't specify them—I'm guessing that an everyday sight set them off in my head, as frequently happens. I suspect it may have been the swollen faceless plastic head, and has the bag of

washing in a pram from "Napier Court" found a new lease of grisly life? For some reason I didn't identify the location by name, but "Baby" is set around Granby Street in Liverpool; in those days finding Chinese vegetables and Indian spices in a grocer's was worthy of remark. The following year I returned to the area in *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*.

I recall even less about the genesis of "In the Bag". The ledger shows only that the first draft was begun on 20 November 1974 and completed two days later. No doubt the sense of random unreasonable severity came from my schooldays, though the headmaster isn't based on anyone specific. "Conversion" was written on 18 January 1974, but the other EC tale—"Call First"—took all of two days, starting on the 8th. In both cases, as with "Heading Home", I wrote copious notes at speed and incorporated nearly all of them.

I find this as hard to believe as anybody would, but when I wrote "The Chimney" I didn't know it was autobiographical. It was conceived on Christmas Day 1972, after Jenny and I had watched that splendid tale of television terror The Stone Tape. "Child afraid of Santa Claus— Perhaps from a very early age has associated horror with the large fireplace in his bedroom? His parents tell him of Santa Claus— But when they tell him the truth about SC, the horror comes flooding back— And something's always moving in there towards Christmas— He sees it emerge each year: but this year he sees it in more detail…" I got as far as the charred apparition but not, at this stage, its real identity (which, as David Drake pointed out, it has in common with L. P. Hartley's "Someone in the Lift", a tale I'd read back in the early fifties). Often my ideas lie low for years, and I didn't start "The Chimney" until 20 June 1975, finishing it on the 27th. Only when I read the tale aloud at Jack Sullivan's apartment on the Upper West Side years later did I remember how terrified I'd been on most Christmas Days of my childhood—not by Santa Claus but by having to go upstairs and knock on a bedroom door to invite my unseen father down for dinner. That he stayed unseen, then and for nearly all my childhood and early adulthood, only added to my dread.

And so to "The Companion", which took years to get itself together. On 30 June 1969 I had an idea about the derelict fairground in New Brighton. At this stage the protagonist is "a young girl, frightened of people generally". The place seems to be partly operative, with "white faces like papier-mâché

at some pay windows". Two years later I had thoughts about a ghost train in a fairground, but they weren't incorporated—maybe, having rediscovered them in the process of writing this afterword, I may develop them. Then on 13 September 1973 there's a page of notes for "The Companion", including a version of the final line and thoughts for an unused encounter with a fortune-teller. The 14th sees most of the ideas for Stone's last ride, and the next few days gather more material, but I have to conclude I was writing the story by then. Certainly once Stone heads for the abandoned fairground I finished the tale in a single session.

If I had the time I'd rewrite much of my old stuff, and "The Companion" is a case where I like some of it (the second half) enough to wish the rest were better. Well, my time is limited, and I'd rather work on something new—perhaps I'll write that ghost train tale from forty years ago. In any case, some people have liked the story—Steve King declared it a favourite, and more recently Jeremy Dyson did. Jeremy and I gave a public reading in Liverpool recently, and "The Companion" seemed to go down pretty well with the audience. Maybe there's life in these old tales yet, and even in this old writer. I'm happy to see *Dark Companions* rise from its grave.

Ramsey Campbell
Deep Blue Sea Apartments
Georgioupolis, Crete
20 September 2011

Afterword to the story *The Page* in *Shadow Show: All New Stories In Celebration Of Ray Bradbury*

Which tale of Ray's first pierced me with a sense of loneliness and loss? It may well have been "The Fog Horn" or "Kaleidoscope" or "The Dwarf" or "The Lake"—I can't now remember the order in which (precocious child) I read his first few books when I was no more than eight years old. I was borrowing adult fiction from the local public library on my mother's tickets, and Ray quickly became one of her favourite authors too. Now I think about it, perhaps that poignant jewel "The Smile" initially alerted us when it was reprinted in our local newspaper. Each of these stories affected me as some of Hans Andersen's fairy tales had—they were inescapably moving and disturbing as well. I think I was already also able to appreciate the poetry of Ray's prose.

On a Bradbury panel at the 2010 British Fantasy Convention, Joel Lane rightly celebrated him for rooting his fiction in the most crucial human experiences. The various panellists named their choice of Ray's tales, and some of the above were mine. An hour wasn't enough to let us say everything we should have, but here's my opportunity to cite a favourite theme of mine in his work—the death of books. While it's most fully explored in *Fahrenheit 451*, I've never forgotten two other treatments: "The Exiles" (mysteriously missing from the British edition of *The Illustrated Man*) and "Pillar of Fire," which I first encountered in August Derleth's anthology *The Other Side of the Moon*. In the latter story I was especially haunted by the last dead man's eulogy for our beloved fears. Back then I didn't know about the carnival magician who bade the twelve-year-old Ray to live forever, nor that Ray had embraced the exhortation by becoming a writer, but the information came as no surprise in the wake of his tales. Believe me, Ray—you'll live that long in the souls of your readers and in the work of the writers you've influenced. I believe that like others—Pete Crowther and Caitlín Kiernan among them—I learned lyricism from you.

For me Ray's achievement is inimitable, and so when Mort Castle asked me to write a tale for this book I vowed to avoid trying to imitate. In the course of my career I've come to believe in the happy coincidence, one of which was the source of *The Page*. A few weeks after Mort's request my wife and I spent two weeks in Rhodes. As we sunbathed I turned over ideas in my mind for a Bradbury tribute, and on a windy day one blew along—the sight of a man in pursuit of a page that a gust had torn out of the book he was reading on the beach. Thank heaven I always take a notebook with me! I was instantly reminded of "The Exiles" and its relatives, and it didn't take me long to sketch my tale. It's pretty personal, but isn't that the best kind of homage? I hope it contains a little of Ray's poignancy, and perhaps it has some of the redemptive quality you can often find in his work (from the list above, "The Lake," for instance). One final thought: if a character in any of his early stories had a mobile phone, it would be science fiction. Sometimes I feel we're all inhabiting the future he envisioned.

Ramsey Campbell
2012

Signs In The Air: Foreword to The Unspoken, May 2013

In January 2009 my wife Jenny's sister Penny died. She'd been treated for cancer some years earlier. While it wasn't the direct cause of her death, we suspect it was a factor. In my little eulogy at her funeral I said this:

"I've been a skeptic for much of my life, but I do at least believe we all pass into the fabric of the universe. On the morning Penny died I was up in my workroom as usual by dawn. It's on the third floor of a Victorian semi, and I have a view across the river to Liverpool. What I mostly see from my desk is the sky. That morning, all the time that the sun was visible beyond my window it was surrounded by an enormous rainbow halo, the like of which I've never seen. I thought it might be Penny.

"Like all the family I've kept being overtaken by surges of grief these last few weeks. Whenever I am I hear Penny's voice comforting me - saying 'Oh Ramsey' as only she could, with sympathy and humour as well. I don't mean an actual physical voice, but it might as well be; it sounds exactly like her. It certainly feels like her presence, as if in some sense she's still here. I hope she is for as long as she wants to be."

As is the way these days Lum'Rhin Dharvu, the LifeRites Celebrant/Officiant, asked to be sent the eulogies in advance for inclusion in Penny's memorial book. While I was typing this piece to send, the rainbow once again appeared around the sun.

I offer all this as consolation without attempting to interpret it. One way we keep our loved ones with us even once they're gone is by talking about them. We writers have the great gift of being able to pass on memories or elements of our lives to people who don't know us or those who were dear to us. I know that some of the stories in this anthology are based on actual experience, but I won't presume to speculate how many of the others are. I believe it needn't matter. What counts is that the authors have engaged their considerable imaginations with their themes and contributed stories worthy of the book. Perhaps some of them have the ability to heal, at least

emotionally. Meanwhile science builds up its own healing power, and our hopes.

I have a last anecdote to share, and once again I'll leave it uninterpreted, though I know what I would like it to mean. Earlier this month we had another death in the family, alas; Jenny's brother's partner Doris died of cancer. I was already booked on the day of the funeral, and so Jenny took the train to Newton Abbot on her own. As she stepped off the train she saw Penny waving to her from the far end of the platform. In a moment Penny was gone but not, I think, for ever. Perhaps my writing this will help her to be here.

A Warning To The Curious by M. R. James

Chosen by Ramsey Campbell for the anthology *My Favourite Horror Story*

I'm delighted to introduce M. R. James to this anthology, but first let me mention some other tales I might have picked. I might have selected *The Colour Out of Space* or *The White People* until I discovered that Lovecraft and Machen were already represented. Still, I'm here to praise James, and I shall, because he is one of the absolute masters of the British tale of terror. His influence alone would ensure him a place in the pantheon. As with all influential writers, his superficial traces can be found in the work of some bad ones—M. P. Dare was surely his most ludicrous literary offspring, and hardly one he would have been pleased to acknowledge—but such excellent and different contributors to the genre as L. P. Hartley, Fritz Leiber, Kingsley Amis, T. E. D. Klein, and Terry Lamsley learned from him. So did I, and in a tale called *The Guide* attempted to acknowledge my debt in full. He even appears as a character (Dr. Matthews) and tells a new story in Penelope Fitzgerald's superb novel, *The Gate of Angels*. For me, his achievement is twofold, or more accurately, his two strongest qualities are united in it. No writer better demonstrates how, at its best, the ghost story or supernatural horror story (either term fits his work) achieves its effects through the eloquence and skill of its prose style—and, I think, no writer in the field has shown greater willingness to make his tales as frightening as possible. He can convey more spectral terror in a single glancing phrase than most authors manage in a paragraph or a book. Certainly no writer of fiction aimed mainly at adults gave me more childhood nightmares and night fears. It quickly became apparent to the shrinking short-trousered Campbell that James habitually described just enough to suggest far worse. If only there were more like him today to nourish the dark side of the imagination with a little haute cuisine! I often wonder if he acquired some of his technique from George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, which he might well have read. Among his many memorable horrors are the sheeted spectre of *Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad*, the thing that crawls out of the well in *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, the various dismaying manifestations of the powers of Count Magnus (one example of which later appeared, lit too brightly, in the film, *The Brides of Dracula*), and the unwelcome visitor mistaken for a dog in *The Diary of Mr. Poynter* (an encounter reworked with less style by Paul Suter in an early Weird Tales story, *Beyond the Door*). I could have chosen any of these tales, or quite a few others, by James for this book. *A Warning to the Curious*, however, continues to impress me as offering the most sustained sense of relentless menace of any of his stories. In some ways it resembles *The Familiar*, his favourite ghost story by J. Sheridan Le Fanu, whose work he championed; but it is very much its own tale, particularly in its lightness of style. I hope readers new to either author will be impelled to seek out their work. A revival of their influence can do our field nothing but good. It was James who said of the *Not at Night* anthologies that they were "merely nauseating, and it is very easy to be nauseating"—a criticism many of our current writers might usefully consider, along with the following tale.—Ramsey Campbell.

The place on the east coast which the reader is asked to consider is Seaburgh. It is not very different now from what I remember it to have been when I was a child. Marshes intersected by dykes to the south, recalling the early chapters of Great Expectations; flat fields to the north, merging into

heath; heath, fir woods, and, above all, gorse, inland. A long sea-front and a street: behind that a spacious church of flint, with a broad, solid western tower and a peal of six bells. How well I remember their sound on a hot Sunday in August, as our party went slowly up the white, dusty slope of road towards them, for the church stands at the top of a short, steep incline. They rang with a flat clacking sort of sound on those hot days, but when the air was softer they were mellower too. The railway ran down to its little terminus farther along the same road. There was a gay white windmill just before you came to the station, and another down near the shingle at the south end of the town, and yet others on higher ground to the north. There were cottages of bright red brick with slate roofs… but why do I encumber you with these commonplace details? The fact is that they come crowding to the point of the pencil when it begins to write of Seaburgh. I should like to be sure that I had allowed the right ones to get on to the paper. But I forgot. I have not quite done with the word-painting business yet.

Walk away from the sea and the town, pass the station, and turn up the road on the right. It is a sandy road, parallel with the railway, and if you follow it, it climbs to somewhat higher ground. On your left (you are now going northward) is heath, on your right (the side towards the sea) is a belt of old firs, wind-beaten, thick at the top, with the slope that old seaside trees have; seen on the sky-line from the train they would tell you in an instant, if you did not know it, that you were approaching a windy coast.

Well, at the top of my little hill, a line of these firs strikes out and runs towards the sea, for there is a ridge that goes that way; and the ridge ends in a rather well-defined mound commanding the level fields of rough grass, and a little knot of fir trees crowns it. And here you may sit on a hot spring day, very well content to look at blue sea, white windmills, red cottages, bright green grass, church tower, and distant martello tower on the south.

As I have said, I began to know Seaburgh as a child; but a gap of a good many years separates my early knowledge from that which is more recent.

Still it keeps its place in my affections, and any tales of it that I pick up have an interest for me. One such tale is this: it came to me in a place very remote from Seaburgh, and quite accidentally, from a man whom I had been able to oblige—enough in his opinion to justify his making me his confidant to this extent.

* * *

I know all that country more or less (he said). I used to go to Seaburgh pretty regularly for golf in the spring. I generally put up at the "Bear," with a friend—Henry Long it was, you knew him perhaps—("Slightly," I said) and we used to take a sitting-room and be very happy there. Since he died I haven't cared to go there. And I don't know that I should anyhow after the particular thing that happened on our last visit.

It was in April, 19—, we were there, and by some chance we were almost the only people in the hotel. So the ordinary public rooms were practically empty, and we were the more surprised when, after dinner, our sitting-room door opened, and a young man put his head in. We were aware of this young man. He was rather a rabbity, anaemic subject—light hair and light eyes—but not unpleasing. So when he said: "I beg your pardon, is this a private room?" we did not growl and say: "Yes, it is," but Long said, or I did—no matter which: "Please come in." "Oh, may I?" he said, and seemed relieved. Of course it was obvious that he wanted company; and as he was a reasonable kind of person—not the sort to bestow his whole family history or you—we urged him to make himself at home. "I dare say you find the other rooms rather bleak," I said. Yes, he did but it was really too good of us, and so on. That being got over, he made some pretence of reading a book. Long was playing Patience, I was writing. It became plain to me after a few minutes that this visitor of ours was in rather a state of fidgets or nerves, which communicated itself to me, and so I put away my writing and turned to at engaging him in talk.

After some remarks, which I forget, he became rather confidential. "You'll think it very odd of me" (this was the sort of way he began), "but the fact is I've had something of a shock." Well, I recommended a drink of some cheering kind, and we had it. The waiter coming in made an interruption (and I thought our young man seemed very jumpy when the door opened), but after a while he got back to his woes again. There was nobody he knew in the place, and he did happen to know who we both were (it turned out there was some common acquaintance in town), and really he did want a word of advice, if we didn't mind. Of course we both said: "By all means," or "Not at all," and Long put away his cards. And we settled down to hear what his difficulty was.

"It began," he said, "more than a week ago, when I bicycled over to Froston, only about five or six miles, to see the church; I'm very much interested in architecture, and it's got one of those pretty porches with niches and shields. I took a photograph of it, and then an old man who was tidying up in the churchyard came and asked if I'd care to look into the church. I said yes, and he produced a key and let me in. There wasn't much inside, but I told him it was a nice little church, and he kept it very clean, 'but,' I said, 'the porch is the best part of it.' We were just outside the porch then, and he said, 'Ah, yes, that is a nice porch; and do you know, sir, what's the meanin' of that coat of arms there?'

"It was the one with the three crowns, and though I'm not much of a herald, I was able to say yes, I thought it was the old arms of the kingdom of East Anglia.

" 'That's right, sir,' he said, 'and do you know the meanin' of them three crowns that's on it?'

"I said I'd no doubt it was known, but I couldn't recollect to have heard it myself.

" 'Well, then,' he said, 'for all you're a scholard, I can tell you something you don't know. Them's the three 'oly crowns what was buried in the ground near by the coast to keep the Germans from landing—ah, I can see you don't believe that. But I tell you, if it hadn't have been for one of them

'oly crowns bein' there still, them Germans would a landed here time and again, they would. Landed with their ships, and killed man, woman and child in their beds. Now then, that's the truth what I'm telling you, that is; and if you don't believe me, you ast the rector. There he comes: you ast him, I says.'

"I looked round, and there was the rector, a nice-looking old man, coming up the path; and before I could begin assuring my old man, who was getting quite excited, that I didn't disbelieve him, the rector struck in, and said: 'What's all this about, John? Good day to you, sir. Have you been looking at our little church?'

"So then there was a little talk which allowed the old man to calm down, and then the rector asked him again what was the matter.

" 'Oh.' he said, 'it warn't nothink, only I was telling this gentleman he'd ought to ast you about them 'oly crowns.'

" 'Ah. yes, to be sure,' said the rector, 'that's a very curious matter, isn't it? But I don't know whether the gentleman is interested in our old stories, eh?'

" 'Oh, he'll be interested fast enough,' says the old man, 'he'll put his confidence in what you tells him, sir; why, you known William Ager yourself, father and son too.'

"Then I put in a word to say how much I should like to hear all about it, and before many minutes I was walking up the village street with the rector, who had one or two words to say to parishioners, and then to the rectory, where he took me into his study. He had made out, on the way, that I really was capable of taking an intelligent interest in a piece of folklore, and not quite the ordinary tripper. So he was very willing to talk, and it is rather surprising to me that the particular legend he told me has not made its way into print before. His account of it was this: 'There has always been a belief in these parts in the three holy crowns. The old people say they were buried in different places near the coast to keep off the Danes or the French or the Germans. And they say that one of the three was dug up a long time ago, and another has disappeared by the encroaching of the sea, and one's still left doing its work, keeping off invaders. Well, now, if you have read the ordinary guides and histories of this county, you will remember perhaps that in 1687 a crown, which was said to be the crown of Redwald, King of the East Angles, was dug up at Rendlesham, and alas! alas! melted down before it was even properly described or drawn. Well, Rendlesham isn't on the coast, but it isn't so very far inland, and it's on a very important line of access. And I believe that is the crown which the people mean when they say that one has been dug up. Then on the south you don't want me to tell you where there was a Saxon royal palace which is now under the sea, eh? Well, there was the second crown, I take it. And up beyond these two, they say, lies the third.'

" 'Do they say where it is?' of course I asked.

"He said, 'Yes, indeed, they do, but they don't tell,' and his manner did not encourage me to put the obvious question. Instead of that I waited a moment, and said: 'What did the old man mean when he said you knew William Ager, as if that had something to do with the crowns?'

" 'To be sure,' he said, 'now that's another curious story. These Agers—it's a very old name in these parts, but I can't find that they were ever people of quality or big owners—these Agers say, or said, that their branch of the

family were the guardians of the last crown. A certain old Nathaniel Ager was the first one I knew—I was born and brought up quite near here—and he, I believe, camped out at the place during the whole of the war of 1870. William, his son, did the same, I know, during the South African War. And young William, his son, who has only died fairly recently, took lodgings at the cottage nearest the spot, and I've no doubt hastened his end, for he was a consumptive, by exposure and night watching. And he was the last of that branch. It was a dreadful grief to him to think that he was the last, but he could do nothing, the only relations at all near to him were in the colonies. I wrote letters for him to them imploring them to come over on business very important to their family, but there has been no answer. So the last of the holy crowns, if it's there, has no guardian now.'

"That was what the rector told me, and you can fancy how interesting I found it. The only thing I could think of when I left him was how to hit upon the spot where the crown was supposed to be. I wish I'd left it alone.

"But there was a sort of fate in it, for as I bicycled back past the churchyard wall my eye caught a fairly new gravestone, and on it was the name of William Ager. Of course I got off and read it. It said 'of this parish, died at Seaburgh, 19—, aged 28.' There it was, you see. A little judicious questioning in the right place, and I should at least find the cottage nearest the spot. Only I didn't quite know what was the right place to begin my questioning at. Again there was fate: it took me to the curiosity-shop down that way—you know—and I turned over some old books, and, if you please, one was a prayer book of 1740 odd, in a rather handsome binding—I'll just go and get it, it's in my room."

He left us in a state of some surprise, but we had hardly time to exchange any remarks when he was back, panting, and handed us the book opened at the fly-leaf, on which was. in a straggly hand: Nathaniel Ager is my name and England is my nation, Seaburgh is my dwelling-place and Christ is my Salvation, When I am dead and in my Grave, and all my bones are rotton, I hope the Lard will think on me when I am quite forgotten.

This poem was dated 1754, and there were many more entries of Agers, Nathaniel, Frederick, William, and so on, ending with William, 19—.

"You see," he said, "anybody would call it the greatest bit of luck. I did, but I don't now. Of course I asked the shopman about William Ager, and of course he happened to remember that he lodged in a cottage in the North

Field and died there. This was just chalking the road for me. I knew which the cottage must be: there is only one sizeable one about there. The next thing was to scrape some sort of acquaintance with the people, and I took a walk that way at once. A dog did the business for me: he made at me so fiercely that they had to run out and beat him off, and then naturally begged my pardon, and we got into talk. I had only to bring up Ager's name, and pretend I knew, or thought I knew something of him, and then the woman said how sad it was him dying so young, and she was sure it came of him spending the night out of doors in the cold weather. Then I had to say: "Did he go out on the sea at night?" and she said: "Oh, no, it was on the hillock yonder with the trees on it." And there I was.

"I know something about digging in these barrows: I've opened many of them in the down country. But that was with owner's leave, and in broad daylight and with men to help. I had to prospect very carefully here before I put a spade in: I couldn't trench across the mound, and with those old firs growing there I knew there would be awkward tree roots. Still the soil was very light and sandy and easy, and there was a rabbit hole or so that might be developed into a sort of tunnel. The going out and coming back at odd hours to the hotel was going to be the awkward part. When I made up my mind about the way to excavate I told the people that I was called away for a night, and I spent it out there. I made my tunnel: I won't bore you with the details of how I supported it and filled it in when I'd done, but the main thing is that I got the crown."

Naturally we both broke out into exclamations of surprise and interest I for one had long known about the find of the crown at Rendlesham and had often lamented its fate. No one has ever seen an Anglo-Saxon crown—at least no one had. But our man gazed at us with a rueful eye. "Yes," he said, "and the worst of it is I don't know how to put it back."

"Put it back?" we cried out. "Why, my dear sir, you've made one of the most exciting finds ever heard of in this country. Of course, it ought to go to the Jewel House at the Tower. What's your difficulty? If you're thinking about the owner of the land, and treasure-trove, and all that, we can certainly help you through. Nobody's going to make a fuss about technicalities in a case of this kind."

Probably more was said, but all he did was to put his face in his hands, and mutter: "I don't know how to put it back."

At last Long said: "You'll forgive me, I hope, if I seem impertinent, but are you quite sure you've got it?" I was wanting to ask much the same question myself, for of course the story did seem a lunatic's dream when one thought over it. But I hadn't quite dared to say what might hurt the poor young man's feelings. However, he took it quite calmly—really, with the calm of despair, you might say. He sat up and said: "Oh, yes, there's no doubt of that: I have it here, in my room, locked up in my bag.

You can come and look at it if you like: I won't offer to bring it here."

We were not likely to let the chance slip. We went with him; his room was only a few doors off. The boots was just collecting shoes in the passage: or so we thought: afterwards we were not sure. Our visitor—his name was Paxton—was in a worse state of shivers than before, and went hurriedly into the room, and beckoned us after him, turned on the light, and shut the door carefully. Then he unlocked his kit-bag, and produced a bundle of clean pocket-handkerchiefs in which something was wrapped, laid it on the bed, and undid it. I can now say I have seen an actual Anglo-Saxon crown. It was of silver—as the Rendlesham one is always said to have been—it was set with some gems, mostly antique intaglios and cameos, and was of rather plain, almost rough workmanship. In fact, it was like those you see on the coins and in the manuscripts. I found no reason to think it was later than the ninth century. I was intensely interested, of course, and I wanted to turn it over in my hands, but Paxton prevented me.

"Don't you touch it." he said, "I'll do that." And with a sigh that was, I declare to you, dreadful to hear, he took it up and turned it about so that we could see every part of it. "Seen enough?" he said at last, and we nodded. He wrapped it up and locked it in his bag, and stood looking at us dumbly. "Come back to our room," Long said, "and tell us what the trouble is." He thanked us, and said: "Will you go first and see if—if the coast is clear?" That wasn't very intelligible, for our proceedings hadn't been, after all, very suspicious, and the hotel, as I said, was practically empty. However, we were beginning to have inklings of—we didn't know what, and anyhow nerves are infectious. So we did go, first peering out as we opened the door, and fancying (I found we both had the fancy) that a shadow, or more than a shadow—but it made no sound—passed from before us to one side as we came out into the passage. "It's all right," we whispered to Paxton—whispering seemed the proper tone—and we went, with him between us,

back to our sitting-room. I was preparing, when we got there, to be ecstatic about the unique interest of what we had seen, but when I looked at Paxton I saw that would be terribly out of place, and I left it to him to begin.

"What is to be done?" was his opening. Long thought it right (as he explained to me afterwards) to be obtuse, and said: "Why not find out who the owner of the land is, and inform—" "Oh, no, no!" Paxton broke in impatiently. "I beg your pardon: you've been very kind, but don't you see it's got to go back, and I daren't be there at night, and daytime's impossible. Perhaps, though, you don't see: well, then, the truth is that I've never been alone since I touched it." I was beginning some fairly stupid comment, but Long caught my eye, and I stopped. Long said: "I think I do see perhaps: but wouldn't it be—a relief—to tell us a little more clearly what the situation is?"

Then it all came out: Paxton looked over his shoulder and beckoned to us to come nearer to him, and began speaking in a low voice: we listened most intently, of course, and compared notes afterwards, and I wrote down our version, so I am confident I have what he told us almost word for word. He said: "It began when I was first prospecting, and put me off again and again. There was always somebody—a man—standing by one of the firs. This was in daylight, you know. He was never in front of me. I always saw him with the tail of my eye on the left or the right, and he was never there when I looked straight for him. I would lie down for quite a long time and take careful observations, and make sure there was no one, and then when I got up and began prospecting again, there he was. And he began to give me hints, besides: for wherever I put that prayer-book—short of locking it up, which I did at last—when I came back to my room it was always out on my table open at the fly-leaf where the names are, and one of my razors across it to keep it open. I'm sure he just can't open my bag. or something more would have happened. You see, he's light and weak, but all the same I daren't face him. Well, then, when I was making the tunnel, of course it was worse, and if I hadn't been so keen I should have dropped the whole thing and run. It was like someone scraping at my back all the time: I thought for a long time it was only soil dropping on me, but as I got nearer the—the crown, it was unmistakable. And when I actually laid it bare and got my fingers into the ring of it and pulled it out, there came a sort of cry behind me—oh, I can't tell you how desolate it was! And horribly threatening too. It spoilt all my pleasure in my find—cut it off that moment. And if I hadn't

been the wretched fool I am, I should have put the thing back and left it. But I didn't. The rest of the time was just awful. I had hours to get through before I could decently come back to the hotel. First I spent time filling up my tunnel and covering my tracks, and all the while he was there trying to thwart me. Sometimes, you know, you see him, and sometimes you don't, just as he pleases, I think: he's there, but he has some power over your eyes. Well. I wasn't off the spot very long before sunrise, and then I had to get to the junction for Seaburgh and take a train back. And though it was daylight fairly soon. I don't know if that made it much better. There were always hedges, or gorse bushes, or park fences along the road—some sort of cover. I mean—and I was never easy for a second. And then when I began to meet people going to work, they always looked behind me very strangely: it might have been that they were surprised at seeing anyone so early; but I didn't think it was only that, and I don't now: they didn't look exactly at me. And the porter at the train was like that too. And the guard held open the door after I'd got into the carriage—just as he would if there was somebody else coming, you know. Oh. you may be very sure it isn't my fancy," he said with a dull sort of laugh. Then he went on: "And even if I do get it put back, he won't forgive me: I can tell that. And I was so happy a fortnight ago." He dropped into a chair, and I believe he began to cry.

We didn't know what to say, but we felt we must come to the rescue somehow, and so—it really seemed the only thing—we said if he was so set on putting the crown back in its place, we would help him. And I must say that after what we had heard it did seem the right thing. If these horrid consequences had come on this poor man, might there not really be something in the original idea of the crown having some curious power bound up with it, to guard the coast? At least, that was my feeling, and I think it was Long's too. Our offer was very welcome to Paxton, anyhow.

When could we do it? It was nearing half-past ten. Could we contrive to make a late walk plausible to the hotel people that very night? We looked out of the window: there was a brilliant full moon—the Paschal moon.

Long undertook to tackle the boots and propitiate him. He was to say that we should not be much over the hour, and if we did find it so pleasant that we stopped out a bit longer we would see that he didn't lose by sitting up.

Well, we were pretty regular customers of the hotel, and did not give much trouble, and were considered by the servants to be not under the mark in the

way of tips; and so the boots was propitiated, and let us out on to the sea-front, and remained, as we heard later, looking after us. Paxton had a large coat over his arm, under which was the wrapped-up crown.

So we were off on this strange errand before we had time to think how very much out of the way it was. I have told this part quite shortly on purpose, for it really does represent the haste with which we settled our plan and took action. "The shortest way is up the hill and through the churchyard," Paxton said, as we stood a moment before the hotel looking up and down the front. There was nobody about—nobody at all. Seaburgh out of the season is an early, quiet place. "We can't go along the dyke by the cottage, because of the dog," Paxton also said, when I pointed to what I thought a shorter way along the front and across two fields. The reason he gave was good enough. We went up the road to the church, and turned in at the churchyard gate. I confess to having thought that there might be some lying there who might be conscious of our business: but if it was so, they were also conscious that one who was on their side, so to say, had us under surveillance, and we saw no sign of them. But under observation we felt we were, as I have never felt it at another time. Specially was it so when we passed out of the churchyard into a narrow path with close high hedges, through which we hurried as Christian did through that Valley; and so got out into open fields. Then along hedges, though I would sooner have been in the open, where I could see if anyone was visible behind me; over a gate or two, and then a swerve to the left, taking us up on to the ridge which ended in that mound.

As we neared it, Henry Long felt, and I felt too, that there were what I can only call dim presences waiting for us, as well as a far more actual one attending us. Of Paxton's agitation all this time I can give you no adequate picture: he breathed like a hunted beast, and we could not either of us look at his face. How he would manage when we got to the very place we had not troubled to think: he had seemed so sure that that would not be difficult. Nor was it. I never saw anything like the dash with which he flung himself at a particular spot in the side of the mound, and tore at it, so that in a very few minutes the greater part of his body was out of sight. We stood holding the coat and that bundle of handkerchiefs, and looking, very fearfully, I must admit, about us. There was nothing to be seen: a line of dark firs behind us made one skyline, more trees and the church tower half a mile off on the right, cottages and a windmill on the horizon on the left, calm sea

dead in front, faint barking of a dog at a cottage on a gleaming dyke between us and it: full moon making that path we know across the sea: the eternal whisper of the Scotch firs just above us, and of the sea in front. Yet, in all this quiet, an acute, an acrid consciousness of a restrained hostility very near us, like a dog on a leash that might be let go at any moment.

Paxton pulled himself out of the hole, and stretched a hand back to us.

"Give it to me," he whispered, "unwrapped." We pulled off the handkerchiefs, and he took the crown. The moonlight just fell on it as he snatched it. We had not ourselves touched that bit of metal, and I have thought since that it was just as well. In another moment Paxton was out of the hole again and busy shovelling back the soil with hands that were already bleeding. He would have none of our help, though. It was much the longest part of the job to get the place to look undisturbed: yet—I don't know how—he made a wonderful success of it. At last he was satisfied, and we turned back.

We were a couple of hundred yards from the hill when Long suddenly said to him: "I say, you've left your coat there. That won't do. See?" And I certainly did see—the long dark overcoat lying where the tunnel had been. Paxton had not stopped, however he only shook his head, and held up the coat on his arm. And when we joined him, he said, without any excitement, but as if nothing mattered any more: "That wasn't my coat"

And, indeed, when we looked back gain, that dark thing was not to be seen.

Well, we got out on to the road, and came rapidly back that way. It was well before twelve when we got in, trying to put a good face on it, and saying—Long and I—what a lovely night it was for a walk. The boots was on the lookout for us, and we made remarks like that for his edification as we entered the hotel. He gave another look up and down the sea-front before he locked the front door, and said: "You didn't meet many people about, I s'pose, sir" "No, indeed, not a soul," I said; at which I remember Paxton looked oddly at me. "Only I thought I see someone turn up the station road after you gentlemen," said the boots. "Still, you was three together, and I don't suppose he meant mischief." I didn't know what to say; Long merely said "Good night," and we went off upstairs, promising to turn out all the lights, and to go to bed in a few minutes.

Back in our room, we did our very best to make Paxton take a cheerful view. "There's the crown safe back," we said; "very likely you'd have done

better not to touch it" (and he heavily assented to that), "but no real harm has been done, and we shall never give this away to anyone who would be so mad as to go near it. Besides, don't you feel better yourself? I don't mind confessing," I said, "that on the way there I was very much inclined to take your view about—well, about being followed; but going back, it wasn't at all the same thing, was it?" No, it wouldn't do: "You've nothing to trouble yourselves about." he said, "but I'm not forgiven. I've got to pay for that miserable sacrilege still. I know what you are going to say. The Church might help. Yes, but it's the body that has to suffer. It's true I'm not feeling that he's waiting outside for me just now. But—" Then he stopped.

Then he turned to thanking us, and we put him off as soon as we could.

And naturally we pressed him to use our sitting-room next day, and said we should be glad to go out with him. Or did he play golf, perhaps? Yes, he did, but he didn't think he should care about that to-morrow. Well, we recommended him to get up late and sit in our room in the morning while we were playing, and we would have a walk later in the day. He was very submissive and piano about it all: ready to do just what we thought best, but clearly quite certain in his own mind that what was coming could not be averted or palliated. You'll wonder why we didn't insist on accompanying him to his home and seeing him safe into the care of brothers or someone. The fact was he had nobody. He had had a flat in town, but lately he had made up his mind to settle for a time in Sweden, and he had dismantled his flat and shipped off his belongings, and was whiling away a fortnight or three weeks before he made a start. Anyhow, we didn't see what we could do better than sleep on it—or not sleep very much, as was my case—and see what we felt like to-morrow morning.

We felt very different, Long and I, on as beautiful an April morning as you could desire; and Paxton also looked very different when we saw him at breakfast. "The first approach to a decent night I seem ever to have had,"

was what he said. But he was going to do as we had settled: stay in probably all the morning, and come out with us later. We went to the links; we met some other men and played with them in the morning, and had lunch there rather early, so as not to be late back. All the same, the snares of death overtook him.

Whether it could have been prevented, I don't know. I think he would have been got at somehow, do what we might. Anyhow, this is what happened.

We went straight up to our room. Paxton was there, reading quite peaceably. "Ready to come out shortly?" said Long, "say in half an hour's time?" "Certainly," he said: and I said we would change first, and perhaps have baths, and call for him in half an hour. I had my bath first, and went and lay down on my bed, and slept for about ten minutes. We came out of our rooms at the same time, and went together to the sitting-room. Paxton wasn't there—only his book. Nor was he in his room, nor in the downstairs rooms. We shouted for him. A servant came out and said: "Why, I thought you gentlemen was gone to already, and so did the other gentleman. He heard you a-calling from the path there, and run out in a hurry, and I looked out of the coffee-room window, but I didn't see you. 'Owever, he run off down the beach that way."

Without a word we ran that way too—it was the opposite direction to that of last night's expedition. It wasn't quite four o'clock, and the day was fair, though not so fair as it had been, so there was really no reason, you'd say, for anxiety: with people about, surely a man couldn't come to much harm.

But something in our look as we ran out must have struck the servant, for she came out on the steps, and pointed, and said, "Yes, that's the way he went." We ran on as far as the top of the shingle bank, and there pulled up.

There was a choice of ways: past the houses on the sea-front, or along the sand at the bottom of the beach, which, the tide being now out, was fairly broad. Or of course we might keep along the shingle between these two tracks and have some view of both of them; only that was heavy going.

We chose the sand, for that was the loneliest, and someone might come to harm there without being seen from the public path.

Long said he saw Paxton some distance ahead, running and waving his stick, as if he wanted to signal to people who were on ahead of him. I couldn't be sure: one of these sea-mists was coming up very quickly from the south. There was someone, that's all I could say. And there were tracks on the sand as of someone running who wore shoes; and there were other tracks made before those—for the shoes sometimes trod in them and interfered with them—of someone not in shoes. Oh, of course, it's only my word you've got to take for all this: Long's dead, we'd no time or means to make sketches or take casts, and the next tide washed everything away. All we could do was to notice these marks as we hurried on. But there they

were over and over again, and we had no doubt whatever that what we saw was the track of a bare foot, and one that showed more bones than flesh.

The notion of Paxton running after—after anything like this, and supposing it to be the friends he was looking for, was very dreadful to us.

You can guess what we fancied: how the thing he was following might stop suddenly and turn round on him, and what sort of face it would show, half-seen at first in the mist—which all the while was getting thicker and thicker. And as I ran on wondering how the poor wretch could have been lured into mistaking that other thing for us, I remembered his saying, "He has some power over your eyes." And then I wondered what the end would be, for I had no hope now that the end could be averted, and—well, there is no need to tell all the dismal and horrid thoughts that flitted through my head as we ran on into the mist. It was uncanny, too, that the sun should still be bright in the sky and we could see nothing. We could only tell that we were now past the houses and had reached that gap there is between them and the old martello tower. When you are past the tower, you know, there is nothing but shingle for a long way—not a house, not a human creature, just that spit of land, or rather shingle, with the river on your right and the sea on your left.

But just before that, just by the martello tower, you remember there is the old battery, close to the sea. I believe there are only a few blocks of concrete left now: the rest has all been washed away, but at this time there was a lot more, though the place was a ruin. Well, when we got there, we clambered to the top as quick as we could to take breath and look over the shingle in front if by chance the mist would let us see anything. But a moment's rest we must have. We had run a mile at least. Nothing whatever was visible ahead of us, and we were just turning by common consent to get down and run hopelessly on, when we heard what I can only call a laugh: and if you can understand what I mean by a breathless, a lungless laugh, you have it: but I don't suppose you can. It came from below, and swerved away into the mist. That was enough. We bent over the wall.

Paxton was there at the bottom.

You don't need to be told that he was dead. His tracks showed that he had run along the side of the battery, had turned sharp round the corner of it, and, small doubt of it, must have dashed straight into the open arms of someone who was waiting there. His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits. I only glanced once at his face.

At the same moment, just as we were scrambling down from the battery to get to the body, we heard a shout, and saw a man running down the bank of the martello tower. He was the caretaker stationed there, and his keen old eyes had managed to descry through the mist that something was wrong. He had seen Paxton fall, and had seen us a moment after, running up—fortunate this, for otherwise we could hardly have escaped suspicion of being concerned in the dreadful business. Had he we asked, caught sight of anybody attacking our friend? He could not be sure.

We sent him off for help, and stayed by the dead man till they came with the stretcher. It was then that we traced out how he had come, on the narrow fringe of sand under the battery wall. The rest was shingle, and it was hopelessly impossible to tell whither the other had gone.

What were we to say at the inquest? It was a duty, we felt, not to give up, there and then, the secret of the crown, to be published in every paper. I don't know how much you would have told; but what we did agree upon was this: to say that we had only made acquaintance with Paxton the day before, and that he had told us he was under some apprehension of danger at the hands of a man called William Ager. Also that we had seen some other tracks besides Paxton's when we followed him along the beach. But of course by that time everything was gone from the sands.

No one had any knowledge, fortunately, of any William Ager living in the district. The evidence of the man at the martello tower freed us from all suspicion. All that could be done was to return a verdict of wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.

Paxton was so totally without connections that all the inquiries that were subsequently made ended in a No Thoroughfare. And I have never been at Seaburgh, or even near it, since.

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